

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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May 18th, 2025

Sermon Title: Self-Deception

Sermon Text: Romans 1:21-25

Rom. 1:21 For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Rom. 1:22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools,

Rom. 1:23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Rom. 1:24 ¶ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves,

Rom. 1:25 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.

Main Point: Sin always has its roots in a prior truth commitment, which has its own roots further back in a prior worship commitment. Our ultimate commitments and loyalties are determinative for how we live and who we live for.

Outline:

1. Distortion Through Deception (1:21)
2. Discipline Through Sin (1:24)
3. Depravity Through Idolatry (1:25)

Introduction

If you look at the leading thinkers in the past century or two, one thing you start to notice is this sort of consistent wild utopian thinking about the future. And so many of these thinkers seemed to believe that with the spread of knowledge, with access to more information, people would become happier and more peaceful. Listen to this:

Andrew Dickson White, a historian and educator said this in 1896: “The improvement of scientific knowledge has not only made man more comfortable but better, by dispelling the darkness of ignorance and superstition.”

Lester Frank Ward, in 1883 said this: “The improvement of scientific knowledge has not only made man more comfortable but better.”

Edward Bellamy, in 1888: “With science and industry guided by reason, mankind will enter into an age of prosperity where war, poverty, and suffering are relics of the past.”

Moving a little closer in time, H.G. Wells, (before the outbreak of World War I) said this: “Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe.” Here is Wells saying, if only we could have more intellectual progress, we could outrun catastrophe.

Here is one more from H.G. Wells: “The political world of a century ahead will be as different from that of today as ours is from the Middle Ages. Education and science will guide men away from war, and the last remnants of barbarism will disappear.”

Wells anticipated a rational, educated society where scientific advancement and social progress would eliminate war and inequality.

Oh H.G. if you only knew what was right around the corner. 20 million dead in the trenches of World War 1. 70 million dead in World War 2. The holocaust with 6 million Jews dead. Stalin’s purges in the Soviet Union resulting in 20-30 million dead. The Armenian genocide by the Ottomans. Some say 1.5 million dead. Mao’s cultural revolution in China with 45 million dead. The most educated and also bloodiest century in human history. And we willingly did these things to ourselves. Often in the name of science and

progress! There were few places on earth more educated and envied for its knowledge than Germany before the outbreak of World War 2.

Now, I think you may have noticed that in the aftermath of such horrors, people have generally stopped talking this way. The utopian dreams aren't quite what they were.

Why were these utopian thinkers so far off the mark? You could include many factors, but I want to suggest that you see one core assumption that ties them all together: a belief in the power of knowledge, and an unbiblical view of the human heart. There is this deceived optimism in thinking, "If only if we knew more and understood more, we would be happier and more peaceful."

But that assumes that human beings will do good things with what they know – that people do *not* take what they know and twist it – that people always do what is best for themselves and their neighbors with what they know.

A dose of realism – like the sort we see from Paul today in our reading... this dose of realism might have gone a long way toward tempering the utopian thinkers and preparing them for the reality of the dark things we are capable of.

Listening to the Scriptures, and listening to Paul's own understanding of human nature might have helped them to see that perhaps growth in knowledge doesn't equal growth in peace or happiness after all, because knowledge is not our biggest problem. Nor is knowledge even close to our greatest answer.

Let me bring this even more up to date.

If knowledge were mankind's greatest problem, we would expect the least educated to be the most sinful and the most educated to also be the most enlightened and pious. Yet we find that often it is the most educated who commit some of the worst evils.

The driver who attacked police and exploded his Cybertruck at a hotel in Las Vegas back in January was a Green Beret, but also a top student who graduated summa cum laude from college.

Luigi Mangioni, who allegedly shot a man in cold blood on the streets of New York this past December was the valedictorian of his class and a college graduate from the University of Pennsylvania.

By the way, is there any greater evidence for the darkness of the human heart that there are actually people who treat this murderer as if he's some sort of folk hero? And that those who trumpet his cause tend to be those who have attended America's most elite universities?

