



# Finding Our Way With Sexuality

## Summary and Goal

All humans are born into sin. All humans are born sexually broken. God's design, however, is for sexuality to be expressed in marriage between one male and one female. Sin has disrupted God's design for sexuality, but the application of the gospel can restore what He intended from the beginning.

### ***Main Passages***

Romans 1:18-32

### ***Session Outline***

1. God's Wrath on Wrongful Worship (Romans 1:18-23)
2. Stubborn Hearts Given Over (Romans 1:24-31)
3. Volitional Rebellion (Romans 1:32)

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### ***Theological Theme***

God has made known what is right through general and special revelation. As a result of the fall, all people commit volitional sin in spite of that knowledge.

### ***Christ Connection***

Christ's atoning work extends grace to the repentant. For those who reject His grace, however, only wrath awaits.

### ***Missional Application***

The truth of God's Word with regard to sexuality equips believers to walk as sources of hope in a world shrouded in the darkness of sexual sin.

# Historical Context of Romans

## Purpose

Paul's purpose in writing Romans can be identified from his direct statements in the text and inferred from the content. He expressly wrote that he wanted to impart spiritual strength to the believers at Rome (1:11-12; 16:25-26). He asked for prayer for the difficult task he was undertaking (15:30) and that he might be able to come and see them (15:32). He hoped to enlist the Roman churches to support a mission to the west (15:23-29). The content of the letter shows that the churches experienced tensions between believers from different backgrounds. Paul wanted them to be united and to avoid dissension and false teaching (16:17-18). The content also reveals his exposition of what is essential Christianity and what are matters of indifference.

## Author

Paul the apostle is the stated and indisputable author of the book of Romans. From the book of Acts and statements in Romans, we learn that Paul wrote this letter while he was in Corinth and on his way to Jerusalem in the spring of AD 57, to deliver an offering from the Gentile churches to poor Jewish Christians (Ac 20:3; Rm 15:25-29).

## Setting

All of Paul's writings grew out of his missionary/pastoral work and were about the problems and needs of local churches. The book of Romans is also of this genre, but it is the least "local" in the sense that Paul had not yet been to Rome. This letter was his opportunity to expound the good news message (the gospel). He could discuss the essence of sin, the salvation accomplished on the cross, the union of the believer with Christ, how the Spirit works in the Christian to promote holiness, the place of the Jewish people in God's plan, future things, and Christian living or ethics. Though Paul did not write Romans as a systematic theology, his somewhat orderly exposition has been the fountain for the development of that discipline.

## Special Features

Paul's letter to the Roman house churches has been preeminent among the New Testament writings for its theological and pastoral influence. It focuses on the doctrine of salvation, including the practical implications for believers as they live out the salvation given to them through Jesus Christ.

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## Session Plan

# Finding Our Way With Sexuality

### ? For Further Discussion

How comfortable are you in discussing your views on sexuality when the topic is raised in conversation? How would you describe the tones of those conversations?

## Introduction

- ? How would you respond to the statement that “you don’t have to look very far to see that we’re in big trouble” with regard to sexuality in our culture? What evidences come most readily to your mind?
- ? Where do you generally see the strongest biblical worldview represented when it comes to sexuality? Would you say that it is rare to find such a view?

In this week’s session, Paul opened his letter to the believers in Rome with an explanation of the seriousness of sexual sin. Paul highlighted the reality of God’s righteous wrath on those who arrogantly persist in deliberate sinfulness, in spite of realizing that this is contrary to God’s design and desire.

## 1. God’s Wrath on Wrongful Worship (Romans 1:18-23)

The verses that immediately preceded Romans 1:18 spoke to the power of the gospel for salvation, with particular application to the daily living of “the righteous.” The righteous are those who have come to know Christ through the preaching of the gospel. The transition, or lack thereof, between verses 17 and 18 makes the contrast of the experience of God’s presence between the righteous and the unrighteous stark and alarming. Paul moved immediately from the worship and salvation of the believer to the impending wrath of those that “suppress the truth.” Both experiences involve revelation, which is authored by God, but the content of that revelation is markedly different.

