

Summary: Humanity’s problem is idolatry: we have exchanged the glory of God for images, we have exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and we have exchanged natural relations for that which is unnatural (1:18-23). And the result is that God gave us up to impurity (1:24-25), to dishonorable passions (v26-27), and to a debased mind (v28-32). Because we chose to worship the creature rather than the Creator God has given us what we asked for!

Perhaps you have heard of the “great exchange”?

The great exchange is where our Lord Jesus Christ  
took upon himself the wrath and curse that we deserved;  
and gave to us the blessing and inheritance that he deserved.  
The great exchange was neatly summarized by Athanasius  
when he said that God became all that we are by nature,  
so that we might become all that he is by grace.

But the great exchange was only necessary because of another exchange –  
an exchange that I am calling the “cursed exchange.”

Paul summarizes this cursed exchange in verses 22-23:

*Claiming to be wise, they became fools,  
and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images  
resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.*

This is the root of the problem with the human race.

We prefer to worship the creature rather than the creator.

Notice that I said “we.”

Paul says “they.”

Paul is going to show that there is no one righteous,  
and he starts with “them” out there.

But by the time he gets to the end of chapter 2 he has demonstrated  
that “we” are no different from “them.”

Who is Paul talking about here?

Could he be referring to the Gentiles?

After all, there are no reference to Israel, the law,

or anything else that would make us think of the people of God.

Therefore many have said that he is referring to the Gentiles here.

But that is why we read Jeremiah 2.

Jeremiah speaks of the “cursed exchange” of how *Israel* turned away from the LORD.

Jeremiah 2:11 says,

“Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods?

But my people have changed their glory for that which does not profit.”

So when Paul says that “they” exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images  
he uses language drawn from Jeremiah’s condemnation of Jerusalem.

So it might be better to say that in chapter one Paul is talking about humanity in general.  
He does not refer to Israel in particular,  
but neither does he exclude Israel.  
The problem with humanity is universal.

Paul does not speak of Israel in particular,  
he does not speak of the Gentiles to the exclusion of Israel,  
he does not simply blame the whole thing on Adam.

Rather, he addresses all humanity everywhere and in all times.

**The Problem: Everyone Knows God...and Seeks to Suppress that Knowledge (1:18-23)**

Because the problem with humanity is that everyone knows God –  
and yet everyone seeks to suppress that knowledge.

Paul says that *the wrath of God is revealed from heaven  
against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men,  
who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.* (v18)

Paul has just said that “the righteous shall live by faith,”  
So in Paul’s view there are two kinds of people –  
the righteous (who live by faith)  
and the unrighteous (who suppress the truth by their unrighteousness).

But Paul wants to make it clear that the unrighteous have no excuse for their rebellion.  
*For what can be known about God is plain to them,  
because God has shown it to them.* (v19)

In other words, everyone knows who God is.  
Everyone you meet not only knows that there is a God,  
but they even know who this God is.

How can Paul say this?

How can Paul say that *everyone* knows who God is?  
What about the Hindu who has never heard of the Bible?  
What about the atheist who has explicitly rejected God?

Paul says that they do know God –  
*because God has shown it to them.*

*For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature,  
have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world,*

*in the things that have been made.  
So they are without excuse. (v20)*

Paul is not saying that everyone *acknowledges* that God exists –  
rather, he is saying that everyone has perceived God in creation.

Psalm 19 points this out:

*The heavens above declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.  
Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.*

There is a message proclaimed by the heavens – and that message is of the glory of God.  
While there are no words in the message of creation,  
creation itself clearly reveals the character of God.

We sometimes call this “general revelation.”

General revelation shows us God’s *invisible attributes*,  
*namely, his eternal power and divine nature.*

And Paul tells us that everyone sees this clearly.

Here’s the basic point:

All people live in God’s world – so they can’t help but see the glory of God in creation.  
General revelation is an objective revelation – it is there  
and because all people are created in the image of God,  
they cannot help but see the revelation of God.

Our problem is not metaphysical (metaphysics has to do with “the way things are”).

In other words, there is nothing wrong with the way God made us.  
We live in God’s world.

Neither is our problem epistemological (epistemology has to do with “the way we know”).

In other words, we cannot help but think as though God is God.  
If you think about it, our minds were created to receive God’s revelation.  
We are constantly surrounded by God’s revelation in creation –  
you cannot escape God.

Rather, our problem is ethical (ethics has to do with the “the way we live”).

In other words, humanity’s problem is that  
*Although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him,  
but became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.  
Claiming to be wise, they became fools,  
and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images  
resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles (21-23)*

Cornelius Van Til explained this

by telling the story of a little girl riding on the train from Philadelphia.

She was sitting on her father's lap.  
She was not happy that she was sitting on her father's lap,  
so she reached up and slapped him in the face!

This is what Romans 1 is teaching us.  
When people say that they don't believe that God exists,  
the only way they can say it  
is if they use the air that God created,  
and the lungs that God gave them.  
It is only because they are sitting on his lap  
that they can reach up and slap his face!

