

Intro: All the big whigs were there when it happened. By invitation only, 1,000 of the most influential men in the world gathered for the biggest party of the year. The most powerful leader in the world, at the time, pulled out all the stops to impress his guests. The wine flowed freely. The banquet soon turned into an orgy. That was not surprising, in light of the decadent moral conditions of the day. Sin was rampant. Life was cheap. The true God was ignored, even mocked. Such was life in Babylon when Belshazzar was king.

As the evening wore on, Belshazzar got bored with ordinary sin, and decided to try something new. He told his servants to bring out the gold and silver goblets which his father, Nebuchadnezzar, had taken from the temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem. He had them fill up the vessels with the best wine available, and passed out the drinks to his noblemen, his wives, even mistresses. The "dignitaries" drank the alcohol. As they drank, the alcohol loosed their tongues. A worship service erupted. No, it was not Yahweh they honored. They mocked the God of Israel by praising the gods of gold and silver, the gods of bronze, iron, wood and stone.

Then it happened. Someone yelled, "Look!" And all eyes stared in horror at the sight. The fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote a message on the plaster of the wall, near the lampstand in the royal palace. The king turned pale. He was so frightened that his knees knocked together, and his legs gave way. His eyes were glued to the handwriting on the wall. Four strange words: "Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin."

He called for his enchanters and astrologers to interpret the message. He promised riches and honor to the one who could help. But not one of his pawns could help. They couldn't read the handwriting on the wall.

Belshazzar became even more terrified. Then the queen spoke up, "O king, live forever! Don't be alarmed. There is a man who can help. His name is Daniel."

When Daniel was summoned, Belshazzar tried to bargain with Daniel. Daniel looked at the ruler and said, "You can keep your gifts. I don't want them. God has a message for you, and here it is."

"Belshazzar, your father Nebuchadnezzar learned the hard way that there is only one true God. When your father became arrogant, Yahweh humbled him, and made him insane like an animal, until he acknowledged the Most High God. Belshazzar, you knew all this. You knew that the LORD is God, but you rejected Him. You dishonored Him. You set yourself against Him. So here's the message God has for you. Mene--Your reign is over. Tekel--You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting. Parsin--Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians."

That very night, Belshazzar, king of the mighty Babylonians, was slain. Darius the Mede took over the kingdom (for the details, see Daniel 5).

*** Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

A leader is in trouble when he sees the handwriting on the wall. A nation is in trouble when the handwriting is on the wall. How can you tell when a society has gone too far, when its time is up, when the handwriting is on the wall? I wrestle with that question when I see the whirlwind effect of sin in our world. Is the handwriting on the wall? And if it is, is there hope? Romans 1 answers both questions for us.

The Setting: The letter Paul wrote to the Roman Christians is actually a careful statement of the message of the gospel Paul preached. It's a message about righteousness. Rom 1:16-17 "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ...for in it is the righteousness of God revealed."

Why do we need God's righteousness which is available in the gospel? That is the question Paul answers in chapters 1-3. In short, the world needs God's righteousness because the world is under the wrath of God (1:18). The latter half of Romans 1 describes a world that is under the wrath of God, a world that God handed over, a world under the sentence of judgment. Romans 1 makes this clear. The handwriting is on the wall. The reason is obvious. This world, as did Belshazzar, has turned from God.

What happens when a society (or a person) turns from God?

Proposition: As we examine Romans 1:28-32, we will see three effects which result from turning from God.

- I. Turning from God results in Depraved Thinking (28).
- II. Turning from God results in Deviant Behavior (29-31).
- III. Turning from God results in Distorted Values (32).

Implications: What must we do?

1. We must turn to God.
2. We must help others turn to God.

I. Turning from God results in Depraved Thinking (28).

V 28 "And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over." Stop there. This is the third time we have heard those dreadful words, "God gave them over (24, 26, 28)." In fact, v 28 sums up what has happened to our world, how it got degenerated to its present condition. Notice three actions.

One, man rejected God. The text says, "They did not like to retain God in their knowledge." In the greek text, the article "the" precedes the word God. Literally, it reads, "They did not like to retain THE God in their knowledge. The world has plenty of substitute, false gods (see vv 21-23), but not the true God.

Two, God rejected man. "God gave them over." As we learned in verses 18-27, God revealed His wrath against this rebellious world by "giving them over."

Three, mankind experienced the consequences of his choice. What are the consequences of rejecting God, and being rejected by God? We will see three consequences in verses 28-32. Here is the first.

Turning from God results in depraved thinking. V 28 says, "God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not seemly."

What is a reprobate mind? There's an obvious play on words in v 28. The same root, greek word Paul used in the first part of the verse, "they did not LIKE,"

appears in this word "reprobate," with a negative prefix. The word means "to test, to approve." Here's what happened. They didn't approve of God, so God gave them over to a mind (mindset) that He doesn't approve.

Do you know what is often the worst thing God could give us? It's exactly what we want. When the world said, "We don't want You, God," He gave them their wish.

