

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Romans – Jesus’ Gospel Sets You Free!

The Devolution of Man

Study #2

(Romans 1:18-32)¹

Introduction: A downward ascent...

In a book titled, The Ascent of Man, Jacob Bronowski gives us his “take” on human history and paints a picture of overall progress and of mankind moving toward greater and greater heights of social and moral excellence through the millennia.

Optimistic books, preachers, and politicians (and there are many of each, from every persuasion) view mankind as essentially moving toward a human-powered utopia.

Such optimists express hope that the human condition will improve over time. Things will get better and better. Freedom and justice will prevail. All people will come to enjoy dignity and respect. Just as technology has advanced, so will love advance, worldwide.

They tell us, “*Yes, we can and yes we will provide for ourselves the kind of world we all dream of having, where equality reigns and wars cease.*”

People who write books like The Ascent of Man, though, must read different history books than I do. They must also subscribe to different magazines and newspapers and watch different news shows.

¹ In Romans 1:18-32, Paul deals specifically with the sinfulness of the non-Jewish world of the Gentiles, who live without the light of God’s special revelation.

As I read history - be it American, English, European, African, or biblical - I do not see moral progress but regression. I read of a humanitarian descent, not an ascent.

Call it pessimism or realism, but the older I get, the more is my sense that humanity is not evolving into a higher form, but that the process of “devolution” has taken hold. The trajectory of human morality is not up, but down. What we see is not progress, but regress. And this morning we’ll check my gut instinct against the teaching of Scripture.

Last Sunday, in our first study of Paul’s letter to the Romans, we listened as the apostle proudly proclaimed (and we began to memorize),

[16] For I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

To which we say, “Amen!” The Gospel of Jesus IS outrageously good news. But, you and I will never fully appreciate that Gospel message until we grasp the truth of our moral bankruptcy - our sin - before God.

Well, thanks to the passage before us this morning, we will grow in our appreciation for the grace that we so desperately need and that is so abundantly available to us through Jesus’ Gospel.

Today we see that humanity (including you and me) is traveling at breakneck speed the wrong way down a one way street.

Paul takes pains to show the sinfulness of all people everywhere, and, without mincing any words, kicks off this section with a bang.

First thoughts: “the wrath of God” (v. 18)

[18] For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men...²

² Ungodliness refers to that which is sinful in the religious sense; unrighteousness, to that which is sinful in the moral sense. The order in which the two are stated is critical. Impiety is the precursor to immorality. The former is illustrated in the experience of man by idolatry, the latter by immorality.

Now, to be truthful, the idea he introduces here - the “*wrath of God*” - has never been a terribly popular theme. But today, it may be more unwelcome than ever. We probably all know of people - and preachers - who revolt against the whole idea that God even has the capacity for wrath.

Frankly, it’s more appealing to think of God as the great “Innocent Bystander.”

There, the idea is that God has set in motion general laws that govern His world. If you violate these laws, of course, things won’t go well with you. But it’s not as if God is angry or that He executes judgment or expresses His wrath against people who rebel against Him.³

Well... the truth is that the “God-as-Innocent-Bystander” idea simply doesn’t square with the whole of biblical history.

- God’s wrath was revealed when He cast Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden after they sinned.
- We see His wrath displayed in the days of Noah, when all but eight people were destroyed in the great flood.
- His wrath was poured out on His own people for their sin when He delivered them over to the Assyrians and the Babylonians.
- And, at the final judgment, the wrath of God will be displayed again against all unrighteousness.

Thankfully, God deals more frequently in grace than judgment (that’s why Isaiah referred to judgment as God’s “*strange work*” - Isaiah 28:11). But it would be a mistake to think of the outpouring of His wrath as some sort of anomaly found only in a few isolated cases.⁴

³ William Barclay is one well-known scholar who says that God made this world in such a way that we break His laws at our own peril. God’s wrath, in Barclay’s view, is simply the natural laws of cause and effect. If you do bad things, bad things will happen to you. Charles H. Dodd, likewise, is another theologian who said that the wrath of God is “some effect in the realm of objective facts. It is the inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe.” I believe that Scripture paints a picture of a more active “wrath” of God against sin.

⁴ In fact, the way Paul phrases the opening words of verse 18 teach that God’s wrath is being continuously revealed.

