

The Deepening Darkness

by Ray C. Stedman

It may seem strange to preach a Christmas message from the latter part of the first chapter of Romans, but I think this section is exceedingly appropriate. Romans is probably the most contemporary, the most continuously up-to-date human document that ever has been written. In this chapter, Paul has been analyzing the civilization of the 1st century Roman Empire. He describes the moral life of great cities like Ephesus and Corinth and Rome. But the letter describes exactly what happened last night in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Palo Alto, and New York. The moral climate of today is the same as the moral climate of the 1st century Paul wrote about. That gives rise to the question, “Just how much progress have we made in twenty centuries of human existence?”

The apostle says there were two characteristics of the civilization he lived in, and those characteristics describe our society today too. The first characteristic is godlessness; the second is wickedness. Godlessness is a disrespect of God, and this results in wickedness – injury and hurt done to other human beings. The fundamental thesis upon which this epistle to the Romans is built is that in every generation there is godlessness, which results in wickedness.

The apostle has traced for us how this godlessness came about. He begins with the self-disclosure of God in nature; God has spoken to this world and has shown himself in the natural scene. Nature includes mankind itself, for we are part of nature too. God has made himself visible in every age and place. The truth about God pours out toward us from every direction, if only we have eyes

to see. This truth, the apostle says, has been met with an unspoken agreement among men to suppress it. There is a conspiracy of silence everywhere to ignore the truth that is everywhere present.

In the first part of this chapter, Paul explains that mankind follows a three-fold process in suppressing the truth:

- First, he ignores God. He does not glorify him or give thanks to him. This is characteristic of our day in the way the media ignores God. We act as though he does not exist and has nothing to do with our world.
- The second step in the process of suppressing truth is that men imitate God. They claim to be wise; they claim that they are able to handle all the problems of life and that they understand all that has happened in human affairs.
Some of you have followed the rather remarkable presentation by Jacob Bronowski and the Public Broadcasting System, called The Ascent of Man. Here is a very clear example of man’s attempt to trace all that has happened to mankind without a single reference to God.
- The third process by which man suppresses truth is to choose substitute gods and to make God appear to be much less than he really is.

By these means, men suppress the truth of God and have become godless.

In Verses 24-32 of Chapter 1, the apostle traces the effects of this godlessness in human society – the wickedness which inevitably follows. When men lose God, they always lose themselves. They do not understand what is happening in human affairs and are not able to diagnose the sicknesses and problems that break out in society because we have lost God.

In his book, *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis says hell is made up of people who live at an infinite distance from each other. That is the result of the loss of God in our life.

This wickedness at work among human beings also follows a three-step process which is identified for us in this passage by the thrice-repeated phrase, “God gave them over.” Paul repeats this phrase in Verses 24, 26, and 28, and this phrase identifies what is going on in our culture.

Let’s look at the first reference to this phrase in Verse 24:

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. {Rom 1:24 NIV}

The first mark of wickedness in a godless society is widespread **sexual immorality** – the degrading, or the dishonoring, of the body. Note that the sentence begins with the word *therefore*. This immorality is a result of the idolatry into which men fall. Idolatry is common in our day. We do not worship idols and images so much anymore, but concepts and ideas are idolized and deified as much as any of the idols of the ancient world. The result of idolatry is widespread sexual immorality. Many people think this account describes all the evil things men do and then says that God, in effect, gives up on the people who do them. They think God washes his hands of them because they are so filthy and dirty. That certainly is not what this account says. But because men run after other gods and refuse the testimony of their own hearts and the world of nature around them, because they run after other gods and do not glorify or thank the true God, God removes his restraints from society so that what is done in secret is allowed to break out into openness and acceptability. That is the mark of the wrath of God at work. The first sign of wickedness in a civilization is that sexual immoral-

ity, which is always present in human life, becomes widely accepted.

God allows us to experience the full effects of our attempts to satisfy our hungers and our cravings and our desires without him. He allows us to discover that we don’t have the answer. God removes the societal restraints to let these things come to the surface. By that means, he forces us to experience the full effect of what we do. God forces us to harvest the crop we insist on sowing. We like to sow our wild oats, but, when they begin to sprout and the results begin to appear, we want to abandon the field and run to another one, and just keep sowing our wild oats. But God says you cannot do that. You are going to have to live with the results. This is what Paul, earlier in the passage, calls “the wrath of God” at work among us.

You may ask, “Why is it that sex always seems to be singled out as the sign of God’s judgment? Why is sexual immorality the first sign of a disintegrating civilization?”

