

DRAFT THREE – THE FOREST AND THE TREE – ROMANS 1

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What is a reprobate mind anyway?

Reference passages: Paul's letter to the Romans

INTRODUCTION

When discussing the Bible's view on homosexuality as it relates to the life of Christians, there are many who will skip the Old Testament prohibitions and go straight for Romans. Why? Many of us have been taught that when Jesus died and was resurrected the Old Covenant was fulfilled. At the moment of Jesus' death on the cross, the veil that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple of Jerusalem split in two from top to bottom (God to man). Not only were we given a direct route to God, but we were freed from the strictures of the Law.

Many New Testament Christians abandon arguments over Sodom and Gomorrah or Levitical *abominations* in favor of Paul's perceived condemnation of homosexuals. However, a new pitfall opens from this approach. By ignoring the history in which the Old Covenant was established, we cannot properly understand the New Covenant.

In this chapter, we will examine Paul's letter to the Romans. As we study the Scriptures and examine the times and culture for which they were written, we will find:

- Paul wrote Romans to introduce his gospel and to lay the groundwork for setting up a base of operations in Rome for a missionary journey to Spain.
- The Roman Christians were a mix of Jews and Gentiles whose disparate cultural values were a potential source of tension in the church. Paul wanted to reach both elements and so united them as sinners, sharing a common predicament.
- Any heart attitude or action that places a barrier between us and God is a *sin*.
- Jewish ceremonial law and tradition make a distinction between ritual *impurity* and *sin*. Paul's introduction to Romans plays to this sensibility to persuade one faction of his audience.
- While many believe that Paul refers to lesbianism in **Romans 1**, he actually refers to prostitution in pagan temples and shrines.
- Paul's reference to homosexuality in **Romans 1** is a further description of the rituals of the shrine prostitutes.
- While it is likely that Paul did not approve of homosexuality, his objection was based on his cultural heritage and his understanding of same-sex acts in the context of pagan ritual.
- Viewing **Romans 1** in the context of pagan excesses, we see that Paul's message is that by making idols out of animals, humans open themselves to sexual compulsions that are little different than the rutting of animals in heat.

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- To stage his appeal to the Jewish Christians of Rome, Paul uses Hellenistic Stoicism and couches his discussion in terms of “natural use” versus “unnatural.”
- Throughout his letter, Paul gradually redefines what is natural and unnatural by showing that the categories of men mean nothing to God.

ZOOM OUT...

Christianity did not simply arise in a vacuum. Most of the New Testament authors were *Jewish* converts, familiar with the Law and the Prophets from childhood. When they went to the synagogue to study the word of God, it was the Old Testament which was read by the teachers. So to truly understand the New Testament, it is imperative that we acquaint ourselves with the culture that produced it.

Before Paul became a great missionary for the gospel of Christ, he was first Saul, the persecutor of Christian Jews. From his point of view at that time, the Jewish Christians preached heresy in proclaiming that Jesus was the Messiah whom the Jews had so long awaited. Saul was “circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee.” (**Philippians 3:5, NIV**) He was intimately familiar with the inner workings of the Jewish culture and mindset.

After his experience on the road to Damascus, Saul’s name was changed to Paul and his mission in life took a 180-degree turn. No longer persecuting the early Christians, Paul was sold out for Jesus Christ, having died to himself and been raised up in a new life. However, this does not mean that Paul simply forgot everything of his heritage. What a tragic mistake that would have been! Instead, Paul used his knowledge and experience in pursuit of new goals that God revealed to him. As with all of us, God was intimately acquainted with Paul from before his birth and had prepared in advance good works for Paul to do.

To understand what Paul is saying in **Romans 1**, we must step back and take a look at the larger picture. In **Romans 16**, Paul wraps up his letter with personal greetings to many friends and acquaintances. Analysis of the list indicates that the Christians of Rome were both Jews, such as Priscilla and Aquila, and Gentiles.¹ Greek names account for about two thirds of the list. Ten of the addressees carry slaves’ names.

For many years the Jews had resented the rule of the Romans. There were frequent riots against Roman authority which the Roman army easily crushed. Galilee itself had been a hotbed of revolution for many years. To Rome, there was no distinction between Jews and Jewish Christians. However, these two groups were in conflict with each other.

¹ The word *Gentile* in Romans is a translation for two separate Greek words: *ethnos*, a tribe or people, and *ellên*, or *Hellen*, a Greek. In both cases, the broader sense is a non-Jew.

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According to the Roman biographer Suetonius, the Jewish community of Rome was at odds over someone named “Chrestus.”² As a result of the unrest, Emperor Claudius exiled the Jews from Rome some time between 49 and 52 CE. After Claudius’ death in 54 CE, the ban lapsed and the Jewish population began to filter back into the city. Jewish Christians returned home to discover a church that had continued to grow and flourish during their absence – a church in which Jewish traditions and customs had been absent for several years. The Christians of Rome found themselves in a delicate situation, following the same Lord, yet embracing different cultural values.

In his first recorded work, the letter to the Galatians, Paul had addressed a similar situation. Jewish missionaries had arrived in Galatia after his church planting endeavors and insisted that the Gentiles needed to be circumcised in order to truly become followers of Christ. Paul vigorously denied their claim and appealed to the apostles in Jerusalem. Though the council of Jerusalem finally settled the controversy, word had already spread about the missionary to the Gentiles who had forsaken his proper Jewish upbringing and kept company with pagans.

