

### 3. Wrath inflicted (1:24-32)

Verses 24–32 detail the consequences for failing to worship God (1:21). It should be kept in mind that there is good news for sinful man, but Paul doesn't get to that until 3:21. He is still building the case against man and is detailing why everyone needs the gospel.

***1:24 Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, that their bodies might be dishonored among them.***

***1:25 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.***

***1:26 For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural,***

***1:27 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.***

To understand verses 24–32, the previous context needs to be kept in mind. In verses 16 to 18 Paul explained that the gospel is needed since the wrath of God is being revealed against the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.

Wrath is God's anger *and* the resultant condemnation and judgment against sin. In other words, when Paul speaks of God's wrath being revealed, he is speaking of it being revealed in God's acts of judgment.

God's wrath has been revealed throughout human history. It is clearly seen in the plagues of Egypt and the destruction of Pharaoh's army (Exo. 15:7); it can also be observed in His judgment of the nations (Psa. 2:5; 59:5; 59:13; 78:49; 79:6) and in the exile of Israel. But in Romans 1:18 Paul says that the wrath of God *is being* revealed; that is, it is *presently* observable for it is *continuously* being poured out upon humanity even now.

Verses 18 to 23 tell us *why* God is imposing wrath; namely, because people suppress the truth about God (1:18). God has revealed His eternal power and divine nature in creation (1:20), but men suppress that knowledge (1:18) and exchange the glory of the incorruptible God for idols (1:23). They, therefore, deserve wrath. In Ephesians 2:3 Paul says that we are all by nature "children of wrath"; that is, we are objects of God's wrath by birth and are deserving of God's judgment.

Romans 1:24–32 explain *where* God's wrath is seen, *who* is experiencing it, and *how* it is being meted out.

The *way* that God is inflicting His wrath is found in the words, "God gave them over"; this expression appears three times in the chapter:

- 1:24: God gave them over . . . to impurity
- 1:26: God gave them over to degrading passions
- 1:28: God gave them over to an unfit mind

This is retributive justice (Murray, 45). (Retributive justice assumes that punishment is a natural and necessary component of justice. This is the opposite of restorative justice that views justice as correction and rehabilitation, not punishment).

It may not be immediately apparent how giving people over to sinful desires is punishment until we realize that our flourishing and joy are tied to living in harmony with our design, walking in the light of the truth, and being reconciled and at peace with our Creator. When God gives people over to their sinful desires, sin dominates their lives. Jesus said, "Everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin" (Jn.8:34 also see Ro. 6:16). In a similar way, Peter called false prophets "slaves of corruption." Then he said, "whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved" (2 Pet. 2:19).

Thus, God's wrath is seen (it is being revealed—Ro. 1:18) in all who are given over to the power of (i.e. enslaved by) sin. Verses 26 to 31 represent a partial list of what that looks like in people's lives.

There are two sides to "God giving people over".

(1) First, there is the human side. The people God is giving over to sinful desires have already given themselves over to sin, as the expression, "in the lusts of their hearts" indicates. That is, God gave them over to what was already in their hearts. Paul says that the Gentiles "having become callous, *have given themselves over* to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness" (Ephesians 4:19).

(2) Secondly, there is the divine side. God does not compel or encourage men to do evil, but He *actively* gives people over to the course they have chosen. "Like a judge who hands over a prisoner to the punishment his crime has earned, God hands over the sinner to the cycle of ever-increasing sin" (Moo, 111).

First, the Bible says that God gave men over to impurity (1:24a). "Impurity" in the writings of Paul often refers to sexual aberration (2 Cor. 12:21; Gal. 5:19; Eph. 5:3; Col. 3:5; 1Thess. 4:7). Giving people over to impurity presupposes the existence of impurity. As a result, *their bodies are dishonored* (1:24b). Dishonor is contrasted to glory in the Bible (1 Cor. 15:43; 2 Cor. 6:8; 1 Cor. 11:6–7). Glory is something that is weighty or impressive; it is a sign of honor. As image-bearers of God, humans possess a degree of glory that reflects the Creator (1 Cor. 11:7; Psa. 8:5). Dishonor refers to something shameful or degrading. The dishonor that entered human sexual relationships is a consequence of rejecting God. Those who *exchanged* God's glory (1:23) and *exchanged* His truth (1:25) also *exchanged* natural sexual relationships for unnatural ones (1:26).

