

When God Gives Up

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Unashamed - A Study of Romans

Humanity was created to worship God, but when people persistently exchange the Creator for created things, God eventually gives them over to the path they have chosen. In Romans 1, the Apostle Paul reveals a terrifying form of judgment: not merely punishment from heaven, but the removal of divine restraint. As desires become disordered and truth is suppressed, society begins to unravel from the inside out. Yet even in this dark passage, the gospel shines brightly, because the same God who gives sinners over is also the God who rescues sinners through Christ.

Introduction

- The Roman poet Juvenal coined a phrase that historians still use today: *panem et circenses* — bread and circuses.
 - The empire discovered that if the population stayed fed and entertained enough, people stopped asking deeper questions.
 - So Rome filled massive arenas with spectacles: gladiators, violence, games, performances — constant amusement.
 - The emperors learned quickly — keep the crowds roaring and you can do almost anything you want.
 - Moral seriousness is nearly impossible to sustain in a people whose bellies are full and whose eyes are fixed on the spectacle.
- And while the crowds roared in the Colosseum, something deeper was quietly collapsing underneath the surface.
 - Rome did not suddenly fall in a moment.
 - The visible collapse came long after the internal decay had already taken root.
 - The empire still looked powerful.
 - The roads still worked.
 - The buildings still stood.

- The economy still moved.
- The arenas were still full.
- But underneath the spectacle, the soul of the civilization was eroding — quietly, steadily, irreversibly — and almost no one in the crowd had the eyes to see it.
- Rome did not fall in a day. It was distracted into decline.
- In 1985, a media critic named Neil Postman wrote a book called *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.
 - His argument was simple but it was also devastating.
 - Postman warned that cultures do not always collapse because truth is hidden from them.
 - Sometimes cultures collapse because truth becomes *irrelevant* to them.
 - He wrote, "*We are now a culture whose information, ideas, and epistemology are given form by television, not by the printed word.*"
 - Entertainment becomes central.
 - Distraction becomes constant.
 - Amusement becomes anesthesia.
 - Postman saw that we were not marching toward George Orwell's *1984* nightmare, where truth is crushed under a boot.
 - We were drifting into Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*— where truth simply drowns in an endless sea of stimulation and irrelevance.
 - Postman was writing about television. He could not have imagined what a screen in every pocket would do to us.
- And honestly — this all feels strangely modern.
 - We live in the most entertained civilization in human history.
 - Every quiet moment filled.

- Every silence interrupted.
- Every discomfort medicated with distraction.
- Our arenas look different now.
- The colosseum fits in your hand.
- But the dynamic is the same: keep people amused, and you can do almost anything.
- Keep people stimulated, and they will never have to face what is actually true.
- Across twenty centuries, the warning has stayed remarkably consistent.
 - Rome distracted itself with bread and circuses.
 - Neil Postman warned that modern cultures could entertain themselves into numbness.
 - And long before either of them, the Apostle Paul described what happens when humanity suppresses truth and worships created things instead of the Creator.
- Eventually, a society stops pursuing what is true and simply pursues what it wants.
 - And [Romans 1](#) gives us the terrifying phrase for what happens next:
 - “God gave them up.”
- That is the text before us this morning.
 - [Romans 1:24-32](#) is not easy.
 - It has been used as a blunt instrument.
 - It has been avoided like a live wire.
 - Neither approach does it justice.
 - What Paul is doing here is not ranting. He is diagnosing.

- With surgical clarity, he describes what happens to a human culture — and to human hearts — when worship collapses and desire takes the throne.
- And then he describes what God does in response. That response may be the most sobering thing in all of Scripture.
- Three times in this passage, Paul repeats the same chilling phrase: *God gave them up*.
 - Not because God stopped existing. Not because God stopped caring.
 - But because humanity continually exchanged the Creator for created things — until the restraint of God was removed, and society began collapsing from the inside out.
 - Not fire falling from heaven. Something even more unsettling than that. Abandonment.
 - The withdrawal of the hand that was holding things together.
- The bread is still baking and circuses are still running.
 - The screens are still on.
 - The arenas are still full.
 - And [Romans 1](#) is not merely the story of ancient Rome.
 - It is the story of every civilization that has ever turned its back on God and discovered — too late — that He is capable of a silence more terrifying than any judgment they imagined.
 - It is the story of what happens when a culture suppresses what it knows to be true long enough that God finally says: *have it your way*.
 - The question this passage forces on us is not a comfortable one.
 - What does it look like when God gives a civilization exactly what it wants?
 - What are the signs?

