

## Prayer

We praise You, Lord God, for when we are stressed by problems, we can always turn to You for guidance. Lead us through the maze of feelings and emotions that accompany our troubles, for you have always been a help to Your people through the years. Keep us sure-footed on the pathway of faith and compassion shown to us by Jesus, and may we always keep close to You, whatever happens to us in this life. AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*Try to find an opportunity to pray out loud today, because doing this can focus our prayers immeasurably.*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for people on low pay.** *Pray for your government, and pray that it will seek to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor*
- *Pray for those who are seeking the freedom of their countries*
- *Give thanks to God for the way He has guided you through your life*

## Meditation

All around us, there are people rushing about,  
Doing the things that people do to keep things going;  
Working, playing with children, shopping and visiting friends:  
Travelling, texting, phoning, listening to music, eating snacks.

All around us, somewhere just beyond our horizons  
Are people rushing about, trying to keep everything going  
Despite the break-up of marriage or the death of a loved one,  
Barely aware of what they are doing; lost, and looking for help.

All around us, Jesus is alive and God is with us by His Spirit,  
Just waiting to be found, offering all the strength and help ...  
Now, people need to overcome their trials, troubles, and strife;  
So who will point them towards the help of God as found in Christ?

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## Bible passage – Romans 1:26-32

<sup>26</sup> For this reason God handed them over to shameful passions. Their females exchanged natural sex for what is contrary to the natural order, <sup>27</sup> and in just the same way, males also gave up natural sex with females, and burned with sexual desire for one another, males committing shameless naked acts with males and receiving the due consequences of their perversion amongst themselves.

<sup>28</sup> And in addition, since they did not think it necessary to acknowledge God, God handed them over to a corrupted mind and to doing what should not be done: <sup>29</sup> filled with all manner of evil, wickedness, greed and malice; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and callous spite; they are rumour-mongers, <sup>30</sup> slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant, boastful, evil schemers, rebellious to parents, <sup>31</sup> ignorant, disloyal, inhuman and pitiless. <sup>32</sup> Although they know God's natural law, those who practice such things deserve death, for they not only do the same but give approval to those who practice them.

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# Bible Study

## Review

This is no ordinary passage of Scripture. It describes the sins of humanity that follow from the rejection of God, and it is astonishing! Paul is unrelenting in his exposure of the sins of humanity. When faced with such a broadside it is tempting to stand aside and criticise this text, but although Paul talks about some extreme examples, we should not avoid his core message. Those who ignore the moral order of the God who made the world will be become trapped by the consequences of their own choice of evil.

To begin with, Paul delivers an attack on sexual deviancy (1:26-27), and as soon as we read it, we realise that this passage is centre stage in current controversies around homosexuality. Following this (1:28-32), Paul cites a long list of sins demonstrating rebellion against God. There are lists like these throughout Paul's letters (e.g. Galatians 5:19-21, Ephesians 4:31 etc.), but none of them as long as this. Then finally, Paul pronounces God's judgement on all such sin, which is death. There is little time for us to draw breath!

The issue of what this passage says about homosexuality is important. It clearly says that all forms of sexual deviancy including homosexual practice are a perversion of God's natural world; it is also possible that the words of the text imply paedophilia and sodomy as well (1:26,27). This is controversial today, because society increasingly accepts homosexual relationships, and those who feel it right to accept this within the church struggle with what this text says about sexual practice. In the first century, homosexual relationships were tolerated in significant parts of the Empire, but certainly not everywhere. Paul knew this, yet argued strongly that anything other than male/female sexual practice was a perversion of God's natural order.

Paul's argument comes from his strong belief that the image of God is found in the marriage union of a man and a woman, as commanded in Genesis 1:27,28. The issue here is not human preference, but God's order, and we must remember that Paul is still contrasting human choice with God's natural world. If we wish to explore this issue further, we need to look carefully at the root of the matter, and study what Scripture says about the image of God found in men and women. Remember, this passage is designed to set the scene for the doctrine of salvation.

The second paragraph contains a long list of sins and wickedness (1:29-31). It is easy to gloss over the meaning of each sin, because the list is long and seems to have no structure. Lists were a feature of Greek literature, and Paul used them purposefully, so we should be prepared to look at it carefully. Each listed sin represents actions or attitudes that relate in some way to one of the Ten Commandments, and they include violence, deviousness, false reporting, rebellion against God and against parents, and the attitudes lying behind them. Also, almost all of them are mentioned explicitly or implicitly by Jesus, especially in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7, see 5:21-42). So each sin says something not just about behaviour but about human intent to ignore what is right in God's world; they will always have consequences.

The last verse of this passage spells out Paul's conclusion, which is that all who do these things deserve death. This sounds terrible, for our natural desire is to want to forgive. But Paul is not talking about how we handle sin in this life, he is simply reiterating the story of Genesis 3 about the Fall, which tells us that the end result of sin and the end result of all human life is death. As we study Romans, we will find that Paul's strong desire is to tell people that death is not the only possibility; through Christ, we have the possibility of being saved and receiving eternal life!

