

*Contrary to God's Design: Romans 1:24-28*

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We're in the middle of a sermon series on marriage right now, and we're moving from the Old Testament to the New Testament this morning in our biblical study of what God's design for marriage is. The question, "What is marriage?" is a hotly debated question in our culture and in our country right now. Can two men be married to one another, or two women? Our Supreme Court has given the green light to this agenda. By a slim margin, to be sure. But this is the direction our country has moved, and moved quickly.

As Christians, though, we don't look to the culture or the Supreme Court as our source of truth. We look to God's Word. And when it comes to this hotly debated issue of marriage, the Scriptures do have a very clear and beautiful vision of marriage which we've been studying these weeks. And we need to understand that even if we're the last people on the planet who believe what the Bible says, we've still got to be willing to stand with the Bible over against whatever it is that others might be saying in opposition to the Bible.

At the very beginning of the Bible, in the first 2 chapters of Genesis, we saw marriage as God designed it . . . before the Fall. Then, in Genesis 3, we saw what sin did to that first marriage, and what sin continues to do in marriages today. The past 2 weeks we've been looking in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. Two weeks ago we looked at many verses throughout the book of Proverbs, gleaning wisdom about singleness and marriage. Last week we gleaned further wisdom from Song of Solomon. We found some principles for dating and looked at the wedding celebration and the profound statement that love is strong as death.

Today we come to the New Testament and to a passage that speaks very directly and insightfully to the things happening in our country today. Of course, sin has been happening throughout history ever since the Fall. Every person is born in sin and pursues sin of various kinds, and does so relentlessly unless and until God intervenes. Romans 1, which is our passage for this morning, lists many sins. But this chapter also makes a point to unpack the specific sin of homosexual behavior. And that's what makes this chapter so relevant to our context, where homosexual behavior and so-called gay marriage is being celebrated by a great many people across our country. We need to talk about this. We need to listen

to what God's Word has to say about this. We want to know God's design for marriage. So today, and probably next week as well, we're going to look at this sin which is contrary to God's design for marriage.

### **Suppressing the Truth**

Let's start in verse 18 with this idea of suppressing the truth. It says, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness *suppress the truth.*" And then also in verse 21, "For *although they knew God*, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him . . ." We have to understand that this happens. There is truth. There is even truth that is plain for all to see. But sinners suppress that truth in order to pursue ungodly and unrighteous living.

It's amazing to observe the intellectual energy that goes into suppressing the truth. Many brilliant thinkers work tirelessly to explain the universe in a way that denies God. What a clear example that is, and a sad example, of suppressing the truth. God's glory is seen so powerfully in the world around us. That's what verses 19-20 talk about. "*For what can be known about God is plain to them, 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.*" (Romans 1:19–20, ESV)

Whether it's the stars you can see through a telescope, or the cells you can see under a microscope, it has the fingerprints of God all over it. And yet men and women in various fields of research are working diligently to explain it all from an atheistic framework.

**Stephen Meyer** is a scientist who is part of the intelligent design movement, and he has written a book entitled, *Signature in the Cell: DNA and the Evidence for Intelligent Design*. Other scientists have looked into various aspects of creation and have noted many compelling features that point to a designer. Stephen Meyer looks specifically at the information that is embedded in DNA. He comments on how scientists who are committed to the evolutionary theory have to constantly reason away the evidences of design. For instance, **Francis Crick**, who along with James Watson, discovered the DNA double helix, said that "biologists

must constantly keep in mind that what they see was not designed, but evolved.”<sup>1</sup>

That’s the suppression of truth. The evidences of design are right there in front of all of us, and so profoundly evident to those scientists who are investing incredible intellectual energy into understanding nature. These things have design written all over them, and yet so many of these scientists are repeating that mantra to themselves, “it was not designed, it evolved. As much as it looks like it was designed, that cannot be the case. That conclusion is simply unacceptable. I must believe that it evolved.”

### **Effects of Suppressing the Truth**

Let’s look, next, at some effects of suppressing the truth. When God’s wrath is manifest in leaving sinners to their own ways, there are all kinds of perversity—sexual impurity, unnatural sexual relations, homosexual activity, and a list at the end of the chapter that includes everything from disobeying your parents to murder. These are some of the effects of suppressing the truth. Humanity sees the fingerprint of God in nature, and yet suppresses that knowledge and lives like there is no God.

I’ll mention 4 things briefly that go along with suppressing the truth. First is the **failure to honor God**. Verse 21, “For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God.” This is what is so offensive about the suppression of truth. God, who deserves all honor and glory and praise, is dismissed as fiction.

