

## WORLD GONE WRONG

### Everything's supposed to be different

In the movie "Grand Canyon," a tow-truck driver named Simon responds to a call from an attorney whose car has broken down. When he arrives on the scene, five street toughs are threatening the stranded attorney. Simon, the tow-truck driver, pulls the leader of the gang aside and schools him in theology:

"Man," he says, "the world ain't supposed to work like this. Maybe you don't know that, but this ain't the way it's supposed to be. I'm supposed to be able to do my job without asking you if I can. And that dude is supposed to be able to wait with his car without you ripping him off. Everything's supposed to be different than what it is."<sup>1</sup>

One would be hard-pressed to find a more powerful analysis of the human condition. Everything's supposed to be different than what it is. Simon the tow-truck driver, it turns out, has much in common with Paul the apostle.

In Romans 1:18-32, Paul tells us that humanity's desperate condition, rooted in the rejection of God in favor of other gods, demonstrates our desperate need for the gospel, the story and announcement concerning the lordship of Jesus Christ. The gospel reveals the saving activity of God to a world gone wrong.

Romans 1:18 begins a section that continues through Romans 3:20. Its overall function is to demonstrate that both Jews and Gentiles are under the power of sin and therefore need the gospel, which reveals God's saving activity in Christ. The Jewish and Gentile believers in Rome would therefore find themselves on equal footing, and in equal need. Believers are being saved from the sin described in Romans 1:18-3:20 and from God's wrath against it.

The sin described in Romans 1:18-32 has a distinctly Gentile flavor. Paul writes in such a way, however, that Jews would find themselves implicated as well. This, then, is the sad story of the world. The story of Jesus the Messiah is released into this world.

Romans 1:18-32:

<sup>18</sup>For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, <sup>19</sup>because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. <sup>20</sup>For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. <sup>21</sup>For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. <sup>22</sup>Professing to be wise, they became fools, <sup>23</sup>and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

<sup>24</sup>Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. <sup>25</sup>For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. <sup>26</sup>For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their

women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural,<sup>27</sup> and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.

<sup>28</sup>And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper,<sup>29</sup> being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips,<sup>30</sup> slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,<sup>31</sup> without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful;<sup>32</sup> and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.

## **Rejection of God**

The final judgment, in which God's wrath will be completely revealed, will be according to the gospel (Romans 2:16). The gospel, which concerns the lordship of Jesus Christ, reveals not only God's righteousness, as noted in Romans 1:17, but also his wrath. His righteousness, in fact, cannot be separated from his wrath. The psalmists and the prophets expected God, in his righteousness, to rescue his people by inflicting his wrath on his enemies, who were oppressing his people.

God, in his wrath, opposes wickedness. If he didn't, he would be sanctioning wickedness. God's righteous judgment of the world involves both salvation and judgment.

The gospel, in the present, brings into focus the wrath to come. God has enthroned his king, the Lord Jesus Christ, to let the world know that he will judge it.

Just as the righteousness of God benefits all who believe (verse 16), the wrath of God is revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness. Ungodliness primarily concerns a disregard for worshiping God. Unrighteousness primarily concerns a disregard for justice. The ungodliness and unrighteousness among men and women is in opposition to the righteousness of God that both saves and judges. It is also in opposition to faith, by which righteous persons are called to live (verse 17).

Opposition to God is expressed in suppression of the truth about him. While God reveals truth, these people cover it up. They suppress the truth because they don't want to know it. They live in denial.

If it is argued that no such truth was ever revealed, Paul goes on to say that God, in fact, has made himself known through his creation of the world. From the beginning, humanity has known of the "eternal power" and "divine nature" of God. It is evident that some power, beyond time and separate from creation, is responsible for creation. It is also evident that creation can only be attributed to divinity. Humanity, therefore, cannot plead ignorance.

Such revelation calls for a response, but men and women refused to worship God and preferred futile speculations concerning what they saw in creation. Failure to respond appropriately to revelation further diminished their capacity to comprehend truth. Paul would consider any theory that disavows a creator as futile speculation.

Humans took the place of God, thinking that they were wise. Essentially, they worshiped themselves, the height of human folly, and then made idols of what God had

created, both humans and animals. Additional folly is evident in that they chose to worship that which is corruptible—creatures on the way to death—over against God, who is incorruptible. Pagans created images of such creatures and placed them in their temples as objects of worship.

