

# **Evergreen Presbyterian Church**

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**5/25/25**

**Sermon Title:** Fallen Desires and Personal Identity

**Sermon Text:** Romans 1:24-27

**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.

**Rom. 1:26 ¶** For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature;

**Rom. 1:27** 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 themselves the due penalty for their error.

**Main Point:** Christians must reject the modern Freudian tendency to equate a person's desires with who they are. This is not only incoherent, but involves a completely unbiblical view of human nature

## **Outline:**

1. Power of Desire
2. Perception of Identity
3. Purposeful Design

## **Introduction**

In his book *Out of a Far Country*, Christopher Yuan talks about his transformation from a life involving drug dealing and identifying as a gay man to eventually embracing Christianity. His story includes, among other things, a prison sentence and an HIV diagnosis, which he credits to his eventually coming to faith in Jesus Christ. Yuan emphasizes a concept he calls "holy sexuality," focusing on identity in Christ rather than sexual orientation.

Christopher asks a very important question. Here is the question Christopher presents: "How can we discuss with someone that homosexuality is sinful *behavior* when they don't even view it as behavior? It's their whole identity." Christopher then goes on to elaborate what he means:

"If we were to go back 20 years before, before I came to Christ, and you were to tell me this is sin, I would not hear you say what I'm *doing* is a sin or that my *desires* are sinful. I wouldn't hear you say that. What I would mistakenly hear you say is that my whole person, from head to toe, is reprehensible to you and to God. Before I knew Christ, I couldn't hate my sin without hating myself. Now that God has given me the mind of Christ, I can hate my sin without hating myself." (X Post from 3/12/2025)

Now, this gets us to a topic that in our own day we have to address. It's something that our forefathers didn't have to address. There are no Puritans or Reformers who talk about what I'm talking about today. It is a uniquely modern issue, but it is one that it is almost impossible to talk about this part of Romans without addressing it.

And you've heard Christopher already address it. Here it is again: "How can we discuss with someone that homosexuality is sinful behavior when they don't even view it as behavior? It's their whole identity."

Next week, we will talk about why it is that this passage really is addressing homosexual behavior (among other sins). But this week, we have some groundwork to lay. We need to get more fundamental and talk about fallen desires, and specifically how people today identify their very SELVES with those desires.

If we can't clarify in our modern context the difference between the person and their fallen desires, it will be very hard for us to make headway even engaging with people at all. And in fact, if we can't untangle fallen desires from the fallen person and at least distinguish them, then we as Christians will become confused and entangled in an erroneous, non-christian, but very modern way of thinking about the self. And the only way for us to really make headway on this is for us to address this first.

To do that, I have three points that will get us to where we need to go, and perhaps help us to think better about our fallen desires and how they fit into who we really are, personally. The three points for today are first, the power of desire; second, the perception of identity; third, purposeful design.

## **1. Power of Desire**

First, we need to recognize the power of desire. Paul says in verse 24 that we know the wrath of God is real, *in part*, because God gave people up. But what did he give them up to? He says "in the lust of their hearts to impurity." I want to focus in this first part on this phrase "lust of their hearts."

I won't bore you with an in-depth word study, but here's the conclusion: when he uses this word "lust," he's talking about a deep desire within a person. He's talking about: any deep overpowering desire or appetite have. Paul says, God has let them have what they want. But the thing he gives them up to is their desires. And there really is nothing worse any of us can experience than to be given our heart's desire when all we really desire is sin. We saw this already. This was last week.

But think about the power of this thing Paul mentions here: desire for what is forbidden. And Paul is saying, we know God's wrath is real because he's given people over to the thing they desire which is forbidden. The theological word for this desire for what is forbidden is called concupiscence.

This is no small thing. Human beings, from the very beginning have desired things. All kinds of things. In the garden, Adam and Eve desired food, they desired companionship, they had physical needs like hunger and thirst. Because they had each other before the fall it is fair to say they had physical desire for each other

sexually and that it wasn't a fallen appetite. So desires in themselves are not wrong. They are good. Human beings have a desire for God. We have a desire for friendship. We have a desire not to be alone. None of these things are bad. And so my point is that desire in itself is not the problem. The problem becomes when we desire things that we were not meant to have. When the object of our desire is forbidden by God, that is concupiscence.

The old fashioned word for this from the ten commandments is coveting. When we want something that God has forbidden or has not providentially given us, we covet. We want something that isn't rightfully ours, something that God hasn't given to us. So when Paul speaks about the lusts of the heart, he's not talking about some positive (or even neutral) force in our hearts. He is talking about a will and desire that has been infected by sin, and that is entirely self-seeking, apart from God's grace.

