

## *Paul's Greatest Letter (Romans)*

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In the middle of the fourth century, a mother knelt at the edge of a harbor in Algeria, praying “God, don’t let him go.” Her son had set his sights on Italy, intent upon living a life of self-centered debauchery. “Don’t let him go,” she pleaded.

But he went. By the summer of the year 387, he was Professor of Rhetoric at the University of Milan and, indeed, living a life of wine, women and song. Yet, he was also going through a great spiritual struggle, trying to *leave* this kind of life – though lacking the strength of character to do so. One day, as he sat in tears in the garden of a friend, he heard a child’s voice in a nearby house crying, “Take up and read! Take up and read!” There was a scroll lying nearby and, picking it up, he found it to be a copy of Paul’s letter to the Romans. His eyes fell upon a section of Romans 13:

... no orgies or drunkenness, no immorality or indecency, no fighting or jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and stop paying attention to your sinful nature and satisfying its desires. [Romans 13:13b-14]

The text gripped him. He later wrote, “Instantly, at the end of this sentence, a clear light flooded my heart and all the darkness of doubt vanished away.” What an overwhelming impact this moment would later have on the Church through the great mind of this young man named Augustine – later to become a bishop and eventually called Saint Augustine.

This morning, since our SOAP readings will, for the next two weeks, bring us through all of Paul’s letter to the Romans, I thought we would take a brief break from our Kingdom of God series and get a bit of an overview of this book which many consider to be the most important book in the Bible. You see, no other book has had such a profound effect upon the life of the Church, and in the spiritual and theological shaping of some of its greatest leaders.

For instance, a little over 1000 years after Augustine, a young Martin Luther was struggling as Professor of Sacred Theology at the University of Wittenberg – struggling not because of his teaching load but because of his fear of a righteous God. God is righteous but I am not, Luther thought – and yet this God demands that I *be* righteous. (For instance, from our Gospel lesson: “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”) Luther was driven to terror and despair. In 1515, he was assigned to teach Paul’s letter to the Romans. This exposed him to Paul’s central teaching of Justification. One thing stood in the way, however: this phrase “the righteousness of God.” As long as he took this to mean simply that God was righteous, and punished those who were unrighteous, he couldn’t move forward. He actually found himself angry at God. But then he made a discovery – a *rediscovery*, actually – and one that changed his life as much as it had changed the life of Augustine. Later, Luther wrote:

Night and day, I pondered until ... I grasped the truth that the righteousness of God is that righteousness whereby, through grace and sheer mercy, *he* justifies *us* by faith.

In other words, in Romans, the “righteousness of God” is not that righteousness which is demanded of us but rather the righteousness which God *gives* us – the righteousness of *Christ* which indeed exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees and with which he *covers* us – and which comes to us through *faith* in Christ. Luther continued:

Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. ... This passage of Paul became to me a gateway to heaven.

And Luther was on his way, launching the Reformation two years later.

Another two centuries pass, and we come to an unbelieving John Wesley. Of the events that took place on May 24, 1738, he later wrote:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where [some]one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. 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.

From *this* beginning came the Methodist Church as well as the great Evangelical Revival of the 18th century.

And then, once again, almost 200 years pass. It was August of 1918, an age of theological liberalism and uncertainty, when many pastors and lay people were starting to wander far from faith. A parish pastor in Switzerland by the name of Karl Barth became disillusioned as he saw his former seminary professors cave in to German nationalism. He dug deeply into Romans and ended up publishing a commentary – his *Romerbrief*. Dr. Karl Adam later noted how this first edition of Barth's powerful work fell, as he put it, "like a bombshell on the theologians' playground." It soon led to the greatest theological turnabout of our age, drawing the church back to a centering on the Resurrection of Christ.

