

The letter to the **ROMANS**

Former Adventist Fellowship Bible Study

4. Notes on Romans 1:24-32

In the first part of chapter one, Paul has explained to the Roman believers the fact of mankind's natural depravity which has suppressed the glory and knowledge of God. People's wickedness has kept them from honoring the divine, eternal, omnipotent God who revealed himself to all men through what He has created. Instead, they have surrendered themselves to futile thinking and darkened hearts.

As a result of this refusal to acknowledge God, he has given humanity over to its own sinful desires. God's wrath, which is currently "being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men" (v.18), comes now in the shape of His permission for sinful people to explore and experience the destructive outcomes of their lusts and cravings. He does not stop wicked people from making wicked decisions. Rather, he allows them to sink into depravity as a means of creating in them a sense of desperation that will drive them to call out to Him, the one they have refused to see. God wrath against sin allows people to self-destruct as a means of exposing the chimera of sin's seduction.

Since the flood, when God nearly destroyed mankind and wiped out the prehistoric wickedness of which we have only hints, God has dealt with sinful man by allowing him to suffer as the result of persistent unbelief. Psalm 81 quotes God saying, "My people would not listen to me...So I gave the over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices." Ezekiel also quotes God recalling his dealing with Israel; he dispersed them among the nations, he "gave them over" to laws they couldn't keep and rituals that traced horror in their hearts: the sacrificing of their firstborns to the pagan god Molech. He did these things

because they had rejected God's laws and turned their backs on the One who deserved their worship.

When Stephen addressed the Sanhedrin just before his fatal stoning, he also recounted God's turning Israel over "to the worship of the heavenly bodies." (Acts 7:42) They had refused to obey God at Sinai and had built the golden calf while Moses was on the mountain with God. God had let them go into their sinfulness, knowing they would suffer and eventually remember Him.

Paul addresses new Christians in his letter to the Ephesians. He admonishes them to live "no longer...as the Gentiles do...separated from the life of God" because of their ignorance. "Having lost all sensitivity," Paul says, "they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge every kind of impurity..." (Ephesians 4:17-19)

Exchanging Truth for a Lie

Natural humanity has "exchanged the truth of God for a lie," Paul writes in verse 25. The truth of God is the reality of his eternal power and divine nature. The lie humans have adopted is the illusion that they can determine truth, control their own destinies, and create their own fraudulent gods. Isaiah and Jeremiah record man's ignorant refusal to question the power of idols they fashion out of wood gold which they control with their own hands. (Isaiah 44:19-20 and Jeremiah 10:14-16; 51:17-19) He further says that their sins have separated them from God and they are stained with guilt. They speak lies and do not have integrity or demand justice. This lack of truth and integrity

yields trouble, evil, rebellion, treachery, oppression, and revolt. (Isaiah 59:2-4, 13)

Because of humanity's arrogance in claiming power over truth and even their gods, the Lord God has given them over to depravity. In this passage of Romans 1, Paul lists three "God gave them over" descriptions. The first, in verse 24, says, "God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another." The second says, "God gave them over to shameful lusts." The third reads, "God...gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done."

Sexual Impurity

A common argument in favor of sex outside of marriage is that it's a personal decision and, if the participants agree to it, the behavior hurts no one. Both the Old and the New Testaments are emphatic, however, that immorality is wrong for God's people, no matter how heartily the participants agree to practicing it. In the New Testament especially the commands to live sexually pure lives are explicit and repeated. The new birth, a phenomenon not known in the Old Testament, makes us new creatures. Those who are born again become the bride of Christ, the church, and this new intimacy with God makes immorality an even more serious issue.

In 1 Corinthians 6:13-20 Paul discusses this issue. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, he says, but for the Lord—and further, the Lord is meant for the body. As Christ-followers, our bodies are members of Christ himself. How could we dare to unite the members of Christ with a prostitute, for example? Sexual sin is sin against our bodies which are the temple of the Holy Spirit. We are not our own; we "were bought with a price" by Christ who paid more dearly for us than we could ever pay for anything.

When we are born again, the Holy Spirit literally indwells us. We become intimately connected with God—a connection which brings our souls to life and makes us spiritually living. This indwelling, however, does not affect only our spirits. It affects even our bodies, these still-unredeemed "jars of clay". Our Savior, the God of creation, has chosen to make our sinful flesh the place of his dwelling, his temple. He puts his holiness and righteousness into our flawed bodies by the literal presence of His Spirit. Because he awakens our spirits and unites us with our Father, we now have the ability to make spiritual decisions, not just sinful decisions. By the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, our habitual sinful behavior in our bodies of sinful flesh can begin to change.

