

Sermons through

# Romans

## The Debased Mind

Part 2

*Romans 1:28-32*

*With Study Questions*

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# The Debased Mind

## Part 2

*Romans 1:28-32*

**And even as they did not like to retain God in *their* knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting;<sup>29</sup> being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; *they are* whisperers,<sup>30</sup> backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents,<sup>31</sup> undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful;<sup>32</sup> who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them (Romans 1:28-32).**

### Introduction

In an interview with the Baptist Press posted July 2, Dan Cathy, the CEO and president of the popular fast food chain, Chick-fil-A was engaged with the statement:

Some have opposed the company's support of the traditional family.

He responded:

Well, guilty as charged. We are very much supportive of the family – the biblical definition of the family unit. We are a family-owned business, a family-led business, and we are married to our first wives. We give God thanks for that. We operate as a family business ... our restaurants are typically led by families – some are single. We want to do anything we possibly can to strengthen families. We are very much committed to that. We intend to stay the course. We know that it might not be popular with everyone, but thank the Lord, we

live in a country where we can share our values and operate on biblical principles.

The national hue and cry against this statement serves well to illustrate the Apostle Paul's point in the passage before us. Young people are protesting the opening of these restaurants in their communities and some politicians have gone so far as to say they do not want to see any of these businesses open in their communities.

A casual perusing of the internet regarding this topic yields an expose' of our cultures sentiment regarding the issue. One is required to flip through a number of pages before the statement finds an advocate.

Although the turnout at Wednesday's support of Chick-Fil-A may indicate that the media, social or otherwise, with its commandeering of web pages and other outlets, catapulting their minority report to the fore, may not provide an accurate diagnosis of America's heart.

Be that as it may, a free exchange of ideas, love, tolerance, acceptance, constitutional freedoms and all the other undefined abstract words so popularly bantered about have been neatly locked away. Cathy's simply not allowed to have that opinion and continue to function as an industrious businessman.

My point in highlighting this event is not, at least here, that we might jump into action as political activists (I'm all for political activism – please don't interpret this as an endorsement of cultural lethargy or insignificance). But for now, let this serve as a cloudless, front of the classroom, sociological specimen of human nature – especially as it relates to the first chapter of Romans.

I am speaking of the debased mind of which Paul writes in verse 28. According to the Apostle Paul, the love affair cultures adopt with gender confusion is the consequence of choosing not to retain God in their knowledge. The debased mind reveals itself as debased by the engagement in **“those things which are not fitting” (Romans 1:28)**. “Not fitting” seems a mild expression, but N. T. Wright expounds on the meaning of the phrase:

Paul's view of sin, once more, is not that it is the breaking of arbitrary divine rules but that it is subhuman or nonhuman behavior, deeds that are unfitting for humans to perform.<sup>1</sup>

Paul makes three remarkable statements at the end of the chapter. I am inclined to think the closing remark, perhaps more than anything on this list, underscores the natural man's hostility toward the things of God. The statements are:

- People know that sinfulness deserves the righteous judgment of God.
- People practice sinful behavior in a brazen disregard of that judgment.
- People approve of others doing the same.

Of the third infraction Charles Hodge wrote:

This is the lowest point of degradation. To sin, even in the heat of passion, is evil; but to delight in the sins of others, shows that men are of set purpose and fixed preference, wicked.<sup>2</sup>

Wickedness arrives quite early in the list of sins highlighted by the Apostle Paul which serve to reveal where men go when they have relieved themselves of the burden of a loving, wise and righteous Creator:

**...being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; *they are* whisperers (Romans 1:29).**

### **Filled With All Unrighteousness**

Paul begins with a sweeping statement, informing us that when God is removed from the cup, only poison remains. Man is **"filled with all unrighteousness."** The vessel is full of **"all"** or **"all manner"** (ESV) of unrighteousness." Clearly Paul's list is not exhaustive. Suffice it to say that there is no corner of the universe that is free from the effects of sin.

