

God's Great News for Humanity's Great Problem
Paul's Letter to the Romans

Exhibit A in the Hospital of God: The Control Freak
Romans 1:21 – 32

Exegetical Outline

<p>²¹ For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.</p>	<p>SIN AT ITS ROOT MIND HEART SPEECH BEHAVIOR</p>
<p>²² Professing to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.</p>	
<p>²⁴ Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them.</p>	<p>LUSTS/PASSIONS BODIES</p>
<p>²⁵ For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.</p>	<p>SIN AT ITS ROOT</p>
<p>²⁶ For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, ²⁷ and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.</p>	<p>LUSTS/PASSIONS BODIES</p>
<p>²⁸ And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, ²⁹ being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹ without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful;</p>	<p>SIN AT ITS ROOT MIND HEART ATTITUDES SPEECH SPEECH BEHAVIOR BEHAVIOR</p>
<p>³² and, although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.</p>	

Introduction: Discovering My Self-Centeredness

As the financial crisis we're in deepens, I don't think anyone would argue with the observation that human beings are self-centered. For example, how did we get into this crisis? Banks used predatory lending practices that were originally designed to exploit black people in inner cities. They mainstreamed those loan practices and renamed them adjustable rate mortgages, and other things. It was the self-centered greed of bankers. But also the politicians are calling each other self-centered. The House of Representatives yesterday rejected the \$700 billion financial aid packages to bailout Wall Street, so politicians were accusing each other of thinking only of their careers. It reminds us of course of the self-centered CEO's who paid themselves millions of dollars and left thousands of people without a home. So the question is now whether we're self-centered, but to what degree, and with what implications? So what? If everyone is selfish, does it matter? How does God view us?

This question is always personal. It's been personal for me for the last few months. I'm a father of two kids. My son John turned 8 this past weekend, and my daughter Zoe will be 6 in October. I have to admit that my daughter has been in a phase of her development that has been really challenging for me. She is really into her clothes; the rest of us are not. She insists on asking for McDonald's chicken sandwiches and when she doesn't get one, she cries. She gets easily jealous of her brother. For example, if John is sitting between me and Ming, Zoe will come and try to push him out of the way. Her reasoning is, 'He's had his turn!' And when we sometimes send her to her room, she blames us. One thing she says is, 'No one likes me in this family!' This particular kind of self-centeredness is what I would call the 'Princess attitude.' She thinks she's the only special one. That is a kind of self-centeredness that we sometimes have.

But the thing that makes it hard for me is that it touches on a self-centered streak that I have. I've realized that for all of my life, I have avoided people who have 'Princess' attitudes. I could detect it pretty easily, and then I avoided them, especially if they were girls. I mean, why bother, right?!? So I have to fight this urge to say to my wife, 'There she goes – she's your daughter! I'll just play with John. I can't deal with her.' All of my life, I've simply avoided this kind of person out of my own self-centeredness, and now I have to deal with one.

Relevance:

You might be wondering about yourself, 'Is my self-centeredness really that bad?' A lot of other people will tell you, 'Oh, you're a great person' and so on and so forth. And as much as I may personally like you, or as much as I'm sure I would personally like you if I knew you better, that's not the same question. The question here is: Is your self-centeredness really that bad? I have to say unequivocally, unambiguously YES IT IS.

Context: Seeing Our True Nature in the Hospital Of God

At this point in the book of Romans, Paul has opened to us the double doors of a huge hospital. Patients are being treated. But it's clear that some of the patients are resisting the treatment. Some are denying that they are sick. Representatives of every people and every nation are seated in lobby. We are here together to witness the condition of all humanity. In verses 18 – 20, Paul reads the diagnosis (in my paraphrase): 'All men and women have turned away from God and become sick, broken, and self-centered. What's more, they are attempting to deny that they are sick and in some cases medicate themselves.' Now Paul escorts us to Wing A, to the people who are called 'The Control Freaks.' The defining characteristic of this type of people is that they are caught in a downward spiral of self-centeredness and control.