Because God has given us his divine power, we as God's children can choose to forsake behaviors that formerly seemed natural and even inevitable. We can choose to keep our bodies pure from sensual indulgence including illicit sex. We can keep our bodies pure for the sake of Jesus—whose we are. Offering our bodies to God as a living sacrifice, offering to keep ourselves pure for him including living within His boundaries for sexual behavior, is our "spiritual act of worship". (Romans 12:1) As born again children of the Father, offering our sinful

bodies to him is not just a physical act of worship; it is a spiritual act. Our bodies are intimately connected with our spirits; we cannot sin in our bodies and keep our spirits untouched. What we do in our bodies reflects the condition of our spirits. When the Holy Spirit makes our bodies his temple, everything we do affects our relationship with him, and everything we do can become a reflection of his power at work in us.

Shameful Lusts

In verses 26-27 Paul deals explicitly with the problem of homosexuality in both women and men. The precedent for the prohibition against homosexuality was set in the early days of Israel when Moses was receiving the law from God. "Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable," God told Israel. (Leviticus 18:22)

In his first letter to the obstreperous church in Corinth, Paul told the believers there, "Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders...will inherit the kingdom of God." (1 Cor. 6:9-11)

In this first chapter of Romans, Paul emphasizes that homosexuality is one of the shameful lusts over to which God has turned wicked humanity. The argument that homosexuality is natural, that people are born into it, may actually have truth in it. According to Paul, homosexuality is one of the natural consequences of living in sinful flesh and is the result of persistent disbelief. Just as alcoholism and depression and rage seem to have some genetic component, so also may homosexuality. Being "normal" variations of our genetic code, however, does not justify people embracing and encouraging these things in one's life.

Just as we provide treatment for alcoholism, rage, and depression even though they are "natural" and people are "born that way" and even insist that those we love seek that treatment if they suffer from those disorders, we can also see homosexuality as a disorder that needs intervention.

The difficult part of treating homosexuality, however, is that it is related to a normal, powerful part of a human's life. In fact, this condition is probably not treatable at all unless people take seriously Paul's analysis of it in Romans 1: is it the result of spiritual deadness. Homosexuality, just like promiscuity and greed and deceit and malice and slander, is primarily a spiritual problem that has become entrenched in humanity's sinful flesh. It is not "cured" by a strong will or by punishment or censure, and it does not cut a person off from God's love. Rather, just like every other kind of sin, homosexuality is a condition in which God saves people, and his love will heal the hearts of such people as they surrender that part of themselves to him. God will place his Spirit in the place where sin had a foothold and bring that person to new life. Such healing does not necessarily mean that temptation will be gone any more than God's healing removes an alcoholic's weakness for alcohol or a rageaholic's tendency to quick anger. It does mean, however, that God can bring that person to a place of freedom where those

temptations no longer rule him or her. He or she will be able to live a healthy, normal life without being bound by an internal force that controls him or her.

Sexual Sin Is Against the Body

The question remains, however: why is sexual sin such a serious offense? Why, when the early Christian at the Council of Jerusalem established rules for the Gentile converts to observe, did they have only four: do not eat blood, do not eat food sacrificed to idols, do not eat strangled animals, and do not engage in sexual immorality?

Marriage has always been God's living metaphor to explain his relationship with his people. The story of the prophet Hosea describes God's love for Israel and compares her to an unfaithful wife whom he kept taking back to himself after she wandered away and finally repented. The New Testament describes the church, the redeemed, as being the Bride of Christ, the "wife of the Lamb". (Revelation 21:2, 9) What this metaphor promises is yet unknown to us; we are still in our unredeemed bodies waiting for the return of the Bridegroom. We do know, however, that this metaphor implies that we will have an eternity of committed intimacy with Jesus that will be deeply fulfilling and completing.

If, as Paul says in Romans 12, offering our bodies as living sacrifices is our spiritual act of worship, then the commitment to be loyal and devoted to and to serve our husbands or wives in obedience to God's command to keep ourselves pure is an act of spiritual worship. When we sacrifice the "normal" desires to pursue other interests or potential loyalties, we are making a spiritual sacrifice to God. Our choosing to say "yes" to our spouse and to remain loyal to that commitment, both in attitude and in behavior, is a metaphor of our saying "yes" to Christ. It is a type of choosing Him as our life's one true loyalty and giving up all other distractions and potential loyalties that might appear.

Further, homosexuality adds another dimension of distraction. For Christ, our Creator, our God, to choose us humans, his creation, as his bride, he had to commit himself to an eternity of loyal intimacy with someone unlike himself. He is God; He and the Father and the Holy Spirit are "like" each other. But He is not intrinsically like us, and we are not intrinsically like him. He became like us, but he did not give up divinity. We become like him by the power of the Holy Spirit, but we do not give up our native humanity. For us to commit to Him and for Him to commit to us requires a giving up of ourselves in a deep way. We have to commit to one unlike ourselves. We have no innate understanding of how God "works" or thinks or lives or functions. While he gives us His Spirit to help us grow into that understanding, we do not have that insight until AFTER we commit ourselves to him, and then it is an ongoing revelation, not a natural understanding.

