



## **Romans 1:18-32**

**“WHAT’S WRONG WITH OUR WORLD?”**

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**“Following Christ at City Center!”**

## **I. SERMON TEXT**

### **Romans 1:18-32 (RSV)**

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles.

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

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct. They were filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's decree that those who do such things deserve to die, they not only do them but approve those who practice them.

## **II. SCRIPTURE SHEET AND SERMON**

**IIA1: ROMANS 1:18-32 "WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE WORLD?"**

Conventional Jewish Polemic vs. Gentile World

**1) vv.18-23 WRATH REVEALED: NOT GIVE THANKS TO GOD: IDOLATRY.**

18 1 For the wrath of **God** is (being) revealed from heaven //1:17a, *Wrath = Love's Active, Opposition To Evil, 11:22*  
 against **all** impiety (*asebia*) and **wickedness** (*adikia*) of men v.29, *Unrighteousness, Final Reckoning Is Under Way*  
**Rebellion** who by their **wickedness** suppress the truth (i.e. about God). **Our Choice, Truth Available & Denied, Therefore Culpable**  
**Truth Is The First Victim, Shows God As Active In The World**  
 19 2 Since (*dioti*) what can be **known** about God is plain to them, **Humanity As A Collective, Ps. 8, Acts 17:27-28**  
 because God has shown it to them. **General Revelation In Creation; Truth Is Plain/Shown/Perceived (3x)**  
**Grace Operative Through Nature, In Perception**  
 20 3 Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, **God Is; We Are Accountable**  
 namely, his eternal power and deity (godhood), **God Is, Is Powerful, Is Other Than Creation**  
 has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. **Invisible God Thru Visible Creation**  
 So they are **without excuse**; **Know That The World Is Not God //Wisd. Sol. 13:1-5, 6-9**  
 v.21 = Positive Response We Refuse To Make  
 21 2' for although (*dioti*) they *knew God* **Ignorance Of God Is Deliberate, Not Fated**  
 they did not honor (glorify) him as God or give thanks to him, **= asebia, Our Purpose Is Worship Of God**  
**(Self)** but they became (were made) futile in their thinking **Ps. 94:11, Ignored Object Of Primary Contemplation**  
**Perception** and their senseless **minds** (hearts) were darkened. **Wis. Sol. 11:15, Idolatry Leads To A Corrupted Heart**  
 22 1' Claiming to be wise, they became (were made) fools, **If Not God, We Worship Creation Itself: Homo Liturgicus**  
 23 and EXCHANGED the glory of the immortal God **Became sophomores! 1:14, Exchanged (vv. 23, 25, 26b)**  
**Idolatry** for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles. **Wisd. Sol. 11:15-16, Many Pagan Temples, Ps. 106:20, Jer. 2:11**  
**=adikia, Image for Glory, Life for Death, Ps. 14:1, 53:2**  
**Now Worship What Intended To Rule, Gen. 1:26-28**

**2) v.24 GOD GAVE THEM UP: HETEROSEXUAL IMPURITY.**

Wisd. Sol. 14:12-14, 26-27

24 Therefore **God gave them up** in the lusts of their hearts to impurity (uncleanness), **Ps. 81:12, ABANDONED**  
**Immorality 1, 2** to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, **Image Marred, Honorable Desire/Dishonorable Use**  
**Degraded Mind Leads To Degraded Body**

**3) v.25 Core Of The Problem And Cure: Idolatry Or Worship? //vv.22-23.**

25 because they EXCHANGED the truth about God for a (the) lie **Exchanged/Given Up (3x)**  
 and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator,  
 who is blessed for ever! Amen. **At Center Paul Worships!**