At the time of his writing (middle to late 50s CE) Paul had not yet been to Rome. However, rumors of the circumcision conflict and questions regarding the role of Jewish law in the life of Gentile Christians had been carried to other churches. Paul used his letter to the Romans to dispel any misconceptions about his teachings by providing a systematic exposition of his theology. He also hoped to prepare the way for his arrival and lay the groundwork for using Rome as a base of operations from which to launch a missionary campaign to Spain. Because Paul was using this letter to introduce himself and his message, Romans is his most lengthy and well-defined work regarding the good news of Jesus Christ and salvation through the grace that God extends to us.

NOTES ON SEXUALITY IN FIRST-CENTURY ROME

In Paul’s day it was considered a disgrace for a man to be the passive partner in anal intercourse with another man. While it is true that the Greeks and Romans practiced male to male anal intercourse, these acts were regulated by a rigidly defined social order. A man was allowed to participate in anal intercourse as the active partner with a youth because the youth was of a lower social standing. Likewise, a citizen could also play the active role in intercourse with a slave.

The socially defined function of a woman was to be penetrated by a man. Any man thus penetrated was relegated to a lower status, as though he was a woman. A citizen would lose his status in society if he were to engage in the passive role in anal intercourse. This would be true whether the active partner was a youth, a slave, or another citizen. Because of the disgrace associated with the perceived loss of manhood, sex between two men of the citizenry was not socially acceptable.

² *Chrestus* is commonly interpreted as a misspelling of the Latin *Christus*, from the Greek *Christos*. The English word *Christ* is derived from these forms, meaning “anointed one,” a translation of the Hebrew *mashiyach* or “messiah.”

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Jewish custom and culture held this same belief, as evidenced by both the story of Ham and Noah³ and King Saul's insistence on suicide rather than being subjected to rape by Philistine soldiers.⁴ For this reason, Levitical prohibitions against homogenital contact refer only to men and specifically ban anal intercourse, or "lying with mankind as with a woman."

For many people today, this belief is still the same. Much of the visceral homophobia of our society is based on a deeply seated fear and disgust for what people imagine homogenital acts must be like. There is a marked understanding, even among school-aged children, that any boy or man who engages passively in a homosexual act must somehow be less than a man.

Judging from the attitudes of the Greco-Roman world in which Paul lived, as well as the cultural values of his Jewish heritage, it is doubtful that Paul would have endorsed homogenital acts. As we will see below, his only frame of reference for discussing these acts is in situations described above and the ritual prostitution of pagan temples.

ZOOM IN...

In the 16 chapters of the letter to the Romans, Paul mentions homosexual practices in one verse in relation to men only. Through years of misinterpretation, a general idea is held today that one other verse also condemns lesbianism.

*For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompence of their error which was meet. **Romans 1:26,27 (KJV)***

The view of most conservative theologians of our time is summed up by a quote taken from Donald C. Stamps, whose commentaries I study regularly as a part of my Bible study: "A primary sign of God's abandonment of any society or people is that they become obsessed with sexual immorality and perversion."⁵ Paul's message agrees with this assessment; however, we must lay aside our traditional interpretations to accurately see what Paul means.

My own experience in discussing Paul's statements in Romans 1 has been that people concentrate on their perceptions of the words used in the passage: "shameful lusts" (NIV), "vile affections" (KJV), "against nature" (NIV), and finally "a depraved mind" (NIV, NAS). I have found that once we get down to a level of tossing these words back

³ Genesis 9:20-27

⁴ 1 Samuel 31:4; 1 Chronicles 10:4

⁵ Full Life Study Bible, page 1709, commentary on **Romans 1:24**.

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and forth, the discussion becomes futile. Paul's message of God's love and the grace extended to all sinners is nowhere to be found. We have lost the forest for a single tree.

Several passages in the New Testament warn us of the trap that results in quarreling over words and splitting hairs about the Law (1 Timothy 1:3, 4; 1 Timothy 6:3-5; Titus 3:9). Rather than focusing on love with a pure heart and good conscience, we abandon our calling and enter into meaningless talk. Debates become heated, accusations are made, and suddenly all our higher Christian calling flies off out the window.

I therefore propose that we step back from this passage again and take a look at Paul's entire message to the Romans. From this overview, we can then return to the first chapter and look at the passage above in context. As part of our study, it will be necessary to closely examine the Greek words that Paul uses in his exposition. Only through our diligent study will we be able to rightly divide the word of truth.⁶

WHAT IS SIN?

There are libraries of theological works written on the nature of sin, not to mention the various opinions held by us all. Ask ten people what sin is, chances are you'll get ten different answers. Rather than get caught up in tomes of philosophy, let's take the following simple definition and examine it:

sin - noun

- transgression of a religious or moral law, especially when deliberate
- Theology.
 - deliberate disobedience to the known will of God
 - a condition of estrangement from God resulting from such disobedience
- something regarded as being shameful, deplorable, or utterly wrong⁷

As seen in the definition above, there are several different common connotations to the word *sin* as viewed in our secular society. To avoid any misconception during our study, I want to offer a simple definition to guide us:

Sin is any heart attitude or action that puts a barrier or distance between us and God.