In this chapter of Romans, Paul says four times that people have every chance to observe the goodness of God and choose what is right (1:19f.), and these glimpses should help us realise that Paul does not condemn for the sake of it. Rather, he is beginning to point towards the solution of sin, not its punishment.

### **Going Deeper**

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Sin and moral responsibility
- The list of sins
- Homosexuality in the Roman world
- Paul's message about homosexual practice

### Going Deeper

Even though this passage begins with Paul's rejection of homosexuality, we will now look further at the moral culpability that Paul highlights in the whole text; how he describes this and why. We will finish by examining the difficult subject of homosexuality in the light of all this.

## ***Sin and moral responsibility***

It is very important for us to realise that Paul is writing now with the broadest of themes in mind. The subjects of human sin and evil, the reasons why there is evil in the world and the consequences of it, have been the stuff of philosophy ever since the Greeks began to explore this kind of rational thinking several hundred years before Christ. Paul knew about the predominantly Stoic philosophy which was held by cultured (Greek) society within the Roman Empire of his day, however, he never engages with this philosophy, and he never engages or argues with other religious systems of belief. He makes his appeal to all who will listen to him, and when they do, it proves his theory that the truth of what he says is inherently present in the world and available to all if they will be open to God as Creator and their responsibilities as His creatures within a world created 'good'.

It has long been noticed that Paul's argument about the nature of sin in Romans 1 is very similar to that of the story of the Fall in Genesis 3. In that famous Old Testament account, Adam falls into sin by accepting temptation, initially out of ignorance, by accepting his wife's disobedience (Gen 3:1-7). He then slides further into the mire, choosing to hide from the Lord to avoid his being seen, and then also failing to see God in the world. The first thing he realises about his sinful condition, once challenged by the Lord, is his identity as a sexual being (which is another clue as to why Paul addresses the issues of sexuality in our passage today). The end result of Adam's sin, however, is that it is compounded by the awful murder of Abel by Cain (Genesis 4:1-16), and then evil grows even more until the profanity and wickedness of the people of the world becomes so much that God has to destroy the world and start again at the time of the Flood (Gen 6-9). Any Jew who read what Paul said in Romans would have recognised this way of describing the universal nature of sin in the world. But what they would not have known was that Paul intended to demonstrate not that there was a new 'Noah' come to start a new work of God, but a new 'Adam' to change the heart of humanity. This is where Paul is heading as we will find out later on (5:14).

### ***The list of sins***

The list of sins in our passage today does have some structure and form, but not a great deal. Paul begins by pointing out that when the mind rejects the 'logic' of its own creation by the Creator it has itself become corrupted (1:28). It will be one of Paul's very important points within his letter to show that the work of salvation in the believer creates a new 'mind' which is in tune with the creator; for in the concluding part of his letter he says 'be transformed by the renewing of your minds' (12:2). 'All manner of evil' (1:29) flows from the unregenerate mind; 'wickedness, greed and malice' (1:29), the first two words of this could be translated 'unrighteousness' and 'covetousness', two words with considerable Old Testament history, the first being the opposite of 'right with God' and the second being the subject of the last of the ten commandments! Amongst the rest of the list there are evils of strife and conflict (1:29), evils of the tongue (1:30) and evils which dishonour relationship (1:30,31) such as rebellion against parents and disloyalty. This, at least, is a three-point structure upon which a sermon on the nature of evil could be based!

The final insult of evil against the whole of Creation is that those who do these things encourage and teach others to do the same (1:32). This is the ultimate consequence of Paul's description of sin as something which is self-perpetuating because God, in His wrath, has figuratively taken his 'hands off' those who choose their own evil ways (1:20,24,26,28).

### ***Homosexuality in the Roman world***

The importance of human sexuality and the image of God has been explained above, but what Paul says about homosexuality in this passage does require further comment. Firstly, the picture painted by Paul in this text is true to what we know of the first century. Homosexuality was regarded as a virtue in some parts of the Roman Empire, notably those that were the remnants of the Greek Empire which preceded it, and whose rampant armies were, in parts, notoriously held together by homosexual relationships. It is also clear from documents of the time that the wealthy and cultured indulged in sex with young children, and with boys in particular; the Emperor Nero was infamous in this respect. Lastly, the town of Lesbos was the place where a culture of female sexual practice developed which has now given its name to 'lesbianism'.

Whilst these things were known and accepted as part of the world in which people lived, that does not mean to say that everyone in the Roman Empire personally accepted homosexuality as 'right' or 'acceptable'. Certainly, the Israelite nation and the Jews who lived in cities across the known world were known to regard homosexuality as more than distasteful, and morally wrong. This undoubtedly stems from the belief that Paul expressed in his writings about the nature of God as being reflected in humanity, both male and female.