Idolatry Has Sexual, Rational, Social, Eternal Consequences

**2') vv.26-27 GOD GAVE THEM UP: HOMOSEXUALITY IMPURITY.**

Restraint Is Withdrawn

26 For this reason **God gave them up** to dishonorable passions. **Dishonorable Passion, ABANDONED**  
**(Nature)** Their women EXCHANGED natural relations **God Lets Us Stew In Our Increasingly Perverse Juices**  
 for unnatural, **Exchanged: Glory/Images, Truth/Lie, Natural/Unnatural**  
 27 and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women **Lev. 18:22, 20:13**  
 and were consumed with passion for one another, **Sin =Out Of Control Appetites, Inflamed, 1 Cor. 7:9**  
 men committing shameless acts with men **From Dignity To Bondage**  
 and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error. **Addiction, Wrath Is Intrinsic**  
**T. Gad. 5:1, Wis. Sol. 11:16, 14:30**

**1') vv.28-32 DEATH SENTENCE DESERVED: NOT ACKNOWLEDGE GOD.**

28 1 And since they did not see fit to acknowledge **God**, **Mind (v.28), Conduct (vv.29-31), Ps. 106:41**  
**God gave them up** to an unfit (worthless) **mind** and to improper conduct; **12:1-2, Mind + Deed, ABANDONED**

Tear Social Fabric; Life Poisoned, Not Causes Of Wrath But Evidence

29 2 they were filled with **all** manner **Vice List, Wisd. Sol. 14:23-27, Evil Flowers (21)**

**Corruption** of **wickedness**<sup>1</sup> (*adikia*), evil<sup>2</sup>, covetousness<sup>3</sup>, malice<sup>4</sup>;/ **General Categories: 4 Feminine Dative Nouns**  
**These Vices Are Signs Of Wrath Already Present**  
**(Others)** 2' full of envy<sup>1</sup>, murder<sup>2</sup>, strife<sup>3</sup>, deceit<sup>4</sup>, malignity<sup>5</sup>;/ **5 Genitive Nouns: Belief Effects Behavior**  
 they are gossips, <sup>30</sup>slanderers, / haters of God, insolent/  
**12 Adjectival Nouns, Masc. Plural In 6 Pairs**  
 haughty, boastful, / inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, / **Echoes Of Wisd. Sol. 14:23-29**

v.1 = 2 a vices, Last 4 Adjectives Begin With a-privative

Alienation From God Is Made Visible In Corrupt Life

32 1' though they **know** God's **decree** that those who do such things **deserve to die**, **v.20, Wis. Sol. 14:22, Promote Evil**  
 they not only do them **vv.28-32 = 1 Gk. Sentence, "This is the Gentile World we all know."**  
 but approve those who practice them. **Is. 5:20, Suppress Truth/Promote Lie, Base Mind, Corrupt Actions, Recruit Others**

## WHAT’S WRONG WITH THE WORLD?

*“Claiming to be wise they became fools....”*

The fate of all who ignore the Living and True God.

### R O M A N S 1 : 2 2

**F**irst, the good news: we have laser scalpels, surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, and a good track record of cures. The bad news is your cancer has spread; the disease is systemic, and so must be the cure. Imagine the feelings coursing mind and body at such news: fear, shock, anger, confusion, somewhere in the mix perhaps even relief to finally know what the problem is and that there’s hope, but on this day life changes forever. Some of you have had this experience.

I feel the same mixture of emotions as I read the first chapter of Romans. Here is the good news of God's powerful medicine in Jesus Christ and the bad news of why we need it. Paul writes a few verses earlier, “For I am not ashamed of the good news: it is the power of God for salvation *to every one who has faith*, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”<sup>1</sup> What an amazing statement of a universal cure. Anyone who trusts in Christ may be set on the road to the kingdom of God, whatever their history: be it respectable or reprehensible, polite little sins or the truly vile and gross ones. This is the divine medicine of which the church is the pharmacy. Our relationship with God can be healed and life rebuilt around a new center. You must submit to the therapy, but the cure works. Life is serious, and there are only two destinies: inside or outside God’s coming kingdom of the new heavens and the new earth.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1:16-17.

<sup>2</sup> 1:32, “... though they know God’s decree that those who do such things deserve to die.” On the issue of two possible destinies, United Methodist doctrine- in line with classic Christianity- is clear in our Confession of Faith, Article XII- The Judgment and the Future State, “We believe all men stand under the righteous judgment of Jesus Christ, both now and in the last day. We believe in the resurrection of the dead; the righteous to life eternal and the wicked to endless condemnation” (*Book of Discipline 2008*, 70).

