

Why Listen to Romans?

Romans 1:1-7

Today we begin a sermon series in the book of Romans. Many people consider Romans to be Paul's most profound, detailed explanation of the Christian faith. Since the book of Romans is 16 chapters of dense teaching (as opposed to narrative or poetic sections of Scripture), we are going to try and not wear out the preachers or the listeners. . . We are planning to teach Romans in four sections over the course of two years: chapters 1-4, 5-8, 9-11, and 12-16. We'll intersperse other series between sections of Romans.

This morning we consider Paul's introduction in 1:1-7. This introduction answers the question, "Why should we pay attention to what Paul says in the book of Romans?" In these verses Paul talks about his credibility, his message, and his mission (what he's hoping to accomplish). These are important to establish up front so that his readers will receive what he's writing.

These same factors affect the way we read Romans (or some other writing). I noticed this dynamic at work this past summer as I read (or didn't read) various books. For example, one book I read, *Visions of Vocation*, hooked me in the introduction. Almost every page was interesting and insightful. I had met the author earlier in the summer and had come to respect his life and his commitments. That credibility prompted me to read with great anticipation and interest. I was actually sad when I finished that book; it was that good. By contrast I half-heartedly tried to read another book (a "western") a friend had loaned me. But I got bored after a few pages and never picked up the book again.

The introduction to the book of Romans was meant to ensure that Romans didn't shrug their shoulders and say, "Well, that's just one person's opinion. . ." or "I'm sure this is relevant to others but not me. . ." Paul wanted them to know that he was writing with the authority of someone who was commissioned by Jesus Himself to communicate the message of the gospel across the known world.

I hope that Romans 1:1-7 convinces all of us that what Paul writes in the book of Romans is worth the time and energy necessary to internalize/metabolize what has been written. Life's too short to go through the motions and have a superficial experience with Scripture (and God!).

Romans is the longest of Paul's thirteen letters in the New Testament. Not surprisingly, his greeting in verses 1 through 7 is also the longest of his greetings. Typical greetings written in the first century were a single sentence which simply identified the writer and the recipients, followed by the word "greetings." But Paul gives a long and nuanced greeting in his letter to the Romans. In this greeting he introduces themes that will be fleshed out later in the book of Romans.

Paul's Credibility (bond-servant, apostle, set apart). (1:1) In this first verse Paul describes his calling using three phrases. In this way Paul establishes his authority to write a letter such as Romans. He describes himself in this way:

1 Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God,

First, Paul identifies himself as “a bond-servant of Christ Jesus.” The term “bond-servant” is normally translated simply “slave.” This term gives us a significant insight into how Paul thought about his relationship with Jesus. As a slave of Christ Jesus, he lived with a type of devotion and deference to Jesus that is staggering. There was nothing Paul wouldn’t do out of obedience to Jesus. Paul understood that obedience to Jesus kept him out of step with most people. In Galatians 1:10 Paul wrote:

10 For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ.

The intensity of Romans reflects the perspective of someone who cared more about what Jesus thought about him than what others thought. Being a slave of Jesus introduced all sorts of conflict into his life - a price Paul was very willing to pay.

Paul identifies himself as a “bond-servant of **Christ** Jesus.” The term Christ = Messiah. Paul was emphasizing that Jesus was the Messiah - the One promised in the Old Testament who would finally rescue Israel, bring God’s salvation to earth, and who would reign. Whereas most Jews in the first century understood the mission of the Messiah in nationalistic terms, Jesus made clear that He had something much grander in mind: bringing salvation to every tribe, tongue, and nation. As we’ll see, as a bond-servant of the Messiah Jesus, Paul adopted this same mission.

Second, Paul was “called as an apostle.” The term apostle is used in the New Testament in a couple of different ways. Sometimes Paul used the term to refer to a “messenger” (Phil. 2:25) or a fellow missionary (Rom. 16:7). Most often, however, the term apostle was reserved for the select few disciples who had been commissioned by Jesus after His resurrection (Ephesians 2:20). The apostles included the original twelve (minus Judas) plus Matthias (Acts 1:26) plus Paul. Paul repeatedly reminded people that he belonged to that select group of apostles because Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus (Acts 9, 1 Cor. 15:8). When Jesus called him to be His follower He also called him to be an apostle to the Gentiles. In Acts 9:15-16, this is the message given to Ananias to give to Paul:

15 But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; 16 for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake.”

The book of Acts confirms that Paul fulfilled this calling. He took the name of Jesus before “Gentiles [i.e., non-Jewish peoples], kings, and sons of Israel [Jews].” There is a sense in which every believer is “called” by God into a relationship with Himself; we’ll see that in verses 6 and 7. But Paul is here talking about a specific calling to take the name of Jesus to people who hadn’t yet heard.