If humanity did not really know who God is and what he requires,  
then it would be unfair for God to judge those who "don't know."  
But Paul's point is that humanity *does* know.  
As he'll say in verse 32,  
*Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die,  
they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.*

In other words, our rebellion is fundamentally ethical.  
It is a refusal to love God and honor him as God.

Or to put it another way, our problem is worship.  
We know God –  
but we do not honor him as God.

We do not give thanks to him.  
And in our rebellion against God  
we have exchanged the glory of the immortal God  
for images of creatures.

This is the cursed exchange.  
And while you could point to Adam's sin in the garden as the "cursed exchange,"  
Paul does not limit this to Adam in the garden.  
It is not as though Adam alone is guilty of this.  
All of humanity is guilty of this.

Every unbeliever you meet knows God.  
They are his creatures who are in rebellion against him,  
and yet they cannot escape him (no matter how hard they try!).

And they are trying!  
But the problem is that they are trying to escape from the God who made all things.  
They have to use the minds that he gave them.  
They have to live in the world that he created.  
And so they are like the little girl, sitting on her father's lap,

who can only slap him in the face because he allows her to sit on his lap.

Every unbeliever you meet (and, if we admit the truth, even ourselves at times!)  
is trying desperately to suppress the truth.

When you talk to an unbeliever  
you know something about that person:  
he knows God and is trying desperately to avoid God;  
he has exchanged the glory of the immortal God and is worshiping a creature.

What you must do as you speak with an unbeliever  
is figure out “where has this person committed the ‘cursed exchange’?”

Or to use the question rooted in verse 25,  
“what lie has she believed?”

### **The Result: God Gave Them Up . . .**

Because the result of this cursed exchange,  
where we exchanged the glory of the immortal God for creaturely images,  
is that God handed us over to what we wanted.

Three times Paul says “God gave them up” – or “handed them over” or “delivered them”  
This is the same word that Paul will use to refer to the “traditions”  
that he “handed over” to Timothy and Titus.

Paul says that God has handed us over – he has given us up  
to impurity (v24-25)  
to dishonorable passions (v26-27)  
and to a debased mind (v28-32)

All three of these things are rooted in this cursed exchange.  
Because we chose to worship the creature rather than the Creator  
God has given us what we asked for!

### **1. . . . to Impurity (1:24-25)**

And so

*Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity,  
to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves,  
because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie  
and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator,  
who is blessed forever! Amen.*

Any time you sin, you have believed a lie.  
Any time you sin, you are serving the creature rather than the Creator.

And Paul says that this is the basic problem with humanity.  
Our basic problem is that we do not worship God,  
we worship creatures.

Paul here connects idolatry with adultery –  
something the prophets did regularly!  
God created us for himself.  
We were designed as his bride.  
But instead we have whored after other gods.  
We have loved God – sometimes --  
but other times we have ignored God and served the creature.

And so God handed us over to what we wanted.  
If you want to serve the creature,  
then you will be enslaved to it.  
Sexual sin is a powerful reminder of the bondage of idolatry.  
To the one enthralled by sex, it appears “liberating” –  
just think of the language of “sexual emancipation.”

But such “liberation” is a lie.  
Proverbs 5 contains a warning against straying sexually,  
reminding the young man that “the iniquities of the wicked ensnare him,  
and he is held fast in the cords of his sin.”

Paul says that our impure lusts and desires  
are rooted in our idolatry.  
Humanity has exchanged the truth about God for a lie.

And so in the cursed exchanged,  
we have exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images,  
we have exchanged the truth about God for a lie

and

## **2. . . . to Dishonorable Passions (1:26-27)**

*For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions.  
For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature;  
and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women  
and were consumed with passion for one another,  
men committing shameless acts with men  
and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.*

I'd like you to notice something.  
Paul does not say that individuals choose to become homosexuals.  
(It may be that some people do choose this, but Paul does not address this).  
Rather, in a world dominated by the cursed exchange,  
where we have replaced God with idols,  
where we have replaced truth with lies,  
we also replace the natural, created sexual relation between man and woman  
with homosexual relations.

There are some people who have said,  
“how can it be wrong to be a homosexual when God made me this way?”

They need to understand what Paul is saying in Romans 1.  
God did not make anyone a homosexual.  
Yes, it does appear that there are some people who are “born” homosexual.  
But that does not mean that God made them that way.

Creation has been marred by sin and death.  
In the cursed exchange (which is rooted in Adam)  
we have exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images,  
we have exchanged the truth about God for a lie,  
and we have exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature.

Homosexual relations are *contrary to nature* or *against nature*.

Perhaps you have had to deal with a friend or colleague or family member who is homosexual.  
Perhaps you have wrestled with the question for yourself.  
Paul here plainly condemns homosexual relations  
(I know that some people have tried to say that he is just condemning  
“unnatural” homosexual relations,  
but his point is plainly that the homosexual relation itself is against nature).  
God created us male and female and gave us the command to be fruitful and multiply.  
The having and enjoying of sex is not a God-given right to all human beings.