And the second thing, which goes along with this, is **ungratefulness**. Verse 21 continues, “they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him.” Imagine if you spent a great deal of time knitting a sweater for one of your children to give them on their birthday, or you built a bunk bed for them, or you worked on a painting or a sculpture. And then, when the big day comes to give them the present, and they take it and enjoy it but don’t thank you at all, but instead make up some story about the sweater coming a sibling’s closet, or the bunk bed coming from a yard sale, or the painting or sculpture just appearing out of nowhere. You would be flabbergasted. You would be appalled. You would be thinking, “I made this especially for you, and you’re making up stories about it coming from somewhere else! How could you do that to me?” That would be just a taste of what God experiences day after day. Failing to honor Him and being totally ungrateful for His good provisions.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Stephen Meyer, *Signature in the Cell*, page 20.

A third effect of suppressing the truth that we see in our text is **foolishness**. This is in the second part of verse 21 and also verse 22, “they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools.” This is the insane arrogance of depravity. There is the presumption of wisdom, but it’s just an illusion. People think they are so smart, so intelligent, so up-to-date with the trendy philosophical ideas of the day, so enamored by pop-psychology. But in God’s eyes, it’s absolute absurdity. Individuals may be able to wax eloquent about relationships, morals, personal achievement, success, purpose in life, peace, prosperity. But when their message contradicts the truths and absolutes of Scripture, they are conveying foolishness. They may sound very wise. They may have all the credentials and all the success that this world applauds. They may have lots of data, lots of complex ideas, and it may sound like their conclusions are well-researched and well-reasoned. But if they’re using all of that to justify sin, then we need to recognize that they’re suppressing the truth. This is what we encounter so often in discussions about sexuality and homosexuality, which we’ll be looking at more in the following verses. All kinds of wise-sounding arguments are presented for free love and homosexual love, but it’s foolishness. I pray the Holy Spirit will give you eyes to see that.

In another passage Paul writes something very similar, even using similar language. In **Ephesians 4:17-19** he says, “Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the *futility* of their minds. They are *darkened* in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.” These are frightening descriptions of what happens when humanity suppresses the truth in rebellion against God.

A fourth effect of suppressing the truth that I’ll mention here is **idolatry**. This is what Paul is talking about when he says in verse 23 that they “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.” This is what idolatry is—turning away from the glory of God and instead worshipping created things. The phrase, “God gave them up,” is used three times in this passage (vv. 24, 26, 28). The word, “exchanged,” is also used three times. In addition to verse 23, it’s used again in verse 25, “they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.” And then also in verse 26 speaking of the sexual perversion of homosexuality—

exchanging what is natural for what is contrary to nature. This is what happens when sinful human beings suppress God's truth. Instead of seeing God's glory manifest in creation, sinners worship created things instead of the Creator.

An infamous example of idolatry was when the Israelites made the golden calf. Moses was up on the mountain hearing from the Lord, and it seemed that he was taking too long. So the people told Aaron to make gods for them. And Aaron instructed them to take off their rings and jewelry, and he made it into the image of a calf and said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" And the people made burnt offerings and peace offerings to it, and they had a feast. (Exodus 32)

**Psalm 106:20** describes the situation in these words, which Paul echoes in Romans 1. "They made a calf in Horeb and worshiped a metal image. They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass." They thought they were so clever. They thought they had such a good idea, given the circumstances. But it was blatant idolatry, utter foolishness, ungrateful toward God, and terribly dishonoring to Him.

These are the shocking displays of sin that the Bible describes for us, and which we see still in our world today. This is what we need to be rescued from. Many of us here have been rescued, by the grace of God. God has saved us from our own foolish desire to suppress the truth. He has granted us repentance of sin and faith in Jesus Christ, who died for sinners. And therefore we rejoice that the wrath of God is no longer against us. We are saved, which means that instead of punishment, we will get reward.

Some here may still be trapped in the darkness of futile thinking, in the foolishness of suppressing the truth. I pray that today will be the day of deliverance for you. Turn away from your idols, and let go of your attempts to justify your sin. Open your eyes to see the glory of the immortal God. Open your eyes to see God's eternal power and divine nature manifest in creation. And hear the call of the Gospel proclaimed right here in this passage, in verses 16-17, that the Gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. I pray that you will believe in this Good News, believe in this great Savior, today.