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**Romans 1:18-32 ..... 5**

We intuitively understand that where the diagnosis is serious, so must be the cure, and if our cure meant the unjust and brutal death of the innocent Jesus, then how devastating must be the disease? If this is what we did when God showed up in our world in the person of a Nazareth carpenter, what does it say about us? Not flattering is it? We are not born as blank, innocent slates to be written upon with the pen of experience<sup>3</sup>; we are born with a flaw that goes far deeper than the shaping forces of the environment. Bob Dylan restates the church’s position with poetic precision in a song from the album *Saved*: “I was blinded by the devil, born already ruined, stone cold dead as I stepped out of the womb.”<sup>4</sup>

I’ve often wondered: Why do people want their doctors to be honest and their pastors to be pleasant? “Give it to me straight, Doc, I can handle it.” “Pastor Phil, how about a little *inspirational pick-me-up* to get me through the week.” Any wonder the culture regards physicians as serious and pastors as trivial? But- on second thought, it may be easier to be told you have cancer than to be told by a doctor of the soul that you have a full blown case of the moral disease the Bible calls *sin*. You are not who you think you are, and neither am I. The church’s teaching of Original Sin gives us a God’s-eye view of the common human condition, and it is an ugly portrait.<sup>5</sup> It is also not easy on your precious *self-esteem*!

So the question this morning is this: What’s wrong with our world? No shallow answer will suffice. We too quickly name the cure without first attending to the seriousness

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<sup>3</sup> “...our modern idea of the theory is mostly attributed to John Locke's expression of the idea in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* in the 17th century.... *tabula rasa* was the theory that the (human) mind is at birth a blank slate without rules for processing data, and that data is added and rules for processing are formed solely by one's sensory experiences. The notion is central to Lockean empiricism.... *tabula rasa* meant that the mind of the individual was born blank, and it also emphasized the individual's freedom to author his or her own soul. Each individual was free to define the content of his or her character - but his or her basic identity as a member of the human species cannot be so altered. It is from this presumption of a free, self-authored mind combined with an immutable human nature that the Lockean doctrine of natural rights derives” ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tabula\\_rasa](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tabula_rasa)). The church’s doctrine of Original Sin does not allow for so optimistic an understanding of the human situation or human freedom as Locke. We are born into bondage, and apart from God’s grace are bent towards evil and wired for rebellion. Ours is a more radical diagnosis than the optimistic philosophers.

<sup>4</sup> Lyrics from *Saved* at [www.bobdylan.com/songs/saved](http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/saved).

<sup>5</sup> Wesley’s sermon *Original Sin*- part of our U.M. Doctrinal Standards- may be read at [www.gbqm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/44](http://www.gbqm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/44). Copies are available today.

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of the illness. Yes, Jesus is the answer; but Why? and What for? In our day people want positive messages that make them feel good. No sting of guilt, no trembling of holy fear, no real accountability before God and the church, so pop-preachers put band-aids over cancers to keep pews and plates full. It is the curse of the American psycho-babble church, and in this move to trivialize the gospel we Methodists have sadly been among the leaders for several generations now, and it is time to stop. We are up against immensely powerful and destructive forces around us and within us: original sin and spiritual evil are our constant companions, which is why our first baptismal vow is so clear about three distinct challenges. So at every baptism the church asks for multiple renunciations:

- 1) “Do you renounce           the spiritual forces of wickedness,
- 2) resist                         the evil powers of this world, and
- 3) repent                        of your sin?”<sup>6</sup>

*Renounce, resist, repent.* What a complex situation. According to the Christian world view, the problem is *up there* in the heavenlies- the realm of fallen angels, *the spiritual forces of wickedness*; it is *out there* in a compromised culture which shapes our perceptions and squeezes us into its distorted molds- *the evil powers of this world*, and finally the problem is *in here*- in my rebellious heart, thus *Do you repent of your sin?*” Nowhere to hide. We live on a spiritual battlefield of multiple fronts, and the hostile forces are not just outside but inside the self; we are each a castle in which the walls have been breached. Self-help is no help at all; we require a Savior and a divine rescue, which is precisely the story the New Testament tells in its twenty-six parts. We are *the visited planet*; God has come to us in Jesus.

