

*All Roads Lead Here: The Downward Spiral*  
*By Jason Huff*  
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*Isaiah 64:5-9; Luke 11:27-28; Romans 1:22-32*

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Romans 1:22-32. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy Word. “Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. 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 of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator -- who is forever praised. Amen. Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion. Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.”

Some Scriptures don't lend themselves to an easy sermon opening. I try to ease us into the discussion each week to make the subject matter more relatable. Sometimes that's the wrong thing to do, and it is this week. The end of Romans 1 is among the harshest descriptions of sin in the whole Bible. You can't gloss over it or joke about it. It hits you right between the eyes. As one book put it, “If you don't see yourself somewhere in that list, you're a psychopath.”

This list is controversial. Many people disagree with some of the sins listed. Our culture says this list is narrow-minded, bigoted, out of date, and out of touch. Guess what? The pagan culture of ancient Rome said the exact same thing. Godly morality has never been popular. This particular passage was aimed at pagans, but God's ways weren't popular with the Jews either, which Paul will talk about next week. Nobody likes being told they aren't right with God. But we aren't, and this list shows what happens when we create our own morality.

Paul's primary purpose in this part of the letter is to describe how turning a blind eye to sin leads to even greater sin. *Paul describes the downward spiral of sin in culture and in our own lives.* We shouldn't think that, because we don't do everything on the list, it doesn't apply to us. Almost nobody fulfills the whole list. We could use the list to pat ourselves on the back. “Well, I'm on the list three times, but Joe down the street hits at least five of 'em, and George down at the plant fits about ten! I must be doing OK!” But that's not how this list works. It only serves to show we are all guilty.

Paul describes how sin pervades hearts and cultures until they're drowning in it. Paul states that God gave pagan society over to new depths of depravity at least three different times. God said, "If you want to flee from me that badly, if you have no respect for me and want to go off into the far-off land of the prodigal, then your will be done." God can allow us to do greater and greater sins, but God restrains a ton of sin. God's hand holds us back from the wickedness we are actually capable of. We do not want to see the furthest depths to which we could sink.

But there is a downward spiral. When one set of sins no longer satisfies us, we rush to commit even more. We start with sins of idolatry. We find something else to worship besides God. Whether it's statues or sports, gods or creatures or other human beings, we give our time, attention, and love to things that don't deserve it. We serve our own desires rather than getting our marching orders from God. We build our own kingdoms rather than God's Kingdom.

So God allows us to spiral down to the next layer. That layer is sexual immorality. Ancient pagan cultures combined their idol worship with sexuality. For over fifty years in America, our idol has been sexuality. Since the sexual revolution of the '60s, we've torn down tons of taboos. No-fault divorce, adultery, promiscuity, cohabiting without the benefit of marriage, abortion-on-demand – our culture is saturated with it.

Every family is touched by divorce. Every child knows children in their classrooms who don't live with both Mom and Dad. Children grow up without a sense of innocence and trust because they have been broken by our desires, changing the course of their lives. How many families have been broken apart by lust, by pornography, by abuse of different kinds?

Now we need to stop for a moment. We like to point fingers about all this. We want to put guilt on other people whose practices are further down the spiral of sin. "The problem really lies with this group or that group that is so wicked. That's what's leading to the downfall of our country." That's what we want to say.

But the problem lies with us. The spiral continues because we stop fighting our own temptations. We get tired and complacent, and then start to practice those same things. We're guilty of these sins too. The problem is not first with those whose sins are further downstream. It's with us who did what our hearts wanted rather than what the Lord wanted.

This is not meant to condemn us. We all have different struggles in this area. Some are far in our past. God has forgiven them, we no longer practice them, and because of the mercy of Jesus Christ, we are free from them. There's no sin that God cannot save you from. But it also means that as we see others tangled in the currents of sin, we don't judge them; we love them and reach a hand out to help them out of sin's bitter waters. Because we swam there before too.

That's how we must approach the third layer of the downward spiral. Modern culture thinks the church is homophobic, that we destroy lives by not celebrating gay behaviors. We need to tackle the arguments against Scripture's view of homosexual behavior – not because we want to focus on it or hurt anyone, but because this touches all of us. While only 3% of the population deals with this, they are our children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews. And the new sexual revolution is bearing down on Christianity full force.

