

God Gave Them Up

Romans 1:24-32

March 19, 2017

Introduction:

My father, while not much of a handyman when it came to remodeling or repairs inside the house, took a great deal of care of our yard. Growing up in the city, we didn't have a very big yard by any stretch of the imagination, but what we did have my father worked hard at maintaining. We had a row of tall bushes along one side of the house that he always kept trimmed, a small garden on the other side where he grew tomatoes and other vegetables, and a lawn that was frequently weeded, cut, and trimmed so that it was nice and even with the edges of our sidewalk.

Fast-forward to many years later. My childhood home has long-since been occupied by various new owners, and every once in a while, when we are visiting in Milwaukee, I'll take a drive into the city and go past the home I grew up in. Sadly, it's not quite the same as it was when my father owned it. Weeds have sprung up, the bushes in the backyard are wild and untrimmed, and the lawn is in desperate need of being cut. Over the years, the new owners haven't taken care of things. They've let the yard go. They abandoned the outside of the house to grow untamed and uninhibited and as a result, the property looks trashy to say the least.

We all know how this goes: if you let your yard go, it doesn't become nicer as the weeks and months pass by, does it? Ignore it long enough and your once manicured lawn will quickly become a tangled jungle of tall grass and weeds. Well, that's a fitting metaphor for what happens in our lives should God back off and leave us to our own devices. This morning we're going to consider what takes place when God gives us over to our natural bent as sinful human beings. Much like a yard that's neglected, should God back away from us, we'll descend into an ever-increasing tangle of sin and wickedness.

Let's see what Scripture has to say about what happens when God allows us to go our own way by opening your Bibles with me to Romans 1. You can find today's passage on pg. 939 if you are using one of the pew Bibles. We're going to be covering v. 24-32 today, which I'll have us read through to begin with, and then we'll break it down into three smaller parts after that. So if you would, please follow along as I read Romans 1:24 to the end of the chapter. **"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 forever! Amen."**

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; 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 themselves the due penalty for their error.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. 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 righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them."

Before we get to the main points that derive out of this passage, we need to review the context for a moment. Notice the first word in v. 24: **"therefore."** What Paul is about to say in v. 24 comes as a result of what he said previously. Therefore, we must remind ourselves what the **"therefore"** is there for. To do that, we need to go back to v. 18 for a moment. Paul began his explanation of the gospel by stating that, *"The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth."* So Paul starts off saying God's wrath is currently against mankind due to our unrighteousness by which we have suppressed the truth.

But how exactly have we suppressed the truth? Paul explains that in v. 19-20 saying that God has revealed himself clearly through nature such that everyone should recognize he exists and he is vastly powerful to have created all things. Yet, in v. 21 it says we didn't respond to that revelation properly. Instead of giving God honor and thanks, we rejected him for false idols, for images resembling animals and birds and other human beings. In other words, we rejected God the Creator and began to worship that which he created. As a result, God's wrath is against us and justly so, for as Paul said at the end of v. 20, "They are without excuse." God revealed himself to all mankind through creation and yet we've all failed to respond to that revelation by worshipping the creation instead.

So now we come to the word **"therefore"** in v. 24. Because of our rejection of God's revelation of himself through creation, God's wrath is against us and what follows is the consequence of that rejection. So let's begin with the first consequence that has come as a result of God's just wrath for our willful rejection of him, and that is...

1. God gave them up to the desires of their hearts

First, I want you to notice the first phrase in v. 24, a phrase Paul repeats three times in our passage. In v. 24 it says, **"Therefore God gave them up..."** and then in v. 26, **"For this reason God gave them up..."** and again in v. 28, **"And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up..."** This phrase is used elsewhere in Scripture to describe God handing over the Israelites to judgment by foreign nations. We just got done going through the book of Judges and throughout we saw God giving the Israelites over the Philistines and Midianites as judgment for forsaking him for the worship of the false gods of the Canaanites. Well, the same idea is in play here. Since we have not worshipped God and instead worshipped creation, therefore God has given us up, but in this case, it is not an enemy from without but rather the enemy from within. God gives us up to our internal desires, the passions and lusts of our hearts, allowing them to grow unhindered like weeds in the garden of our lives.