Despite what you may have been told or picked up through osmosis, the good news of Jesus Christ is not about *being nice* or *being better* or *being respectable* or *being comfortable*; it cannot be reduced to *middle-class*, *small town values* or the *American way of life*- though these things have a place. The news of God’s kingdom in Jesus Christ is God’s cure for a deadly plague that effects us all at every level: our bodies and their passions, our minds and their thoughts, our wills and their choices, our relationships with one another, the institutions we create, and the earth itself. The cure works, but the diagnosis is not pleasant. We are creatures meant to know and worship the Living God, and yet this ugly, slithering thing called *Sin*- this alien power which has invaded our world and with which we so gladly cooperate- turns us away to worship what is not God. We are at war with our own deepest natures; you- my friends- are each a battle zone in a much larger war.

Today’s text from Romans is Paul’s best and most precise analysis of the common

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<sup>6</sup> *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 34.

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human condition.<sup>7</sup> Life must have a center. And if not the Living God of Israel and of Jesus, we center ourselves in some lesser loyalty, something near at hand, something more manageable than an invisible and immortal Spirit. But when we give ourselves to anything less than the Creator, the results are disastrous for our bodies, for our minds, for society, for the earth and its creatures. Disconnected from God we degenerate; we become like what we worship, the clearest example of which is perhaps the addict. They know they are not free and must be helped by a Power higher than themselves. The humblest place in town is the A.A. meeting. Everyone understands that everyone has the same problem. What if the church were this honest? What if- in parallel to AA- we opened every worship service with our first names and our broken condition, “My name is Phil, and I am a sinner.”

The Christian doctrine of original sin is no easy teaching. It is offensive to modern sensibilities, but it goes to the root and it is true. There is nothing *original* about the teaching if you mean something *new*; it is *original* in the sense that it explains the *origins* of everyone’s behavior. Though the language is old and quaint from the 17th century English Reformation, our official United Methodist teaching about *original* or *birth sin* says what needs to be said. We are not what we were designed to be, and when left to ourselves make a mess of things: “Original sin,” it states, “is the corruption of the nature of every man (and woman)... whereby we are very far gone from original righteousness, and of our own nature inclined to evil, and that continually.”<sup>8</sup> It’s that bad. We are corrupted. Think of a rotten tomato or a mushy banana, a thing of promise now spoiled. This is our human condition east of Eden. Our hope is God’s grace, not in ourselves. See, I told you it was offensive.

**TURNING TO THE TEXT**

**3) v.25 Starting At The Center.**

As a boy I loved to skip stones over a pond and watch the splashes chase one another. It was also fun to heave in a large rock and watch the rings spread out in circles. Paul does not skip a stone in the text before us; instead, he drops the biggest one he can find into deep water (ka-ploosh!). He then catalogs the spreading effects of the central sin of false worship as it moves out to corrupt and distort all that is originally good about being human.

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<sup>7</sup> Recent scholarly treatments of this text include Charles H. Talbert, *Romans* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 55-78; Frank J. Materna, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010), 43-56); Leander Keck, *Romans* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2005), 57-73; Ben Witherington, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 2004), 58-72.

<sup>8</sup> *The Book Of Discipline* 2008, 61, paraphrased for inclusion.

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At the center in verse 25 is the core sin of false worship or idolatry, "...because they exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator who is blessed for ever." We scurry around looking for something other than God to give life meaning. We slice off a piece of the world and make it the whole. We take what is not God and ask it to be what it can never be, and so our bondage deepens.

**2//2') vv.24, 26-27 How Sin Affects The Body In Distorted Passions.**

This idolatry problem manifests itself out from the center in the first ring of human distortion, primarily as lust- both heterosexual and homosexual,<sup>9</sup> and in both cases Paul says bluntly, *God gave them up*. Our good- and even originally innocent desires, are now distorted and misdirected because of our disconnection from God. People are not things to be used and tossed; people are not cars to be test-driven. The wrath of God is not that God adds misery but that God lets us go our own way; intimate misery is our own creation.

