

Bodies and Nature
Romans 1:18-27

Turn to Romans 1 please. We're looking at Romans 1 because this chapter takes a closer look at same sex relationships than any other New Testament text. That's a controversial topic these days, so we need to find out what Paul says here, and why he says it.

We will see two things by the end. One is that same sex sins are not by any stretch the worst sins. If we read right to the end of Romans 1, which will not do today, the list of sins gets darker after he leaves same sex relations behind. The other is that the problem with same sex relations is bodies, people dishonour their bodies with one another.

But we'll not start with that, we'll start where Paul starts, which is with creation and worship.

Humans are a Mess. How did we get so bad? – Romans 1:18-21

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

This is a brief history of God and humans, so we know why we all need Christ so badly. Humans have stirred up God's wrath by pushing down the truth, holding down the truth. That's where this begins. We knew the truth about God, and we kept pushing it down and holding it down by sinful choices and actions. This infuriated God. The NT in several places speaks of the coming wrath. We don't like to think about it, but it will come, make no mistake.

But did people ever really know the truth? That's the question Paul takes up. Yes, says Paul, we knew the truth. God deliberately made it plain to all human beings. "God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him."

Right from creation, God made the visible material world to give all people an unmistakable message about himself, the invisible God. By creation we mean everything from insects in the ground to the sun and moon and stars, we mean rivers and lakes and mountains and trees and people and animals and seedtime and harvest and summer and winter.

From creation we could see that there was an eternal and powerful God who was kind and generous. At that time we all knew beyond any doubt that we should praise and thank this God. An eternal powerful God had been very good to us. He deserved our praise and thanks. “Wow, God, thanks!” And everybody knew this.

At some point in time, even though we knew all this, we refused. We got stubborn and independent. “No,” we said to ourselves, “I’m not going to praise and thank God any more. Enough of that.” And when we chose that, the light in our minds and hearts went out. Our thinking got silly, and our hearts got dark.

How did humans get to be like this? We made that choice. Now we can’t see the message written on creation anymore, not like we could then. The message is still there, the whole earth is still full of God’s glory, but some kind of light went out in us, and now we can’t read the creation message any more. Now we have to be taught it, but then no one could mistake it.

So God Gave Them Over – the Triple Cycle – Romans 1:24, 26, 28

The rest of Romans 1 goes through the same cycle three times. The cycle is simple. People turn away from worshipping God, so God gives them over to sinful behavior. That’s it. People’s worship gets dark, so God gives them over to dark actions. We get three different views of the same worship choice, and the same dark consequences. People don’t get given over more and more, it’s the same event seen from three different angles. We’ll just do the first two.

What does it mean that God “gave them over”? What actually happens there? In simple terms, God lets go. That’s all. When we worship and thank God from the heart, God responds, he takes care of us, he keeps us on the right path, he’s our good shepherd. When there is a choice *not* to honour and thank him, he lets us go, watches us go. He gives us over.

Our Worship Exchange, then our Dark Behavior - First Cycle – Romans 1:22-24

*Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for the likeness of the image of a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles. **Therefore God gave them over** in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.*

They exchanged the glory of immortal God for the likeness of the image of a mortal human being. “The likeness of the image” is how it reads. Paul’s talking about creation. Can you think of “likeness” and “image” together in the creation story? Sure. In Genesis 1, God made us humans in his image and likeness.

The reason that our God insisted that his people never, ever make any kind of image or shape to represent him is that God already has an image and likeness on earth. It is every one of us. God has eight billion images of himself on earth now, every one of them alive!

The idea that Aaron, himself in the image and likeness of God, would build a golden calf with his hands and call it “Yahweh,” is ludicrous. But people, themselves in the image and likeness of God, made carvings in the image and likeness of humans, and worshipped that. They made images of animals, which humans were supposed to rule, and they worshipped the images of the animals that they were to rule. Totally confused about creation.

So God gave them over, he let them go to sexual impurity, to degrading their bodies with each other. People degraded themselves in their worship, bowing to carvings of a human body, so he let them degrade their bodies with one another sexually.

In both creation stories, bodies and sexual union are central to marriage. In Genesis 1, male and female are to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. That takes a man’s body and a woman’s body coming together and joining intimately.

In Genesis 2, God made one flesh, and then he divided into two. “This is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh.” They come together to go back to the original state, to be one flesh again, as they began. Sexual union is the ultimate act of becoming one flesh again.

