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ROMANS: THE GOSPEL OF GOD

Introduction, Romans 1:1

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Romans, Lesson 1

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Introduction, Romans 1:1

I've been a pastor for 33 years now, but I've shied away from preaching through Romans. To be honest, it has always intimidated me. Whenever I teach God's Word, I am painfully aware of Paul's rhetorical question (2 Cor. 2:16), "And who is adequate for these things?" But I am *especially* aware of my inadequacy when it comes to preaching through Romans! It contains some of the deepest theological truths in all of God's Word. If we get even a glimmer of their majesty, we will join Paul on our faces, exclaiming (Rom. 11:33), "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!"

So the daunting task before me is to teach God's unsearchable judgments and unfathomable ways in such a way that we all will bow in wonder and worship before Him. And yet, I am painfully aware that I still don't understand many portions of Romans! But I decided that if I wait to understand it all adequately, I'll never teach through the book. So with fear and trembling, we begin.

The influence of Romans: God has used this powerful letter in some remarkable ways. In A.D. 386, Aurelius Augustinus, whom we know as Augustine, a North African man, was a professor of rhetoric at Milan, Italy (this and the stories of Luther and Wesley are in F. F. Bruce, *Romans* [IVP/Eerdmans], pp. 56-58). He was a follower of a false cult called Manichaeism. Under conviction about his sins, but not yet resolved to follow Christ, he sat weeping in the garden of his friend Alypius. Suddenly, he heard a child on the other side of the fence singing, "*Tolle, lege!*" ("Take up and read!") He had never heard this song before, so he took it as a word from God. He picked up a scroll of the Bible and his eyes fell at random on Romans 13:13-14, "Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts."

Augustine later wrote, "Instantly, at the end of this sentence, a clear light flooded my heart and all the darkness of doubt vanished away." He was saved from his life of sexual immorality. He went on to become the most influential man in church history from the time of Paul to the Reformation, over 1,000 years after Augustine.

Unlike Augustine, Martin Luther, whom God used to spawn that Reformation, was not an immoral man. He was a scrupulous monk, striving through fasting, prayer, and severe treatment of his body to find peace with God. He felt condemned because of the sins that he knew lurked in his heart. As he pored over Scripture, looking for an answer, he wrestled with Romans 1:17, "For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'But the righteous man shall live by faith.'" Instead of loving God, as he knew he should, Luther found himself hating God in his heart because of this apparently impossible standard of God's Law that requires us to be perfectly righteous.

As Luther wrestled with this text, God finally opened his eyes to see that God's righteousness is that which He freely imputes to the guilty sinner who has faith in Jesus. Luther wrote that then he felt reborn and that he had entered into Paradise. Scripture took on a new meaning and the concept of God's righteousness, rather than filling him with hate, now became inexpressibly sweet in greater love. He called Romans "the chief part of the New Testament and the very purest gospel."

Two hundred years later, John Wesley had formed a "Holy Club" at Oxford, striving to live in a manner pleasing to God. He had served as a missionary in Georgia, but had failed miserably. Then, on May 24, 1738, in great agitation of soul he went to a meeting at Aldersgate Street in London, where someone was reading from the preface of Luther's commentary on Romans. Wesley wrote in his journal, "At about a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for my salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken *my* sins away, even *mine*; and saved me from the law of sin and death." That conversion was the spark that lit the great 18th century revival that changed the history of England.

Romans also profoundly affected the life of the church father, Chrysostom, who had it read to him twice each week. God used it in John Bunyan's conversion. The English poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, said that Romans is "the profoundest piece of writing in existence" (these examples from Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: The Gospel of God* [Zondervan], pp. 5-7). So God has greatly used the Book of Romans at some key moments in church history. The Swiss commentator, Frederic Godet, wrote (*Commentary on Romans* [Kregel], p. 1) that "every great spiritual revival in the church will be connected as effect and cause with a deeper understanding of this book."

