

The final context in Paul's triad addressing the relationship between human idolatry and judgment closes out the first chapter of the epistle (1:28-32). It has been seen that the second and third contexts do not represent a progression or intensification of Paul's argument, but rather serve to elaborate on his primary assertion that the *exchange* that constitutes idolatry brings divine judgment in *being given over* (1:21-25). As verses 1:24-25 present Paul's overarching maxim, so the succeeding two contexts introduced by verses 1:26 and 1:28b further develop what it means to be given over to one's own lust.

It has also been observed that *lust* refers to any compelling human passion, and so is not confined simply to moral or ethical unrighteousness. Every human pursuit - however good or noble - is a manifestation of self-directed lust. As sinners, all people are enslaved to self-concern: *self-idolatry is the essence of sin*, with the result that men worship and serve themselves, whatever their religious exercises happen to be. And because they have exchanged the truth of God for the original lie, worshipping and serving the creature rather than the Creator, mankind has become "*futile in their speculations and their foolish heart was darkened.*" The consequence of this is that human lust cannot help but manifest itself in *degrading passions*. What men believe to be good and profitable is actually degrading and destructive of their nature and purpose as image-bearers.

Accordingly, when God gives a man over to such passions He is also giving him over to the *depraved mind* that underlies, informs, and directs his lust. This depravity is at the heart of Paul's argument, so that it is crucial to understand it in context: *human depravity must be understood in terms of a perverted understanding and orientation of life associated with man's estrangement from God*. Tangible acts and expressions of unrighteousness and wickedness are not the essence of depravity, but rather its fruit.

- Depravity speaks of man's alienation from God and, therefore, his alienation from himself and every other created thing. For man was created in the divine image and likeness for the purpose of perfect communion with God and faithful, submissive dominion over His works. When Adam and Eve chose to exercise independence from their Creator they forsook their own identity and purpose; their autonomy came at the cost of absolute estrangement.
- Apart from this proper framework of understanding it is easy to read Paul's words in 1:28-32 and conclude that depravity consists in demonstrably unrighteous attitudes and conduct and fierce opposition to God, His word, and His ways. Many, in fact, do conceive of depravity in exactly this way. However, such a conception leaves the Scripture unintelligible, for it makes it impossible to reconcile the knowledge, commitment, and actions of biblical figures with their obvious unbelief. Repeatedly the Bible presents the same Israelites who perished in unbelief fervently committing themselves to love and serve God and keep His covenant (cf. Exodus 24:1-8 and 32:1-10; also Deuteronomy 30:11-31:30; Joshua 24:1-28; etc.). Perhaps more than anyone else the apostle Paul himself epitomizes the biblical knowledge, religious zeal, and strict compliance to God's law that can characterize those who are, in truth, blasphemers and vile offenders (cf. Galatians 1:13-14; Philippians 3:1-6; 1 Timothy 1:12-14).

The depraved mind that led Paul to be a blasphemer and violent aggressor did not manifest itself in a secular preoccupation and open rejection of the true God. Quite the opposite, Paul was a man who believed that his disposition and conduct were eminently honoring to the God of Israel and His true religion. Paul did not act as he did because he *hated* God, but because he was *zealous* for God and so labored to purge the world of the newly-founded “way” that he believed was corrupting the true faith of Old Covenant Judaism (cf. Acts 22:1-5, 26:1-11).

Along with his Jewish brethren, Paul’s personal depravity did not express itself in rejection of God and His word, but - like every other human being - in his insistence upon establishing his own righteousness before God. For human depravity is the ascension of self to equality with God, so that every person effectively becomes his own god. That being the case, it is axiomatic that all people regard their personal righteousness as ultimately linked to themselves. *Therefore, while depravity can express itself in a zealous embrace of God and the righteousness of His law, it always opposes His gospel.*

The gospel of God’s own righteousness gained solely by faith is Paul’s constant thesis in his epistles, and its rejection by fallen men was proven true in his own personal experience as well as his interaction with his own countrymen (Romans 9:30-10:21). Those who, as God’s privileged covenant people, so fervently studied the Scripture and labored to keep His law ultimately viewed their righteousness in terms of themselves, and so “stumbled over the stumbling stone” (cf. John 5:1-47, 6:1-66, 8:12-59, 9:1-41; Acts 13:14-50, 18:1-6, 28:16-31; 2 Corinthians 3:1-18; 1 Peter 2:1-8; etc.).

So also in the present context it must be kept in mind that Paul’s intention in 1:18-3:20 was to show the glory and necessity of the gospel and its promise of righteousness by faith. In their self-declared equality with God men find great confidence in themselves, whether in the self-serving paganism that marks the Gentiles or the self-righteous knowledge and conformity to the Law that mark the Jews. Thus Paul’s argument in this larger context establishes the universal guilt, need, and incapacity of *all* men, in order that the gospel may be exalted to its place of singular glory. For, inasmuch as self-righteousness and the gospel are antithetical principles, the former must be unraveled and destroyed - whatever form it may take - before the latter can be embraced for what it is.

