

The Great Exchange

Lost—part 3

The Downward Spiral of Indulgence

March 27th

Last week we looked at the downward spiral of ignorance. When we refuse to take God at His word we slowly harden our heart even more to the very truths we most need to find the road to lasting joy, learning to walking with God as our greatest treasure and anchoring in this life amidst the storms of life. Tragically, the downward spiral of ignorance occurs while we foolishly believe that we are open-minded people.

This week we'll look at two more downward spirals of human nature.

Day 1:

The downward spiral of indulgence (1:22-27)

²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Knowing He Was God: What would be the expected response to this kind of knowledge? The choice has dire consequences. If people had chosen to honor God and thank Him in response to His revelation, the power of God for salvation would have been available to them. In contrast, the choice not to honor Him as God or give Him thanks resulted in futile and foolish thinking, a darkening of their hearts.

And what does this darkening and futility naturally lead to? Being wise in our own eyes (1:22). It also means that the “God-shaped vacuum” He created to draw us to Himself remains empty. Those who have rejected God find other things to worship in His place (1:23). After all, the existential questions about where we came from and the meaning of life don't go away even if we reject the correct answer to them. So how do we make something that isn't God seem godlike? We assign godlike qualities and characteristics to it. If someone tries to persuade you to worship something, chances are they are not going to call it a dumb idol or a false god. They are going to use every means possible to make it sound attractive. Think of a used car salesman trying to get you to drive one of his cars off the lot.

Paul uses the same kind of marketing strategy to build a case *against* exchanging the worship of God for something else. He contrasts the inherent unworthiness of these things with God's worthiness to be worshiped, and he uses terminology that intentionally casts a negative light on the peoples' decision to reject God. Instead of describing their behavior as a change—from worshiping God to worshiping animals and such—Paul casts the exchange as abandoning worship of the Immortal for images of things that are mortal. He draws a stark contrast between how God intended things to be and how things actually are. His contrasting terminology makes clear the lunacy of the exchange. He seeks to talk us out of going down this path by making it sound like a really bad idea—which it is.

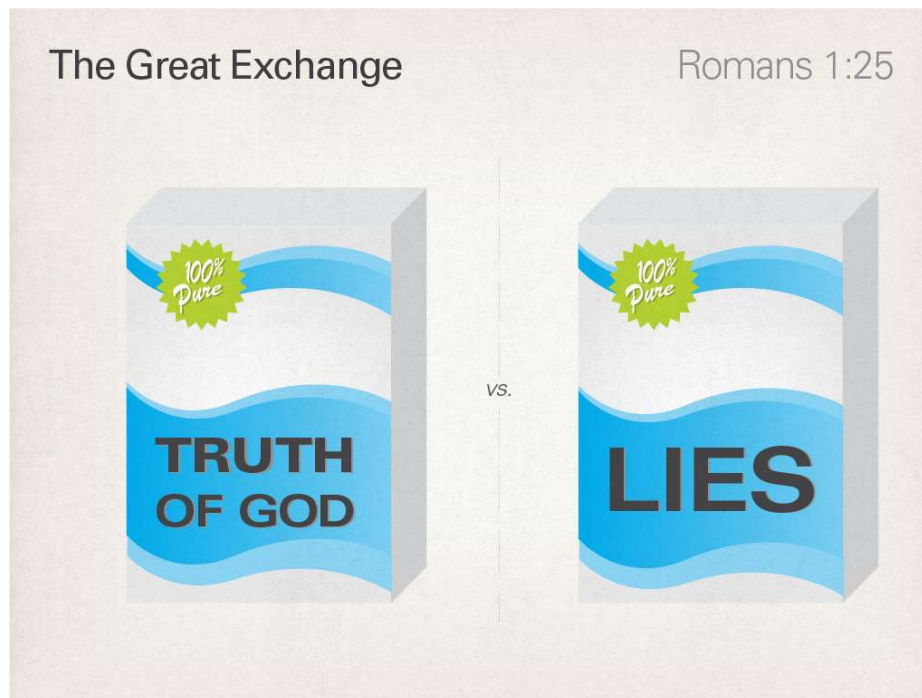
Day 2:

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.

Which Will You Worship? Like a good salesman, Paul makes his pitch by casting the choice between worshiping God vs. worshiping something else as a “no brainer” decision. He does this by reframing the choices and adding thematically loaded modifiers to create sharply contrasting antonyms. No matter how appealing that other thing might sound, it is still a horrible exchange.

Verses 24–25 outline the natural consequences of rejecting God as the object of worship. Their rejection of God *as God* led Him to give them over to their own lusts. Verse 25 reiterates the exchange described in 1:23, but now in starker terms. Instead of contrasting the mortal with the immortal, Paul now expresses the exchange in terms of origins. He contrasts worship of a created thing with worshiping the Creator. There is also a contrast between the *glory* of God and the *image* of the created things.

In 1:25 Paul characterizes the rejection of God in terms of truth and lies, and again he paints rejection in a bad light to make the desired outcome look even more favorable.



Day 3:

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.

The Great Exchange: Paul “markets” his ideas to make the desired option sound much better than “the leading brand” of idolatry. He changes the contrast from the creator/creation to truth of God/lies. This is not an objective comparison, but “spin” designed to cast the act of forsaking God in as negative a light as possible.