The theme: Godet sums up the theme of Romans (*ibid.*, italics his): "For what is the Epistle to the Romans? The offer of the *righteousness of God* to the man who finds himself stripped by the law of his *own righteousness* (1:17)." John Calvin puts it (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], xxix-xxx, italics in this edition), "... *that man's only righteousness is through the mercy of God in Christ, which being offered by the Gospel is apprehended by faith.*"

In a nutshell, the theme is *the gospel*: the good news that God declares sinners to be righteous when they trust in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on their behalf. It involves both the *imputed* righteousness of justification (Romans 3-5) and the *imparted* righteousness of sanctification, worked out progressively through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit (Romans 6-8). Other sub-themes, such as "flesh versus Spirit," and "law versus grace," relate to this overall theme. We will grapple with these as we work through the book.

The author, date, recipients, and purpose: Romans is one of the rare New Testament books where liberal scholars have not challenged the authorship. Almost all agree that Paul wrote Romans, although he used a secretary named Tertius (16:22). He wrote it from Corinth (Acts 20:2-3), probably sometime around A.D. 56-58, just as he was about to go to Jerusalem with the gift for the poor that he had collected from the Gentile churches in Macedonia and Achaia (15:25-26). Phoebe (16:1-2), who was from a port city near Corinth, probably carried the letter to Rome. After his ministry in Jerusalem, Paul hoped to pass through Rome, minister there briefly, and then be helped on his way to do further missionary work in Spain (15:24, 28).

We don't know how the church in Rome began. It is almost certain that, contrary to Roman Catholic tradition, Peter did *not* start it, at least by being there. If he had been there, surely Paul would have included him in his long greeting list (16:1-15). Probably the church began when some Jews who were present on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:10) got saved and returned home. By the time Paul wrote this letter, the church contained Jews, but was predominately Gentile (1:13; 11:13, 17-31; 15:14-16).

While it is obvious that *Romans* is Paul's theological masterpiece, the difficult underlying question is, "Why did he write *these* truths in *this* book to *this* church?" The bottom line is, nobody knows for certain. One reason Paul wrote was to prepare for his intended visit there on his way to Spain. He wanted to secure a western base for that venture.

Perhaps, also, he anticipated that the Judaizers, who plagued his ministry at every step, would try to inflict their errors on the Roman church. To head off that possibility and to defend the gospel of grace that he preached everywhere, Paul felt it necessary to write out a longer treatise, expanding on many of the themes that he had earlier written in *Galatians*.

He also wrote to help resolve any conflict between the Jewish and Gentile believers in Rome over various food and Sabbath laws (14:1-15:13). Thomas Schreiner sums up Paul's purposes (*Romans* [Baker], p. 28), "From the inception of the letter Paul wants to persuade the Romans that his gospel is orthodox and worth supporting. His goal is to unify the Roman church and rally them around his gospel so that they will help him to bring the gospel to Spain."

Outline and flow of thought: There is a more detailed outline in the bulletin, but we can trace six main sections:

1. Introduction and Theme (1:1-17)
2. Sin (1:18-3:20)
3. Salvation (3:21-5:21)
4. Sanctification (6:1-8:39)
5. Sovereignty (9:1-11:36)
6. Service (12:1-16:27)

After introducing the letter, Paul sums up his theme (1:16-17), "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God

for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'But the righteous man shall live by faith.'"

Then (1:18-3:20), he shows how God in His righteousness is opposed to all sin and all people have sinned. The "good" pagans who did not have the Law of Moses have sinned apart from that Law and will perish because of their sin. The religious Jews, who received the Law, have sinned and will perish because of their sin. Thus no one can hope to be justified in God's sight because of his own goodness or obedience to the Law.

Since this is the case, salvation must be by God's grace alone (3:21-5:21). Jesus Christ offered Himself as the only sacrifice for our sins, satisfying God's justice. By faith alone we can lay hold of the benefits of His sacrifice, just as Abraham and David did. This faith in Christ reconciles us to God and brings us peace, joy, and hope, even in the midst of our trials. By God's grace, our old identity in Adam is replaced by our new identity in Christ.

But (6:1-8:39), God's grace does not mean that we are free to go on living in sin. Rather, by being identified with Jesus in His death and resurrection, we too have died to the old life and live to the new. The power of sin is broken, because we are no longer under the Law, but under grace. Although, due to indwelling sin that still remains in us, we struggle against sin, through the indwelling Holy Spirit we have victory in Christ. The hope of future glory in Him and the assurance of God's unfailing love sustain us in all our trials.

