

Lesson 21 at StudyRomans.org

Romans 1:27, Continued

Romans 1:27 — 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.

When we ended our previous lesson, we were just about to look at the final phrase in verse 27: **“receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.”** What does that mean?

It is certainly a difficult and widely debated phrase, but I think we can unravel it if we pay close attention to the context and to everything else that the Bible teaches us about this subject.

Let’s start with the word “penalty” in that phrase. A penalty sounds like a punishment of some sort. Is it? Yes and no.

The Greek word translated “penalty” means a reward or wages given in compensation for something. That Greek word is used only twice in the Bible — here and in 2 Corinthians 6:13 where it is translated “return.” We can think of it as something that **naturally** comes due from something else — which fits very well with the context. What we see at the end of verse 27 is what *naturally* comes from this *unnatural* conduct.

In light of that meaning, I think the better view of verse 27 is that this final phrase is describing the **consequences** of the sin rather than some specific direct punishment for the sin. They were receiving in

themselves the natural returns or the expected consequences that came from their unnatural conduct.

But is that consequence also a punishment? Yes, in the sense that the consequence of a sin is a built-in punishment for that sin. But we cannot equate the two. Sin has consequences that go far beyond the punishing consequences experienced by those who commit the sin. Drunk drivers, for example, often injure and kill others along with themselves. And, likewise, the sexually immoral destroy entire families. Those sins have consequences that go far beyond those who commit the sins.

So, yes, two different people can experience the same consequence of a sin (such as both dying in a drunk driving accident) with only one of them (the drunk driver) experiencing that consequence as a punishment for the sin. The great flood is another example — both the sinful parents and their sinless children died in that flood. They both experienced the same consequence, but only the parents were being punished by that flood.

The Bible teaches that God's punishment for sin is limited to those who commit the sin.

Ezekiel 18:20 — The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.

Deuteronomy 24:16 — Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to

death because of their fathers. Each one shall be put to death for his own sin.

Romans 14:12 — So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

But what about punishment today for sin? Is God punishing people today directly as he did when he sent a great flood to destroy the earth? Or is God only punishing people indirectly today through the natural consequences of their own sin?

I think it is the latter. Elsewhere, Paul tells us that it is on **the day of judgment** that Jesus will be revealed “in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” so that “**they will suffer the punishment** of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (2 Thessalonians 1:8-9).

That is the direct punishment that is coming for all who fail to obey the gospel of Christ, but God does not want that to happen to anyone. God wants us all to repent so that we all can avoid that punishment. The Lord “is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

And the consequences of sin that we experience today should remind us of the eternal consequence that awaits all who reject the gospel. I think that is what we are seeing here at the end of verse 27. Remember the context — God has given these people up in what I believe is a last-ditch attempt to wake them up to their true condition. I think we are still seeing that final appeal from God at the end of verse 27.

But, if verse 27 is describing a natural consequence of homosexual conduct, then what is that natural consequence?

It is a very telling reflection on our modern society that we have to pause and wonder about the consequences of homosexuality. I don't think anyone would have had any trouble identifying those consequences in years past, but today that lifestyle has been so normalized that many of those former consequences have been eliminated.

- No marriage? That was once a consequence of homosexuality, but the Supreme Court has now done its best to eliminate that consequence.
- No children? Again, that was once a consequence of homosexuality, but no longer with adoption and surrogacy.
- Poor health? That was quite recently a very big consequence of homosexuality, but modern medicine has now almost entirely eliminated that consequence.
- Social isolation? Again, that was once a big consequence of homosexuality, but not any more. The ones who experience social isolation today are those who oppose homosexuality.
- Shame? Yes, that was once a consequence of homosexuality, but no longer. Today, the word most closely associated with homosexuality is not shame, but is pride, the opposite of shame. They are not ashamed at all of their conduct, but rather they are very proud of their conduct.

Jeremiah 6:15 — Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush.

And so, for the most part, those former consequences of homosexuality have been eliminated. And those who previously suffered those former consequences certainly see that elimination as a great step forward. But is it?

We are certainly not wishing harm on anyone, but those natural consequences did serve a useful purpose. They were a wake-up call for people who needed to wake up. But now that alarm has been muffled or silenced. And that silencing of the alarm bell is worsened when those in religious garb either approve of that sinful conduct or fail to proclaim the whole counsel of God regarding that sinful conduct. If people need to wake up, then we do them no favors if we turn off their alarm clock!

But while most of the consequences have largely disappeared, there are still consequences. And I think we can see those consequences all around us today. The natural consequence of moving into a pigpen is living in that pigpen. The natural consequence of living a corrupt and degraded lifestyle is just that — corruption and degradation.

Paul elsewhere describes the impurity that comes as a consequence of such corruption and degradation — very soon everything about them becomes defiled, and nothing is pure.

Titus 1:15 — To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled.

And if anyone doubts whether that verse applies to homosexuality, we might point out that they have even managed to defile the rainbow! And perhaps they should not have chosen as their symbol of homosexual pride the same symbol that God chose to confirm to the world that he will be true to his promises — because God also has a promise for those engaged in homosexual conduct: they will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:10).

In short, sin has consequences, and that is especially true of sexual sin (1 Corinthians 6:18), and even more so for homosexuality (Romans 1:27). And if those engaging in such activities do not see those consequences, then that is just evidence of how far our society has fallen and of how hardened many have become in their rebellion against God.

And what should our attitude be toward homosexuals? It should be the same as God's attitude toward homosexuals — we should want the very best for them. And we know that the very best will come to them only through their obedience to the gospel of Christ and through their continued faithfulness to God.

We should proclaim God's complete word on this subject, not suppressing any part of it. We should let them know that they need to repent and turn to Christ in obedience. Yes, many will disagree with us and many will accuse us of hate speech, but we show our love for people when we proclaim God's word to them. The world may call it hateful, but God does not — and God's view is the only view that matters.

God's word is not hate speech. If we want an example of hate speech, we can look at the example that Paul described to Timothy.

2 Timothy 4:3 — For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions.

What those false teachers proclaim is hate speech.

2 Peter 2:18-19 — For, speaking loud boasts of folly, they entice by sensual passions of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption.

There is nothing more hateful than telling someone they are right with God when they are, in fact, not right with God. That is the most hateful thing anyone can ever say. The first step to loving our enemies is to proclaim the truth to our enemies.

R.L. Whiteside: “Much is said about preaching the truth in love and so it should be preached. But in love of what? The preacher should so love the truth that he will not sacrifice any of it nor pervert it, and he should so love people that he will not withhold from them even one unpleasant truth. He that does either of these things loves neither the truth nor the people.”

So let's not shrink back when we are accused of hate speech. If we have seen one theme so far in Romans it is that the wisdom of this world is usually the exact opposite of the truth. And that is certainly the case if our proclamation of the gospel is ever called hate speech.

But, with all of that said, there is one more important point about this subject from the pen of the Apostle Paul that we should note.

1 Corinthians 5:9-13 — I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people — not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone **who bears the name of brother** if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler — not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.”

The key phrase in that passage is the phrase “who bears the name of brother” — not just those who are brothers, but those who call themselves brothers. Paul divides the sexual immoral into two groups: those who call themselves Christians and those who do not. And Paul’s commands about purging and not associating applies to the former group — those who commit those sins while bearing the name of brother.

I don’t think we always make that same distinction today. Or worse, we make the distinction — but we do so in reverse. We purge those who do not call themselves Christians while overlooking the conduct in those who do. That is the opposite of what Paul commanded.

Our mission from God is not to convert people to heterosexuality. Our mission from God is to convert people to Christ. And, after we do that, the required changes in their conduct will follow. Paul tells us about that in another of his letters:

1 Corinthians 6:11 — 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.

Paul did not convert the Corinthians to heterosexuality — Paul converted the Corinthians to Christ. And then their conduct changed so that Paul could say, “such were some of you” (past tense). And I think we could make that same point about other social ills of our day.

Romans 1:28

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.

Our first question about verse 28 is how this verse relates to the prior verses. Verse 28 begins with a conjunction, but that conjunction can be translated in two different ways.

- (ESV) “And **since** they did not see fit to acknowledge God...”
- (ASV) “And **even as** they refused to have God in their knowledge...”

In the ESV, the conjunction is **causal** — God gave them up because they gave God up. But in the ASV, the conjunction is **comparative** — as they gave up God, so God gave them them. In short, are we looking at a cause or a comparison?

I think what we see here in verse 28 is a comparison. That is how this same Greek conjunction is used elsewhere in Romans. Paul uses it that way repeatedly in the phrase “as it is written,” and he also uses

it that way in Romans 15:7 — “welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you.” Likewise, I think verse 28 is comparing what these people did to God with what God was doing to them. As for what caused it, Paul explained that earlier in verse 26.

The next thing we should note about verse 28 is that there is some wordplay going on here. I think the Holman Christian Standard Bible translation captures it well:

“And because they did not think it **worthwhile** to acknowledge God, God delivered them over to a **worthless** mind to do what is morally wrong.”

The Greek word translated “worthless” in that translation and translated “debased” in the ESV originally referred to coins that had not stood the test and were rejected as substandard. The same word is translated twice in 2 Corinthians 13:5-6 as failing to meet the test.

Likewise, the Greek word translated “worthwhile” in the Holman translation and translated “fit” in the ESV is used elsewhere to describe coins. It means to examine something, such as a coin, to see if it is genuine.

In short, they tested God and found him substandard — and so God gave them over to their own substandard mind. They tested God and found no value in him — and so God gave them over to their own worthless minds. They viewed God as unfit, and so God gave them up their own unfit minds.

And what does it mean to have a worthless and unfit mind? What it means is that your mind is no longer able to do what God intended for it to do — it is no longer able to make proper moral decisions and

judgments. What it means is that your mind is no longer able to think and decide correctly about God's will.

Instead, your mind now does the opposite — it makes wrong moral decisions and judgments while thinking it is doing the opposite. It is like a coin dealer who rejects *genuine* coins while accepting *counterfeit* coins. They are "depraved in mind and deprived of the truth" (1 Timothy 6:5).

I think Paul also describes this same sad situation elsewhere:

2 Thessalonians 2:11-12 — Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

That strong delusion is what comes from a worthless and unfit mind. That sort of mind is what causes men to believe what is false and reject what is truth — and Paul tells us here that God sometimes gives people over to that sort of mind. I think that is what Paul means in 2 Thessalonians when he says that God sends them a strong delusion.

Can we think of a modern example of someone who has such an unfit and worthless mind? Can we think of a modern example in which someone is no longer able to think and decide correctly about God's will? Yes — and we looked at it in the previous lesson.

As we saw, there are people today who call themselves Christians, but who find license rather than prohibition in verses 26-27. These are people who, after reading those two verses, somehow believe that God approves of their homosexual conduct. We can find no better ex-

ample than that of someone who has lost the ability to discern the will of God from reading the word of God.

Our next question is about the word “acknowledge” in verse 28 — “they did not see fit to acknowledge God.” The KJV translates that phrase as “they did not like to retain God in their knowledge.” What does that mean?

This knowledge is not just some sort of academic knowledge as we might have with regard to some subject that we studied in school. For example, when I took the Bar Exam, I had a great deal of knowledge about many aspects of the law outside my own area of practice — but, for the most part, that is not something that I retained in my knowledge for very long! That sort of book knowledge is not what is being described here.

The knowledge of God in verse 28 is not being lost through inattention or neglect. Instead, they are deliberately thrusting God out of their knowledge. This knowledge is not the knowledge in verse 19 that God had made plain to everyone.

I think the best way to see the difference between the knowledge in verse 19 and the knowledge here in verse 28 is to remember what we said about Hosea 4:6 when we studied that book.

Hosea 4:6 — My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me.

As we said when we studied that verse, the knowledge of God in Hosea 4:6 is a broad term that includes both objective knowledge and subjective knowledge. It is a broad term that includes, not only an academic

knowledge about God, but also intimate and experiential knowledge about God. It is the same word that is used elsewhere in the Bible to describe the knowledge between husband and wife.

We need much more than just an academic knowledge about God to be pleasing to God and to keep from being destroyed for lack of knowledge. We need to know God. We need to have a relationship with God. We need to have knowledge of God like that between a husband and wife. And that knowledge includes objective knowledge, subjective knowledge, academic knowledge, intimate knowledge, and experiential knowledge. We need all of that — and if any of that is lacking, then we, like the people in Hosea 4:6, could be destroyed by that lack of knowledge.

And we see that destruction right here. The people here in verse 28 did not have that knowledge for the same reason that the people in Hosea 4:6 did not have that knowledge — they did not have that knowledge because they had rejected that knowledge. And so they are destroyed — God gives them up to a debased mind. Why? Because they did not know God.

Finally, let's look at the last phrase in verse 28: "to do what ought not to be done." The ASV translation reads: "to do those things which are not fitting."

Most commentaries agree that this Greek phrase used by Paul was also a technical term used by the Stoics to describe what is unseemly. Why does Paul use that phrase?

I think the answer is simple — Paul is saying that this behavior is not just offensive to God but is, in fact, offensive to society.

But how could that be true given the prevalence of homosexuality in Greek and Roman society? After all, at least according to Barclay, fourteen of the first fifteen Roman Emperors were homosexuals.

The answer is that, while homosexuality may not have been offensive to all of Roman society, it was offensive to some of Roman society — in particular, the Stoics.

In fact, the Stoic view of homosexuality was very similar to the view that Paul describes in Romans 1. Both considered homosexuality to be against nature. The Stoics taught that homosexuality violated nature, self-control, and the purpose of sex, that homosexuality created enslaving passions, and that homosexuality was a dishonorable sign of moral decay.

Although we cannot see it in our English translations, I think that anyone in Rome reading the Greek in the first century would have been thinking about the Stoics in verse 28. And they would have understood Paul's point that these views were not something new or something peculiar to Christianity but were instead the same views that the Romans' own Stoic philosophers espoused.

Romans 1:29-31

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, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

Paul's conclusion about the people he has been describing since verse 18 is summarized by the opening phrase of verse 29: "they were filled with all manner of unrighteousness." That is the general allegation against them, but Paul does not stop with that general allegation. Instead, Paul also provides 20 specific allegations in these three verses, and the list that we find in these three verses is the longest list of its kind in the Bible.

Before we take a closer look at each of the sins on this list, let's look at two items that are **not** on the list — at least not on the list we just read from the ESV. Here is the KJV translation:

Romans 1:29-31 — Being filled with all unrighteousness, **fornication**, wickedness, covetousness, malice; full of envy, murder, debate, deceit, malignity; whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, despiseful, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, without understanding, covenant breakers, without natural affection, **implacable**, unmerciful.

The words "fornication" in verse 29 and "implacable" in verse 31 from the KJV do not appear in the ESV. Why not? The short answer given by most commentators is that neither of those words is found in the earliest and best manuscripts of those verses, and so most think that those two words were added later by a scribe.

If they are correct, then our question is how those two words made their way into the manuscripts upon which the KJV relied. There are various theories:

- The Greek word for "fornication" is very similar to the Greek word for "wickedness," and so the additional word may have

come from a scribe who saw one word but wrote down the other word.

- Another view is that a scribe may have added fornication to the list because of the focus on sexual sin in the immediately preceding verses.
- As for “implacable,” the most popular view is that some scribe added that word here next to the word “heartless” because those two words appear next to each other in the list of sins that we find in 2 Timothy 3:3.

Let's look at one more question about the list before we look at the list itself — is there some underlying structure or order in this list?

Most commentaries conclude that the content and order of this list stem from rhetorical skill rather than from some rigid logical progression. For starters, Paul uses words that sound alike in the Greek (and sometimes even in the English).

Also, there is a focus here on the overflowing nature of these sins in the lives of these people — they are filled with these sins; they are full of these sins. As one commentary explains, “these people are not half-hearted sinners; they are wholly given over to evil, leaving no room for God.” I think those factors best explain the length of the list, the order of the list, and the content of the list.

Getting back to the list itself, let's look now at each of the twenty specific sins that Paul lists in verses 29-31.

- **Evil** (poneria) [Strong's #4189] — There is some overlap between this term (evil) and the third term (malice). Commen-

taries suggest that one may be focused on active wrongdoing with the other focused on an inner disposition — but they can't agree on which is which.

- **Covetousness** (pleonexia) [Strong's #4124] — This word describes the “inordinate desire to have more.” It describes a settled disposition of unlimited selfishness and self-aggrandizement. Greed is the underlying basis for many of the other sins on this list, which is why Paul describes covetousness as idolatry in Colossians 3:5.
- **Malice** (kakia) [Strong's #2549] — Again, this word overlaps in meaning with the first word, and this word appears later on this same list in a different form (maliciousness), which is a further overlap. Why does Paul use these synonymous and overlapping words for evil? Perhaps the simplest explanation is the best explanation — Paul just wanted to emphasize how thoroughly evil they had become.