

Romans
Broken and Decaying
Romans 1:18-32
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Good morning. Last week as we kicked off our summer preaching series on Romans I shared some background for Paul's letter to the Romans and we explored Paul's introduction. If you'd like additional background on Romans I encourage you to check out the Gospel Project's video on Romans chapter 1-4. I put a link to it in Thursday's communique, and you can also find it by googling "Gospel Project Video Romans 1-4."

Our text this morning is Romans chapter 1 verses 18-32 and I've asked ??? to read this for us. As they read, ask yourself the question, "What's being said in these verses?"

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 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 people are without excuse.

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. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. 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, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. 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. Romans 1:18-32

What stood out the most to you from today's text? Those verses are difficult to hear, because they espouse views about sexuality that run counter to our culture's beliefs, and they're also hard to read, because they identify a wide range of sins that many of us struggle

with and none of us enjoy having our weaknesses pointed out. A pastor friend of mine told me that after reading those verses from Romans 1 and preaching on this passage a committed couple in his church left the church, never to return. They said, *“If that’s what this church believes we can’t attend here.”* LGBTQ advocates have discounted Romans 1 as unloving and out of touch with what we know about how the world works today. Meanwhile, some Christians seem to delight in this chapter using the truth they see in these verses to hammer those who hold different views. In these verses Paul paints a stark picture of the sin and brokenness that’s so prevalent in our world. If we’re familiar with these verses, our tendency might be to focus on what Paul writes about sexuality in general and specifically, about homosexuality, but Paul identifies a list of over 20 sins in this passage, and then starts chapter 2 with this caution, *“You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.”*

My heart is always to faithfully and lovingly preach God’s Word. I’m committed to following Jesus’ example as we read in John chapter 1 verse 14, The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:14

Communicating grace and truth is challenging. We usually fixate on one and neglect the other. Grace apart from truth leaves us wishy washy and unrooted, while truth without grace leads us to live like modern day Pharisees who use truth as a hammer that injures people.

When I realized last week that I’d be preaching on the 2nd half of Romans 1 today, I sent the following email to our staff...

I’m cautious when preaching scriptures about homosexuality, because there is so much wounding connected to the topic, it’s such a polarizing issue and the Church typically doesn’t do well at communicating truth about sin—especially this sin—with grace. I’ll do my best with God’s help to preach truth with grace, but I’m anxious about addressing this topic. It seems there’s no way to escape the guilt, shame, anger, etc. this subject stirs up.

My prayer is that in the face of the guilt, shame and pain connected with our sexuality, the truth of God’s Word and Jesus’ presence brings confession and repentance, healing and wholeness, and ultimately reconciliation with God. I’m praying for hope, healing, and freedom.

As I read and reread Romans 1:18-32 this week, I came away with two overarching impressions. First, **The world we live in is undeniably broken and decaying.** Sin is rampant and

it's clearly demonstrated in the godlessness and wickedness that is so prevalent in our world. At least 20 different manifestations of sin are listed in these verses. Paul gives much attention in these verses to sexual sin, but he identifies many other sins as well. Sexual sin or temptation may not be your struggle, but please don't check out of this sermon. Everyone of us can identify with some of the sins mentioned in these verses.

N.T. Wright likens our world as portrayed in Romans 1 to a beautiful, large Copper Beech tree that grew on his property for years. At some point he received advice from an arborist that the tree was rotting and needed to come down before it fell and damaged property or harmed someone. He was a bit skeptical, because the tree gave little evidence of decay, so he watched curiously as the tree was felled. When the trunk of the tree was sawed into pieces, he saw that the outer 3-4 inches of the trunk was healthy, but the inside was soft and rotten and the decay extended 10-15 feet up the trunk. Wright likens this decaying Beech Copper tree to Paul's depiction of our culture—rotten from the inside out with the decay spreading up the tree.

And while the extent of our sinfulness is bad enough in its own right, Paul closes this section with the indictment, "*They not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.*" (v. 32) In other words, our world isn't just filled with sin; wrong-doing is applauded. Our culture has it backwards calling right, wrong and wrong, right.

The second impression from this passage that jumps out at me is **Our worship matters, because we become what we worship.** It might seem odd that Paul ties the prevalence of sin in our world to worship, but as we think about it, it makes sense. Look again at verses 21-24 & 28. 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. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. Romans 1:21-24 & 28

Look at the contrasts in these verses...

- People knew God, but didn't glorify Him or give thanks to Him.
- They claimed to be wise, but were actually fools.

