

It's a very common image in the Bible of giving something into someone's hand. And that's easy enough to understand, right? If I were to give you something and put it into your hand, that means it becomes yours. It now belongs to you. That's a very easy thing for us to understand. But this image is often used in the Scriptures to talk about God and about what he is doing, that God gives something into the hand of someone. Sometimes that something is victory, that God gives victory to his people by giving their enemies into their hand. So, for example, in the book of Joshua, God gives the Canaanites into the hand of Israel, and they win the victory time and time again. That's one example of how this image gets used in the Scriptures.

But far more often, Christians, this image is used to describe judgment, to describe the judgment of God upon sin. That God gives his people into the hand of their enemies because of their sins. In the book of Judges, for example, God gave Israel into the hand of the king of Moab because of their sins. God gave Israel into the hand of the Philistines because of their sins. Later in the Bible, God gave Israel into the hand of Assyria and into the hand of Babylon because of their sins. So in this way, this image of putting into the hand describes the judgment of God upon sin.

And this sin that's being judged is almost always in the Old Testament idolatry. The people of Israel had turned away from God. They weren't listening to him. They weren't following him. And so God brings this judgment down upon them to punish them for their sins. That's how this image gets used the most often throughout the Scriptures.

Now, Paul in our reading for this evening also uses this image. In fact, when he says that "God gave them up," you could translate that as "God handed them over" or "God gave them into the hand." So we see here Paul talking about the same kind of judgment visited upon sinners because of their sin. But God is not handing them over into the hand of a king in this case, or into the hand of a nation, like he did so often in the Old Testament. But rather he is giving them over into the hand of their own sin. And what a terrible slavery that is, Christians, to be handed over to your own sin! To become in bondage to your own corruption! To be bound to your own iniquity! It is a terrible judgment which God is bringing upon unrepentant sinners. But it is a just judgment. It is their due reward for the things that they have done.

Why, we might ask? Because last week, if you remember, God has revealed himself in his creation through the works that he has done. Every man, woman, and child who has ever lived and ever will live know that there is a God because of the things that he has done. And that all by itself should be enough for us to believe in him. But because of sin, we by nature have turned away from God. We don't want to listen to him. We don't want to believe in him. We don't want to do what he says. And so God brings judgment, then, down upon them because of that sin, because of that idolatry. And they are, as Paul said, "without excuse." Nobody can say on the Judgment Day that "I didn't know what was happening" or that "I didn't know God" or that "I didn't know what to expect." It won't work. Because by nature, we have all turned from God. By nature, we are not listening to what he has to say.

And therefore, Paul says, verse 24: "God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen!" Now, pay attention in that verse to the word "because," because I think that helps us to

understand this whole thing. All of this happens because of their sin. God hands them over because they exchanged the truth of God for a lie. God gives them into the hand of their own sin because they worshiped the creature rather than the Creator. This judgment didn't come out of nowhere. This isn't just something that God decided to do one day. It is because of sin that this judgment has come. And it is this sin that now God is coming down upon.

But we should say at this point that God is not the cause of this sin. God's not forcing them to do anything, when he says that "he gives them over to their sin." God is not the author of sin. Nor is God just sitting around doing nothing, like he's saying, "I don't want anything to do with it. I'll just let them go their own way." That's not quite it either. Rather, God is coming down upon this sin. God is handing them over to their sin, so that the sin itself becomes its own judgment. The sin itself becomes its own punishment. God is using their wickedness as a way of bringing justice to this situation.

This is why he goes on to say, verses 26 and 27: "For this reason, God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error." I should just say at this point, don't let anyone ever tell you that the Bible is somehow unclear or ambiguous about homosexuality. A passage like this makes it abundantly clear what God has to say about that particular sin. But that being said, pay attention to what Paul is doing in this verse. He begins by saying: "For this reason." For what reason? Everything that he's been talking about before. Because they have worshiped the creature rather than the Creator, because they have just exchanged the truth of God for a lie, because they have fallen into idolatry--all of these things together. For this reason, "God gave them up." God gave them into the hand of their sin. So the sin comes first, and then the judgment. But once the judgment comes, once they have been handed over to their sin, then sin begins to grow upon itself. They're handed over to "dishonorable passions," so that all of these things that we see happening, this explosion of sin, this growth of sin, is the very judgment that God has laid upon them because of their iniquity.

I think that's important for us to remember, because, yes, Paul is talking about his own time, for one thing. He is talking about a time when there was great wickedness and when all of these things that he talks about were tolerated, even celebrated. It was a very dark time for people to live in. But it also speaks to our time too, Christians. Because when we see all of the things happening around us, the way that sin seems to be growing exponentially in our culture, this is not something that is going towards a judgment. The judgment has already come. We have as a nation been handed over to our sin. And all of these things that we see happening as a result of it, is the explosion of sin. So yes, that's not something that we should celebrate. That's not something that we should even go along with. But we must recognize that we as a nation have turned away from the Lord. We have turned our own way. And as a result God has handed over to sin. And so we as Christians must resist that with all that we can.

But this is why Paul expands on it, starting in verse 28: "And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy,

murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless." It's a picture of what happens when we are handed over to sin. Sin starts to grow. It starts to fester. It starts to turn into lots of other things, so that it becomes a very dangerous and deadly thing indeed. Because they did not want to acknowledge God, because they don't want to admit that there even is a God, sin becomes the very judgment by which they are judged.

This is why Paul finishes, then, verse 32: "Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them, but give approval to those who practice them." So the conscience is still there. The unbeliever still knows that what he is doing is wrong, because there's that little voice that's telling him that it is against God's will. But he tries to cover it up. He tries to silence it, say that, "Oh, well, it's natural. It's good. It's only human. It's right for us to do." Whatever it may be. Anything to silence that conscience. But in this way, he continues in his sin. And more than that, he approves of those who do the same thing, encouraging them towards the same sin. And sin we see growing and festering, infecting not only ourselves, but also those around us. Because sin is like a weed that will soon become the means of its own destruction.

So Christians, we have to see sin for what it is. It is dangerous. It is something we must avoid. Because one sin will soon become two. And two sins will soon become four, and eight, and sixteen, and so on. They will just continually build upon themselves, leading to more sin. And if we are not careful, if we persist in that sin, there may very well come a point when God hands us over to it. And then we will not be able to return. Sin is a dangerous thing. We must be on guard against it every day of our lives.

But there is one more thing to remember here too, Christians. That even when God handed over Israel in the Old Testament to their enemies, when they called upon the Lord, he heard them, and he answered them and delivered them. Because God is faithful, and he will hear the cries of his people. So when we are struggling with sin, when we are fighting against these temptations which threaten to overwhelm us, we can turn to the Lord and call on his name, knowing that he will deliver us from our sins. God is faithful, and he will hear us for the sake of his Son, Jesus Christ, who has taken our sins upon himself.

So sin is dangerous, Christians. It is. We must take it seriously. We must see it for the danger that it is. But we should also call on Christ, because he is our strength in the midst of all danger.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have called us to yourself in your Son, Jesus Christ. Forgive us our sins for his sake, and help us always to fight back against sin, so that we may not be taken captive by it, but may seek after you in all things. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.