- ? Describe a time that you were overwhelmed by some aspect of God’s majestic creation. What aspect of God’s character were you especially aware of during that moment? How did it contribute to your worship of God?
- ? How would you explain the “wrath” of our loving God to someone? What particular points would you make to show it is consistent with His character? What objections might you anticipate someone making to your argument?

## 2. Stubborn Hearts Given Over (Romans 1:24-31)

Verse 24 clarifies the nature of God's wrath for those who worship creation instead of the Creator. The truth of humanity's sinfulness is that there is no sense of neutrality with regard to rebellion. Left to its own devices, humanity will only increase the depravity of the expression of its sin. In this particular case, the expression of sin was sexual impurity and the magnitude of its depravity would only increase. As it did, the men and women that rejected God would actually experience the increasing degradation of their bodies as sin continued to take an increased toll.

- ❓ What are some ways in which you observe culture worshiping the created instead of the Creator? In those cases, how would you describe the opinion of God held by those that worship the creation?
- ❓ How does Paul indicate the self-worship of the rebellious influencing the view of sexuality? What aspect of this expression of sin is strengthened by self-worship? What determines that which is acceptable and taboo?

## 3. Volitional Rebellion (Romans 1:32)

Paul boldly confronted the pervasive misperception that once a person came face-to-face with the drastic consequences of his or her sin, he or she would repent, become sober-minded, and devote his or her life to God. Paul made clear that no such moment of awakening would be brought about by the pursuit of rebellious living because the appetite for sin is insatiable. Instead, the rebellious will only become increasingly calloused to the consequence and collateral impact of their own sin, and will also actively seek the downfall of others due to the same sin.

- ❓ Why do you think a person's ability to be dissuaded from sin by the consequences of God's wrath decreases the longer he or she persists in that sinfulness? How does their perception of the consequences change?
- ❓ In navigating the modern sexual culture, what sexual ethics are promoted today that were not treated that way in the recent past? How do you observe the evidence of such celebration in your regular weekly routines?

## Conclusion

- ❓ How comfortable would you say you are in being able to articulate the Bible's teaching on sexual ethics? What passages would you make sure to use?
- ❓ What does it indicate to you that so much energy is spent in modern culture defining people by their sexual orientation? How does your identity in Christ war against that? What particular aspect of your life do you want to be known for?

### ❓ For Further Discussion

How would you describe the attitude in the churches you've attended toward discussing sexuality as an aspect of discipleship? How have you seen that change over the years? Why do you think that is significant?

# 6

## Expanded Session Content

# Finding Our Way With Sexuality

### Introduction

In his 2018 book, *Sex in a Broken World*, author and pastor Paul Tripp carefully unpacks the significant differences between God’s intention for the divinely created gift of sex and the numerous distorted expressions of that gift that are rampant in modern culture. In a heartbreakingly appropriate assessment of the current sexual climate, Tripp notes:

*You don’t have to look very far to see that we’re in big trouble. The news is littered daily with sex scandals. The content of the tabloids is enough to alert us to the fact that something has gone terribly wrong. It’s hard to listen to any cultural discussion of sex that isn’t infected with either self-deception or distortion of reality. Sex can’t deliver the promise that we think it makes, and it’s more dangerous than we tend to think. Sadly, today this beautiful creation of God functions in the surrounding culture like a spiritual solvent eating away at the very fabric of human community. It has perverse power to master your heart and, in so doing, determine the direction of your life. It gives the buzz that you’re in control while, at the same time, becoming the master that progressively chains you to its control.<sup>1</sup>*

Understanding the powerful ability of sexuality to control the formative characteristics that make up society, the need to approach sexuality with a biblical worldview has never been of greater importance. What God created as a gift to humanity has become distorted, being viewed as an end of itself. Consequently, culture has increasingly allowed itself to become fragmented by and defined by sexuality. For the church, then, it is critical to understand how sexuality is addressed by God’s Word and what the application of that truth means for daily living.

- ❓ How would you respond to Tripp’s statement that “you don’t have to look very far to see that we’re in big trouble” with regard to sexuality in our culture? What evidences come most readily to your mind?
- ❓ Where do you generally see the strongest biblical worldview represented when it comes to sexuality? Would you say that it is rare to find such a view?



