

Lesson 22 at StudyRomans.org

Romans 1:29-31, Continued

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.

In these three verses, Paul gives us twenty examples of the unrighteousness with which these people were filled. When we ended last week, we had looked at evil, covetousness, and malice, and we were about to look at envy. All twenty of the sins are shown on the Handout for Lesson 22 along with the Greek words, the Strong's numbers, and the lexicon definitions.

- **Envy** (phthonos) [Strong's #5355] — This word (envy) and the next word (murder) are linked in two different ways. First, they are linked by their assonance — they sound very similar in Greek. (See the Handout for Lesson 22.) Second, they are linked logically given that envy often leads to murder — as we see with the very first murder in Genesis 4:8.
- **Murder** (phonos) [Strong's #5408] — I suspect that many of us see “murder” as the worst sin on this list, and maybe it is, but it is not the sin at the top of this list. Instead, we find murder wedged between envy and strife, and listed just a few sins ahead of gossip. Is that how we view gossip? That it is not very far from murder? Perhaps we need to remember what Jesus said about murder:

Matthew 5:21-22 — You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment.

- **Strife** (eris) [Strong's #2054] — This word is not describing a calm disagreement or an honest difference of opinion. Instead, it refers to contentious rivalry — to a conflict fueled by ego, by competition, and by hostility. In classical Greek, the word often described feuds, political infighting, or social rivalry. And, yes, the KJV translates the word as “debate,” which has caused some to argue against ever having debates about Biblical topics — but I think most of those arguments came from those who were frequently on the losing side of those debates! And they certainly came from those who did not know the meaning of this Greek word. It may have been a coincidence, but the statistics show that the church quit growing at about the same time that the church quit debating. In any event, this sin is unrelated to such debates — and I think Paul would have been the first to tell us that, given how often he personally engaged in such debates.
- **Deceit** (dolos) [Strong's #1388] — Originally referring to fishing bait, this word denotes cunning, treachery, or using strategies to deceive. It is interesting just how often the allure of sin is described in the Bible using fishing terminology. Sin is the fishing lure — and I think we all know what happens to the fish!
- **Maliciousness** (kakoetheia) [Strong's #2550] — We saw this same word in a different form earlier on this same list. Aristotle defined the word as “putting the worst construction on

everything.” In a general sense, it means spite, malignity, or intentional wickedness.

- **Gossips** (psithuristes) [Strong’s #5588] — Again, we see a pair of related words. The first (gossip) describes someone who maligns others in secret or behind closed doors. How serious is gossip? Well, in Proverbs 6:16-19, God lists seven things that are an abomination to him — and over half of them are related to gossip. And maybe there is a good reason why this sin of reputation assassination is listed near murder on Paul’s list.
- **Slanderers** (katalalos) [Strong’s #2637] — This second word (slanderers) describes someone who maligns others openly. We might describe a gossip as a cowardly slanderer, and a slanderer as a brave gossip. But both are sins, and both are listed here between murderers and haters of God, which perhaps should tell us something about how seriously God views the sins of gossip and slander. And Paul, of course, experienced these sins first-hand almost everywhere he went. And with Paul, as they still do today, those sins of gossip and slander greatly hindered the work of God.
- **Haters of God** (theostuges) [Strong’s #2319] — There is some controversy about whether this word should be translated **actively** (“haters of God”) or **passively** (“hated by God”). I think the context demands the active view — this list is a list of sins that people actively commit. As for the meaning of the word, it is not describing disbelief in God or indifference toward God. Instead, the word is describing a settled opposition to God’s authority, to truth, and to moral order. The word is describing the rebellion that comes from those who know God, but who

refuse to honor or thank God and who instead suppress the truth about God. It describes people who reshape morality to suit their own desires. It is the opposite of the love of God, which is keeping God's commandments (1 John 5:3).

- **Insolent** (hubristes) [Strong's #5197] — This word refers to those who are rude and convinced of their own superiority. It carries a sense of violence or mistreatment of others stemming from pride. Some suggest that the focus of this word is on **boastful actions**.
- **Haughty** (hyperephanos) [Strong's #5244] — While this word can mean “splendid” in other contexts, in the Bible it always denotes arrogance. It refers to haughtiness and self-importance. Some suggest that the focus of this word is on **boastful thoughts**.
- **Boastful** (alazon) [Strong's #2013] — This word was originally related to wandering or roaming, but it later was used to describe a charlatan or a boaster. Some suggest that the focus of this word is on **boastful words**.
- **Inventors of evil** (epheuretes kakos) [Strong's #2182; #2556] — (As a patent attorney, I have to note that this is the only appearance of the word “inventor” in the Bible — but I do wish they would have used their inventive powers for good!) What we see here is creativity in action when it comes to sin. These people are not content with the established or ordinary forms of wickedness, but instead they display their ingenuity by devising new ways to do what is wrong. I think we are still seeing that inventiveness today. While the Internet itself was

not created for immoral purposes, pornography has been one of the most powerful forces driving the rapid adoption and refinement of high-bandwidth delivery and streaming.

- **Disobedient to parents** (apeithes goneus) [Strong's #545; #1118]
— In the ancient world, the obligation to honor one's parents was taken very seriously. This sin involves a lack of gratitude and a contempt for the authority established by God. It is also an attack on the family, which is certainly also true of the sin that we discussed back in verses 26-27.
- **Foolish** (asunetos) [Strong's #801] — This word means “without intelligence” or acting stupidly, but it carries a moral rather than an intellectual connotation. It describes those who can no longer comprehend God's will.
- **Faithless** (asunthetos) [Strong's #802] — This word refers to those who break agreements or covenants. It describes people who are untrustworthy and who refuse to abide by their promises whenever those promises go against their own self-interest.
- **Heartless** (astorgos) [Strong's #794] — This word denotes a lack of the natural love and affection shared between family members. It describes a corruption that has gone so deep that it destroys even the instinctive bonds of family. There may be an allusion here to the pagan practice of exposing unwanted infants, which should have a lot to say about our own society, which frequently deals with unwanted infants in a very similar fashion. The Bible calls it heartless.

- **Ruthless** (aneleemon) [Strong's #415] — This word means “without pity” or “without mercy.” And it is telling that, in an epistle that will stress the mercy of God, Paul lists being “merciless” as the very depth of evil.

As we said, and as we can see from the Handout, some of the Greek words in this list sound alike. That similarity in sound with the Greek words is hard to see in the English, but if we want an example of it, we can look at these final four words: foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Those English words have an almost musical quality in their sound, and Paul uses the same thing elsewhere in Greek as a rhetorical technique — it makes the list very memorable.

After looking at all 20 of these sins, one thing stands out as being particularly interesting given the context — there are no specific sexual sins on this list. Instead, this list is focused more on social sins. Why is that?

I think the most likely reason given the context is that what we are seeing in these 20 sins is the breakdown of social order that comes as a natural consequence of the sexual sins that Paul described earlier. And I think we can see that breakdown with our own eyes all around us today.

We are witnessing a terrible spiral here in Romans 1. It started out with a rejection of knowledge about God, which led to foolish, darkened hearts, which led to idolatry, which led to sexual sin, which finally led to a complete breakdown of society.

But were the people sorry that this sad decline had occurred? Were they ashamed of what they had done? Did they wish that everything

was different? Not at all, as the next verse tells us. They were not ashamed at all of their sin. Instead, they were proud of their sin.

Romans 1:32

Romans 1:32 — Though they know God’s decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

Here in verse 32 we see the lowest point of this terrible spiral away from God.

Given the context, we often view this verse as saying that homosexuals deserve to die — and the verse *may* be saying that depending on the antecedent of “such things.”

But whether or not verse 32 is saying that, there is one thing that verse 32 is *definitely* saying: there is no doubt that verse 32 is telling us that gossips deserve to die! And that people who are disobedient to their parents deserve to die! Those two sins are on the list we just looked at, and the phrase “such things” in verse 32 must at least include those twenty immediately preceding sins. “Such things” may also include the other sins we saw in that first chapter (such as idolatry and homosexuality) but we can’t be as certain of that.

But whether or not “such things” includes more than the twenty sins in the previous three verses is really beside the point. Paul’s point here is that this verdict of death is the same for all sin. All sinners deserve to die whether the sin is homosexuality or the sin is gossip. We are all under the same sentence of death because we have all sinned — a point that Paul will make with great force at the end of this section.

But here is the big question: is the death in verse 32 physical death or spiritual death? I think it is spiritual death.

As for the penalty of physical death, although some sins under the Old Covenant had that penalty (Leviticus 20:9), most sins did not. And, likewise, although at least one sin under the New Covenant resulted in a sentence of physical death (Acts 5:5), that was not true of most sins.

Earlier we talked about the difference between a consequence of sin and a punishment of sin — I think we see that difference again when it comes to physical death. I think the Bible teaches us that physical death is a **consequence** of sin rather than a **punishment** of sin. I think that difference explains why innocent children suffer physical death and why faithful Christians suffer physical death — not as a punishment for sin but as a consequence of sin.

We know that physical death was not part of God's original plan for mankind. Instead, physical death came as a result of Adam's sin.

Genesis 3:17-19 — And to Adam he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Genesis 3:22-23 — Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil.” Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the

tree of life and eat, and live forever therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken.

Adam's sin brought physical death to all mankind (including Adam himself eventually). And we experience that physical death today as a consequence of Adam's sin, but not as a punishment for sin.

And, yes, Jesus died on the cross for us, and yes, Jesus bore our punishment on that cross — but the death of Christ was a death by crucifixion. The punishment was not just **that** Jesus died, but rather **how** Jesus died. Jesus did not die from an illness or from old age — Jesus suffered the punishment of crucifixion.

When the Bible describes the connection between the death of Christ and our own sins, the Bible does so by describing **how** Jesus suffered and died.

Isaiah 53:5 — But he was **pierced** for our transgressions; he was **crushed** for our iniquities; upon him was the **chastisement** that brought us peace, and with his **wounds** we are healed.

1 Peter 2:24 — He himself bore our sins in his body **on the tree**, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his **wounds** you have been healed.

Galatians 3:13 — Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law **by becoming a curse** for us — for it is written, “Cursed is everyone **who is hanged on a tree**.”

And so, yes, Jesus has set aside the punishment we deserve (Colossians 2:14), but Jesus has not set aside our physical death (Hebrews

9:27). Instead, physical death is an enemy of all mankind — an enemy that Christ will destroy when the end comes (1 Corinthians 15:26).

Here, in a nutshell, is what I believe the Bible teaches on this subject: Adam's sin made us mortal (Genesis 3:19); our own sin makes us guilty (Romans 6:23). For Christians, Jesus removes our guilt now (1 Corinthians 6:11); Jesus will remove our mortality later (1 Corinthians 15:53).

The choice to obey or reject the gospel of Christ is not a choice between **physical** life and **physical** death but instead is a choice between **spiritual** life and **spiritual** death.

John 3:16 — For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not **perish** but have **eternal life**.

John 5:24 — Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has **eternal life**. He does not come into judgment, **but has passed from death to life**.

Romans 6:23 — For the wages of sin is **death**, but the free gift of God is **eternal life** in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And so I think the better view is that the penalty of death in verse 32 is a penalty of spiritual death. We will have more to say on this topic when Paul returns to it in Romans 5:12.

Our next question about verse 32 comes from the reference in that verse to God's decree. "They know **God's righteous decree** that those who practice such things deserve to die." What is that righteous decree of God?

The Greek word (*dikaioma*) is a legal term, but it is **not** referring to the Mosaic law. How do we know that? We know that because Paul's focus in these verses has been on the Gentiles who know God **only** through the natural word and who both practice and approve of the very worst kinds of sin. None of those descriptions was true of the Jews, at least not on the surface. (Paul will soon tell the Jews that they are, at least in some sense, guilty of these same things.)

The Gentiles did not have the Mosaic Law, so what then is this righteous decree? When and where had God ever decreed a sentence of spiritual death on all mankind because of their sins?

Paul answers that question in the next chapter, and we will largely save our discussion of that answer for later — but for now let's just read his answer.

Romans 2:14-16 — For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

So, yes, the Gentiles do have a decree from God — it is written on their hearts. And, again, we will have more to say about that when we get to chapter two.

But we should not be surprised by it. Why not? Because we can see modern examples of it. Anthropologists have discovered tribes with no access at all to the Bible, with no written laws, and with no contact with any modern civilization. And yet, in every case, those isolated

tribes know that murder is wrong, that betrayal is evil, and that certain conduct deserves punishment. How do they know those things? I think Paul just told us — it is written on their hearts.

Our final question about verse 32 (and about chapter one!) involves the final phrase: “they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.” On the surface, that sounds like **approving** of sin is worse than **committing** sin. Is that true? Is the sin of approving greater than the sin of doing?

Well, first, we might be tempted to say that there are no greater and lesser sins — but if we said that, we would be wrong.

John 19:11 — Jesus answered him, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin.”

And I think we can add Romans 1:32 as additional evidence that there are greater and lesser sins because I think this verse is, in fact, telling us that approving of a sin can be worse than committing the sin.

To see why that might be true, let’s consider an example. Think for a moment about someone who struggles with a particular sin in his or her life. He knows it is wrong, and he tries not to commit it, but he still commits it. But whenever he does, he regrets the sin, he repents of the sin, he vows to do better, and he turns to God for forgiveness and for strength. Paul will describe such a person later in this letter — someone who has the desire to do what is right, but who does not have the ability to carry it out (Romans 7:18). That person is our first person.

Now, let's consider a second person. Let's compare that first person with someone who tells that first person that what he thinks is a sin is not really a sin at all, but instead is something God wants him to do and something for which he should feel neither guilt nor shame. This second person says to the first person what Satan said to Eve in Genesis 3:4 — “You will not surely die.” This second person promises the first person freedom, but this second person is himself a slave of corruption (2 Peter 2:19).

Now, which one of those two people has committed the greater sin — the first person or the second person? Which one of those two is the better example of just how far someone can be from God — someone who calls good evil and evil good? Which one of those two examples better illustrates the hardness of heart that always comes from the rejection of truth? Which one has committed the greater sin? I think Paul just answered that question — “they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.”

We often hear the phrase “gay pride” today, but that phrase is describing, not one, but two sins. And I think verse 32 tells us which of those two sins is the greater sin. And I think that fact has a lot to say to those today in religious garb who falsely proclaim that God approves of such conduct.

Chapter 2

Romans 2:1

Romans 2:1 — Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things.

Wait! Who is Paul talking to here in verse 1? We know that Paul can't still be talking to the people in chapter 1. Why not? Because Paul says that this group in verse 1 is doing "the very same things." That statement would make no sense if it were directed to the very same group. Paul must be talking to someone else here in verse 1. But who?

Let's see if we can find a clue in verse 1. When we look at that verse we immediately see a key word — **judgment**. That word or a form of that word appears three times in that single verse — and four times if we throw in the word "condemn." Someone, it seems, was judging and condemning those awful sinners that we saw in chapter one.

Well, who could that be? Who is it who would read a lengthy diatribe against idolaters and homosexuals and then immediately pass judgment and condemn those idolaters and homosexuals? Or those murderers? Or those God haters? Or the foolish, the faithless, the heartless, and the ruthless?

Well, I could. Maybe you could. In fact, maybe I did. Maybe you did. And I think we can certainly add to that list the first century Jewish Christians in Rome who were reading or listening to Paul's letter. I suspect that when Romans 1 came to an end, they were all cheering.

“Let them have it, Paul! Those Gentiles are awful! And those Gentile Christians are not very far removed from all of that terrible sin in their past. Preach on, brother Paul!”

Was that also me at the end of Romans 1? Was that also you? In short, did I see Romans 1 as a window or a mirror? Was I just looking at others the whole time? Or did I see something about myself in that first chapter? James tells us that we should always see the Bible as a mirror.

James 1:23-25 — For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

And I think Paul is telling us that same thing here in verse 1 — Romans 1 was a mirror. “Because you, the judge, practice the very same things.” Whoever this judge is in verse 1, he should have seen himself in chapter 1. That is what Paul tells him.

So, who then was this judge in verse 1? The commentaries almost all agree that Paul has turned his attention from the Gentiles in Romans 1 to the Jews here in Romans 2. And I think the evidence we will soon see should convince us that they are correct — Paul is now talking to the Jews.

But that conclusion raises a big question — how were the Jews guilty of practicing the very same things? How were the Jews guilty of idolatry and homosexuality?

In fact, didn't we use those two specific sins as evidence that Romans 1 was **not** about the Jews? The Jews didn't worship idols. The Jews didn't engage in pagan sexual practices. So what's going on here? I think we have at least four possibilities.

First possibility: “The same things” in verse 1 doesn’t mean the identical sins in Romans 1.

Perhaps Paul isn't saying here that the Jews commit the exact same sins as the Gentiles. Maybe Paul is instead just saying that the Jews sin in the same fundamental way as the Gentiles — they know better, but they sin anyway. Maybe the “sameness” here is more about their same attitude toward sin and less about the specific sins they commit. So, yes, while they may commit only some of those sins, they do so in the very same way as the Gentiles.

The Gentiles in Romans 1 had received knowledge from God, but they had suppressed it. And the Jews? They had received much greater knowledge from God, and they, too, had suppressed it — even to the point of rejecting and killing their promised Messiah. Both groups are without excuse, and that is particularly true of the group that had received the most knowledge about God. Paul will later remind the Jews that they had been “entrusted with the oracles of God” (Romans 3:2).

But a problem with this first view is the Greek phrase that Paul uses here, which means “the very same things.” Under this first view, we are saying that they were not really guilty of the very same things. Instead, they were guilty of similar things that were done for the very same reason. Maybe — but I think this first view may be stretching

the language in verse 1 a bit too far. The text says “the very same things.”

Second possibility: Some of the Jews did commit the very same sins.

Under the first view, **all** of the Jews committed **some** of the very same things. Under this second view, **some** of the Jews committed **all** of the very same things.

We know from history that some Hellenized Jews did participate in pagan sexual practices. We looked at such Jews in detail when we studied the prophecies in the book of Daniel about the history between the Testaments. We also know that some Jews did, in fact, practice overt idolatry.

But I don’t think this view of verse 1 is the right view. I don’t think Paul is referring to such unusual and isolated examples. Instead, Paul in this verse appears to be making a broad statement that applies to the Jewish community generally, not just to a few Jewish apostates.

Third possibility: The “same things” in verse 1 refers to something less than all the sins in chapter one.

Maybe “the same things” in 2:1 doesn’t refer back to the entire catalog of sins in 1:18-32, which includes rejection of knowledge, suppression of truth, idolatry, homosexuality, and the terrible list of 20 sins at the end of that chapter. Maybe verse 1 is referring back more narrowly to the act of judgment itself, or to sin in general, or to just the 20 sins at the end of the previous chapter, or perhaps to just the sins Paul will specifically mention later in chapter 2.

This view is possible, but one might argue that the first word in verse 1 pushes against this view. Verse 1 begins with the word “therefore,” which certainly suggests continuity with the previous verses. And maybe we could limit ourselves to the list of 20 sins at the end of chapter 1, but I think a natural reading of both chapters makes it difficult for us to exclude idolatry and homosexuality from the very same things in verse 1. Also, those two sins were the sins that Paul emphasized the most in Romans 1. Why would we think that Paul would exclude those two sins here in Romans 2?