We Reject God, Turn to Self: v.21a

As we start studying this passage, it will be helpful to do a few things that will make it more clear. First, make a note of the phrase: they knew God in verse 21. Then look at verse 32 and make note of the phrase: they knew the ordinance of God. That is the front and back cover of this passage, because at the beginning and at the end, they knew about God and yet they are hiding the truth. This is exactly what Paul said in verse 18: they suppress the truth they know about God.

There is also something else to make note of, and that is the action and reaction between human beings and God. Look at the word 'exchange' in verses 23, 25, and 26. That is the primary action of man. Then look at the words, 'God gave them over' in verses 24, 26, and 28. That is the primary action of God. This passage is like a tennis match, with the action like this: Humanity exchanged, God gave them over...three times.

Now, verse 21 tells us that man knew God. 'For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks.' How? We know about God through the internal presence of the conscience and the external presence of creation. I think everyone has the sense of God being in control over the things we are not in control over. This helps explain why everyone prayed in ancient cultures and religions. Whenever something came up that you felt was totally outside of your control, you prayed. So they know about God but as soon as the thought of Him comes up, they shove it aside and suppress it.

This suppression takes two forms. First, in verse 21, they refuse to glorify God. That is, they refuse to pay him respect and recognize our responsibility to be His image-bearers. We were intended to bear His character and His life to all creation, since He is greater than us. But we refused to acknowledge this. Second, we did not give thanks. God created this earth and gave it to us as only a part of His great love for us. Yet humanity has never been content. Instead, we have always tried to get MORE, MORE, MORE. Essentially what this verse is saying is that humanity thrust a defiant hand in God's face and said, 'I don't need You.' And from that day forward, we always had to ask ourselves the question, 'Am I truly loved? Who am I?' And that begins the downward spiral of selfishness and control that defines this man.

Now, what is the verdict on this suppression of God's truth? The verdict is: It is supremely dumb. Look at v.21: But they became futile in their speculations and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools.' We thought, 'Ha! I've rejected God! Now I can think more critically!' But Paul says that in reality, man's mind and speculations become futile. And notice what happens? His heart becomes darkened. Without God, a light inside the human heart goes out. It becomes cold. This is great tragedy of sin. Not just in our behavior, but in our heart, something goes terribly wrong. Sin spreads from within, wrapping its icy fingers around us and dragging us down this downward spiral.

Where does sin first work its way out? Through the mouth. Look at the word 'professing'. Man starts to talk about himself. And the first thing he calls himself is 'wise.' He praises himself for his great know-how. That's very interesting. Especially because Paul immediately says that he's really not as wise as he thinks he is. In fact, he's a fool, which means 'person who has no practical insight into living.' Of course, we'd like to see evidence of this, so as proof, Paul points to an exchange that man makes. What kind of exchange is this? The kind of exchange Paul speaks of is ludicrous: 'and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.'

I am convinced that this verse is one of the most important in all the Scriptures because it unlocks so much, so let's study it carefully. Since we're in the twentieth century, this seems a bit out of place. Isn't idol-worship gone in our society? Do we have little animals and statues? When we consider the history of idol worship, I think we find some thought provoking things. In the history of all older societies, people turned to idols because they felt insecure. They didn't want to leave anything to chance. So they worshiped the gods of war (Dagon of the Philistines, Rimmon of Damascus, Mars of Greece/Rome) to better control their military victories. They turned to fertility gods (Baal and Ashtaroht) to control their agriculture. All the time, men and women thought that if they sacrificed enough animals, had enough sexual orgies, or killed enough of their own children, they could gain security and control over their own lives. You see, idolatry is very easy to understand. An idol was the extension of man's effort, a mechanical input-output device that was intended to control their environment based on works. When human beings turned from God, they felt very insecure that disaster was just... behind... their shoulder... Now we start to understand. Idolatry is always a way to try to feel more secure. We don't completely trust God and put our identity in Him. So we turn EVERYWHERE ELSE looking for security and control. That is what defines the people in Wing A, the Control Freaks.