The idea of His wrath is true and is therefore something with which each of us must grapple. As theologian and philosopher, Francis Schaeffer once wrote, “*There is no real preaching of the Christian gospel except in light of the fact that man is under the wrath of God.*”

And we should understand that the wrath of God is not inconsistent with the rest of who we know Him to be, a God of love and mercy.

If I witness some violent act directed against an innocent person and feel no anger, that lack of anger is an indictment against my character. Anger is appropriate at times.

And when God reveals His wrath, it is not the Almighty flying off the handle. He hasn’t lost His self-control. His wrath is His studied and holy response to rebellion.

So, what is it that prompts the wrath of God? Paul’s going to tell us as soon as he reminds us of how gracious God is.

Sins of the Heart (vv. 18-25)

Suppressing the Truth (vv. 18-21)

Self-evident truths about God (vv. 18-20)

[18] For the wrath of God is revealed⁵ from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, [19] because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. [20] For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen,⁶ being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.

⁵ Note that “revealed” is present in both v. 17 and v. 18. In one, the righteousness of God is revealed in the Gospel; in the other the wrath of God is revealed in God’s posture toward ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.

⁶ Psalm 19 is one place in the Old Testament where God’s power in nature is especially noted.

God's grace is seen here in that He has given evidence of His existence where we can all see it.

In most any home where there are young children, you can tell where the kids like to go because of the traffic patterns in the grass or in the carpet.

Sometimes, you can tell where they are because of bread crumbs or jelly stains.

Paul says that God has graciously left bread crumbs and fingerprints all over His creation. We can't see Him, but we can see His handiwork.

Certain specific truths about God are clearly discerned from the physical world as Paul uses an oxymoron to say that ***"His invisible attributes...have been clearly seen."***

The creation, all by itself, shouts God's existence. Solely from the creation we are able to grasp how powerful God is. Just by looking at the creation we can "get" His eternal nature.

Look at the rugged Texas Hill Country, or gaze out over the sand into the endless waters of the Gulf, look overhead at the clouds or the stars, or look to the rich soil of the Rio Grande Valley and be amazed at the power and the wisdom of the God who made it all.

Reflect on all that exists and you'll be struck with the creative genius required to fashion the world. You'll marvel at the intelligence and the purposefulness of God.

Those tell-tale smudges God has left behind in His creation tell us important truth about the kind of God, God is. And knowing something about Him from the creation, we are invited to worship the Creator.

It is not enough to "appreciate" nature's beauty, or to be a good steward of nature by not "messing with Texas."

Now, don't get me wrong. Above all people, Christians should be good stewards of the environment. But any concern for earth that doesn't lead to the worship of earth's Maker is deeply, deeply flawed.

Each one of us is to deal with the fact that there is an eternal God who has created all that there. And the only reasonable response to such a God is to worship Him and to love Him - heart, mind, soul, and strength.

But what do we actually *do* with the obvious revelation about God, knowledge that is universally available? Nothing.

Suppression of truth about God (v. 21a)

[21] For even though they knew God,⁷ they did not honor Him as God or give thanks

The first steps on the road to the wrath of God involve doing precisely nothing. DON'T acknowledge God. DON'T give thanks. DON'T honor Him.

Everybody understands all they need to know to be moved to worship. But honor and worship is exactly what people in general (people like you and me) refuse to give God.

Then, having taken those first two fateful steps (non-thanking; non-worship), the result is unavoidable.

Futile speculations and darkened hearts (vv. 21b)

[21b]...they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.⁸

⁷ The point is that people "know" God in the sense of understanding His invisible attributes, not in the sense of having a saving relationship with Him.

⁸ The word "***became futile***" only occurs here in the New Testament. Idols are referred to in the Old Testament with the same word group, though, as mere "useless nothings." That is the quality of the moral capacity of man apart from the worship of God - useless nothings.

The human mind is never a religious vacuum. If there is the absence of truth, there will be the presence of lies.

Once we choose to suppress the knowledge of the-God-who-is our thinking about spiritual matters, life's purpose, and all the stuff that matters becomes skewed. And Paul shows just how skewed life becomes after rejecting God in what follows.

However, before looking at the specifics of humanity's fall into sin, I want to highlight two thoughts that appear repeatedly in Romans 1.

The first is a phrase that describes God's role in man's descent. Paul says that God "*gave them over.*"

Parenthesis: "Giving over"

Those words show up three times in this passage (at verses 24, 26, 28) and they describe the form God's wrath takes.