### **Dishonorable Passions**

Well, we're going to come now to the matter of homosexual activity in verses 26-27. But before we do that, I want to say something about how I hope that we, as a church, can

address this whole topic. I want to begin by saying that men and women who are living a gay or lesbian lifestyle are welcome here at Three Rivers Grace Church, and I hope we will all demonstrate a loving compassion toward the homosexual community. Those who are living a homosexual lifestyle are welcome here, just like those who gossip are welcome here, and those who are lustful or proud or selfish or greedy.

### Speaking the Truth in Love

Our aim is to speak the truth in love regarding all sin, proclaiming the hope that there is forgiveness in Jesus Christ. When talking about any sin, the most loving thing to do is speak the truth. It's certainly possible to speak the truth in a harsh and unloving and unhelpful way, and that's all too often the case. We don't want to do that. We want to go out of our way to communicate love and compassion and humility. On the other hand, though, it's also possible to appear loving and kind and accepting, and in doing so fail to communicate the truth. We don't want to go down that road either. If we don't clearly speak the truth we do everyone a grave disservice. It is not loving to hide the truth or distort the truth.

Christians need to speak the truth, and speak it clearly and unapologetically and in a loving, compassionate way. So let's look at the clear truth of Scripture, keeping in mind the fact that most of us know individuals who have either embraced the homosexual lifestyle or who are struggling with homosexual feelings and temptations. And if you're here this morning as someone who struggles with same-sex attraction, you struggle with homosexual desires, I want you to know that this is a church where we want to come alongside you and help you. We're not here to condemn you or judge you. Rather, we want to band together as men and women who are fighting the fight of faith—some with heterosexual temptations, some with homosexual temptations, but hopefully all of us wanting to honor God with our sexuality, as well as with every other aspect of our lives.

Let's start by briefly looking at the Old Testament passages that deal with homosexuality, and then we'll return to the verses in Romans 1. The first is in **Genesis 19:1-11**, which was read earlier in the service. This is the account of God's judgment on the city of Sodom, from which we get our word "sodomy." The men of this city, in their perversion and lust, were determined to rape these two male angels who were staying with Lot. And in the New Testament, in **Jude 7**, it says, "Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a

punishment of eternal fire.” This confirms that the sin of Sodom was sexual in nature and was unnatural.

The Old Testament also explicitly condemns homosexual behavior. In **Leviticus 18:22** the Lord says, “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.” And in **Leviticus 20:13**, “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them.” Homosexual acts are categorically condemned under the Old Covenant, and that’s how the Israelites were to deal with those sins in that particular time.

### Romans 1

Moving to the New Testament, Romans 1 is probably the clearest statement on homosexual activity in the whole Bible. Notice again in verses 21-23 the general problem Paul is addressing. He is addressing the problem of people exchanging worship of God for worship of images of ourselves. That’s the fundamental problem. In verse 23 it’s exchanging the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. In verse 25 it’s exchanging the truth about God for a lie and worshiping and serving the creature rather than the Creator. Again, it’s substituting self-worship for God-worship. It’s ignoring the Creator of all things and instead following a lie that says the creation is worthy of worship. And then Paul narrows in on a specific and vivid portrayal of this self-worship. Verse 26 says that God gave them up to these dishonorable passions. And then Paul describes the sin of homosexual activity, first speaking of women, and then men. Pretty clear what Paul is talking about here, right? And it’s clear that he is condemning this kind of behavior as sinful.

### Gay Activism and the Bible

Gay activists who want to justify the gay lifestyle and who also want to hold on to the Bible in some way, treat these texts in different ways. Some would say that Paul is only referring to homosexual activity that is promiscuous and non-committed. Or some say this refers to homosexual rape or the sexual abuse of young boys. But, they would say, when Paul condemns homosexual acts, he is not speaking against long-term, committed, homosexual relationships.

Others argue that Paul was unaware of what we now know about sexuality. He didn’t use terms like heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, etc. He didn’t know about sexual

orientation, and he wouldn't be so closed-minded if he could understand things the way we do in the modern world.

These are further examples of suppressing the truth. As creative as those explanations are, it's impossible to get around the plain truth of what Paul is saying here. He is talking about any kind of homosexual activity. It doesn't make any sense to limit the scope of his comments to only certain types of homosexual behavior. Any kind of sexual activity that is female with female or male with male is contrary to nature and contrary to God's design.