What makes this exchange so absurd? Let's look carefully now at the words in verse 23. There is a contrast between glory and an image. The word 'glory' always implies a 'revealing': in this case, a revealing of reality and the revealing of God's character. But rather than hold on to that, man goes for images, which are not reality. Images disappear like smoke when you try to hold on to them. Why? Because God is incorruptible and images are corruptible. That's the second contrast. People turn away from God and then become totally fascinated by things that rot and decay and waste away, things like designer clothes or good looks, or a college degree. All those things don't mean anything in the long run. Yet somehow right now we feel like they're everything because we want to control what other people think of us, or how other people relate to us, so we worship the things that bring us that security. So the irony is incredible. Man exchanges God, the everlasting reality, for smoke-like images that he can

see decay right before his eyes. Surely this is not a wise trade, and this clearly demonstrates the embarrassing foolishness of the man or woman without God!!

Self-Centeredness in Our Sexuality: v.24

Illus: I can illustrate this well out of my own life. At the end of my 10th grade year, my parents' arguing turned into a raging fight about divorce. I was stunned. I thought I was pretty independent from my parents, but this proved me wrong. I got involved in their fights. I came to school with little sleep. I felt like I had no security in life. Despite three faithful Christian friends, I refused to come to faith in Jesus Christ. Instead I stuck with my agenda for my own security. I relied a lot on my friends, tried twice as hard to keep my parents together, and became even more performance oriented than before. Within the next year I got involved with this girl. And I realized something. There was just something nice about being loved. There was something nice about having someone who you think you're safe with. And so again, rather than trust God for my security, I brought all my hopes for security that my family didn't meet, and I put my hope in her. And because I wanted her to be with me and need me, too, I pressured her for sex. My reasoning, and there was a cold logic to this, was: 'If she were to sleep with me, that would increase the chances that she would stay with me.' After the instability of home, I tried to control her because I wanted to feel secure. I was totally dismayed when I read Romans and found that God said that this would happen if I turned away from Him. Look at verse 24: 'Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, that their bodies might be dishonored among them.'

Impurity refers to sexual impurity. When we turn from God for security, we typically will crave attention from other people. The most obvious way to gain that is to play off our sexual nature. Whether it be sex or flirting, if we were to see through it all, we'd see a very fundamental self-centeredness. This exchange leads to our bodies being dishonored through sexual impurity. There's a sad poetic irony here. We don't honor God, but now our bodies are dishonored. Why our bodies? Because our bodies are what we want to give free reign to. But our bodies are intended to contain God's Spirit. We were made for deep and permanent relationship with Him from the heart yes, but in our very bodies. But without God, we are fundamentally alone and we're left to try to make relationships work on our own. Sometimes we try to cement human relationships quickly, so we use sex, or manipulate another person's sexuality. Or, sometimes we just become hedonistic pleasure seekers so that sex means very little and other people mean very little. Regardless, this underlying self-centeredness is sending us spiraling downward. We're going to see this self-centeredness work out in our sexuality in verses 24 – 27 and then in our general relational style in verses 28 – 32.

The fascinating thing here is that God lets us do this. He gives us over. Why? Is He being vindictive? No. Here we see the first action God takes in response to man's sin. God lets man go. He respects our choice not to choose Him. Even though it pains Him because He loves us, and He loves the people we abuse or neglect, He accepts the exchange that we make. Why? Because our sin is meant to cause us pain, so we learn from it and turn back to Him. God said through Jeremiah: 'Your own wickedness will correct you and your apostasies will reprove you. Know therefore and see that it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the LORD your God.' In fact, Romans 1 might be a summary of the book of Jeremiah. God is hoping that man will realize how far he's fallen away from a secure, everlasting love, and will cry out to God and say, 'Forgive me. Please, take me back!!' But instead, we make plunge deeper into our selfish agenda and another exchange.