There are two reasons that we want to be careful to make sure that we understand this concept. First, many people mistake anything they happen to think of as "bad" as a sin. This opens the door to a lot of finger-pointing and debate over the exact nature of sin and arguments over any number of manmade rules for living a "good" life. So let's focus on the basics: *anything that we harbor in our hearts or do that distances us from God is a sin.*

⁶ **2 Timothy 2:15**

⁷ "sin¹" from *Dictionary.com* <<http://www.dictionary.com/cgi-bin/dict.pl?term=sin&r=1>> [Accessed June 4, 2002].

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The second reason we want to clarify what we mean by *sin* is that religious and nonreligious folk alike often build a false dichotomy between the “saved” and “sinners.” In order to understand the message of Romans, we will have to understand that we are all sinners. All of us, no matter how perfect we would like to think we are, have moments when we either harbor things in our hearts or act out in such a way as to estrange ourselves from God. But there’s hope!

PAUL’S GOOD NEWS: REDEMPTION THROUGH CHRIST JESUS FOR SIN

Romans is divided into several sections that can be briefly outlined as follows:

- both Gentiles and Jews have sinned and are under God’s wrath
- no one can be justified and escape the wrath of God apart from the gift of righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ
- through faith in Christ we have died to our old selves and to striving to measure up against the Law
- we are being transformed through the work of the Holy Spirit
- in spite of initial rejection of Christ by the Jews, God is making a way for the ultimate salvation of both Jew and Gentile
- the transformation of our lives through the work of the Holy Spirit is seen in the expression of righteousness and love in all areas of our lives (social relationships with other believers and our neighbors, relationships to government, and between Jews and Gentiles)

At the end of the letter, Paul writes about his future plans and sends greetings, followed by a general warning note and a doxology (word of praise).

This is a bare bones overview of the book of Romans. If you haven’t taken the time to read the entire letter, I strongly suggest that you do so. (It is less than 20 pages long in a Bible without commentaries.) This small investment of your time could change your life forever. For the serious student of the Bible, there are many good, full-length commentaries that have been written to aid you in an in-depth study.

FOCUS: ALL HAVE SINNED⁸

In the first three chapters of Romans, Paul describes the predicament of all people: every last one of us has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. As a result of our sin, no one among us can claim that through our own righteousness we can be accepted by God. This is the cornerstone of our understanding of the gospel today. In a later letter to the Ephesians, Paul put it this way:

*For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:
Not of works, lest any man should boast. Ephesians 2:8,9 (KJV)*

⁸ Romans 3:23

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For most Christians today, this is fairly straightforward. But that's because this is the way in which we have been taught from our earliest spiritual education. For the Jews of Paul's day, things were quite different. In **Exodus 19-24**, God established the Sinaitic or Mosaic Covenant with the children of Israel. God pledged to bless and protect Israel on the condition of Israel's total consecration. God would continue to bless the Hebrews as long as they remained loyal. The covenant contained many rules and regulations that were augmented over time. The priests and teachers of the Law eventually reinterpreted and expanded the Law into a system that only the most diligent follower could maintain.

By Jesus' time, the Pharisees had created a sect that emphasized strict adherence to both the written letter of the Mosaic Law and the oral traditions passed down for many generations. The result was an enormously complex set of rules and regulations that only the most dedicated adherent could possibly hope to follow. For the Pharisees, visible acts had become the means of their salvation.

Jesus condemned this heavy load that the teachers of the Law had tied on the backs of God's people.⁹ He taught that through being overly concerned with outward appearances, the Pharisees had neglected their own spiritual state and lost sight of love for God and their fellow human beings, which had been the entire point of the Law and the Prophets. Jesus taught that salvation was not a matter following rules, but of having a pure heart before God.

Paul's conflict over circumcision of new Gentile Christians was also based on a rejection of the idea that observing the Law can in any way guarantee our salvation. (This is the crux of the message in the book of Galatians.) He also warned of the futility of observing religious holidays, traditions, and laws concerning food in an attempt to "earn" righteousness through one's own deeds.

Understandably, this was a hard pill for the Jews to swallow. They had spent their entire lives observing the Law. From their childhood they had been taught that good Jews don't talk to Gentiles. They knew what days they were to work and what days they were to rest. They had followed strict rules concerning what they could eat and what was "unclean." This conditioning was so deeply engrained that Simon Peter *argued with God* about the appropriateness of breaking kosher dietary rules when God presented him with a vision of unclean animals and commanded that he kill and eat (**Acts 10**). How was Paul to break through the resistance to his message of grace when the Jewish constituency of his audience was convinced that adherence to the Law was the way to their salvation?

Paul's strategy was ingenious: he chose to strike at the heart of the Jewish argument of superiority to the Gentiles by exposing the inherent futility of trying to attain righteousness (and by extension, salvation) through observance of the Law. As noted earlier, God had prepared this work for Paul from before Paul was born. And in the life

⁹ **Matthew 23**

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school of training, God had also equipped Paul for the task at hand. Paul's former life as a Pharisee gave him impeccable credentials on which to stand while speaking about the Law. And his upbringing provided the keys to understanding his fellow Jewish Christians, allowing him to disarm them with familiar language before making his point in a way that they would not soon forget.

THE STAGE IS SET

In **Romans 1:18-32**, Paul speaks at length regarding the history of the Gentiles. Although God revealed himself to Abraham and chose the Hebrews as his own people, Paul asserts that all of creation points to the eternal power and divine nature of God. But in the spite of the powerful witness of all of nature, the pagans did not glorify God. Rather, they turned to their own thinking and began to worship the creation itself, making idols in the forms of men, birds, animals and snakes.

