

Romans: The Gospel of God

Romans 1:1

Today we begin a new series of lessons on Paul's letter to the Romans. Over the last few weeks as I have prayed over and studied through this great book I have felt both joyful anticipation and dreadful intimidation. I feel as Piper said, "like a mountain climber gazing up into the clouds around the peak of Mount Everest ... It has felt very daunting."

I've been a pastor for 25 years now and although I have preached through many books of the Bible, this is the first time I have set out to preach through the book of Romans. As I prepare and as I preach I often feel inadequate for the task, and I remember Paul's rhetorical question in 2 Cor. 2:16, "**And who is sufficient for these things?**" Certainly not me when it come to the deep theological truths of the book of Romans. The more I study it, the more I find myself falling on my face, exclaiming the words of Romans 11:33, "**Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!**"

So the daunting task before me is to teach God's the wisdom and knowledge of God's unsearchable judgments so that we all will bow in wonder and worship before Him. Please pray for me and pray for each other as we begin.

Today we are just going to wet our feet in the deep ocean of Romans. So I will begin by just reading the first verse:

Romans 1:1 -- **Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God.**

The Impact of Romans: Someone has observed that almost every great movement of God in the history of the Christian church has been tied to the book of Romans. In A.D. 386, a North African man, was a professor of rhetoric at Milan, Italy. He was a follower of a false cult, an immoral man, living with a woman, lost, despairing and guilty. 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!") the repetition got through to him and he got up and went indoors and opened the Scriptures at random. Before him was the letter to the Romans and these the words of Romans 13:13-14 leapt out of the page and captured him, "**Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.**"

He 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. This man was Augustine, who went on to become the most influential man in church history from the time of Paul to the Reformation.

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. Instead of

coming to love God, he found himself hating God. What did the righteous God think He was doing in demanding from us a righteousness that we could not attain?

As Luther wrestled with Romans 1:17 he found the solution, **“For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘The just shall live by faith.’”** 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. Luther called Romans “the chief part of the New Testament and the very purest gospel.” The words of Romans were the cause of the glorious Reformation and life and liberty coming into the people of God.

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 Great Britain and New England.

There has been no book of the Bible which has been so instrumental in changing lives and in impacting the church as much as Romans. How many countless men and women have been saved by the profound, yet simple gospel found in the book of Romans?

The theme: Even though the Epistle to Romans is deeply theological, its main message is very simple. God saves sinners. The theme found at the end of verse 1 **“the Gospel of God.”** And that gospel is summarized in Romans 1:16-17, **“For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘The just shall live by faith.’”** The Gospel of God is the good news that God declares sinners to be righteous when they trust Jesus Christ.

This righteousness of God by faith in Jesus includes both the *imputed* righteousness of justification (Romans 3-5 focuses on this) and the *imparted* righteousness of sanctification, worked out progressively through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit (Romans 6-8).

The author and date: The apostle Paul wrote Romans, although he used a secretary named Tertius (16:22). From the names he mentions in chapter 16 it is clear that he wrote it from Corinth. Phoebe (16:1-2), who was from a port city near Corinth, probably carried the letter to Rome. Paul wrote it 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).

Paul hoped to come to Rome, encourage the church there, and move on to do missionary work in Spain (15:24, 28).

Recipients, and purpose: The New Testament doesn't tell us how the church in Rome began. We do know that Paul did not plant the Roman church, and Peter probably didn't either. It's possible that 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 some Jews, but it was predominately Gentile (1:13; 11:13, 17-31; 15:14-16).

Why did Paul write this theological masterpiece to the church at Rome? One reason Paul wrote was to prepare for his intended visit there on his way to Spain.

Paul also likely anticipated that the Judaizers, who plagued his ministry everywhere, would try to inflict their false teaching on the Roman church. So Paul wrote to defend the gospel of grace that he preached everywhere. In Romans Paul expands on many of the themes about which he had earlier written in Galatians. So he wrote to help resolve any conflict between the Jewish and Gentile believers in Rome.

