

04. Romans 1:19 – 2:29

We all need redemption



In the first section of his Letter (1:18 – 4:25), Paul is making the point that the gospel reveals the righteousness of God, who, faithful to who God is and to what God has promised, gave us his Son, Jesus, to heal us from sin and to set us in a right relationship of love-communion with God.

Paul begins (1:18 – 3:20) by demonstrating that it is God's will that everyone be liberated from sin and its consequences. Everyone, including the Jew who has the law, needs this liberation. We will focus on this here and in the following presentation.

He goes on (3:21 – 4:25) to demonstrate that it is God's will, in fulfilment of his promise, is to bring all into communion with him through sharing in the faith of Jesus. We will examine this in the presentations 05 and 06.

Romans 1:19-23

Paul lists the kinds of sinful behaviour that are found in the Gentile and Jewish world.

What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. By his creating of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they ('those who by their wickedness suppress the truth') are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they were reduced to futility in their thinking, and their hearts, lacking insight were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they were made foolish and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

'They went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves' (Jeremiah 2:5).

Sin has its consequences. Disordered behaviour leads to disorder. We cannot simply wish these consequences away or think we can behave in an unrighteous way and not suffer the consequences. If we refuse to open our eyes, we cannot expect to see. If we refuse to acknowledge the manifestation of the invisible God in the visible creation, if we refuse evident insight, our mind and heart will lose the power to perceive. If we refuse to worship the living and true God, we will end up worshipping something else in God's place.

The fact that God is involved in the disorder that we experience as a result of our sin takes this disorder out of the sphere of the meaningless and takes it into a sphere where, through divine action, it can be given meaning and purpose. To miss this point, and to understand this and the following passage as simply a description of depraved human behaviour is to miss Paul's focus. It is this focus on God, as we shall see, that provides the clue as to why Paul has chosen to present the good news by beginning in this way.

Romans 1:24-26

God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen. For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions.

Paul does not simply describe the depravity of those who are given over to sexual vices. Rather, he says: ‘God gave them up to impurity’; ‘God gave them up to degrading passions’. When we remember the language of the Book of Exodus and how God is spoken of as hardening Pharaoh’s heart, we realise that Paul’s way of expressing himself here is traditional.

On the level of cause and effect, what is happening to people is happening because of what they have chosen to do. He will go on to say: they are ‘receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error’. As he said earlier: ‘They are without excuse’ (1:20).

Romans 1:26-28

Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men, and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done.

There is a heavy accent here on ‘unnatural’ (παρὰ φύσιν) homosexual behaviour because it highlights the disorder created in the human condition by suppression of the truth and failure to acknowledge God.

The distinction between natural and unnatural behaviour comes from Stoic moral philosophy, as do the expressions ‘debased mind’ (ἀδόκιμος νοῦς), and ‘things that should not be done’ (καθήκοντα).

What kind of homosexual behaviour is Paul calling ‘unnatural’? Let us look at the sexual behaviour that Jewish writers saw as typically Gentile.

I. Homosexual behaviour in the Greco-Roman world

The culture in the Greek and Roman world was, speaking generally, indulgent towards male sexual behaviour. The male was considered (by male writers and teachers) to be superior, not only intellectually, but also from the point of view of physical beauty. Sexual union with a woman is needed for obvious reasons, but the idea that the appropriate partner for a male was another male was widespread.

An adult male was encouraged to have a young male to give him pleasure, including the pleasure of sexual gratification. It was expected that the intimacy be intellectually stimulating, and that the older male would look to the education of the younger male, and behave towards him in a sensitive way.

Moralists condemned those who ran brothels, and those males who made a living out of offering their sexual services to older males. In cities like Corinth, the presence of coiffured and perfumed young men in the streets and public squares was a common sight and moralists of divergent philosophical persuasions spoke out against what they decried as decadent behaviour, but pederasty was widely encouraged.