Later Paul will say in verse 32 that "Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them." I mentioned before, sometimes the celebration is its own punishment. This well educated young man murdered someone in cold blood, and many in our world today do in fact approve of him doing this. Not a knowledge problem. They just like what he did because of his victim's job. We live in dark days, indeed.

My point (and even Paul's point) is not that education or knowledge are bad. Paul was a highly educated man. The point is this: If knowledge is the problem, or if all we need is to gather more information and memorize more, why are some of the most educated among us also so darkened in our thinking? The answer is, what we're talking about isn't a knowledge problem. It is a problem of the heart, and of the will. Disordered loves.

Last week we looked at the reality of God's wrath. And I hope I was able to show you from Scripture that God's wrath really is good news. It's good news about God, that he is holy, that he's a good judge... but it's also good news that God takes sin seriously, and that in Christ he honors and caps off that commitment to goodness and justice.

Here Paul is today, and building upon what we saw last week, we need to answer a question: if all mankind know that God exists... if we all know that God is good and expects us to obey his law... if all of us *know* that we are guilty... if all of us *know* that the wrath of God is real... if we can see the outworking of his wrath in the sin of the world around us... all of these things we've seen so far in Romans... Then how is it that we continue to put ourselves in this position in the first place?

Why don't we just learn the lesson from our fathers who came before us? And why is it that we keep doubling down on the very things that *place* us under the wrath of God to begin with when we know full well what it's doing to us, to our world, and to our relationship to God?

To ask it more clearly: what is keeping what we know from translating into what we feel and do? If we *know* what is good, why aren't we good? If God has shown us so much about himself and ourselves, then why isn't there peace on earth and love between men? How could something like World Wars 1 and 2 happen? Why do we destroy ourselves against our own best interests?

Paul's answer is that we don't do the right thing with what we know. Our knowledge has become just another tool to destroy ourselves and others with.

Instead we saw this two weeks ago, that we know plenty, but Paul's language for what we do with this knowledge is, we "suppress" it. Why? Well that is what I want us to answer today.

And the answer is "self-deception." We deceive ourselves. I want to draw the answers from this passage here in Romans, but we can also draw from a couple of other places that I think we'll find helpful to sort of complete the picture of what Paul is painting here.

Here are the three points for today: First, Distortion Through Deception. Second, Discipline Through Sin. Third, Depravity Through Idolatry.

1. Distortion Through Deception – (1:25)

First, sin produces distortion through deception.

Now, look at verse 25 again. Paul says that God gave them up. Remember, last week we saw that when God gives to sinful people what they want, it's really a judicial act of God and a horrible punishment and a sign of God's wrath. But in Paul's argument, why did God give them up? Why did he let them have their way?

Because, he says, "they exchanged the truth about God for a lie." Now, this is what we call a bad trade. So just think of the irrationality of doing this. To know

something, to know that it comports with reality, and to deliberately try to unknow it.

What would move someone to make such a stupid trade? Especially when they know better! The answer is self-deception. In the interest of shaping the world around ourselves, we deceive ourselves, lie to ourselves, and convince ourselves that up is down, black is white, and good is evil.

Self-deception is very much a theme of Scripture. Listen to this from James 1:22-24 – “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.” James is saying, our sin makes us like this person who knows what he looks like, and decides to immediately in the next moment to forget it. Whatever knowledge we have is neutralized by our hearts.

1 John 1:8 – “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” Self-deception. We deceive ourselves. In this case we deceive ourselves by not being able to accurately assess what we are really like: we hide our own sin from ourselves. We can’t bear to see it.

Or think of what God says about our hearts in Jeremiah 17:9 – “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?”

Here is what Irenaeus, the church father, writing in the second century said about this: “The mind, once turned away from God, invents countless justifications for its own corruption.”

And then Tertullian, less than a hundred years later: “Men would rather be deceived by their own desires than be enlightened by the truth.”

John Chrysostom in a sermon from the 5th century adds something here: “Nothing is so deceitful as sin. It makes those who are its captives think they are free.”