In the Ancient Near East, Canaanite fertility cults occupied the land where the Israelites settled after their exodus from Egypt and subsequent desert wanderings. As a part of their worship practices, both male and female sacred prostitutes devoted their lives and bodies to their gods through sexual acts with temple patrons. The prohibition of **Deuteronomy 23:18** against the "hire of a whore" and the "price of a dog (male prostitute)" (KJV) refers to these practices.

Sacred prostitution was by no means a practice unique to Canaan. When the Greek historian Herodotus first encountered the fertility cults of the Ancient Near East in the fifth century BCE, he mistakenly identified them as followers of Aphrodite, goddess of love, to whom cult prostitutes also dedicated their lives in the temples of his homeland.

The fertility cults of the Romans were much the same. The center of Rome featured the Capitoline hill on which stood the temples of Jupiter and Juno. Juno was the Roman goddess of women, childbirth and the moon. As protector of the state, she was portrayed as a standing matron, sometimes with military characteristics¹⁰ – another interesting comparison to the goddesses Inanna and Ishtar, who held similar roles in the religious practices of the Sumerians and the Semitic tribes of Canaan who succeeded them as the dominant power of the Ancient Near East.

Ancient Canaanite cults also employed male sacred prostitutes (referred to in the KJV as "sodomites"). These men engaged in sex as part of reenactments of myths and in worship in the fertility cults of Baal and Asherah/Ashtoreth. The prohibitions against anal intercourse between men in **Leviticus 18:22** and **20:13** are a direct response to these practices.

Paul's asserts that the results of idolatry are "uncleanness" (KJV) of the heart that is manifested through the ritual sexual activities of the pagan worshipers. He describes the

¹⁰ "Juno" *Encyclopædia Britannica* <<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article?eu=45201>> [Accessed May 10, 2002].

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ceremonial prostitution of the fertility cults and the homosexual relations practiced as part of their worship (the *abomination* of the Levitical prohibitions) as by-products of desires that burn out of control in the hearts of those who have turned away from God.

Paul further describes how God abandons the idolaters to unfit minds that could no longer pass the test of righteousness. He goes on to catalog an extensive list of sins that resulted from their darkened condition and reminds his audience that the due penalty under the Law for this list of offenses is death.

But as Van Johnson points out, what a modern reader might have missed in Paul's description of the plight of the Gentiles is the echo of the arguments used by Jewish apologists of the time who were trying to convince the Gentiles of the truth of Judaism.¹¹ In effect, Paul was wooing the Jewish Christians with words that appealed to their belief in the correctness of their lifelong cultural and religious faith.

Paul also makes use of the rhetoric of Stoicism, a popular philosophy of both Greek and Roman culture of the period. Stoics maintained that the invisible God of the universe is perceivable through the creation and can thus be comprehended by the rational mind. They believed that perception is the basis of true knowledge and that through perception of the material world around us, humankind is able to discern the order of the universe (its nature). To live in tranquility and peace of mind, it is necessary to live "according to nature," which was defined as following the perceived patterns of the universe. To go "against nature" was to deviate from what was perceived as the norm.

In **Romans 1:18, 19**, Paul uses Stoic philosophical arguments to assert that God was accessible to the pagans through observation of their surroundings. He further plays with Stoic constructs when he discusses "natural use" and acts that are "against nature" (KJV) when describing the sexual practices of the fertility cults in **verses 26 and 27**.

Thus, the trap is laid: the Jewish audience has been sufficiently flattered and disarmed by Paul's rhetoric. He has appealed to their sense of superiority to the unwashed Gentile masses and has echoed the Old Testament polemicists who decried the idols of Israel's neighbors as deaf and dumb images of wood, metal and stone. Finally, he has appealed to the Jew's understanding of the Law to assert the "unclean" nature of the Gentiles. ***And that, dear reader, should be your tip-off that something is not right with this argument...***

Paul has already written extensively to the Galatians about the futility of observing the Law in hopes of proving oneself righteous. It would be inconsistent for him to point to the Law now as a basis for condemnation of the Gentiles. But the Jewish Christians of Rome would not have made this jump.

¹¹ *Full Life Bible Commentary to the New Testament*, p 708.

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SLAP! RIGHT UPSIDE THE HEAD ☺

The tide abruptly changes with the introduction of Chapter 2:

You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else.

Romans 2:1a

Though he had taken what amounts to 14 verses in our annotated copy of Romans to describe the fallen state of the Gentiles, Paul proceeds to spend the next chapter and a half describing the state of the Jews.

Paul tells the Jews that in the same way that God judges the sins of the Gentiles, he also judges their sins. There is no double standard with God: all will stand or fall by the same measure with no regard to favoritism. In the end, Jesus Christ will judge all people. Did they spend their lives following God or did they follow sin and their own self-seeking desires?

In the arguments that Paul had carefully mimicked regarding the Gentiles, he had pointed to ritual impurity (uncleanness) of the Gentiles as determined by the Law. At the same time, he appealed to the Jews' pride in being the chosen people of God. They enjoyed a special relationship and held the Law up as the basis for that bond. But the Jews were also human: they stole, committed adultery, and held tight to their "little gods" that they put before their relationship with God. In spite of the Law, they were no better than the Gentiles they deigned to judge.