The following judgment is typical: ‘To be in love with those who are beautiful and chaste is the experience of a kind-hearted and generous soul; but to hire for money and to indulge in licentiousness is the act of a man who is wanton and ill-bred’ (Aeschines, *Timarchus*, 137).

One can readily see the dangers inherent in what was judged to be acceptable forms of pederasty: dangers in the unequal nature of the relationship, in its impermanency, and in the occasion it provides for abuse and humiliation. However, the point being made here is that the culture saw its advantages as outweighing its disadvantages. There is a good deal of evidence in the ancient texts of a prevailing misogyny, but there is no evidence of the kind of homophobia that we witness today.

2. The Hebrew Scriptures on male sexual behaviour

There is the terrible story of Sodom (Genesis 19) which describes a mob seeking to rape two male strangers to whom Lot has given hospitality. Rather than betray hospitality Lot offers to hand over to them his two virgin daughters. The story is a condemnation of rape, both homosexual and heterosexual, and betrayal of the law of hospitality. The story demonstrates an assumption of male superiority and a disgusting denigration of women, but it is not about homosexuality verses heterosexuality.

The same issues are highlighted in the even worse story of the Levite (Judges 19). A mob wanted to have sex with the Levite. Instead they were offered his concubine whom they raped till she died.

The only passages that refer to homosexual behaviour are found in the Book of Leviticus:

‘You shall not lie with a male (ἄρσενος κοίτην) as with a woman; it is an abomination’ (Leviticus 18:22). ‘If a man lies with a male (ἄρσενος κοίτην) as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them’ (Leviticus 20:13).

The word ‘abomination’ occurs 116 times in the Hebrew Bible and covers a range of behaviours (see for example Proverbs 6:16-19). Since no context is given for the condemnation expressed in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, we must ask what behaviour are the authors calling an ‘abomination’? We do not know what they were saying unless we know what the nature of the behaviour was which they were setting out to condemn.

Were they condemning the kind of public, flagrant, male prostitution that they observed in the Greek world? Were they concerned at the waste of male semen and so of what they understood to be the vehicle of life (they had no concept of the role of the female gamete)?

What emerges in the discussions of these texts among the Rabbis and in the writings of Jews living in the Greek world is a strong disgust for the male prostitution that is also condemned by Greek and Roman moralists. They also condemned pederasty, which Jewish writers condemn as typically Gentile.

There is no discussion at all of homosexuality as a physiological-psychological sexual preference or tendency. The focus is on homosexual behaviour. It is not evident that the condemnations in Leviticus envisage a situation in which two male adults as equals express their affection sexually and with mutual sensitivity.

3. The Christian Scriptures and homosexual behaviour

When we turn to the Christian Scriptures we find that Jesus has a lot to say about love, about patience, about respect and forgiveness – values that are basic to any committed love. There is no record of Jesus ever addressing the subject of homosexuality.

Paul touches on the topic in three places. In two of these he includes homosexual behaviour in lists, but without comment. Again we need to ask what behaviour he was condemning.

1 Corinthians 6:9

Among those who will not inherit the kingdom Paul lists ‘μαλακοὶ’ and ‘ἀρσενοκοῖται’.

According to the most obvious reading of the text Paul is repeating what is commonly said by Jewish writers and to a lesser extent also by Stoic and other Greek and Roman moralists of his day. He is speaking against the behaviour of those young men, quite obvious in cities like Corinth, who dressed themselves up and offered themselves for money for the sexual gratification of other males. He is also condemning those who take advantage of them. The word ἀρσενοκοίται is not found in the Greek moralists. It seems to have its origin in Jewish circles and to derive from the Leviticus texts. Since Paul simply lists these sins here we should assume that he is repeating common Jewish condemnation of male prostitution and pederasty. We would need more evidence to justify extending Paul's meaning to condemn outright all expressions of homosexual attraction.