Creation reveals the Creator and beckons humanity to worship him. But humanity worshiped what God created instead of the Creator.

### **Homosexual behavior**

Authorities would “give over” a criminal to punishment (Mathew 18:34). God also “gave over” his rebellious people to their enemies (Judges 2:14). God had two responses of judgment to human idolatry. Twice he gave them over to some form of punishment (Romans 1:24, 28). The use of the words “gave them over” in verse 26 are part of the same “giving over” that Paul begins describing in verse 24. In verse 25, he recapitulates God’s reason for giving them over: idolatry.

Because of human idolatry, God “gave them over” to their own sinful lusts, which they preferred to him, with the result that their bodies were dishonored. Paul’s similar wording in verses 26-27 may indicate that he is referring to homosexual lusts even in verse 24. God not only let men and women do what they wanted, he handed them over to a cycle of sin, evidently to illustrate the destructiveness of sin. As a result, they became more attached to their lusts.

Their bodies were dishonored, or degraded, in that they were misused. Instead of honoring God with their bodies, they honored their lusts and thereby dishonored their bodies. These lusts of the heart, when honored in this way, have a dehumanizing effect.

Paul then focuses on the particular lusts connected to homosexuality. He says women exchanged the natural function for the unnatural function. He specifically says that men abandoned the “natural function of the woman” and engaged in homosexual acts, leaving little doubt that he intends it to be understood that women exchanged the “natural function of the man” and engaged in homosexual acts. The “due penalty” for such activity, at least for men and presumably for women, is the dishonor they bring to their bodies.<sup>2</sup>

### **Distortion of God’s image**

Why does Paul, in showing how God judges humanity, focus first on homosexuality?

First, Paul is showing how pagan idolatry distorts the story of creation in Genesis 1-2 and mirrors the story of sin in Genesis 3. God created humanity, male and female, in his image, as his representative on earth. They were commanded to multiply, thereby reproducing his image. Then they were commanded to rule over creation. Paul has demonstrated that instead of ruling over creation, humans worshiped it. Worshiping creation, therefore, resulted in a distortion of, and a rejection of, God’s image in humanity. Paul mentions women first and men second, echoing Genesis 3:6, in which the woman sinned first, then the man.

The first thing to mention about being made in the image of God is that a person is either a male or a female. It follows, therefore, that the first thing to get distorted, when humanity rejects God and wants nothing to do with representing him, is human sexuality.

So men behaved like women, and women behaved like men. Moreover, two people of the same gender cannot multiply and reproduce the image of God. It is impossible for them to do what God, from the beginning, intended them to do.

Second, also related to the Genesis story, homosexuality directly corresponds to humans' decision to worship other gods. Humans abandoned God and "exchanged" him for other gods. Therefore, men "abandoned" women in favor of men and women "exchanged" men for women. The punishment fits the crime and proceeds from the crime.

Paul highlights homosexual behavior, and not heterosexual sins, for specific reasons. He is not saying anything in Romans 1 about one sin being worse than another.

### **Antisocial behavior**

Because humans did not want to know God, he gave them over to homosexual passions. He also gave them over to depraved minds with the result that they engaged in improper behavior. Apart from God, men and women are unqualified to make proper behavioral decisions. In fact, they are free to do whatever they want. God, in judging idolatry, lets humans do whatever they want. The source of human misbehavior is a mind that has rejected the influence of God.

Paul's list of "things which are not proper" is almost entirely composed of anti-social behavior and attitudes. The list is headed, and summed up, by "unrighteousness," the second attribute that motivated human suppression of the truth. Whereas the first attribute, "ungodliness," is primarily seen in human worship, unrighteousness is primarily seen in human relations.

Paul asserts that God has given humans the knowledge that those who engage in such behavior are deserving of punishment, even death. That people do, in fact, feel guilty gives credence to Paul's analysis. The knowledge that such behavior deserves punishment, like the knowledge of God that all humans have, is disregarded. It is not only disregarded by those who engage in such behavior, it is disdained to the extent that they endorse such behavior in others. These men and women thereby contribute to cultures in which antisocial behavior can flourish. Many of the behaviors cited by Paul would not be considered antisocial in our culture, just as they weren't considered antisocial in Roman culture.

