

## Romans 1:21-27

## Idolatry and sexual fallenness

Sin wasn't a mistake, or an accident, or part of an evolutionary process. It was an explicitly chosen course of action, and human beings are responsible and will be accountable to God. This wilful turning away from God is underlined 3 times by Paul in 1:21-32, which makes for three sections:

### 1:21-27      Idolatry and sexual fallenness

1:21      "For **although** they knew God they did not honour [glorify] Him as God ..."

### 1:28-31      A list of vices

1:28      "And **since** they did not see fit to acknowledge God ..."

### 1:32      A collective rebellion against the Creator

1:32      "**Though** they know God's righteous decree ..."

### 1:21-27      Idolatry and sexual fallenness

1:21-23 Paul describes idolatry in the human heart and its effects. The 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Commandment (Exodus 20:3-4) forbid false gods or carved images. But the problem of sin goes back to the Fall in Genesis 3. The problem was eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, which God had told them not to do. Humans became proud and confident in their own knowledge and reason. It's not that all human knowledge is wrong, it is just not ultimate. However, darkened in their understanding, human beings exchanged the glory of God with poor substitutes.

- Animal idols were characteristic of Egypt
- Human idols were characteristic of Greece and Rome

How does the Bible describe idols? They are:

- Futile (or vain) – e.g. Jeremiah 2:5, Ephesians 4:18
- Cannot give life – e.g. Jeremiah 10:14-16
- Cannot hear or see or speak – e.g. Psalm 115:3-7; Habukkuk 2:18

Idolatry is the Great Exchange and the Great Lie. (Romans 1:23 cf Jeremiah 2:11-13).

There are a multitude of forms of idolatry in all cultures. They don't usually come in the form of statues in the West today but in other guises such as:

- -isms like Materialism (Colossians 3:5), Environmentalism (Mother Earth), Marxism, Utopianism, progressive idealism, spiritualism and mysticism (New Age) etc
- Gifts from God which become little gods, such as sport, music, fame, pleasure, family etc
- Faith in Education, Politics, the Economy or Science as the ultimate answers for humanity etc

The main problem is that we attempt to do 'religion' our own way instead of God's way. Exodus 32 tells the story of the Golden Calf, in the context of the building of the Tabernacle. The people were impatient, which caused them to sin. The idol of the Golden Calf represents man's way, and the Tabernacle represents God's way of worship. Now Messiah has come, the glory of God in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ, who *dwelt* (or *tabernacled*) among us (see John 1:14) is God's way, and any idol is a very poor substitute indeed.

Back in the Sinai desert,

Exodus 32:6 *And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.*

That is, they indulged in pagan revelry and sexual immorality. In the Bible sexual immorality is one of the consequences of turning away from the living God and embracing idols. It is cause and effect. We often focus on the effect, but we should focus much more on the cause.

In Biblical law (e.g. Leviticus 20), sexual offenses are related primarily to idolatry, (and secondly to parents). In other words, a sexual act is never simply a matter for consenting adults (behind closed doors) as in European Law. It affects our relationship with God and others. It is no coincidence that idolatry is also called (spiritual) adultery (e.g. Jeremiah 3:1). God is like a husband burning with jealousy over His wife who has been taken by someone else (an idol). Spiritual and sexual adultery go hand in hand. When we embrace idols, our whole being, including our sexuality – which is a central part of who we are – falls away from God's grace.

In 1:21-27 Paul is describing this human fallenness in the same way, (i.e. Romans 1:24,26 *God gave them up.*) Our sexual fallenness is a part of our fallenness from our Creator God.

In 1:24-27 Paul uses homosexuality as an example because:

- It was common practice in the Greco-Roman world;
- It represents a clear example of the exchange of the male-female relationship designed to enable fulfilment of God's command to *be fruitful and multiply* (see Genesis 1:27-28)

In Biblical law adultery is any sexual deviation from the norm of monogamous heterosexual marriage. Other deviations include: unfaithfulness in marriage, incest, three-way relationships, paedophilia and bestiality.

The good news of the gospel is about being put right with God (Roman 1:17). Again it is about cause and effect. If, turning from our own way, we are put right with God through Jesus, this will bring healing to every area of our lives, including our sexuality.

Thus the Bible presents us with a hugely positive vision of right relationships within family and wider society. It presents a vision of rightly ordered sexual relationships (instead of sexual chaos,) because we are sexual beings. When we get this right, everything else will flow out of that for the wellbeing of children and society. This should be very relevant in the light of the report by Dame Janet Smith this week into the abuse at the BBC by Jimmy Savile; and the conviction of the Rotherham paedophiles – though we know this is just the tip of the iceberg.

The area of sexual fallenness is a sensitive one. We should not think this is only the problem of the adulterer or homosexual or paedophile. It is an area that affects each one of us, to a greater or lesser extent, because we are all fallen. We stand on a level playing field. Part of the redemption in Jesus is healing through confession and repentance, whoever we are.

For questions about homosexuality and same-sex attraction, see *Is God Anti-Gay*, by Sam Allberry.

And [www.livingout.org](http://www.livingout.org)