

Lesson 20 at StudyRomans.org

Earlier we looked at the difference between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of the world, and one thing we saw is that very often those things are polar opposites. Just this week we saw a perfect example of that on the news.

In one of the verses on the Handout for Lesson 20, God asks a rhetorical question that can have only one answer. It would be like us asking the question “does a fish swim?” or “is the sky blue?” In Jeremiah 30:6 the question was “can a man bear a child?” The answer, of course, is no. No other answer makes any sense, and that is why the question is asked in Jeremiah 30.

But what does the wisdom of the world say? How does the world answer those questions? “Does a fish swim,” “is the sky blue,” and “can a man bear a child?”

We got our answer this week when it comes to that third question when Missouri Senator Josh Hawley repeatedly asked Dr. Nisha Verma whether a man can bear a child — and was never able to get a straight answer to that question from that alleged expert. “Can a man bear a child?” That question was apparently too difficult to answer for at least one medical doctor this week.

That is the wisdom of this world, and, as usual, it is the direct opposite of the wisdom of God. And we don’t have to look any further for a perfect example of Romans 1:22 — “Claiming to be wise, they became fools!”

Romans 1:24

Romans 1:24 — Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves,

What have we seen so far about the people Paul is describing in these verses?

- We have seen that God had made his eternal power and divine nature plain to them.
- We have seen that, despite knowing God, they did not honor God or thank God.
- We have seen that their thinking had become foolish and their hearts were darkened.
- We have seen that, while claiming to be wise, they had become fools.
- And we have seen that they exchanged the glory of God for images of mortal man and animals.

What is the next step on that terrible descent? What's next is sexual immorality. And I think we can say that sexual immorality is always next on that list. I think we can say that sexual immorality always comes after idolatry.

We certainly see that with the idolatry of the golden calf. Exodus 32:6 euphemistically tells us that afterward “the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.”

And history shows us the same thing over and over again — people with sinful desires who embrace idolatry as an excuse to engage in those sinful desires. And that is true whether the idol on which they focus their adoration is an ancient golden calf or a modern glowing screen. In each case, man has exchanged the glory of God for an image.

There is a direct connection between false religion and sexual immorality. In fact, the surest sign that a religion is from man rather than from God is when that religion very easily comes to terms with the very worst sorts of immorality. I think, for example, of Mormonism with its well-documented history of pedophilia and polygamy.

A false view of God inevitably leads to immorality, and that is Paul's point here. Verse 24 is what always follows from the previous verses — from futile thinking, from darkened hearts, from worldly wisdom, and from false religion. That is the road that has led us to verse 24, and that road always leads to sexual immorality.

And what is the very first thing we are told about them in verse 24? We are told that God gave them up.

We talked about that phrase at length in Lesson 18 when we discussed how the wrath of God is being revealed. And, as we said, this act of giving them up is one way that God reveals his wrath. But, as we also said, God does this — not because he hates them — but because he loves them and wants them to repent. God does not want anyone to perish (2 Peter 3:9), and that includes even the people here in Romans 1 who are being given up. They still have an opportunity to repent, and God wants them to do just that before it is too late.

Verse 24 tells us that God gave them up “in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves.” Later Paul will focus on homosexuality as a specific example of such lust, but here I think that Paul is being more general. I think verse 24 is describing all manner of lust and impurity.

There is a bit of wordplay going on in verse 21 and verse 24. Back in verse 21, they did not **honor** God. But instead, here in verse 24, they are **dishonoring** themselves. And again, that is something that always happens — when we fail to honor God, we end up dishonoring ourselves.

And this charge of dishonoring their own bodies again reminds us of something that Paul wrote to the Corinthians.

1 Corinthians 6:18-20 — Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

Oh, but I thought it was my body, my choice. I thought it was my body to do with as I please. Well, if I thought that, I was wrong. Paul just explained it as plainly as it could ever be explained: “You are not your own, for you were bought with a price.”

“The sexually immoral person sins against his own body.” That is what Paul means here in verse 24 when he speaks about the “dishonoring of their bodies among themselves.”

