

Darkened Mind, Darkened Behavior

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[0:00] Good morning, everyone. For those who haven't met me, I'm Simon. I'm the vicar here. And if you don't know, I arrived only a few weeks ago. And very warmly welcomed. Thank you very much.

And I arrived to see, wonderfully, that scheduled was a whole summer's worth of teaching. And I thought, brilliant, what a gift. And from this day onward, we are going to be looking at the mighty book of Romans.

Romans. Brilliant, I thought. Together, we are going to explore the breadth and the depth of God's love for humanity expressed through Jesus Christ.

Brilliant. If you're new to these things, the book of Romans was written by St. Paul to the Christians living in Rome in about 57 AD. And I can tell you, it's epic. It's huge. It's wonderful. And through history, lives have been transformed as they've grappled with this book.

Arguably, the whole of Western civilization has been shaped by it due to its central role that it played in the Protestant Reformation.

[1:10] And so I thought, what an opportunity to preach also to start the series off. Brilliant. And then I looked at the verses that had been allocated to me. Less brilliant, I thought.

Because they contain, if you spotted them amongst others, two subjects that the wider church seems to have got increasingly uncomfortable talking about. And so I have to warn you this morning, it's going to feel a bit like doing a deep dive straight into the marine pool.

OK. Whereas my temperament would be to sort of dip a toe in gently and gradually sort of get myself used to it. This is going to be a plunge. And rather we led by my temperament.

We are going to be led by the word of God as it is written, as it is directed. So this is a warning. It's going to be like a deep dive into a cold pond. It will be a shock at first, but we will leave glad that we did it.

OK. Are you ready? OK. So the first of these topics in our passage that has become increasingly difficult to talk about is sex.

[2:15] Now, there is a story told of a youth worker in a church who rang up the vicar to ask him whether he'd be able to come along to his youth group and talk to the young people about sex and relationships.

It was on a Wednesday evening, some weeks ahead. So the vicar thinks for a little while. He looks at the family diary with the hope that there might be a clash. But there wasn't.

So he felt obliged to agree to the talk. And so after putting the phone down, he went to the family diary and he wrote, Talk at youth group about, oh, I can't write sex.

I'll write sailing instead. Then I'll know what I mean. Perfect. Anyway, a few weeks later, the obviously very conscientious youth worker rang up the vicarage again to check that everything was still OK for next Wednesday.

This time it was the vicar's wife who picked up the phone. Hi, I was just checking your husband was still OK to do the talk on Wednesday. The vicar's wife replied, I'll just check. Let me just check the family diary.

[3:17] Yep, he's written. What? What's he doing talking that about? He's only done it twice. The first time he was sick. The second time his hat fell off. The church's reluctance to talk about sex and God's intentions for it over the past many decades has led us into a real mess.

As society's views on sex have veered away from the biblical vision, there's been a lot of, let's call it, defensive scrabbling about to try and work out what the church should be saying and believing about such issues.

And so now the church, both nationally and globally, stands divided on issues of sexuality and relationships. And there's been a lot, you've probably been aware of them, a lot of recent discussions and debates in the Church of England, particularly under the banner of living in love and faith, that have quite frankly been ugly and divisive.

And it's because this topic is both deeply personal and life-affecting, especially for those whose sexuality and sexual experience is not necessarily straightforward, or that of the majority, let's say. And I'm aware that there will be people here this morning, or if you're listening in on the recording, for whom this is your experience. Or you're here and you're thinking of a family member or a friend who identifies as LGBTQI+.

[4 : 46] People with different views to those of traditional Christian thinking on sexual ethics, I have to say, have often been demonised, scapegoated, and sometimes even abused by those who supposedly represent the loving God of the Bible, who after contact with church, have felt more stigmatised and more marginalised, more shamed, rather than less.

So I want to begin this morning, in as much as I can in my capacity as an all-day minister in the church, to say, sorry. You know, we have often failed to treat people as Jesus would have done. And we want to repent of that, and learn to dialogue and love each other in a much more constructive and healthy and loving way.

So if you do identify as LGBTQI+, I want to say you are welcome here, as we together sit under the word of God to be instructed and to be given a vision of God's loving intentions for our lives. And so as this passage that Sonia read for us talks about sexual behaviours, as well as many other behaviours that may take us outside of God's intentions for us, I want you to know that we are all being put under the spotlight.