Why does Paul, in showing how God judges humanity, focus second on antisocial behavior? If homosexual behavior distorts the image of God, antisocial behavior attacks it. Antisocial behavior represents an affront to other humans, who bear the image of God. As homosexuality aptly mirrors the story of sin in Genesis 3, antisocial behavior aptly mirrors the story of sin in Genesis 4, which begins with Cain's murder of Abel.

### **Effect of false worship**

For Paul, homosexual choices and antisocial behavior particularly illustrate the effect of false worship. They aptly illustrate the idolatry of which humanity is guilty. Humanity worshiped other gods. As one consequence, some chose, and continue to choose, homosexuality. As another consequence, some chose, and continue to choose, antisocial behavior. Some chose, and continue to choose, both.

God hands them over to a cycle of sin in order to judge them and the idolatry that such choices represent. By giving them over to their own passions and thoughts, God gives them over to their own sin. They become enslaved to their own sin. The punishment for sin is that you are free to sin more. Anything that is both pleasurable and repeated becomes enslaving—and, in the case of sin, increasingly destructive. The punishment for sin is sin.

In Romans 1, the enslaving nature of both homosexuality and antisocial behavior serves as a signal that humanity has rejected God in favor of other gods. In Romans 1-4, the enslaving nature of sin serves notice that men and women need the gospel: the story and announcement concerning the lordship of Jesus Christ.

### **The garden and the wilderness**

Paul tells the story of pagan idolatry in a way that awakens not only the story of the first humans in the garden but also the story of Israel in the wilderness. Eve, believing she was wise, became a fool. She chose the serpent, a “crawling creature,” over God (Genesis 3:6). The first humans, charged with ruling over creation, instead gave homage to it, obeying the serpent. The antisocial behavior of Romans 1 was first depicted in Genesis 4.

God called Israel out of Egypt to address the problem of sin. But in the wilderness, just as God brought them to himself, the Israelites rejected God, became futile and chose other gods (2 Kings 17:15-16, Jeremiah 2:5). “Thus they exchanged their glory for the image of an ox that eats grass” (Psalm 106:20). They “changed their glory for that which does not profit” (Jeremiah 2:11). God “gave them over to the stubbornness of their heart, to walk in their own devices” (Psalm 81:12). When they finally entered the Promised Land and worshiped another god, “the anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and he gave them into the hands of plunderers who plundered them; and he sold them into the hands of their enemies around them” (Judges 2:11-14). Homosexual behavior was practiced among the Israelites in the Promised Land (Judges 19:22). Antisocial behavior was also evident among the Israelites both in the wilderness and the Promised Land.

The subplots, underneath the story of pagan idolatry, homosexuality and antisocial behavior, are two other stories: the original human failure and the failure of the would-be solution to human failure. The pagans followed in the footsteps of the first humans, but so did the Jews. The subplot supports Paul’s case for God’s solution to the problem: the gospel.

### **The human problem**

Almost everyone acknowledges that humanity has problems. However, opinions diverge widely on the nature of the problems. Romans 1:18-32 offers a simple explanation: Humans turned away from worshiping the true God and instead worshiped false gods. Therefore, we live in a world of sexual confusion, hatred and violence. Any approach to human problems that does not take sin into account is widely off the mark.

The explanation is simple, but the problem is complex. And it’s everyone’s problem. It’s a problem that believers in the gospel not only share with each other but with the rest of the world. If we find ourselves anywhere in Romans 1:18-32, we know that we have an issue with idolatry.

We tend to worship creation, parts of creation or the modern versions of Mammon, Mars, Aphrodite and Bacchus: money, power, sex, and food and drink. We can therefore empathize with all our brothers and sisters in Christ; we can therefore empathize also with all those who see no need for Christ.

Sin is a human problem. It's a universal problem. It's our problem.

We can confess to God and cry out to him concerning both our desperate condition and the desperate condition of the world. We can acknowledge that all of us desperately need the gospel: the good news concerning the lordship of Jesus Christ in which God addresses the problem of human sin.

### **Indicators of the human problem**

What does Romans 1:18-32 tell us about homosexual and antisocial behavior?

Paul is not speaking in degrees of sin. False worship results in both homosexual behavior and antisocial behavior. Paul gives us no reason to feel superior or inferior because our sin falls in one category rather than the other.

