

PAUL'S VIEW OF IDOLATRY IN ROMANS 1

Romans 1:20-28 is one of Paul's most explicit elaborations on idolatry. This passage affirms the following:

20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. 21 For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. 22 Professing to be wise, they became fools, 23 and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. 24 Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. 25 For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. 26 For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, 27 and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error. 28 And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper.

This introductory section to Romans affirms that idol worship is the root sin of all other sins. When one turns from trust in God to trust in some part of God's creation, then the "heart" becomes "darkened" and all manner of sins follow from this, as Paul has begun to elaborate in verses 24-28, which is continued in verses 29-32." Thus Paul sees idolatry to be the essence of sin. Already Ezekiel 22:1-16 had asserted that Israel's idolatry (vv. 1-4) led the nation to all manner of sins (vv. 5-13), which then led to its judgment (vv. 14-16). Significantly, Paul's survey of the history of idolatry includes all humanity who have turned from God to worship something else, which likely includes Adam and Eve (whom Rom 1:20-21 probably includes in its purview): "for *since the creation of the world* His invisible attributes have been clearly seen . . . so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God." Hence, all humanity, including Adam and Eve, are indicted here, since they have been among all humans who have committed part of the "all unrighteousness" of sinners (1:18a) and who have been "without excuse" "since the creation of the world," because they also have been among those "who suppressed the truth in unrighteousness" (1:18b).

The essential nature of the idolatry is explained to be “exchang[ing] the glory of the incorruptible God for an image” (Rom 1:23), “exchang[ing] the truth of God for a lie” and “worship[ing] and serving the creature rather than the Creator” (v. 25). The fitting punishment for malfunction in worshiping God is a malfunction in other relationships, which includes homosexuality, lesbianism, disobedience to parents and all kinds of dysfunctional relationships with others (vv. 24-32).

Likewise, the *lex talionis* judgment (“the punishment must fit the crime”) for not honoring God (v. 21) is “that their bodies would be dishonored among them” (v. 24); similarly, the penalty for not approving to have God in their knowledge fittingly is that God “gave them over to an unapproved mind” (i.e., a mind not approved by God, v. 28).

In fact, the punishment itself is that the idol worshipers’ unnatural relationships with others resemble their unnatural relationship with God. So far these judgments involve people being punished by means of their own sin, which does not include the idea of reflecting what one worships. But this also appears to be discernible.

Because they have “suppressed the truth” of God, they have also suppressed knowledge and reflection of the attributes of his divine nature (Rom 1:18-20), so that they fail to acknowledge and likely even to reflect God’s nature and attributes, but instead they mirror the corruptible nature of the creation (vv. 21-25). Thus they are not righteous like God but are “unrighteous” (vv. 18-19), not “wise” as reflectors of God’s wisdom but “fools” (v. 22), not truthful but filled with “deceit” (v. 29), not good but “inventors of evil” (1:30), not loving but “unloving” (1:31) and not merciful but “unmerciful” (1:31).

(We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry by G. K. Beale, Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, Kindle, 2008, 276, 278 of 525, Text and Paragraph Structure Modified)