[6 : 18] All of us are to come under God's word. And that there is good news, again, for all of us in Jesus Christ. And I'll do my best this morning to explain why it is that St. Paul seems to single out sexual behaviour, in particular, as part of a wider point, a wider argument that he is making as he writes to these Christians in Rome.

So again, just as we start this series, it's probably worth us setting the scene a little bit. Paul is writing to Christians that he's never met. They are mainly Gentile Christians.

What I mean by that is that they are non-Jewish followers of Jesus. So as Paul, writing, we think, from Corinth, seeks to encourage them by expounding and explaining the good news of Jesus, the Gospel, he's particularly keen to demonstrate how this Gospel, which is essentially a belief in a Jewish Messiah beginning amongst Jewish people in Judea, how can that be good news to those without that heritage?

And so he also has to set the scene as he begins. And before he gets to the good news, and before we get to the good news, folks, he has to outline just how bad the situation is for the whole of humanity.

Which brings us to our second topic that has become very difficult to talk about. The wrath of God.

[7 : 57] Let me read verse 18 for us. The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people who suppress the truth by their wickedness.

Now, many of us will be hearing that, and immediately the question is, how does the wrath, the anger of God, how does that fit with a loving God? Again, in the church's reluctance to talk about this aspect, this difficult aspect of God, many have decided it is better actually to redraw what God is like, rather than face up to the fact that references to God's divine anger, fury, judgment, occur over 600 times.

throughout the Bible. The fact that God is loving means that he also must get angry.

It's because he loves so intensely that he hates all that hurts the ones he loves. Now, any parent amongst us will have an impression of this.

Because if anyone hurts or bullies our child, are we apathetic? Ah, never mind. No. We too are hurt and jealous to protect our loved one.

[9 : 26] However, God's anger is not like your or mine anger because we will often, at least I do, will flip into anger or when our egos have been bruised or because of some past trauma that's been triggered.

So our wrath, as it were, is often uncontrolled and misdirected. not God. His steady anger against all that might destroy his good creation, it's more like a furnace.

Steady, controlled, but incredibly hot. And it is a fire against injustice. That's what he is angry about.

We're told in the passage, they use this term, we're told his wrath is against all the godlessness and wickedness of people who suppress the truth. And that word wickedness, it could just as well be translated injustice.

And again, when we see the results of wickedness in our world, and we've been praying about some of the consequences of them, aren't we angered? Surely it is hardwired in us to recognise what is right and what is wrong.

[10:41] And Paul says that is so. Verse 19 and 20, it says this, since what may be known about God is plain to them because God has made it plain to them. 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.

Paul, writing that, is taking us all back to the first pages of the Bible where, again, the foundational truths are that God made humans in his image.

And part of being made in God's image is that we are each given a God-shaped sense of right and wrong, a sense of a divine power that is working beyond us.

So you might be asking, well, how come then there are atheists? How come there are people who deny that God exists? Well, Paul tells us why there are atheists.

He explains what happens and he explains it as if it's an outworking of the wrath of God. God's image because atheism is a self-prescribed, if you like, it's a self-chosen punishment from God.

[12:00] Again, thinking about being a parent, you may have got to the point where no matter how much you tell your child not to do something, the only thing that will stop them doing it is letting them, by their own experience, taste a bit of the consequences of their action.

Is that right? And obviously, a good parent holds that within the boundaries of safety. But allowing small people to get a taste of the consequences can actually be an expression of love by a parent because we want them to grow, we want them to understand, we want them to see whether they're going to learn from that or not, an open question.

And obviously, God, ultimately, God is the perfect version of that parent. He allows the choices of wicked humans to take their course whilst he steers them away from complete annihilation.

He lets them taste their own injustice because no matter how many times and how clear he is, and Scripture gives a great long story, a history of that, we will not listen.

And so Paul, recognising this, presents a picture, a kind of downward spiral of what happens when we're given over to the consequences of our thoughts and actions.

[13:28] Let me just read those in verses 21 to 23. For although they, that is, fallen humanity, although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but in their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

So do you see how failure to acknowledge God and give thanks for him and to him leads firstly to futile thinking and then darkened heart.

It affects our thinking and our emotions. And then we begin to overestimate our own wisdom.

Actually, they're making us foolish. and then we begin to exchange created things and putting them in the place of the creator.

We as humans begin to worship idols. That's the language the Bible talks about when we replace something that's supposed to be God and worship the living true God and replace it with things that have been created.

