

Righteous Wrath Revealed: *The Great Exchange* – Part 3

Romans 1:28-32

*“...God gave them up to a **debased mind** to do what ought not be done.”*

Introduction: *“How do you see the world?”* This important question has to do with a *worldview*, the type of lens by which we interpret all things in the universe. How many times have people asked the question, *“what’s going on?!”* genuinely, without actually having a grid to think through. Without a **Biblical worldview**, this life would give us reason to live in fear, distrust, hopelessness, and anxiety, without any real hope for change. When possess a worldview that has the truth of God’s Word and acknowledges the power and nature of God, we can see things clearly.

In **April of 1965**, an American Radio broadcast for ABC news named Paul Harvey (who passed away in 2009 after filling the airwaves from 1951 through 2008) gave an insightful take on the world around, predicting what could happen in the next 60 years. In a C.S. Lewis-esque, *Screwtape Letters* type of commentary, he said the following about the potential downfall of the United States:

*If I were the devil ... If I were the Prince of Darkness, I’d want to engulf the whole world in darkness. And I’d have a third of it’s real estate, and four-fifths of its population, but I wouldn’t be happy until I had seized the ripest apple on the tree — **Thee**. So I’d set about however necessary to take over the United States. I’d subvert the churches first — I’d begin with a campaign of whispers. With the wisdom of a serpent, I would whisper to you as I whispered to Eve: **‘Do as you please.’** “To the young, I would whisper that ‘The Bible is a myth.’ I would convince them that man created God instead of the other way around. I would confide that what’s bad is good, and what’s good is ‘square.’ And the old, I would teach to pray, after me, **‘Our Father, which art in Washington...’***

*“And then I’d get organized. I’d educate authors in how to make lurid literature exciting, so that anything else would appear dull and uninteresting. I’d threaten TV with dirtier movies and vice versa. I’d pedal narcotics to whom I could. I’d sell alcohol to ladies and gentlemen of distinction. **I’d tranquilize the rest with pills.***

*“If I were the devil I’d soon have families that war with themselves, churches at war with themselves, and nations at war with themselves; until each in its turn was consumed. And with promises of higher ratings **I’d have mesmerizing media fanning the flames.** If I were the devil I would encourage schools to refine young intellects, but neglect to discipline emotions — just let those run wild, until before you knew it, you’d have to have drug sniffing dogs and metal detectors at every schoolhouse door.*

*“Within a decade I’d have prisons overflowing, I’d have judges promoting pornography — **soon I could evict God from the courthouse, then from the schoolhouse, and then from the houses of Congress.** And in **His own churches I would substitute psychology for religion, and deify science.** I would lure priests and pastors into misusing boys and girls, and church money. If I were the devil I’d make the symbols of Easter an egg and the symbol of Christmas a bottle.*

*“If I were the devil I’d take from those who have, and give to those who wanted until I had killed the incentive of the ambitious. And what do you bet? I couldn’t get whole states to promote gambling as thee way to get rich? I would caution against extremes and hard work, in Patriotism, in moral conduct. **I would convince the young that marriage is old-fashioned,** that swinging is more fun, that what you see on TV is the way to be. And thus I could undress you in public, and I could lure you into bed with diseases*

*for which there is no cure. In other words, if I were the devil I'd just keep right on doing on what he's doing. Paul Harvey, good day."*¹

Paul Harvey had insight into what was going on around him 60 years ago because he understood the greater battle raging around and in mankind. The world is NO NEUTRAL PLAYGROUND but a battleground for the mind and heart of humanity. He seemed to understand the logical progression that Paul lays out in Romans 1, where sin is **progressively digressive**, and begins with exchanging the truth of God with a lie, which leads to greater and greater sin, both in individual lives and the collective lives of a culture. Here we see that Satan is a tempter and deceiver, appealing to our desires and thoughts, but God is the One who exercises wrath when people move toward those temptations. We've seen that when an exchange of God happens in anyone, God willingly gives that person **over** to the sin, which until there is belief and repentance, will continue to roll down a hill toward destruction or final wrath, only picking up steam and pace as time goes on.