Notice what he is saying. Sin is a moral principle that dwells within our hearts. It is *our* sin, not some external thing that comes in. Sin is not a substance; it is your heart choosing against God. Sin is really an expression of our own hearts and desires. And yet in sin, we fool ourselves, because our hearts really are deceitful. And the first person our heart lies to is us.

When you are tempted to sin, you are being tempted to believe a lie.

Adam and Eve believed that God was evil and selfish.

The man or woman who pursues an adulterous relationship believes some kind of lie (“I deserve this,” or something foolish like that).

The man who decides to rob someone likely tells himself something similar.

These are lies, and the more that we believe them, the more deceived we are.

Why do we do this? It isn’t because we’re missing information. Not really. We know the truth, but we don’t *love* the truth. That’s our problem.

Here is what Jesus said to Nicodemus. Notice what he says about our motivations here:

“And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people *loved the darkness rather than the light* because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed” (John 3:19-20).

We are motivated by a greater love. In sin, we are driven by what John calls a love of darkness. A love of self. You see, that original question we had is really answered here. Jesus doesn’t say, “People do wicked things because they don’t know better.” Oh no, he says, “We do wicked things because we *do* know better, but we have a heart orientation away from the good.” We’re morally culpable all the way down, we’re not fundamentally ignorant.

Peter talks about self-deception in 2 Peter 3:5 – “For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God.” Here Peter speaks of a “deliberate overlooking” that people do. We know God made this world, and we deliberately overlook. Suppress. Avoid. Ignore. Whatever we can do. If we can make ourselves forget the creator, we can replace his will with our will, then we can sit on his throne in our hearts. Again, this is the old human problem.

There is this incredible stubborn willfulness to the human heart. Jesus in Luke 16:31 tells the story of Lazarus, and how Lazarus wanted to return from the dead

to warn his brothers about how horrible hell is, and do you remember what Jesus said? “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.” Why would that be? Most modern people think of themselves as straight shooters and truth tellers, but Jesus says, they aren’t. They deliberately overlook true things. They know what is good, and they suppress it. They could see someone return from the dead and still tell themselves that they can’t believe their own eyes.

You see, what really happens is this – sin is fundamentally a willful truth exchange. We get presented with a lie, and we accept the proposition, yield to it, and act on it. But even that’s not the whole story. You see, that sin begins further back than just the action, it starts in the heart, in the core commitments of what we love. We yield to the lie because it serves us in our pursuit of dethroning God from our hearts.

This is why Jesus says (for example) that adultery isn’t *in* the act, it’s in the eye and in the heart. Only then do we move and think and will in response to that deeper love commitment.

The deception of our hearts runs deep. And so because of that, we distort the truth, but not because we don’t know it, but because we don’t like it.

Let’s keep going.

2. Discipline Through Sin (1:24)

Second, we see that God disciplines *through* sin. We saw last week that one of the ways we know the wrath of God is real is that sin continues to happen. This is very counter-intuitive. Most people today, if you asked them would say that they are never freer than when they are able to do what they want – and that especially includes being able to sin.

People deceive themselves into thinking that they are free when they sin. They can’t even imagine the idea that when they sin they are not only in chains, but that they are adding to their chains. In fact, in sin, we are able to see those chains.

But the truth is that sin is not freedom, it’s punishment. It’s enslavement.

Psalm 81:11-12 “But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would not submit to me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels.”

There’s that language again of “giving over.” God giving people what they most want. Giving people what they love is good when we love good things. But giving us what we most want when we want bad things – it’s horrible. It’s a form of discipline from God when it happens.

Now, it could be worse in practice.

The Bible repeatedly teaches that God restrains evil, that he doesn’t give us over so completely that we destroy ourselves. We see God’s restraint of sin in Genesis 20:6 how God restrained Abimelech from sleeping with Abraham’s wife, and God says, “it was I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not let you touch her.” If you remember David’s confrontation with Nabal, David tells Abigail that God used her to keep him from hurting her foolish husband. God restrains evil in this world.

In Hosea 4:17 God is speaking of Israel’s idolatry and says, “Ephraim is joined to idols, leave him alone.” So there, God judges Israel by “leaving [them] alone” and giving them the sin that they want so much.