And what happens in the garden is that Adam and Eve continue to desire, but now they desire other things... forbidden things. They desire things that go far beyond their "needs." They start to desire things that *they* decide for themselves. The first example of this happening is the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It is forbidden, and yet to Adam and Eve it looks good and delicious, and because they want it, they take it. They know better, but they desire it, and so they put their desires on the throne, and they remove God from the throne of their heart. This is the first but it is far from the last time that human beings will allow *their* desire (rather than God's desire) to dictate what they do.

We are fallen beings, which means that our desires are powerful, but our desires are not a *reliable* guide to what is good. This is very important. We saw last week the ways that we deceive ourselves. Our hearts are not trustworthy. For a fallen person, "want" does not equal "good." We want all kinds of things that are not good. We deceive ourselves, as we saw.

When you pair a propensity toward selfishness and powerful desire with a heart that is deceitful, it's very important to know that in a fallen person, "is" does not always equal "ought." Just because you have a powerful desire for something does not mean that it is therefore a good thing.

And so you can see that when Paul talks about these powerful desires here that God gave people over to, he's not talking about small-time little indulgences. He's not talking about a piece of chocolate here or there.

He is talking about self-destructive, and even suicidal impulses within the human heart. And if left unchecked, or unrestrained, they can destroy a person. And that's what he's talking about here. Now how does that relate to personal identity and our fallen human desires?

In this way: people have always made excuses for their sin. Just look at the Bible and you find excuses: "The woman gave me the fruit and I ate." "Am I my brother's keeper?" "The people told me to make the idol, so I threw their gold in the fire and out came this calf!" So people have always made excuses.

But there is a modern development that we need to talk about next regarding our fallen desires. And it's probably the central thing that we need to address this week before we move further into Paul's argument next.

## **2. Perception of Identity**

You see, Second, we need to address the perception of identity.

For ages, human beings have wondered, "Who am I?" "Why was I created?" "What is my purpose?"

Ancient people answered this question by looking to God. They could their own transcendent value by looking to the transcendent creator to tell them why they had been made.

But we live in a very different moment. And because of that, what I'm about to mention here is a very modern problem. As I said earlier, this is not something you will find the Reformers addressing. Because the Reformers never had to deal with someone saying, "God doesn't ultimately define me, I do." "I am not who I am before God, but who I *feel* myself to be." They had to deal with *sinners*, but they weren't dealing with people who identified themselves with their desires like today.

And what is uniquely modern, especially is this belief that our desires are our identity. That we are what we feel and what we want. Such that a modern person might say, “My *desires* are who I am. The ten commandments might say ‘thou shalt not steal,’ but this desire to steal is *who I am*, and that overrules whatever God says.” Calvin and Augustine and Luther ran into some very wacky things in their time, but they never had to deal with this.

And so modern Christians are in new territory here. And it’s territory that we ignore to our peri.

But the modern age has done something incredibly subversive. In an age of expressive individualism, people are told that the best way to find themselves is to look inward, that the highest goal in life is realizing that inward desire with the goal of finding personal happiness as they perceive it.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, writing in the late 1700s said that not only is human nature basically good, but he said it is really society that corrupts us. And so the only way for us to find true authenticity is by expressing our inner feelings and desires. Rousseau said that if we don’t do that then we’re just being corrupted by society and external traditions. And so he said, only by breaking away can we really be true to ourselves or ever really find ourselves.

This has translated right over to today, even though Rousseau said these things 280 years ago. Writing in 2019, the secular sociologist Francis Fukuyama says this: “Modern understandings of identity hold that we have deep interior spaces whose potentialities are not being realized, and that external society through its rules, roles, and expectations is responsible for holding us back” (Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment, 2019, pg. 103). That is Rousseau through and through. Yes, it has a sociological sheen to it, but it’s clearly Rousseau.

Friedrich Nietzsche, the famous German atheist, argued that because God is dead, we have no choice but to construct meaning and identity for ourselves. We cannot receive it from God, so we must discover it for ourselves by looking within.

These voices have been very powerful in forging what modern people think of themselves.

But there is another important piece of this puzzle of how we got here. And it's not just the denigration of self-control. It's not just the powerful draw of expressive individualism. It's not just the human tendency to excuse ourselves and our sin. But there is one more important piece, which is the centralizing in the modern consciousness of sexual desire.