Envision, if you will, all of humanity living in a perfect environment. This is a protected, fenced-in place where there are no distractions from seeing the glory of God in nature. There is nothing in this place to prohibit the full expression of worship to God for all that He is and all that He has created.

And even in THIS arena, people refuse to give glory to the Lord. There is no worship. There is no thanksgiving and there is no recognition of His majesty.

Now, of course, that is exactly what happened when Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden. But it is also exactly what happens in each of our own lives when we fail to worship God as He deserves. And it is this non-responsiveness that prompts God's wrath.

However, rather than hurl lightning bolts, God simply opens a gate to say, in effect, "*You want autonomy? You want life without Me? Here you go.*"

In opening the gate God certainly doesn't compel us toward sin. In His wrath He simply releases us from His protection.

God doesn't force worship. He gives us freedom to wander into unprotected spaces, separate from Him. He allows rebellion.

This is what God does in response to sin. He "*gives us over*" to do what we will.

And with the gates open, what have we done? Well, we have left to find fulfillment in life in something other than - in ANYTHING other than - a submissive, trusting relationship with Almighty God.

Or, as Paul says it in Romans 1, we have "*exchanged*" what God offers for something else.

Parenthesis: "Exchange"

We all know what it means to exchange something for something else. All buying and selling is an exchange.

We hope that we get a good deal at Target or at Car Max when we exchange our hard-earned cash for a jacket or a mini-van.

When traveling to a foreign country we hope that the exchange rate is favorable on the day that we have to turn in our dollars for pesos or rubles or euros.

And when the birthday gift isn't quite the right size we exchange it on the next day for something that actually fits.

Some exchanges are better than others.

In 1626 (or so goes the legend) the island of Manhattan was purchased from American Indians for 60 Dutch guilders, which had the purchasing power, in today's economy, of about \$1,000. That was a good exchange.

Today, if Mayor Bloomberg were to authorize a trade of Manhattan Island for \$1,000, that would not be a good exchange.

Three times in the verses in front of us today, Paul says that people have made an "*exchange.*"

Abandoning God's order and God's perfect plan, we have crafted another order. And being fools (v. 21), we have made fools' trades.

The first exchange we have made is in the arena of worship. This exchange has to do with our hearts. It always starts here.

In having chosen to not worship God, it doesn't follow that we will worship nothing. God has made us to be worshipping beings (just as it is the essential nature of God to receive worship). The tragedy is that if we won't worship God, we'll worship anything.

Exchanging the Truth for a Lie (vv. 22-25)

[22] Professing to be wise, they became fools,⁹ [23] and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.¹⁰ [24] Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. [25] For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

We have been offered the opportunity to worship and serve God.

This is the God who made everything, the God who put together the sub-atomic world and the constellations. He is the God revealed in nature - and in Jesus we know Him to be loving and gracious, forgiving and holy.

As a race, we looked at this God and decided, "Now, let's not worship Him. Let's worship other human beings. Let's worship animals. Let's worship images made of stone and wood. Let's worship the forces of nature. Anything but God."

That's quite an exchange!

In many places around the world, people still worship stone idols and frail people (North Korea), while in the United States, we generally don't. But, that doesn't mean that there is no idolatry here.

Martin Luther wrote four centuries ago, "*Whatever your heart clings to and relies on is your god.*" This is the heart of idolatry: to trust in and to commit our lives to someone or something other than the living God.

Today, science, education, reason, secularism, pleasure, mysticism, family, friendship - these, and more, make up our pantheon of gods.

We have exchanged the worship of God for something far less. We have chosen to worship and serve the creation rather than the Creator - and that is a terrible exchange.

But that is not the only exchange we have made. Paul continues, now speaking to another "*giving over*" on God's part and another human "*exchange*".

This exchange concerns, not relationship with God, but the most intimate human relationships.¹¹

Sins of the Passions (vv. 26-27)

[26] For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, [27] and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.

⁹ One commentator described what happens this way, "Reason estranged from the source of light led them into a delirium of vanity." Nicely put.

¹⁰ It is commonly held that idolatry preceded monotheism. Not so. "Idolatrous heathenism is not the first religion, from which man has gradually risen to the knowledge of the true God. On the contrary, it is the result of a falling away from the original revelation of the true God." (Meyer, Romans, Vol. 1, p. 22)

¹¹ Much helpful material found in a book published by Inter-Varsity Press, Homosexuality (The Use of Scientific Research in the Church's Moral Debate); Chapter 6 - *Toward a Christian Sexual Ethic*

What I am NOT Addressing

What is obviously in view here is the practice of homosexuality, and the practice of homosexuality is not a new thing.¹²

Homosexuality was not unknown in the age of the patriarchs (see Genesis 19 - Sodom and Gomorrah) and it was also practiced in Paul's day.¹³ The verses in front of us invite us to consider the topic this morning.