Outline: Romans breaks up easily into six sections:

1. Introduction and Theme (1:1-17) – The Gospel of God's Righteousness
Here Paul summarizes the theme of Romans as we have said.
2. Sin (1:18-3:20) – Righteousness Needed
In this section Paul shows how God in His righteousness is opposed to all sin and all people have sinned. Therefore no one can hope to be justified in God's sight because of his own goodness or obedience to the Law.
3. Salvation (3:21-5:21) – Righteousness Imputed
Paul argues here that salvation must be by God's grace alone. Jesus Christ offered Himself as the only sacrifice for our sins, satisfying God's justice. We must come by faith just as Abraham did. Our faith in Christ reconciles us to God and brings us peace, joy, and hope, even in trials. By God's grace, our old identity in sinful Adam is replaced by our new identity in Christ.
4. Sanctification (6:1-8:39) – Righteousness Imparted
Paul says here that God's grace does not mean that we are free to go on living in sin because we 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 we continue to struggle against sin 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.
5. Sovereignty (9:1-11:36) – Righteousness In Election
In these chapters Paul deals with the problem: Why have the Jews for the most part rejected Christ? Paul says that God's promises to Israel have not failed. God has chosen a remnant and has temporarily set aside the Jews because of their rejection of Christ and poured out His

grace on the Gentiles. But ultimately He will bring salvation again to all Israel according to His great wisdom and unto His great glory.

6. Service (12:1-16:27) – Righteousness Applied

Finally, in the last section Paul applied these deep theological truths to practical everyday living. He says that we must give our entire being to God and serve Him. 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. Closing the letter Paul warmly greets his friends in Rome.

So that is a very brief overview of Romans. So in the remainder of our time this morning I just want to focus on Romans 1:1. It begins with the name Paul. 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. God used Paul not only to plant churches all over the Roman world, but he inspired Paul to write a third of our New Testament.

Paul describes himself in three ways in this first verse:

1. Paul's Master: "a bondservant of Jesus Christ"

The word "bond-servant" means "slave." Jesus Christ had bought Paul with His own blood. Paul was no longer his own, but he belonged exclusively to Christ, to do His will.

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 in everything?"

2. Paul's Mandate: "called to be an apostle."

To be an apostle was to be a person who had seen Jesus Christ risen from the dead so that he could give first-hand testimony, and who had been commissioned and authorized by Christ to represent him and speak for him and provide a foundation for his church through true and authoritative teaching.

Paul didn't take a vocational aptitude test that indicated that apostle would be a good career track for him. What happened was God knocked him to the ground, saved him, and commissioned him.

Paul says that he is "**called to be an apostle**" so that the church - so that we - will receive the book of Romans as the message not just of a man, but of Christ. Romans is not great because it is the work of a genius, but because it is the word of God.

The application question here is, "Is my heart in submission to what God has revealed here through His called apostle, Paul?" 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.

3. Paul's Mission: "separated to the gospel of God."

In Galatians 1:15, Paul 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). God did not look around for a person to fill the apostolic role; he prepared Paul from his mother's womb to serve the gospel - which is an astonishing thing when you realize the pathway that led from the womb to the Damascus road, namely, Paul's unbelief and persecution of the church.

While few of us are called into a full-time ministry of preaching or evangelism, we should view our lives as set apart to gospel of God. 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!

Ask yourself, "Do I increasingly view my life as set apart for the gospel? Is the good news from God and about God increasingly good news to me, news that I long to share with others?"

Verse one may look like it is about Paul; but behind every phrase is Someone far greater. God chose the author before he was born. God purchased his freedom by the death of his Son. God called him to be an apostle. And then God gave him a gospel - the Gospel of God himself.

Leon Morris is exactly right when he wrote, "God is the most important word in this epistle. Romans is a book about God. No topic is treated with anything like the frequency of God. Everything Paul touches in this letter he relates to God. In our concern to understand what the apostle is saying about righteousness, justification and the like we ought not to overlook his tremendous concentration on God. There is nothing like it elsewhere" (The Epistle to the Romans [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), p.40).

Conclusion

Romans is a deeply theological book that has stretched the minds of the most brilliant men of God in history, but its main message is simple. God saves sinners.

During our invitation time would you allow God to speak to your heart? Would you come to the Savior Jesus? Romans clearly tells us how: Romans 10:9-10 says **"that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation"**