We may not think about this much, but when we look around ourselves and see people not destroying each other, being faithful to their spouses, exalting what is good and beautiful... we need to see that as a gift of God’s restraining grace. Even in unbelievers and people who otherwise don’t care about God, we see this thing which theologians sometimes refer to as “common grace.” It is God not giving us what we want most in the darkest part of our hearts.

It may seem counter-intuitive, but one of the worst things that can happen to a person is for God to give them everything they want. This is why it is almost universally true that winning the lottery is bad for those who win it. Suddenly the heart is given free reign, and with fewer and fewer constraints many people destroy themselves.

I mentioned this last week, but it bears repeating: Peter Martyr, in his commentary on verse 24 of this passage says, “This is the ultimate punishment, when man is forsaken by God and handed over to govern himself.”

Again, very counter-intuitive. People often think of real freedom as being able to do anything, or being able to do what you want. But Paul has said, "One of the worst things you can ever get is everything you ever wanted." For an unholy and unrighteous person, what they want ultimately leads to self-contradiction and self-destruction.

Think of the Gerasene Demoniac. They put chains on him, and actually those restraints were a kind of blessing, but he kept breaking the restraints. And when he does, think of how terrible it is for him. What is he doing when Jesus comes upon him? He is living among the tombs, hurting himself, cutting himself, destroying himself. This is the direction of all fallen creatures if allowed to go where we want and do whatever we want. God's grace provides restraint. To have those restraints removed is a horrible judgment.

Much of what makes this so dark is that when this happens, people are happy all the way down.

You remember that final moment in the *Lord of the Rings* when Gollum falls into the fires of Mount Doom? He has the ring: this thing that has been destroying him nearly his entire life, and now he has it as he sinks into the fires. And as he sinks there is that elated and joyful look on his face all the way down as he sinks into the fire. This is all of us with our sin if God doesn't alert us. We know we're miserable, but we double down on the thing that is destroying us and making us miserable.

Peter Martyr says this: "When wicked people take pleasure in their sins, their fall is even greater, for they appear to find joy in what should disturb them." I wish I could not think of example after example of precisely this. Friends who lost the restraints in their life, gave in to temptation, and found themselves completely imprisoned and ruled and governed by their worst impulses. I suspect you could multiply the examples from your own experience as well.

But even if you don't have anecdotes and examples, God's word tells us here that God does discipline through sin.

3. Depravity Through Idolatry – (1:25)

Third, Paul introduces us to depravity through idolatry.

So we've seen already that sin distorts the truth through deception – something that we willingly choose that is rooted deep in the heart. Then that God gives people over to what they most want – which actually ends up destroying them. But finally today look at what verse 25 tells us.

The result of the self-deception and the removal of God's restraints and giving us what we want most results in "serving the creature rather than the Creator." Servitude is the result.

Again, think of what we just saw in the last point: people think they are free because they sin! Las Vegas – famously called "sin city" advertises itself like that, as though there is no freer place on earth. But Paul says, when the restraints come off, when we can deceive ourselves to our heart's content, we still end up serving – or if I could get more textually accurate – we still end up enslaved by the thing we are living for.

But the thing we're enslaved to is an idol. Sin leads to deeper deception as God gives people what they want most.

Look at this from Isaiah 44: "They know not, nor do they discern, for he has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see, and their hearts, so that they cannot understand. No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment..." (Is. 44:18) You see here how spiritual blindness is both a result of (and a punishment for) idolatry.

Or think of [God speaking] in Ezekiel 20: "I defiled them through their very gifts in their offering up all their firstborn, that I might devastate them. I did it that they might know that I am the LORD" (Ezek. 20:26). God does not need to make people sin. In fact, James says that God does not sin or tempt people to sin. But he doesn't have to. We already have so much darkness and deception within our own hearts by nature that when Scripture says these sorts of things, what is really happening is that instead of restraining people, he is setting them loose to follow their hearts. He lifts the restraints, and we yield to our own desires.