Paul boldly proclaims that all of their observance of ritual and tradition comes to nothing if the Jews still break the Law. If the actions of the Jews are indistinguishable from their Gentile counterparts, then circumcision (taken as an example of a separation between Jew and Gentile and a sign of the special relationship that the Jews had with God) makes no difference. In **Romans 2:28, 29**, Paul concludes that being a Jew is not a matter of pageantry, but of a pure heart before God.

Through acquaintance with the Law, we have learned what sin is. Without a standard of righteous behavior, we would not recognize that which is unrighteous. So the Law still remains important, having instructed us in what is godly. But its rigid standards will always bring about failure because no one is able to obey the Law 100 percent of the time.

In the end, Paul concludes that God is the God of the Jews and the Gentiles alike, and both groups are in the same boat. We have all sinned, we are all condemned under the Law, and we all need deliverance if we are to escape the just consequences of our actions.

THE SOLUTION TO OUR QUANDARY

But God didn't leave us all in a jam. God sent Jesus Christ to die for the sins of all humankind. When we give up on trying to live our lives for ourselves and surrender our

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will to Jesus, we die to our own selfish desires. Through this spiritual death something miraculous happens.

First, we are set free from the curse of the Law. As Paul points out, the Law only applies to the living. But when we die, we are released from the power of the Law. The legal contracts of this life no longer apply. Paul's example is marriage. A woman is married to a man only as long as the man is still living. Once the man physically dies, her marriage is no longer binding. Jesus confirmed this point in his discourse on marriage with the Sadducees (**Luke 20:27-38**).

In the same vein, when we give our lives to Jesus and die to ourselves, we are also set free from the Law. Our death is not physical, but spiritual. And we are spiritually resurrected through Christ Jesus as new creations. Though we still sin, the Holy Spirit begins the process of transforming our hearts and minds, changing us into the likeness of Jesus.

This is the good news that Paul preached to the Gentiles and Jews alike. Though we were all condemned by the Law, God made a way through which we could be set free from the failures of our lives and make a fresh start. This opportunity is available to all, regardless of nationality or ethnic heritage. Though first offered to the Jews because of their "most favored nation status" under the Sinaitic covenant, God has extended his offer to include all people. This is the discussion of the last part of Paul's message to the Romans; however, we will take a break to discuss Romans 1 and the language that Paul employs in his argument before returning to this point. The reasons for the break and then the transition to the last piece will be evident shortly.

WORD STUDY

As we begin this section, I feel the need to reemphasize the motivation for this study. We do not seek to split hairs over shades of meaning in words. This is the reason that we have taken such pains to establish an understanding of the people to whom this letter was written and their worldview.

To many of us, there is no difference between *unrighteousness* and *dishonour*, or *wickedness* and *unnatural relations*. But this is a part of our own worldview and should not be accepted as an objective truth. As we proceed, it is my sincere prayer that God will offer illumination to those who humbly and diligently seek it.

We will concentrate on **Romans 1:18-32**, presented here in both the KJV and the NIV translations.

KJV

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all **ungodliness** and **unrighteousness** of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness;

NIV

18 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the **godlessness** and **wickedness** of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness,

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- 19 ¶ Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed *it* unto them.
- 20 For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, *even* his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse:
- 21 Because that, when they knew God, they glorified *him* not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.
- 22 Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools,
- 23 And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things.
- 24 Wherefore God also gave them up to **uncleanness** through the **lusts** of their own hearts, to **dishonour** their own bodies between themselves:
- 25 Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen.
- 26 For this cause God gave them up unto **vile** affections: for even their women did change the **natural** use into that which is **against nature**:
- 27 And likewise also the men, leaving the **natural** use of the woman, burned in their **lust** one toward another; men with men working that which is **unseemly**, and receiving in themselves that **recompence** of their error which was meet.
- 28 And even as they did not like to retain God in *their* knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not **convenient**;
- 29 **Being filled** with all unrighteousness, **fornication**, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, debate, deceit, malignity; whisperers,
- 19 ¶ since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.
- 20 For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities— his eternal power and divine nature— have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.
- 21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.
- 22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools
- 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.
- 24 Therefore God gave them over in **the sinful desires** of their hearts to **sexual impurity** for the **degrading** of their bodies with one another.
- 25 They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator— who is forever praised. Amen.
- 26 Because of this, God gave them over to **shameful** lusts. Even their women exchanged **natural** relations for **unnatural** ones.
- 27 In the same way the men also abandoned **natural** relations with women and were inflamed with **lust** for one another. Men committed **indecent** acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.
- 28 Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done.
- 29 They **have become filled** with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips,

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- | | |
|---|---|
| 30 Backbiters, haters of God, spiteful, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, | 30 slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents |
| 31 Without understanding, covenantbreakers, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful: | 31 they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. |
| 32 Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them. | 32 Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them. |

Remember that the KJV is a literal translation, which will help us to follow its language back to the Greek texts from which it is derived. The NIV is a dynamic translation that attempts to convey the meaning of the text without a strict adherence to a one-to-one translation scheme. It is important not to lose sight of this fact because, in several instances, the traditional interpretations of the Scripture are augmented by this translation philosophy, *in spite of the fact that the Greek text does not support the addition*.