Think of it like this. Your car is pointed in the wrong direction; you have your foot to the floor on the accelerator, and after a while of you not listening to the restraints of conscience, God takes a foot off the brake. God withdraws restraint, and off you go in a blur, thinking you are free, but you are headed towards a cliff. *God gave them up*, writes Paul. What a frightening thought. *God gave them what they wanted*, which says something about how highly God values our choices. And when the crash comes, and when the pain is high enough, and when shame and guilt are constant companions, and when someone cries out, "O God, what have I done?" God is there to pick up the pieces, "Not going so well, is it? Like to try another way? Hand me the keys and let me drive. Submit your desires to me."

When we center on lesser gods, our bodies and their deep appetites for pleasure and intimacy are corrupted because we are designed- male and female- in the image of God. Our United Methodist Wedding Service is clear in its preface that *God created us male and female for each other*.<sup>10</sup> Without the restraint of God's law and grace, human passions rage out of control. Look at our culture. Rampant adultery. Abortion as birth control after the fact. The tragic college hook-up scene of *friends with benefits*. An eight billion dollar porn industry. The flood of what is now called *mommie porn* in the wake of the publishing

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<sup>9</sup> See Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1996); Stanley Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: An Evangelical Perspective* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 1997); the definitive treatment of the texts is Robert Gagnon, *The Bible And Homosexual Practice* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 864.

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phenomena *Fifty Shades of Grey*.<sup>11</sup> We are quickly moving to an anyone, anywhere, anyhow understanding of sexuality that is a return to the practices of pre-Christian paganism.<sup>12</sup> Look for a return of polygamy soon, and- after that- even more bizarre arrangements sanctioned by law. The casualties are all around us, and increasingly in our churches. I deal with them all the time: broken hearts and busted lives. We are in a moral free fall, and it is time for the church to be clear about the what and why of our good boundaries and much bolder in pointing people to the mercy and healing found in Jesus Christ where all must learn the virtue of *self-control*. We Methodists have been weak here for a long time. We have not given clear moral instruction. We have not even offered our own teaching on the matter, so great has been the cultural pressure on clergy to compromise in the face of a self-indulgent culture.

**1//1') vv.18-23, 28-32 A Second Wave Of Distortion.**

There follows at the beginning and end of our passage a second concentric wave of effects where idolatry corrupts the mind through intellectual confusion and the character through personal and social vice. Verse 21, "They became futile (empty) *in their thinking* and their *senseless minds were darkened*," and so in verse 28, "God gave them up to a *base mind* and to *improper conduct*. They were filled with all manner of wickedness...."

Idolatry has cognitive, perceptual, intellectual, and behavioral consequences. It changes your thinking, what you see and don't see. To put it clearly, sin first makes us stupid, then it makes us ugly and selfish and mean. Notice how Paul puts the words *mind* and *wickedness* in close proximity. Evil is first formulated in the heart, refined in the intellect, then acted out in the body with social consequences. Examine your own life for this pattern.

The existence and power of God are shown in creation- its beauty, order, the sheer mystery of its existence. That awe you feel is a hint of the Creator shining through the creation. But when we refuse to follow the hints and turn back on the creation itself, our minds become distorted and our thinking polluted. Senseless minds are darkened. Does this mean that the atheist scientist or historian or psychologist has nothing to teach us? Not at all so long as they stick to their specialty, but don't let him teach you theology, and beware of their philosophy! God at the center of consciousness is true knowledge.

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<sup>11</sup> Karen Yates, *Why Pastors Should Respond from the Pulpit to Fifty Shades of Grey*, [www.churchleaders.com](http://www.churchleaders.com).

<sup>12</sup> On paganism and sexuality, see Dr. Peter Jones, *The God of Sex: How Spirituality Defines Your Sexuality* (Wheaton, ILL: Victor Books, 2006). Dr. Jones grew up in Liverpool as a friend of John Lennon and was invited to play keyboard with the Beatles. I remember an evening in his home hearing stories of their friendship. Ask me about it!