How comfortable are you in discussing your views on sexuality when the topic is raised in conversation? How would you describe the tones of those conversations?

## Session Summary

In this week's session, Paul opened his letter to the believers in Rome with an explanation of the seriousness of sexual sin. Paul highlighted the reality of God's righteous wrath on those who arrogantly persist in deliberate sinfulness, in spite of realizing that this is contrary to God's design and desire.

### 1. God's Wrath on Wrongful Worship (Romans 1:18-23)

The verses that immediately preceded Romans 1:18 spoke to the power of the gospel for salvation, with particular application to the daily living of "the righteous." The righteous are those who have come to know Christ through the preaching of the gospel. The transition, or lack thereof, between verses 17 and 18 makes the contrast of the experience of God's presence between the righteous and the unrighteous stark and alarming. Paul moved immediately from the worship and salvation of the believer to the impending wrath of those that "suppress the truth." Both experiences involve revelation, which is authored by God, but the content of that revelation is markedly different.

Paul's mention of God's wrath was a theological problem even in his time. Doug Moo explains, "Since the time of certain Greek philosophers, the idea that God would inflict wrath on people has been rejected as incompatible with an enlightened understanding of the deity. The second-century heretic Marcion omitted "of God" in vs. 18, and many others since would like to omit the verse altogether."<sup>3</sup> The severity of divine wrath, if it seemed out of place, would have been due to an insufficient understanding of the God who revealed Himself in the pages of Scripture. His wrath was different from the pettiness of human wrath. According to Robert Mounce, "God's wrath is his divine displeasure with sin. We call it 'wrath' because it shares certain basic characteristics of human wrath. But because it is God's wrath it can have none of the sinful qualities of its analogical counterpart."<sup>4</sup>

The stated recipients of God's wrath were those that suppressed the truth. The truth that the offenders attempted to suppress was the general revelation of God. According to Mounce, "God, in his creation, has provided sufficient evidence of himself to hold accountable all who reject that revelation. What can be known of God is perfectly clear. God himself made it plain...Disbelief requires an act of rebellion against common

### The Wrath of God

God's wrath is both eschatological and present. Frequently when God's wrath is discussed, focus immediately shifts to the final judgment at Christ return. Paul, however, primarily discussed here the immediate judgment of God for the volitional pursuit of habitual sin. Mounce notes, "The use of the present tense (apokalyptetai, 'is being revealed') indicates something that is taking place in the present."<sup>2</sup>

### Without Excuse

Mounce states, “The Greek word translated ‘without excuse’ (anapologetous) suggests that from a legal standpoint people had been stripped of any defense.”<sup>6</sup>

sense. It displays fallen humanity’s fatal bias against God.”<sup>5</sup> The beauty and majestic perfection of God’s creation leaves the rebellious without an excuse.

- ❓ Describe a time that you were overwhelmed by some aspect of God’s majestic creation. What aspect of God’s character were you especially aware of during that moment? How did it contribute to your worship of God?
- ❓ How would you explain the “wrath” of our loving God to someone? What particular points would you make to show it is consistent with His character? What objections might you anticipate someone making to your argument?

In spite of the magnitude of God’s general or natural revelation through His creation, there have always been those who would reject giving God glory in favor of creating their own truth system. As Paul explained it, witnessing the goodness of God’s creation, “they did not glorify Him as God or show gratitude.” When this occurred throughout the Scriptures, the result was some type of idolatry or wrongful worship. The most glaring example might have been the incident of the golden calf in Exodus 32, in which the Israelites melted their gold and had Aaron, the priest, make an idol for them to worship as their deliverer from Egypt. The tragedy of that event is aptly described by Paul: “their thinking became worthless, and their senseless heart were darkened.” The rejection of God’s truth invariably left the hard-hearted to satisfy their craving for truth with a lesser glory.