And we have Sigmund Freud to thank for this. Because Freud introduced this idea that only by looking within, into a person's sexual desire can we really know and discover the person who is there deep down. Other thinkers like Herbert Marcuse and Wilhelm Reich argued that if people cannot be liberated to act out their sexual desires then they will never truly be free. And if we cannot be free then we will never know our true selves.

Bring these things together, and you can see the making of the cultural moment we live in now. How does this connect? You cannot read this part of the book of Romans without someone becoming not just angry, but personally hurt. They hear this and think, "We aren't having a conversation about my desires or my behavior or my sin. You're talking about me. You're not just telling me to abandon *sin*, you're asking me to abandon my very *self*!"

So think about this: Paul here is making an argument. Paul's larger argument that he's building towards – with our reading today being part of it – is that "all are under sin" (3:9). His point is that Jews and Gentiles are both answerable to God for their sin, and that all of us are guilty. His even larger point is that whether his reader is a Jew or a Gentile, we ultimately must turn to the same source of forgiveness and hope: Jesus Christ.

So Paul's identifying the problem in these first two chapters of Romans. Like a physician who needs to remove cancer, the patient first needs to hear the diagnosis, and to consent to the procedure. All of this is Paul getting the patient to see that his problem (in this case) is sin, and sin must be surgically dealt with.

But here's what happens today. People hear the diagnosis which is sin, and they reject that diagnosis.

Here's what happens. This is a little exaggerated for effect, but not by much. You tell a person the good news: Jesus saves you from your sins. If you had done that

in the 70s or 80s, people would have still known what you were talking about. But times have changed.

Now in 2025, you say, “Jesus saves you from your sins.” The person says, “What are you talking about?” That shared understanding that there is even a such thing as sin is no longer there, you see. So there’s even more fundamental groundwork that we have to do in our own day.

But perhaps you tell them, “well sin is whenever we miss the mark or think or do something that God has told us is wrong. And all of us are sinners. I sin, you sin, we all sin, and if we’re ever going to have peace with God, we need God to forgive us of our sin.”

Then the person says, “Well I don’t feel guilty. What makes you think that I am a sinner?” You say, “Well the ten commandments say you shouldn’t commit adultery. Have you ever looked with lust upon another person?” The person replies, “Well yes, of course. But that’s not a sin, that’s just who I am.” They might even take a theological approach and say, “I am just being who God made me to be.”

So what happens is that the desires that underly the act become *more* normative and determinative than God and what he says. It is not the God above who tells people what they are and who they are, but really the god within. That’s the moral framework of our day.

So the person you’re evangelizing puts their desires on the throne of their heart. And this especially comes into prominence in what we will discuss next week. Some who experience a desires for those of the same sex especially have been told that not only is *that* desire not sin, but that to call it sin is to take their identity and personhood away. They say, “You aren’t just saying my sin is bad, you are saying that I am invalid as a person, and that my whole identity is unacceptable to you.” It’s not just a rhetorical device. They believe this. They feel this. And they have been catechized by the culture to think this way about themselves.

So at once it makes things incredibly personal (even more than it already is), and at the very same time it scrambles the person talking to them. Instead of confronting them over sin, which is a very loving thing to do, the person sharing the gospel is



seen as a homophobe or a hater. You see, when that happens, the tendency to identify a person with their desire then gets turned against the Christian: “you think this is a sin because you hate me. That makes you a hater.” Again, this is not mere rhetoric. It is how people think and feel today. It’s why I would argue so many professing Christians keep abandoning the field on this topic.

As long as we accept that the person’s desire is who they are, we will fail to persuade, and will find ourselves unable to break through to the person.

A while back there was a clip circulating of the show *Love is Blind*. I know nothing about this show except the clip that I saw. But on the clip, there was a woman who decided not to marry this fellow because she asked him if he was religious. He said “yes, I go to church every week.” So she went to his church’s website and saw a clip where the preacher said that homosexuality was a sin. When she confronted him with this, he waffled on it. He said, “Well I must not have been there that week, or at least I don’t remember them ever talking about that.” He had a chance to say, “Yes, I go to church each week. I believe what Christians have always believed,” but instead he got cold feet, waffled, and disappointed literally every person who was listening to his answer. Christians were disappointed. Non-Christians were disappointed. Nobody heard an answer with any conviction from him. When he did this, he lost AND abandoned the field.

But Christians and churches all over are folding on this issue of holy sexuality because the culture’s appeal is just too powerful. It’s not a scriptural argument at all, but nobody wants to be misunderstood as saying, “I hate you,” and so they just abandon the whole project that Paul takes on here.