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**Romans 1:18-32 ..... 10**

Paul concludes his diagnosis in verses 28 through 32 with a laundry list of social sins. It is a vice list, a partial catalog of twenty-one symptoms of what happens to people who turn away from God. It starts with *wicked* and ends with *ruthless* (think Nazis!), and in between are *murder* and *gossip*- which is the murder of someone's reputation. How about *insolent* and *haughty*? Ever see that in yourself? How about *inventors of evil* and *heartless*? This kind of life is hard on people, those who do it and their victims. I find myself here in several places; so will you if you take them time. All these corrupt society. Sin is expensive. It's why we have police and armies and laws and courts to restrain evil. When we do not acknowledge and worship the true and living God, our social fabric begins to fray and tear under the stress of accumulated sin. And in America these days I can hear the tearing.

To review what Paul says, misplaced worship is the center of the human problem. Idolatry is the root of all sin, not God but me at the center trying to fulfill myself apart from my Creator. We focus on something less than God and pay the penalty for it. Sexual sin- the first and inner layer of distortion Paul notes- does immense damage. In Paul's words, *we dishonor our bodies among ourselves*. But it is nothing compared with the outer layers of intellectual and social distortion that wreak havoc at every level of human life. You want to understand the situation in our war-filled world, read Paul. You want to understand the chaos in your own life, read Paul. This is the world in which we live. This is the truth about each of us. And we are without excuse. We deserve to die for our idolatries, not only for what we have done but because we influence others around us to join in our sin, and when they do, we applaud them for it. Verse 32, "...though they know God's decree that those who do such things deserve to die, they not only do them *but approve those who practice them*." Think about the friends who introduced you to things that were bad for you. Remember their words? "Aw, come on, it's only a joint. It won't hurt you. Live a little!" To willingly corrupt another human being and draw them into your vice is a great evil.

Original Sin is systemic; nothing in us or around us is untouched by its blight. It affects the body and its appetites, the mind and its thoughts, both character and behavior, both private and public. If any of the details of our lives or thoughts were made public, we would be thought a monster. We are shocked at stories of rape and murder and robbery and violence and greed and genocide. Why are we shocked? Is it not because we are morally naive and have not absorbed what Scripture says about our common condition? These are the bitter fruits of the worship of something other than the Living God whose face we see in Jesus. This is what life looks like when God *gives us over* to what we desire. This is why worshiping the Living God and the good effects it brings are the only strategy I know to keep from being sucked downwards. True worship is healing. It glorifies God and is good for us. It lines us up with the North Star of the soul, and if all I say to you once a week is *Blessed be God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit*, I have done what is most important: pointed you to the Triune God and away from idolatry. So when someone looks

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**Romans 1:18-32** ..... **11**

at me with anguish in their eyes and asks, “How could they?” my response is, “My naive little child, how could they not? Do you not understand this world?”

This downward process of human disintegration is what is meant by the *wrath of God*. Wrath does not just wait for the *then and there* of Last Judgment; it operates continuously in the here and now.<sup>13</sup> Paul does not speak in the future but in the continuous present tense in verse 18, "For the wrath of God *is (being continually) revealed....*" When we center our lives on anything other than the Living God witnessed to in Scripture and whose face we see in Jesus, it is not God who is diminished but we ourselves. Divine wrath is not thunderbolts from heaven or fire and brimstone nailing each violation; it is the chilling truth that God right now *gives us over* to what we worship to stew in our own juices till perhaps the degradation or emptiness make us cry out. We get what we want, and it brings pain to us and every one around us. Three times, like the refrain in a mournful ballad, Paul writes, "Therefore, *God gave them up...*"<sup>14</sup> What could be more chilling than for God to withdraw restraining grace and let us tumble into a pit of our own design? Even the church feels the effects. If we crave a soft and easy gospel, we get it, and grow weaker by the day. We do not have to wait for wrath; it is upon us as God lets us go our own way and experience the awful consequences in mind and body, in our communities and families and churches. Judgment is not just at the end; it is every day. God’s loving and holy resistance to evil is constant. We do not sin because we lack grace but because we refuse to use the grace that is always present.