For the Roman believers specifically, Paul zeroed in on the fruition of such darkened foolishness. They exchanged the true and rightful glory of God for a lesser glory of images that they themselves created. Mounce says, “To exchange the one who exists outside of creation, not subject to its inevitable demise, for that which at the very moment is caught in the process of decay indicates the abysmal ignorance of fallen humans.”<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Stubborn Hearts Given Over (Romans 1:24-31)

Verse 24 clarifies the nature of God’s wrath for those who worship creation instead of the Creator. According to Mounce, in delivering them over to sexual impurity, God’s wrath was shown not be an “active outpouring of divine displeasure but the removal of restraint that allows sinners to reap the just fruits of their rebellion.”<sup>8</sup> The truth of humanity’s sinfulness is that there is no sense of neutrality with regard to rebellion. Left to its own devices, humanity will only increase the depravity of the expression of its sin. In this particular case, the expression of sin was sexual impurity and the magnitude of its depravity would only increase. As it did, the men

and women that rejected God would actually experience the increasing degradation of their bodies as sin continued to take an increased toll.

The rebellious had already been described as exchanging God's glory for a lesser glory. Now Paul wrote of their exchanging God's truth for a lie. "To turn from God is to head straight for theological and moral bankruptcy. The lie they bargained for led them to worship and serve that which is made instead of the Maker."<sup>9</sup> Specifically, they began to worship themselves, pursuing their own glory, delighting in their own passion. Tragically, wasting the opportunity to praise He who endures forever, their worship was cheapened as it was given to something already in the process of being degraded.

-  What are some ways in which you observe culture worshiping the created instead of the Creator? In those cases, how would you describe the opinion of God held by those that worship the creation?
-  How does Paul indicate the self-worship of the rebellious influencing the view of sexuality? What aspect of this expression of sin is strengthened by self-worship? What determines that which is acceptable and taboo?

The manner of God's wrath is the withdrawal of holy restraint from those that willfully rejected the worship of God, choosing instead to continually pursue wickedness. Mounce says, "The penalty for sin is sin itself with all its inevitable consequences."<sup>10</sup> What follows next in Paul's letter is perhaps the clearest teaching in the Bible on homosexuality. Paul referred to sex with someone of the same gender as "unnatural" and "shameless acts." This would have been in sharp contrast to the sexual ethic of the Roman empire, which tolerated and, in certain eras, encouraged homosexuality.

The third and final mention of God delivering them over to something was delivering them over to a corrupt mind so that they could only do what was evil. To continue in such rebellion, continuously pursuing greater perversions of God's design, eventually resulted in the loss of ability to think clearly with sound judgment regarding right and wrong. As a result, "they are filled with all unrighteousness, evil, greed, and wickedness." The acceleration of degradation to those repeatedly giving themselves to the pursuit of self-worship was alarming and all-consuming.

### 3. Volitional Rebellion (Romans 1:32)

Paul boldly confronted the pervasive misperception that once a person came face-to-face with the drastic consequences of his or her sin, he or she would repent, become sober-minded, and devote his or her life to God. Paul made clear that no such moment of awakening would be brought



about by the pursuit of rebellious living because the appetite for sin is insatiable. Instead, the rebellious will only become increasingly calloused to the consequence and collateral impact of their own sin, and will also actively seek the downfall of others due to the same sin.

- ❓ Why do you think a person's ability to be dissuaded from sin by the consequences of God's wrath decreases the longer he or she persists in that sinfulness? How does their perception of the consequences change?
- ❓ In navigating the modern sexual culture, what sexual ethics are promoted today that were not treated that way in the recent past? How do you observe the evidence of such celebration in your regular weekly routines?

The just sentence that those that persist in sin deserve to die did not serve as a significant deterrent for those that habitually pursued particular avenues of sinfulness for a prolonged period. Paul's application to the sexual sinfulness that he had been writing about certainly resonated that truth. As their wantonness gradually and subversively consumed their lives, they were unable to be dissuaded by the consequences. Instead of being warned into repentance, they celebrated all the more heartily when others participated in their own brand of brokenness. It was not that they did not understand their punishment, it was that their wickedness had blinded them to the clear thinking of God's truth. In their self-worship, the sacrifice of more lives for the sake of their own pleasure was a relatively small price to pay.

## Conclusion

When reading Paul's letter to the Roman believers, the applications to modern culture seem to leap off the page. There is perspective to be gained in realizing that those perversions and atrocities that litter the cultural landscape are not new depths of depravity.