It's a futile endeavor to try to hold on to the Bible and also endorse the gay lifestyle. Therefore other gay advocates address the issue differently, by saying that these passages are culturally bound and no longer in force for Christians today. Or others directly oppose the biblical teaching on this issue, even calling for these passages to be removed from the canon.<sup>2</sup> As Christians, we believe in the truth of God's Word, and we are not at liberty to edit the sacred text. We submit ourselves to God's truth, to God's commands, even when they are countercultural, even when it is uncomfortable, even when it goes against our own personal sinful inclinations.

### Genetic?

Another question that comes up in these discussions is: What if certain people are genetically prone to homosexuality? What if individuals are physically wired to have this orientation? Maybe I'll say more about this next Sunday. But I'll just say briefly here: It's certainly true that many individuals have an attraction toward the same sex. Whatever the immediate causes might be, if any causes are even apparent, the thing we need to remember is: we live in a fallen world. Humans are totally depraved. Our minds, our wills, our physical bodies. Therefore, appealing to the fact that some people have a disposition toward homosexual attraction is not an argument for condoning homosexual activity. Rather, it is simply evidence of the Fall. We all have dispositions toward certain sins, but that doesn't mean we are right in pursuing those sins. And the person inclined toward same-sex attraction is not right in acting on those temptations.

Getting back to the text of Romans 1, Paul mentions several other sins in verses 29-31, but why do you think he addresses homosexuality so fully here in his point about

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<sup>2</sup> See quotes by William M. Kent and Gary David Comstock in Albert Mohler's article, "The Compassion of Truth: Homosexuality in Biblical Perspective." [www.albertmohler.com](http://www.albertmohler.com)



worshipping God rather than self? He's making a point about true worship versus self-worship. So why does he tie in this detailed description of homosexuality as an illustration of the dishonorable passions that God gave sinners up to? I believe this is connected to the analogy of the husband-wife relationship to the Christ-church relationship. God designed marriage to be a living drama of Christ's relationship to the church. And when the husband and wife are fulfilling their respective roles, that one-flesh union highlights the beauty of the Gospel. We need to see the positive purposes of God in marriage, and we also need to recognize the distortions of that design in homosexual behavior.

### Christ and the Church

When a man looks to another man for sexual intimacy, or a woman to another woman—this is the breakdown of God's design. This is the antithesis of God's plan. So on the one hand the beautiful sexual union of husband and wife is a portrayal of the spiritual intimacy experienced by the church in worshipping Christ. On the other hand, the sexual inversion of turning to the same sex is a portrayal of self-worship.

Homosexual activity is the opposite of God's plan for our sexuality, and it is a picture of the spiritual disorder that comes from "exchanging the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man."

And that's why this is a gospel issue. This is not merely a moral issue. This is not merely a social issue or a political issue. It certainly is an important issue on all those levels, but it rises to an even higher level as well in its significance. This is a gospel issue, because God has chosen to reveal Himself and reveal His glory in our manhood and womanhood and in our sexuality. Ephesians 5 speaks of the relationship of a husband and wife as intended by God to be a display of Christ's relationship to the church. And 1 Corinthians 6 speaks of sexual union as a pointer to the believer's union with Christ. Not that there's anything sexual about one's relationship with Christ, but there are these powerful examples that God has placed in this world which point to profound spiritual realities.

The piece of the picture that Romans 1 adds is the fact that unnatural sexual behavior, homosexual activity, is a rebellion against God's design and points in the opposite direction of where our sexuality is supposed to point. Human sexuality is supposed to be part of a life-long marriage between one man and one woman, and thus it glorifies God by illustrating Christ's eternal love for the church. When human sexuality deviates from God's plan, it

dishonors God. And specifically in the sin of homosexual behavior, this becomes an illustration of self-worship.

So whatever your sexual issues are, whatever your temptations are, I hope you can see that this is not just a matter of God telling you, “Do this, and don’t do that.” There certainly is a clear right and wrong here. But I want us to see something even beyond that. God made us in such a way that we are male and female. He made us as sexual beings. He ordained the institution of marriage. And all of this is for His glory, to display His majesty, and to communicate the Good News of Jesus Christ, the bridegroom, laying down His life for His bride, the church.

Whatever you may be struggling with this morning, I pray that message will give you hope. I pray that you’ll recognize your need for a Savior and put your hope in Jesus Christ who died in our place to pay the penalty for our sins – sexual sins and all the rest. I desperately want this sermon to be a message of hope and compassion and healing, not a message of condemnation. So if you hear this as judgmental or mean or harsh, please talk to me afterwards and give me the chance to explain myself, and explain Scripture, further. Our God is very gracious. He is a God of truth and love, and we aspire to be a church that likewise speaks the truth in love.