

Staircase to Hell – Idolatry

Text: Romans 1:21-24

Introduction:

1. This Section: 1:18-3:20 – The Universal Reign of Sin/Man’s Condemnation. Sin, wrath and judgment occupy center stage. These verses prepare the way for the Gospel of God’s righteousness. (Moo)
2. Paul has announced the fact of God’s wrath against sin in Vs. 18. The rest of the chapter explains the reasons for this wrath. Gentiles main focus. The Jew is dealt with in chapter 2 & 3.
3. This lesson: The downward spiral of unbelief/apostasy. It starts with idolatry, leads to perversity and ends in eternal ruin.

I. Irreverence (Vs. 21a)

A. They failed to acknowledge the Creator

1. ‘because’ = links verse to previous statement that they are without excuse (Vs. 20)
2. “knew God” = not a saving knowledge but a knowledge received through the light of conscience and creation
3. Note: Ancient History confirms that people began as monotheists and then degenerated into polytheism
4. “glorified” = to honor, magnify & praise
 - a. Man was created for the purpose of bringing glory to God. To fail to glorify him is then a most serious offense.
 - b. Rev. 4:11 *“Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.”*

B. They failed to thank the Creator

1. ‘thankful’ = un-thankfulness a serious heart attitude from which much evil springs
2. E.g. for life, breathe, food, clothing, rain, sunshine etc...

II. Imaginations (21b)

A. Vain Thoughts

1. ‘vain’ = empty, futile, foolish, wicked
2. ‘imaginings’ = thoughts & reasoning’s (in the mind)
3. Note: When man empties his mind of honorable thoughts towards the True God, he leaves a vacuum that will inevitably be filled with evil. This is where idolatry starts.

B. Darkened Hearts

1. ‘heart’ = man’s inner essence encompassing mind, will, emotions etc...

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2. 'foolish' = Psalm 14:1 – denial of the Creator foolish
3. 'darkened' = spiritual darkness. Light rejected brings darkness

C. A.W. Tozer on Idolatry:

Let us beware lest we in our pride accept the erroneous notion that idolatry consists only in kneeling before visible objects of adoration, and that civilized peoples are therefore free from it. **The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him.** It begins in the mind and may be present where no overt act of worship has taken place. "When they knew God," wrote Paul, "they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened." Then followed the worship of idols fashioned after the likeness of men and birds and beasts and creeping things. But this series of degrading acts **began in the mind.** Wrong ideas about God are not only the fountain from which the polluted waters of idolatry flow; they are themselves idolatrous. The idolater simply imagines things about God and acts as if they were true. Perverted notions about God soon rot the religion in which they appear. The long career of Israel demonstrates this clearly enough, the history of the Church confirms it. **So necessary to the Church is a lofty concept of God that when that concept in any measure declines, the Church with her worship and her moral standards declines along with it. The first step down for any church is taken when it surrenders its high opinion of God.** (Knowledge of the Holy Pg. 11-12)

III. Ignorance (Vs. 22)

A. The Illusion – they thought they were wise (22a)

1. 'professing' = they affirm or claim this of themselves
2. Speaks of one puffed up in pride. How tragic and foolish to be proud about that which they ought to be ashamed!
3. The Philosophers of Greece and Rome indulged in "boundless extravagances of skepticism, doubting or denying what was evident to common sense!" (Haldane)
4. Application: 21st century denial of God under the banner of "intellectualism" falsely so called.

B. The Reality – they were fools (22b)

1. 'fools' = English word 'moron' comes from this Greek word!
2. 'vain' (21); "foolish hearts" (21); 'fools (22) This is the worst type of ignorance when one is self-deceived
3. Note: Vs. 21 & 22 demonstrate that idolatry begins in the mind

IV. Images (Vs. 23)

A. Deification of Man (23a)

1. 'changed' = carries the idea of an exchange (e.g. exchanging trade). Not turning a thing into something else but a replacement of one thing for another.
2. "incorruptible God...corruptible man" = what an exchange! From light to darkness, from truth to falsehood.
3. Not surprising that the first idol man worships is himself!
4. Atheistic Humanism a modern day example:

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Humanist Manifesto 2: In the best sense, religion may inspire dedication to the highest ethical ideals. The cultivation of moral devotion and creative imagination is an expression of genuine “spiritual” experience and aspiration. We believe, however, that traditional dogmatic or authoritarian religions that place revelation, God, ritual, or creed above human needs and experience do a disservice to the human species. **Any account of nature should pass the tests of scientific evidence** (does Evolution qualify!!!??); in our judgment, the dogmas and myths of traditional religions do not do so...We find insufficient evidence for belief in the existence of a supernatural; it is either meaningless or irrelevant to the question of survival and fulfillment of the human race. **As nontheists, we begin with humans not God, nature not deity. Nature may indeed be broader and deeper than we now know; any new discoveries, however, will but enlarge our knowledge of the natural....While there is much that we do not know, humans are responsible for what we are or will become. No deity will save us; we must save ourselves.**¹

B. Deification of Animals (23b)

1. Birds (e.g. Romans worshipped the Eagle)
2. Beasts (e.g. the Golden Calf)
3. Creeping things
 - a. E.g. Snakes (the Greeks)
 - b. E.g. Dung Beetle (the Egyptians)
 - c. Note the progression downwards! Men do not begin with polytheism and evolve upwards to Monotheism as some wrongly assert. Men actually begin with belief in One God (Vs. 21) and then having rejected Him, they degenerate into the worship of idols. Quotations from ancient historians prove this.
 - d. Note: First two commandments in the Decalogue (10 commandments)
4. Illustration: Hindus have approx.. 330 million gods
5. Note: It is of interest that with the rise of humanism in the West, there has been a corresponding rise in the popularity of Eastern Religions (e.g. Hinduism, Buddhism, New Age)

V. Immorality (Vs. 24)

A. Given over by God (24a)

1. “gave up” = to hand over, to give into the hands of another
 - a. Same word used in Mark 1:14 to describe John being “**put in prison**” (same Greek word)
 - b. Judicial act. While God’s final judgment of sinners is still future, God is not a neutral bystander when it comes to man’s rebellion against Him.
 - c. “He relaxed His restraints on the fury of their passions, as a corresponding punishment for their idolatries.” (Haldane)
2. ‘uncleanness’ = in a moral sense. Details of this uncleanness outlined in Vs. 27-28

B. Lust of their own hearts (24b)

¹ <https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/manifesto2/>

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1. This is a testament to the depravity of the human heart. All God has to do is leave them to the dictates of their own wicked hearts
2. Jer. 17:9 *“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?”*

C. Dishonor of the body (24c)

1. ‘dishonor’ = shame and reproach
2. They dishonor God (Vs. 21), so God allows them to dishonor themselves through degrading passions.

Conclusion:

1. Unsaved: At what point are you in this downward journey? Repent before it is too late and you incur the wrath of God.
2. Saved: What is our view of God? Have we erected idols in our mind or are we entertaining ideas of God that are unbiblical and idolatrous?