

You Are What You Worship (or) What the Prodigal Loses

Romans 1:21-25, Luke 15:11-24

Well friends, I hope that today's sermon is as easy to understand as last Sunday's was deep and technical. But do not be fooled--today's application is just as profound as last week's.

The Romans portions for the next few Sundays are rather severe. They tell of the downward progression of humanity. Because, when we *suppress the truth*--refuse to see God in our lives--and our *senseless minds grew darkened* (Romans 1:18-21), then the only way is down.

Interestingly, as I was studying today's passage which describes four different ways that humanity has suppressed the truth of God--that which we intrinsically know about God in our lives, I could not help but see their parallel in Jesus parable of the prodigal son. So let me briefly list out these four ways that humanity has exchanged what they knew for something much less and then show you how Jesus illustrated them in "what the Prodigal loses."

1. We knew but did not honor or thank God.
2. We exchanged the glory of invisible God for idols.
3. We exchanged truth about God for lies.
4. We refused to acknowledge God.

1. We knew but did not honor or thank God.
Our "minds were darkened" (1:19-21)

Prodigal: "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me."

First exchange: even though we knew God, we did not honor Him as such and we were not thankful. In a similar way, the prodigal refused to acknowledge or be thankful to his father. In both cases "*senseless minds were darkened*".

What does it mean that our "*senseless minds were darkened*?" It means that having no sense, not pausing to think about possible consequences, both Adam's and the prodigal's minds fixated on what they wanted and not on what they were about to lose. They did not see the consequences of their actions because they did not pause to look—their minds were "darkened;" they had tunnel vision which proved fatal.

Think of where humanity first lived and what we lost in the fall.

1. We were made in God's image (with a well-formed mind) reflecting God's values.
2. We lived comfortably in a garden, with abundant food and pleasure (*God made to grow every tree that was pleasant to the sight and every green plant that was good for food*).
3. We had labor and responsibility but it was not hard sweaty work (*till and keep the garden*).
4. We had privilege—the whole earth was open to us (*be fruitful, multiply, and have dominion*).
5. We lived open and honest lives together (*naked and unashamed*).
6. We were in close, daily fellowship with God (*walking together in the evening*) (Genesis 1:26—2:10).

To honor and be thankful to God requires reflection on our part; it requires that we pause to think about and be grateful for what we have and why we have it: to know what we already have before grasping for more.

Do you imagine Adam would have listened to the serpent if he had thought for just a few moments on how blessed he already was and what he might possibly lose? But with the serpent's temptation to "be like God," Adam's mind became darkened with greed—to be equal with God was the one thing Adam didn't have. Therein began his disobedience—wanting to be a god rather than honor and thank the God who created and placed him where he was.

Now let's look at our young prodigal, where he once lived and what he lost with his fall.

1. He came from a wealthy family. They had land, and flocks, and workers; they owned jewelry and fine clothes, and could spread a feast at a moment's notice; and he even knew he had an inheritance coming to him. Like Adam he was loved, well fed, living comfortably, and expecting a bright future.
2. The prodigal probably labored some on the family farm—but not hard sweaty work like the hired help.
3. As the landowner's son, he had privilege. He was recognized and respected in town. The future was wide open to him.

4. And he had his Jewish faith and moral training; he knew how to live a holy and God honoring life.

Did the prodigal ever stop for a moment to think of how richly blessed he already was? No, this senseless boy had tunnel vision, his mind was darkened by the thought of his independence, his freedom from family obligations, he could be his own boss—his own “god”. He was certainly not thankful for what he already had, but in his request he also greatly dishonored his father.

Did you know that in Jewish culture, one only got his inheritance after his father had died. So, in asking for his inheritance now, the prodigal was in fact telling his father that he wished him dead. With that request, the prodigal declared all that his father had previously done for him was worth nothing. Neither honoring nor being thankful, he claimed what he felt was owed him; he took his money and marched out the door. And the amazing thing was, that instead of giving the prodigal a swift boot in the butt and telling him to get back to work...Dad gave him the money and let him go! But after all this was just a story.

Whether it's to God, or parent, or spouse, or friend, to honor them and **to be thankful requires reflection on our part, taking the time, pausing to think about and be grateful for what we have and why we have it.**

When was the last time you paused to express your gratitude towards God as your creator and provider. Certainly **asking** the blessing over our meals (notice that I said ***“asking” not “saying”...do you see the difference in attitude that one word change causes?***). To pause and seriously, thoughtfully, thank God for the blessings he has provided has long been one method that Christians have used to increase our own mindfulness of the blessings we have and to express our thankfulness and to instill the same in our own children. Are your family prayers thoughtful and meaningful or fast and formulaic?