This is how important Paul's letter to the Romans is. This is the impact that it has had – and continues to have – on the lives of God's people. As William Barclay has put it: "If scripture is a ring, then Romans is the jewel." Again and again, Paul's letter to the Romans has changed lives. May we pray that, as we study it in these next two weeks, our lives, too, might be changed.

So, *why* did Paul write this powerful letter? First of all, the burning question of Paul's career as a missionary was, "Is the Gospel meant just for Jews or for non-Jews, as well ... for Gentiles?" God made the answer very clear to Paul on the road to Damascus: "For Gentiles, too!" That came as a surprise to many early Christians – who were, after all, all Jews. You may remember, from our sermon series on Acts a couple of years ago, how this was a struggle for the early church. Recognizing that "Gentile Lives Matter" didn't come easily. But, God had sent Paul as missionary to the Gentiles, and this theme is dealt with right at the beginning of Romans.

But Paul had a second concern, as well. He was always scanning the distant horizon, as it were, always asking, "Where does God want me to carry the Gospel next?" At this point in history, a major center of intellectual ferment was Spain, and so it was that Paul had set his eyes on distant Spain. But how to get there? He would need financial

assistance and support to make that happen, and so he writes to this major congregation which he had neither founded nor even visited – unique for Paul's letters – in order to seek their support for this outreach. Thus, he lays out just what he believes, in detail, to justify that support. To which we can only say, "Thanks be to God!" Because that has led to this fantastic letter – Paul's magnum opus – which has guided the church and changed lives ever since.

So those are the two reasons Paul wrote this letter to Rome. And what I'd like to do now is briefly break the letter down into **four chunks** to give you some hooks to hang things on as you read through it in coming weeks. The back of bulletin gives you an outline and a little space for notes. I'll be skipping chapter 16, since it's just a letter of introduction for a woman named Phoebe, a warning about dissensions, and a bunch of greetings – including from Tertius, who is taking Paul's dictation.

So, let's start with what is often called Paul's theme verse: Romans 1:16

For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

... "Greek" in this case meaning Gentile, of course – folks like us. Paul says he was "not ashamed." Or fearful. Paul never ceased sharing what Christ had done in his life, even when it led to beatings, imprisonment and finally to his own death.

So here comes **chunk number one, chapters 1-5: *The Basics of the Gospel or Gospel 101***. Here, Paul lays out *Our Grievous Situation* and *God's Gracious Response*. Our grievous situation and God's gracious response. What *about* Jew and Gentile? Do Jews have an advantage? Paul says Yes and No. Yes, because God entrusted them with his Law through Moses; but No because they stand condemned by that very Law for failing to keep it. And the Gentiles? Although we Gentiles were not given God's Law in the same way, all human beings have, as it were, God's Law written on their hearts in terms of conscience – which also condemns us just as much as the Law condemns the Jews. So, we're all in a hot mess, whether Jew or Gentile, and all of this leads to a summary Bible verse many of us may have learned in Sunday School: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," Romans 3:23.

But, thanks be to God, that's not the end of the story. The very next verse leads us into God's Gracious Response. It tells us we are "justified" – *made right with God* – "by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." In other words, God, in his mercy, has taken all this on himself, entered the world in the person of Jesus, and died and risen again to bear this burden of sin on our behalf. Thus, we read: "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us," Romans 5:8. Paul then describes Christ as a new Adam: whereas sin entered the world through Adam, God's grace and forgiveness entered through Jesus Christ ... and all by the grace of God.

**The second big chunk is chapters 6-8, *The Life That Follows – Part 1*** ... *The Life That Follows – Part 1*. How do we respond to this good news? What kind of lives should we lead *because* of what God has done for us? Paul gives his answer in two chunks, this being the first – which is why I call it "Part 1." He begins with a *wrong-headed* response. Some folks, whether they misunderstood or whether they were mocking Paul, were saying, "Hey, this grace is a good thing. When I sin, I get God's grace. So, let's sin all the more to get more of this good stuff." You'll read Paul's aghast response to *that* in Romans 6. But then in Romans 7 we see another *side* of *The Life That Follows*: it's not a bed of roses. We are not so changed that we simply stop sinning and have no problem with temptation. Paul talks about his struggle – his almost hopeless struggle – as he seeks to be a follower of Jesus. Ever been there? That's where chapter 8 then comes in – but we're not going there yet. I want to hold that gem back until the end. So, we'll be returning to chapter 8.