At the center in verse 25 is an epitaph on the tombstone of the human race, "...because they exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen." Paul may have drawn his diagnosis from the prophet Jeremiah, who lamented:

"Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the LORD, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, cisterns that can hold no water."<sup>15</sup>

God offers a fountain; we choose to drink stagnant water from cups full of holes. We

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<sup>13</sup> United Methodist doctrine is clear at this point in our Confession of Faith, “Article XII- The Judgment and the Future State : We believe all men stand under the righteous judgment of Jesus Christ, *both now* and in the last day...” (BOD: 70).

<sup>14</sup> vv.24, 26, 28.

<sup>15</sup> 2:13.

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human beings are a God-enlivened amalgam of spirit and dust with a drive to center our lives on some center of power. We are given the raw materials, but must construct a sense of self through some life project. We hunger for something powerful enough to give us life and worth, yet at the same time manageable enough to stay under our control.<sup>16</sup> Problem is that only God- our Creator, can meet this need, and God is one who- by definition- is never under the control of his creatures. So we settle for something less, more tangible and predictable to fix our energy on: a person, a home, a habit, a history, a family name, a career, an idol.

Doctors look for bugs and viruses, dentists for cavities, and pastors for idols. "Pastor, my marriage or my work are not all that I want them to be, what can I do?" Often there are improvements to be made and new wisdom to learn, but many times a different question needs to be asked, Why is this so important to you, and are you asking of work or family what only God can provide? Are you making your work or spouse into a little god and thus overloading them with expectations they can never fulfill? But with the Living God at the center, we can hold all the good things of this life with a light touch and real humor, but when the center is empty we put a tight humorless squeeze on what is close at hand. "Fulfill me!" we demand of things that never can. And when they do not, we throw them away and look for some new god to deliver us. Lewis Smedes understands this process well:

"The problem with idols is that sooner or later they are going to let us down. Because only God himself can satisfy our longing for ultimate meaning, anything else, no matter how creation positive and redeemable, is only a relative good beside him. When we elevate one part of creation- a relative good such as sexuality- to an absolute status, then it is invariably the devil who has the last laugh. Like a skilled drug pusher, he keeps altering our thresholds upwards, so that we need progressively more (and often more bizarre) stimulation to give us even passing relief."<sup>17</sup>

There is an easy test to spot idols in your life. We all have them. Ask yourself: What are my compulsions and addictions? What do I fear irrationally or love unwisely? Since none of these things are God, they do not sustain themselves and thus require our constant attention and maintenance. Idols are time consuming and expensive, the reason being that while you are focused on them, they are consuming you!

You can worship almost anything, even many things at the same time. It's not that

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<sup>16</sup> Luke Johnson, *Faith's Freedom* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1990), 62-64.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Mary Van Leeuwen, *Gender and Grace* (Downer's Grove, ILL: Inter-Varsity, 1990), 219.

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when people turn away from the one God they become atheists believing in no God; rather, they become polytheists believing in many.<sup>18</sup> They worship many gods and construct private pantheons. Men in this culture are perhaps more prone to work idolatry, women to relationship idolatry. Some worship pleasure, others alcohol, others TV, others exercise or sports, money and career, their children, others the ability to control details. Gambling is the worship of *Lady Luck*, and behind her attractive lies are powers of evil. Watch one who feeds money into a slot machine; there you see a worshiper who offers themselves with all the zeal of a Pentecostal revival. Only God knows the full number of tiny altars that dot the cathedral of my soul, and every one must come down. It feels like death when one of my deities takes a dive. God wants my worth to be in the one place that is secure, his love for me in Jesus Christ. We cling tightly to idols, and since God is committed to their death, faith is a down-to-the-mat struggle of God exposing and us letting them go in repentance. If you can't let go, it's an idol; and if you refuse to let go, you will diminish as a human being as the wrath of God visits and allows the consequences of your action to be progressively revealed.