[14:42] Let me just get my prop here. I've found that in the past that the idea of us being a mirror us as humans being a mirror to reflect God's truth and beauty to be a really useful one when we think about being created in the image of God.

And I have to say I have used this as an illustration in the past and I've taken that mirror as a reflecting all God's goodness and I've then smashed it. I've smashed it to show that this is what we when we reject the knowledge of God.

And it's a good illustration because what happens then is shattered. Although you can see glimpses of God's goodness it is ruined. The image is ruined and it just has to be replaced.

But I'm not going to inflict to you or the host team with the mess that that is going to make. It's a health and safety nightmare. But instead and probably more in keeping with Paul's argument I'm going to take this mirror you can imagine I might darken it as it were so it becomes less clear and

instead of having a mirror I am going to place an image of a created thing onto it. For the sake of those listening and those in the back of the church who can't see I have placed a picture of George Clooney lowless onto my mirror. Other sex icons are available.

[16 : 12] I use that term advisedly I have to say. So what happens now if we look into the mirror and we see this image men if you look at it and you think oh yeah it's a bit like me you're deluded. Women if you look at this image and you start swooning then that's just a testament to the truth I'm about to explain. You see one area in which Paul says that this downward spiral happens in a particularly poignant way is in the area of our human bodies and in sex. Because in the Garden of Eden again back to the beginning of the Bible he made humans to reflect his image and what he tells us is that God created mankind in his own image in the image of God he created them male and female he created them.

And there's something about this complementary nature of male and female that speaks of the diversity within the Godhead itself. And Paul here and elsewhere in his writings in the New Testament often holds up marriage as particularly important in reflecting and imaging this God that we are now in a covenant relationship with.

In fact he says in Ephesians that this mystery that's being imaged that's being reflected in marriage even if sometimes faintly is the picture of Christ and his bride the church.

[17 : 38] So it's a really important image. So if you start exchanging parts of that image out you're going to get at the very least a distortion of the original picture that was being painted by God who created us.

And to come back to George if you put a George Clooney image in the place of for example your spouse you start distorting the love that is supposed to be between a husband and his wife. The husband gets jealous the wife starts thinking adulterous thoughts and taking to its extreme and although I'm doing it jokingly the marriage falls apart. You know I am only teasing you with Mr. Clooney but if we start idolizing others and thinking about that's what life is for and worshipping them it will send our desires into meltdown it makes our thinking futile it darkens our hearts and it will send our desires into meltdown and it will join this downward spiral.

And the fact is let me place it down there God gave each of us sexual desires actually as a taste of what it means to yearn after him.

Why did God give us sex? Why did God give us sexual desires? That longing that we have for intimacy of a loved one the Bible says it's only a taste of what the Bible promises is to come a perfect intimacy with the God who made us.

[19 : 14] So sexual desire was given to us as a gift as an imprint of this longer term greater longing. So even if in this life our sexual desires are only partially met or we've never met even more so in that yearning we get a sense that sex cannot be an end of itself.

It points us beyond that desire to the possibility of an eternal marriage. And if you remember Jesus tells us that we won't actually be married in heaven in the new creation because again it's because the earthly marriage is only really a pointer towards what will be fulfilled.

And so even in the best marriage where there's this covenantal love between two corresponding complementary individuals, male and female, even when that's mirrored, even where there is mutual intimacy, nakedness and the thrill is experienced, it still is nothing compared to what that sex points to, finding its fulfillment in the arms of our ever-loving God when we see him face to face. And that is why through the ages the church has only sanctified that one picture, that one image of marriage between one man and one woman and has encouraged celibacy elsewhere so that all of humanity's desires can be directed towards the groom who made us for ourselves and for whom we are made.

And so to do otherwise is to draw a different image, is to draw a different picture from what we were created to reflect and one that has come from our own dimmed imaginations and distorted desires.

[21 : 06] Now, if that jars with you, as it will do for many of you, I expect it also did with Paul's first readers. You see, Christians in Rome would have been living in a society where sex was used to promote a very different picture of life.

You know, the historians will tell us, you know, women and even children were used by the powerful really as sort of sexual trophies. And Greco-Roman attitudes to sex paint a very different picture to what is on Paul's mind as he writes to them.

And Paul, remember, is steeped in this Jewish heritage, believing in the created order of the image of God being reflected particularly in marriage.