1 Timothy 1:10

The same must be said about his statement to Timothy. Among those who behave in ways that are 'against sound teaching' he includes 'fornicators (πόρνος), sodomites (άρσενοκοίτης) and slave traders' (άνδραποδιστης). The first group are the πόρνοι, the primary meaning of which is 'male prostitutes'. This may well be its meaning here. If so it may include those whom Paul calls μαλακοὶ in 1 Corinthians.

The second group are, once again, the άρσενοκοίται, which, as in his list in 1 Corinthians, could be referring to those who take advantage of the prostitutes. The third group are the άνδραποδισταίς. Paul may well be referring to those who take slave boys into brothels for purposes of prostitution.

Given that Paul was writing to Christians who were living in a Greco-Roman milieu it is reasonable to conclude that he is condemning the exploitative, corrupting or injurious homosexual relations that he witnessed, as in other places he condemns such behaviour among heterosexuals. He includes women to demonstrate the universal degradation from which human beings need redemption. It is likely that he intends to include the Gentile practice of pederasty. Beyond that, we are in the area of conjecture.

To propose that he was speaking against adult consensual intimacy between male or female homosexuals in a committed relationship is to extrapolate well beyond the context of the times. Paul may never have envisaged the possibility of such sensitive intimacy.

If Paul did think of all homosexual relations as 'unnatural' (and this not at all evident), this could have been because he assumed that all people are 'by nature' heterosexual?

We should note that everything Paul says about love, sensitivity, mutuality, and the sacred nature of sex, is relevant to the discussion of sexual behaviour. What we cannot do is take these few texts from Paul and use them to close the discussion on homosexual behaviour, as some are wont to do. The Bible has a lot to offer us, but we must discover the most loving way forward, faced with questions which are, in the light of advances in psychology, quite new.

If we want to act in a Christian way we need to keep our eyes on Jesus, who revealed in everything he was and said and did that God is love. In every scene in the Gospels we see him loving people. He rejoiced in their goodness and when people were behaving badly he knew to embrace them in love, knowing that only love can offer us the space to change when change is needed; only love can attract us to find our deepest self and grow in the unique expression of love that each person must find.

Though homosexuality is not mentioned in the Gospels, it is surely obvious that our sexual identity is at the heart of who we are. Jesus pleaded that we love others as we love ourselves. If we are heterosexual surely we should rejoice in the amazing gift to us and to society of people who are homosexual.

If we are homosexual we should rejoice at the amazing gift to us and to society of people who are heterosexual. Our hearts should be filled with gratitude as we rejoice in our differences. As regards our sexual identity it will take us all our life to learn to express our identity in ways that are only beautiful, and we will need everyone's help on this journey. People who are homosexual need special sensitivity because they are in the minority and they have suffered a long history of ignorance and conscious or unconscious prejudice. If we believe that God is love, and if we watch the way Jesus respected and loved everyone why do we not love each other across our differences? Should not Christians be the first to embrace our own sexual identity, and join people who identify as heterosexual or homosexual in joyfully celebrating their committed love.

Thus far Paul has been speaking of disorder in sexual behaviour. It is not without reason that he follows the general practice of moralists of his day by beginning his list of sinful behaviour in this way. They recognised, as do we, that the way we express our sexuality affects the very core of our loving and so all our moral activity. The list of sins which follows here is typical of the lists found in Jewish moral manuals of the day.

Romans 1:29

They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice.

‘**Covetousness**’ (πλεονεξία) is one of the expressions of the corrupted human heart mentioned by Jesus himself (see Mark 7:22). It speaks of a ruthless, aggressive, grasping at what we do not have, just so as to have more. It includes using other people to satisfy our lust for possession and power. It is well described in the Letter to the Ephesians: ‘They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, **greedy** to practise every kind of impurity’ (Ephesians 4:19).

Jesus warns against it: ‘Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of **greed**; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions’ (Luke 12:15).

Romans 1:29-32

They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of **envy**, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventive in finding new ways to do evil, rebellious towards parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die — yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practise them.

‘**envy**’ (φθόνος) is a certain meanness whereby a person feels displeasure at another's good. Paul listed it among the signs that a person is living without the Spirit of Jesus (Galatians 5:21).