But until such time as “*the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ*” shines in the individual human heart, every person continues on in the darkness and futility of his depravity. And so ingrained and pervasive is the human conviction of self-righteousness that, even in the conscious knowledge of personal sin and the judgment it deserves, there still continues the confidence that, in the end, all will be well: “*And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; and, although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them*” (1:28-32).

Again, the fundamental thematic principle of 1:18-32 is that idolatry brings the judgment of divine wrath. *Exchange* results in being *given over* - exchanging the truth of God for the lie results in being given over to one's own lust (1:24-25). So it is that:

- Exchanging natural sexual functions established by God results in being given over to the degrading passions that brought the exchange about (1:26-27).
- So also, exchanging the knowledge of God Himself results in being given over to the depraved mind by which this knowledge is obscured and perverted (1:28-32).

Three things about this final context in Paul's triad are important to note:

- a. The first is that, just as the perversions enumerated by him clearly do not constitute an exhaustive list, neither are they to be viewed as specifying particularly heinous sins. They cannot be used as a "grocery list" by which a person can measure himself in terms of his personal sanctity. In fact, several are seen to indicate broad categories of perversion rather than specific infractions. The maladies specified in this context are best understood as presenting an *expansive portrait* of the varied and universal manifestations of human depravity, implicating all arenas of personal interrelation with self, God, and others. Thus Paul's intention was to bring all men under the indictment of idolatry.
- b. Viewed in this way, it becomes easy to see a common thread binding them all together. In every instance the perversions here listed by Paul find their origin, impetus and orientation in the central contextual principle of *self as god*. Whether they are *inwardly personal* in nature (wickedness, greed, envy, malice, folly, arrogance), or *interpersonal* involving one's relation with God (hatred, boasting) or men (murder, strife, deceit, gossip, slander, disobedience, lack of love and mercy) they all reflect man's insistence upon worshipping and serving himself. Individually and collectively these perversions affirm God's insistence that all human activity is ultimately motivated by personal interest.
- c. The final thing to observe is the *personal consciousness* of personal unrighteousness. Just as men know of the existence of a sovereign Creator both innately and by the witness of the creation (1:18-20), so they are aware of their own created nature and accountability to their Creator: "*they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death*" (1:32a).

Paul's assertion is profoundly important, for even as it reiterates his contention in 1:18-20 it also expands upon it. For not only are men aware of God as Creator and, therefore, their own status as creatures, *they are conscious of a divine standard of righteousness and their accountability to it*. Their capacity to acknowledge that the attitudes and conducts listed by Paul render one guilty before God and worthy of death shows that all men have an innate knowledge of objective righteousness. This is consistent with the totality of biblical example and instruction, and is best summarized in Jesus' own words (Matthew 7:1-5).

It is interesting to consider that Jesus' indictment in this context indicates that men readily find fault with others while they are themselves guilty of far greater sin, which observation is repeated by Paul in Romans 2:1-3. Yet in the present passage Paul was insisting that men willfully act in rebellion against God and at the same time give *heartily approval* to others who follow in their ways. At first glance these divergent observations may appear to be contradictory, but are in fact *complementary*. That is to say, under various circumstances men eagerly encourage others to follow in their own sinful practice, while at other times they openly condemn those whose practice actually replicates their own. Though the responses differ, both reflect the same defining principle of *self as god*. For both serve the purpose of self-exoneration and self-aggrandizement, so that the need of the moment determines which response is made.

Thus in both contexts of 1:28-32 and 2:1-3 Paul was rightly insisting that men continue to live in denial of what they know to be true: on the one hand, they do so by condemning others for doing what they themselves practice, believing that they will escape the judgment they pronounce upon their fellow man; on the other, they flagrantly do the things that they know bring divine retribution while also openly approving of others who do the same. In both instances there is the distinct fragrance of self-idolatry.

For those who practice what they know justly brings God's condemnation are able to convince themselves that, though others will be punished for their rebellion and unbelief, somehow they are exempt or will escape (again, ref. 2:1-3). In the case of the former, men are able to provide for their own exemption by regarding themselves as essentially good in spite of their many mistakes and failures. Others, of course, deserve what they get. As to the latter, men conclude that the God of love and forgiveness who perhaps does see and know of their unrighteousness will never require it of them; their personal vision of God insures that all will be well for them in the end (Psalm 10:1-13). And so, whether a man excuses himself by exalting his own character and standing before God or by defining God according to a self-serving criterion, the effect is the same: he has raised himself up to a place of equality with God, which "equality" always results in man assuming the place of supremacy.

So also their encouragement and approval of others in following after them has self-serving motives. For by encouraging others in their rebellion men are able to exonerate themselves by putting themselves into "good company." The fact that something is universally true - that "everyone does it" or "this is just part of being human" - is a powerful and effective basis of self-deception and self-vindication. One need only consider the dynamic of peer influence to prove the point.

The worship and service of self that originated in Eden stand as the essential issue in man's plight. This explains the irony of the gospel: though it is humanity's only remedy, its doctrine of righteousness gained solely by *faith* leaves men cold; in their idolatry they prefer to die standing upon their own righteousness than submissively embrace God's.