Last week we explored the dismal topic of sexual confusion and sexual corruption. How can a society become so entangled in the web of blatant sin? Here we are told. Reckless living is the consequence of reprobate thinking. Watch the connection, "God gave them over to a reprobate mind, TO DO those things which are not seemly." A mind which is reprobate is a mind which is so corrupt that it can't be trusted in making moral decisions (Cranfield, 36).

Although I don't agree with all his theological conclusions, commentator William Barclay gives us plenty to ponder with this observation (33), "There is hardly any passage which so clearly shows what happens to a man when he leaves God out of the reckoning. It is not so much that God sends a judgment on a man, as that a man brings a judgment on himself when he gives no place to God in his scheme of things. When a man banishes God from his life he becomes a certain kind of man, and in this passage is one of the most terrible descriptions in literature of the kind of man he becomes."

Key: The first consequence of turning from God has to do with the mind. Sin affects a person's ability to think clearly. That's why an anchorman who doesn't know God presents the news the way he does. It's also why an agnostic professor mocks at the things of God in the classroom. A person with a reprobate mind views life as though God did not exist. He is inflicted with a case of depraved thinking.

There's a second tragic effect that results from turning from God.

II. Turning from God results in Deviant Behavior (29-31).

This week, we took some friends to see the locks at the Greenup Dam. The locks are intriguing. A boat enters at one level. The water is let out, and the boat drops to a lower level. The change in elevation happens gradually, almost without notice.

What has happened to mankind is like that. Though oblivious to the process, mankind is dropping. The degeneration starts with the mind, and leads next to the lifestyle. Depraved thinking leads to deviant behavior.

Last summer, Newsweek's July 19 edition featured a headline story entitled, "Life Means Nothing." It was about the senseless murders of 14-year-old Jennifer Ertman and 16-year-old Liz Pena. In the article was an intriguing statement made by one of the suspects, a young gang member. While on the witness stand, he said, "Life means nothing, mine or anybody else's."

See the connection. If I am convinced that life has no value or meaning--whether it's my life, or your life--then I will see nothing "wrong" with destroying life. What I think determines how I behave.

Notice v 28 again. A society with a reprobate mind devotes itself to doing "those things which are not seemly (NASB "not proper)." What are the things which

are "not proper"? For one, sexual perversion (vv 24-27). We are quick to attack a "big sin" like homosexuality. And certainly, it is not proper. But in vv 29-31, Paul lists some 24 other, specific sins. He gives us a full blown look at the deviant behavior that results from depraved thinking (for other similar lists, see Mk 7:20-23; Gal 5:19-21; I Tim 1:9-10; II Tim 3:2-5; Wiersbe, 519).

Let's peruse the list. The first thing that is apparent is that there is no particular order to the list. Scholars have tried unsuccessfully to classify Paul's list. As one commentator suggests, "It floods out in something of a jumble (Dunn, 75)." That's the point. Sin is irrational. It doesn't make sense. There's no order to it.

In staccato-like fashion, the apostle puts before us two dozen characteristics of a society that turns from God. What an ugly list!

V 29 "Being filled with all unrighteousness." Here's the key word of the list. It's the opposite of what we are told in 1:17 is man's greatest need, that being "righteousness." Society needs righteousness. What we are full of is unrighteousness (injustice). We are full of it. What a vivid description.

Every so often as a teenager, I had the job of cleaning out the cattle stalls in the barn. After holding the cattle all winter, the pen would be full of manure. We'd set the wheelbarrow by the door, take a pitchfork in hand, and start shoveling. We would fill the wheelbarrow to capacity, and get rid of it. Load after load.

I have that sense as I move through Paul's list. Paul is describing the deviant behavior that plagued his culture (and ours). Our world is full of evil. It's saturated with evil. Let's scan the deviant behavior: (see Barclay, 34)

1. Unrighteousness--the opposite of justice; An unrighteous person is one who robs both man and God of their rights
2. Fornication (not in oldest manuscripts, but is in Gal 5:19)
3. Wickedness--There are two kinds of badness. In one, there's no malicious intent, and nobody gets hurt. This word describes the other. The Greeks defined it as the "desire of doing harm." It's the active deliberate will to hurt someone. It's the person who is not only bad, but who wants to make everyone as bad as himself. In the Bible, Satan is identified by this word, "The Evil One."
4. Covetousness--from the Greek which means "to have more"
5. Maliciousness--the most general word for "badness"
6. Full of envy--Envy is a warped and twisted emotion. Instead of delighting in the successes of others, a person with envy grudges others, and wants those blessings for his own.
7. Murder--the taking of life
8. Strife--contention which comes from heart gripped by jealousy
9. Deceit--the quality of a person with a twisted mind, a person who stoops to devious methods to get his own way, a person who always has an ulterior motive
10. Malignity--lit. "evil-naturedness;" Aristotle said it was "the spirit which always supposes the worst about other people." (Barclay, 36)

The next two are related.