And what was Paul's conclusion in 1st Corinthians 6? He said: "So **glorify** God in your body." And what did Paul write here in verse 23? They "exchanged the **glory** of the immortal God for images."

There is something in these verses that is both profound and a bit unsettling. What these verses from Romans and 1st Corinthians are describing is a link of some sort between our sexual purity and the glory of God. Look at it again:

- **Romans 1:23-24** — And exchanged the **glory of the immortal God** for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in **the lusts of their hearts to impurity...**
- **1 Corinthians 6:18-20** — Flee from **sexual immorality**. ... You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So **glorify God** in your body.

What is the link? What is the connection between the glory of God and our sexual purity? I think we can find several answers to that question in the Bible.

We like to say that sin is sin, but that is not what the Bible says, at least with regard to this sin. The first thing we need to understand is that sexual immorality is unlike every other sin that a person commits. That is what Paul just told us.

1 Corinthians 6:18 — Flee from sexual immorality. **Every other sin a person commits is outside the body**, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body.

And that uniqueness of sexual immorality is directly connected to the human body. Every other sin is outside the body, but sexual immorality uniquely sins against the body itself.

And what can we say about the human body? What we can say is that there is a connection between the body of man and the glory of God.

- We are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27).
- God has crowned man with glory and honor (Psalm 8:5).
- Our body is a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19).
- Our lowly bodies will be transformed to be like his glorious body (Philippians 3:21).
- Our bodies are sown in dishonor, but raised in glory (1 Corinthians 15:43).
- We are to present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is our spiritual worship (Romans 12:1).
- Our purpose is to glorify God in our body (1 Corinthians 6:20).
- The perfect body of Christ accomplished what sacrifices and offerings never could (Hebrews 10:5).

Those are all ways in which the body of man is connected to the glory of God. But perhaps the most important connection between our sexual purity and God's glory is found in Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

Ephesians 5:31-32 — Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two

shall become one flesh. This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

And that is also what Paul told the Corinthians immediately prior to the verses we read earlier.

1 Corinthians 6:15-17 — Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, “The two will become one flesh.” But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.

Paul calls it a mystery, so I don’t think we should expect to understand everything about it. But we are meant to understand enough to know (1) that sexual sin distorts a relationship that was designed by God to illustrate how we become one with Christ and (2) that there is a direct connection between our sexual purity and Christ and his church. That is what Paul said in Ephesians 5, and that is what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 6.

And so, given that, what should our view of sexual immorality be? Paul also answers that question — and his answer is very short and very much to the point: “Flee from sexual immorality” (1 Corinthians 6:18). Paul tells us to run from it — not walk, but run. That is how dangerous sexual immorality is. We should turn and run.

Later in this chapter we will look at the question of when illicit desire becomes sinful desire. I think Paul has just given us one answer to that question — if we did not turn and run as soon as we recognized that illicit desire in ourselves, then we can be certain that it is sinful desire.

Romans 1:25

Romans 1:25 — 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.

Why did God give them up? Verse 25 answers that question. God gave them up “because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.”

If God gives people up as a last-ditch effort to reach someone who is as far from God as it is possible to get — then verse 25 must be describing such a person. Verse 25 must be describing people who are as far from God as they can be. That is why God gives them up — maybe that will finally get their attention. Maybe that will wake them up.

What is the truth about God in verse 25? I think it is the truth that was clearly perceived in verse 20 — his eternal power and his divine nature. That is the truth that had been shown to them, and that is the truth that they had suppressed by their unrighteousness.

In verse 23, they exchanged the glory of God for something else, and here in verse 25, they exchange the truth about God for something else. Verse 21 told us that they were not thankful, but here we see the depth of their thanklessness. They are as ungrateful and insulting as it is possible to be. Not only do they fail to thank God for his gifts, but they head to the store to exchange those gifts! “Yes, I see the glory you have shown me, and, yes, I hear the truth you have declared to me - but what else do you have?”

There is an underlying theme in these verses — the theme of foolishness. Verse 22 told us that they had become fools, and verse 25 proves

it. These people were so foolish that they exchanged truth for a lie, and they worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator. In short, they exchanged what is priceless for what is worthless, and they exchanged power for weakness. They thought they were wise, but their foolish decisions proved otherwise.