- They exchanged God’s glory for images made to look like people and animals.
- They exchanged the truth of God for a lie.
- They worshiped created things rather than the creator.
- Since they didn’t hold on to God’s knowledge, their minds became depraved.

Several of those contrasts involve worship—exchanging worship of God for worshiping things God created. Who or what we worship matters immensely. Our worship determines where our heart—the seat of our affection lies—and it shapes our identity. What we worship is the most the most important thing about us.

The focus of these verses is sin and brokenness—to use N.T. Wright’s analogy, the tree is decaying from the inside out—but sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular, are highlighted. Why is sexuality given such prominence among this list of over 20 sins? Was Paul fixated on sex? Is God a kill joy who wants to deny his people pleasure?

I want to begin answering the question of why this passage on sin in our world seems to emphasize sexuality by quoting a statement the Apostle Paul made in his first letter to the Corinthians. Incidentally, one of Paul’s primary reasons for penning the letter was news he had received that the Corinthians were not only tolerating sexual promiscuity in their midst, they were celebrating it. Here’s what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians chapter 6...

You say, “Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both.” The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, “The two will become one flesh.” But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit.

Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies. 1 Corinthians 6:13-20

Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? 1 Corinthians 6:19

A common heresy in the New Testament, which Paul and other New Testament writers address in nearly every letter they write is that since our spirits have been renewed in Jesus, what we do with our bodies doesn’t matter. The philosophical term for that belief is dualism. Dualism separates our spirits from our bodies, claiming our spirits are what truly matter, while our bodies are temporary and unimportant. Christianity, in contrast, sees our spirit, mind and

bodies as interconnected and important. When asked what the greatest commandment was, Jesus said, *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart (emotions), soul (personality), mind (thinking) and strength (body).”* Dualism is an ancient philosophy, but it’s alive and well today. How often do we hear the message *“It’s what is in your heart that truly matters. What you do with your bodies is unimportant.”*? Our sexuality is inextricably linked to our identity as people created in God’s image. That’s why Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:19, *“All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their body.”*

Disagreements around homosexuality in our culture and in the church have been intense for some time, but recently they’ve been elevated to a fever pitch. We see these disagreements being played out in politics, in schools, in churches, in local communities, and within families. Disagreement over homosexuality has been especially painful in the church where long-standing denominations have been split in two, pastors have left denominations where they’ve ministered for years, local congregations have separated from denominations they’ve been part of for decades and even local congregations have been divided.

I’ve found N.T. Wright’s commentary on this section of Scripture particularly helpful. Wright begins by asking why Paul starts his argument about the brokenness in our world by highlighting homosexuality? As a practicing Jew was Paul particularly disgusted by homosexuality? Did he identify it specifically, because it was common in 1st Century pagan worship? Or was Paul taking the opportunity to critique the Emperor Nero and other Roman officials who were known to indulge in homosexual practice? Wright claims that Paul begins with homosexuality because he looks back to creation in Genesis 1 and says, *“This is not what males and females were created for.”* Same sex relations for Paul were indicative of the fact that the human world is out of joint from God’s intention in creating it. This brokenness is the result of God giving people freedom to follow lust wherever it leads and to worship whomever and whatever they choose. As we move further in Romans Paul points out that it’s faith we place in Jesus and God’s grace extended to us that repairs human brokenness.

Paul’s intent here is not to pile condemnation on individuals who are sinning sexually or in any of the others ways listed, but to give a picture of how broken and decaying our culture is. That’s such an important point, because the Church and Christians have often failed at this point. We’ve ostracized those struggling with same sex attraction. We’ve elevated homosexual sin above all other sin, while excusing comparable sins of adultery, pornography, sexual intimacy

before marriage and marital infidelity. Singling out homosexuality has left us open to the charge that we're lacking in love and grace.

Followers of Jesus have often been deficient in love and grace when it comes to our response to homosexuality, but that doesn't mean believing homosexuality is inconsistent with Scripture is unloving. A common critique of followers of Jesus who don't affirm same sex attraction as consistent with Scripture is that we are unloving and hate-filled. We can follow Jesus' example in not endorsing what we view as sinful behavior and yet choose to love and care for people. Jesus demonstrated this on numerous occasions in the Gospels, most notably with the woman brought to Him who was caught in adultery and with the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus spared the woman caught in adultery from stoning by her accusers, but also instructed her to "go and sin no more." And He extended grace and love to the Samaritan woman at the well even though He knew she'd had 5 husbands and was at that time living with a man who she wasn't married to.