Before we begin the study of individual words, a few introductory points regarding the translations are in order:

First, notice that in verse 24, the NIV adds the word *sinful* to modify *desires*. While the KJV is clear that their lusts lead them to *ritual impurity* (the meaning of *uncleanness*), the NIV translators have added commentary which takes us out of the realm of social taboo and leads us into sin. The distinction between these two ideas is important because Paul is staging an argument for the Jewish Christians being addressed in the first part of Romans. To him, *ritual impurity* is of no consequence (as evidenced in many of NT passages, notable in both Colossians and Galatians). *Sin*, however, is a completely different matter. By inserting the word *sinful*, the NIV translators create new meaning that is not expressed in the original text, resulting in a distortion of Paul's argument that leads the modern reader to believe that he was actually espousing Jewish ritual law.

Verse 24 in the NIV adds the word *sexual* to modify *impurity*. While this augmentation appears to fit the context of the passage, *akatharsia* implies only *ritual impurity*. It is the same word used in the Septuagint Greek translations of the Old Testament to describe uncleanness in the Holiness Code. Reducing the meaning of the word to sexual impurity as a specific category – when the original word addresses a much larger category of uncleanness from Levitical law – results in a loss of accuracy regarding the general concept of uncleanness.

Verses 28-32 are an inverted text. "Being filled" in verse 39 is a perfect participle which denotes an act of completion. Only *after* the pagan subjects of the text were filled with all of the listed sins completely did God cast them off (reject them). Having been

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completely filled with all unrighteousness (list of sins here), God yielded to their free will and let them have their own understanding (not in line with his own) that resulted in unbecoming behavior. These sinful behaviors are a result of their deeper problem of *heart motives* – the root sin.

Verse 29 in the KJV lists *fornication* among the sins of the pagans. However, this is a scribal error. The early text reads *evil*. In the Greek, evil is *poneros*, while fornication is *porneia*.

TWO CLASSES OF WORDS

Because most Christians today do not come from a Jewish heritage and have not studied Jewish culture and traditions, we are at a disadvantage in understanding Paul's argument in Romans 1. The modern reader should be aware that Paul uses two different types of words to describe two different negative conditions. One group of words is an absolute moral judgment that refers to sin. The other group refers to items that are considered improper or socially taboo, but are not sinful.

An example of the difference between morally wrong and socially unacceptable in American society would be the child who picks her nose and then eats the mucous that she has removed. While this action is not a sin, it is distasteful to the vast majority of Americans. In Russia, it is proper to remove one's shoes at the door on entering a home; however, there is no moral deficiency implied by such a lack of courtesy.

In the Old Testament, many conditions which were not sin were nonetheless classified as *uncleanness*. Menstruation, sexual intercourse, shell fish and pork, touching a dead body – all of these actions or objects were part of the ritual taboo of the Law. There is nothing inherently sinful about menstruation or sexual intercourse. The undertaker is not sinful because he has contact with the dead. Most Christians can enjoy bacon and sausage without a moral dilemma. But all of these things fall into the second category that we are discussing.

With this distinction in mind, we can now examine the words used in Paul's argument concerning the Gentiles.

ABSOLUTE MORAL JUDGMENTS

In **verse 18** Paul begins by announcing that the wrath of God is revealed against all *ungodliness* and *unrighteousness*. The Greek words used here are *asebia* and *adikia* respectively. Both of these words fall into the category of absolute moral judgment.

ungodliness

asebia – closely related to the Greek verb *asebeô* used in our discussion of **1 Peter 2:6** and the adjective *asebês*.

- the three forms appear 16 times in the NT
- denote a lack of proper awe or reverence for God – something that is unholy, ungodly, or profane

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unrighteousness or wickedness

adikia – from *a* (negative) + *dike* (“right” or “just”)

- denotes something a wrongdoing or injustice that is connected with a wrongful heart motive. In other words: a sin.

Paul’s argument is presented in reverse fashion. Using the language above he tells of the state in which we find the unbelieving masses already. The wrath of God is upon them.

1:19 → God creates a universe that points to Him

1:23 → People choose the imperfect and ephemeral over God who is perfect and eternal

1:24 → God gives people over to “uncleanness” (ritual impurity)

1:25 → People choose to worship the created rather than the Creator

1:26 → God gives people over to vile affections (KJV) or shameful lusts (NIV)

1:29-32 → People are filled with every form of sin

1:28 → God gives people over to a reprobate (depraved, substandard) mind

God shows his wrath with people in three places (**verses 24, 26 and 28**), where God gives people over to something (uncleanness, vile affections, a depraved mind). At any point along this journey, the people could have repented (and many did, as we see in **1 Corinthians 6:11**). But in the absence of repentance, the final judgment is death (**Romans 1:32**). This sequence of events represents a downward slide into sin that characterizes the darkened hearts of the pagans who worshipped false gods.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF SIN

In each of the three levels of sin in Paul’s example, there is a divine punishment that people receive as a consequence of their actions. The ritual impurity, the strong desires that are deemed “shameful,” and the morally unprincipled minds of the people are the consequences (punishment) of sin – not the sins themselves. Without repentance, these people are doomed to one final judgment – eternal condemnation.