There is a good reason. Many Christians have wrongly concluded that sexual sins are the worst kinds of sin. But that is not true. Sexual sins are not the worst kind of sins. C. S. Lewis has caught this fact very accurately. In a paragraph from his book, *Mere Christianity*, he says,

If anyone thinks that Christians regard unchastity as the supreme vice, he is quite wrong. The sins of the flesh are bad, but they are the least bad of all sins. All the worst pleasures are purely spiritual. The pleasure of putting other people in the wrong, of bossing and patronizing and spoiling sport, and backbiting; the pleasures of power, of hatred. For there are two things inside me competing with the human self which I must try to become: they are the animal self, and the diabolical self; and the diabolical self is the worst of the two. That is why a cold, self-righteous prig, who goes regularly to church, may be far nearer to hell than a prostitute. But of course, it’s better to be neither.

Those words are true, and this passage in Romans bears it out. It begins with sexual impurity and proceeds to sexual perversity. But the final result, the ultimate climax of the chapter, is not sexual sins, it is the sins of the spirit. Widespread animosity, hatred of the heart – these are the worst sins.

There is good reason, however, why God allows heterosexual practices to become publicly detectable. He allows it to show us what is going on in our spiritual lives. It highlights the fact that sex is linked with worship. Any serious reading of the Scriptures will make this crystal clear. Sex is man's longing after worship. Sex, you see, is a desire to possess another body and to be possessed by another. It is a deep-seated craving inherent in every human being.

We have all heard the statement, "Girls give sex in order to get love; boys give love in order to get sex." This is true, superficially. But what both are really after is not sex at all; they are after worship. They really want to worship and to be worshipped. They really want a sense of total fulfillment, a oneness, an identity. That is what they think they are getting when they indulge in illicit sex.

The Scriptures tell us that only God can give that fulfillment. Only God can satisfy that deep sense of longing for complete identity and unity with another person. That is what we call worship. When we worship, we are longing to be possessed of God, and to possess him fully. That is why the highest description of the relationship possible to a believer is found in the words of Jesus in John 15, "You in me, and I in you," {cf, John 14:20}. When men think that they are going to find that fulfillment in sex, God, in effect, says to them, "Look, it won't work. But you won't believe that until you try it out." So he removes the restraints and allows immoral sexual practices to become widely accepted, understanding that men indulging in these things will finally find themselves just as dissatisfied, empty and hopeless as they were when they started. Thus they will learn that God is trying to teach them that sex is not the way by which men find fulfillment. This is true even in marriage. Men only find their fulfillment in a relationship to God.

This brings us to the second mark of a godless and wicked society, found in Verses 25-27:

They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator, who is forever praised, Amen.

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. 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. {Rom 1:25-27 NIV}

Homosexuality is the second mark of a godless and wicked society. In the first step of this process, bodies were dishonored. In this second step, Paul speaks of shameful lusts arising from inside, desires that are part of the soul of man. The apostle describes the growth of widespread psychological confusion. Notice the irony of this. This is God's silent way of forcing men to demonstrate their sin so they can see what is going on in their lives. Paul says because they have exchanged truth for a lie and exchanged the Creator for created things, God allows them to exchange natural functions for unnatural functions – to use a man for a woman, and a woman as a man. The restraints are removed, so homosexuality becomes widely accepted in society. In this 1st century world in which Paul lived and wrote, homosexuality was a commonplace thing. All the great philosophers extolled it and practiced it, for the most part. Men like Socrates, and other great names of Greece, were homosexuals. Out of the first fifteen Roman emperors, fourteen of them were homosexuals, and some gave themselves blatantly and openly to this vice. This was common in the Roman world, as it is becoming common in our own day. Once again, the restraints are being removed, and these things are thrusting themselves into public view.

The truly awful thing about the rise of homosexuality today is that homosexuals are allowed to believe the lie that this is a biological condition which they cannot help, but to which they should adjust. Even churches are falling into this trap and consenting to this deceit. The papers carried a report this week that the Santa Clara County Council of Churches accepted into membership the Homosexual Church of San Jose. The arguments reported in the local papers were unbelievable. Pastors stood up and said they could not make a judgment as to whether homosexuality was good or evil. Yet I was encouraged this week by a paper which was sent to me by a Christian who is an ex-homosexual. The paper was written by a group of Christians who were homosexuals, but who have been delivered by the grace and the gospel of the

Lord Jesus, by the power of Christ in their lives. In order to help those still enmeshed in this vice, they are publishing a paper that makes a forthright plea to those trapped in homosexuality not to believe the lie so widely circulated today, that this is a biological condition and they cannot help themselves. This lie is what holds them in a fatal grip. As long as homosexuals believe that, there is no help for them. But if they understand that homosexuality is a sin, like other sins, that it can be forgiven and they can be delivered and freed from this sin by the power and grace of Jesus Christ, then there is tremendous hope in the midst of their darkness.