Let me explain this a bit. Theologians speak of the common grace of God, the grace God gives that has the sun and rain bless both the righteous and the wicked alike. But beyond nature, common grace also works to restrain wickedness. We're not as bad as we could be. Even godless people, through common grace, retain enough of the image of God that they can live relatively moral lives where they're kind, generous, and avoid committing especially heinous sins. You could consider common grace similar to the kind of yard work my father would do: my dad kept the yard in check. Our yard always had the potential to become a wild, weed-infested jungle, but my dad restrained it by weeding and trimming and cutting.

But it seems those people who own my childhood home have "given up" on the yard. They are intentionally not cutting the grass or trimming the bushes and as a result the wild potential of the vegetation has grown unchecked. This is what Paul is saying God does. God is intentionally giving people up to allow their passions and lusts to grow unchecked. His hand of restraint is removed. He's letting people go their own way, allowing them to act out upon their sinful desires without his common grace to curb them in any way.

Perhaps a historical example will help us see how this works itself in real life. One of the shocking things about the Holocaust was the complicity of average ordinary German citizens in the persecution of the Jews. After the war, many asked, "How could these people who were church-going, family loving, hard-working neighbors of Jews suddenly turn upon them and willingly participate in handing them over to the Nazis and burning their synagogues and looting their homes?" The answer is simply this: the societal restraints were removed. Social norms and laws were changed such that the hatred and prejudice and anger that was once held in check by the culture disappeared. No longer was it unacceptable to do such things; quite the opposite: it was expected and encouraged. So without the restraints law and culture once provided, the human heart was free to engage in what it desired without inhibition.

The frightening thing about each and every one of us is we don't really know how far we would go if all the restraints were removed. What if we lived in a society that actively encouraged the brutalization and slaughter of a certain race of people? What if you were given permission to have sex with as many women as you wanted, regardless of their feelings about it, with no repercussions? What if you could steal anything from your neighbor and face absolutely no consequences for it? How far would you go? Remove all restraints and what would you do? What would you become?

It is scary to realize that the thing we in our sinful hearts most want is what God in his wrath may very well give us. If you want God to leave you alone, if you want to live your life the way you want, without his interference, well then, God might just answer your prayer. The wrath of God against us for our sin is shown by him allowing us free reign to indulge in exactly the wickedness we want. Let's look at v. 24-25 again. Please follow along as I read. **"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 forever! Amen."**

This isn't God imposing upon us something foreign to us. It says, "**God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts...**" God's wrath for our idolatry is not in giving us what we don't want but rather what we do. It's the lusts of *their* hearts which is what God gave them over to. God is not creating it such that new sinful desires are made; he's simply allowing us act on the ones already there. Whether our conscience no longer convicts us, or because our society has loosened the moral restrains by the shifting of cultural norms, or something else, the end result God in his wrath says, "Have it your way."

Paul describes what happens when God gives people over to the lusts of their hearts, saying in v. 25 that it leads to "**impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves.**" The term translated "**impurity**" is frequently used by Paul elsewhere to refer to sexual immorality, which clearly has the same connotation here since he follows it up by further describing it as "**dishonoring of their bodies among themselves.**"

There is something especially grievous about sexual sin, which is why I think Paul mentions it here first. Our sexuality is deeply connected to our bearing the image of God. When in Genesis 1 we're told that we're made in the image of God, it does so by saying, "male and female he created them." Our unique gender difference and the complementary roles they play are essential to reflecting God's image.

Furthermore, in Ephesians 5 we're told that marriage is to reflect Christ's love for the church. The unity of a man and his wife in marriage, in loving commitment to one another, reflects Christ's love for his people. Marriage, and the sexual union reserved only for marriage, reveals a deeper spiritual mystery of Christ's love for the church.

Then in 1 Corinthians 6 Paul mentions the unique seriousness of sexual sin when he says, "Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body." Sexual sin is an especially serious sin because it strikes most closely at the image of God in us. Thus, for those who have rejected God and turned to created images instead of the Creator, it should come as no surprise that the first area where our wickedness and depravity should show up is in regards to our sexuality.