Self-Centeredness in Worship: v.25

'For they exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.' Again, this is only too logical. Man exchanges the truth of God for a lie. The truth of God--that He exists, that He loves us, that He accepts us in Jesus Christ, that He sends His Spirit to live in us--is established truth that will stand for all time. But the Control Freak traded that truth for 'THE' lie. That's really the definite article there: THE lie. I think that what he has in mind is the ancient lie of Satan in the garden encapsulating two things. One, God is not near; He's distant. Two, God is not loving; He's holding you back. This is what is encapsulated in THE lie of Satan.

How is THE LIE being put forward today? Perhaps it's in ideas like, 1) 'The God of the Bible is full of unnecessary restrictions.' 2) 'The Bible was written by white men.' 3) 'The God of the Old Testament is not loving.' And especially 4) 'The world sucks, so God must not be loving.' Etc. All those statements smack of Satan's hook, line, and sinker in the garden.

But what happens when we believe ‘the lie’? A strange thing. We feel like we’re alone, so we want to go out and ‘Get the love we want’ and ‘Master the possibilities’ and ‘Control our destiny!’ And we worship whatever makes us feel secure: created things. What other people think of us becomes really important. But the problem is a little more advanced. The fascination with idols intensifies to worshipping and serving them. Notice that we’re a little farther along in the downward spiral of self-centeredness and control. So what does God do in response? In verse 26, ‘For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions.’ Again, God sadly lets man go, this time to degrading passions. Literally, this means ‘passions of dishonor.’

Illus: As I studied this, I couldn’t help but think of a friend of mine that I’ve known since elementary school. She grew up as the second of three daughters and early on, wanted a boyfriend like her older sister. So during high school, she got involved with a guy who wasn’t that good to her, in fact, who used her. She held on to this relationship throughout college but things were never really good so her moods swung back and forth. She felt like she had no control in life. So she began to eat abnormally and she developed an eating disorder because she felt like she could at least have control over these things in her life. She served that which brought her a sense of control and security, even these passions of dishonor.

In our society, we should understand these passions of dishonor in another way. Virtually every commercial or advertisement suggests that if we just buy the right sports equipment, or drink the right beer, or drive the right car, we’ll have a good life. Have you seen those beer commercials where the people on the beach are drinking beer, and they look totally fit. When I go to the beach, and I see people drinking beer, they don’t look like that. But maybe the ads make us think that if we drink the right beer, we’ll look the right way, and hook up with the right people. We go in thinking to gain control, and we wind up enslaved to fad, fashion, and money.

Self-Centeredness in Homosexuality: v.26 – 27

At this point, instead of admitting our own confusion, we make another exchange. And the example Paul uses is homosexuality. When we’re committed to ourselves, then who can better care for us than someone who looks like, thinks like, and acts like, the self? ‘For their females exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way, also the males abandoned the natural function of the female and burned in their desire toward one another, male in male committing indecent acts and receiving in their own selves the due penalty of their error.’ Paul emphasizes homosexuality as being not natural. Twice the word natural appears in this section as something that is violated. God intended from Genesis that the natural expression of sexuality be male and female in a marriage of oneness. But male and male only equals male. Female and female only equals female. There is none of the oneness that God designed for marriage. God also intended that in marriage, Adam and Eve would be fruitful and multiply. Again, same sex relations cannot bring forth life as God wished.

Now, I realize how explosive this is in our day. I can also tell you about how one of the leading psychiatrists who updated DSM-IV from DSM-III (the standard manual for psychiatrists and psychologists) believed that sexual orientation was purely genetic now views sexual orientation as fluid, and not an identity, and influenced by the things that happen to us early in childhood and also the decisions we make. To make a parallel, in men, we have seen that cocaine use, pornography and video games stimulate the same pathways in the brain; it leads to the overproduction of testosterone, which actually damages our brain and emotional life; it has a physical impact on us and it makes us shallow. So with sexual orientation, the nature vs. nurture debate breaks down, and notice that we’re not really having it anymore. Our circumstances and *our choices* do physically affect us. That’s why I think that under different circumstances, this would be me. I’m sure my own self-centeredness could have taken me here.