Let us examine the words used to describe the consequences of sin in greater detail:

uncleanness

akatharsia – impurity, especially ceremonial

- appears 62 times in the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament
- used 10 times in the NT
- covers instances of death, uncleanness

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- used to describe ritual impurity after sexual intercourse between husband and wife, etc.
- listed separately from iniquity in **Romans 6:19**, or sexual sins in **2 Corinthians 12:21**
- other references say to avoid as a stumbling block, but differentiate between this (unacceptable behavior) and sin as in **Ephesians 5:3, 4**

lust/desires

epithumia (**verse 24**) – a longing after or desire for; sexual desire or lust

- used 37 times in the NT
- most commonly associated with cravings of the flesh
- sometimes a strong desire for something that is good (**Luke 22:15; Philippians 1:23; 1 Thessalonians 2:17**)

orexis (**verse 27**) – desire, appetite; longing or yearning; natural affinity, tendency, inclination

- used only one time in the NT
- does not carry negative connotation in itself

dishonour/degrade

atimazo – to hold in no honor; to esteem lightly, dishonor, slight

- social value rather than a moral absolute
- used six times in the New Testament
- **Acts 5:41** uses it to characterize social disapproval that is spiritually positive

vile/shameful

atimia – dishonor, disgrace

- social value rather than a moral absolute
- used seven times in the New Testament
- **Romans 9:21** and **2 Timothy 2:20** use the term to describe chamber pots, vessels of dishonor because they hold human excrement – not to be talked about in polite society
- **1 Corinthians 11:14** uses it to describe the social standard of Paul's time that claimed that long hair on a man was a disgrace

unseemly

aschemosune – ungracefulness, awkwardness, disfigurement; indecorum, obscene, or disgraceful conduct

- used two times in the New Testament
- used to describe a shameful state of nakedness in **Revelation 16:15**

recompense

antimisthia – a return, good or bad, for anything done; requital, recompense

- used two times in the New Testament

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- used to describe an exchange, one thing for another, in **2 Corinthians 6:13**

reprobate

adokimos – cast off, rejected; not standing the test, spurious; lacking authenticity or genuineness

- used eight times in the New Testament
- each case meaning lacking authenticity or having failed a test
- *reprobate* in English carries connotations of lacking moral fortitude and, by extension, being abandoned by God to eternal damnation. These are secondary characteristics that do not appear in the Greek *adokimos*

convenient

katheko – proper, fit, becoming

- used two times in the New Testament
- carries a value judgment, but not an absolute moral value

In each of these cases, the words describe the lowered state of those who have already sinned. They are value judgments, but they are not moral judgments. While not something that we would want for ourselves or others, they are not themselves the acts that result in divine judgment.

NATURAL VS. UNNATURAL

Oftentimes the modern reader is confused by the usage of the terms *natural* and *against nature* in **verses 25 and 26**. The reader of the 21st century has long grown used to the terms *natural law* and *crimes against nature*. However, this is not the context of the words in this passage.

Remember that Paul is using the arguments of Stoicism. Stoics believed above all else that the universe was laid out in a rational and logical order. This order is accessible to all people through perception – the five senses. By observing the physical *nature* of things, a person can discern the rules that should govern his behavior as a citizen of the world order. By following the “rules,” a man does right.

Two key phrases in the dialogs of the Stoics are *kata phusin* (with nature) and *para phusin* (against nature). They respectively describe actions that follow the rationally discernible rules of the world and operate in violation of the same rules.

The word *nature* as used in **verse 25** is *phusikos*, which derives from the noun *phusis*. This is the word from which we derive the English words *physics* and *physical*. It relates to the body, as distinguished from the mind or the spirit. It also relates to material things (the *physical* world). A clear use of the word is found in **Romans 2:27**, where Paul describes uncircumcision as being “by nature,” or as the NAS renders it, “he who is *physically* uncircumcised.” This describes the material state of the individual.

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In the context of the **Romans 1:18-32**, the “unnatural” use of the woman’s body results from her strong fleshly desires to engage in the ritual prostitution observed as part of pagan fertility rites. When Paul describes the *natural use* of a woman, he is referring to childbearing.

There is a modern school of thought that interprets **verse 25** as a description of lesbianism, based primarily on the proximity of **verse 26**, which specifically mentions homosexual relations between men. However, this is not the case. There is no regulation regarding lesbianism anywhere in the Hebrew Bible or in Christian New Testament. All mention of sexual sin involving women falls into three categories: fornication (sex outside of marriage), adultery (sex in which one participant is married, though not to the other) and bestiality.

The men of **verse 26** have given up the defined and discernible use of women as objects of sexual desire and have turned to one another. Again, in the context of the entire passage, this refers to ritual prostitution as part of the worship of idols (**verse 25**). *There is no basis from which to generalize this passage as a judgment upon all homogenital contact, just as the preceding description in verse 25 cannot be used to condemn all heterogenital contact.*

We must not lose sight of the fact that *worship of the creation rather than God* was the sin of the Gentiles. The *compulsions* that they feel are the punishment. The urge to participate in ritual prostitution is a hunger that burns out of control. In modern terms, what Paul is saying is that those who choose to worship animals will end up rutting like animals.

A CLOSER LOOK: NATURAL VS. UNNATURAL

As we’ve already touched on, much of the homophobia in our society today stems from the idea that a man is somehow less than a man if he is a passive participant in a sexual act. By choosing this form of sexual expression, the man has somehow taken the role of a woman and has somehow become inferior. This argument is often couched in terms of what is “natural,” while ignoring the fact that heterosexual couples participate in various sexual acts for reasons that go well beyond procreation. Indeed, many of the acts that heterosexual couples engage in within the bonds of holy matrimony exclude the possibility of conception by their very nature.