Our Worship Exchange then our Dark Behavior – Second Cycle – Romans 1:25-27

*They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped 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 females exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the males also abandoned natural relations with females and were inflamed with lust for one another. Males with males committed shameful acts, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.***

The second cycle describes the same worship choice as the first, and the same sexual sin, but expands on the same sex relations. These are the sensitive lines, and they are also controversial even though they are actually pretty clear. We’ll spend some time on this.

In Greek it does not say women and men, it says females and males. In Leviticus 18 and 20, where Moses gave Israel its sexual rules, Moses spoke like that as well, which is probably where Paul is getting this.

Paul mentions women first. “Even the females exchanged natural for unnatural,” says Paul. He seems more surprised at these women than at these men. One of the ways that people dismiss these verses is to say that Paul meant forcible sex, or pederasty, or prostitution, but not mutual relationships between consenting adults. But lesbians in those days did not have any of those excesses. All they ever had was mutual relationships between consenting adults, but that was still shameful and degraded their bodies.

Paul is probably getting this from Leviticus 18, where the act itself was wrong. It does not matter how much a woman and her father-in-law care for each other, or a man and his mother-in-law, it's incest. It does not matter how much a woman and her neighbour's husband love each other, it is still adultery, so stay apart.

Men nurtured their wrong desires and acted on them. Behavior matters, what people do with their bodies. Remember the summary a few lines back – “they dishonour their bodies, their own bodies, with one another.”

Natural and Unnatural

Paul uses “nature” a few other places in his letters. It means something built in, usually by creation. Paul tells the Galatians that they used to be slaves to things that by nature were not gods. The Galatians had treated them like gods, and had believed they were gods, but by nature, by what God had made, they were not gods at all. Given what we've read about Creator and creation in these lines, it will mean the created order.

Some have said that “nature” here means long term desires, and same sex relationships are only wrong if they go against long term desires. That does not work. Adultery is wrong, no matter how much and how long you desire your neighbour's wife or husband. The only reason the Bible gives us sexual instructions is that our desires lead us into what's wrong.

In the Bible, people's sexual desires go all over the place. That's always been true, and this includes God's people. Some people's long term desires take them to dark and horrible places, like child molesters for one example. Do we really want to call long term desires “natural” and good just because they are long term desires?

Or, some say that “nature” means cultural rules that are not necessarily God's rules. But does not matter what the culture says either. They did these things in Egypt, and they do them in Canaan. But Yahweh is your God, so even though you want these, you will not do them.

If we read Paul's tirade against human sinfulness in the third cycle of Romans 1, it becomes clear that neither desires nor cultural norms enter the picture at all. These acts are just wrong.

“Natural” means what God's creation puts in place. Here are four things that are natural about men's and women's bodies, things the Creator put in place in men's and women's bodies:

- An erect penis and a vagina are a good fit.
- Neither one of these has any other regular use.
- These are the most concentrated nerve centers in each for sexual stimulation and pleasure.
- This union produces babies.

Same sex relations cannot match any one of these physical realities, never mind all four. Every society in the world knows these four things about bodies. It does not take special revelation from God. That's what "natural" means.

Why Does Paul Only Elaborate Homosexual Relations?

Same sex relations are not the worst sin. The Old Testament and the New Testament always mention same gender failures beside many other failures. That's true in Romans 1 as well. So why does Paul begin with same gender relationships, and why are they the only ones that get a description?

Because material visible creation told us about God, and people got in trouble at the start because they decided to ignore what God had made clear to them in material visible creation.

Included in what God made clear by visible creation was how he made women's bodies and men's bodies. God revealed to us his sexual intentions by the particulars of our bodies. God has revealed himself by what he made.

For Paul, same gender sexual relations were the best illustration of sin that comes from ignoring God's message through material creation. It's not a worse sin than what follows, it's just the best illustration of ignoring what God made known from what we can see. That's why he begins with homosexual relations.

The World Around Us

God has never urged his people to change the world. God never asked Israel to make Egyptians and Canaanites behave better. Why should they? Yahweh was not their God. God feared that Egypt and Canaan would change Israel; that's what must not happen.

The Old Testament prophets never condemned the pagans for their sexual behavior, and neither did Paul. No New Testament church was ever told to improve the sexual behavior of their home city. Churches were told to improve their own sexual behavior. Those without Christ are tired of Christians tell them to behave like Christians, and I don't blame them.