The first argument we hear is that the Bible doesn't know about loving, committed same-sex relationships but just condemns forms of rape. The thing is, same-sex marriage is mentioned by the Roman poets Martial and Juvenal in Paul's era. Hundreds of years before, Greeks like Plato and Sappho wrote of same-sex relationships among equals being purer love. It's not new.

The second line of argument is that Jesus didn't say anything about it. That's true. He didn't have to. His ministry was exclusively to the Jews, and Jewish law unquestionably banned it. They had no questions about it. It wasn't an issue. Jesus didn't need to speak about it.

But what if being attracted to the same sex isn't a choice? There is truth to that. Whether our attractions are because of nature or nurture, we don't often choose who we are attracted to. But because sin permeates every part of life, our natural choices are sinful. Different people have different tendencies, but we all gravitate towards sin. Some people's natural instinct is to sleep around with people of the opposite sex. Some are naturally violent. Some are naturally drawn to gossip and slander. Some are naturally greedy, naturally cruel, naturally thieves. Our natural inclinations run counter to God's ways. We cannot judge what is right by what our natural selves want. When Jesus said that Christians must die to themselves daily to follow Him, this is what He meant. We must abandon our natural instincts to do what is right in God's eyes.

But one really difficult argument is this one – if the church changed to suit the sexual revolution, isn't it hypocritical not to change around this issue? My answer is simple: the church was wrong to change. When we treated divorce as no big deal, when we stopped teaching chastity to avoid offending people, when we excused behavior as “boys will be boys” but shamed young women who wound up pregnant, we dishonored the Lord. Sin is sin no matter who commits it. And there is forgiveness available from God for sin no matter what the sin is.

Homosexual practices – not the feelings, but acting on them – are sinful, just as heterosexual practices outside of marriage are sinful. And how do we deal with people who act this way? The same way we act towards people who commit other sins – with great love and kindness. Nobody's going to be convicted of their sin by a mean, spiteful, hateful person. But a person who loves them, who cares for them even though there's disagreement, who shows compassion to them – that believer can break through the walls that sin puts up. This sin is not the greatest sin, by any means. Love your neighbor means love your Muslim neighbor, love your mean neighbor, love your gay neighbor, love your pro-choice neighbor. That love will open doors to share the good news of Jesus with them to lead them to life eternal with Him.

This is not the low point for sin in society. No, the spiral keeps going. Since people rejected even knowing about God, “he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity...envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless.”

Paul throws down the gauntlet. Pagan society is overwhelmed with sin and every form of evil. It's amazing how what Paul says sounds exactly like our own society 2,000 years later. Has our society gotten to this point? Are we in the moral decay that Paul saw in Rome?

I would say, absolutely. You can't turn on any device without being offered something foul to read or watch. Our culture is crude and crass all the time. There is good pushing against the darkness, but darkness has a stronghold in American culture. Paul sees it when he writes, "Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them." Things that were unspeakable a hundred years ago became tolerated, then accepted, then celebrated. Marches about good things become celebrations of vulgarity and violence; parades that celebrate sin now draw crowds where we set up lawn chairs and let the children watch.

We have lost our moral compass. We are going headlong down the spiral. If you need proof that we've lived in a pagan culture for a long time, this is it. It's depressing, it's distressing, and we're not making it up or emphasizing it. It's right here in Scripture. We're repeating the past. We may have industry and technology they didn't have in ancient times, but as Paul said, it's just helped us invent new ways of doing evil.

So where's the fix? Here's a surprise. *Paul doesn't provide solutions; he introduces us to the One who is the Solution.* Earlier in Romans 1, Paul gave us the core theme of the letter: a righteousness from God is being revealed for all who believe and trust in Christ Jesus. The good news is Jesus. He can save us from all this. Paul gives us no other relief.

We want to fix the problem ourselves rather than relying on God. We're told if only we have certain people in government, that will solve it. If only we had prayer in schools; if only we roll back Roe vs. Wade; if only we defund Planned Parenthood; if only, if only, then we'd live in a wonderful America under God where everything was wonderful and blessed by God. If only we would fix it and get it back to what it was.