Another theme in these verses is the glory of God, and we see that theme again with the doxology at the end of verse 25 — “the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.” That is Paul glorifying God. That is Paul worshipping God. That is Paul giving us an example to follow — not the example of those who dishonor God, but the example of one who glorifies and worships God in spirit and in truth.

Romans 1:26-27

Romans 1:26-27 — 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.

Perhaps our first question about these two verses is whether we should say anything about them at all. I know that is a strange question to ask about verses in the Bible, but the topic of these verses is one that we rarely, if ever, address.

But there is a simple test for whether we should talk about something: if the Bible talks about it, then we should talk about it. And we should not be shy in talking about it. And that is particularly true when it comes to a topic such as homosexuality, which is a sin that is very

quickly becoming normalized among those we are trying to reach with the gospel of Christ. So, yes, we must talk about the topic of verses 26-27, but I think we already knew that.

And for two millennia, this discussion would not have been a lengthy discussion. Up until recently, I think we can say that all Christendom (no matter how broadly that term is viewed) agreed that homosexuality is a sin. But now, some who claim to follow Christ have apparently spotted something in these verses that was missed by everyone else for almost 2,000 years. And this group now argues that homosexuality is not a sin at all, or at least is not always a sin. Who knew? How could we have all been so wrong about these verses for so many years?

Or perhaps we weren't wrong at all. Perhaps what these verses very clearly say is also what they very clearly mean — that homosexuality is a sin — and not only a sin, but a terrible example of just how depraved mankind becomes when it rejects and suppresses the truth we have from God.

So which is it? Have we been wrong about these two verses? Is Paul condemning all homosexual conduct in verses 26-27, or instead is Paul's condemnation in these verses more nuanced than that?

Perhaps it would be helpful at this point to briefly look at some of those alleged nuances.

There are many in the world today who call themselves Christians, but who at the same time are proudly engaging in homosexual conduct — perhaps with a homosexual partner to whom they believe they are married. And, yes, some of them are ordained ministers in various denominational religious groups that call themselves Chris-

tian churches. What do those people and those groups say about these two verses?

Before we look at that, let me quickly add that this topic is hardly the only topic where we see such an apparent disconnect between what the Bible teaches and what man does.

I find it amusing when I see denominational preachers railing against those terrible sinners who twist Paul's teachings here in Romans 1. Why? Because very often those denominational preachers are women, preaching from their denominational pulpits. And yet the clarity that Paul uses in these two verses with regard to homosexuality is matched by the clarity that Paul uses in 1 Timothy 2:11-14 with regard to the proper role of women in the church. Why are those women preachers free to ignore what Paul said there on that subject while they loudly preach against those who ignore what Paul said here on this subject? I have an idea — let's not ignore what God has said on any subject!

And let me make another quick point — we need to be very suspicious of any view of these verses that is motivated by personal desire.

That is, we need to look very carefully at any view that came — not from a study based on what the Bible says — but that instead came from a study based on what someone wants the Bible to say. We often see that, for example, with the topic of marriage, divorce, and remarriage, where people who are looking for license somehow find just what they were looking for in the writings of Paul. We must not ever study God's word with the goal of finding some justification for our personal desires. When we do that we are no better than Eve reach-

ing for that forbidden fruit after listening to Satan twist the word of God.

So, with that background, let's look at how some people today try to reconcile these two verses with the homosexual lifestyle that they proudly practice or loudly approve.

A very frequently heard argument is the contention that homosexuals are born that way, and so how could Paul possibly be condemning them here for something over which they have no control. They argue that God made them this way, so how can God hold it against them?

Is homosexuality genetic? It is certainly not entirely genetic. Both science and the Bible tell us that.

As for science, identical twins do not always have the same sexual orientation. That fact confirms that homosexuality is not entirely genetic, although science does suggest that there may be a genetic predisposition. But a predisposition toward a certain sin is not a license to commit that sin. And a predisposition is not a compulsion — homosexuality remains a choice even if we assume that science is correct that some have a genetic predisposition toward such conduct.