My point in telling you this narrative is, if you are here and you are a Christian, and you have family, for example, who might identify as gay, then apart from God’s spirit changing hearts, you are facing a nearly insurmountable and invincible obstacle that has very much ensconced itself in the way all modern people think. Many of us, including myself, have family members who say, “this is who I am”; they identify themselves *with* their desires rather than defining themselves as God has told them they are.

Because to follow God would mean to go against the grain of culture, the grain of personal desires, and it would require them to face in their own hearts the truth that we often desire things that are bad.

This has affected all of us. And I say *all*, because this is so much in the water that even Christians have adopted the language of “gay” or “straight.” And if you asked your average churchgoer who has a basic biblical moral framework, they would likely have said that God says you’re supposed to be straight, and you’re not supposed to be gay.

Carl Trueman points out, Christians of all people must abandon these labels—“gay” and “straight.” We have to abandon this way of talking about ourselves and others, and here’s why: because to think this way means to say you’re right about your desires being who you are. “You’re a man who desires other men? You must be gay. That’s who you are. And Jesus calls you to stop being who you are.” That’s wrong. That’s another way of saying that you are your desires. And you can’t escape from who you are.

Why should Christians abandon sexually-oriented terminology like “Gay” or “Straight”?

First, because as we saw, these terms reflect a psychological, expressive individualist identity rather than a biblical understanding of what it means to be human. The biblical view does not allow us to categorize people by their sexual desire. That was Freud who did that. Not only are people more complicated than that, but as we’ll see in a minute, we do live in God’s world, and we aren’t self-created. Nobody gets to choose who we are, we are told by God who we are. We are creatures whose reality is imposed by God, not us. Freud is just wrong, and therefore these terms are deceptive.

Second, we should abandon these terms because identifying people as “Gay” and “Straight” assumes that people simply “are” one of these things – or one of another schmorgasbord of terms. And yet human beings have a God-imposed identity. And Christians, especially, even if they are putting to death fallen desires, need to know that their identity is rooted in Christ, not in something as shallow and flimsy as fallen sexual desires. This is really just me

saying, “Freud is wrong. God is a better source on Who we are than an atheistic austrian psychologist.”

I want you to see that we are way past the days when Adam and Eve made excuses and sewed fig leaves together, or when Aaron accused the golden calf of self-generating out of the fire. We’re now in an age when people are incapable of distinguishing between what they want and who they are. And we as Christians *must* stop reinforcing that. We should not play along. We should see the foundational error and resist it from the beginning.

You are more than your desires. There is more to you than that. You are created by God, fearfully and wonderfully made, and you were made to be liberated from your fallen desires and your fallen condition – you were not meant to be more and more deeply pushed into sin... You’re meant to be freed from sin, not enslaved to it.

The culture is giving you a counterfeit freedom. An imitation freedom, but it’s actually more and more enslaving.

Here’s what I want to say. Next week I am going to directly ask this question: what does the Bible say about homosexual behavior, but also what does it say about the *desire* for that behavior? Paul is not talking here about being “gay” or “straight.” Paul doesn’t even have those categories.

And we as Christians shouldn’t, either. And that’s because God does give us a personal design and a personal identity, and I’d like to end on that constructive third note. Because what God gives us is better, more solid, longer-lasting, and more meaningful than what the culture could ever give. It’s a deep meaning that God gives, not a shallow meaning that we give ourselves.

### **3. Purposeful Design**

Third, I want to end on this note of purposeful design.

I’ve been very critical of the culture and its definition of what it means to be human today, but I want to end on a positive and affirmative note. As Christians

the most important thing is not the things we are against, but the things we are for.

So let me tell you what the Bible says and compare it with what the culture says.

First, we are made in *God's* image.

On the surface our culture may very well acknowledge God, or speak in some ways that sound spiritual. Again, this language of “God made me this way” is often present. But in its practice, our culture is very Nietzschean, because it thinks we are alone in the universe and so must define and create ourselves. (If it does acknowledge God, he is simply useful or helpful to us, but he doesn’t define or create or rule over us.)

And yet, God has told us in his word that he has made us and that he defines us. This means that he knows us better than we know ourselves. It means that regardless of how we or our friends or neighbors feel, we are Made in the image of God and must go to him to know who we really are.

The most loving thing we can do is keep pressing this truth and don’t stop saying it. You are made in God’s image, and that is true regardless of how you feel or what you desire. It’s true no matter what happens: you are imprinted with the mark of your maker. You can resist it, you can deny it, you can live like it isn’t there, but no matter what you do, you cannot remove the image of God from you.