The "lie" that is exchanged for the truth in verse 25 is the lie of worshipping and serving the creature rather than the Creator. For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions (1:26).

Four important observations need to be made from verses 26 and 27.

1) The meaning of "nature" and "unnatural."

The degrading passions that God gives people over to are described as women exchanging the *natural* function for that which is *unnatural* (1:26) and men abandoning the *natural function* of the woman and burning in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts. Degrading passions are clearly homosexual desires and actions. If we understand what Paul means by “nature” we can understand why homosexuality is a degrading human behavior.

Paul generally uses the word “nature” to describe the way things are by reason of their intrinsic state or birth (Moo, 114).

In Romans 1:26 and 27 the adjective “natural” (φυσικῆν) is used. In Romans 1:26 the related noun “nature” (φύσιν) also appears. This noun shows up again in Romans 11:26. By comparing Romans 1 to Romans 11 the meaning of the terms become clear.

In Romans 11:26 it states, “if God did not spare the *natural* branches (the Jews), He will not spare you (the gentiles), either.” Here the word translated as “natural” is really the noun “nature” in a prepositional phrase; literally translated it would be “according to nature” (κατὰ φύσιν). Branches that sprout from a tree are acting “according to nature.” That is, they act in harmony with the created order; they grow in a way that is normative for nature.

The opposite of “according to nature” is “against nature” (παρὰ φύσιν). In Romans 11:24 branches that are grafted to a tree are said to be “against nature”; most versions translate this as “contrary to nature.” Grafted branches become part of the tree in a way that is unnatural. They violate the tree’s design.

This clarifies what Paul means when he calls homosexual behavior “unnatural” in Romans 1:26. He literally says that homosexuality is “against nature” (παρὰ φύσιν); it violates design; it abandons the natural function (τὴν φυσικὴν χρῆσιν) of male/female sexuality. This might also explain why Paul singled out homosexuality; it perfectly illustrates how people, once they exchange the truth of God for a lie, are also willing to abandon what is natural for something else.

## 2) The words used for “women” and “men.”

Paul uses unusual words to refer to women and men. He specifically chose words that mean female (θῆλυς) and male (ἄρσεν). These terms emphasize sexual distinctiveness (Moo, 109). The same words appear in the creation account in Genesis (cf. Matt. 19:4; Mk. 10:6). In Genesis 1:27 it says, “God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; *male and female* He created them.” These terms are no doubt chosen by Paul to make that connection (creation is a major theme in Romans 1:18ff.). It is important to remember that Genesis 1 speaks of God’s design at creation and Genesis 1 and 2 make it clear that man and woman were designed to complement each other. Together male and female could fulfill God’s mandate to multiply and fill the earth (Gen. 1:26-27).

The above two points shed light on what “natural” means in this context; “natural” refers to God’s design for men and women that was established at creation. Homosexuality contradicts the design intended by the Creator. It dishonors man by perverting sexuality.

3) Homosexuality is referred to as a lust (1:24—ἐπιθυμία), a passion (1:26—πάθος), and a desire (1:27—ὄρεξις). Passion is an unquenchable craving that overwhelms all constraint and controls man completely (Lenski, 112). Unchecked, man's sexual passions have no limitations and will pursue anything to find satisfaction. They are even willing to violate nature to satisfy their cravings (1:26). Both homosexual acts and homosexual desire (lusts, passions) are a rebellion against God's intention in creation and a perversion of God's good and perfect plan for His created order.

In I Corinthians 7:9, it also speaks of the burning of the natural sexual impulse, and commends marriage as the legitimate means of satisfaction. "But here it is the burning of an insatiable lust that has no natural or legitimate desire . . . It is lust directed to something that is essentially and under all circumstances illegitimate" (Murray, 48).

