

“A Fouled Exchange”

Psalms 121; Romans 1:18-23

October 16, 2022

I'm really going to date myself this morning but do y'all remember a brief fashion frenzy that happened sometime in the early 1980s called the Member's Only Jacket? Perhaps some of you may even have one lurking around in a closet somewhere. I mean, the things were a big, big deal for a brief period of time. Well, I went to a private school and, well, there, what you wore was a big, big deal. Just the kind of place where having a Member's Only Jacket would propel you forward in your standing among other students. Well, long story short – I wanted one. I see now that I myself wanted to be a big big deal and that was the root of many of my problems). But anyway, And, at that age (I would've been around 12 years old at the time), I could be very persuasive. Read: obnoxious. My parents, who didn't give me everything I wanted by any stretch of the imagination, yielded on that one. One day I arrived home and there was a royal blue Member's Only jacket, just like I'd wanted for so long. I don't know why Mom and Dad capitulated on that one but there it was. The irony of the thing was that those Jackets stayed in style for like the cultural equivalent of 15 minutes before they passed out of fashion into the scrapheap of short-lived fashion fads.

Although I'm certainly no longer attenuated to it any longer, I'm sure fashion trends still come and go these days with great frequency. Seems like UGG boots were a thing a few years back, and that's probably the last trend I recollect but I'm sure things are similar today as they were back then. That's because there is an expression which I think you still hear in culture that seeks to define what we're all searching for. It goes a little something like this – Image is everything.

Image is everything. That's what was in the back of my mind way back when I would do anything just to get a Member's Only Jacket. Image is everything.

I would, thinking Biblically, adjust that expression only slightly to make a wry commentary about you and I. I would say that for us fallen humans, “Images are everything.” And, by images, I mean, idols. John Calvin, one of the founders of our Presbyterian Reformed tradition once noted in Institutes of Christian Religion that, “**we may infer that the human mind is, so to speak, a perpetual forge of idols**”. Basically, what Calvin is saying is that our minds do little more than act as creator of idols all of the time.” In fact, in the beginning of his book, Counterfeit Gods, a book on idolatry really, Timothy Keller notes that many Biblical scholars look at the entirety of the Bible as a statement against idolatry. That all of its central stories reveal how making an idol of something is the surest way to heartbreak and misery and that many of the stories of the Bible have, at their center, a warning against idolatry.

Paul, as he writes the Roman church, is greatly concerned about idols and idolatry. Rome, after all, was the center of the universe at the time. And, as a consequence of drawing all sorts of people into the city, all sorts of other gods and perversities were permitted and even encouraged.

So, Paul writes this at the beginning of Romans to alert the congregation to the central danger of our faith – idolatry: *“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For His invisible attributes, namely, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So, they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.”*

A couple of things need be mentioned before we go any further. First, Paul's claim is that God is knowable through creation. That is too easy that one can look out at this glorious thing called creation and see clearly that there had to be some kind of divine hand behind it all. I think I never felt so assured of the handiwork of God as I did one day in the Pisgah National Forest when I looked out over a valley as the sun was rising in the East. It was the most breathtaking image I think I'd ever seen in my entire life. As I stood there, an avowed teenage atheist, I quivered, for I knew deep within my heart of hearts that no matter what I said, that there most assuredly was a God at the center of all creation. It's funny, atheism is becoming out in the academy. As

particle physicists and other scholars continually probe the mysteries of the universe a growing consensus is stating the obvious – something must be behind all of this. There is too much order, too much purpose embedded into things to be randomness. My experience is the kind of thing Paul means when he says that the glory of God has been “clearly perceived.” That is to say that it doesn’t take a PhD in particle physics to know that there is a God. Paul says that it is plain to see within the bounds of God’s creation. That you can look out and see and know that there is a God. Which should lead you directly to worship and adore that God.