The most interesting part about this verse is the end. They receive in their own selves a punishment. I think what Paul is talking about here is the deep identity crisis the homosexual faces. Sexual orientation is not your identity. It never is. Only God gives us an identity. Darlene Bogle, a former lesbian, talks about this in her book, *Long Road to Love*. She writes that it was inner torture. She was molested numerous times while she was young, and her family life was definitely not great. When she went to college, she became a lesbian for the next 17 years. She was a gay rights political activist, but she felt very confused about her own identity. She gave her life to Christ and after a challenging process of healing, this is what she said: ‘I know God is in control, and deep inside I’m at peace.’ Darlene now lives in Hayward and counsels homosexuals trying to leave that lifestyle. Let me be clear though that homosexuality is not regarded as the worst possible sin, so if any of us here are struggling with it, God has hope and healing for us.

Self-Centeredness in Our Motivations: v.28 – 29

You might ask, ‘Okay, what is the worst sin?’ It is self-centeredness in general. So what happens when we turn from God? We turn in upon ourselves. ‘And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil.’ How poetic. It’s in the mind that man judges God to be unfit. So God lets man make this choice. And now the human mind deteriorates. There is a word here that is translated ‘depraved.’ I don’t like that translation because it sounds like the man described here is a mindless, drooling beast. But who becomes like that? In Greek, that word is the negative form of the root word ‘dokimos,’ which means ‘approved.’ So the most straightforward translation of this is two say that God gave them over to an unapproved mind. The reason the mind is unapproved is because it refuses to acknowledge God. So God seems to say, ‘Okay. I’ll let you be yourself.’ Isn’t it frightening to think that God’s wrath is to let you be yourself? God gave us choice because He made us in His image, and He has choice.

Illus: After the recent crisis of AIG, Lehman Brothers and Merrill Lynch, surely BC’s CSOM, Econ, and Philosophy departments should be asking itself some serious questions about ethical responsibility, greed, and evil. But they’re probably not. And you know why, right? Because there’s no money in ethics! BC wants to rise in the ranks, so they want wealthy alum, and ethics don’t get you rich alum who give you money. We make our beds, and we must sleep in them.

Now there is a long list of negative adjectives that Paul uses here to describe us. I used to think it was kind of random, as if Paul was just trying to nail as many people as possible with a laundry list of sins. But when I studied it carefully, I found a logical order. He describes the entire way we relate to other people. First it starts in the heart, as we saw in v.21. Then the mind is affected – it becomes unapproved – and this influences the way we behave.

²¹ For even though they knew God,	
they did not honor Him as God or give thanks,	SIN AT ITS ROOT
but they became futile in their speculations,	MIND
and their foolish heart was darkened.	HEART
²² Professing to be wise, they became fools,	SPEECH
²³ and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God	BEHAVIOR
for an image in the form of corruptible	
man	
and of birds	
and four-footed animals and	
crawling creatures.	

In verses 28 – 31, there is a similar pattern. Humanity turns from God (sin at its root). That affects our mind (depraved/unapproved mind). Then our hearts are ‘being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, and evil.’ Those are all things that come from the inside. Then our attitudes towards others are influenced. Then our speech. Then our attitude to authority, and finally, our outward behavior. It is a hideous picture of the spread of human sin.

²⁸ And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over	SIN AT ITS ROOT
to a depraved mind,	MIND
to do those things which are not proper,	
²⁹ being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil;	HEART
full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice;	ATTITUDES
they are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, haters of God,	SPEECH
insolent, arrogant, boastful,	SPEECH
inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,	BEHAVIOR
³¹ without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful;	BEHAVIOR

Our Competitive Self-Protectiveness: v.29 – 31

After our hearts go bad and we become filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, and evil, we develop a bad attitude towards others. Namely, we become very competitive. Look at the next set of words: ‘full of envy,

murder, strife, deceit, malice.’ So our attitude towards them becomes one of comparison. The mind is behind this the whole way through. We start to envy others for the authority they have, or the friends that they have.