That is what science tells us, but what does the Bible tell us? The Bible tells us the same thing — homosexuality is a choice; it is not a compulsion.

I think Paul is telling us that right here. These people in verses 26-27 **exchanged** natural relations and **gave up** natural relations. Those are things that they did to become what they now were. What is described in these verses is something that they became rather than

something that they were born with. And Paul confirms that same understanding elsewhere:

1 Corinthians 6:9-11 — Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, **nor men who practice homosexuality**, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. **And such were some of you.** But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

“Such were some of you!” 1 Corinthians 6:11 confirms that homosexuality is a choice rather than a compulsion. Homosexuality is not a permanent condition.

And note that yet again we find an example where the wisdom of the world is completely opposite to the wisdom of God. The world tells us that homosexuality is immutable while gender is not — whereas the Bible tells us that gender is immutable while homosexuality is not.

Another argument we often hear is that verses 26-27 and similar verses are prohibiting, not all homosexual conduct, but only certain types of homosexual conduct, such as homosexual prostitution, pedophilia, or exploitative homosexual relationships.

The biggest problem with that view is, of course, that it is entirely absent in the text. The text describes homosexuality in general without any sort of narrowing limitations. Rewriting Romans 1 is not a proper way to study Romans 1.

And another problem with this view is that Paul condemns both male and female homosexuality in these two verses. While male homosexuality in the ancient world did often involve adolescents, slaves, or prostitutes — that was not the case with female homosexuality — and Paul condemns both male and female homosexuality in these two verses.

Some argue that the phrase “contrary to nature” means that Paul was talking only about people who “naturally” feel desires toward a person of the opposite sex but who then practice homosexuality in opposition to their natural desires. They, in effect, argue that Paul is just telling everyone to stay in their own lane — but we can all choose whichever lane we want.

But Paul does not say here that what they were doing was contrary to their own nature. Instead, Paul says that their conduct was contrary to nature — and the phrase “contrary to nature” that Paul uses here was used outside the Bible by then contemporary Greeks to describe all kinds of homosexual conduct.

Also, there is a reason why homosexuality is against nature, and we can find that reason stated all the way back in Genesis shortly after God created that nature.

Genesis 1:27-28 — So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it...”

That is the natural relation that God created, and homosexuality is contrary to that natural relation.

Some argue that Paul could not possibly have been condemning homosexual couples who have faithful, loving, fulfilling relationships.

But what is right and wrong is not determined by what I want to be right and wrong. What is right and wrong is not determined by my personal experience and my subjective beliefs. And Paul himself provides us an example of that.

In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul rebuked the church in Corinth because of its acceptance of an illicit relationship — a man who was with his father's wife, most likely his stepmother.

How did Paul respond when he heard about that relationship? Did Paul ask whether it was a loving relationship? Did he ask whether it was a committed relationship? Did he ask whether those in the relationship were faithful to their partners? Did he ask whether they were both fulfilled by that relationship?

No. Paul asked none of those questions. Why not? Because those questions were irrelevant. All that mattered was that the relationship was sinful, and so the relationship had to end. Likewise, all homosexual relationships and homosexual “marriages” are sinful, and they must end before the participants can ever be right with God.

The final argument we often hear is that homosexual “marriage” is now legal in all fifty states and so it must now be approved by God.

The Supreme Court of the United States is certainly powerful, some might say too powerful, but that High Court is not higher than God. No court can declare the Bible unconstitutional. When it comes to determining whether homosexuality is right or wrong, what our sec-

ular society says about homosexuality is irrelevant because God has spoken on the subject.

Also, although Paul will later tell us in Romans 14 that we should all be subject to the governing authorities, Peter provides the guiding principle in Acts 5:29 — “We must obey God rather than men.” Many things prohibited by God are legal in every state or at least in some states, such as alcohol, adultery, profanity, pornography, prostitution, and gambling. When it comes to determining whether homosexuality is right or wrong, what our legal system says about homosexuality is irrelevant because God has spoken on the subject.

