

Studies in Romans

The Dark Exchange (1:24-32)

Context

- **1:1-17 Introduction**
 - 1:1-5 Paul's greeting and a summary of the gospel
 - 1:6-15 Paul's relationship with the Romans
 - 1:16-17 Paul's thesis: God's gospel is powerful to save all who believe
- **1:18-4:25 The problem and God's solution**
 - 1:18-3:20 The problem: God's wrath at our unrighteousness
 - 1:18-32 Mankind is facing God's wrath, both now and, ultimately, in the future, because we have all rebelled against Him
 - 2:1-3:20 There are no exceptions and no excuses; even the Jews are sinners who face God's wrath

In **Romans 1:17** Paul makes the staggering claim that the only way “the righteous shall live” is “by faith.” God rescues only those who believe—those who trust in what God has done *for* them. So the logical question arises: how can there be no other way? Why is God's saving righteousness needed—this righteousness that only comes to people empty-handed with faith (**v. 17**)?

The answer, says Paul, is because our sin has resulted God's just wrath.

Romans 1:18-32 has a very clear, logical structure. First, Paul states the charge against every human being. Then he proves it in four stages.

1. The charge is stated (**v. 18**)
2. The charge is proved (**vv. 19-32**)
 - a. What God has done (**vv. 19-20**)
 - b. What people have done (**vv. 21-23**)
 - c. What God has done (**vv. 24-31**)
 - d. What people have done (**v. 32**)

What was the charge against mankind in v. 18?

Then Paul sets out to prove that charge. To show that we “suppress the truth,” Paul must first establish that we know the truth. We can't be guilty of suppressing a truth that we never knew. So what truth have people in their unrighteousness suppressed?

Perhaps we could lay it out this way: Paul is handling an objection here. The objection is: **“Okay Paul, but what about those who don't have the truth about God? Don't they have a legitimate excuse to protest God's anger?”**

Paul's answer (**vv. 19-20**):

So this *general* revelation of God renders all without excuse. There is no such thing as “an innocent native in Africa” any more than there is “an innocent pagan” in Australia...

But what have people done in response to this revelation of God? See vv. 21-23. Note the regression.

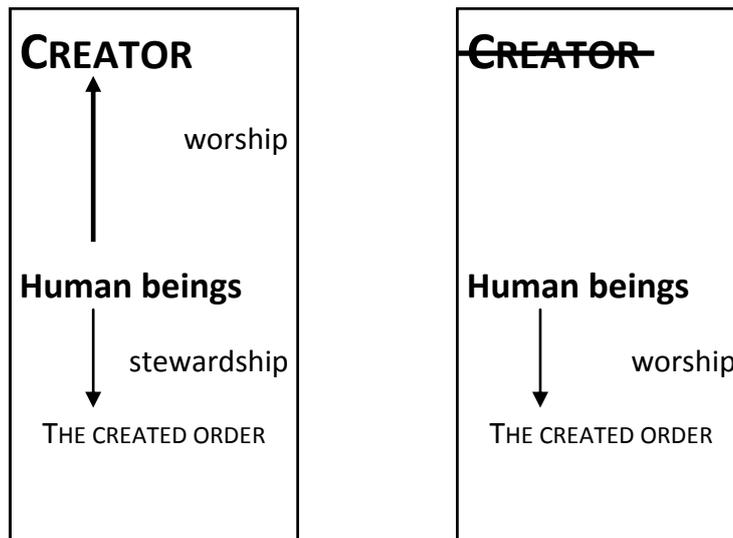
At the heart of the human condition Paul diagnoses a terrible exchange. They “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images...” So not only have people “suppressed” the knowledge of God that all people have by observing the creation, they have also distorted that knowledge of God.

Notice that when man rejects God *he does not cease to be religious*. Indeed, he can even become religious in order to reject God. He substitutes for God a deity of his own making.

Note that idolatry isn't just a problem for those who lived in ancient times...

Isn't it amazing how quickly we can take the very best of gifts from God and turn those things into God-replacements? Tim Keller writes, "We think that idols are bad things, but that is almost never the case. The greater the good, the more likely we are to expect that it can satisfy our deepest needs and hopes. Anything can serve as a counterfeit god, especially the very best things in life."

Exchanging the glory of God for lesser glories... Man exchanges God for pitiful substitutes.



Question: *what does this tell us about why people ultimately reject the gospel? Is their reason intellectual, as so many claim, or moral?*

What happens to those who have never heard the gospel? R. C. Sproul has noted, sometimes the question is phrased this way: "What happens to the innocent person in the middle of Africa who has never heard of Jesus Christ?" Fortunately, as R. C. Sproul points out, the innocent person has nothing to fear. But the problem is:

What we see, according to Paul, are people who suppress the knowledge of God that they have been given, and since they suppress the truth that they have (as much or as little as it is)—that will be the foundation of their judgement.

And what's the lesson for us?

Okay, having told us what God has done (revealed Himself through creation as worthy of worship) and what man has done in response (suppressed the truth about God and distorted that knowledge of God by worshipping the creation and not the Creator), Paul tells us what God's response is to all of this See **vv. 24-28**.

Note a number of things:

Notice the word "therefore." *What does this word "therefore" tell us?*

Take note of phrases that are repeated in this section. *What's the phrase that's repeated three times over?*

And note that this phrase “God gave them over” is part of a three-fold sequence. The sequence is:

1. Human beings exchange God for what God has made. They prefer the creature to the Creator.
2. God “gives them over” to what they prefer.
3. Man acts out sinfully, externally displaying the rebellious condition of his soul and the horrendous exchange he has made by exchanging God for other things.

So we see that sequence in **vv. 23 and 24**; **vv. 25-27**; and **v. 28**.

It’s not just that God withdraws His restraints and permits man to do what he wants to do (we “get what we want”). But it’s also this idea of God’s judgement. God punishes mankind by allowing him to suffer the consequences of his sin.

Note too that the behaviours Paul describes in this section are not the root problem. No, they are the result of the “exchange” of **verse 23**. This sexual sin that Paul writes about here is the consequence of the being “given over” that Paul mentions. **Verses 24-25** speak of “uncleanness” or “impurity.” Sexual sin—the sexual *disordering* of the human race is a judgement of God for our exchanging Him for the creature.

Why does Paul focus on homosexual relations here?

Verses 25-27: God gives them over to homosexuality. And **verses 28-32**: God gives man over to depraved minds. Note that there is no scale here of “better” or “worse” sins. The conclusion is unavoidable: all of mankind is under God’s wrath because of their rejection of Him.

Okay, take a look at the final verse – **v. 32**. In his last logical argument to prove God’s charge against mankind, Paul notes what people have done. *And the end result?*

For further discussion

- *If you were to stop people on the street and ask them what they associate with sin and judgement, how might they answer? What do Christians generally think of sin and judgement (when not giving “textbook” answers)?*
- *These verses give us a deep insight into the nature of sin. What are the “hallmarks” of our wickedness?*
- *How would Paul correct the following statements?*
 - *“We fall into sin.” (i.e. we can’t really help ourselves)*
 - *“Sinning means we are free!”*
- *Why does Paul include sexual sins? In other words, what truth are people suppressing?*
- *How should we correct the following views?*
 - *“The main problem with sin is that it messes up our lives.”*
 - *“In response to this passage we should stop sinning and live better lives.”*
- *How should this passage affect what we say in evangelism?*