- What does the decay look like from the inside — to people who are still convinced the roads work, the buildings stand, and the arenas are full?

Scripture Reading

Romans 1:24–32 ESV

²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves,

²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature;

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.

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.

²⁹ They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips,

³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,

³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

³² Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

- Let's not pretend that this is an easy text for us to consider this morning.

- But, its difficulty doesn't give us permission to skip it or avoid it.
- In fact, in light of where we find ourselves as a civilization, this text may be one of the most important ones we could consider.
- However, I need to say this at the outset...this is not a culture war passage.
- Paul is not filling our hands with rocks for us to hurl at unsuspecting sinners - besides, if you paid attention last week, there's no such thing as unsuspecting sinners.
- There are only sinners who like to suppress the truth to differing degrees of intensity.
- We ended last week with sinful man exchanging the glory of the Creator and worshiping the creation.
 - Paul continues with an acknowledgment that such an exchange cannot go unanswered.
 - So in response, God gives sinful man up.
 - In essence, God says, "if you want to sin, go ahead and sin."
 - The frightening thing about [Romans 1](#) is that God is not surrendering His authority.
 - He is surrendering people to the consequences of their own rebellion.
 - And it is that action, sometimes described as God's *passive wrath*, that has catastrophic effects.
 - We tend to think of God's wrath conjuring fire from heaven or plague or famine.
- But here, God's wrath is simply letting us live out the consequences of suppressing the truth.
 - And those consequences will bring about a tragic rearranging of reality.

- Instead of aligning ourselves with God's purposes and acknowledging the truth of God made plainly known in creation, we will find great disorder in our desires, our relationships, and our society.

Disordered Desires (vv. 24-25)

- There is nothing wrong with desire.
 - We all have desires that can be as simple as "I desire a tasty and fulfilling lunch when church is over today."
 - Parents desire for their children to do well for themselves. Godly parents desire for their children to walk faithfully with the LORD.
 - Strong marriages are built on healthy desire within the husband-wife relationship.
 - As your pastor, I desire for you all to grow in the grace and knowledge of the LORD. I desire to see people come to faith in Jesus Christ.
 - But Paul isn't talking about proper desire, he's talking about disordered desire.
- In v. 24, he says God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts...
 - That isn't desire coming from an ordered place.
 - That is desire coming from a disordered place.
 - That is desire that is birthed out of a fundamental denial and suppression of the truth.
 - And Paul's language couldn't be clearer what he is trying to communicate.
- The word lust in the context isn't just about misplaced sexual desire.
 - The word here implies any kind of inordinate or self-indulgent craving.
 - This is pointing to any kind of desire that takes on the role of an idol.

- It is desire that displaces what should be proper affections for God.
- As man pursues those lusts, they embrace impurity.
- That is a word built around a word you're familiar with - catharsis.
 - We went for a hike yesterday morning up at Lula Lake.
 - We might say that standing in the mist of that roaring waterfall was cathartic.
 - It was good for our emotional and mental wellbeing.
 - I enjoy running - it is cathartic for me.
 - It helps me manage stress and helps me live a healthier life.
- The word Paul uses here is the negation of cathartic.
 - He's essentially saying that the disordering of our desires isn't to pursue that which is cathartic, but that which is "uncathartic." (That's not a word, but it works for today).
 - Why does sinful man seem inherently committed to pursuing things that are not for our good?
 - Because our desires are fundamentally disordered by our suppression of the truth.
 - As a result, our lives are spent pursuing stuff that is inherently in our worst interest, not in our best interest.
- How do we get to that place?
 - Paul reiterates the exchange that he introduced to us back in v. 23.
 - The truth about God is making itself known. It is unavoidable. You have to work to ignore it or disregard it.
 - Some of you have driven through the Great Smoky Mountains
 - You know what that drive looks like — the way the mountains rise up around you, the light coming through the trees, the sheer scale

of what God has written into creation right there through your windshield.