But we don’t. That brings us to our second point. The second point is a difficult one to swallow. Oftentimes our image of God hovers somewhere near an old Santa Claus like figure who is always jolly and sure to say a kid was nice when he was really naughty. That is to say that what we imagine most about God is like a universal grandfather that is permissive and just loves and loves and loves. Which is certainly true about God. God is, after all, love. But God is also Holy, powerful, AWESOME. The scriptures say that in His presence, the mountains melt like wax. Can you imagine power that great? That simply in the presence of God, the mountains crumble into the sea. Amazing power like that reminds us that this is no simple grandfather. This is the awesome and mighty and Holy God who commands our attention and whose handiwork is so apparent, so manifest, so all around us that we simply should not ignore it. But we do. That’s what Paul says. We exchange this amazing Glory of idols. That’s what Paul says.

That brings us to our third point. The third point is that central is significance of the glory of God. Wow, we really get a sense of that glory as you read Ezekiel. We’ve been studying Ezekiel for a couple of weeks in our weekly Bible study and there, the prophet sees God’s glory leaving the Temple in Jerusalem and it is a sight to behold. The Bible puts forward that the glory of God is the ultimate value in the universe. This is a bit of an inversion for us. We tend to place our values in lots of lots of different places but seldom on the glory of God. The glory of the presence of God is what everything flows from and to for it is the central and sovereign power in this universe and beyond. If you can imagine one power that stands behind all the power in the universe (and beyond) that is the Glory of the Presence of God. That GLORY is so pure, so amazing, so beyond our comprehension that even to view it is breathtaking as we see so clearly from the prophets who were exposed to God’s glory.

So what Paul is saying here in Romans is essentially this – that the ultimate value in the universe is God’s glory and we humans do something dreadful in its ongoing presence here in creation – we ignore it. Worse still even, we trade it. If it sometimes feels that all life is just one bad trade Paul would suggest you may be onto something.

The year was 1983 and, as a gift for my 12th birthday, I was given something fantastic, a complete box set of the 1978 Topps Baseball card collection. You see, then as now, I am a baseball fan. A heart-broken one if I may confess it today as the Braves season now has ended at the hands of the dreaded Phillies. But, being a baseball fan, then as now, I had begun collecting baseball cards. It was a fun thing to do in the era before hand-held videogames. I had amassed quite a number of cards but that box set was my pride and joy. After all, I had EVERY card. I recently got rid of that box set as my mom downsized from her home of nearly 50 years and, with it, a lot of my childhood stuff crammed into the attic had to go. 1978 sadly, wasn’t a great year for cards, at least as far as long-term value goes. There was one card that year that really made it worthwhile. It was the George Brett rookie card. Last time I checked, the George Brett rookie card was worth somewhere north of \$2,000. That means, had I held on to that entire set, I would be looking at a \$2000 payday. I sold my set for the equivalent of \$20. Why the difference in price? You guessed it, mine no longer had that George Brett rookie card. You see a buddy of mine happened to have a Dwight Gooden rookie card the year the world went crazy for the guy. It was worth a whopping \$10 at the time and my friend made me an offer. His Dwight Gooden Rookie card for my George Brett rookie card. Well, George Brett was a good player for sure but he wasn’t as hot as Dwight Gooden at the time. That George Brett was putting up Hall of Fame worthy numbers was entirely lost on me at the time. Dwight Gooden was the Member’s Only Jacket of baseball cards. Not surprisingly, I fell for it, hook, line and sinker. I made the trade. It was an awful trade.

Paul suggests that every single day, we wake up and make a terrible trade. We exchange the glory of God with something else, something far inferior. And, as a result of this exchange, we face a measure of God’s wrath. That’s an uncomfortable awareness to a lot of us. That in our sin, we are exposed to God’s wrath but

that's what Paul says happens here in Romans 1. It makes sense, doesn't it. We know that when we sin, there are always consequences.

I think that's what becomes clearer and clearer to me as I spend time in the pastorate and just live life, in general. That for every sin-action, there's an equal but opposite wrath action. Now, I don't mean like you sin and God's strikes someone you love with illness. Rather what I mean is that sin comes with consequences. As a rough example, gluttony. When you overeat, you gain weight and life becomes more difficult. That's what I mean. When we exchange the glory of God for idols, something of our own manufacture, we bring misery into our lives. Worse still, we can fashion idols out of anything, even good things.