Needless to say, my treatment of the topic today won't be exhaustive. For those of you who are interested, there is somewhat more material in the written manuscript than you will hear during the sermon.

But today I'm restricting myself to the biblical text. I am not addressing politics (but then I never do). And I am not addressing myself to any of the highly charged social issues related to homosexuality.

This morning I'm not speaking to the origin of homosexual tendencies in a given person and I'm not talking today about the possibility of change in a person with homosexual tendencies toward becoming someone with heterosexual tendencies.¹⁴

¹² Significantly, however, it is relatively recently that people who engage in homosexual behavior identify themselves by this behavior.

¹³ One commentator/ historian (Barclay) says that fourteen out of the first fifteen Roman emperors were homosexual (or bisexual). From Homosexuality, "There were persons in the New Testament fellowship who were once participants in homosexual practice but who identified with such practices no longer."

¹⁴ From Homosexuality - Arguments about change can be simply summarized: contemporary science, it is claimed, has shown that there are no effective therapies to produce change by which the homosexual can become heterosexual, and hence the church's moral condemnation of those who act in a manner they cannot willingly change is wrong. Again, this "if-then" clause is wrong on both sides. The research actually shows a change effect of modest size, approximating that for such vexing conditions as examples cited earlier: pedophilia, alcoholism and Antisocial Personality Disorder. Initial change may occur for only a minority, and relapses among those who change at all may be frequent. But that is not the same as saying that none can change. It appears to us that profound change of orientation occurs, even if infrequently. (As the authors go on to make clear, though, even if sexual orientation never changed, the command of Scripture to not engage in homosexual behavior would still stand.)

My aim today is to help us think about the issue biblically. I hope to speak in such a way that is solidly biblical AND that is really helpful as we face a world that is quite often confused about sex, generally, and sexual orientation, specifically.¹⁵

Very briefly, too, I'll mention what I believe Paul is NOT saying.

What Paul is NOT Saying

I do not believe that he is saying that homosexual behavior is the worst kind of sin or the worst kind of sexual sin.

Adultery is also sinful. So is physical and sexual abuse and rape. So are the other twenty some-odd sins listed in verses 29-31. I do think that there is a very good reason behind Paul's mention of homosexuality here, but it is not that such behavior is the worst or the worst kind of sin.

Paul is also not saying that homosexual desires (or same-sex attraction) are sinful.¹⁶ The issue at hand is the committing of homosexual acts, not the temptation to do so and not the desire for same sex intimacy.

So, what is Scripture actually teaching here?

Paul's Teaching

First, the Bible is clearly teaching that the committing of homosexual acts is sinful.

As God's people, we are called to agree with Scripture's judgment on behavior. When the Bible declares something sinful, we say that it is sinful, too, whether that is currently a popular perspective or not.

¹⁵ The actual percentage of practicing homosexuals in American society is small (2-3%). However, sexual identity confusion, especially among young people, is not insignificant. Same sex attraction is even more common.

¹⁶ The authors of Homosexuality say this about homosexual desires. "The state of having homosexual desires is of uncertain moral status but certainly must be viewed as a deviation from the Creator's intent for those individuals and must be seen as representing an occasion for sin (just as does heterosexual lust)."

If our society suddenly were to agree that “greed is good”, we would still come out solidly against greed because the Bible is solid in its teaching that greed is sin.

Paul says that same-sex sexual intimacy is always sinful and we submit to Scripture’s teaching in this, as in all things.¹⁷

Second, occurring as it does in Romans 1, I think that Paul would want us to know that the committing of homosexual acts is a symptom of humanity’s fall into sin. It is one of the results that may occur when the gate is opened and God “*gives us over*” to do what we will.

Third, and what I believe is the reason it is listed here is that homosexuality is a sad but very graphic illustration of how we “*exchange*” God’s order for one of our own making.

The original order - that a man and a woman enjoy a “one-flesh” relationship with each other at all levels for a lifetime in the covenant of marriage - is replaced by a same-sex relationship.

