

# The Gospel According To Paul: Romans

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## **God Gave Them Up to the Lust of Their Hearts (1:24-25)**

*Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves,<sup>25</sup> who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.*

All sin is rooted in disbelief, which leads to a distortion and destruction of man's moral character, which ultimately ends in a state of complete moral malignancy. From the rejection of knowledge of God (disbelief) man falls into *epithumia* - lust, desire or want "out of control." When God is **Lord** and man is **servant**, God's nature dictates the terms of moral existence. When man, however, makes himself lord of his existence, his nature dictates the terms of moral existence. The history of the world has shown that man's moral autonomy leads to the unchecked pursuit of selfish gratification of his baser passions.

## **God Gave Them Up to Vile Passions (1:26-27) (Sins of a Sexual Nature)**

*For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due.*

Paul's comments here are consistent with the Jewish understanding of human sexuality. Judaism believed human sexuality to be a gift from God. From the time of his creation, the purpose of man was to, "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:18). It was man's purpose to reproduce after his own kind, to be blessed with many sons and daughters. Likewise, the greatest blessing for the woman was to bear her husband many children, especially sons. To be barren was the greatest of disappointments to a woman; likewise if a man died without offspring, his name would die in Israel. With this understanding of the purpose of human sexuality, the sexual practices of the Gentiles were clearly not consistent with who and what they were created to be as sexual beings.

Paul first addresses females:

*For even their females exchanged the natural usage into that contrary to nature" (1:26).*

The Greek word for "female" is used here rather than *gune*, the more common word for "woman," most probably to emphasize the sexual identity of the one under consideration. The term here is *thelus* rather than *gune* (a woman or wife as an adult entity or social being). The term *thelus* is a sexual being in whom life is generated through the natural sex act. It is woman as a *thelus* who conceives, gives birth, and suckles or nourishes the infant. In fact, the root word from which *thelus* derives is *thele* (nipple) hence, to suckle, give the breast to the offspring. Paul is speaking of a female who is by nature a procreating being.

The "femaleness" of the woman is intrinsically related to her sexuality. The uniqueness of the female's "femaleness" is here exchanged from that which is her natural function as a *thelus*. The Greek word for "natural" or "nature" is *phusikos* meaning, "governed by the instincts of nature," that which is inborn or instinctive, as here associated with procreation.

In 1:27, Paul addresses the male:

*Likewise the males having abandoned the natural usage of the female, became sexually inflamed in their ardor for one another, males with males, committing perverted acts, the penalty which was due for their error in themselves receiving back.*

The word for male in the Greek text is *arsen* meaning, “a male as a sexual being.” It is not the more common *anthropos*, which is used generically for “mankind or man as a member of the human race,” or *aner*, the more common term for “man as an mature male, a husband, citizen, head of a family, or man as a social being.” *Arsen*, as contrasted with *anthropos* and *aner*, has to do with the male as a sexual being as relates to a female as a sexual being. The root word from which *arsen* derives is *airo* meaning, “to rise up.” Here Paul is speaking in terms one capable of the male sexual function, a man as a procreating entity, a progenitor.

Paul uses this word to identify the male for the same reason he has used the specific term for the female. He wishes to emphasize the sexual identity of the one under consideration. Just as the “femaleness” of the female is intrinsically associated with her sexuality, so also with the “maleness” of the male. Paul’s concern here is the abandonment of the sexual activity of the male with the female as is consistent with procreation.

***God Gave Them Up to a Reprobate Mind (1:28-32)***  
***(Sins of a Social Nature)***

*And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them.*

The term translated “**debased**” or “**reprobate**” is the Greek *adokimos* from *dokeo* meaning, “to think,” with the *alpha* privative prefix which negates it, it mean, “**to not think,**” so what Paul has in mind is, “a non-thinking mind.” Paul uses the word *nous*, not the brain but the activity of the brain; the mind is the conscious activity of the brain. So we are actually talking about intellectual activity. But Paul uses a term that literally means, “non thinking” activity, a non-thinking mind - an oxymoron! The translations “reprobate” and “debased” are interesting. Debase means, to be

lowered in value, worthless, corrupted, or perverted.

Whatever kind of thinking (or non thinking) it was it was “willful,” a point essential to Paul’s argument. Those who professed themselves to be wise, were, in reality, people possessed of non-thinking minds whose thinking was worthless or debased. This is what ancient man chose to do with his mind and God gave him up to his choice.

To this point, those sins with which Paul has dealt have been of a sexual nature. Here, he picks up a second group, those of a social nature. As a consequence of the Gentiles rejection of their Creator (disbelief), their relationship with God had been broken (1:18-23), in the listing of sins in 1:24-27 sexual sin are under consideration (demise of moral character), and in 1:28-32 Paul takes up a discussion of social sins (all of which are associated with morally malignant thinking and behavior). Those things not fitting are designated in a listing of twenty-one different terms that follow:

*They were filled with all manner of wickedness (adikos), fornication (porenia), greed (pleonexia – covetousness, greedy desire to have more, avarice), evil (kakia - malice, maliciousness, ill-will, desire to injure), full of envy (phthonos), murder (phonos – murder or slaughter), strife (eridos – contentious), deceit (dolos), and malice (kakoetheias – malignity, bad character, malignant subtlety, malicious craftiness). They were whisperers (phithuristas - secret slanderer), backbiters or character assassins (katalalous – to speak against), God-haters (theostugeis – profane or impious), insolent (hubristes - an insolent man, one who, with uplifted with pride, either heaps insulting language upon others or does them some shameful act of wrong), arrogant (huperephanos - despising others or even treating them with contempt), braggarts or loud mouths (alazon), contrivers of evil (epheuretas kakon), disrespectful/disobedient to parents (apeithis), without understanding (asunetos), untrustworthy (asunthetos - covenant breaking, faithless), lacking normal human affection (astorge – alpha privative with storge), and ruthless (aneleeos – without compassion), (1:28-32).*

### **Interpretation, Application, and Inconsistency**

This list of social behaviors clearly renders the Gentiles without excuse for such behavior. Here a curious inconsistency in terms of

application becomes apparent. Paul's first list (i.e., the sexual sins) are easily recognized as unacceptable behaviors within most Christian communities. The second list (i.e., the social sins), however, do not seem to generate the same aversion and condemnation as the first. The issue we cannot escape, if we are going to be honest with this text, is why there is an inconsistency here. Such behaviors as those listed in verses 26-27 would not be tolerated within hardly any community of believers. Can this be said of the behaviors of verses 28-32? It is an observation that is as sad as it is true, but some of the behaviors listed in these verses are just as prevalent among Christians as they are among those considered "thoroughly pagan."

Such behaviors as **evil** (*kakia*-maliciousness, ill-will, desire to injure), **envy** (*phthonos*-ill will toward someone because of their good fortune), **strife** (*eridos*-contentious), **malice** (*kakoetheias*-a mean spirit, malignant character, malicious), **whisperers** (*phithuristas*-secret slanderer), **backbiters or character assassins** (*katalalous*-to speak against with ill will toward), **insolent** (*hubristes*-one who either heaps insulting language upon others or does them some shameful act of wrong), **arrogant** (*huperephanos*-despising others or treating them with contempt), **braggarts or loud mouths** (*alazon*-boisterous conceit), **contrivers of evil** (*epheuretas kakon*-to concoct evil), are as common in many church communities as they are in any other social environments of our world. Why the inconsistency? It is easier to identify sin when it falls into the category of those things we "hate and cannot tolerate." As Shakespeare laments, "Oh consistency, thou art a jewel!"

We can rest assured, however, that God is aware of the inconsistency and will hold "the brethren" as guilty of their social sins as he does those whose sexual sins are so clearly recognized and consistently denounced from the pulpits and pews of the churches of the saints! This is the driving point of this whole section of Paul's letter, *viz.*, it is the case that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. In the eyes of God, sin is the failure (*hamartia*) to measure up to the image of God within us. Our lives are to reflect the moral nature of God, when we are full of ill-will toward other beings created in the image of God, we are *hamartoloi*, i.e., sinners or failures; we have "missed the mark."

### A Moral Dilemma or a Moral Law

Here the question may be raised: What could the Gentiles, apart from

the revelation of God found in the Old Testament Scriptures, know concerning that which is morally or ethically right or wrong? If God is justified in his revelation of wrath upon all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men (Rom 1:18), then there must be some standard of behavior to which the Gentiles may be held accountable. This dilemma is usually answered by the suggestion of a "natural moral law" which is intrinsic within every human being. This is one of the oldest and most perplexing problems of both Old and New Testament studies. If evil is correctly defined as violation of God's will, how can it be argued that the Gentiles of ancient times justly deserved punishment for their actions, if they did not know that their actions were wrong? The Law of Moses was given to the house of Jacob (Israel). If the Gentiles were not under the Law of Moses, what law were they under that made them subject to punishment for the behaviors listed here by Paul?

In Rom 2:14-15 Paul says:

*Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have **the law (Torah)**, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since **they demonstrate the works of the law written in their hearts**, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts (logismon- discursive reason) accusing and also defending them.*

Paul's words seem to suggest that there is a "natural moral law" within every man by which he may determine right from wrong. From the beginning of man's existence he has had an awareness of something called "moral oughtness" within him. As C. S. Lewis says, "Men may say that no one can say what is morally right or wrong for another person, but that person has very little difficulty recognizing moral wrong when he is the person wronged." If someone takes something that doesn't belong to him, who is to say that what he has done is morally wrong? But if what he takes belongs to me, he has wronged me! Where did this sense of right and wrong (moral oughtness) come from?

The Scriptures say that this is a reflection of the moral nature of God inborn with all of us; man, as a being created in the image of God, has a sense of this morality nature within him. Man may choose to live in defiance of what is morally right, but he nonetheless knows what is morally right and morally wrong. When he refuses to abide by this sense of oughtness, he is answerable for his actions. If this were not the case, the

very concept of the justice of God becomes totally unintelligible.

In Rom 4:15 Paul reasons, "Where there is no law, neither is there transgression." In 3:23 he declares that, "all have sinned" meaning, in this context, all Jews and Gentiles. In 1:18-32, the text most immediately before us, Paul argues that all men, from creation forward, can know that a Supreme Being must, of necessity, exist and that certain things are right and certain things are wrong. This renders them "without excuse" for their behavior.

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