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<sup>1</sup> N. T. Wright (*New Interpreters Bible—Romans*) p. 434.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Hodge (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*). p. 44.

Total depravity may not mean that people are as evil as they can possibly be, but it does mean that every aspect of humanity has been so infected by sin that even the righteous deeds of man are as a filthy rag before God (Isaiah 64:6). Paul will pursue this more fully in chapter three.

## **Wickedness**

**Wickedness** is also a somewhat general term with the implication of a motive forming from an evil spirit or intent. Wickedness relates to why we do what we're about to do. We are to do all things to the glory of God. We should ever examine our motives. What motivates somebody, by the way, is known only to that person and to God – and sometimes only God.

Interesting the play entitled *Wicked* was a play revealing that the wicked witch from the Wizard of Oz was indeed not wicked at all – I think she was an animal activist. In reality just the opposite in true; wickedness is a universal plague even among those who are most righteous. We need to thoughtfully examine why we do the things we do.

## **Covetousness**

**Covetousness** is the first sin that leads to every other sin. It is a desire to have more than one's due. We see in the Tenth Commandment this is often motivated by what someone else has (neighbor's house, wife, servants, etc). Covetousness is distinct from jealousy (sometimes jealousy is appropriate – covetousness never), which is a response to someone taking that which is yours; covetousness is a desire to have that which is not yours. The coveter creates the jealous.

The seed that grows the monstrous vine of coveting is the seed of discontent. It germinates from the daily disposition that God is not giving us all that He should. Discontent is crafty. It tells you that God is holding back – there is more for you if you can manage to disregard the counsel of God.

**Then the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die.  
5 For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil (Genesis 3:4, 5).**

## **Maliciousness**

Maliciousness is similar to wickedness in that it is a word describing one's motivation – again, something known but to God (and maybe the person). The malicious person desires to cause pain or hurt someone. I was recently speaking with an old friend – a very sweet man. But he is caught up in a legal battle with his neighbors that is bringing out a side in him of which he needs to be aware. He knows he needs to do what is right and, to a certain extent, legally strategic. But, as we seek to be wise and strategic, vindictiveness follows closely in our wake, just waiting to strike.

Malice is a subtle sin. It can surface in our theological discussions in the form of a “gotcha.” It's been said of Jesus that He became angry but never malicious. To the natural man, malice becomes an acceptable disposition and, according to Paul, he encourages others to be malicious as well; for the Christian malice is something to which we must be dead.

## **A Place for our Failures**

We will continue our examination of these behaviors next time, but I would like to conclude with two thoughts: One – let us recognize that Jesus never committed one infraction regarding any of these sins – never one in thought, word or deed was Jesus wicked, covetous or malicious when face to face with an environment where all humanity would and have, and did fail. Our understanding of the righteousness of Jesus should be elevated as we ponder His pure and holy conduct.

Recognizing also, that at various levels, we have all failed in each and every sin of which Paul will write, but the good news is that the righteousness of Christ is freely given to all who, by grace through faith, call upon His name. Paul is still in a line of thought where he is explaining why he is eager to preach the gospel – the good news that God has kept His promise to send a Deliverer to rescue man from sin and darkness. Let us consider the righteousness of Christ and the graciousness of God's grace as we prepare our hearts for the Lord's Supper.

## Questions for Study

1. How can a culture's disposition toward the things of God help illustrate Paul's point in this passage (pages 2, 3)?
2. What does it mean when people engage in that which is not fitting (pages 3, 4)?
3. What are the three statements we see in verse 32 about the natural man (page 4)?
4. What does it mean that people are "filled with all unrighteousness" (pages 4, 5)?
5. Can you see wickedness? Explain (page 5).
6. What causes covetousness? How can this be avoided (pages 5, 6)?
7. How is maliciousness a subtle sin (page 6)?
8. What do we learn about ourselves from the list Paul gives? What do we learn of Christ? Where can we go with our failures (page 7)?