So then, if you want to see how the wrath of God is being revealed, look at what a person does with regards to his body sexually. Look at what a society says is or is not permissible regarding sexual norms. Given the current state of America at the start of the 21st century, I can't say I've very optimistic. Does anybody even bat an eye at the idea of two unmarried people having sex anymore? We have web sites that provides easy ways for people to discreetly cheat on their spouses. Pornography is rampant depicting any and every kind of sexual perversion imaginable. Our television shows and movies are full of sexual innuendo as best, if not outright sexually immorality at worse. One could go on but you live in the same culture I do. You see it. Our culture may have looked upon the sexual revolution as a good thing, but that's not how I see it given what Paul says here. The massive loosening of sexual norms in our culture over the past 50 years is not something to be celebrated; it's a clear and unmistakable sign that what Paul is saying here about God giving us up to the lusts of our hearts has

happened and is happening still. God's wrath is being revealed against us and it's seen first and foremost in regards to our sexual sin.

Paul goes on to mention a second result of God giving us up to our wickedness in v. 26-27, which brings us to our second point, which is that...

2. God gave them up to dishonorable passions

Please look back in your Bibles and follow along as I read. **“For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; 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 themselves the due penalty for their error.”**

This is in a sense a sub-point of what Paul said in v. 24 when he spoke about God giving them up, **“in the lusts of their hearts to impurity...”** Sexual immorality was in mind there and now here Paul addresses a particular kind of sexual immorality by mentioning homosexual behavior. Likely, this aspect of sexual sin is being highlighted by Paul because he's sending this letter to Rome where the practice of homosexuality would have been more prevalent than what would have been the case in other cities. The Romans were far more tolerant of homosexuality than other cultures, and so it is no surprise that Paul would specifically highlight this aspect of sexual sin because it is one that Gentile Roman believers would be more prone to accepting than would those with a Jewish background.

Now I'm not going to spend much time on this point because I want to discuss it at greater length than what I have time for this morning. I don't need to tell any of you that this issue has become a significant cultural flashpoint for us and so next week my plan to come back to these two verses and spend our whole time together going over what Paul is teaching us about homosexual behavior here. But suffice to say, Paul includes homosexual behavior as something first to be regarded as immoral and impure and second, it is something that God has given people over to in his wrath. But more on that next week.

For now, we need to skip ahead to the third and final way Paul tells us that God has given people up and that is...

3. God gave them up to a debased mind

First off, look with me just at v. 28. **“And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.”** Much like twice before this, we're told God gave them up to their sin because they rejected him. Paul describes it as, **“they did not see fit to acknowledge God.”** As a result of viewing creation, people should have recognized God as God and given him honor and thanks, but they didn't. They rejected him and so now for the third time we're

told God gives people up to something and this time it's to a **“debased mind to do what ought not to be done.”**

This is the working out of what Paul said back in v. 22 when he described those who refused to honor God as, *“claiming to be wise, they became fools...”* People who deny God think they are wise. They think they're rational, that they've freed themselves from the shackles of religious dogma and can blaze their own trail by deciding for themselves what they want to do with their lives, to live life according to their rules, to do whatever they feel is right because no one can decide that for them, especially God. That is the spirit of our age, is it not? Do not our movies and television shows bombard us with the message that we each must do what we think is right, that we must follow our heart, and must be true to ourselves? It's a godless approach to life, but one our culture celebrates as the highest good for our own individual self-fulfillment.

But though we regard ourselves as wise and enlightened, God says we are fools: fools with debased minds, worthless minds, that no longer think rightly about life. God gives us over to minds that, untethered from God's moral authority, quickly fall away into all manner of immorality. As it says in Proverbs 14:12, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end, leads to death.” Following the desires of your heart, without any regard to God, may get you brownie points with our culture, but it leads to a dead end. It leads only to ever-increasing depths of sin and eventually eternal death. So then, our imaginary freedom from God comes with a very real price: as Paul says, it leads us into unrighteousness, or as Paul says in v. 28, **“to do what ought not to be done.”**

As to what that might be, Paul gives no shortage of examples. Starting at v. 29 he says, **“They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice.”** Paul starts with a general, broad statement of the kind of wickedness that characterize those whom God have given over to their sin. The first two terms - **“unrighteousness”** and **“evil”** - cover over all kinds of sin, with **“covetousness”** being the root of numerous sins people commit to gain something they want that others have, and **“malice”** is a negative disposition towards people that is quite the opposite of love.