Timothy Keller, in *Counterfeit Gods*, tells the story of Anna, a woman he met who was obsessed from the get-go with having children and raising them rightly. You see, Anna had suffered from a poor upbringing and she was determined to reverse the course – to raise perfect children perfectly. So, she made it the purpose of her life. She found a husband and did indeed get blessed with two amazing children. In essence, she'd gotten what she'd always wanted. Sometimes that's not the best stuff for us. Because you see, in making her children her focus and not God, she lost her way. She helicoptered the kids and her anxieties had then never feeling sufficient. As a result, these two children grew up anxious and with self-esteem issues. And it wasn't because their mother valued them too little. In fact, the opposite was true, the mother valued them TOO MUCH.

That's what happens when we make what Rev. John Piper calls this "Dark exchange" between the glory of God and a cheap substitute. In this dark exchange we trade a George Brett Rookie for a Dwight Gooden rookie on a cosmic level and our lives are the worse for it as we exist as natural men and women apart from God's amazing Grace. And it comes with consequences. Paul says that in this dreadful exchange, that our minds are darkened. It makes sense, if Jesus is the light of the World, then to live without Him is to live in spiritual darkness all of the time. No wonder it's so cold out there, right? When we're in spiritual darkness, you can feel spiritually chilled, can't you?

There's a great story in the Bible that shows in a worse-case scenario what this spiritual darkening of our minds looks like. It comes to us from the Book of Daniel, and it concerns one of the central characters in the book, Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar is the leader of Babylon and the one who holds Daniel and his compatriots in his service there as the people are in exile. Now Nebuchadnezzar had much to be proud of, if you think about it. After all, in his mind at least, it was he and he alone who built this vast and terrifying empire. Daniel 4 – *"At the end of twelve months he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, and the king answered and said, 'Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?'"* Basically, the King looks out over his empire and says, "Good Job me." He fails to give any glory to God and, as a result, his mind is darkened. God says, *"While the words were still in the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, 'O King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: The kingdom has departed from you, and you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. And you shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom He will.'"* Nebuchadnezzar does indeed live like a wild beast for seven years. It's only when God allows him to reacknowledge God does anything change. That is the payoff of the story. As we acknowledge God, our minds become undarkened.

Apart from the knowledge of God, we have senseless shootings. Apart from the knowledge of God we have needless abortions. Absent the knowledge of God, we are left to be idol makers and thus, experiencers of the wrath of God. When Paul says that we give our minds over to futile things, what he means is things that are vain, empty and meaningless. Do any words more suitably describe present culture than that? I'm sorry to sound so negative but I'm sorry, what I see out there within contemporary American culture is a bit obscene, more than its share of vain, empty and meaningless. I remember thinking this several years ago when I literally witnessed two women vehemently arguing over the color of a dress that they'd seen in a meme that was going around at the time. I thought, "here are grown women arguing over something that is essentially, meaningless."

And it makes sense, doesn't it? Our minds are darkened by this fouled exchange.

Paul also suggests that our hearts are darkened as well. When we look around the world and see such economic disparity, we know that something is wrong deep in our hearts. When the most important thing in.

our minds is who is signing in costume on The Masked Singer, we know something is horribly awry. Our hearts are darkened as we allow homeless people to dwell without roofs over their heads or children to go hungry in our midst. Yes, it is easy to see that our hearts have been darkened as we dwell without God. As we make this dark exchange of the glory of God for false and inferior substitutes. The funny thing is, according to Paul, it is when we are most hard of heart and blind of spiritual vision (Deprived of Christ's light) that we perceive ourselves WISEST. Don't miss that. When we are the fullest of ourselves, we think ourselves the smartest people in the world. How often does that feeling permeate your life? Do you often think, "I am glad I am not like other men?" Which is exactly what the Pharisee says in the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, Hint – it isn't good to be the Pharisee. And the only thing that changes this dynamic, this awful trading, is the presence of Jesus Christ in your life by the power of the Holy Spirit. Are you somehow staying away from sin today? Then thank God, that isn't you. That's God within you doing all of the heavy lifting.

And how did that happen? How did you manage to find yourself here this morning? Well, in one way, it all flows back to the Glory of God. God drew you here this morning to experience a measure of His Glory. He knew you needed it. Maybe it was a long week at work. Perhaps it's been a tough time in your family, or you've been suffering with some illness. But somehow some way, you needed God's Glory and here you are, in worship, in His presence.

To God be the Glory.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.