- The glory is everywhere. It is relentless. It demands a response.
- And somehow, we manage to drive right past it because we've got Ripley's Believe It or Not plugged into the GPS.
- We roll past the majesty of what God has put on full display and we get genuinely excited about a pancake restaurant shaped like a barn.
- That's not just a failure of attention. That is a choice. You have to work to miss that kind of glory.
- And Paul says that's exactly what sinful man does — not accidentally, but willfully.
- We look directly at what creation is pointing to, turn our backs on it, and start photographing the gift shop.
- It's absurd. And Paul means for it to feel absurd.
- Because that is precisely what the exchange looks like from where God is standing.
- We didn't just miss the thing creation was pointing to — we replaced it.
 - We made the lesser thing the destination. And we did it on purpose.
 - And when creation becomes the object of worship instead of the thing that points toward the Creator, desire doesn't just get confused — it gets handed over.
 - That's the word Paul uses. Given up. Given over.
- And what follows is not a punishment handed down from outside.
 - It is the natural catastrophe of a soul cut loose from what it was made for.
 - And we did it on purpose.

- But a soul cut loose doesn't stop at disordered desires.
- The disorder moves outward — into our most intimate relationships.

Disordered Relationships (vv. 26-27)

- For the second time in this text, Paul emphasizes God's action of "giving them up."
- This time, God hands mankind over to what Paul calls, "dishonorable passions."
- And then he proceeds to describe in great clarity the extent to which those dishonorable passions will take us.
- I think it is important that Christians treat these verses with what I will call "interpretive integrity."
- We will quickly turn to texts like [Romans 1](#) and [Genesis 19](#) to condemn the prevalence and practice of homosexuality.
- But let us not pretend that those are the only sins of consequence within the pages of Scripture.
 - C.S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*:
 - "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."
 - Just to be clear, this chapter ends with a list of vices that is far more inclusive, and just as condemning.
- Paul isn't pointing to the sin of homosexuality because it is the worst of the worst.
 - Paul is pointing to this class of sin in particular because it perfectly illustrates the argument he is making.

- Remember, we are guilty of this great exchange.
- We've exchanged the glory of the Creator for the Creation.
- Despite the fact that creation is boldly declaring the presence and power of the Creator.
- Paul identifies homosexuality as a striking example of how this exchange works itself out.
- Paul points to same-sex relations because they visibly embody the larger exchange he has been describing throughout the chapter.
- Remember, that's how all this got started back in v. 18.

Romans 1:18 ESV

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

- Here's why this part of Paul's argument is so important...and it is vitally important that we understand this.
 - Creation itself declares the truth about God — his power, his nature, his design.
 - That declaration is not subtle. In v. 19...Paul said that this declaration is plain, clearly perceived.
 - It is written into the fabric of the physical world, including the human body itself.
 - Male and female are not arbitrary categories.
 - They are part of the created order through which God has written something that is undeniably true.
 - In the distinctiveness of male and female, we see clearly, even down to biological reality, how those two are designed to complement one another.
 - And in the union of male and female, we see a remarkable truth - it is the only union capable of producing life in the image of God.

- And in that, we see the truth about God on full display.
- In other words, creation is not silent.
 - The body speaks.
 - Male and female speak.
 - Marriage speaks.
 - The created order is constantly declaring something about the wisdom and design of its Creator.
- When Paul highlights same-sex relations as the illustration of the exchange, he is making a specific argument.
 - He is saying that in order to fully embrace and celebrate what he is describing, you must suppress what creation is plainly declaring.
 - Not just theologically — physically.
 - The design itself is a declaration.
 - And to reject the design is to suppress the declaration.
- This is why Paul calls it the exchange made visible in the body.
 - We exchanged the glory of the Creator for the creation.
 - And now, Paul says, that exchange is being worked out in the most intimate and physical dimension of human existence.
 - The same suppression of truth that began in the mind and the heart has now reached the body itself.
- That is not a culture war argument. That is a creation order argument.
- And it is not Paul's invention — it reaches all the way back to [Genesis 1](#) and 2, where God declares his design before sin ever enters the picture.
- And before anyone begins to think this text is about somebody else's sin, remember where Paul is headed.

- Before Romans is finished, every one of us will stand guilty before God.
- The point of [Romans 1](#) is not to identify the sinners.
- The point is to expose the depth of humanity's rebellion.
- In fact, this chapter ends with Paul dramatically widening the circle.
- We've already seen how the exchange of the Creator for creation has distorted our desires.
 - The suppression of truth has shown itself very capable of corrupting our relationships.
 - And chapter 1 ends by revealing how our rebellion has reached all the way into the human mind.
 - Because a disordered mind doesn't just affect the person who holds it.
 - It begins to call what is wrong, right — and what is right, wrong.
 - And then it invites everyone around it to agree.

Depraved Society (vv. 28-32)

- For the third time, Paul tells us that “God gave them up...” and this time he highlights the corruption of our whole society.
- For three verses, Paul gives us a list of the moral consequences of our depraved minds.
 - Lest we forget...

