

## The Depraved and Redeemed Mind in Romans

I remember memorizing large chunks of the book of Romans when I was a teenager. It was a required text one year when I was on the Bible Bowl team at my church. Romans 1 begins Paul's train of logic to show how depraved the unredeemed mind is and why all people need a Savior. These texts have taken on new meaning since I have embraced a Christian naturist lifestyle.

Naturists claim to experience a close connection to creation and to their Creator through their practices. Another wonderful benefit from this lifestyle is the reversing of the polarity in terms of the body and its connection to sexual impurity. Allow me to explain.

Sexual sin and objectifying the body through lust has been one of the most damaging of all evils in society since the beginning of time. Our enemy viciously exploits this issue, and we give him more than a foothold! The root of the problem is in how you look at the body, whether a source of shameful lewdness or as the pinnacle of God's creation.

Romans 1:20 says, "...since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse." Creation speaks and testifies to God's goodness. As the crowning glory of His creation, we too should exercise dominion over creation and reflect God's glory as image bearers that we are. But there is a problem.

The text continues in verse 21, "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles." This is a clear reference to idols. What is an idol? Anything that comes before God in his rightful place over all things. We know an idol does not have to be a little statue or figure of some sort. One idol I struggled to put down for half my life was the lust of the flesh. I'll be honest (I've become more open and vulnerable since embracing naturism), I had addictive behaviors when it came to this vice. I didn't like it, but this bondage was my dirty secret.

The text connects sexual immorality to the downward spiral in verse 24: "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 about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen." We will come back to this, but the idea culminates in verse 28, "...they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done."

I never cheated on my wife in a physical way, but Jesus' words about looking lustfully at a woman being just like adultery cut like a dagger. The passage in Romans goes on to detail

many more shameful acts that stem from the depraved mind. Verse 25 is a key to the whole chapter and to this issue as a whole. It came to mind in a fresh way as I spent an entire week with no clothes in a rented villa in Florida with five other nude couples. That may sound strange to many, but this was actually a marriage retreat! The only thing I wore was my wedding ring. I never once experienced the feelings of old, lusting after another woman, objectifying or judging anyone's body. The company of naked people around me never aroused anything but love for God and healthy respect for each other. In fact, we shared some of the most open and honest and spiritual conversations I've ever had in my life!

What made the difference? I changed the way I think about the body, and the former issues vanished. The truth of God is that all people are his image bearers and precious in his sight. This sounds elementary, but like the depraved of Romans 1, we can easily exchange the truth of God for a lie. The world does not take this high and sacred stance on people. We can take our cues from the world rather than from God. When our minds are not redeemed, we devalue humanity, not respecting their inherent worth as God's image bearers. My past issues with lust were a practical application of worshipping the created rather than the Creator.

Now having embraced naturism, if I see another human, whether clothed or not, I see the pinnacle of God's creation. Like a sunset or the Grand Canyon, I praise God for their beauty. The definition of beauty is no longer the shallow and unrealistic values of the world. Everyone is beautiful, however they are created. I no longer worship the created, I now worship the Creator and forever praise Him. It's a much better way to live! My relationship with my wife is obviously much improved as she trusts me and knows that I see her as the most beautiful of all God's creations.

You may say, this text is about those who are apart from Christ. The next chapter, though, begins, "You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things." (Romans 2:1) The chapter that follows in desperation claims, "There is no one righteous, not even one." (Romans 3:10) Salvation is not a guarantee that all will be easy and well. We will still struggle with sin. Chapter 6 starts out with the question, "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means!" (Romans 6:1-2) The next chapter confesses, "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." (Romans 7:15) This was my experience as a Christian and as a pastor even!

Romans is so rich, but for the sake of time, chapter 12 urges us, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." (Romans 12:2) There it is. If you don't want the depraved mind of chapter 1, don't exchange the truth of God for the lie of the world. Choose instead to redeem your mind! We do this in the Christian life in many areas. However, we typically admit defeat in the area of lust, which was my idol.

We say it would be impossible to restore the innocence of Eden in the area of lust, because we live in a fallen world. Yes, mankind was naked and unashamed in the garden, but that was

before sin. You couldn't possibly live nude with other people and not fall into sexual impurity, at the very least in the thought life. I just got home from that very experience and can testify that this is a false notion.

We don't use that excuse in any other area. You wouldn't counsel a habitual liar to give up trying to be truthful, because after all, we live in a fallen world. Adam and Eve were truthful before the fall, but lied immediately after sinning. We don't expect to never be truthful anymore since humanity's truthful state was before sin, and now we are fallen. No, we want to redeem our minds and not conform to the pattern of the world, and we want to overcome the fallenness of the world and live differently, offering our whole selves (our bodies) as a living sacrifice. It would be foolish to remain a liar.

You see my point? Why do this with every offense against God and man, but throw in the towel on lust. Why agree with the world that the simple sight of another person will evoke a sexual response and do nothing about the root issue? The best advice I gave as a pastor was to avert the eyes from looking at what tempts you, but I, myself, ignored that advice when no one was looking at me. We try to manage the symptoms only, without offering a cure. It's like trying to treat a viral infection with an antacid tablet. I worshipped created beings. The answer is so simple. Worship the Creator.

I'm no longer tempted to fall into impure thoughts or sinful acts anymore. I thought I'd never grow out of it. I just held onto a worldly depraved mind (unredeemed) in that area. I lived and taught that God wanted us to live according to his truth, but I exchanged his truth for the lie of the world and its standards and morals (or lack thereof).

The final verse to highlight would be from Romans 16:19, "I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil." The human body is not evil. The heart can be. A depraved mind certainly is. The human body is good and beautiful, especially when viewed with the innocence of Eden, having a holy respect for all people. I believe it's impossible to worship the Creator while at the same time be selfishly devaluing one of his creations. That is plain evil, and having been redeemed, we are called to a much higher standard. I choose redemption over depravity!