11. Whispersers--a person who whispers damaging stories about another person
12. Backbiters--a person who slanders

Both whispering and backbiting are bad, but the whisperer is worse. At least with a slanderer, a person can defend himself, for his slander is out in the open. But a whisperer destroys reputations in secret.

13. Haters of God--Why hate God? Because He makes me feel guilty for my action.

14. Insolent--a person who is so proud that he defies God; "It is the spirit of the man who is so confident in his wealth, his power, and his strength that he thinks he can live life alone (Barclay, 37)."

15. Proud--arrogant; a person who delights in making others feel small

Challenge to Business owners, Supervisors: How do you treat your workers?

16. Boasters--those who pretend to be richer and braver than they are because their aim is to impress others (we see this in our "credit card" society!)

17. Inventors of evil things--the person who is not content with ordinary sin, who seeks the thrill of new and baser sin

18. Disobedient to parents--a violation of the 5th commandment

19. Without understanding--senseless; people who don't use the brain God gave them

20. Covenant breakers--people whose word means nothing (don't pay bills; break contracts, whether marriage or business)

21. Without natural affection--lit. there is "no family love;" Paul lived in an age in which children were considered a misfortune. When a child was born, it was laid at the father's feet. If he lifted it up, the baby lived. If he left it, the child was literally thrown out. Every night 30 or 40 abandoned children were left in the Roman forum (Barclay, 39). Seneca wrote about his society, "We kill a mad dog; we slaughter a fierce ox; we plunge the knife into sickly cattle lest they taint the herd; children who are born weakly and deformed we drown." Is our view of children much different, with 1.5 million aborted yearly?

22. Implacable--impossible to appease

23. Unmerciful--pitiless; to have a cheap view of human life (eg--the gladiator games)

Though written 19 centuries ago, this list of vices is contemporary. In fact, if we were to take a newspaper and scan the headlines, we probably could find an illustration of each of these 23 cases of deviant behavior.

Lest we hastily excuse ourselves, and think the problem is not ours as well, take another look at the word "all" in v 29. Our world is full of "all" unrighteousness. Sometimes we pride ourselves in saying, "Well, I don't do THAT sin so I'm Ok. I've never cheated on my wife. I've never cheated on my company. So I'm in pretty good shape before God, right?" Look at the list again. Are you a gossip? Are you a boaster? Are you proud? Are you unmerciful to the needy? These are ALL examples of unrighteousness. These ALL place us under the wrath of God.

What happens when a society turns from God? We've seen two results so far--depraved thinking, which leads to deviant behavior. Here's a third.

III. Turning from God results in Distorted Values (32).

V 32 "Who, knowing the judgement of God, that they who commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same but have pleasure in them that do them."

A society that sins is bad. A society that promotes sin has reached an even deeper level of depravity. It's one thing to do sin. It's another to encourage others to

sin. And it's the height of madness to flaunt sin in the conscious awareness of the judgment of God.

That's the type of society Paul is describing in v 32, a society where values are distorted. The problem is not that people don't know the truth, but that they don't care. A culture hits rock bottom when its people commit this atrocity. They rally together, they form parades, they organize marches for this reason--to promote sin.

Implications: What must we do?

The effects of turning from God are obvious. We see the depraved thinking, the deviant behavior, and the distorted values. You may be thinking, "What's the point? What must we do? Is there anything we CAN do?"

Our first tendency is to say, "Que sera, sera, whatever will be, will be." That's fatalism. Paul is not endorsing a fatalistic approach in Romans 1. He's not describing the horrible condition of a world apart from God so we'll throw up our hands and say, "What's the use! There's no hope!"

There is hope, in the gospel of Christ. So what must we do? Two steps...

1. We must turn to God.

This sounds like a cliché, but it is not. The world has turned from God, but in all practicality, so have many of us who know Christ. Does Christ affect your thinking, your behavior, and your values?

2. We must help others turn to God.

Joe Stowell shared the following story (at Pastor's Conference, 5/23/94). A Prayer Breakfast was held in Washington, D.C. several months ago. Our president was there, along with many other leaders. The speaker was Mother Theresa. With clear conviction she looked at those powerful figures, and told them the #1 hindrance to love and peace in this world is abortion. President Clinton said in response, "It's hard to argue with a woman whose life is so well lived."

How can we bring about change in a world like ours? We can't. But the gospel can. The gospel of Christ is the power of God. The gospel brings change. The gospel changes our thinking, our behavior, and our values.

So we must help others turn to God. How do we do that? First, we must help people to see their true condition. They are sinners under the wrath of God. All of us are born into that condition. Second, we must help them to see that Jesus Christ came into this world to rescue us from that helpless condition. He did what we could not do. He satisfied the righteous requirements of a holy God by living a perfect life, by dying in our place, by shedding his blood to cleanse us from our sin, and by conquering death. Third, we must help them to take two very specific steps--they must repent, and they must believe in Christ. They must turn from their sin, and trust in Christ. Then, and only then, will they be right with God.

Friends, the handwriting is on the wall. The wrath of God is being revealed. Are you right with God? If not, turn to Christ today.