

Wicked Distortion

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[0:00] All right, tonight let's open our Bibles to the book of Romans, Romans chapter 1, and find verse 21.

! Romans 1, verse 21. In a moment I'm going to read verses 21 through 25. That will be our text for tonight as we are looking at Romans and as I'm preaching through the book.

And just to remind you of a few things, kind of connect ourselves with last Sunday. There are three ways people respond to the truth of God.

Three ways. Number one, obviously they can believe it. That's the best way, isn't it? To respond to the truth of God in faith. In faith.

But there are two other ways to respond to the truth. I guess I've divided these into two. Either you're going to accept it or reject it. But we could divide the rejection or at least, considering what Paul says here in chapter 1, divide rejection into maybe two categories.

[1:22] And I say two categories. I think the rejection of the truth, ultimately, the result is kind of two focuses, focuses on life that we see very evident in our world today.

And so I would say this, that some may deny the truth. Right? Obviously. They may deny the truth and become what?

Atheists. Though I don't believe there are any true atheists. Maybe we ought to use the word agnostic or agnostics. And so there's a way to respond to the truth.

Deny it. Become atheists. Another way. And some respond to the truth by distorting it. Not denying it so much as they distort the truth and become not atheists, but really quite the opposite or quite the other extreme.

And that is idolaters. Idolaters. Idolaters. And those are basically the three ways. And these last two categories is what we're going to be looking at tonight or what I think is the subject of our text tonight in verses 21 through 25.

[2:45] So if you have it there, let me go ahead and read it. Verse 21.

Gave them up to uncleanness in the lusts of their hearts to dishonor their bodies among themselves who exchanged the truth of God for the lie. And worshiped and served the creature rather than the creator who is blessed forever.

Amen. So we'll conclude the reading there. And that will be the portion of chapter one that we're going to look at tonight. Now, last Sunday I started or started to reveal from scripture here what I have called a survey on heathenism.

And that's basically what we have here. Kind of a survey on heathenism. And as I said last Sunday, there is in heathenism, number one, a willful rejection of God's general revelation.

And to remind you, when I say general revelation, I'm talking about, well, what Paul was talking about. That revelation that he places in man and places in the creation around man that gives a witness of the true God.

[4:28] Though it's not enough revelation to save a man because the creation certainly cannot provide a redeemer. That comes from God and did come from him in Christ.

But there is this general revelation of God that is out there. It's in us. It is around us. And everything in us and everything around us cries out that there is a God.

And that's what Paul is telling us here in the first part of the book of Romans. And so there is this willful rejection of God's general revelation. And every human creation, including the wicked heathen, hears this cry.

Every one. But instead of responding to it in faith, they, many of them, most willfully close their eyes to it. And they do one of two things.

They either deny the truth about God. Or they distort the truth about God. So then not only is there the willful rejection of the heathen, which we saw last Sunday.

[5 : 37] But there is the willful or wicked distortion of the heathen. Distortions of the truth. The truth that's in and truth that is out in creation.

There is the wicked distortions of the heathen. And I really believe that this is because it falls in succession here in Paul's treatment here in chapter 1.

It is a direct result of the heathen's willful rejection. These distortions. And there are two distortions. Either, again, atheism or agnosticism.

Or false religions. Idolatry. And so forth. Now, one is the worship of or by man of his own intellect. That, I think, is what atheism would fall under that category. Again, one is the worship. This denying, distorting of the truth is the worship by man of his own intellect.

[6 : 36] The other is the worship by man of his own ingenuity. His own ingenuity. And I think that works itself out into false religions and idolatry.

And both of these are treated here by Paul in chapter 1. So, let's look at each of these wicked distortions tonight. And, first of all, then, let's start with atheism or the worship of man's own intellect.

And look again, if you would. Though I've already read it. I want to read it again. Verse 21. Because although they knew God, they did not glorify him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts.

Some of you might have in your copy of God's Word, your version of the Bible, might have the word imaginations here. The word thoughts is talking about the inner reasonings of the mind.

All right? The intellect. All right? So, they become foolish or rather futile in their thoughts. Their inward reasoning and their foolish hearts are darkened.

[7 : 49] Are darkened. All right? So, that is the passage that's going to reveal to us the worship of man's own intellect. That's one of the distortions.

To really deny the truth of God. Now, Paul points out two things in this verse that we need to see. When a person dethrones God in his thinking, in his intellect, in his inner reasoning.

When he dethrones God from his thinking, he becomes, first of all, as Paul said here, futile in his thinking. Futile in his thinking. This is really quite remarkable.

And when you think about it, when you understand what he's talking about here, you'll come to realize that we see this kind of stuff all over. All around us in our culture today and all around the world.