So this critique, as he writes this letter, of alternative uses of sex would have clashed with the surrounding culture, where they were living. To accept Paul's viewpoint would have been to really kind of stick out and be a minority view.

It would have almost been like a rebellion against the prevailing culture. And I feel that that's the same increasingly today. Today, sex is used to prop up various ideologies.

[22 : 19] You know, sexual liberation tends to go hand in with this sort of hedonistic dream, doesn't it? You know, live for your own happiness. You know, that's the thing we kind of idolize in a way, isn't it?

Our own happiness. Or part of the personal fulfillment fantasy, you know, we can have it all. Or it's also part of the picture of individualism, isn't it? And self-definition.

Many use sex as a central expression of their personal identity. But these are all alternative pictures for sex.

And for all their gloss and glamour often, they have major limitations and large shadow sides. You know, the cracks quickly show where these pictures are lived out and the spiral takes root.

We increasingly live in a fatherless society. Increasingly, children are growing up across split families. Our society is full of broken and bruised relationships.

[23 : 18] And it seems to me that the less commitment there is alongside sex, it's normally the women who end up at the brunt of receiving abuse or get cast aside. So much for sexual liberation.

And I know that marriage itself is open to abuse. It too is subject to the effect of godlessness. forgiveness. But when it's modelled on the sacrificial, compassionate love Jesus has for his church, who he wants to see honoured and beautified, and that love is then returned, it really does allow both husband and wife to thrive.

I was interested to read, back last November, I came across an article in the Spectator magazine.

So that's a completely secular magazine, a news magazine. And the title of the article was Marriage is the Real Rebellion.

And the article was bemoaning the decline of marriage, and it was recognising the strength marriage offers in society, and particularly the protection it offers to people, particularly women, that is often lacking when that covenantal, legal love is missing.

So just as I stop talking about sex for a little bit, I'll just render this. It's a well-worn analogy, but sex is like superglue. It is designed for bonding two corresponding people together within a loving, lifelong union.

[24 : 45] And when you try and tear those two people apart, or put glue in the wrong place, it causes a lot of tears and a lot of tears. But lest we think we can point fingers at those who have lived out those alternative images for sex, Paul swiftly moves from like this sort of case study to show us that it is actually part of a much bigger, broader picture of a downward spiral, and one that actually we each contribute to.

Let me just read again verses 28 to 32. Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a deprived mind, so they do what ought not to be done.

They've become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed, depravity. They're full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, and malice. They're gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant, and boastful.

They invent ways of doing evil. They disobey their parents. They have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. 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.

You see, we're all actually quite good at deceiving ourselves into thinking, well, okay, at least I'm not as bad as that person or them over there.

[26 : 08] In fact, in the next chapter, if you read on, Paul calls out the religious types who judge others whilst breaking God's law themselves. But what I struck back as I read that sort of litany of sinful behaviours, even our lack of love and lack of mercy, for which I'm daily guilty of, demonstrates where our sort of natural human tendency lies.

We are all, in our own rights, in trouble. We are heading for divine judgment. We are part of the picture that God is so angry about.

The injustice that is causing, as we've already used the illustration, earthquakes earthquakes across the world, destroying lives. Again, Paul writes in chapter three, there is no one righteous, not even one.

All have turned away. We are all rightly deserving of God's wrath. Now, I realise some of you are thinking, I like last week's vicar.

What's wrong with it? Didn't he have a bad half term? You know, last week was all kind of Holy Spirit coming, speaking our language. So much more palatable than this stuff, right? Well, I spoke then, and I spoke in previous weeks, about the sense of our church increasingly desiring to be blown by the Spirit of God, to see spiritual renewal, right?

[27 : 39] That's kind of on our heart as we journey forward. And perhaps you desire that in your own heart, a spiritual renewal, a new life, fullness of life you've never experienced before.

Well, folks, that spiritual renewal will only happen as we increasingly become reliant on the grace of God. Not in our own sense of goodness, not on our track records, no, on our sense of dependency on God for his goodness, his ways, his righteousness.

And so actually to be convicted of our sin, of our own wickedness and godlessness, and to repent, to turn to God and cry out to him for help.

For us to recognize our own need to be rescued from this downward spiral of godlessness and wickedness. that we're all contributing to, and to have it redeemed, to have it rescued.

That is at the heart of what God is calling us to recognize, particularly through God's words this morning. I'll say it now.