When I read arguments such as those we just looked at, I am left with a profound sadness. The people making those arguments desperately want to enjoy two things at the same time that can never be enjoyed at the same time.

They want to enjoy a right relation with God while enjoying the fleeting pleasures of sin. They want to keep one foot in the world and one foot in the kingdom of God. But that is not possible. When we are added to the kingdom of God, we are transferred out of the domain of darkness — and so we cannot still have a foot down inside that dark domain if we are in the kingdom of Christ (Colossians 1:13).

And, in desperately trying to avoid being grouped with the sinners in Romans 1, their arguments conclusively prove just the opposite. Why? Because their arguments show how they are perfectly described by the closing phrase in this first chapter: “they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.” They are **proud** of their sin — as they themselves will always be the first to proudly declare.

Now, in light of that background, let's look at the actual text of verses 26-27.

Romans 1:26-27 — 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.

“For this reason” — what reason? Why did God give them up to dishonorable passions?

As we have seen, this process of “giving up” seems to be God's final attempt to reach someone who has fallen into a deep pit of sin. This is what caused the prodigal son to come to himself in that pigpen. Verses 26-27 are describing that pigpen, which is the final step in their journey into that far country.

But if this sexual immorality is the last step, what was the second to the last step? It was idolatry. That is what we saw in verse 25 — they “worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.” And, as we saw earlier, idolatry always leads to sexual immorality.

And so verses 26-27 tell us that their idolatry was the reason why God gave them up so that they would find themselves in this pigpen. Maybe now they would wake up to their terrible condition just like the prodigal son did.

“For their women exchanged **natural** relations for those that are contrary to **nature**; and the men likewise gave up **natural** relations with women...”

We looked earlier at the word “natural,” but let’s now take a closer look. As we saw, “natural” refers to God’s original design in creation rather than to someone’s personal psychological orientation.

And when it comes to what is natural, we should note that idolatry and homosexuality have something in common — they both turn God’s created order upside down. Idolatry does that with unnatural worship in which man worships the creature rather than the Creator, and homosexuality does that with unnatural sexual relations.

Paul confirms this view of “natural” with his use of the words “women” and “men.” The Greek words that Paul uses here are not the usual Greek words for male and female. Instead, Paul uses words that are found only a handful of times in the Bible and that are used in the gospel accounts when Jesus quotes the creation account.

Matthew 19:4 — He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them **male** and **female**.”

Mark 10:6 — But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them **male** and **female**.’

Paul uses the same Greek words here, and these unusual words take us straight back to the creation of male and female by God. What makes homosexuality unnatural is that it is contrary to God’s created order.

Also, as I also mentioned before, this phrase “contrary to nature” is used elsewhere in other first-century Greek documents to describe homosexual conduct.

Josephus: “And why do not the Eleans and Thebans abolish that **unnatural** and impudent lust, which makes them lie with males?”

Philo: “But also those who were men lusted after one another, doing unseemly things, and not regarding or respecting their common **nature**.”

Paul uses the phrase here the same way — not to describe something that was opposed to an individual’s personal nature but rather to describe something that was opposed to the nature that God created and ordained.

“Consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men.”

Paul is describing two sins here — one that is internal and one that is external. The internal sin is homosexual lust, and the external sin is the homosexual conduct that follows and proceeds from homosexual lust. James describes the process:

James 1:14-15 — But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

And how do we know when our desire has crossed the line into sin? I think Paul helps us answer that question later in this same letter.

Romans 13:14 — But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and **make no provision for the flesh**, to gratify its desires.

If anyone is experiencing that desire because they have made some provision for the flesh, then that desire starts off as a sin because it

arises from a violation of Romans 13:14. And, likewise, if anyone experiences that desire because they did not flee sexual immorality when they had the opportunity to do so, then that desire starts off as a sin. In short, if there is a window of time before illicit lust becomes sinful lust, it is a very brief window of time, and not one that we should rely upon.

Jesus also helps us understand the relation between lust and conduct.

Matthew 5:28 — But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

We can be certain that our desire is sinful if we have already formed the intent for the conduct that follows from that desire. That is what Jesus just told us, and that is certainly the case here in verses 26-27.