

The Lie

Imaginary Gods Pt. 4 | Romans 1:24–25 | Pacific Church of Irvine

DAY ONE The Divide

There is a line that runs through every human life. You cannot see it the way you can see the Rockies highlighting the Continental Divide, but it is just as real, and it determines which direction everything flows.

On one side of that line is the truth of God. The world as he made it, designed it, and governs it. A world in which human beings were made to know their Creator, to find their deepest satisfaction in him, and to live in the reality he has revealed. On the other side is what Paul calls simply "the lie." A world of our own making. A world where our desires are centerstage, where we decide what is true and what is good, and where we quietly crown ourselves as the one who knows best.

Most of us did not choose one side with a dramatic act of rebellion. We just drifted. We followed our instincts. We made decisions that seemed reasonable and felt good, and over time we found ourselves living by a set of assumptions we had never really examined. The lie does not announce itself. It just quietly becomes the water we swim in.

Romans 1:24–25 “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 truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator, who is forever praised. Amen.”

The word Paul uses in the Greek is not just "a lie." It is "the lie." There is one fundamental lie underneath all the other lies, that we do not really need God. That we can find real life, real satisfaction, real meaning somewhere else. In a person, a career, an experience, an achievement, ourselves. The lie says those things can give us what only God can give, and that God is largely optional for the living of a full life.

Jesus had a different idea. He called himself the way, the truth, and the life. Not a way. The way. Not a source of truth alongside other sources. The truth. He was not offering a spiritual supplement to a life that was already working fine. He was claiming to be the only place where life as it was designed to be lived becomes available.

John 14:6 “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

The divide is real. And today is a good day to ask which side of it we are actually living on, not just in our theology, but in the daily decisions and assumptions that run underneath everything else.

REFLECT

- When you are honest about it, where do you most often turn when you want to feel satisfied or secure? What do you reach for first?
- Is there a version of "the lie" you have absorbed without fully realizing it? A quiet assumption that life will work out if you can just get a certain thing, relationship, or outcome?

DAY TWO What the Lie Looks Like

If the lie is the belief that we do not really need God, then the question becomes: what do we replace him with?

Paul's answer in Romans 1 is precise. We worship and serve "created things rather than the Creator." We take something from the category of "things God made" and we promote it into the category of "thing that will give my life meaning and happiness." And the list of things available for that promotion is long. It can be a person. A career. A status. An experience. A cause. A body. A relationship. An image. Money. Comfort. Approval.

None of those things are inherently evil. The problem is not that we want good things. The problem is what we do with them. When a good thing becomes the thing, when we hand it the job of making us feel whole and secure and satisfied, we have, in the language of Romans 1, worshipped it. We have given it our highest hope and our deepest trust. And created things were never designed to carry that weight.

Romans 1:25 “They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator, who is forever praised. Amen.”

I think about this in terms of what I am actually trusting on a Tuesday afternoon when nobody is watching. Not what I believe on paper, but what I am functionally relying on to make my life feel okay. The sermon I am working on. The response I hope to get. The plan I have for the next six months. Those are not bad things. But when my sense of security and worth gets wired to how those things go, I have handed them the throne.

The word Paul uses for "served" is a word that means to give your highest effort. Your daily energy. Your attention and labor. And that is a useful diagnostic. What do I spend my energy protecting? What would quietly unravel me if it disappeared? The answers to those questions tell me more about what I am actually worshipping than anything I might say out loud.

The good news, and there is good news in this passage, is that Paul holds the alternative clearly in view. The Creator, who is forever praised. The God who designed us for himself, who has not moved from his throne, and who is not threatened by the fact that we have been looking for satisfaction in the wrong places. He is still there. And he is still the only place where what we are actually looking for can actually be found.

Psalm 16:11 “You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”

REFLECT

- If someone watched your schedule and your bank statements for the last month without hearing a word you said, what would they conclude you are serving most?
- Is there something specific you have been handing the job of making you feel secure or satisfied? Name it.

DAY THREE What Drives the Lie

Here is the thing about the lie that makes it so difficult to diagnose in yourself. It does not feel like a lie. It feels like wisdom.

That is actually Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 1. The people who are most deeply committed to living without God are not people who think of themselves as foolish. They think of themselves as the ones who have figured it out. They have looked at the cross, at the idea of a God who would die for people who did not deserve it, and they have concluded that the whole thing is absurd. Foolishness. And from where they are standing, that conclusion makes sense to them.

1 Corinthians 1:18 “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

Harold and Seth say that people do what makes sense to them. It may not make sense to you, but it makes sense to them. And I think they are right. Nobody wakes up in the morning and thinks, "I am going to pursue a life of foolishness today." They wake up and pursue what seems like the reasonable path toward a good life. They trust their own read on things. They rely on their own instincts and judgment. And that is exactly the problem, because the human heart, left to its own instincts without the correction of God's truth, has a long and well-documented track record of getting things badly wrong.

Psalms 14 describes it bluntly. "The fool says in his heart, there is no God." And we read that and assume it is talking about atheists. But the psalm goes on to describe not just intellectual atheism but practical atheism. People who functionally live as though God is not relevant to their daily decisions. Who crown themselves as the final arbiter of what is true and good and right. That description has a much wider reach than we might initially think.