2. We exchanged the “glory” of the invisible God for idols.

And fell into lust and impurity ... (1:23-24)

A few days later, the prodigal gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country (Luke 15:13)

Now this step away from God to idolatry intrigues me. Certainly Adam and Eve continued to worship the Creator God, as did their three sons Cain, Abel, and Seth; whom God also conversed with in some way. But at what point did our ancestors first

decide to exchange their worship of a God they knew but could not see, for one they could touch, and carry around with them?

If the events of the Exodus provide any example, **then our human urge to build idols (controllable gods) comes on rather quickly.** Now perhaps the Hebrew slaves weakness towards idols can be somewhat understood, having come out of an idolatrous culture. But to counter those false beliefs they had already seen what the invisible God of their forebears had done to the very visible idols of Egypt. And they had also experienced several months of seeing the very visible presence of God (in the pillar of fire and smoke) guiding, guarding, and feeding them. But notice how quickly they rejected the Creator God whose actions they had clearly seen for gods they could build for themselves.

Exodus, chapter 19, recounts that after the third new moon the nation of Israel arrived at Mount Sinai. Moses then went up, talked with God, and came down telling them of God's intention to build them into His nation of priests. ***And the people answered as one, everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.*** (19:9). Then as the days passed Moses went up several more times to speak to God and came back down to tell them what God had said; he even wrote down and recited for them the 10 commandments that God had declared. And the people again repeated, ***all that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient*** (24:19) Then God calls for Moses to come back up yet again—this is Moses' fifth or sixth trip up (I lost count), this time to get the stone tablets and write down all God's instructions for building the tabernacle—which took more time than the people expected. Chapter 32 recounts what they did, when they grew impatient for Moses' return.

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron and said to him, 'Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him' (Exodus 32:1).

If you think about what they just said, after all their previous pledges of loyalty to God, it seems that they attached all of the miracles and provision of their deliverance to Moses rather than to the God for whom Moses spoke. Once Moses was out of sight longer than they were comfortable with, they immediately rejected Moses without even apparently considering whether or not Moses' God was still with them, and they began to build idols. *Professing to be wise they became fools.* But we live in 21st century modern America—we don't have any idols like they did, do we? Do we?

By definition, idolatry is **anything** that **we replace God with**, anything we worship rather than being thankful to God. As God's first and second commands teach us.

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or

that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. (Exodus 20:2-4)

That command seems rather clear to me. But see how quickly they started building themselves an idol.

So, what does Paul mean by our *exchanging the "glory of God" for idolatry*?

Though we use it regularly in religious circles, "glory" is truly a hard term to define. It means our obligation to honor God as God, to offer God our worship and thanksgiving rather than worshipping other things. So our steps downhill into idolatry come rather fast: *not being thankful, not honoring God*—leads quickly to our rejection of God for some more convenient less demanding deity, which in our prodigal's case was the same as Adam's: self-worship—"you can be a god."

What might we be tempted to place above our recognition and thankfulness to God?

Wealth? Power? Security? A certain car? A certain hobby? Our own weekend pleasures? Our self? You would be surprised at the number of people—who claimed to once be faithful Christians—who eventually traded in their church family responsibilities for a camper, a boat, or weekends at the cabin.

What about our prodigal? What did he exchange for his obligation to recognize and be thankful for his family (and God)? Could it be his dream of the good life?

I was pondering why Jesus's parable sent the prodigal off to a "distant country." Was it that he wanted to distance himself as far as possible from his family and what he knew to be right (moral)? Did you notice that he took everything with him; he certainly wasn't planning on ever returning. The foolish young man's "god" would now be the good life that he could buy for himself. Or as Francis Schaeffer has labeled our modern form of this idolatry, the prodigal's god was now his own "**personal peace and affluence.**" **All he wanted out of life was to be comfortable and happy, nothing more.** He certainly has now raised himself and his "dream of the good life" above his family and the Creator God that he knows. Perhaps that was why he was also putting some distance between himself and his family's God. Didn't he know—as the Psalmist declared--that there was no place on earth that he could hide from the real God (Psalm 139)?

3. **exchanging the "truth about God" for lies.**

We worshipped the creature rather than Creator
And fell into degrading passions (1:25-27)

In a distant land ...

he squandered his property in dissolute living

So the truth that the prodigal exchanged for a lie was the command he had daily recited from his youth: "*you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and strength.*" **And since the God he was now rejecting had instilled into him the morality that warred against his new devotions, he also had to reject his conscience** (*that little voice inside telling you what's right or wrong*). In this our prodigal was a very modern person--rejecting the good that he knew he ought to do in favor of the pleasure he wanted to do. Believing, as one of our modern truisms falsely complains, "*Why is it that everything fun is either immoral, illegal, or fattening?*" Think of the multiple lies buried within that popular expression.