In a similar way, forsaking same-gender sexuality is giving up ourselves in a profound way. We say "no" to what we innately understand and instead say "yes" to a relationship which promises great joy and intimacy but which is distinctly

unknown in advance. Saying "yes" to heterosexuality is committing to being potentially loyal, devoted, and understanding of a person who is greatly unlike ourselves. It is a commitment to growing in knowledge and insight and closeness with one who does not see or react to the world as we do.

God's apparently strict requirements for human sexuality are not merely arbitrary laws which we humans may accept or reject without consequences. Accepting Jesus and growing in a relationship with him is saying "yes" to eternal depth and intimacy with one unlike—yet like—ourselves. Through our human sexuality and commitments he teaches us the freedom and joy of surrendering what is "natural" to our sinful flesh and committing ourselves to what is spiritually real. Sexual purity is foolish to the unregenerate world; it doesn't make logical sense. But, like all other spiritual issues, it makes sense and brings great freedom and fulfillment when it is the product of the power of the Holy Spirit in us. Through our marriages and commitments to purity, God reveals himself to us. We are Christ's body when we are born again, and we defile that body when we flaunt our natural tendencies to sexual impurity. We literally bring the Spirit of Christ into unions that involve both body and spirit that break our covenant with him.

Depraved Minds

The third "gave them over" is to depraved minds, "to do what ought not to be done." (v.28) Along with sinful desires, sexual impurities, and shameful lusts, God also gave wicked humanity over to the full extent of their sinful thought and ideas. Without an acknowledgment of God, without the mediating power of the Holy Spirit in one's life, a person is completely subject to the sin into which he or she is born. (see 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 and Ephesians 2:1-3) Satan and his evil is such a person's master, not God. Yet God in his sovereign wisdom knew that allowing humanity to wallow in the degradation their own thoughts and lusts would produce eventually would make them desperate to be saved.

The evil results of depraved minds are listed in verses 29-31: every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity, envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice, gossip, slander, God-hating, insolence, arrogance, boasting, invention of new ways to do evil, disobedience to parents, senselessness, faithlessness, heartlessness, ruthlessness. Further, people who indulge in these things not only do so themselves but also "approve of those who practice them."

Approving of others' sin reveals a conscience even more seared than that of a person who is only bound in his own sin but hates it. Sin grows and spreads when people approve and encourage each other's sinfulness.

Paul makes it clear that disobedience, deceit, gossip, slander, and greed are as heinous as the shameful lusts and sexual promiscuity he denounced in verses 24-27. If a Christ-follower struggles with any of these sins, it is a signal to him that God is calling him or her to surrender this behavior to Him and to allow Him to cleanse and heal the place in his heart that generates it. Without the Holy Spirit, none of these sins can truly be

overcome. Even if one suppresses bad behavior in public, a person's heart still bears the sin and the temptations to practice it. With the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, however, such sin can be defeated.

Commitment

Paul presents the desperate condition of sinful humanity to emphasize that each one of us is born spiritually dead, separated from God, and is the inheritor of millennia's-worth of habitual sins that have become embedded in our genetic codes. Our sinful flesh is hopelessly flawed and leads us inevitably into destructive behaviors, and our dead spirits see no logical sense in the commands of Jesus.

Yet our Creator is sovereign, and he calls us. He reaches into our hopelessness and reminds us that he created us and wants to rescue us. He plants in us the desire for truth and boldly points out to us our uncontrollable sinfulness.

God is calling you. He is asking you to look honestly at the sins he points out in your life and to surrender them, regardless

of what you feel the cost may be, to him. He wants to heal you and to bring cleansing to your soul and to your body. He wants to make new synapses in your mind, synapses created by faith and trust in Him and by obedience to Him. He wants to remove your foolish and depraved thought patterns and to create a new heart in you, a heart living with the life of God. He wants to bring life to your mortal body (Romans 8:11) and release you from habitual sin, even sin so deep it feels natural.

Ask God to reveal to you the things he wants you to surrender. Ask him to make you willing to be willing to give up even things that seem logical and part of you. Ask him to give you faith so you can act on His prompting. Finally, praise him that he has already won the battle over sin and that he will also win the battle in you.

Praise the Father for sacrificing his Son for our lives. Praise Jesus for bearing our sin and for giving us his righteousness. Praise the Holy Spirit for giving us the mind of Christ and the power of God in our mortal flesh.

Praise Father, Son, and Holy Spirit!