We shall not condemn the unbelievers around us for their sexual behavior. Peter told us that everyone gets respect. Everyone. Paul said, "as we have opportunity, let us do good to all." At the end of 1 Corinthians 5, Paul is clear that he and the church have no business judging those outside the church. Our business, says Paul, is to clean up the inside of the church.

We will not live as they live, and if they want to know why, we will be ready to kindly explain. We shall give those outside no reason to dislike us, and every reason to appreciate us.

Three Celibate Christians

1, Wes Hill grew up in a warm healthy Christian home, and from the first time he remembers sexual feelings and attractions, they were to boys and men, not girls or women. That is a difficult way to grow up. He did not know what to do with his sexual desires, but he knew he wanted to follow the Lord, and he eventually decided that the Lord meant him to live celibate.

He wrote a book called *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Faithfulness and Homosexuality*. He's a seminary New Testament professor in a conservative school, and a good one. I heard him speak at Providence a few years ago.

He does *not* encourage healing from these desires, nor does he think the Lord permits homosexual relationships. He does not accommodate. He says, "let's be faithful in the midst of our brokenness."

Isn't that good? That's what we're all doing. His desires aren't leaving, and the Lord's call has not changed. He's like the rest of us. He's an Anglican priest, and I'm glad he's in church leadership. Washed and waiting, faithful in brokenness – that's just right.

2, Eve Tushnett grew up in a completely liberal home. Like Wes Hill, her sexual desires and attractions were always same sex desires. Her parents were completely accepting of this, no problem, she should live as a lesbian. God was not a part of her upbringing. So she did not have any kind of guilt and struggle with this.

When she was a university student she already said openly that she was lesbian. There she met students who were Catholics, and she enjoyed conversation with them. They were warm and interesting people. She found out that the Catholic church had never blessed gay relationships. So she thought about this. She wondered who was more likely to be right?

Was her liberal home and environment right to say gay relationships were fine? Or was the ancient church right which said these relationships were wrong? Some how she became convinced that the Catholic church was right. At that point she thought her only choices were to reject the church, or reject her sexuality.

But she found another option. She joined the church, and became a celibate. She wrote a book called, *Gay and Catholic: Accepting My Sexuality, Finding Community, Living My Faith*. That subtitle is worth reading again: accepting my sexuality, finding community, living my faith.

Many believers over the years have the same story as Wes Hill and Eve Tushnett, they just don't talk about it. They have had same sex desires and lived celibate. They are active in the church and don't marry and that's all people know.

3, The third celibate I will not name, because she has lived in this area. She and her husband married young, they had a couple of children, and then he left. She was still young and healthy, and had strong sexual desires. She wanted to remarry, but it never worked. The men who were suitable were not interested in her, and the men who were interested in her were not suitable.

She gets indignant when she hears Christians who want to accommodate same sex desires by changing God's standards. People reason that a God of love would never let homosexual people go through life with unfulfilled sexual desires. She asks, "What about me? Does the Lord change his ways for me, so I can have sexual fulfillment? No he does not."

What about all the straight people who follow Christ who would like to be married, but it never worked out? Lots of straight people who follow the Lord live without sexual fulfillment. There are more straight celibates in the church than homosexual celibates, and that's always been true. Our world thinks that everyone has a divine right to the sexual satisfaction of their choice. That's not in the Bible. There is no such divine right.

The Way Forward

We are going to have people in our church with same sex desires, if we don't already. Sooner or later children of this church will grow up with same sex desires. We fail them if we do not hold up celibate life the way we hold up married life. Jesus agreed that it was better not to marry. Paul also said it was better not to marry. Unmarried is not a problem that needs fixing.

If you want to marry, fine, get married. If you want help finding a spouse, fine, ask for help. But the church must never treat unmarried celibates as a sad second best. Jesus wanted no part of that thinking, and neither did Paul.

If we dismiss this, what do we say to our brothers and sisters with same sex desires? Or our children who grow up that way? Let's create a warm family environment for these brothers and sisters. Jesus called himself a eunuch, and he deliberately joined himself to all the who by their birth or for some other reason could not be in a man-woman marriage. They had no choice. Jesus was one of them, and we who are married are on the outside. Let's be a warm family to these brothers and sisters. Let's take these things to heart. Amen.

PRAYER: O God of peace, you raised our Lord Jesus from the dead. He's with you now, with scars on his hands and his feet. He's always praying for us. O God of peace, equip us with everything good for doing your will, and work in us what pleases you. Do this through our Lord Jesus, whom we will praise forever. Amen.

DOXOLOGY: To him who is able to keep you from falling, and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power, and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.