“You want that more than me?” asks the Lord. “OK, I will let you have it, and we will both watch as it distorts you into something far less than I intended. And when the pain gets strong enough, perhaps you will cry to me for mercy. But if not, there is a place beyond death reserved for those who persistently use their freedom to turn away from the life I offer. I will uphold your choice, even if it lands you permanently outside my kingdom.”

**CONCLUSION**

Why is it that you need to be here or some other church on Sunday unless prevented by illness or travel? Not to hear me- though I try to have something thoughtful to say. Not to meet friends or catch up on news- though that's OK. It is to realign your life, to get a fix on truth, to worship the Triune God in community, to have your idolatries exposed, to pray that you never get so far gone that God has to give you your own way. Weekly worship is a booster shot to maintain immunity against a full-blown case of idolatry with all its horrors.

Life is not a game; it's for keeps. Nutritionists tell us we are what we eat. The Church tells us we become like what we worship. What and who you worship will either land you in the kingdom of God or on the scrap heap and refuse pile of the universe. We pay a terrible price for ignoring God, and the riches of a right relationship with Christ are beyond price. It's a good thing when God messes with us. May he mess with you and destroy your idols. It is only in seeking and then following Jesus Christ that we find true freedom.

**Pastor Phil Thrailkill, Main Street UMC, July 15, 2012**

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<sup>18</sup> A paraphrase of G.K. Chesterton.

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### **III. STUDY QUESTIONS**

**vv. 18-23**

1. What signs in our world do you see of God's continual resistance to evil?
2. What is it about a broken relationship with God that makes for wicked people?
3. How is the majesty of creation an argument for God's existence?
4. What happens to our capacity for right perception when God's left out of the picture?
5. Make a list of things people put at the center of life that are not God? Are these idols?

**v.24**

6. What is there about lust, fornication, adultery, prostitution, perversity and porn that dishonors and degrades all who participate?
7. What is wrong with thinking of another person as a disposable object?

**v.25**

8. When anything in creation other than God is worshiped, how is God dishonored?

**vv.26-27**

9. How is homosexual practice a sign of disordered passions?
10. How are Christians to deal with heterosexual and homosexual sinners in our midst? Ignore them? Cheer them on? Bring truth and loving discipline to bear? Should they be in leadership or public ministry?
11. Why is it so painful and embarrassing when pastors fail in this area?

**vv.28-32**

11. Notice in v.28 how avoiding God leads to a corrupt mind and bad conduct.
  12. How do you with people- in and outside the church- who show the vices of v.29?
  13. According to v.32, what is the penalty for introducing others to your sins and vices?
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## IV. WHAT NOW? POSSIBLE ACTION STEPS

1. Read one of the books of the so-called *new atheists* like Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens. Can you refute their arguments?
2. Read Dinesh D’Souza’s book *What’s So Great About Christianity* for a comprehensive and yet accessible approach to the rational defense of the faith? Keep a list of questions as you read and call me for a discussion. Teach it to a class.
3. How is a sex-obsessed culture a sign of a deep hunger for an experience of God?
4. Now that most people no longer worship animals or totems, what forms do idols take? Be on the look for idols in your own heart, the media, in the culture at large.
5. Look for other basic descriptions of the human situation. Compare them to Paul’s.
6. If someone asked you, What’s wrong with our world? how would you answer?

## V. A PRAYER FOR THE CHURCH

The Lord be with you. **And also with you.** Let us pray:

**Almighty God, our heavenly Father,  
none of our secrets are a secret to you.  
We have hidden ourselves from your holy presence.  
We have closed our minds to true knowledge.  
We have winked at immorality and found pleasure in vice.  
We have given loyalty and service to gods of our own making.  
May your Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, pull back the veil,  
that we may see ourselves as you see us:  
weak and rebellious, in need of forgiveness and healing.  
May the sacrifice of Jesus Christ be for us this day.  
May his blood speak of the care you have for all sinners.  
Soften our hearts and open our minds,  
that we may gladly welcome the mercy you bestow,  
and turn away from all that offends you and hurts us and others.  
Keep us from idols.  
Amen.**

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