At this point, Paul takes a detour in **chapters 9-11, *The Question of the Jews***. This is our **third chunk**. Chapters 9-11. Something has been bothering Paul and has become a deep source of anguish for him: it's his own people. You see, although Paul had been sent to the Gentiles, he himself was a Jew – and he anguished over the fact that most of his own people were rejecting Jesus as the crucified and risen Messiah. What is going to happen to *them*? Long story short, Paul sees their rejection as being only temporary – to allow for, and even lead to, the bringing in of the Gentiles, like branches grafted into a tree. Eventually, he expects all

Israel to be saved. It is, after all, God's desire that *all* people be saved, as we read in 1 Timothy (2:4). In Romans 9-11, you can follow Paul's very hopeful thinking on this matter with regard to his own people.

**The fourth and last major chunk is Romans 12-15.** Here, Paul continues where he left off before considering the fate of the Jews, and so I call this section *The Life That Follows – Part 2*. And it begins with “the great ‘therefore’.” Paul does this again and again in his letters. He first describes all that God has done for us in Christ in making us forgiven children of God. Then comes that word, “therefore.” “Therefore, live your life in a way that *show* you are a child of God.” Live your life as a “thank you” to God. He doesn't say, “Be good and then God will love you;” that's legalism, and religion in general is full of legalism. No, rather he says, “God already loves you; Jesus died for you; *therefore ... therefore* live in this way.” He begins:

I appeal to you *therefore*, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. [2] Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Don't be conformed to this world but be *transformed*. Or, as the old J.\_B. Phillips paraphrase puts it, “Don't let the world squeeze you into its mold.” You are a forgiven child of God – by God's grace – through faith in Christ – so “if you've got it, flaunt it;” let the world see not just who you are but *whose* you are.

In chapter 14, Paul tells how to respond to those who *do* get wrapped up in all the dos and don'ts of legalism. “You gotta do this, you can't do that,” and so forth. Paul describes them as folks who are “weak in faith” – but says to go gently with them so as not to be a stumbling block in their lives.

Finally, at the end of chapter 15, he gets around to asking for assistance in his missionary plans to go to Spain. And so ends our fourth chunk.

Now, I said, earlier, that I wanted to leave chapter 8 to the end. That's because chapter 8 is, in some ways, the “heart of the watermelon.” It

has been said that if Romans is the crown of the Bible, then Romans 8 is the glittering jewel in the center of the crown.

Chapter 8 begins with another of Paul's "therefore" statements, using the word "law" in two ways – law as a principle, like the law of gravity, and then law as what God gave Moses on Mt Sinai. He begins:

There is *therefore* now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death.

In other words, life in Christ frees us from the burden of Old Testament Law. He then goes on to *describe* the life of one living in Christ and being led by God's Holy Spirit. He notes that this may well involve suffering, and that, indeed, the *whole creation* has been suffering since the Fall but will, in the end, be redeemed along with the rest of us. Here we have the beginnings of an answer to the persistent question, "Why do bad things happen to good people." Read this part of chapter 8 carefully.

Romans 8 also shares how the Holy Spirit helps us when we don't know what to pray, and it is in Romans 8 that we find the well-known verse 28

We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.

But it is at the very end of Romans 8 that Paul soars to the heights. Having just gone through all that God has done for us in Christ, through cross and resurrection, through forgiveness of sin, and all of this by God's grace alone, Paul ends the chapter with a series of bold questions and challenges:

What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And to all this, can even a group of Lutherans give an "Amen"?

Amen!