But there seems to be a problem (9:1-11:36): Why have the Jews for the most part rejected God's grace in Christ? At first glance, it would seem that God's promises to Israel have failed. But this is not so. Rather, God has always set His choice on a remnant and passed by others. Even so, God has temporarily set aside the Jews because of their rejection of Christ and poured out His grace on the Gentiles. But finally, He will use the Gentiles to bring salvation again to the Jews, all according to His great wisdom and unto His great glory.

In light of these abundant mercies (12:1-16:33), we must give our entire being to God and serve Him in practical godliness. Our

relationships should be marked by loving service. We should be subject to our civil government. We should be careful not to wound our fellow Christians by our liberty in Christ. We should join Paul in working to take the gospel to the Gentiles, according to God's promises. And, as a practical display of Christian love, Paul warmly greets his friends in Rome, ending with a final warning to be on guard against those who cause dissension and strife.

With that as a brief synopsis of the flow of thought of the entire book, I'd like to focus briefly on Romans 1:1, where we see Paul the man; Paul's Master; Paul's mandate; Paul's mission; and Paul's message.

1. Paul the man:

The most common formula for letters in that time began by identifying the author, then naming the recipients, followed by a word of greeting. Romans, along with all New Testament letters, except for Hebrews and 1 John, begins that way.

The late New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce says of Romans (*ibid.*, pp. 37-38), "There is more autobiography in this letter than meets the eye—the autobiography of a man who has been justified by faith." Since most of you know the story of Paul's amazing conversion, I will just mention it in passing. He was an extremely zealous Jew, bent on persecuting the church. He was responsible for the imprisonment and death of many Christians. But the Lord struck him down on the Damascus Road with a blinding vision of Himself (told in Acts 9:3-21; 22:3-16; & 26:4-18). God commanded this Jewish zealot to become His instrument to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, whom he formerly hated (Acts 26:17). God used Paul to take the gospel into Europe, which is why most of us are now Christians.

While perhaps few of us have had the kind of dramatic conversion that Paul experienced, we all should ask ourselves, "Has my heart been changed by personally experiencing God's grace in Christ's death and resurrection on my behalf? Am I, like Paul, a new person through faith in Jesus Christ?"

2. Paul's Master: "A slave of Christ Jesus..."

The word "bond-servant" means "slave." It emphasizes the "subordinate, obligatory, and responsible nature of his service in

his exclusive relation to his Lord.... The slave owes his master exclusive and absolute obedience.... His work earned him neither profit nor thanks; he was only doing what he owed as a bondsman" (R. Tuentes, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. by Colin Brown [Zondervan], 3:596, 595). Jesus Christ had bought Paul with His own blood. Thus Paul was no longer his own, but he belonged exclusively to Christ, to do His will. For Paul, Christ was the center of his life. Note how often he refers to Christ in these opening verses: "Christ Jesus" (1:1); "His Son" (1:3); "His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1:4); "His name's sake" (1:5); "Jesus Christ" (1:6); and, "the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:7).

The questions we need to ask here are, "Is Jesus my exclusive Master because He bought me with His blood? Do I view my daily life as not my own, but belonging to Jesus to serve Him? Do I seek to obey Him, beginning on the thought level? Is He central to my thoughts, words, and activities?"

3. Paul's mandate: "a called apostle."

Paul didn't take a vocational aptitude test that indicated that apostle would be a good career track for him. Rather, he was pursuing his chosen religious career, rising in the ranks of Judaism by persecuting the church, when God knocked him to the ground and saved him. He told Paul (Acts 22:10), "Get up and go on into Damascus, and there you will be told all that has been appointed for you to do." That mandate primarily was to be an apostle ("sent one") to the Gentiles, whom Paul formerly despised. The assignment included suffering much for the name of Christ.