Illus: This reminds me so much of Gene and Phineas, the two 16 year old boys in John Knowles’ literary masterpiece *A Separate Peace*. Gene Forrester is the introverted intellectual, and Phineas was the natural athlete who was Gene’s free-spirited best friend during their years at the Devon School in rural New Hampshire. Gene and Phineas take an instant liking to each other. They do everything together. They jump off a high tree into a river. They start a secret society of friends together. They bike together to a New England beach and camp out on the sands overnight. They’re the best of friends for an entire summer. But Gene always envies Phineas for his abilities and his fearlessness. And when the school season starts, Gene begins to see Phineas as his chief rival for being top of the class. So on one particular night when they go to jump off the tree together, Gene wraps his arms around the trunk, and bounces on the branch so that Phineas, who is not quite above the water, falls to the hard ground and shatters his leg. What a poignant commentary. I wonder how many of us would be honest enough to say that our drivenness and our insecurities, which are deep inside us, can take us this far.

How does this bad attitude issue forth? Sin appears first in the mouth again. First, we put down other people. ‘they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God.’ Maybe it starts out with just a slip of the tongue. We gossip. Those of us who gossip know that gossip is a powerful way of control: We can make ourselves seem funny; we can seem secure; we can build a coalition of people against others. But we must stop. Secondly, we defend ourselves. If we feel like God isn’t on our side, then we take it upon ourselves to look good. And if my security depends on other people, then I’d better tell them how wonderful I am. So Paul says we’re: ‘insolent, arrogant, boastful.’ Again, our unapproved mind makes the words, give the orders, and our mouth leaps to obey. We use words to knock other people down and prop ourselves up. We lie on our resumes, and so on.

What comes next? Our attitude towards authority in v.31a. Of course we don’t like it when other people are superior to us. We don’t like it when people tell us what to do because our attitude is I KNOW WHAT’S BEST FOR ME. So we become very disrespectful and resentful of authority. That leads Paul to make two more observations. We are: ‘inventors of evil, disobedient to parents.’ We figure out how to ‘beat the system.’ Or we may even deeply resent authority because it causes us to compromise our deeply entrenched commitment to ourselves. Now we’re going to see all these qualities come together in the last four words Paul uses to summarize our outward behavior. In verse 31, Paul lists four profoundly negative words: without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful.

The first description is ‘without understanding.’ In what subject are we without understanding? In terms of understanding ourselves, others, relationships, and God. For example, some people think they can be happy by being first and foremost committed to themselves. That’s stupid. Why would you think that? If you’re first and foremost self-centered, then everyone else will disappoint you. They’ll piss you off. Even your future spouse won’t be as committed to you as you are. **SO IF YOU THINK THAT WAY, YOU ARE WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING OF LIFE.** The paradox of life is that in order to be happy, you have to give your life to something larger than yourself.

There are deep places in all of us that want to be affirmed. Once we turn away from God’s profound love, we start to think of all our other relationships in terms of friendship and performance. We turn our backs on God’s love and try to earn other people’s love. When we do that we awaken a thirst that is very hard to satisfy. Why is it so important to understand God’s love for us? Because otherwise we become committed above all else to have those places in us lovingly touched by someone else. That is when we become committed above all other things to ourselves. We may be outgoing, or we may wait for others to come to us first, but we’re ultimately committed to ourselves. So we become the next word, **UNTRUSTWORTHY.**

That’s the next word Paul uses to describe us in v.31. We can’t keep our word. In some of your Bibles, this second word might be translated, ‘faithless,’ so it sounds like not having faith in anything. But the literal meaning of this word means ‘not keeping covenant’ or ‘not keeping promises.’

Illus: In our society, it is no surprise that it is harder for us to be faithful to each other. The rise of self-centeredness is certainly the major cause. The trend of magazine popularity over the past 4 decades is so interesting. In the 50’s the most popular magazine was LIFE. Broad coverage. In the 60’s, the most popular magazine was PEOPLE. Still,

broad coverage. In the 70's, it was US. You begin to see the trend. In the 80's, it was SELF. Sadly, the rate of divorces climbed, too. Our public commitment and concern for the poor declined as well, as the Civil Rights gains of the 60's were lost in the decade of greed in the 1980's.