Now, I want to keep our eye on the context. There is a reason I have been printing the surrounding context of our verses in the bulletin each week. I want you to see how these things connect with what's before and after. In some ways what is said here by Paul applies to all sin, but he has a special regard for sexual sin in this passage. That's where he is going.

The powerful example Paul is moving towards in verses 26 onward is the unrestrained sexual license that his Roman readers would have seen all around themselves. And in 2025, has that really gone away?

What we see is that sexual desire is an incredibly powerful force. It has driven many men or women completely insane, and because of it many people have been consumed by themselves. Sexual desire is good. God created it for man and woman to enjoy in marriage. But if it is not accompanied with appropriate self-control and God-given boundaries it can run out of control like a river that spills over its banks.

Now, I just mentioned self-control. Modern people tend to think that sexual desires are completely and totally uncontrollable.

Or they at least assume that if one exercises self-control that they can never really be happy or embrace their true self, or truly be free.

And yet as Christians, we have to preach the truth to the world and our neighbors and to ourselves. The Scriptural view of human beings is that we are *not* animals that must always do everything that pops into our heads. We don't find our true selves by living without restraint and self-control. Instead, we are image bearers of the king, made in uprightness and nobility, and we are to treat one another in that way also.

This passage is difficult because not only is it accusatory, not only does it tell us things that cut against the grain of our culture, but it's difficult because of where it's leading. It's not very popular to talk about sex in church, either. I remember when I was pastoring in Mississippi there was a Sunday after church where someone said, "Pastor, no one has ever mentioned sex this much in a sermon in this church before," and I was reminded that there are some topics we'd rather not dwell on.

But here is the problem: if we ignore this topic, which is where Paul is going with this – we do so to our detriment. The world doesn't ignore this topic. Our culture has taken sexual desire and set it up on a pedestal. I would argue that in that sense our culture is still quite Roman. And yet we need to confront new developments as well. We don't just live in a world that says that we should be able to do what we want, and that we should not be expected to have self-control.

Our culture's self-deception is much deeper: it now tells us not just that we can have whatever we want, but that we *are* whatever we want, that we *are* what we feel, that we *are* what we desire. And so next week we have to turn our attention to that problem before we can ever actually take seriously the things Paul says in verses 26 and 27.

Conclusion

So I asked this question at the beginning: what keeps us from utopia? What keeps mankind from realizing the peace and optimism that our forefathers hoped for? And of course, the answer, as we've seen, is not a problem of knowledge: it's a problem of love and idolatry. We have deceived ourselves, and created a mess for ourselves that comes from the heart. Not our environment, not ultimately from other people around us. The problem stems from us!

I know what this sermon has felt like today. If last week's sermon on God's wrath wasn't hard enough, here we are mostly talking about the fallenness of our hearts. Not exactly the most inspirational of thoughts.

But here's the thing: Reflecting on our own sinfulness has this incredibly powerful effect of driving us to despair of ourselves and to hope in Jesus. When we really know ourselves, we'll stop *hoping* in ourselves, and start looking outside of ourselves to Jesus.

So think of what Jesus said to Nicodemus again.

"And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who

does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed” (John 3:19-20). That’s hard news. It’s what we’ve heard about ourselves today. But Jesus keeps going. Listen to the rest:

“But whoever does what is true comes to the light.” Jesus himself calls us to stop loving darkness. Isn’t that interesting how he says that? You can “do what is true.” How? Christ tells us, by coming to him.

Everything we’ve heard here about ourselves today is meant to reduce our self-hope and self-confidence. But what happens when we see Jesus? He’s so refreshing and hopeful and heart gladdening.

He himself is the light who dispels the ugliness of human self-deception. He himself breaks through and changes hearts. God’s people are evidence of that. We’re not left to ourselves, and God has not abandoned us. This is why Jesus can say, “Whoever believes in him is not condemned” (3:18).

Let Jesus dispel the hopelessness of human nature. How can that happen? By believing on the Lord Jesus Christ, the light who has come into the world, and who has overcome the world. And when we repent of our sins and rest in him, we can finally know real peace – not something that we only know, but also love.

Let’s pray.