When applied to the twelve and to Paul, "apostle" carried the special authority to lay the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20; 1 Cor. 3:10; 2 Cor. 10:8; 13:10). Coupled with the word "called," "apostle" emphasizes the authority that Paul received from God, given to us in these New Testament epistles. Douglas Moo (*the Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 42) observes, "Any reading of this great theological treatise that ignores this claim to authority will fail to come to grips with the ultimate purpose of its writing."

The application question here is, "Is my heart in submission to what God has revealed here through His called apostle, Paul?" One of the difficult topics that Romans addresses is that of predes-

tination. As I wrestled with this as a college student over 40 years ago, I found myself fighting against what Paul wrote in Romans 9. The breakthrough for me was when I finally realized, "This isn't just Paul's word; this is *God's* word, and I must submit to it if I am going to be a Christian."

4. Paul's mission: "Set apart for the gospel of God."

The word "set apart" is related in Greek to the word "Pharisee," which was Paul's former association. The Pharisees proudly viewed themselves as set apart or separate from the common Jews (John 9:34), and especially as separate from the Gentile "dogs." But ironically, now Paul is set apart to preach the riches of Christ to the very Gentiles whom he formerly hated. In Galatians 1:15, he says that God had set him apart from his mother's womb and called him by His grace so that he might preach Christ among the Gentiles (see, also Acts 9:15; 13:2).

As we saw recently when we studied 1 Corinthians 9:23, Paul said, "I do all things for the sake of the gospel . . ." While few of us are called into a full-time ministry of preaching or evangelism, we should be growing to imitate Paul, so that our lives are focused more and more on the gospel—first, for our own souls, and then, to proclaim it to others. So we should apply Paul's mission by asking, "Do I increasingly view my life as set apart for the gospel?"

5. Paul's message: "The gospel of God."

As I understand it, the genitive ("of God") means that the gospel comes from God. He devised the plan before the foundation of the world (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28). As 1 John 4:10 puts it, "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins."

Also, the gospel is all about God. He is both its source and its object (Schreiner, p. 37). The gospel is about how we as sinners can be rightly related to the holy God through the sacrifice of His Son. It's about how God can be both "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (3:26). As John Piper puts it, "God is the gospel." He is the treasure that we receive when we believe the good news that Christ died for our sins.

Leon Morris (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 20) points out,

The thought of God dominates this epistle. The word "God" occurs 153 times in Romans, an average of once every 46 words. This is more than in any other New Testament writing (except the short 1 Peter and 1 John). . . . And not only does "God" occur in Romans more frequently than in any other writing, it occurs more often than any other theme in that book. Apart from a few prepositions, pronouns, and the like, no word is used in Romans with anything like the frequency of "God."

He concludes (p. 40), "*God* is the most important word in this epistle." He also points out (*ibid.*) that Paul uses *gospel* 60 out of its 76 New Testament occurrences, the most being nine times each in Romans and Philippians. He uses it in all of his letters except Titus. The gospel is the ultimate good news, that although we are sinners, God made a way through the sacrifice of His Son to reconcile us to Himself. And although it was costly for Him, it is absolutely free to all who believe in Jesus Christ!

The application questions here are, "Am I growing to know God more deeply? Is my understanding of God shaped more by popular cultural ideas or by the great doctrines of the Bible? And, is the good news from God and about God increasingly good news to me, news that I long to share with others?"

Conclusion

Someone has pointed out that although Romans is Paul's most theological book, a treatise that has stretched the minds of the most brilliant theologians for centuries, he wrote it to a church made up of common people, many of whom were slaves. The Holy Spirit knew that we all need the message of Romans. We need to be stripped of our own righteousness so that we flee to Christ and His sacrifice as our only righteousness. Then, being justified by faith, we need to grow in righteous conduct and relationships. We need to grow to embrace and embody the gospel of God.

Application Questions

1. "Has my heart been changed by personally experiencing God's grace in Christ's death and resurrection on my behalf?"
2. "Do I view my daily life as not my own, but belonging to Jesus to serve Him?"
3. "Is my heart in submission to what God has revealed here through His called apostle, Paul, especially on the doctrine of predestination?"
4. "Do I increasingly view my life as set apart for the gospel?"
5. "Is the good news from God and about God increasingly good news to me, news that I long to share with others?"

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