First, what and who we worship is of utmost importance. The proliferation of sexual sin and confusion is based in self-deification and self-worship. Self-worship involves a person making himself or herself the ultimate authority for what is right and wrong in creation. More dangerously, though, it seeks to usurp God's authority and glory as Creator. The cure for this descent into fleshly madness is the right and holy worship of the one true God, who created everything that has been created.

Second, sex is a beautiful and wonderful creation of God, given as a gift to His creation. As believers seek to view sexuality in a biblical worldview, it is paramount that it is honored as one of God's good gifts to be enjoyed as He intended before the Fall – in the covenantal relationship between a man and woman.

Third, sin that is allowed to persist unchecked – especially sexual sin – has the capacity to devour a person. For that reason, it is imperative that believers live with transparency in this particular area of life and discipleship. Certainly that transparency should not be extended to every person, but having a close group of fellow believers that assist in holding one another accountable for sexual purity is critical. The risk of becoming entangled in sinfulness with such power to destroy is too great to live in isolation and secrecy.

Fourth, the world communicates perpetually about sexuality. In order to navigate the sexual culture, then, it is imperative that the believer guard the sources that he or she allows to influence them about their sexual ethics. Something will exert influence on the believer about sex. It is incumbent on the believer to be sure that what exerts influence is the living Word of God.

- ❓ How comfortable would you say you are in being able to articulate the Bible's teaching on sexual ethics? What passages would you make sure to use? What passages would you make sure to highlight to address the consequences of ignoring God's sexual ethics (other than this one)?
- ❓ How would you describe the attitude in the churches you've attended toward discussing sexuality as an aspect of discipleship? How have you seen that change over the years? Why do you think that is significant?
- ❓ What does it indicate to you that so much energy is spent in modern culture defining people by their sexual orientation? How does your identity in Christ war against that? What particular aspect of your life do you want to be known for?

## Prayer of Response

*Pray and ask God to lead you to a right view and practice of sexuality. Ask Him to help you guard the influences you allow in your life regarding sex and for the ability to point to the goodness of sex, according to His design.*

## Additional Resources

- *Sex in a Broken World* by Paul Tripp
- *Finally Free* by Heath Lambert
- *Respectable Sins* by Jerry Bridges

## For Next Week

### Session Title

- Finding Our Way With Technology (Our Mind)

### Main Passages

- Philippians 4:8

### Session Outline

1. Think on These Things (Philippians 4:8)

### Memorize

*They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served what has been created instead of the Creator, who is praised forever. Amen.*

-Romans 1:25

### Daily Readings

- Monday - Romans 12:1-2
- Tuesday - 2 Corinthians 10:3-5
- Wednesday - Galatians 5:1
- Thursday - 2 Timothy 1:7
- Friday - 1 Peter 4:7
- Saturday - Colossians 3:1-2

## Extended Commentary

### Romans 1:18-32

1:18 All people need the gospel because they are under God's wrath, which stems from his holy revulsion to sin. Paul wrote this letter from the Greek city of Corinth—a city full of idolatry and immorality. Humankind originally knew God and fellowshiped with him (Gn 3:8a). The history of the world and of the OT reveals a subsequent regression and loss of moral knowledge. Since the garden of Eden, people have been unrighteous, and they have suppressed the truth.

1:19 God as Creator has disclosed himself in creation. “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the expanse proclaims the work of his hands” (Ps 19:1; cp. Ac 14:15-17). People also have an innate capacity for God as well as a moral conscience. God is at work to show himself in the world, yet the world is in rebellion against him.

1:20 Humanity's problem is not that they don't know the truth. The history of the human race discloses a determined effort to oppose the will of God. People are without excuse for their idolatry and practical atheism.

1:21 Because of human willfulness, people's knowledge of God became clouded and their thinking became darkened. Without contact with God, the human heart loses contact with reality, misses the purpose of one's existence, God and becomes ungrateful. People are supposed to glorify God as God but instead find all sorts of created objects to worship. Part of the wrath of God is revealed in humanity's loss of intelligent thinking.

1:22 A classic example of human foolishness is found in Is 44:9-20 where human cleverness ends in stupidity.