If it was, then Jesus was deprived of that right – because our Lord was celibate.

Celibacy was practiced by our Lord, by the apostle Paul,  
and by most of the greatest Christians in church history.

Our generation is so sex-crazed that we have forgotten that the call to  
“deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me”  
may well include “deny yourself from sexual gratification.”

I’ve heard a lot of people say that it’s good to have married pastors,  
because that way the pastor can relate to his congregation better.

Having been a single pastor first, and now being a married pastor,  
I would submit to you that such a claim is simply not true.

It was far easier to counsel and encourage married people as a single pastor  
than it is to counsel and encourage single people as a married pastor.

It is hard for me to stand here and tell you that if you are homosexually inclined,  
God’s call on your life is to remain single and celibate.

Because the response comes back so quickly:

Well, how come those who are homosexually inclined  
are the only ones who have to deny themselves?

But in fact, in a sex-crazed generation, there is need for a new generation of celibates.

After all, the solution to generic sexual lust is not marriage.

When Paul says in 1 Corinthians “it is better to marry than to burn,”  
he is referring to people who are already betrothed.

If you are engaged to be married,  
and you are burning,  
then by all means, get married.

But marriage does not eliminate, or for that matter even reduce, lust.

The solution for lust is not sex.

Gratifying your desires does not make them go away!

After all, lust is not about “sex” – neither is it about love.

We have forgotten that “lust” simply means “desire” or “craving.”

Lust is not about love or sex –  
it is about power.  
It is a quest for being in control.

And so the solution for lust is not marriage,  
it is humility.  
It is self-denial.  
It is the cross.

After all, it is in *the gospel* that the righteousness of God is revealed.

And what is the gospel?

The gospel is the humiliation and exaltation of Jesus.

The good news is the *great exchange* in which Jesus took our curse.

But how did he take our curse?

By humbling himself – denying himself –  
and enduring the cursed death of the cross.

And we dare not tell those with homosexual inclinations  
that this route of self-denial is only for them,  
while we selfishly and proudly claim that our “natural” relations  
may be exploited merely to gratify our lusts.

Let me ask you married people,

how often in your married life have your sexual relations been pure and holy?

How often has the glory of Christ and his bride been reflected in your hearts?

Or are you just being selfish?



How does the gospel – the message of the cross – affect your bedroom?

### **3. . . . to a Debased Mind (1:28-32)**

Well, Paul concludes by pointing out that the fundamental sin of idolatry is not only expressed in sexual misconduct, but also bears its fruit in all sorts of evil deeds.

*And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God*

(this goes back to verse 21 and connects to Paul's comment that although they knew God they did not honor him as God)

and so,

*God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.*

*They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness,  
evil, covetousness, malice.*

*They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness.*

*They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil,  
disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.*

That pretty much covers everything.

This reminds us that while Paul may have started with idolatry, sexual sin and particularly homosexuality, every sin participates in the same cursed exchange.

And therefore every sin deserves death, as Paul says in verse 32:

*Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die,  
they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.*

When Paul says that they "know God's decree" of death for such things, he is saying that all humanity knows this.

Not just the Jews – not just those who have heard the message of the gospel.

Anywhere you go in the world

you will find that people know that God will judge the ungodly.

They may try hard to suppress that knowledge –

they may loudly protest that they do not believe it.

But they know.

I once sat drinking a beer with some unbelieving friends.

They believed that there is no such thing as the soul.

When you die you return to dust.

Every thought and emotion is simply a biological/chemical reaction in the brain.

We had talked about the gospel – about God's love for us in sending Jesus.

I looked at this couple – obviously in love –

and I asked them,  
“are you saying that your relationship with each other is just a chemical reaction?”  
He laughed – “Sure!”  
But she paused and said,  
“I’m not satisfied with that.  
If I ever believe in Christianity, it will be because I believe in love.”

In theory she had successfully suppressed her knowledge of God.  
But in practice, she could not.  
She had to live in the world that God *really did* make.  
She was created by God and somewhere inside her she could not escape him.

**Conclusion: to the Jew First and Also to the Greek**

As you speak “to the Jew first and also to the Greek”  
you are speaking to people who know God.  
You do not need to convince them of this.  
You do not need to try to prove it to them.  
Rather, you need to ask “where have they bought into the cursed exchange?”  
Where have they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images?  
Where have they exchanged the truth of God for a lie?  
Where have they sought to substitute an unnatural way of life?

And as you uncover the lies that they have believed,  
the perversions that they have practiced,  
and the basic idols that they have worshiped,  
do not be ashamed of the gospel,  
for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes,  
to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

You are speaking to people against whom the wrath of God has been revealed,  
because they are suppressing the truth in unrighteousness.  
But you come to them proclaiming the good news of what Jesus has done,  
because in that gospel the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith.

We are called to bring this good news to the nations.