Before considering the last step of digression in Romans 1:28-32, we want to illustrate that this process is not unique in our day nor in Paul's, but has been true throughout history. Back in **1 Kings 11:7**, it states that **Solomon**, the son of David, did the unthinkable. Remember, Solomon started out with all the resources a king could ask for, and loved the LORD (1 Kings 3:3). When God offered him anything he wanted, Solomon asked for wisdom and discernment (1 Kings 3:9), which pleased the LORD so much that He gave this to Solomon in full, as well as what he didn't ask for, riches and honor so that no other king could compare. But after compromising truth and morality by multiplying wives (only overshot the mark by 999!), his heart was pulled away by **idolatry**! In 11:7, Solomon built a high place to offer sacrifices to "Molech the abomination of the Ammonites on the mountain east of Jerusalem". An immensely consequential **exchange**, which led to a grievous **giving over**.

Fast forward generations and we see the kingdom divided, and **Ahaz**, king of Judah doing the unthinkable – **burning his own son as an offering to a foreign idol** (most likely Molech) (2 Kings 16:3). This practice was also conducted by **Manasseh** (2 Kings 21:6). This was not only in direct violation to God's Law (Lev. 18:21 & 20:2-5, which point out Molech directly; Deut. 18:10), but was an abomination before the LORD (Jer. 32:35) and told the people that they were really slaughtering HIS children (Ezek. 16:20-21). But no one has to have the Law tell them that burning your baby or child in fire to some fake God! This would have obvious to ANYONE and EVERYONE who had a logical, practical, and clear MIND.

So the question is this: **How do people, including those who know God from nature and tradition, get to a point that they could think that killing their child was not only acceptable but worshipful??!!** How does a person or culture get there to that level of depravity, delusion, and debasement, where sin is not only desired and committed, but approved of and celebrated? The answer is abundantly clear in Romans 1.

A BRIEF REVIEW:

If you are new this week or simply forgot the last couple of weeks, its important to see a couple of realities of the text we'll cover today. Paul, who is writing to the church at Rome in hopes of joining them on their mission mature the saints there and that they'd help him with his mission of reaching Spain, set out to explain the gospel in full in order to made sure they were unified on that front. He started with an explanation that the gospel is **the power of God, reveals the righteousness of God, is for everyone who**

¹ <https://www.ilfop.org/if-i-were-the-devil-by-paul-harvey/>

believes, and is obtained by faith in Jesus Christ alone (Rom. 1:16-17). He will reiterate this same reality in Romans 3:21-26, and in between, explains the *wrath of God* poured out in the present AND the future because of the sinfulness of mankind. In the present, God's wrath is seen when there is an **exchange of mankind** between the truth of God and a lie, or the worship of God for an idol, or obedience to God for the unnatural. When this exchange takes place, His punishment is actually **giving us over to our sin**, letting us have what we want, and experiencing the tyranny and captivity of our own depravity. Idolatry leads to immorality, and immorality will never stay caged or contained, but will continue to grow and devolve. We have seen that sin affects our *affections* (idolatry), *senses* (sexual immorality), and now it will affect our **mind, our very thinking**. Understanding this process not only helps us at a worldview level to understand what is going on around us, but what happens IN US, and how to actually REVERSE the spiral.

The Final Exchange in the Sin Cycle: Deluded Thinking

Romans 1:28 *"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".*

Paul was a master wordsmith, and in this section he shows off his ability to play with words to make a point between acknowledging God and a debased mind. *"Since people did not think it worthwhile to acknowledge God, he gave them over to the tyranny of a mind that was not worthwhile/depraved"*² This is a mind that is morally reprehensible and undiscerning, deluded and not able to understand what is right. **Idolatry** moves to **immorality** which moves to **insanity**. This is exactly WHY and HOW we can have people look at a clear moral decision and absolutely choose what is immoral without hesitation or tension. This is how we can have a culture where someone claiming to be a different gender than God gave them is seen as a real choice and healthy reality. This is how something like men competing in women's sports is seen as a real and healthy choice. This is how something like abortion is seen as healthcare and an unborn but fully living human in the womb can be passed off as a lump of cells, freeing the mother to rid herself of a life, which is seen as a real and healthy choice.

Notice as we get into how this plays out in a multiplicity of sin that what is being affected is a person's **mind**. We live in a day with a proliferation of **mental health issues**, which are real and hurt so many. But we must remember that a mind that is rebellious against God, that has suppressed the truth of God for a lie, has worshipped the creation rather than the Creator, given over to immorality and depravity will ABSOLUTELY have mental health issues! Therapy may help but it cannot solve or restore. A mind given over to sin MUST be restored in the gospel of Jesus to a right relationship with God which allows one to once again worship God in the splendor of His holiness.