The problem is, that's not the solution. Even under the Christian veneer of the 1950s, there was a lot of darkness hidden away and left unaddressed. Has God blessed America? Absolutely. Has American blessed God? Rarely. Dreaming of a mythical bygone era isn't biblical and doesn't solve the problem. Paul has no dream of Rome becoming a Christian empire. He dreams of God's Kingdom spreading through the faith and love of believers.

Paul has no illusions. He lives in a pagan world that believes in the polar opposites of Christian morality. He has no reason to think that it's going to change. But individuals? God can change them. And God does change cultures, but He does it a person at a time. *We* cannot break the downward spiral of our culture. But *God* can work in our hearts to heal us, to make us grieved by sin rather than entranced by it, and to pull us out of the death spiral of sin.

Paul doesn't give us 10 steps to fix the problem, but he leads us towards God. Here's how, in our final thought today: *taking sin seriously is the first step to taking God seriously.* Paul holds nothing back. It is God's righteous decree that those who sin deserve death. Sin is the direct cause of death for everyone. Not cancer, not auto accidents, not heart attacks – those are indirect reasons. Sin is the direct reason. Without sin, nothing else would have power over us. Isn't that amazing that until Jesus voluntarily laid down His life for us, no one could touch Him, even though the Pharisees hunted for ways to kill Him and angry people tried to throw Him off a cliff? Sin is what gives death power over us.

The modern church is embarrassed of sin. It's embarrassed the Bible is so bold about what sin is and how it destroys us. The church doesn't preach sin because it makes people leave. Smaller crowds equal smaller donations equal smaller salaries and smaller buildings. There's a reason why the biggest megachurches don't preach sin *by their own admission*. I was really glad to go to Kensington's website to see they had a two-week series in November on secret sins. It wasn't much, but it's the right direction. Crowds come for the positive stuff. Crowds want to hear about God's love, not about God's wrath. But if we do not preach God's wrath on sin, if God will save everyone regardless of what they do, there is no reason to stay in church. There's no point. We can only take the solution to sin seriously if we take sin seriously.

Have you been on a plane recently? Nobody pays attention to the safety instructions. They have to do them by law, but everyone's busy doing something else. On some flights, they have little movies that give the instructions and make fun of the whole thing at the same time. No one takes the safety instructions seriously because flying is really safe. We freak out when there's an airplane accident because they're rare. We don't listen because there is no need.

The same thing is true with God. If God is your co-pilot, if God is there to help you feel better when things get rough, if God is there to make you a little better than your already pretty great self, you don't need Him at all. God is a nice addition to my life, but He's unnecessary. He is, in fact, a crutch, something to lean on when your own ego and personality aren't strong enough to handle a situation.

But you know who pays attention to the safety instructions? The guy jumping out of an airplane for the first time. Paying attention to the parachuting instructor could be the difference between life and death. If he isn't buckled in properly, if he hasn't checked his chute carefully and followed the instructions to the letter, this might be the very last thing he ever does.

If you believe you are under God's wrath for your sins against Him, if you know it is impossible to earn your way into God's good graces, getting to know Jesus becomes a whole lot more serious. We pay attention to what He says and does because He's the only way to avoid God's righteous punishment. If you know how serious your sin problem is, you know how important it is to take God seriously and to fall at the feet of Jesus for forgiveness.

This isn't a pleasant topic. Sin never is. But Paul's list makes us feel the weight of sin. We know we're included; we feel the spiral pulling us in; we realize God would be just to punish our disobedience. But as we mentioned last week, our catchphrase for the next several weeks, Paul writes from the other side of the cross. Jesus is alive. Jesus will save us if we mourn our sins, turn away from them, and come to Him for eternal life. No power in the universe can stop Jesus from rescuing us if we believe in Him for salvation and turn to His ways.

If you don't yet regret your sins, your rebellion against God, pray that you might see your sin as seriously as God does. But if you mourn your sins and feel that there is no hope for you, that God can't forgive all you've done, don't worry. God saves great sinners. God saved a murderer in Moses and Paul. He saved an adulterer in King David, a deceiver in Jacob, a prostitute in Rahab, a denier in Peter, a greedy cheat in Matthew. Turn to Him, and He will save you. Reject the downward spiral of sin and accept Christ, and eternal life will be your story.