The choice not to worship God as God does more than just focus our attention in the wrong direction. Remember Paul’s assertion in 1:21 that it leads to darkened hearts and futile thinking. This mental and spiritual posture manifests itself outwardly in our behavior. Paul provides specific examples and portrays them as “exchanges,” contrasting the order God had originally ordained with the unrighteous behavior that results from the rejection of His order. The people’s rejection is what provoked God to reveal His wrath (1:18).

In verse 26, Paul’s metaphor contrasts people’s desire for each other and highlights another consequence of God handing us over to our own desires. The same Greek word for “desire” used in 1:24 is used again in 1:26, but with a different connecting word. Verse 24 introduces a conclusion summarizing the consequences resulting from 1:20, but 1:26 shifts from consequences to a cause/effect perspective. It focuses on their passions instead of the darkening of their hearts. The two are related; however, describing it in terms of passions sets the stage for a look at sexuality. The same Greek root translated “exchanged” in 1:23 and 25 is used again in 1:26 to describe the exchange of natural relations between men and women for unnatural ones. The repetition of these words purposely connects these different images to one another.

Day 4:

The Great Exchange: The same root term found in 1:23 and 25 is used in 1:26 to describe the exchange of natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. This exchange of relations is portrayed as a natural consequence of people rejecting God as the object of their worship.

Homosexuality would likely have been about as prevalent and accepted in Paul's context as it is for us today, but not in the form of marriage or open relationships. Certain kinds of activity were regarded as more acceptable than others. Not to say that the issue is less amoral than another kind of sin; it is not. After all, of all the potential sins Paul could have chosen to illustrate exchanging God's way for some alternative, he chose this one. which is why we should pay close attention to how Paul chooses to frame the issue here. He does *not* describe it in terms of right and wrong behavior. Instead he uses shame and honor language to frame it as rejecting God's natural order in favor of what is unnatural. Paul's approach is less of a moral judgment and more of an observation regarding natural consequences of human decisions.

Despite the rising acceptance of "alternative lifestyles" and the desire of today's activists for our culture to celebrate diversity, Paul's strategy here has a persisting relevance. There is still shame associated with alternative lifestyles, still a struggle with the reproductive disconnect it represents. Paul's approach presents a more compelling appeal in our present context than the name-calling and placard-waving slogans we see in the media.

Sin is sin, despite the modern church's adoption of an informal acceptability scale. Spiritual revival is characterized as a rejection of *any* sin, exchanging incremental repentance for total. The claims of hypocrisy by those outside the church can be traced at least in part to our inconsistent stance on sin in practice, despite what we might say in theory.

Day 5:

The Downward Spiral of Impenitence:

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.*

The Great Exchange: In the final verses of the chapter, Paul reframes the issue in terms of throwing out God's Word versus allowing it to renew our minds (12:3). Disregarding Scripture results in a debased mind rather than a renewed one, leading us to do what ought not be done.

Paul catalogs some horrible behavior in these verses. Envy, deceit, slander, insolence, prideful boasting—all can make life downright miserable as we suffer the consequences of other people's decisions. Paul summarizes this section in 1:32 by boiling down the fundamental issue of sin. God's revelation of Himself is sufficient for us to recognize our unrighteousness. But instead of agreeing and repenting, our sinful inclination leads us to deny or cover our sin. How? By getting others to join in so that our behavior doesn't stand out as much. The height of sinful hubris is not simply sinning and knowing that the penalty for such things is death; no, it is encouraging and approving of others who do the very same things.

Let's review how Paul develops his argument in Romans 1: He likely has a number of reasons for writing, but he chooses to unpack them in a certain way. Following his greeting, Paul states his intention to come visit the church in Rome in order to be mutually encouraged. He goes on to describe his shameless confidence in the gospel because God's power and righteousness is revealed in it. Why is he so passionate about people hearing the gospel? Well, in addition to the revelation of God's righteousness, there is the revelation of His *wrath*. The wrath is a consequence for those who reject God as God. People's choice to exchange worship of the one true God for non-gods leads naturally to several other "exchanges." In Paul's view, the rejection of God's created order leads to everything that is wrong in our world—and this rejection stems from the ongoing effects of sin. Therefore, God reveals His wrath against all the ungodliness and unrighteousness outlined following 1:18.

One of the effects of sin is that we often think more highly of ourselves than we should. Reading through the list of sins in 1:29–31—and the judgment that goes with them—it's easy to see it as a "them" issue rather than an "us" or "me" issue. I can readily agree that "those kinds of people" deserve God's wrath, not unlike the disciples asking Jesus if they should call down fire from heaven (Luke 9:54). It is much easier (and more common) to point the finger of blame at others instead of being convicted ourselves. Paul builds his argument so as to turn the tables in Romans 2:1. God pours out His judgment and wrath not only on the ungodly behavior of heathens, but even (perhaps especially) on that of people who confidently believe they have measured up to His righteous standard.

Sin and its consequences are universal problems, as Paul points out in the first section of the letter. In chapters 2 and 3, he will drive home the point that no one is exempt, but his main message here

is that God will reveal His wrath against our rejection of His plan. We must understand this problem of sin before we can understand our need for the gospel and its power to bring about a restoration of God's original plan. Remember that to Paul, the gospel offers much more than a means of forgiveness; it is the key to reestablishing the God-intended order and function of creation. The first step in grasping this bigger picture is to accept that we are all under God's wrath.