The Final Trajectory of the Sin Cycle

Romans 1:29-31 *"They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of **envy**, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, 30 slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, **inventors of evil**, **disobedient to parents**, 31 foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless."*

The New Testament contains multiple "vice lists", a list of sins that is not exhaustive but general and written to prove or illustrate a point (see also Matt. 15:9; 1 Cor. 9-10; Gal. 5:19-21; Col. 3:5; 1 Tim. 1:9-10; 1 Pet. 2:1, 4:3...). Admittedly, teaching a list is difficult, and here Paul lists **21 sinful practices** that

² Colin Kruse, "Romans: Pillar NT Commentary", p. 105.

characterize the debased, unworthy mind. We will break these down into **three logical and syntactical sections** (just a fancy word for the signals Paul gave us in word order), and then draw some conclusions.

- 1) **The General Scope of Moral Chaos that pervades human life** – The first 4 on Paul's list go together and are defined as those "filled with all manner", a part of speech that denotes that people are totally controlled by their pursuits. A depraved mind that is given over will have comprehensive wickedness affecting every part of their thinking, motive, desire, and life.
- 2) **Extensive and Full Wickedness on display** – The next 5 give a greater diversity of behavior, but also stem from "fullness". Envy, murder, strife, deceit, and malice all have wicked thoughts and actions but each have a different scope and consequence. Each absolutely has to do with others, so evil and wickedness never stays contained to just a person alone, but will leak out and affect others.
- 3) **Wordplay and Full blown rebellion** – The final list of 12 deal with interpersonal sins that rail against God's authority before a rapid fire ending of the list. Gossips and slanderers are not only prideful but seek to take down others. Sin at the level of debasement cannot see others being happy or successful and seek to take them down. Gossip whispers while slander is not so subtle. These both kill because they can mix the truth with half-truth that disallow anyone actually knowing the whole truth. These operate like a lawyer in court who gets his words out to the jury even if it is stricken from the record by a judge.

Pride seems to be the foundational sin behind or below most of this list, and pride places self on the throne and moves God out. "*Haters of God, insolent, haughty, and boastful*" people make it clear that God is a roadblock to happiness, is unneeded, and the self has enough to carve out a life on its own.

There are two that also stand out in this list. The **first is inventors of evil**. Once any restraints are off, only creativity remains. This is someone who contrives and comes up with NEW WAYS to be wicked. In other words, the depth of depravity in the human mind knows no limits or boundaries. THIS IS HOW we get to places where we shake our heads and say: *how could someone DO that!?* The **second is disobedient to parents**, which almost seems out of place to our thinking and ears, since it is in the same list as murder and inventive evil. But to both Jews and Romans, disobedience to parents would not have been tolerated and would be seen as profoundly dangerous. In fact, **Deut. 21:18-21** in the OT law prescribed the death penalty for those children found to be disobedient to their parents. Though that was not practiced in the NT, the severity was still understood. Parenting is the place where children learn and understand to fear the LORD, to respect authority, and embrace discipline. When a family neglects the discipline of children, bratty kids are produced. When a culture fails to raise their kids in the discipline of the LORD, chaos and depraved minds are produced.

Paul finishes with four words that all rhyme and begin with the same Greek letter, translated without. This letter would have been read out loud, so it would have ended with a rapid fire ending, indicating that the whole world was missing these four attributes essential for humanity. Foolish, faithless, heartless, and ruthless, or as one Jewish translation has it: without *brains, honor, love, or pity*.

Now, let's draw some concluding principles from this list. 1) **This list of sins affects EVERYONE**. Some may rebuff that they struggle with idolatry (they'd be wrong), but especially sexual immorality. But here, there is a smorgasbord of sin that everyone could see themselves. 2) **There is no such thing as**

‘acceptable’ sin – We would like to categorize sin as better and worse, and though there are definitely differing levels of **consequence for sin**, Paul does not differentiate sin. Even ‘little’ sins like gossip are evidence of a mind given over to sin **3) Every sin cuts out the worship and authority of God** – That is at the core of the list. We replace God for ourselves and then feel like we can do what we want, even as it leads us to misery. **4) So many of these sins are hard to recognize in ourselves** – Sin is by nature self-deceiving, and because of this, it blinds us to true realities. How often do people see that they gossip? *“I don’t gossip but I can tell you who does!”* We harbor envy and even murder in our heart and have over-inflated views of ourselves. This is the nature of sin itself.