Psalm 14:1–2 “The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.” They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good. The LORD looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God.”

There is a line from the poem "Invictus" that captures the spirit of the lie better than almost anything I know. William Ernest Henley wrote it from a hospital bed while recovering from a serious illness. "I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul." It is a stirring declaration of human autonomy. It is also, from the Bible's point of view, a description of what it looks like to be profoundly lost while feeling completely in control.

The lie is driven by the conviction that we know better than God what we need. That our judgment is sufficient. That if we just make the right moves, trust the right people, pursue the right things, we can build the life we are looking for. And that conviction is not unique to people far from God. It lives in most of us, quietly competing with the faith we claim to have.

REFLECT

- Where do you most often trust your own judgment over what God has said? In relationships? Finances? Ambition? Something else?
- Can you think of a time when you were certain you knew what was best, and you were wrong? What did that teach you?

DAY FOUR What the Lie Produces

There is a pattern I have noticed in my own life, and I think it is more common than we talk about in church. When I am anxious, I am almost always anxious about something that I am trusting to work out a certain way and am not sure it will. When I am angry, I am almost always angry at a person or a situation that is standing between me and something I have decided I need in order to be okay. When I am discouraged, it is usually because I have tried hard to make something happen and it has not happened, and I am not sure what to do next.

What those three experiences have in common is misplaced trust. I have placed my confidence in something, someone, or myself to deliver what I need, and the delivery has either not come or feels uncertain. And that produces anxiety, anger, or discouragement, depending on the day.

Proverbs 14:12 “There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death.”

The lie does not announce itself as a path to disappointment. It announces itself as a reasonable strategy for a good life. My marriage will make me happy. My career success will make me feel secure. My kids turning out well will prove that I am doing something right. None of those things are unreasonable hopes. But when they become the primary source of my wellbeing, I have handed them a job they will eventually fail at. And when they fail, the result is not just disappointment. It is a disorientation that goes all the way down, because the thing I was trusting turned out to be less reliable than I thought.

Paul diagnosed this with remarkable precision. We do not stop trusting when we stop trusting God. We just redirect that trust onto lesser and shakier things. And the shakier the thing we trust, the more pressure we place on it.

Jeremiah 17:5–7 “This is what the LORD says: “Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who draws strength from mere flesh and whose heart turns away from the LORD. That person will be like a bush in the wastelands; they will not see prosperity when it comes. They will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives. But blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him.””

The question the lie eventually forces us to answer is this: how is this working for you? Not how does it look. Not what would you tell someone else if they asked. But how is it actually working, underneath, where you are honest with yourself at the end of the day?

That is not a question designed to produce shame. It is a question designed to create an opening. Because the God who made us for himself has not stopped being available to the person who finally looks up and admits that the other things have not delivered what they promised.

REFLECT

- Looking at anxiety, anger, and discouragement as potential signals of misplaced trust, which of those shows up most often in your life right now?
- What is it that you are trusting to make life work? And how is that going?

DAY FIVE **The Way Back**

The gospel does not begin with a moral improvement program. It begins with an admission.

The admission is simply this: I have been operating as though I am wise, and I am not. I have been trusting my own read on things, and my own read has been wrong in ways I did not fully see. I have been looking for what only God can give in places that were never designed to hold it. And I need something I cannot produce for myself.

Paul says something in 1 Corinthians 1 that should probably sting a little, because it is designed to. The message of the cross, he says, is foolishness to those who are perishing. Not because the cross is foolish. But because the cross makes no sense to a person who has not yet recognized how badly they need it. If I think I am basically getting things right on my own, then the idea of a God who had to die for me to be reconciled to him seems like an overreaction. A solution in search of a problem I do not think I have.

1 Corinthians 1:18, 24–25 “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.”

But something happens when we actually see it. When we stop defending our own track record and start looking honestly at what the lie has produced in us, at the anxiety, the misplaced trust, the created things we have handed the job of making us whole, and we see the cross in that context. We see a God who was not surprised by any of it. Who was not waiting for us to figure things out on our own. Who did not send a better self-help strategy. Who came himself. Who absorbed into himself everything the lie had produced, every consequence of the world

we had made by turning away from him, and who walked out the other side of death so that the way back to God could be open.

That is not foolishness. That is the only thing that has ever actually addressed the problem at the level it actually exists. Not a moral upgrade. Not a set of better habits. A new nature. A new standing before God. A new direction for all of that trust we cannot stop offering to something.

2 Corinthians 5:17 “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!”

The way back from the lie is not primarily an act of willpower. It is an act of reception. We receive what we could not earn. We accept the gift of a righteousness that is not our own. And then, slowly, over time, with a lot of help and a lot of failure and a lot of grace along the way, we begin to actually live on the truth side of the divide. Not because we are wiser than we were. Because we have been connected to the one who actually is.

There is a verse in Colossians that has always caught me. Paul says that in Christ "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." Whatever I have been looking for, in whatever created thing I have been handing the job of delivering it, is hidden in him. And the way to find it is not to look harder at the created things. It is to look at him.

Colossians 2:2–3 “My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”

REFLECT

- Looking back over this week, what is the one thing that has landed most clearly for you? Where has the lie shown up in your own life that you had not fully seen before?
- What would it look like, practically, this week, to trust God at the specific point where you have been trusting something else?