We break our sweet promises. How many of you wrote in your high school yearbooks and in cards, 'I'll always be there for you' or 'I'll always be your friend' or 'I'll always treat you with respect and love.' We have good intentions, yet those promises are very hard to keep. We want to be faithful to others but we're so committed to ourselves. How many people do you know who are torn between caring for another person and MAINTAINING MY CONTROL TO PROTECT MYSELF. The sad result is that IN THE CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS IN WHICH OUR WORD SHOULD MEAN THE MOST IS WHERE IT IN REALITY CARRIES THE LEAST TRUTH.

So we become the third word, UNLOVING. God is love, and without Him, we try to manufacture our own. But we are not the source of love. And it shows.

Illus: When I was in college, I served for three years in leadership of my Christian fellowship. And at the end of that time, I felt like I was such a loving person. It's true that I was less selfish than before. But soon after I graduated, I moved into a lower income neighborhood called East Palo Alto to live with Mexican immigrant families. I was being mentored by a couple named Jose and Jennifer Espinosa. And I hung out with the kids in this apartment complex. I felt totally overwhelmed; I thought those kids were wild, unruly, and undisciplined. I would pull my hair out trying to enforce some boundaries. At times I thought I would give up, I felt like the Lord said, 'But Mako, I thought you were such a loving person?'

You see, most of us can be 'loving' as long as we feel in control. But as soon as we feel like it's too much, where we're pushed beyond the point where we feel in control, that is where we become unyielding, unreasonable, and inflexible. And woe be it to that person who pushes us beyond our sense of control, because that's when we become UNMERCIFUL. Unmerciful means 'not forgiving or yielding.' I think being unmerciful or unforgiving is one of the biggest problems we have at our age. Why? Because we want control our own lives, and we hate it when anyone hurts us or shakes our sense of control.

Our culture in general has no idea how self-centered we are.

We Legitimize Our Selfishness by Getting Others to Be Selfish, Too: v.32

Finally, we become evangelists of self-centeredness. 'And, although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.' Because we're self-centered in our lives, because we're self-centered in our decisions for our sexuality, for our relationships, for our future, the only thing we can say to others is the guiding motif we live by: 'Whatever makes you happy.' We encourage other people to sin by being as self-centered as we are. We lower other people to our level. And we become so stubbornly resistant to the demand of God to be other-centered as He Himself is other-centered, that we will harden ourselves and try to remove ourselves entirely from God's love. So many people eventually put themselves in hell. God doesn't put us there. In fact, we create hell by trying to remove ourselves eternally from the love of God, the God who calls, invites, and demands that we surrender our control to Him.

Conclusion

So! This is Exhibit A in the Hospital of God, the Control Freak. Since Paul has now dealt with the worst person, he's going to examine the good person. Next week, we're going to examine Exhibit B, the Judgmental Person, the one who claims that he is moral and good. Then, we're going to examine the best person in history, Exhibit C, the Jew. What have we learned about us? When we look at this 'Control Freak,' I think it's very accurate to see ourselves described there. You see, this is not a picture of the pre-literate society. This is a picture of our society. And this is not the description of a homosexual. This is describing you and me in the most searching light of truth there is. Does this scare you? It should.

Just as importantly, what have we learned about God? The most interesting thing through all of this is that all three times, God is said to let man make those choices. Why? Doesn't He care? Yes! In Romans 2:4, we learn that God lets us go because He wants to give us every opportunity to come back. 'Do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?' Then in

Romans 3, we see that God's ultimate response is to come in the person of Jesus to heal humanity, to cleanse humanity, to transform humanity. God went so far to pursue us that he came from heaven to earth, the author of life became dead. We tend to think of God as distant, but it is people who turn away.