The Final End of the Sin Cycle

Romans 1:32 *“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.*

Sin not only cannot stay contained, it PRODUCES conflict within people’s mind and heart. Guilt, shame, and a foreboding knowledge of judgment lingers. Here we see that even after exchanging the truth with a lie and worshipping God for created things, and even though God gave us over to our idolatry which lead to immorality and ultimately insanity, people STILL know that there is a God and that they are not right with Him. A person may hate their father or mother and distance themselves from them, changing their name, moving away, and never speaking of them, but deep down, they know that they truly are his parents and even try find approval from them. Here, even if a person is a **declared atheist**, or if a culture has expunged God from schools, and outlawed prayer in government buildings, or disallowed churches from gathering inside, we know that they cannot rid themselves of the knowledge of God. There is no such thing as an atheist, and everyone knows judgment ultimately exists. So suppression is all that’s left, to rid, distance, and expel God from sight.

But that is not enough. What needs to happen to be able to practice our sinful, selfish, rebellious desires AND get rid of nagging truth of God, truth, and judgement? People MUST surround themselves with people who will tell them the way they are living is not only acceptable, but good! Why do echo chambers exist?! People are desperately trying to assuage the knowledge of God in their head and heart, and the only way to dull the volume of truth is to turn the knob on what is wicked. We see this in our culture, especially with clear immorality. It’s framed like this: *as Christians, we should love people, and thus we should **accept them, meaning turning an eye to their wicked behavior***. This is the kind of half-truth that nullifies the effectiveness of the gospel! Should we **accept everyone as an image bearer made in the likeness of God** (Gen. 1:26-28)? YES! But the real issue is NOT acceptance, but according to Paul, it has everything to do with **APPROVAL, or in giving approval to what someone is doing or thinking**. This is what we MUST NOT DO.

To love and approach a sinner caught up in idolatry, immorality, and insanity is right. To tell them they are ok or healthy or happy in this state is **unloving, selfish, and self-preserving**. Approval of sinful thought, desire, and action is playing into the hands of our enemy and what seems loving is actually hating someone, like telling someone who is in shock and bleeding out is just fine and don’t need immediate medical attention! This will shape and color HOW we interact with unbelievers, family members, and loved ones that want relationship yet continue to walk in rebellion. We love and accept but cannot approve, knowing they are under the wrath of God.

Conclusion:

What is the solution for someone's idolatry, immorality, and insanity? This whole passage, from 1:18-32, cries out for **REPENTANCE**, with full, faith driven turning from sin and reversing the exchanges. When we repent, the downward spiral can be reversed. Repentance has several forms:

*"In repentance at **conversion**, adults seek forgiveness for a life of unbelief. In **interpersonal** repentance, one person confesses sins against another. In **daily** repentance, believers confess their ordinary daily sins as best they can. God extends His love and mercy to every sinner, regardless of where we fit in the list of sins."*³

As we mentioned in the introduction, Israel had a history of idolatry that led to immorality that produced insane practices, like child sacrifice. *How did it change or get reversed?* When kings like Hezekiah came in and tore down the practices of idol worship, restoring worship of YHWH in the temple, and confessing the sins of the people. God responded to Hezekiah's prayer and gave Israel strength, wealth, and victory over the insurmountable enemy in Sennacherib. But Hezekiah was not immune to sinful exchange and feeling the weight of God's wrath:

2 Chronicles 32:24-26 *"In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death, and he prayed to the Lord, and he answered him and gave him a sign. 25 But Hezekiah did not make return according to the benefit done to him, **for his heart was proud**. Therefore **wrath came upon him** and Judah and Jerusalem. 26 But **Hezekiah humbled himself for the pride of his heart**, both he and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the **wrath of the Lord** did not come upon them in the days of Hezekiah."*

No matter where you are on the scale of idolatry, immorality and insanity, today is the time to humble ourselves, confess our sin, ask for forgiveness, and turn back to God in Christ.

³ Daniel Doriani, *"Romans: Reformed Expository Commentary"*, p. 54