

"LETTER TO OUR GENERATION"

A Series of Sermons on the Letter of Paul to the Romans

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by

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II

"Cumulative Problem"

Text: Romans 1:17-32

The second important fact that Paul presses at the very beginning of his book is the immensity and complexity of the human problem. I believe that Paul in these important sentences has faced up to the historical crisis of man in a very profound way. Two things preoccupy his attention:

(1) The origin of the human crisis, and (2) the cumulative nature of that crisis. From Paul's point of view the breakdown and destruction of relationship is at the heart of our problem. In the verses of the text, Paul describes three primary relationships for man: his relationship with God, with himself and with his neighbor. His thesis is that a break or roadblock at any one point will inevitably affect the other two. He puts it this way: If a man's relationship with his creator is broken, which is what happens when a man shifts his worship from the true God to that which is not God, the result of this shift is a break in relationship between men and God. This break results in a broken inner self-view, a confused understanding and acceptance of man's own distinctive identity. Paul makes a specific reference to the crisis of homosexuality as the example of his thesis. Homosexuality is an instance of inward confusion on the question of identity. Paul seems to be saying as Sigmund Freud has also said in the Twentieth Century that a man's sexual self-awareness is the most accurate clue to the state of his inner identity resolution. Paul's illustration is chosen to make really one point, and that is that a man becomes inwardly confused when either of his other two relationships, the relationship with God and/or with his neighbor, are distorted. The third relationship is also dependent upon the first two as they are upon it. When I renounce my obedience to God; ^{when} ~~when~~ my own inward self view ^{is} chaotic, ^{the} result is always hurtfulness toward my neighbor.

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For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live."

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has

shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; for although they know God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator who is blessed forever! Amen.

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct. They were filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's decree that those who do such things deserve to die, they not only do them but approve those who practice them.

.....Romans 1:17-32

In William Golden's Book, "Lord of the Flies," the author has sketched this interrelationship with terrifying symbolism: The young boys in Jack's group become so caught up in the hunt of the pig that they lose their upward relationship, this results first in the blurring of their own individual self-ness (Ralph cannot recognize them with their warpaint and masks), and this in turn results in the murder of Simeon who they confuse with a pig. When I lose the sense of who I really am, then the people around me lose their meaning too.

This then is Paul's first major thesis and its importance is very great to our time. At the core of all human tragedy is the wasteland of broken or distorted communication.

The second major thesis is of equal significance. The human crisis is cumulative by nature. Our bad choices, our mistakes, our hurtful acts, tend to build up, to compound. They never stay small; they never stay the way they start. In the Book of Romans, Paul gives three examples of the cumulative nature of the human crisis:

(1) Idolatry always cumulates in intensity. In Paul's list in Romans, he accuses man of failing to worship the only true God and in God's

place, he charges, we have worshipped "man, birds, animals, reptiles" The order of the list is fascinating. The Apostle gives us credit where credit is due. We first of all chose to absolutize man, he is our Amen Ra. There is something admirable in this first choice of an object of worship; because certainly man is the noblest thing in creation; but, Paul's relentless argument wisely points out that all idolatries of man have tended to cave in and disintegrate. No man can successfully bear the weight of the adoration of other men. Inevitably disappointments unnerve the worship and set in motion a downward drift. When men's worship of man gives way, he slides past birds and animals and is reduced at the end to the worship of what he hates, symbolized by the snake. This downward slide is profoundly ironic; when man abandoned the worship of God and chose to worship the creature rather than the creator, the inevitable result of the downward drift is that man ends his idolatry in the dead-end street obedience to what he fears, hoping perhaps to strike a bargain with that dreaded foe.

(2) There is a second spiral too: the things that we do that are wrong also tend to cumulate in intensity and destructiveness. Nothing stays put! Paul notes that the sins of humanity build up from mistakes, errors of weakness, to cruelty and finally the bottom rung of the ladder, "they not only do these things but even approve those who do these things." One of the major themes of the modern novel is precisely this cumulative impact of man's inhumanity to man. The first killing in "Lord of the Flies," is of less intensity, in effect the result of a moment of emotional excess, the violence of confusion. But Golden will not let the matter rest there. He traces the evil as it increases in terror to the point where the murder of Ralph is their main preoccupation; they want to kill him. In the film, "The Graduate," the same phenomenon is traced. Ben's waywardness begins out of boredom, little more. His first sins are relatively innocuous, but the intensity builds and at one terrifying scene he takes the daughter of Mrs. Robinson to a cheap cafe; a girl he has known since his boyhood, and his purpose is clear and simple: he wants to humiliate and destroy this innocent and good person. Because of his own inner confusion and sense of guilt, Ben feels the compulsion to do this; then in one unforgettable moment Elaine says to him with tears streaming down her face, "Why do you hate me?" His sin had cumulated from boredom and weakness to sadism and cruelty. But the movie has a second chapter and in that one simple redemptive moment, Ben is rescued from the edge of his own destruction.

Let me ask a personal question: how does it go with your own wrongdoing? Have you found the cumulative principle at work?

(3) Paul is not finished. He probes one more fact of the cumulative crisis. The reality of guilt builds up too. The opening chapters of Romans are like a great courtroom scene and Paul stalks back and forth before the judge as a majestic Crown prosecutor. He draws tightening circles of guilt and builds his case with exacting precision. He is determined to show the origins of the guilt, the damage that has been caused and the full extent of the involvement.

This prosecution section begins in Romans 1:18 with the sweeping "they" are guilty. The level of intensity builds even more in the second

chapter as he thunders, "You are guilty. . . ." and a strange uneasiness settles over the courtroom as he continues, "We are guilty. . . ." And, then at last Paul quietly admits before the silent room, "I even I am condemned. . . ." Do you see the full implication of Paul's argument? Guilt cumulates too. It is impossible for a man to stay safely aloof of the human tragedy. Even Ralph, the symbol of order, is guilty in "Lord of the Flies." Ironically, the first hurtful act to be committed on the island was the mockery of the boy with the glasses and it was Ralph who had done that. This is what Paul is trying to tell us. We have a big problem on our hands and no amount of sentimental evasiveness will solve it.

The solution to our crisis must be relevant to both facts about the crisis itself.

(1) The solution must heal relationships since that problem lies at that grass roots level.

(2) And the solution must itself be cumulative or it will never catch up with the crisis. The solution must have its own inner dynamism that is within itself cumulative and, therefore, able to outdistance a dynamic problem.

We know, therefore, what will not work. To try to forget or discount the problem is no solution because basically such an approach is a static answer for a dynamic problem. To try to blame other people for the crisis will not work because that is a solution which looks back into murky previous disappointments and such past tense blame-fixing is of little real help for the present existential problem.

Both of these false solutions fail because at heart they are fixed points but the problem is a moving point and not only moving but cumulating. Thank God there is a word of hope: "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound--where sin cumulated, grace cumulated faster still."