So our downhill progression from thanklessness, to idolatry, to immorality is quite natural and surprisingly quick. Our refusal to honor and be thankful to the Creator God we know, leads inevitably to our manufacture of personal gods (idolatry) which will allow us to ignore our godly, inbuilt morality in favor of our passion-driven desires. **Without some form of external/internal restraint, passion rather than sensibility will always drive our life--eventually to ruin.**

And this was also true for our prodigal. Before very long before his resources had been squandered on dissolute living (*isn't that a nice word for unrestrained partying until you fall over?*). But illicit pleasure costs money, parties cost money. And eventually the party ends with a whimper. As the prostitute Satine, in the movie Moulin Rouge, replies to the young poet Christian—who just wants one night with her "*in the name of love*"—*there's no way, because you can't pay.*

So as idolatry leads to unrestrained passions, and as the resources drain away; the unacknowledged guilt we are storing up inside leads eventually to a debased mind.

4. refusing to acknowledge God.
leads to a "debased mind;"
doing and encouraging others to do
what we know should not be done
(1:28-32)

A "debased mind" generally means we no longer know the difference between right and wrong—in that state we become less than human. The psychological term for such a person is "sociopathic". (Charles Manson is a prime example). We can't reform such people we just lock them up and hope they don't ever escape.

But **a debased mind also can mean knowing what is wrong but finding ways to excuse the wrong we are doing; in this form it is a more common, perhaps even a universal human illness.**

When our stored up guilt becomes too much to bear—because we know what we should not be doing—then we now look for and encourage others to do the same wrongs we know we are doing. **Why?**

- Does a large group of people doing the same bad thing make it seem less bad, help us feel less bad?
- Can it still be considered bad if everybody is doing the same thing? YES!
- Or like a child stealing candy, do we somehow figure we can diminish or deflect the blame if we can get another to steal candy too? You know, “share the blame.”

Unfortunately rationality and morality appear to be mental cousins when we lose one we also tend to lose the other. Thus immorality leads to a debased mind.

In this debased state we humans have proved quite capable of compartmentalizing and isolating those truths that would make us feel guilty...*knowing what is right but not doing it, knowing what is wrong but doing it anyway* (Romans 7:14-24).

But hold on to your seats here friends. What Paul has carefully described as the natural downward progression from not acknowledging and thanking our Creator God to ending up with a debased mind which now cheers on the wrong which we know to be wrong... **Paul says this is all our problem.**

We all now have debased minds; even we who think we are pretty good.

- We who criminalize theft, do we justify our own petty thefts: that’s a debased mind.
- We who champion honesty, especially in others, while excusing our own little lies: that’s a debased mind.
- We who measure our goodness based on other’s badness: that’s a debased mind.

This is our universal human condition. This is what Paul describes as “***being dead in our trespasses and sins***” (Ephesians 2:1-5). And the only way dead people can ever hope to live again is if someone else restores them to life. This my friends is God’s good news in response to the reality of our own bad news; our debased minds. And this is what the rest of his letter to the Romans will explain. But we must be brought to the point of acknowledging our deadness before we will willingly accept the life God would restore to us; that is what this portion of Romans is all about.

When he had spent everything,
he began to be in need.

When he came to himself he said
"here I am dying of hunger
I will get up and go to my father.

But let's not leave our poor prodigal lost in his depravity. Jesus said "*when he came to himself,*" only when he reached the very bottom and woke up in a pig pen did he finally admit to himself that his lack of thankfulness, his self idolatry, had killed him. He could only ever hope to live again by another's undeserved mercy.

You know the rest of his story. Trudging back home to welcome even slavery on the farm, he is completely forgiven and restored by his loving father who had been there all along, watching and hoping for the day when he would return to right thinking; as we say being "restored in his senses". This, my friends, is the Gospel in answer to our debased minds, our spiritual deadness: God is now doing for us what He, and now we, know that we could never do for ourselves.

Even when we were dead through our sins, he made us alive together with Christ – for by grace you (and I) have been saved (Ephesians 2:5).

So what should you take home from today's cautionary tale?

As the saying goes: "*mighty oaks from little acorns grow.*" According to today's lesson this means, refusing to honor God and be thankful for His provisions—quite naturally and eventually leads us to moral and spiritual death, our fallen human condition.

Now having been "born again" into a new life, we as Christians should carefully guard against ever going that way again; following our natural human inclination from ingratitude to idolatry and death.

Amen?