It is important to note that Paul's thought process doesn't end abruptly at verse 32 of chapter 1. He goes on to write these words in chapter 2 that put what he just wrote in context. Listen closely to what he writes,

You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. So when you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?

But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. God "will repay each person according to what they have done." To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favoritism. Romans 2:1-11

In his 1st Century context, Paul is speaking to the tendency Jews have to judge Gentiles as less spiritual because of their lack of Godly heritage that the Jews had been blessed with, but what Paul writes is readily applicable to our context and the tendency followers of Jesus have to judge others. Listen again to what Paul writes, "*You who pass judgment on someone else have no excuse, because you do the same things. Do you think you will escape God's judgment when you judge others for the same things you do?*" Paul's question applies directly to portions of the

American Church who have been quick to condemn homosexuality as sin, while downplaying marital infidelity, couples having sex before marriage and pornography. We've passed judgment on others, while doing the same things. A related area in which we've often been unfair is equating same sex attraction with homosexual behavior. The propensity or temptation toward sinning isn't the same as sinning. I may feel the pull of greed to cheat on my taxes or to swindle someone out of money that is rightfully theirs, but that's not the same as cheating. In loving and caring for people who experience same sex attraction, we need to distinguish between a propensity toward sin and acting on that temptation.

There is so much more that could be said on these verses, but I want to conclude the sermon today by speaking to three audiences. First, to those of us who find ourselves quick to judge the LGBTQ community, God's heart of love and grace extends to all people and He calls his followers to love and care for and to extend grace to all people as well. We don't represent Jesus well when we single out specific sins as worse than others and we open ourselves to legitimate charges of hypocrisy when we critique homosexuality yet engage in lust through adultery, marital infidelity and/or pornography ourselves. God's call for each of us is to confess our sin and experience his forgiveness, and when we experience Jesus' forgiveness and grace, we can't help but extend his grace and forgiveness to others.

Secondly, I want to speak to all of us. We live in a culture that embraces sin and calls it "ok" or even "good" when it clearly falls outside of God's truth in Scripture. Our world is a tree that's rotting from the inside out, and as people who know Jesus, we're called to embrace his understanding of truth and justice, even when our culture calls right, wrong and wrong, right. Based on the vitriol and venom the Church and followers of Jesus have directed toward the LGBTQ community, we're vulnerable to the charge of being unloving. As Jesus' followers, we're called to extend love and grace to all people, but that doesn't mean we need to endorse wrong behavior. I'm convinced that some in the Church have moved to affirm homosexuality, because they've been told it's the only loving response. Love and grace don't equal endorsement and affirmation. Jesus demonstrated this on numerous occasions as He interacted with people. He loved and cared for people, even though He didn't support their choices and behaviors.

The third group I want to speak to today are those here who have in the past or are currently wrestling with same sex attraction. I want you to know first that God loves you and cares for you and He longs for you to experience his grace and healing. On behalf of Christians

who have mistreated you and have failed to love you well, I apologize and I admit that I've not always expressed Jesus' love and grace myself. I also want to emphasize again that same sex attraction doesn't equal sinful behavior. All of us have propensities toward sinful behavior. Being tempted or having a propensity toward sin isn't sinning. Too often followers of Jesus have equated propensity with behavior. A large part of my hesitancy in preaching this message is that I don't want to add to the guilt and shame some struggling with same sex attraction are already wrestling with.

As we consider the analogy of our culture being like that old, giant Copper Beech Tree that was rotting from the inside out and was in danger of toppling over. It's important for each of us to understand that analogy applies to our individual lives. You and I are that tree. All of us are broken and decaying—tempted to sin and at times sinning. It's only by the grace and mercy and forgiveness of Jesus that we can experience his healing and restoration. The Apostle Paul sums this truth up well in some verses we'll study more closely next week: *"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."* Romans 3:23 & 24 All of us have sinned; it's part of our human nature. In sinning we fall short of God's design for us, but that doesn't have to be the end of the story for any of us. We can be justified—a legal term meaning that God declares us not guilty, but righteous and accepted by Him.

"The ground is level at the foot of the cross," is a saying I love, because in our tendency to rank and rate people and their sins and to create an artificial hierarchy of "goodness," it reminds us that we all are sinners who have the opportunity to be saved by the grace of God as place our faith in Jesus, the One who lived a sinless life and died for our sins, so that we have the opportunity to be righteous before God.

May each of us know his mercy and grace and forgiveness and wholeness and freedom today!