But then Paul swings the floodgates wide open and unleashes machine gun-style all manner of specific ways we express our unrighteousness. Follow along as I read starting at the middle of v. 29 through v. 31. **“They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.”** Now I'm not going to go through each one of these and elaborate on them because I think you for the most part know precisely what each of these terms mean either from having experienced it against you or, more pointedly, because they have been true of you. The force of Paul's argument isn't found in the details as much as it is in the collective whole: you're to read this list and reach two conclusions: first, God is just to judge men for sins such as these and second, God is just to judge me because these terms rightly describe me.

When you read this, your mind best not drift off and think of all those other people who act this way. Yes, many people do, but if you can't locate the depths of your sinful heart

in these verses then you may be a Pharisee as self-righteous as any of those Jesus encountered. In fact, Paul warns of this self-righteous tendency at the beginning of the next chapter. Notice what he says in 2:1, *“Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things.”*

Look, you may not be guilty of every one of these sins Paul lists in v. 24-32, but you sure are guilty of some of them. Maybe homosexual sin isn't your problem, but heterosexual sin certainly is! Maybe you don't gossip but you sure are boastful! Maybe you haven't murdered someone but your heart is full of envy and ruthlessness towards others. Don't walk away from this thinking about how this applies to other people: look in the mirror of God's word here and see your own reflection in it. To a greater or lesser degree, this describes all of us. No one is exempt. God's wrath has been revealed against all of us because these unrighteous characteristics are true of us.

But there's one more thing Paul highlights in v. 32 we need to see as well. Look there with me. He says, **“Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.”** Part of the **“debased mind”** that comes with rejecting God is not only engaging in sin but encouraging and approving those who practice it. Is this not abundantly clear when it comes to how our culture bends over backward to give its approval to the sin of homosexuality? The media can't help but celebrate every celebrity who comes out of the closet or drill into us over and over again in movies and TV shows and anywhere else they can that homosexual behavior should not only be tolerated but respected and celebrated. We are living v. 32 as a culture right now when it comes to sin of homosexuality. It's as if Paul had a crystal ball to see into the future and wrote about what would take place in America during the start of the 21st century.

But besides our culture, this is something we all need to be aware of, because we can individually be guilty of encouraging sin in others. Have you ever told someone they were right to do something sinful? Perhaps you aided them in tearing down another co-worker? Maybe you laughed at sexuality immorality and thus encouraged others by your example to take it less seriously? Maybe your slanderous words helped a friend cement a deeper hatred and malice toward someone? You get the idea. We can both sin and compound that sin by encouraging it and approving of it in others.

Conclusion

So let me wrap this up by saying that God's wrath is not coming just because of our sin but the fact of the prevalence of sin is itself the wrath of God. We too often think of God's wrath as only something to fear in the future and rightfully so. God will judge sin, finally and fully, when Christ returns. To those who persist in unrighteousness, who live without regard for God, who love the darkness of sin rather than the light of Christ, for them is reserved the eternal wrath of God in the Lake of Fire.

But what we can easily overlook is that God's wrath has already gone before us. God's wrath is being revealed because we have rejected him as God, in that we have failed to

worship him through the light of revelation given to all men through creation. Therefore, as a result, Paul says three times in our passage, that God **“gave them up”** to their sin. God would loosen his hand of restraint against our sin and like a home owner deciding to leave the grass uncut and the bushes untrimmed, so also has God allowed mankind to go its own way, to follow the wicked desires of their heart.

This should make each and every one of us shudder, but I would be remiss not to remind us that God’s wrath is not the final word. Paul is relating this because while God’s wrath is just and right and dreadful, God’s grace is all the more glorious. The gospel is good news because in Christ, God’s wrath has been satisfied. Christ died for our sins on the cross, so that God’s just sentence against our sin might be served, and so that sinners who are guilty of all those things Paul mentioned may be forgiven. So yes, fear the wrath of God against our sin, but even better, run to the arms of Christ who satisfied the God’s wrath for us on the cross. We have a terrible problem, as Paul has made abundantly clear to us today, but we have a grand and glorious solution in Christ Jesus.

Let’s go to him now in prayer. Please bow your heads with me.