So: WE ARE MORE SELF-CENTERED THAN WE HAVE EVER THOUGHT. And it's ugly. But at the same time, WE ARE MORE LOVED AND MORE ACCEPTED BY GOD THAN WE'VE EVER DARED TO DREAM! Let me repeat that. WE ARE MORE LOVED AND MORE ACCEPTED BY GOD THAN WE'VE EVER DARED TO DREAM!!! Even when we look this ugly, God doesn't love us any less. If you've got ugly stains in your past, it doesn't matter what you've done. God always welcomes you back.

I want you to consider a Healer that is willing to heal you, Jesus Christ. You can look to him in faith and he will place his healed humanity in you. He'll become a spiritual organ donor to you. What that means is that you yield absolute control to him, because he comes to live inside you and he will begin to transform your life from the inside out. To give you an idea for how that might be, here's Danielle Chung to share her story.

DANIELLE'S STORY: My self-centeredness and God's transformative love

Here is my testimony of my on going struggle with my sin of self-centeredness, and God's continual hope for healing me of this sin.

My self-centeredness comes in the form of my tight hold of the security money brings, and thus my apathy for the problems in the world around me.

I guess it's quite obvious that we live in a world of differences: some people live in abundance while others live in need. I would say that I have lived my life on the more side of this unequal world. Up until this year, I blamed my comfortable life style on my parents. I convinced myself that I was well off only because of my parents were well off. I had the things I own because my parents gave me nice things. You know the passage in the bible that says how it states, "its easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God"? My response to that was, hey that's not fair if you're born into that situation! What control did I have over that? How was I being self-centered? However, I didn't realize at the time how I was only legitimizing my own greed and self-centered by saying that it was my parents fault.

Through the blindness of my self-centeredness, I believed that if God ever called me to give up a life of luxuries, I would be able to do it in a heartbeat. I would rationalize the things I bought by saying that I would not need them later in my life. I would think its okay for me to buy expensive things now because when I would live my "real life," when I "grown up," I would be able to give them up.

However, during last year's ACF retreat, I realized that God was telling me to give all of that up NOW. God told me stop spending my money carelessly and brought the thought of lifetime missions in my head. My response was not what I expected, and it wasn't pretty. I sat there looking extremely mad during worship while everyone was praising. As spoiled as this sounds, the only thought in my head was, I can't buy cheap jeans! They don't look or feel the same!

Despite my ugly behavior, God slowly worked in me, and I decided to sign up for Global Urban Trek for Mexico.

So, this summer, I went on a 6 week long mission trip to Mexico. I lived and worked in an urban slum outside of Mexico City. I worked with a Christian organization called World Vision, where I taught 2 different English classes and lead a kid club where we worked and played with kids, teaching them about recycling and human rights. I lived in a swatter's house (illegal housing) with no running water, where I had to hand wash my own clothes, take bucket showers, and live in a crowded house. We brought only a school book bag of possessions, so I wore the same 2 shirts and 2 pants for 6 weeks.

Although many parts of this trip was hard for me, God helped heal my need to feel secure by money and possessions. I learned this not from living in voluntary poverty, and enduring hard conditions, but through loving the community. I realized that God DID give me the power to change my self-centeredness despite the way I grew up. Even though there are many things I cannot change, such as the fact that I am a college student, so right now I have

to take care of certain things, I realized the things I could do now. So, I've started to budget my money and record every single thing I buy. I've limited my spending, and the amount I've saved by not buying clothes this year has been embarrassing amount. With the money I've saved though, I've been able to contribute to various organizations.

I would say that have experienced the transformative power of Jesus' love. Yet, to say that I've been totally freed from my self-centeredness is quite an overstatement. Just an hour ago, I called Mako, freaking out about speaking today because I didn't want to be a hypocrite by saying that my greed doesn't still have a hold on me (especially when it deals with spending money on food and going out in college). However, I can say with absolute confidence that I know that God will not stop trying to get me to be more other-centered, and that my story of this healing process did not stop this summer.