And it is really the worship of our own intellect. Man's own intellect. Adrian Rogers used to say that when a man, the more a man learns, the less he knows.

[8 : 55] And he said, and he continues to learn more and more about less and less until finally he knows more and more about nothing at all. And that's kind of the way it goes in our culture today.

And so here's a person that feels like human science. Or, you know, some of the technology. The new advances in technology of our world in the 20th century.

Now and into the 21st century. Or he feels like philosophy. All of these kinds of things. Man's thinking. Man's intellect. Has now made believing in God unnecessary for us.

And that's what Paul is talking about here. And so there are those in our world today who believe that man has evolved to a point where he doesn't need the God of the Bible.

There was a need for the God of the Bible maybe back in the Old Testament and New Testament times. And maybe on into a few centuries after Christ. But as man has evolved and has improved, he now does not need that kind of superstition.

[9 : 58] There was a need for God then but not a need for God now. So we've evolved beyond that kind of need. And science has taken the place of that. And all of our technology and all of our philosophies.

And so now I don't need God anymore. That's futile thinking. Futile thinking. But it doesn't stop there. The next step downward, really.

And I would say downward is not is from futile thinking, not only futile thinking, but go further to a foolish heart. His foolish heart is darkened, he says.

And I would paraphrase that, say, an unresponsive heart. You see, Paul says emphatically there in verse 21, their foolish hearts were darkened.

Darkened. That is, they have become conceited. Conceited. This is the heathen. Become conceited in his own mind and therefore has become stupid. If I can use that word.

[10:58] Used to be a bad word when I was a kid. But I think that conveys the idea. And that's the idea here. He's become stupid or moronic, as he's going to say a little bit later in the text.

And so this is why you as a believer or we as believers cannot seem to persuade the heathen of their need for a redeemer.

This is why you cannot convince them of their error on a purely rational basis. You just can't do that. And why is that? Because they are not thinking rationally.

And they're not thinking rationally because unbelief is not rational. That's the idea here in chapter 1 as Paul's taking, you know, speaking of the creation around us and the inward witness in us.

See, unbelief is not rational. Unbelief is not logical. It's spiritual. It's moral. And we need to understand this about so-called atheism and or agnosticism or those who claim to be atheists or those who wouldn't claim to be but are identified as agnostics.

[12:05] We need to understand this about them. Now, you see, some have made the mistake into believing that people who refuse to believe in God or decide that somehow God is irrelevant to them, that somehow these people are deciding to believe in nothing.

But that's not the truth. It's not that they have chosen to reject God and believe in nothing. That's why there aren't any true atheists in that sense. That's not the idea at all.

Rather, when people refuse to believe in God, that is, specifically the God of the Bible, they will then believe almost anything other than the truth.

And the belief in evolution, I think, is an example of this. I really do. The theory of evolution, as someone has said, has become a hypnotic or has a hypnotic effect on the modern mind.

I say modern mind. I mean the mind of man since about the early 1900s. Hypnotic effect. This whole idea of evolution.

[13:16] That's why it is not only permeated within the context of science, but has moved on to nearly every context of life. People believe it.

It's not rational, though. They believe it and just forget the fact that there is not one bit of plausible scientific fact to support it.

But that doesn't matter because people believe it. And why do so many people believe it? Someone has said because it gives them a working hypothesis for atheism. May I say that again?

Evolution. Not just applied to science, but applied to every area of life. People believe evolution, the evolutionary theory, because it gives them a working hypothesis for atheism.

Translation, it works for them. It works for them. Fits in with their desire to reject the one true God.

[14:20] So the theory is believable enough. Though you and I probably find that hard to believe. But it's believable enough, just enough to convince those who wish to be convinced.

You understand? See, it's not an intellectual problem. It goes down deep into the heart. Now, there is futile thinking. Certainly. That's part of it. And Paul mentions that.

But it goes deeper into the foolish, dark heart. You see. And so it becomes not an intellectual problem, but a moral problem. And so people believe evolution because they want to believe it.

They want to believe it. One British scientist made this statement. He said, It seems pretty certain to me that life resulted in or resulted from purely chemical events.

What's more, I feel certain that in another decade or two, we ourselves will be able to create life. I no longer find it necessary to believe in God.

[15:21] That's what he said. And that's the word of an atheist today. And the philosophy of atheism today. It's a denial of the truth. A distortion of the truth of God.

Now, before we move on, let me just say that agnosticism is a willful rejection of the truth of God.

And it is not rational. And this is why Christianity is under attack in this country, by the way.

And has been for, well, for a number of years. But it has intensified in the last number of years. And we're living in a predominantly agnostic culture.