The third phrase, “set apart for the gospel of God,” reinforces that Paul’s entire life centered upon sharing this message about Jesus. The word gospel simply means “good news.” Isaiah 40:9 used the term gospel to refer to the good news that God was bringing the people back from exile. In the first century the term gospel wasn’t necessarily a religious term; it simply referred to good news about the emperor or ruler. The gospel might involve the good news that the king was having a birthday or that an heir to the throne was born. For Paul, the gospel of God was the good news about Jesus he’ll explain throughout Romans.

We’ll see next week in verse 16 that the gospel isn’t merely a concept about Jesus or an idea we need to “wrap our minds around” (as they say). The gospel is actually “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.” Through the gospel God transforms individuals and families and communities. Paul was set apart to embody and share the good news about Jesus.

Because Paul was a slave of Jesus the Messiah, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, his letter to the Romans is authoritative. He has credibility and authority to write what he does. This credibility has been acknowledged down through the centuries. One criterion the early church used to evaluate which writings were authoritative (and should be considered “Scripture”) was whether or not a letter was written by an apostle (Matthew, Mark, John, Paul, Peter) or by someone close to an apostle (such as Luke or James). Paul’s authority and credibility should make us take the book of Romans seriously.

Paul’s Message (the gospel). (1:2-4) Verses 2 through 4 give an overview of the message Paul will explain throughout the book of Romans. After mentioning that he was “set apart for the gospel of God,” Paul writes:

2 which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures, 3 concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh, 4 who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord,

By saying in verse 2 that God promised the gospel “beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures,” Paul was stressing the continuity between his message and the Hebrew Scriptures. The gospel wasn’t Paul’s invention or some novel interpretation of OT texts. Paul simply preached what had been promised in the holy Scriptures (what we call the Old Testament).

The gospel of God is a message “concerning His Son”; the gospel focuses on the person of Jesus Christ. By calling Jesus “His/God’s Son” Paul is stressing Jesus’ unique relationship with the Father. The rest of verse 3 highlights Jesus’ human existence: “who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh.” Jesus existed with the Father from eternity past but was born into this world as a descendant of David. Numerous OT Scriptures promised that the Messiah would be a descendant of David (from the tribe of Judah). In 2 Samuel 7:12-16, for example, God promised David that He would “raise up a descendant” and would “establish his throne forever.” The NT

consistently announces that Jesus was that very descendant who would reign on David's throne forever (see Matthew 1:1, Luke 1:30-33).

Whereas verse 3 emphasizes Jesus' earthly existence, verse 4 emphasizes Jesus' resurrection status. Interestingly, Paul writes that "the Son" (verse 3) was "declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead." Paul is making a contrast between Jesus' human existence and His resurrection existence. Jesus has always been and will always be the Son of God. But at His resurrection He was given an exalted status - one that reflects his authority and power. In Philippians 2:9 Paul wrote that after Jesus suffered "death on a cross" God "highly exalted Him and gave Him a name that is above every other name." Paul seems to be saying something similar here: at the resurrection God appointed Jesus as "the Son of God with power." Whereas He humbled Himself and experienced human weakness and frailty during His earthy life, He now has the power and authority of the risen Son of God.

Paul adds that Jesus' resurrection was "according to the Spirit of holiness." Paul is speaking here of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, raising Jesus from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus by the Spirit of holiness is one more reason why the gospel is fundamentally about Jesus.

When I came to Christ in college there were about 8 or 10 "Christian recording artists/bands" - Love Song, Larry Norman, Keith Green, BJ Thomas, Amy Grant, Bob Dylan (for a while). I had a couple Christian cassette tapes that I played over and over. One of my roommates at LSU wanted to listen to one. He was rather unimpressed because every song is about the same thing - Jesus dying on the cross and being raised from the dead. That was a very perceptive observation. The Christian message - and therefore the Christian life - is centered on the person of Jesus Christ. A Christian is someone who is enamored with Jesus Himself. That's why we aren't annoyed when we're told that we should "fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith."

Earlier I mentioned the Alpha Course that we're offering this Fall on Tuesday nights. Alpha is fundamentally a course about Jesus; we talk about who Jesus is, why He died, how to believe in Him, etc. We talk about Jesus because our message is fundamentally about Him. We want to give people a safe place to explore and discuss the significance of Jesus. If what I'm sharing about Jesus this morning is brand new to you, I'd encourage you to consider joining us for the Alpha dinner party on the 23rd. You can come check it out and decide if you want to take the rest of the course.

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus set Him apart from every other teacher or religious leader. . . and His teaching apart from every other philosophy and way of living.

Paul's Mission (the obedience of faith) (1:5-6) In verses 5 and 6 Paul continues speaking about his own calling, with the emphasis upon his specific assignment:

5 through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for His name's sake, 6 among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ;

As we mentioned earlier, Paul received his assignment directly from Jesus. Through Jesus, he “received grace and apostleship”; he is probably indicating that the grace of God came to him in the form of being appointed as an apostle. Along with his assignment came the grace to be faithful. I have experienced something similar in my assignment as a pastor-teacher: I experience God’s grace as I seek to live out my calling to study, practice, and teach the Word and as I am involved in spiritual oversight. Honestly, being a pastor isn’t really something I do for God; it’s something God is doing for me and through me.

