The Pathology of a Doomed Culture
Scripture: Romans 1:18–23
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We need the timeless truths of God's Word to make sense of this crazy world. But Scripture not only explains what is really going on—it also fills us with hope as God works His sovereign plan to its ultimate, glorious conclusion. This blog series, first run in January 2016, is a timely reminder to that end. –ed.

Do you ever forget how sinful the world is? Not that any believer could mistake this place for an untouched paradise—but do you ever lose sight of the depth and breadth of this ruined world's corruption?

I think if we're honest, it's easy to get caught up in our everyday routines and temporarily forget or ignore the depth of the depravity around us. Sometimes we are overexposed and desensitized through entertainment, or too invested in relationships that skew our view of the world. Other times we simply get caught up in short-term issues of life—work, school, and other pursuits—that warp our perspective and distract us from eternal matters.

Clearly corruption, depravity, and sin aren't the most delightful things to think about. That's why many pastors avoid such topics like the plague. But it is vital to have the right perspective on those issues because a biblical understanding drives us to guard against distraction and keep at the work of God's kingdom. Rightly understanding the world around us ought to motivate us to invest in God's people and work for His purposes in this ruined world.

In a landmark sermon titled "[Hope for a Doomed Nation](#)," John MacArthur describes the pathology of a culture sprinting to its own demise. I want to share some of the points he raised—and some of his comments—with you as we look at this sinful world from God's perspective.

Living for Pleasure

Perhaps no culture in the history of the world has been more eager for pleasure, or more adept at heaping distractions and entertainment in its own way. As John explained in his sermon, the reprobate mind doesn't think deeply or broadly—it's not disciplined or productive. It exists merely to pursue its own lusts, which today equates to one long, inebriated stupor.

God's Word warns about the dangers of living for pleasure. In 1 Timothy 5:6, Paul writes, "But she who gives herself to wanton pleasure is dead even while she lives." The point, as John explained, is that the intense pursuit of pleasure reveals the spiritual death within.

You kill yourself chasing pleasure. It's the death of dignity, it's the death of respect, it's the death of potential, it's the death of achievement, it's the death of refinement, it's the death of individuality, it's the death of development, it's the killing of your life, it's the killing of your future. You've got to get

past being endlessly entertained and fulfilling your lusts. . . . That's hard for this culture to do.

We're surrounded by evidence of the high cost of pursuing wanton pleasure. It robs you of your usefulness, your productivity, and your discipline. Worst of all, it dulls your senses and deadens your conscience, leaving unrepentant pleasure-seekers numb to their need for a Savior.

Selfishness and Pride

The people of this world are consumed with their own agendas, their own desires, and their own satisfaction. Humility and meekness are considered weakness, as everyone strives for their own achievement and fulfillment. Healthy relationships are impossible to sustain in this epidemic of pride. And considering someone else as more important than you (Philippians 2:3) is a laughable concept in our arrogant culture.

As John MacArthur explains, at the root of this tidal wave of selfishness and pride is the satanic lie of self-esteem.

Psychologists have created this thing called "self-esteem." That is a satanic idea. You're not as important as you think you are. You are far less important than you think you are, and so am I, so are all of us. You're not better than you think you are, you're worse than you think you are. You are far worse than you think you are, and so am I. In God's eyes, you are inconceivably sinful. In your own eyes, you're something wonderful.

God's Word is clear about the destructive effects of pride and selfishness. Proverbs 13:10 says, "By pride comes nothing but strife" (NKJV). Proverbs 16:18 expands on that point: "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling." And Proverbs 29:23 warns, "A man's pride will bring him low."

Broken relationships, shattered families, and ruined lives are all sacrificed at the altar of self-fulfillment and self-interest. Today no price is too high to pay for happiness and satisfaction. And that kind of wicked selfishness and pride inoculates you from recognizing any purpose for your life outside of your own enjoyment, or any spiritual or eternal need that you can't fulfill yourself. Our world's runaway pride blinds people to the reality of their true spiritual condition and their need for humility, repentance, and salvation.