The essential human problem is idolatry, not homosexual or antisocial behavior. Idolatry is the fountainhead from which all aberrant behavior flows. The presence of homosexual and antisocial behavior is indicative of the presence of idolatry. When we see it, in others or in ourselves, we may want to remember that all of us are guilty of the idolatry that leads to such behavior.

Indeed, if we believe that this is a world gone wrong because of idolatry, we shouldn't be surprised by the presence of homosexual and antisocial behavior. Based on Paul's diagnosis of the human condition, it's what we'd expect to see.

If the roots of a tree are rotten, some parts of the tree may show evidence of rot while others may not. But it doesn't matter if some branches look healthy. They're attached to a rotten tree. The tree, along with all its branches, is doomed. The way you can tell that it's doomed is when certain parts show signs of rot. Homosexual and antisocial behavior is a sign of rot. The human tree is doomed, and so are all of us who are attached to it. We need the gospel.

### **Judgment against the human problem**

We'd also expect to see intense attachment to such behavior to the extent that some people maintain, for example, that homosexuality or greed is natural. "Greed is good," says Michael Douglas' character in the movie "Wall Street."<sup>3</sup> God punishes dreadful decisions by creating space for more dreadful decisions. Intense attachment to sin is indicative of God's judgment against it.

God judges sin. This is good news. The fact that God judges sin tells us that he doesn't want us to be stuck with it forever. It tells us that we live in a world gone wrong and that we need the gospel, and the gospel tells us that we won't be stuck with it forever. If you are enslaved to sin, one of the things God is telling you is that he doesn't want you to be stuck with this forever. The gospel does not guarantee that you will be rid of the tendencies that plague you in the body you now have. It does, however, give you some weapons with which to fight well: the scriptures, prayer, the Holy Spirit and the love of God's people.

The gospel leads us into worship. Sin deconstructs and distorts humanity. Worship restores humanity and sustains it. If we suffer from depraved minds because we have rejected the influence of God, worship renews our minds.

### **Pain in the church**

The issue of homosexuality today is a storm center of confusion, controversy and pain in our country. Some interpret Paul to be speaking only against homosexuality in the context of pagan worship. Others interpret him to be speaking only against homosexual relations in which one or both of the partners have, in fact, natural heterosexual desires. More churches are embracing homosexuality as good. This church is not one of them. We believe that the scriptures, including Romans 1:18-32, teach against such a view.

But we can say this: We're in pain over this issue. We don't have all the answers. We have much to learn about how to be God's people in this part of the world. May God help us.

The people who have come to me for pastoral counsel who love Jesus and also feel enslaved to a same-sex attraction have been in anguish. They haven't told anyone else in the church about their struggle, nor have they felt free to do so. At the very least, we must be a church that helps such brothers and sisters fight well. We must be a church that allows such brothers and sisters to be open with us, as we all must confess our sins to one another in order to be healed, without worrying that they would be ostracized. Those of us who are guilty of greed, envy and gossip, for example, must see ourselves on the same page of Romans as those who are guilty of homosexual behavior.

However far we think our culture has strayed from biblical truth, let us not for a minute think that our world is darker than the world occupied by the first readers of Paul's letter. We may live in the days when a movie about two gay cowboys wins a Golden Globe Award, but they lived in the days of Nero, an openly bisexual emperor who went so far as to go through a formal wedding ceremony with a boy named Sporus. A few years after Paul penned his letter to the Romans, Nero blamed the followers of Jesus for a fire that swept through Rome and proceeded to kill them.

The church always has been, and always will be, God's counter-cultural community.

### **Bible story**

A few months ago, I was reading to my 2-year-old daughter the story of Adam and Eve from an illustrated Children's Bible. Christina, a very sensitive girl, was looking at the picture of Adam and Eve after they rejected God.

"Why are they sad?" she asked me.

"They made a mistake," I told her.

Christina began sobbing uncontrollably. She was inconsolable. Her response startled me, and reminded me that we live in a world gone wrong. Her response was utterly appropriate. For a few moments, I wanted to weep with her.

There's only one thing that can console us: the gospel of God. This may be a world gone wrong, but the gospel tells us that God will remake it.

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<sup>1</sup> *Grand Canyon*, © 1991 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox.

<sup>2</sup> The word translated “due penalty” (antimisthia) is related to the word translated “dishonored” in verse 24 (atimazo) and to the word translated “degrading” in verse 26 (atimia).

<sup>3</sup> *Wall Street*, © 1987 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox.