

09.06.09 / Romans 1:21-25

Romans is at the center of nearly every major theological controversy, and as such is a hotly debated book. Thankfully, Paul's argument begins in verse 18 (the first 17 verses being taken up in discussions of Paul's purpose, both as an apostle and in visiting Rome), allowing us to pick up the argument almost where it started. Verses 18-20 state that God is quite knowable, and that the unrighteous have no excuse because of this. That is to say, they cannot plead ignorance. The passage for this week goes about discussing exactly what these offenses are.

What did it mean for those who first heard it?

The list of offenses that begins Romans sounds very much like a Jewish polemic against the pagans, specifically the Hellenistic pagans. They claimed to be wise (a common complaint against Greek philosophy), they were idolaters (the very definition of pagan), and they engaged in morally dubious sexual practices. (Roman law held that the master of the house had sexual rights to everyone, and everything, belonging to the house. It seems sufficient to say that these rights appear to have been widely exercised.) Later in Romans Paul famously discusses the Law. Here he appears to be establishing the guilt of the Gentiles, later he will add the Jews to his list. But at this point his Jewish audience, such as it is, is probably nodding sagely and patting themselves on the back for not being dirty Gentiles.

Two phrases in this passage are echoed in the Psalms, suggesting that Paul is drawing on Biblical language to make his argument. Psalm 81:12 reads, "So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels," in reference to Israel's own turning from God. Psalm 106:19-20 reads, "They made a calf in Horeb and worshiped a metal image. They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass."

Paul also makes use of a major Biblical theme in the mocking of images (see, for instance, Isaiah 37:18-19, 44:9-20, Jeremiah 10:1-5, Ezekiel 20:32, and Daniel 5:4), namely that these images are created things, and that the true God creates. Paul stresses this both with Creator/creature and the immortal/mortal (or incorruptible/corruptible) distinction.

- 1) Who is active in the transformation of the wicked in this passage? The wicked themselves? God? Both?
- 2) Paul suggests that the proper response to knowing that God is God would have been to honor Him as God and give thanks to Him. What does this actually mean? How would a first-century person honor a being as God in a unique "there are no other gods before me" sense? What would they be thanking Him for?
- 3) What does worship and service of the creature entail?
- 4) Within the context of Paul's argument is sin a conscious choice or something inflicted on the wicked that they are unable to break?

Again, some answers.

Both the wicked and God appear to be part of their transformation. The wicked initiate it by turning away. They did not honor or give thanks, they exchanged, they worshiped and served the creature. God, however, turned them over to a laundry list of sins. Several of the other verbs are, at least in the English (my Greek does not stretch far enough, here), are ambiguously passive. They became futile and foolish. Their hearts were darkened, but without a clear sign as to the darkener.

A Jew in Paul's audience would probably assume that honoring Yahweh as God would mean following the 613 laws of the Torah. (I here substitute the proper name Yahweh into Paul's sentence to make it easier to read. Having God as both a proper name and a descriptive term is difficult, but by the first century devout Jews did not use the name Yahweh outside of specific liturgical use for fear of using it in vain.) A Gentile would be familiar with a number of rites to honor the million and three gods of the Roman Empire, most of which would involve sacrifices and donations to priests. Notably, pagan deities did not always demand much in the way of morality. Some did, especially if they were gods of justice or another virtue, but most Roman gods behaved quite poorly themselves. God, or the gods, would be thanked for providing everything. In the pagan world each god would be thanked individually for their specific domain (wine, or wheat, or fertility, and so on). In Judaism, and within Paul's argument, Yahweh alone is to be thanked for all these things.

Worship and service to the creature would be, in this context, the worship of idols and the provisioning of their temples. The idea that sacrifices fed the gods was common in the ancient world, and donations to priests or to build temples would have been counted as service. Worship was not nearly so uniform a thing. It might involve hailing idols in a parade, praying to idols, singing songs to them, engaging in self-mutilation to please them, or merely in doing service, as already described.

As far as sin goes Paul appears to hit a very Biblical tension, reminiscent of Pharaoh in Exodus. Sin is obviously the product of the wicked. At the same time, the wicked have been so turned over to their choice that it seems unlikely that they will ever dig themselves out. Similar to a man who jumps into a hole it may be possible to choose to go one direction, but nearly impossible to go back. This tension makes solving the problem a matter of judgment, forgiveness, and healing. And so we see that Jesus covers everything. He forgives us in dying for us and atoning for us. As He is resurrected, he breaks completely the power of death and restores those who trust Him.

What does it mean in our current context?

1) What does worship mean? What does service mean? How do we honor God as God? To think concretely about this it might help to think about any other religions you can think of. How do they worship? What makes a method good or right? If you remember the Greek legends from school what makes God a different sort of god than, say, Zeus or Poseidon? How might he be honored as such? Could you honor God as God right this second, or does it require preparation, perhaps a church service? What role does a church service play in worship? Is it better worship? Is it an aspect that can be met elsewhere? Is it just a convenient reminder to worship God at least once a week?

2) We discuss idolatry fairly frequently. Presumably none of you have set up a carved stone image of Fingle, the three-headed lizard god, in your bedroom, but does an idol need to be an image that is worshiped? Paul suggests that the real problem with idolatry is worship of the created. What created things do we worship? People? Activities? Luxuries? Can you think of an example in your own life or that you are simply acquainted with, in which someone worships something created? How does that affect their life? What would it actually mean to cease to worship created things? If your house burned down, should you not care because it was created? If you started starving would the answer be the same? What is the thing you could least do without? (I mean "thing" in a broad sense here, covering everything from the respect of others, to your iPod.)

3) Think about Paul's discussion of chosen evil and God's "turning over" of people to their evil. Can you think of how this would work? Do you know anyone trapped in their own evil? Were you once trapped in evil? (The good Christian answer is, one supposes, always "yes", but don't go rote. Go deeper.) Have you ever seen anyone exit such a trap? How? How could you, as an ambassador of Christ, share the possibility of Christ's deliverance with those trapped? As a Community Group, in the real world and the short-term future? As an individual? How should you feel about those trapped in their own evil? Should you pity them or despise them?

Weekly Questions to Ask the Group

What's the first thing you notice about God in this passage?
How will this passage change your life specifically this week?