

## “What’s the Problem?”

Romans 1:22-32

You might be thinking, “Time out, Jeff! Isn’t this series entitled, ‘The Good News of God’? Where’s the good news here? This sounds more like an angry rant, a ‘laundry list’ of all that’s wrong in the world.” In fact, this passage is an important part of God’s good news. Let me try to explain it this way: imagine I have a deadly disease, a disease that is going to take my life if it isn’t cured. That disease is located deep in my body. There’s only one symptom of that disease, a blemish, a pimple on the end of my nose. No matter what I do, I can’t get rid of that pimple. Sometimes it’s barely noticeable. Other times it seems to scream, “Hey, look at me!” I get fed up with this pimple and decide to do something about it. I go to a dermatologist. But the dermatologist says, “I can try to treat the pimple, but I can’t cure you. You need to know that there’s something going on deep inside that you need to check out.” In this scenario, I have no hope for a cure from the dermatologist. My only hope is a doctor who can correctly diagnose not the symptom, but the source of my problem.

That’s what Paul is doing in this section of God’s Word. He’s like a doctor treating a patient. In this case, the patient is humanity, all of us. He’s diagnosing a problem deep inside of us so that he can point us to the cure. He does this not in a rant, but in a very reasonable and coherent way. Three times in this passage Dr. Paul repeats a three-step diagnosis of the problem. The diagnosis goes like this: Step 1 – We reject God, we exchange God for ourselves. Instead of glorifying and worshiping God, we glorify and worship ourselves; we make ourselves our own little “gods.” This is Paul’s definition of sin here. Step 2 – God gives us what we want. He basically says, “If that’s what you want, you can have it.” Two weeks ago Tommy was right when he said that God’s wrath is certainly, “Hell’s coming!” but not all of God’s wrath is “out there” in the future. God’s wrath is also poured out in this way, right now: He simply lets people who reject Him have their own way. He lets them experience the consequences of their rejection. Step 3 – We act out externally those consequences. In a dramatic visible way we reveal the desperately sick condition of our souls, souls that have rejected God. Let’s see how this three-step sequence is worked out in our passage.

The first time is found in verses 23 and 24. Step 1 – “They (humanity) exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man” (verse 23). Sin is the rejection of God and His glory. In His place, we put our own glory. Step 2 (verse 24a): “Therefore, God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity.” God says, “If that’s what you want, you can have it.” Isn’t it interesting that the desire to glory in ourselves is really a desire to indulge our lust? Step 3, also in verse 24: “for the degrading of their bodies with one another.” The sexual disordering of the human race is a judgment of God for our exchanging His glory for our own. The result is visible and dramatic activities that degrade and humiliate us.

The second time through this sequence is found in verses 25-27. Step 1 – “They exchanged the truth of God for a lie” (verse 25). The “truth of God” is what is right and real and true in creation, in life. The “lie” preferred by us humans is that we will determine what is true and real and right for us, and what is not. Step 2 – “Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts,” which is similar to

verse 24. Step 3 – “Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.” The outward display of this exchanging of God’s truth for a lie is, again, the sexual disordering of human life, of which homosexuality is the prime example, but not the only example of that sexual confusion.

The third time through this sequence is found in verses 28 through 31. Step 1 – “Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God” (verse 28a). In verses 23 and 25 the patient exchanged the glory of God for his own and the truth of God for a lie. Here, they simply don’t acknowledge God at all anymore. Step 2 – “He (God) gave them over to a depraved mind” (verse 28b). Before, He gave them over in their sin to sinful desires and shameful lusts. Now, because they’ve intellectually rejected Him, He gives them over to a depraved mind. Step 3 – here is the outward, visible expression of this rejection of God: “to do what ought not to be done,” acts such as wickedness, evil, greed, and depravity; envy, murder, strife, deceit, and malice; gossiping, slandering, God-hating, insolent, arrogant, boastful, disobedient, senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. This is by no means an exhaustive list. A more contemporary version would include abortion, euthanasia, and indulging in pornography and abuse. This list describes how people act when they have a “depraved mind” (v. 28). Not that everyone does all of these things, but everyone engages in at least one of them.

I have three conclusions. The first is a challenge to the character of God. The question can be asked, how can a good God allow something like this to happen, to hand over people to the evils they desire? God hands sinners over to their wretchedness so that they will experience and recognize how awful and horrible sin really is. When they realize that, they’ll turn to God, turn to His mercy, grace, and love. A similar idea governs the teaching of Alcoholics Anonymous. An alcoholic will recover from addictive drinking only after he or she has hit “rock bottom,” after they’ve experienced to the full the consequences of their sin and resulting destructive behavior. So God’s wrath in the present has a saving purpose. Second, the deepest problem we confront in life is not wickedness, evil, greed and depravity, envy, murder, strife, deceit and so on, regardless of how destructive and devastating these behaviors can be. Going back to my doctor analogy at the beginning of this message, those behaviors are all just pimples, they’re symptoms, outward expressions of a sickness that is deep inside us. The greatest problem is that sickness within. In that sickness, we exchange God’s glory for our own; we exchange God’s truth for a lie. We exchange the knowledge of God for knowledge that focuses on ourselves, and everything that’s messed up in our lives and in our world is caused by that exchange. Third, if Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is the doctor making the diagnosis, the healer is Jesus, the One Who reaches into our soul and where there was deadly sickness He brings us healing and health, robust, energetic health and vitality. Where we were estranged from God in our rejection of Him, when the healer comes into our lives, we’re restored; we return to the right relationship with God, in which we glory in Him, we embrace and live in the truth that is real, that is not a lie; we use our minds seeking and growing in the goodness, glory, and grace that is our Lord and our God! How can that happen? Only when the healer comes, by His wounds we are healed. Jesus our Savior, Jesus our Lord.