For those who cling tightly to the terms “natural use” and “against nature,” I would like to make one other point. While writing Romans, Paul uses phrases that invoke *phusis* (physical nature) eight times. As we have seen, the first usage in **chapter 1** echoes the Stoic philosophy that the physical nature of the world is discernible through the five senses. However, let us consider the following uses:

- In **Romans 2:27** Paul notes that the *natural* state of the male penis is uncircumcised. However, under the Abrahamic covenant of **Genesis 17**, all males of Abraham’s household (and his descendants)

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were to be circumcised as an outward sign of their total consecration to God. God required the Hebrews to go *against the physical nature* of their bodies.

- In **Romans 11:21** Paul warns the Gentiles that God has not spared the *natural* branch of the olive tree (a portion of the Jews) simply because it was part of the original configuration of the tree. God has acted in spite of the perceived nature of the tree.
- In **Romans 11:24** Paul goes on to say that *against nature* (or “contrary to nature,” NIV), God has grafted a wild olive branch (the Gentiles) into the cultivated tree (his chosen people). Again, God has acted in spite of the perceived order of things.

In three instances, God has gone against the natural physical order as we have discerned it. In retrospect, the warning should be clear to us all. Paul told us in **Romans 1:22** that those who had professed to be wise had become fools. The same happens with us when we dare to think that we have figured out God’s whole plan. I am reminded of Solomon’s words:

When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe man's labor on earth--his eyes not seeing sleep day or night-- then I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it.
Ecclesiastes 8:16, 17 (NIV)

CONCLUSION

Paul meant his letter to the Romans to be a complete exposition of the good news that he preached throughout his missionary journeys. But in our ignorance of the culture and circumstances for which it was written, we have managed to wring a few small verses out of context to justify our own cultural bias against homosexuality.

Romans 1 describes the downward spiral of man into a darkened state that results from rejection of God and the worship of false gods (idolatry). The language of Paul’s argument echoes the Jewish apologists of his day, who were trying to convince the Gentiles of the correctness of Judaism. In three successive stages, God gives people over to their own selfish desires, abandoning them to the sin that they have chosen for themselves over God’s own plan for their lives.

Anal intercourse between men was recognized by the Jews as ritual taboo associated with pagan religious practices. For the Greeks and Romans, rigid societal conventions dictated the circumstances under which homogenital acts were permissible. Our own society largely reflects a similar social taboo today. However, it is important to remember that Paul was condemning *idolatry* in his argument and cited *sexual compulsion* in both men and women as the just consequences for those who exchanged the worship of God for the worship of images of people and animals.

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While it is highly likely that Paul himself did not approve of homogenital activity, the terms which he uses to describe the rituals of the pagans characterize *social disapproval* and *ritual impurity* rather than moral absolutes. Sex in itself is not sinful – rather it is the motivations behind sex that may be holy or profane.

Though Paul used Stoic philosophy and Jewish apologetics while appealing to his audience, he subscribed to neither. Through a systematic exposition of his beliefs, he showed that perfect observance of the Law is not humanly possible. Any Jew who tries to attain righteousness through observance of the Law, yet breaks even a single commandment, will reap the same judgment as a Gentile who did not even attempt to observe the Law. Paul also debunks the philosophy of the Stoics by turning their language upside-down while showing that God works in ways that go against the natural order that we perceive with our physical senses.

In the end, we are all sinners. There is not a single one of us who has ever lived up to the measure of the Law. If we had to depend on our own righteousness as our means of salvation, we would all be doomed to spiritual death and eternal separation from God. But God gave us the gift of salvation through the death and resurrection of his son, Jesus Christ. Our belief in and acceptance of the gift extended to us through Jesus Christ opens the way for any one of us to enter into relationship with God. It doesn't matter if you are Jew or Gentile, man or woman, slave or free, or even gay or straight. Jesus' offer is the same to us all! What an incredible gift from our God, who loves us so very much!

COMING UP NEXT...

What we have covered in the preceding sections on the Old and New Testament passages commonly used to condemn homosexuality constitutes a new paradigm through which we can begin to examine Christ-centered same-sex relationships. Though many denominations are beginning to explore this model, Christianity is still decidedly divided into three groups: proponents, opponents, and the undecided. We are talking about a change that would force us to reexamine centuries of church doctrine – a most daunting and uncomfortable task for those who like to have everything figured out.

As we discuss the aspects of this new paradigm, we will return to Romans again for some very sound and practical advice from our brother, Paul. Paul tells us in **Romans 14:14** that he knows and is convinced that in Christ nothing is unclean in itself. We will focus on this revelation, as well as Paul's admonition in Romans and elsewhere to avoid judging those who are convinced otherwise.

Wrapping up our study of the Scriptures that we have covered, I know and am convinced as one who is in the Lord Jesus that no sexual act is unclean in itself. But to those who think that anything is unclean, it is unclean. For this reason, we will also examine the Christian ethics associated with living a life that promotes Christian unity.

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On a final note, **Romans 14:16**, Paul tells us not to let our good be spoken of as evil. To me, this has a two-fold meaning. On the one hand, he is referring to our Christian faith. Our conduct should not undermine our message. But there is a second side to this. For if our Christian faith is misinformed and has cast judgment based on a false assumption, then we should not allow our good to be spoken of as evil. GLBT folk are also created in the image of God and, as such, God stands back and looks on us and says that the creation is very good. As Paul admonishes, let us not allow our good to be spoken of as evil. In the sections to come, we will explore ways in which to love our misinformed brothers and sisters while standing up for good.