1:23 Many people think that the history of religion developed along an evolutionary model. In this view, humanity originally held animistic beliefs and then progressed to polytheism, to tribal deities, and then to a single creator God. From there we progressed to a vague philosophical monotheism in the Enlightenment, and finally we are now embracing atheism in the age of science. But this is not true to the early history of religion. Instead of starting in polytheism, the Bible says humanity started with knowledge of the one true God and then declined into polytheism as humans were separated from God and fractured from one another. Paul warns that loss of knowledge of the true God resulted in the worship of images resembling mortal man. Even in the modern age we have seen

dictators worshiped as gods, and the Bible says this sin will be repeated climactically in the end times (2Th 2:3-12; Rv 13:1-18).

1:24 Because they rejected the truths of God revealed in creation, God punished the Greco-Roman world by delivering them to the desires of their hearts. A similar scenario played out in the life of King Ahab of Israel, who continually rebelled against God (1Kg 16:29-33). As a judgment, God permitted a lying prophetic spirit to deceive Ahab to his doom (1Kg 22:22-23). The ancients were enmeshed in polytheistic idolatry, and in their devotions to their false gods they practiced all sorts of immorality.

1:25 The loss of the knowledge of God in the mind and heart leads to an exchange of the truth for a lie. Something created is served and worshiped rather than the Creator, and judgment is the result (Ps 81:12; Ac 7:42).<sup>11</sup>

1:26–27 Again it is stated that “God gave them over” (cf. v. 24). God’s anger against sin leads him to withdraw from the sinner who willfully continues in wickedness. The penalty for sin is sin itself with all its inevitable consequences. Because people failed to glorify God and give him thanks, God gave them over “to sexual impurity” (v. 24). Because they exchanged the glory of God for a lie, he gave them over to the “passions that bring dishonor” (v. 26).

Romans 1:26–27 contains the clearest teaching in the New Testament on homosexuality. In this section Paul described the practice as “shameful,” “unnatural,” “indecent,” and as a “perversion.” By contrast, the Greco-Roman society of Paul’s day tolerated homosexuality with considerable ease. Among some advocates it was viewed as superior to heterosexuality. Barclay notes that “fourteen out of the first fifteen Roman Emperors were homosexuals.”

In Jewish culture, however, it was regarded as an abomination. Barrett comments that “no feature of pagan society filled the Jew with greater loathing than the toleration, or rather admiration, of homosexual practices.” The Old Testament specifically prohibits homosexuality. Leviticus 18:22 says, “Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable.” The penalty for both participants was death (Lev 20:13). In 1 Cor 6:9–10 Paul specifically said that “homosexual offenders” will not “inherit the kingdom of God.” Against this background it is difficult to understand why some contemporary teachers— even some who claim to be biblical—make allowance for a practice clearly condemned in both the Old and the New Testaments. Achtemeier writes that the kind of life Paul described in vv. 26–27 “cannot be understood as an alternative life-style, somehow acceptable to God” but rather as “a sign of one of the

forms God's wrath takes when he allows us free reign to continue in our abuse of creation and in our abuse of one another as creatures."<sup>12</sup>

1:28-32 In v. 24 God is described as delivering society to impurity, in v. 26 to degrading passions, and in v. 28 to a corrupt mind. The mind becomes (Gk) *adokimos* (disqualified), an untrustworthy guide in moral choices because people have rejected knowledge of God. Verses 29-31 contain a list of vices similar to ancient vice lists. Pagan moralists often lamented the loss of virtue in their societies. Paul's list of sins was no darker than what other writers of that time reported. All sin is serious. Lesbian and homosexual practices may seem particularly objectionable, but any of the twenty-one sins listed (cp. Gl 5:19-21) cut people off from the life of God and bring spiritual death. When society applauds others who practice these sins, it has lost its moral compass. Ancient philosophers warned about the social effects of popular plays. Murder and immorality were so common on stage that people no longer reacted when they occurred in daily life. Modern entertainments have a similar effect on minds and the values that guide behavior.<sup>13</sup>

## References

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2. Moo, Douglas J. *The Epistle to the Romans*. NICNT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996.
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13. *CSB Study Bible*.