[28 : 56] I remember my experience of coming to faith when I was a music student in London, and hand in hand with sort of hearing the word of God spoken and understanding about Jesus, actually became a recognition of this downward spiral.

And I distinctly remember walking through the streets of London, and suddenly the advertising hoardings, I could suddenly sort of see all the sort of powers at work that were sort of selling stuff, sex included.

I was like, wow. My eyes were suddenly open to the sort of powers and the evil that was about. But at the same time, my heart was coming alive because I recognized, oh my goodness, I'm part of that problem.

I put myself in the center of life and getting people to revolve around me. What happened if I put God in the center? And it kind of came side by side, but I remember distinctly a sort of a mind change, transforming of the mind and my heart that was both aware of the depths of depravity, but also the wonders of God's love that came and rescued me and all of humanity.

Because that is what happened. We know that God's desire for us is good because he sent his son Jesus, who left the Father's eternal embrace to come down to earth to rescue people, people like you, people like me, lost in the depths of darkness.

[30 : 20] And Jesus lived the perfect life, and yet he chose to identify with us. And he chose also to become a recipient of God's wrath.

He took upon himself the consequence of human godlessness, and he took it to its kind of final degree. He experienced betrayal. He experienced torture. He experienced death.

He was killed by the vilest wickedness and injustice. And as he died, as he was torn from the life and love of his father, he cried, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

But he did this for me. He did this for you in our place so that we might never have to face the full consequences of our godlessness and wickedness, so that we might never have to be torn from the love of our father.

Because, as we know from the story, Jesus, in his perfect obedience, he conquered death. He rose to life, and he promised that those who believe in him would be redeemed and would share his status as an eternally loved daughter or son of God.

[31 : 37] He would make us spotless. He would make us like the perfect bride. God. And it's because of Jesus that we can now know, in this life and into eternity, this love that the Father has for us.

His Holy Spirit pours that love into our hearts, and he unites us with God. He immerses us in his love. And as that love flows from heaven, we are increasingly remade to fulfill God's intended

picture for life on this earth.

And that grace, that undeserved kindness of God that demonstrated to us in Jesus, and the power of the Holy Spirit, that is spiritual renewal. That's the thing we're after, folks.

That is taking what is dead and making it alive. What is dark and shining a light into it. And so, as I come to a close, and before we pray, I just want to give you a moment to sit before God.

Well, maybe just allow the Holy Spirit to speak further what he's already been saying this morning. You know, there may be some of you amongst us who are, who even as I've spoken, and have become convicted of where there are aspects of your life which actually have become part of this downward spiral.

[33 : 12] That you're actually contributing to the injustice that hurts God so much. If that's you this morning, then you might just want to spend these moments just calling out to God for forgiveness.

Turning to Christ, asking for him to redeem, to make better what is broken. And for all of us, that actually our lives, as we move from here, might become in step with the Spirit, as Paul writes elsewhere in his letters.

That actually the compassion that God shows us might flow out in compassion to others. The mercy we receive from God might make us more merciful. The love we receive might make us more loving.

And I'm also aware, just Phil, a nudge to share, you know, there are people, as we've already said today, have come here this morning with such grieving hearts because death is part of the brokenness of our lived experience.

And I just feel the Lord wants to say, I know that. I know how terribly painful it is. And I want to be there with you. And I want to show my love, even in that dark place.

[34 : 34] So come, Holy Spirit. Come amongst us. Do that work of convicting. Pouring out compassion. Would you show each of us the step we next need to take towards the light, towards the life.

Would you remake us in your image? And wherever we have distorted that in our minds, in our hearts, in our behaviour, thank you, Jesus, that your grace is enough.

And that you desire us to, wherever we're at, to pick up our mats and follow you. So, Lord Jesus, thank you that you've come into this dark world, whether there is death, whether it's pain, and whether it's injustice.

And thank you, as the book of Romans goes on to say, that you didn't just come to die for the good people, the people who have sorted out. You came to die for sinners. And you came when we were sinners. You've come just at the right time, where we need rescuing.

So we hold out our hands once more and say, Lord, we need you. We need your grace and your love, where we are so lacking. Fill us once again.

[36 : 10] Fill us for the first time. Fill us for the hundredth time with your love and grace, that we might be people restored in your image to love and serve those around us. Thank you, Holy Spirit.

Amen. Amen.