4) Homosexuality is the judicial consequence of rebellion against God. Verse 27 says that people given over to homosexuality are receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error. The penalty they receive is being handed over to the sin of homosexuality itself. This is the proper "payment," or the just wage, for their sin.

As Albert Mohler says,

As Romans 1 makes absolutely clear, homosexuality is fundamentally an act of unbelief. As Paul writes, the wrath of God is revealed against all those "who suppress the truth in unrighteousness." God the Creator has implanted in all humanity a knowledge of Himself, and all are without excuse. This is the context of Paul's explicit statements on homosexuality.

Homosexual acts and homosexual desire, states Paul, are a rebellion against God's sovereign intention in creation and a gross perversion of God's good and perfect plan for His created order. Paul makes clear that homosexuality—among both males and females—is a dramatic sign of rebellion against God and His intention in creation. Those about whom Paul writes have worshipped the creature rather than the Creator. Thus, men and women have forfeited the natural complementary of God's intention for heterosexual marriage and have turned to members of their own sex, burning with an illicit desire which is in itself both degrading and dishonorable.

This is a very strong and clear message. The logical progression in Romans 1 is undeniable. Paul shifts immediately from his description of rebellion against God as Creator to an identification of homosexuality—among both men and women—as the first and most evident sign of a society upon which God has turned His judgment. Essential to understanding this reality in theological perspective is a recognition of homosexuality as an assault upon the integrity of creation and God's intention in creating human beings in two distinct and complementary genders.

In these few verses homosexuality is tied to idolatry and rejecting the Creator. It is called impurity (1:24); it is said to dishonor the body (1:24); it is the result of exchanging the truth for a lie (1:25); it is called a degrading passion (1:26); it is the exchange of the natural for that which is against nature (1:26, 27); it is an indecent act (1:27); it is a penalty (1:27).

**1:28 And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to an unfit mind, to do those things which are not proper,  
 1:29 being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips,  
 1:30 slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,  
 1:31 without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful;  
 1:32 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.**

Lastly, God gave them over “to an unfit mind” (1:28). Those who did not *see fit* to keep God in their knowledge (1:28a—ἐδοκίμασαν) were handed over to an *unfit* mind (1:28b—ἀδόκιμον νοῦν) to do those things which are not proper. In Greek, “unfit” means to fail a test and refers to a mind that was tested and found to be no good (McClain. 68). Man’s mind failed, for it did not consider God worthy (fit) of its thought. Therefore, God gave him up to do those things which his mind planned and approved, that is, “those things which are unfitting” (καθήκω 1:28). “With moral perversion comes mental perversion” (Phillips, 33). Again, there is a correspondence between the sin and the penalty.

It should be noted that the unfit mind precedes unfit behavior; the mind breeds the behavior. “God gave them over to a unfit mind, *to do*. . .”

A list of sins in 1:29–32 are added to homosexuality as further examples of what flows from an unfit mind.

The final item in the indictment (1:32) is climatic and is prefaced with the reminder that men possess sufficient knowledge of God. Although they know God’s righteous judgment, that sin deserves punishment, they are undeterred in their pursuit of wickedness and applaud others who do the same. To sin in the heat of passion is evil but the lowest stage in human depravity is to take pleasure in, support, and encourage others to continue in their rebellion against God.

To summarize, Romans 1:17–32 is the author’s argument as to why the unbelieving are under the wrath of God. Men have knowledge of God in creation, but they refuse to accept it. They refuse to give God glory. They refuse to give thanks. They choose to worship something else over the Creator. Their condemnation is deserved.

Or, to state it differently, it is a broad brush stroke that describes how people and societies have moved from God and the truth. All rejection of God involves the exchange of the truth for a lie. These lies are passed from generation to generation, become part of the culture, and are accepted as truth. People begin to live in an “alternative reality,” a reality that does not include their Creator. This results in the failure to acknowledge, honor, and thank God which in turn results in more judgment, and the languishing of humanity. This unbroken cycle is God’s judgment upon man, evidence that God has given men over to their own desires.

Because the unbelieving are devoid of righteousness and are under judgment they are in desperate need of the righteousness of the gospel.