

The Good and Beautiful Life

July 10, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

Romans 1:18-32

¹⁸ The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, ¹⁹ since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. ²⁰ For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

²¹ For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

²⁴ Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. ²⁵ They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

²⁶ Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. ²⁷ In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

²⁸ Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; ³¹ they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. ³² Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

We have all known about people who, at one time we would have thought they had it all, ended up ruining their lives. There are celebrities which appear in the paper frequently who have lost favor in the public eye because of something they said or something they have done. There are popular religious figures who have “fallen from grace” because of misconduct, legally and/or sexually. You may even know of some people locally who were once in a place of power, fame, and prestige who now no one even seems to care about, or worse, are people you would avoid if all possible. It’s not that these people set out to ruin their lives. It’s not that they start out their day seeking a sad and lonely life. Every person wants to find happiness. The sad thing is that so many people think they are going to find happiness in pursuing the things our culture claims will give you happiness. I have to admit that I don’t watch television much any more, primarily because I don’t find much on there that is healthy to watch. The other reason is that most commercials any more are ones that emphasize that happiness comes from sex, power, and money, and the content would be too embarrassing to show on a projection screen in church.

In Romans 1:18-25 Paul warns the readers of his letter about the six steps of ruin, or what author James Bryan Smith refers to as “How to Ruin Your Life (Without Even Trying).”

Step One: Turn away from God and consider yourself as God. Although people knew about God they would not honor him or give thanks to him (Rom. 1:21).

Step Two: Darken your mind. When a person turns away from God, they turn away from reality. Their mindset goes against the truth of the universe. Our minds, which thrive on truth and reality, become dimmed. People who claim to be wise in the ways of the world are in fact fools (Rom. 1:21-22).

Step Three. Take up an idol (or two or more). Everyone needs to believe in something. So, if you do not believe in God, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, then you must substitute with a different small-g “god,” like sex, money, or power. An idol is anything that takes the place of the real God in your life. It becomes what we invest our lives in, what we worship, what we do to gain our idea of happiness (Rom. 1:23).

Step Four: Desire that God leave you alone. When we take up another “god” in our lives, the true God allows us to continue to resist him and pursue a path of destruction. In short, if we reject God, then he will leave us alone. In one of the most frightening verses in Scripture, Paul writes: “Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity” (Rom. 1:24). How tragic that when people ask God to leave them alone and then they are surprised when God does leave them and they are alone.

Step Five: Pursue pleasure at all costs. Once you are disconnected from truth and reality and are alone, then there are other ways a person tried to find fulfillment. The “high” that one might get from that pursuit--through drugs, alcohol, pornography, technology, food, sexual encounters—“has a constantly diminishing effect. Each time we engage in these activities, the pleasure decreases, requiring greater frequency or greater quantities to match the level of pleasure sought.” Paul refers to these as “degrading passions” (Rom. 1:26).¹

Step Six: Allow sin to reign. Doing the things that are wrong and destructive become the norm in one’s life. Some people go so far as to brag about their misbehavior, not realizing how destructive it is to themselves and to those around them. People are filled, instead of the things of God, with the things of this world, descriptive of the things that often make the headlines of today. “They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice,” said Paul of the people in his day (Rom. 1:19). And the saddest proclamation of them all, Paul warns: *Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them* (Rom. 1:32).

We can become quick to judge others for their sinful nature, yet when we find ourselves doing these very things, we try to justify them and rationalize them. “Despite its ugliness and destructiveness, sin still manages to lure us into its illusion of happiness.”

“In contrast, virtue—not the outward appearance but the inner reality of a heart that loves goodness—is beautiful. When I see someone tell the truth, though it hurts them, it is lovely. When man treats a woman not as an object but as a person, I see beauty. A person who does a good deed in secrecy is a marvel and wonder.”²

The good and beautiful life is created by being with Jesus as a new way of life, a narrative Jesus goes into detail about with his Sermon on the Mount. Over the course of the next few months we will be exploring Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and how his teaching may instruct us in living a virtuous, good and beautiful life. At the close of the most profound sermon ever heard, Jesus said,

²⁴ “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. ²⁶ But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷ The rain came down, the

¹ Smith, James Bryan. *The Good and Beautiful Life: Putting on the Character of Christ (The Apprentice Series Book 2)*. InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

² Ibid.

streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.” (Matt. 7:24-27).

“All who take Jesus’ words to heart and arrange their lives around them will be like a person who builds a house on a rock, never to be shaken, even in the storms and floods. In contrast, those who refuse to listen and obey build their house on sand. When the storms of life come, they can be sure that their house will collapse.

... The aim is to help Christians understand and implement the teachings of Jesus about things like anger, lust, lying, worrying, pride and judging others. What Jesus teaches about these things is simply the truth. Living according to his teachings leads to a good life, a life that can withstand the storms and trials we all face. Disobeying his teachings leads to a life of ruin. Jesus is not making life more difficult but is revealing that the way to the good and beautiful life is to obey his teachings. There is no other way. Either our lives conform to his teachings, or we fail to live a good and beautiful life.”³

We cannot find happiness or joy apart from a life of obedience to the teachings of Jesus. C. S. Lewis wrote, “God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing.” God is not being stingy and withholding joy apart from our obedience; there simply is no joy apart from a life with and for God. “God, please give me happiness and peace,” we plead, “but let me also live my life as I please.” And God answers, “I cannot give you that. You are asking for something that does not exist.”⁴

Some people think that following Jesus means living an austere, joyless, and boring life. That is one of the most effective false narratives the devil uses to keep people from God’s kingdom. “Those who follow Jesus do not have to live austere, sad and sour lives. In fact, the opposite is true. Christ-followers experience the highest form of pleasure, laugh with depth and enjoy all of the goodness life has to offer. Kingdom-dwellers are simply more discriminate about how they seek entertainment and pleasure. They trust in a good and beautiful God who has come not to rob them of joy but to bring them real and lasting joy, the kind found when moderation and boundaries are applied.

... The question is not, What will I have to give up to follow Jesus? but rather, What will I never get to experience if I choose not to follow Jesus? The answer is clear: we will forfeit the chance to live a good and beautiful life.”⁵

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.