Notice Paul’s mission (the goal of his apostleship). The reason Paul poured out his life as an apostle was “to bring about **the obedience of faith** among the Gentiles for His name’s sake.” The “obedience of faith” can either mean that the Gentiles obedience consists in faith in Jesus or that their obedience is the result/fruit of their faith. Either interpretation is possible and both are true. Ultimately Paul’s apostleship accomplished both.

First, believing the gospel is a type of obedience; Paul wrote in 10:16 that not believing in Jesus is being disobedient to the gospel (see Romans 10:16 [lit. “they did not obey the gospel”], 2 Thess. 1:8, etc.). Second, Paul and the other New Testament authors consistently claimed that obedience is also the **fruit** of believing the gospel. James famously said that “faith without works is dead” (James 2:17); it’s not a living, active faith. Jesus said that you can know a person by the “fruit” of his/her life (Matthew 7:15-20).

In Romans 5 and 6 Paul will address the charge that his gospel produces “moral anarchy.” People made the accusation that Paul’s message of being saved “by grace through faith” undermined the need for obedience (see Romans 3:8) - that people will sin and sin and sin because their sin is paid for up front. Paul will argue that that line of thinking profoundly misunderstands the gospel and our identity in Christ.

All of this confirms that Paul’s mission wasn’t merely to get people to give mental assent to a few key truths about Jesus. Paul’s mission involved “making disciples” - people whose entire lives were oriented around their relationship with Jesus. In Matthew 28 Jesus said that disciple making involved teaching people “to obey all that [He had] commanded.” Paul’s mission of “bringing about the obedience of faith” was very much a mission of discipleship.

It’s significant that Paul’s mission involved “the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles, among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ.” Even though there are clues throughout the OT and even though Jesus commended Gentiles (non-Jews) for their faith, almost nobody believed that the Gentiles had a chance with God. Almost everybody in the early church believed that in order to be a good Christian you also had to be a good Jew. But the book of Acts records how it became increasingly obvious that both Jews and Gentiles were saved in exactly the same way: by grace through faith. The Romans themselves were among the Gentiles God had called to the obedience of

faith. This statement is one reason that most scholars believe that the church at Rome consisted primarily of Gentiles.

Since Paul's mission involved bringing about "the obedience of faith," we should read Romans with an eye for what he says about obedience. We will see that Paul lays both a theological and a practical foundation for obedience. Romans isn't merely a dense, theological treatise on the gospel. It is definitely that. But it is also an impassioned plea to allow the gospel to form our lives. In other words, as believers you and I are to see ourselves as "bond-servants of Jesus Christ." We are to be people whose obedience has no limits or qualifications.

Here's my challenge: As we work our way through Romans, I'd encourage you to invite God to transform you into a bond-servant of Jesus Christ. Paul's discussion of the gospel and its implications has the potential of convincing us that a life of obedience is not only possible; a life of obedience is our birthright in Jesus Christ. If you allow Him to do so, God will use the book of Romans to diagnose your sin and then convince you that Jesus' death and resurrection is the remedy.

Finally, in verse 7 we have Paul's greeting to the church at Rome.

7 to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul appeals to their identity in Christ when he calls them "beloved of God" and "saints." If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, the love of God has been lavished upon you. God's love for you is constant and fierce. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you are "called as a saint." The term saint simply means, "holy one" - one who is set apart for God's purposes. Saint doesn't refer to a few superstars in the body of Christ; it refers to every believer. If Jesus is your Lord, you are beloved of God and called as a saint.

Because of this identity, Paul blessed the church at Rome with the words, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." He was confident that as they lived out their calling as saints they would experience grace and peace. You and I should have the same confidence. We don't have to wonder when we get up in the morning, "Does God really want to give me grace today? And does God really want me to experience peace with Him and with others in my life?" Grace and peace are ours in abundance from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Lord's Table is an opportunity to fix our eyes on Jesus, remembering His life, death, and resurrection. The bread represents His body; the cup represents His blood. We remember that Jesus died on the cross to pay for our sins and was declared the Son of God with power through the resurrection.

As you fix your eyes on Jesus, I'd encourage you to be honest before God about your willingness to let Him do a deep work in your life through the truth of Romans. If you're willing to let Him do whatever He wants, whatever the cost, express that to Him during

this time. If you're really not at that point of submission, but you **want** to be, express that to Him. Whatever the condition of your heart, be honest before God.

Here at Faith we invite everyone who trusts in Jesus alone to participate in the Lord's table regardless of your church affiliation or denominational background. Please hold the bread until all have received and then we'll eat together; please do the same when we distribute the cup.