Here in this letter, Paul clearly regards anything other than heterosexual acts of sexual intimacy as contrary to the natural order of things, and he had plenty of reason to say that the differing forms of homosexuality practiced in his day were not examples of good social interaction. Certainly, the attractions of the women of Lesbos created controversy and disruption to other parts of the Empire, and by using a word which was used for sex with boys in some Greek literature (translated 'shameless naked acts' – 1:27), Paul hints strongly that

homosexual lifestyle and practice did not represent a stable, 'good' or otherwise moral aspect of society. Along with other evils, he explained that homosexual practice resulted in recurring perversion 'among themselves'. It is hard to establish what Paul might mean here, but the simplest explanation is that homosexuality breeds more homosexuality, and because it does not represent the 'natural' use of sexual parts of the body, it is ultimately counter-productive to the human soul.

### ***Paul's message about homosexual practice***

Scripture does not tell us how to deal with 'homosexuality' as an issue, but it does, without doubt, identify the social acceptance and open practice of homosexual acts as contrary to God's natural law. Whilst some people may find this a tough judgement, it takes place in the context of tough judgements about other practices such as rebellion against parents, the breaking of commandments and the evil use of the tongue, which afflict large numbers of people today, whether homosexual or heterosexual. Paul's intent is to explain God's solution to the whole problem of human sin in the world, and some of this is related to unnatural homosexual acts, where 'natural' means 'the way God made things to work'. We must wait to see how he explains the Gospel of Jesus Christ to see whether or how this offers hope to those who find themselves caught up in the evils of unnatural homosexuality, as well as all the other evils.

## Application

One of the problems of the debate about homosexuality today is that people popularly say that what is 'natural' is 'whatever you want to do', and this is not how Paul defines what is natural here in Romans. Much of the distress about this issue today is created because people want to say that homosexuality is 'natural' for people who are 'born that way', but this is a huge presumption. Strangely, for a world in which we know so much about humanity through our understanding of genes, no-one has ever been able to identify what it means to be 'born that way', and there is no consensus about how much homosexuality is generated by social phenomena, however deep seated and unconscious.

It is undoubtedly true that some people genuinely struggle with their sexual identity, but it is extremely unhelpful for society to label people on the basis of such agonies, or to promote devious sexual practice as a lifestyle. The Christian position is not to condemn people because of such struggles, but to seek to engage with the issues and find God's answers. Within this, the Gospel still calls us to reflect on what it means for people to reflect God's image in this world through the relationship of marriage. It also warns that where society rejects God's natural order of love and procreation, and people chose sexual deviancy instead of family security (in whatever way), then society becomes unstable and people suffer.

Paul's analysis here in Romans can help us as we explore these issues, but it should not, however, be seen as blanket permission to dismiss the personal circumstances of those who genuinely feel they have sexual feelings and a self understanding that is not the same as most men and women, and call themselves homosexuals. The Gospel that Paul explains here in Romans says that Jesus Christ is the source of liberation and salvation for all those under God's judgement, and as we shall find out, this means all of us, whatever we think about what is called 'sexual orientation'.

For Christians who believe they are homosexuals, I suggest that if this aspect of life is offered to God for His judgement along with all other aspects of life, then our Lord will reveal how best to handle this essential sense of identity. He will guide through the complex issues presented by attitudes in today's society, and explain how to manage life in society and the kingdom of God. This, of course, is true for everyone, and so it should be; such commitments throws up issues for everyone. Whatever else has happened to each of us along life's journey, and whatever we feel about ourselves, God has made all people equal in His sight, and He offers the same route to heaven through Christ.

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## Discipleship

### ***Questions (for use in groups)***

1. Discuss in your group what you think about Paul's comments on homosexuality.
2. In your observation, does evil always produce evil, and compound itself in the way Paul describes?
3. Which part of the long list of evils and wickedness are important for us to pay attention to, because they are prevalent in our society?

## **Personal comments by author**

*How we tackle the issue of homosexuality is important. Most of us have come across people either in our families, friends or places of work who are homosexual, and who would probably find this part of Romans very hard to accept. I suggest that it is worthwhile spending some time considering the personal circumstances of those you know, and trying to work out how you might discuss this text with them. Through this, the Lord will help you think this issue through, and work out how you can handle it with more understanding.*

## **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *Have a close look at the list of sins in this passage, and see whether any of them describe you in any way. Do your best to pray about this and ask the Lord to show you how to deal with it. Speak to a friend or loved one if necessary.*
- *You may know someone in your church who takes a different view on the issue of homosexuality than you do. Have a discussion with them about what Paul says here, and see if you can agree with what Paul says, why he says it, and why this is part of scripture.*

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## **Final Prayer**

If we give Your Spirit free reign in our lives, then Your Love, O Lord Jesus, saves us from more than we can imagine. Your Love will save us from bitterness, from fear, from hopelessness, from aggression, and from all the works of the enemy to draw us back into sin. Praise You Lord Jesus for Your love, shown in death, which conquers all. AMEN

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