We really are. And so we as believers, what do we do? We stand for the truth of Christ. And the truth of Christ, the truth of God's word, is an affront to atheism.

It flies in the face of atheism. It cannot stand that. In fact, it reminds me of Paul there when he was on Mars Hill. And he was preaching to the Stoics and the Epicureans.

[16:25] These wise, wise Grecians. And those who had all these idols. To nearly every idol that man could conceive of. And even they had one put there to the unknown God.

And, of course, you remember the text there in Acts 17. How Paul preaches about the one God. That one unknown God to them. And he's preaching along and telling them about this God. And they're very interested. Because they're always interested in learning new things, you know. That's what they said. And so Paul's going along and telling them about this other God. And they're thinking, here's another God to add to our collection. Now he's no longer the unknown God. We'll be able to give him a name. And so I just kind of picture them on the edge of their seats. Listening to everything he has to say. About this one true God. But when Paul got to the point where he said to them face to face. This God demands that you repent. And then he started talking to them about the resurrection. [17 : 24] And they began to mock him. Mock him. You see, when he got to the truth of the human heart. And the heart condition. That could not stand it.

And atheists cannot stand that. Would you listen to what one famous atheist said some years ago? You might remember her name.

Madeline Murray O'Hare. And she said, Christianity is intolerant. Anti-democratic. Anti-sexual. And anti-life.

It is anti-woman. And I cannot stand that. It is anti-everything that is good. And human. And decent. And kind. And love-filled. And understanding. I used to have an intellectual hatred for Christianity. I think that is broadening now. I am enjoying hating the whole thing. That's the words of an atheist. Of course, she's dead now.

[18 : 22] And she knows the truth now. Now, we're talking here about the wicked distortions of the heathen. First of all, they distort the truth of God.

The result being the worship of their godless intellect. Their own godless imaginations. That is spawned, of course, from the dark heart.

But another wicked distortion centers on a distortion of the person of God. The person of God specifically.

Or what I would call the worship of worthless idols. The worship of worthless idols. Now, see, while distortion of the truth leads to atheism or agnosticism.

The belief in no god. Or the agnostic would simply say, yeah, there's a god, but I don't want him. All right, so the distortion of the truth leads to atheism or agnosticism.

[19 : 21] But the distortion of the person of God leads to idolatry. So while the atheist says, I have no belief. Or he believes in no god whatsoever.

The idolater believes in any and all gods. Except the one true god, of course. Now, in reality, idolatry.

And I think it's revealed this way because this is Paul's next step. And he's being progressive. That idolatry is the next step from atheism.

Or we might say the next downward step. It's not the other way around. People don't go from idolatry to atheism. Atheism, you might be surprised, ultimately leads to idolatry.

And this is what the agnosticism and the atheism of our modern culture will, and I think already has, led to. You don't hear very much about humanism anymore, do you?

[20 : 22] Of course, humanism is nothing more than the worship of man. Worship of self. But we used to hear a lot about humanism and atheism.

But now, we're moving more and more into the belief in all kinds of gods. And God's in us. And God's in everything. And, you know, the whole pantheism issue there.

Now, to be sure, in our culture for sure, idolatry is much more sophisticated than you would imagine to find in, you know, some remote place in Africa or someplace like that.

But it is idolatry, nevertheless. And so, look at verse 22 again. We think about idolatry here. The next downward step from atheism.

Verse 22. Professing to be wise, they became fools. And changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.

[21 : 27] Now, the first thing, first step in idolatry is conception. There is the conceiving of it in the heart and mind of God.

Now, there are two words here in verse 22 we need to pay close attention to. The word wise and the word fools. The word wise here in the text is not talking about godly wisdom.

Not talking about a good wisdom. Well, it's really not talking about good or bad wisdom. The idea here is just simply a learned person. That's the idea behind the word wise.

A cultured man. A learned man. But when we attach that to the word fools, the word fools comes from the Greek word moron. I'm serious.

That is the word. Moron. Here in the text. We do get a word from that. Carried over into the English. I just said it. Moron.

[22 : 28] Okay. That's what it is. You see, the idea here is they thought their knowledge had lifted them to a supreme level of wisdom. But actually, their so-called wisdom had lowered them to the level of a moron.

Now, Paul's not trying to be funny as maybe I'm trying to be. He's being very matter of fact. They've become morons. So there's the conception.

They conceive of this in their wisdom. They become morons. And then the second step is once the idol is conceived by man, then the man is deceived by the idol.

There's deception here. There's deception here. So Paul says first conception, then deception. And it's part of Satan's plan.

In fact, their satanic forces are always at work in any form of idolatry. Whatever form it takes. Even the forms that it takes in our lives.