The Bible affirms that within the confines of a man and a woman in a committed marriage sexual intimacy is a wonderful thing. It is just as clear that sexual intimacy between two people in any other arrangement is sinful.

Fourth, all sins do damage. Some more obviously and some less. Homosexual sexual acts do damage. Homosexuality’s damage is specifically mentioned here as Paul says that those who engage in such behavior [27] *[receive] in their own persons the due penalty of their error.*

This is certainly not to say that a particular disease is a specific judgment of God on a certain class of people, any more than a hurricane that hits the Texas coast is targeted by God to kill this or that person.

But, as all sins are deviations from God’s norm, they do damage. And homosexuality does damage - physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Because of the damage that homosexual sin does, it is critical that we not only hold to biblical truth about it, but that we are able to relate lovingly and helpfully to our world about same sex intimacy.

Here I offer a couple of thoughts about how we might engage.

Offering Help

To love

First, we are called to love.

Those of you who have been here a while have heard me mention a book by David Kinnaman, a book called unChristian. It is an excellent book, based on tremendous research that reveals what young adults in our society think of Christians.

Among their findings is that most people outside the church (and a good many of those inside the church!) are of the opinion that Christians regularly show contempt for gays and lesbians.

Kinnaman writes, “*When you introduce yourself as a Christian to a neighbor or business associate who is an outsider to church, you might as well have it tattooed on your arm: anti-homosexual, gay-hater, homophobic.*” Kinnaman goes on to say that this is likely not what you really think, “*but*” he says, “*that’s what outsiders think of you.*”

We in the church have a lot of work to do to convince people who struggle with sexual orientation or who identify themselves as homosexual that we love them.

We have to remember that sinners of any and every stripe are not the enemy. All sinners are the victims of a common enemy. We need to regularly remind ourselves that those who are engaging in homosexual behavior are those for whom Jesus died.

He loved us enough to die for us, just as He loved all other sinners enough to die for them. We are called to love them, too, and to speak respectfully of and to them, and to befriend them and to reach out to them.

¹⁷ See also Leviticus 18:22, 20:13, 1 Corinthians 6:9, Galatians 5:19-21,

In addition, we have encouraging news from God for the homosexual and for those who are confused about homosexuality.

To be pure

One of the great challenges facing someone with strong homosexual tendencies is the realization that they have a predisposition to do something that is outside the moral will of God.

To that struggler we can lovingly and honestly say, *“Welcome to the club. It’s a big club.”*

All people who are honest will admit to a struggle with desires to do things that are outside the moral will of God.¹⁸

The plight of the person tempted to engage in homosexual acts which he or she knows it would be wrong to fulfill (whether he or she chose those desires or not) is, in fact, the common plight of humanity.

We all face the same challenge: How are we to live when what we want is out of line with what God tells us we are free to pursue?

Well, for the man who is tempted to steal, it means he must not steal. For the woman who is tempted to abuse drugs, it means that she must stop using drugs.

For the heterosexual, it means that he or she must not have sex with any person other than his or her spouse. And for the person who is attracted to members of the same sex, it means that he or she is not free to gratify those sexual urges.¹⁹

¹⁸ Even if the homosexual condition of desiring intimacy and sexual union with a person of the same gender is caused in its entirety by causal factors outside the control of the person, that does not constitute moral affirmation to act on those desires. If it did, the pedophile who desires sex with children, the alcoholic who desires drunkenness, and the person with Antisocial Personality Disorder who desires the thrill of inflicting pain would all have an equal case for moral approval of their acts.

¹⁹ Again, from Homosexuality, “We have argued that there is evidence that genetic variables, brain differences and psychological experiential/familial variables are all involved in the causation of homosexuality. Each of these may, to varying degrees,

Coming to Christ for salvation involves a willingness to admit our sin and a willingness to plead for forgiveness. Following Him as Lord requires elements alien to our modern mind - things like self-denial and sacrifice.

The call of Jesus is the call to purity.

That call is something that one of my heroes, a Roman Catholic priest named Henri Nouwen, heard and obeyed.

Nouwen was a brilliant scholar and a compassionate friend to those less fortunate. After most of a lifetime spent writing and teaching at the highest levels of academia, Nouwen lived his last years working at a home for the mentally disabled, L’Arche Community, in Toronto, Canada.

He spoke powerfully about the spiritual life, about ministering to people in deep ways, about being a “wounded healer.” I am convinced that he was able to speak so powerfully because he wrestled with God about his own sexual identity.