Romans 1:29–31 ESV

²⁹ They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips,

³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,

³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

- I would dare say we could all circle some points of struggle in that list.
- If you were a social scientist trying to diagnose the moral decline of our contemporary moment, you might point to things contained in this very list.
- But I don't think the list here is the most condemning part of Paul's argument. That comes in v. 32.
 - You know that scene in *A Few Good Men* when Tom Cruise is cross examining Jack Nicholas character? The one where Cruise demands the truth and Nicholas retorts back, "You can't handle the truth!"
 - Mankind suppresses truth that is evident.
 - And in a sense, [Romans 1](#) is the theological version of that famous courtroom scene.
 - The truth is plainly visible.
 - The problem is not that we cannot see it.
 - The problem is that we do not want it.
- And there are two profound consequences.
 - First, we know better.
 - We suppress the truth, but we never fully escape it.
 - And we act in spite of what we know to be true.
 - But the second consequence Paul points to is even more alarming.
 - We do not merely participate in rebellion, we applaud it.
- That's not just personal moral failure — that's the corruption of the moral ecosystem itself.
 - A culture that applauds what God condemns has moved past rebellion.
 - It has become a civilization that has lost the capacity to call things by their right name.

- And the prophet Isaiah warned:

Isaiah 5:20 ESV

²⁰ Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!

- This is what happens whenever humanity suppresses truth long enough.
 - Eventually we lose the ability to distinguish light from darkness.
 - And when that happens, the collapse is no longer merely around us.
 - It has reached within us.

Invitation

- This is all rather dark. If it were a painting, there's a lot of black paint on this canvas.
 - But you've got to understand something...
 - He's painting darkness so that we can recognize the light when it appears.
 - He is driving us somewhere.
 - He is leading us toward the moment where the righteousness we could never produce is freely given to us in Christ.
- I heard R.C. Sproul preach this text once and he lamented that we seem live in a time when people seem to care less and less about the gospel.
 - And the reason they care so little about the Gospel is because they fail to understand the peril in which we find ourselves.
 - If we understood the peril, we would stop treating the gospel like optional information and start seeing it as a rescue.
 - But because we don't know the danger we are in, we don't recognize our own need to be saved from that danger.
- That's exactly what Paul is working to explain to us.
 - We are in GREAT peril.

- Not because God is unjust.
- But because He is perfectly just.
- God is perfectly justified in his wrath against sinners.
- The terrifying phrase in [Romans 1](#) is: "God gave them up."
 - But the beautiful truth of the gospel is that God did not give up on sinners.
 - In Christ, He came after them.
- If you would let me preach [Romans 1-3](#) in one, 12-hour mega sermon, I would get you to the good news in one sitting.
- But let me give you a brief preview quickly this morning.
- Three times in [Romans 1](#) we hear the same chilling words:
 - "God gave them up."
 - God gave them up to disordered desires.
 - God gave them up to dishonorable passions.
 - God gave them up to a debased mind.
 - But the story of the gospel is not merely what God gave up.
- It is what God gave.
 - "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son..."
 - When humanity exchanged the Creator for creation, God sent His Son.
 - When humanity suppressed the truth, God sent the Truth.
 - When humanity rebelled, God pursued.
 - When humanity deserved wrath, God offered mercy.
- The reason many people treat the gospel casually is because they have never grasped the danger they are in.

- But [Romans 1](#) will not allow us that luxury.
- We are not good people who need a little improvement.
- We are sinners who need rescue.
- The good news is that Jesus Christ lived the life we could not live.
 - He obeyed where we rebelled.
 - He honored the Father where we exchanged His glory.
 - He died the death our sins deserved.
 - He rose again in victory over sin and death.
 - And now everyone who repents and believes in Him is forgiven, reconciled, adopted, and declared righteous before God.
- The greatest danger in this room this morning is not that you recognize your sin.
 - The greatest danger is that you continue suppressing what God is making plain.
 - The same God who gave sinners over to their rebellion now calls sinners to repentance.
 - The same God whose wrath is revealed from heaven has revealed His grace in Jesus Christ.
- So don't suppress the truth.
 - Don't explain it away.
 - Don't postpone it for another day.
 - Turn to Christ.
 - Trust Christ.
 - And discover that the God who would have been perfectly just to leave you in your sin has instead made a way to save you from it.
- God may have given them up...

- But God gave His Son that sinners might be saved.