[23 : 38] And it has always been that way. We can go back through Scripture and find passage after passage that deals with idolatry. And read what the Bible says about certain cultures that were idolaters.

And we can read about what God said to do about them and so forth. It's not a new thing. And so, you see, this deception of idolatry manifests itself.

And Paul's going to go on to tell us a couple of things about how it manifests itself in the life of the idolater. First of all, according to the Word of God here, idolatry will ultimately produce perverted sensuality.

That's what he says here. A perverted sensuality. Look at verse 24 again. Therefore, God also gave them up to uncleanness.

Uncleanness in the lusts of their hearts to dishonor their bodies among themselves. And a little bit later in the chapter, he's going to be a little more descriptive about that.

[24 : 46] The Canaanites were, I would say, the first clear example of this in history.

As we learn it from the Bible. And the biblical record plus archaeological finds, you know, over the years show us that the Canaanite religion was all based upon sexual immorality.

It was a part of their religion. And really, if you've done any reading in that, and even the biblical material on the Canaanites, then, you know, you understand.

You know, and maybe begin to fathom the depths of sensuality and perversion and all of it part of their religion. And God said to his people, his people Israel, to destroy them.

I know folks have a problem with that. They read God's commands to his people to destroy the Canaanite people.

[26 : 02] Man, woman, child, even their animals. See, I don't know that we understand the pervasiveness of sin and immorality in their culture and in their bodies and even in their animals.

And the unspeakable things that were done. In the name of religion. And therefore, the defilement of the body and certain sexually transmitted diseases.

In these cultures. That were even. Beyond our understanding, beyond anything we could conceive of.

Even transmitted into their animals. And I believe that is one among maybe some other reasons why God said, destroy them.

Destroy them. And so we began with the Canaanites. And then the next great culture that came along were the Greeks. And the Greeks were also caught up into sensuality and perversion.

[27 : 20] Immoral. Immorality. And not just their religion, but in their very lifestyle. They were just saturated with it.

And the Greeks fell. And then along came the Romans. Romans, I believe, brought it to another level.

Of sexual immorality. And that culture fell. And now we have our culture. Our culture.

Caught up in sensual, immoral perversion. That's where we are as a culture today.

Even in the church. We're saturated with it in our culture. And, you know, I really think that it's a little different now.

[28 : 24] Than it was when the Canaanites were the dominant civilization of the world in their day. And the Greeks were the dominant civilization in their day. And then the Romans after them.

And now I think in many ways you could argue that America is the dominant civilization of our world today. But yet when it comes to sensuality and immorality, it is really spread all around our world. Into every culture. Every civilization. It may be the indicator that time is very short. As God said in the days of Noah.

As in the days of Noah. And that's what's going on in our world today. And so idolatry. Not only produces perverted sensuality.

But Paul also says here that it produces perverted spirituality. A perversion of spirituality. Look at verse 25. Who exchanged the truth of God for a lie.

[29 : 29] And worshipped and served the creature. Rather than the creator who is blessed forever. See, it just... This idolatry, it kind of starts innocent enough, I think.

Sometimes. You know, when someone makes a little image. Or a little idol. Or a little figurine. Or something. And the idea is, of course, you know, that this is just simply representative of my God. Just a representative of God. It's not my God. But it's a representation of my God. It kind of begins in an innocent way. And, you know, and might even argue that this little idol just brings to my mind my God.

And maybe motivates me to think religious thoughts about my God. Kind of begins that way. And, you know, kind of imagining that, you know, that this little idol is going to remind me of holy things. And so forth. It might start very innocent. But it never ends that way. Because that's the way idolatry works. Eventually become, or you become, the slave.

[30 : 39] Slave to the idol. And whether the idol is, or the image is one of devotion. Some devotional thing. Or some point of reverence. Some image of reverence.

The whole thing invariably degenerates into idolatry. No matter what the object might be. No matter what form it might take.

And so, be careful about graven images. In fact, if you'll look at Exodus. Very quickly.

Exodus 20, verse 3. Part of the Ten Commandments, isn't it? This prohibition against any graven image.

Look at verse 3 of Exodus 20. You shall have no other gods before me. I would like to stop right there and remind you that nearly anything and everything can come before God.

[31 : 42] Anything. Everything. And anything that comes before him is an idol. In fact, I think, though we're talking here, Paul's not talking about Christian idolatry.

I think we can be guilty of idolatry. Paul's focus is the heathen. But let's just take a little side trip and say that you and I can be guilty of the sin of idolatry. Anytime we put anything before God.

He says, you shall have no other gods before me. Before me. In fact, some Christians can become spiritual idolaters.

Worship the church more than we worship God. You'll think on that one a little while. Verse 4. You shall make, not make, for yourself. A carved image.

Any life.