Paul speaks of a “due penalty” for this perversion. Anyone who has spent any time with those involved in this unfortunate condition know what this penalty is. It is a loss of their sense of identity, an uncertainty as to their role and place in life. It creates an almost unbearable tension as to who he is, and what he is, and what he or she is here for. We see this manifested in considerable degree in the Women’s Liberation Movement, as well as in dress styles and the emphasis on unisex in education. This sexual confusion that abounds on every side is an attempt to mar and to defeat God’s precise delineation when he made them male and female.

The third and final mark of a godless and wicked culture is given in Verses 28-32.

Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed, and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. {Rom 1:28-31 NIV}

This is a terrible list of sins, but it is the mark of a civilization that is nearing collapse – this growing spirit of contemptuous and arrogant disregard for other human beings. In one word, this describes **a desire to exploit** other people. Godlessness eventually brings us to the place where we will see these things in society.

“Depraved mind,” used here, literally means “an unacceptable mind,” a mind that cannot be lived with, that simply will not fit into any kind of civilization or culture or society. A depraved mind destroys, rends, and fragments everything it touches. It is an unacceptable mind, and its public hostility is marked by increasing cruelty and violence. I think the most vivid demonstration and documentation of this in our day is probably given in Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s book, *The Gulag Archipelago*, where you find an entire culture characterized by this terrible, senseless cruelty. But we in the Western world are not escaping either. Every day our newspapers report the skyrocketing rise in senseless vandalism and vicious and unprovoked attack upon innocent and often helpless people. The rise in child abuse is a symptom of this in our society.

It culminates, as Paul makes very clear in Verse 32, in an attitude of callous disregard:

Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things, but also approve those who practice them. {Rom 1:32 NIV}

Knowing that harm is coming from their wickedness, nevertheless they attempt to spread it more fully. They invade the field of education; they dominate the media; they seek legal status for their wickedness and defy all attempts at control. As you can well recognize, this is what is going on today.

Thus the Apostle Paul traces the deepening darkness of his own day. And yet it is ours as well. Though this is an honest record, it is also clear that God does not turn his back on man. This account is not a record of what God despises, and thus turns aside with contempt. Man is never treated here as an object of contempt, or as a worm. Rather, God’s concern underscores this whole passage. He is at work to try to bring men to their senses, to wake up a civilization as to what is going on in its midst, and to show it how desperately it is in need of deliverance – which can only come as a gift of righteousness from God’s hands.

You may ask, “Why does God give a civilization over to this kind of thing?”

He does it because it is only when darkness prevails, and despair and violence are widespread, that men are ready to welcome the light. Remember Isaiah's prediction? "They that dwell in darkness, upon them has the light shined. They that live in the land of deep darkness, unto them a great light has shined," {cf, Isa 9:2}. In the 1st century, the world was sunk in the darkness of despair. Idolatry had penetrated the whole world; men had turned from the true God, whom they could have known. Hopelessness and rank despair lay like a heavy blanket upon the earth.

In that hour, in the darkness of the night, over the skies of Bethlehem, the angels broke through and a great light shone about. A multitude of heavenly hosts were heard praising God and saying to a group of lonely shepherds, "Fear not; for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord," {cf, Luke 2:10-11 KJV}. The hope of the world has always been that the Savior would be born again in a human heart, as he once was born in a stable in Bethlehem. From that hope all light streams. The angels' message is the coming of the Lord Jesus, the availability of the gift of righteousness from God. It is against the growing darkness of our own time that the light of this Christmas story goes out again this year.

Everywhere we need to make this message as clear as we possibly can – by our testimony, by the

way we live, by the joy and peace of our heart. God has found a way to break through human weakness, arrogance, despair, and sinfulness to give us peace, joy, and gladness once again. Just as Jesus was born in Bethlehem so long ago, so he can be born in your heart now. This is the good news of the gospel. In this decaying world in which we live we can see again the glory of this truth as it delivers people from their sins. "Thou shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins," {Matt 1:21 KJV}.

Prayer:

Our heavenly Father, we see how accurately these words have described our own times, our own civilization, our own country. As we see the marks of godlessness on every side, in agreement with the description in Romans, we know three things. First, we know you have not forsaken this world. Second, we know that the message of truth and light is still as available as ever. And third, we know that love is behind it all. Your love reaches out to broken, fragmented, hurting man, and longs to set us free from the results of our own sin. Father, we thank you for this. We pray that many today may find this new life in Jesus Christ our Lord. In his name we ask it, Amen.

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