Henri Nouwen never identified himself as a homosexual, but admitted (in a book published after his death) that he had strong attractions to men, not to women. There is no indication that he ever acted on those attractions - and his obedience to God to remain pure was surely a source of the power of his life and of his writings.

The goal of each one of us - regardless of the particular temptations we face - must be the pursuit of holiness. And sexual purity is an integral part of loving and giving glory to God.²⁰

be contributing causes to any specific case of homosexuality. None of these variables has been shown to be causative in the sense understood by the general public - “You have the gene, and thus you have the condition.” In any case, such research is fundamentally irrelevant to the Christian ethical case. The only way to exempt homosexuals from the demands of God’s Law is to show that they are incapable of responsible choice regarding their actions because of the influence of causative factors - that they are subhuman robots. Few gay advocates would accept such a depiction of their condition.”

²⁰ Consider these words from C. S. Lewis: *“I take it for certain that the physical satisfaction of homosexual desires is sin. This leaves the homosexual no worse off than any normal person who is, for whatever reason prevented from marrying. Our*

In the final section of Romans, chapter 1, we find a list that reveals other courses we are all prone to take when God “gives us over” to “a depraved mind.”

Sins of the Mind (vv. 28-32)

Dismissing God Leads to Broken Thinking... (v. 28)

[28] And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper

We didn’t cherish the knowledge of God. We didn’t consider God worthy of much thought and attention.

So God opened the gate and allowed our minds to wander, just as He allowed our hearts to wander into idolatry and our bodies to wander into immorality.

Our minds have taken ideas of beauty and goodness and exchanged them for other, contrary ideas.

...Leads to Broken Actions... (vv. 29-31)²¹

[29] being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed,²² evil; full of envy, murder,²³ strife, deceit,²⁴ malice; they are gossips,

speculations on the cause of [homosexuality] are not what matters and we must be content with ignorance. The disciples were not told why (in terms of efficient cause) the man was born blind (Jn. 9): only the final cause - that the works of God should be made manifest in him. This suggests that in homosexuality - as in every other tribulation, those works can be made manifest: i.e. that every disability conceals a vocation, if only we can find it.”(from a letter to Sheldon VanAuken)

²¹ There are three broad sub-groupings of these sins. First, there are four abstract nouns qualified by “all.” These are followed by five nouns all depending on the adjective “full of.” And the list concludes with a series of twelve items under the heading, “they are”, with the first five being positive and the last five negative.

²² “Greed” - described by Greek writers as “the accursed love of having.”

²³ “Murder - Jesus broadened our understanding of this sin.

²⁴ “Deceit” - the word is used of alloying precious metals and watering down good wines

[30] slanderers, haters of God,²⁵ insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil,²⁶ disobedient to parents,²⁷ [31] without understanding, untrustworthy,²⁸ unloving, unmerciful²⁹[32] and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death,³⁰ they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.

That is quite a list. What I hadn’t noticed prior to this week is that just about everything on that list is the negative of a moral virtue. It is a list of tragic exchanges: unrighteousness for righteousness, wickedness for good, greed for generosity, deceit for truth, arrogance for humility.

I find here no clear ordering of sins, either bad to worse or vice versa. The only things remarkable about the list are its length and its ugliness - and the likelihood that every one of us will recognize at least one of the sins in the list in the person we see in the mirror every day.

Conclusion:

God’s wrath allowed all of us to go our own way. But even His wrath is redemptive.

He allowed us to go our own way so that we might at last learn from our wretched state to hate the futility of a life turned away from Him, come to our senses, and turn to Him, the only source of life and love.

²⁵ “Haters of God” - people hate God because they think that God is keeping them from enjoying life, and restrains them from doing what they want to do.

²⁶ “Inventors of evil” - a capacity for committing old sins in the newest of ways.

²⁷ “Disobedient to parents” - both Jews and Romans set “obedience to parents” up as a lofty virtue.

²⁸ “Untrustworthy” - in the early days of the empire, Romans were well known for honesty. But, not by the time Paul wrote Romans.

²⁹ “Without natural affection” - examples abound of first century infanticide to show how lightly human life was treated; it would certainly not be difficult to find similar examples today.

³⁰ “Death” here must refer to spiritual death, not physical death, for at least some of the sins mentioned could not possibly be punished by death under any earthly penal system.