Immorality

Another hallmark of a doomed society is the absence of any morality. People who don't know God are driven by their lusts and passions (1 Thessalonians 4:5), and we see the evidence of that throughout our culture.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul describes how rejecting the Lord leads to further moral decline. It begins with forms of idolatry—and while physical idols dominated in previous eras, today *the individual* has unseated God and *self* reigns in the heart of every man (Romans 1:18-23). In turn, Paul explains how that leads to sexual deviance and perversion that assaults God's design (Romans 1:24-27)—the rampant and celebrated immorality of our day proves the accuracy of the apostle's warning. The corrupting process culminates in Romans 1:28-32, where Paul spells out the end

results of man's degradation:

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; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; 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.

I struggle to think of a more accurate way to describe our society than that. Every characteristic Paul lists is embodied in our culture—not the least of which is the pervasive, hearty approval of each other's sin. Countless men and women are sprinting to hell, and the rest of the world is cheering them on.

Anger and Vengeance

The culture's perspective on anger and vengeance has shifted in recent years. As John MacArthur explained in his message, anger wasn't always considered a valuable asset:

Anger was once recognized as a sin. Everybody recognized it as a sin. Just a normal, healthy culture recognized that anger had no place; that anger ate up the person who was angry and damaged the relationships of everybody around that person.

Self-control used to be something socially valuable. It used to be valuable if you thought something and kept your mouth shut and didn't say it. It didn't all of a sudden become a virtue for you to vent every angry thought you have as if some kind of psychologically freeing experience. [That kind of constant, angry venting] is in itself damaging.

Again, Scripture leaves no doubt about what God thinks of unchecked anger. Ecclesiastes 7:9 bluntly says, "Do not be eager in your heart to be angry, for anger resides in the bosom of fools." In Ephesians 4:31, Paul exhorts his readers to "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice."

But our society excels as excusing its sin, and one of the prominent excuses for the anger consuming so many people is vengeance. As John explains, vengeance lends false credibility and legitimacy to sinful anger pointed at one another:

This is another dominant sin in our day. It's hailed as a virtue: retaliation, getting back. Chain reactions of evil: you get them back, they get you back. You get them back, they get you back, and that's how life is lived. It's like life in a biker gang, or like in an inner-city gang: you do them, they do to you. So you do to them and they do to you, and you have an amoral, antisocial, destructive, murderous culture—all because of vengeance.

The lust for vengeance is hardwired into our sin nature. In the clutches of sin, we all want to exact our own revenge against those who wrong us. The Lord recognizes that tendency in the sinful heart, and made provisions against acts of vengeance with His people, going all the way back to the Old Testament law. In Leviticus 19:16-18, the Lord issued this command to the Israelites:

You shall not go about as a slanderer among your people, and you are not to act against the life of your neighbor; I am the Lord. You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord.

Quoting from God's Law, Paul made the same point in Romans 12:19, "Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay,' says the Lord."

But it's no surprise that a culture which has so thoroughly rejected the Lord and His authority is so defiantly bent in the expression of its anger and the pursuit of its vengeance. The fixation on fulfilling their own wrath blinds people to the reality of God's wrath, and the due penalty they owe to Almighty God.

There are many other characteristics of a doomed culture that we could discuss—disrespect for authority, civil rebellion, prejudice, and others (I'd encourage you to listen to John Macarthur's sermon for his complete list)—but for now I think you get the point: God's people need to see the world the way He sees it. We need to rightly appraise the corruption of the world around us, and not lose sight of the desperate spiritual needs we encounter on a daily basis.

And when talk in the church turns to the prospect of "redeeming the culture"—as it likely will in this election year—we need to have a strong, biblical grasp on the true depth of this culture's wickedness, and understand what methods we actually have at our disposal to make any difference at all. More on that next time.

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