Second, we are fallen.

The Bible tells us that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” It tells us that as human beings who are fallen, every desire of our hearts is distorted and damaged. This means that we cannot derive who we are from what we feel. We can not get an “ought” from the “is” of our human heart. What we feel cannot be trusted. And so while the culture tells you that you are perfect just the way you are, that all your desires are valid, that anything you want is important to be realized, the truth is, nobody consistently lives that way.

Think about it: there are horrible human desires that most thinking people agree are beyond the pale. Nobody truly and consistently lives this way or

wants to live in a world where serial killers (or worse) are considered to have valid desires. And the truth is, we are fallen, and *this* view of humanity from Scripture has proven itself out in a way that Rousseau's optimistic view of human nature simply hasn't.

These things are true of all people, regardless of their desires, regardless of whatever particular temptations they experience.

But next I want to show you what the Bible tells us about those who have turned to Christ and follow him. Even Christians need to hear these things, because even professing Christians in our own day are tempted to try to accommodate these modern views.

Some professing Christians today believe that our fallen desires really are "who we are," or that they are just neutral, but that they define who we are. Let me give you an example. Matthew Vines, a gay-rights activist, and also a professing Christian, writes that sexual attraction "is simply part of who you are," and "as humans, our sexuality is a core part of who we are." He doesn't believe this changes even after a person comes to Christ.

Is it really true that fallen sexual desires should continue to define Christians? Well, the culture says yes. Freud says yes. Rousseau and Nietzsche say yes (of course Nietzsche wants you to give up all morality completely, but that's another discussion). Herbert Marcuse and Wilhelm Reich say yes.

But God in his word says No! I made you for more than to indulge your fallen desires! Your fallen desires aren't who you are.

In Christ, we are new creations. Let me show you: Later, in Romans 6:11 Paul will say that God has broken the power of sin and that now we are "dead to sin." In 2 Cor. 5:17 Paul tells us that Christ has given us a new life, and now we are a "new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." This is the truth. Christians of all people must not take their spiritual cues from God-hating, God-denying psychologists. They are not compatible with God and his word.

Before St. Augustine had become a Christian, he was wrestling with his own sin and his own desires. While in his garden he heard children singing “Take up and read!” And so he picked up Paul’s epistle to the Romans chapter 13, and he read this:

“Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (Romans 13:13–14).

This is the better thing God has for us. He doesn’t plan for us to stay in the gutters. He doesn’t plan for us to be enslaved to our desires. That’s why he gave us the gospel.

Here is another important truth that Christians need to hear: Even redeemed people live with perpetual conflicting inner desires. We will see this when we get to Romans 7, but if I could put it simply: in this life, we should expect a continual wrestling with sin, and a life of perpetual inner conflict. Paul says, even after coming to Christ, “For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” Paul is saying, there are things that we desire and do that we should hate, and that we will spend our lives battling against. Just because we want something does not mean that it is good for us, or that we are required to submit ourselves to it. Instead, we’re meant to submit ourselves to God and his word.

There is one more thing I want believers to know, and that is this: Believers need to know that their true identity and “life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3). You see, this is a message for all of us. If you are a believer, stop speaking of yourself or others in ways that define or identify them with their desires. Honor them as image bearers of God by pointing them to the more noble and good created nature that God has given them.

If you are an unbeliever and you are here today, let me encourage you to come back next week – especially if you are not convinced that the Bible actually does say that the things are sin which I’ve said today are sin. But even more, my prayer

is that you'll be willing to be corrected by God – to be told by him that not everything is right with you – that perhaps there is something in you and your heart and desires that you need Him to correct.

You see, here is the truth: if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. Nobody gets a pass simply because they have desires, even powerful desires. All of us must come to God and live under him. This is his world. We are his creatures. He has built his law into the universe. We know that he is there and he is not silent. We see the outworking of these things in the world around us.

A world that denies that sin is a problem is a world out of control. A world that is unwilling to submit itself to God is more enslaved and less free. It turns out, running from God and pretending he is not there only leaves us more confused, more conflicted, and more enslaved.

Christ offers a better way. He says, "Come to me, and I will give you rest. My yoke is easy, and my burden is light." He will take that burden from you, but first we have to admit that we're even carrying a burden to begin with. Stop listening to the culture, and listen to the Lord. You are carrying the burden of sin. It's time to repent, come to Christ, and to finally lay that sin down at his feet.

*Let's pray.*