Paul is not passing judgment on individual sinners. He is describing the depraved behaviour that results from our rejection of God's love and the kind of mess which we find ourselves in when we fail to recognise God and welcome God's grace. It is from this separation from God, the only source of life, that we need to be liberated.

Romans 2:1-5

Therefore you (singular) have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another, you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. You say, 'We know that God's judgment on those who do such things is in accordance with truth.' Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and magnanimous love (μακροθυμία). Do you not realise that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

Paul moves to the second person singular, a literary device, used in diatribe, for engaging the direct attention of each of the people reading or listening to his letter. It is most important to understand the literary form Paul is using. He is not engaging in debate here. Rather, he is assuming his readers will agree with him. He is establishing common ground in order to draw out certain implications as regards everyone's need for the salvation that God is offering in Jesus. He is inviting his readers into deeper understanding.

Just in case his description of moral corruption might leave some of his readers agreeing with him about the state of the world but thinking that it did not apply to them personally, Paul engages them in a personal examination of conscience so that they will recognise themselves somewhere in the scene he has depicted. In the unlikely event that some readers might think of themselves as sinless, Paul wants each one to take a closer and more honest look.

God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance

‘For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the Lord, your Redeemer’ (Isaiah 54:7-8).

‘Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live’ (Ezekiel 18:31-32).

‘I know that they will not obey me, for they are a stiff-necked people. But in the land of their exile they will come to themselves and know that I am the Lord their God. I will give them a heart that obeys and ears that hear; they will praise me in the land of their exile, and will remember my name and turn from their stubbornness and their wicked deeds’ (Baruch 2:30-33).

The only thing that can prevent God's merciful forgiveness is the hardness of an unrepentant heart. God is love. God cannot force his love upon us, but respects our freedom and awaits our welcome.

The prophet Jeremiah warns: 'Your own wickedness will punish you, and your apostasies will convict you. Know and see that it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the Lord your God' (Jeremiah 2:19).

'Your ways and your doings have brought this upon you. This is your doom; how bitter it is! It has reached your very heart' (Jeremiah 4:18).

Romans 2:6-11

For he will repay according to each one's deeds (see Proverbs 24:12; Psalm 62:12), to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life; while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honour and peace for **everyone** who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality (2 Chronicles 19:7; Wisdom 6:7).

Romans 2:12-16

All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified. When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are as though they have the law in themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.

Romans 2:17-24

But if you (singular) call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relation to God and know his will and determine what is best because you are instructed in the law, and if you are sure that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth you, then, who teach others, will you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You that forbid adultery, do you commit adultery? You that abhor idols, do you rob temples? You that boast in the law, do you dishonour God by breaking the law? For, as it is written, 'The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you' (Isaiah 52:5).

It is written, 'The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you' (Isaiah 52:5).

Paul finds a new level of meaning in the text from Isaiah, linking the blasphemy among the Gentiles to the failure of a Jew to observe the second commandment: 'You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God' (Exodus 20:7). There is a special evil about sin that is committed by one who claims to know God. When those who sin make the kinds of claims listed above, and make the claims in God's name, their sin causes scandal in that others are tempted to associate their sinful actions with the God to whom they claim to belong.

Romans 2:25-29

Circumcision indeed is of value if you (singular) obey the law; but if you break the law your circumcision has become uncircumcision. So, if those who are uncircumcised keep the requirements of the law, will not their uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the law will condemn you that have the written code and circumcision but break the law. For a person is not a real Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart – it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God.

Paul has consistently gone to the heart of traditional Jewish teaching on the justice and impartiality of God, on the importance of obeying God's will written in the heart, and on circumcision of the heart. The conclusions he has drawn affirm the deepest dimensions of traditional Judaism, but at the same time they highlight the fact that the external law and external circumcision are not essential to a life of obedience to God. He has said, in effect, that belonging to the Jewish race gives no special privileges in regard to judgment, and is not essential for salvation.