

February. 20, 2001

Wrath, Righteousness and the Gospel

A Jet Tour of Romans

Something is terribly wrong with us, but God has provided the solution in Jesus Christ.

LTS: Rom 3:21-28

Introduction:

Today, at long last, we come to the beginning of our study of Paul's letter to the Romans.

And all the people said?

Of Paul's 13 inspired letters, Romans is NOT the chronological first, but it is universally considered the most important. That explains why it holds first place in the order of Paul's writings.

Romans is clearly the greatest and most comprehensive letter in the N.T. And some have declared it to be the greatest letter ever written. It stands in the Bible as the Mt. Everest of N.T. books. And if you don't already love the epistle to the Romans, I hope you will, long before we approach the end of our study.

Why should you love Romans?

I'll let Martin Luther answer. In his commentary on Romans He writes, "This epistle is really the chief part of the New Testament, and the very purest gospel, and is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul. It can never be read or ponder too much, and the more it is dealt with the more precious it becomes, and the better it tastes."¹

I want to study the book of Romans with you NOT merely because I think it will be theologically stimulating to your mind but because I believe it will be a feast for your soul.

My goal this morning is to offer you an overview of the entire 16 - chapter letter. But I don't want to give it merely as a theological exercise or an academic data-dump, but as a message from the Lord who created you, sustains you, who loves you, and to whom we are all accountable. Paul wants you to understand the Gospel of Jesus Christ; to be changed by it, and to learn how to live in its light to the glory of God and your own great joy.

Let's begin with a word of prayer.

¹ Martin Luther & John Theodor Mueller, *Commentary on Romans*, (Grand Rapids, Mich., Kregel Publications, 1992), xiii

Ladies and gentlemen, we have a problem!

Take a look around. Its everywhere! When I think about our country, it just seems like the moral and ethical wheels are falling off the cart. And it's not just our country! The whole world seems to be sinking into the toxic sludge of godlessness and evil. And it's NOT just our world. It has permeated our schools, our marriages, our workplaces, our bedrooms, our theaters. And, most frightening of all, it has breached our churches.

Before we open the word of God to the first page of the book of Romans, we understand that Paul intends to unpack the theology of Good News. He wants us to understand and fully embrace the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But the great apostle to the Gentiles knows that we will never apprehend the glory of the gospel without thinking deeply about the darkness of this world and the darkness of our own hearts. So, let me say it again:

Ladies and Gentlemen, we have a problem.

What is our problem?

Some of you think you are sitting next to your problem. Some of you think your employer is the problem, your child is the problem, your bank account is the problem, or that your addiction is the problem. Those may be real difficulties that need to be addressed, but I am here to tell you this morning that until you address your ultimate problem, you will never experience real and lasting change at the level of your practical, personal struggles.

Believe me, Paul wants to address the vexing, stubborn problems of your everyday life. Indeed, it is the apostle Paul himself who teaches us that the word of God is sufficient for every need of the soul. But... there is one massive problem that must be tackled first; Namely, how do I escape the just and holy wrath of God.

Believe it or not, this is where the Gospel begins, my friend. You have a problem that infinitely transcends all the other problems in your life! So, let's talk about that problem.

I. Man's Biggest Problem.

1. The biggest problem in the history of the universe is (according to Rom. 1:18) is that "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men." Paul addresses this problem in the first three chapters of his letter.

2. Now, this may not strike you as a very frightening prospect – the wrath of God. After all, you're a good person! You work hard. You are kind to people. You have made personal sacrifices for the wellbeing of your neighbors and friends. You love your children and obey the law. There may be people who deserve the wrath of God, but surely not me!

But you can only hold on to that thin hope until you read in God's word statements like this:

Rom. 3:23, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

Rom. 6:23 “The wages of SIN is death.”

4. Let’s think about that first verse. What does it mean that, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

4. This is an important verse because it helps us define sin. You see, sin is NOT primarily about bad things we do to other people. Sin is primarily against God. Sin has something to do with the glory of God. Sin is about “Falling short of the glory of God.

5. Now, if we look carefully, we will discover that the term “fall short” is not what we may think it means. The word actually means “to lack.”²

6. The idea here is NOT that you were shooting an arrow at the glory of God and inadvertently missed, but rather that you could have had the glory of God but you didn’t want it.³ Even now, you still don’t want it. You don’t want the glory of God complicating your life. You don’t want the glory of God messing up your relationship with your girlfriend, your college buddies, your weekends, or how you choose to deal with the pain of life. You don’t want the glory of God! But this won’t make much sense if we don’t define what Paul means by “the glory of God.”

7. What is meant by “the Glory of God?”⁴ Well, in this context I believe the Glory of God represents nothing less than the Person of God and the Presence of God. So, Paul is saying that you are a sinner and that the sin of greatest concern is that you don’t want God: ⁵

- A. This is consistent with what Jesus said, (Jn. 3:19) “And this is the judgment: The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works are evil.”
- B. Jesus, the Son of God, offered Himself to sinners as the Light, but they didn’t want Him. They prefer darkness instead.

² “*fall short*” The present tense. The A. V. leaves it uncertain whether the present or the perfect *have come* is intended. They sinned, and therefore *they are lacking*. See on Luke 15:14. The word is not merely equivalent to *they are wanting in*, but implies want under the aspect of *shortcoming*.

³ John Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory*, (Wheaton, Ill., Crossway Books, 1998), 36

⁵ I am arguing that the glory of God is the Person and presence of God because the foundation of the argument is that sinners (1:18-23) have exchanged the glory of... God” for idols. “Images” are the preferential replacement for God. (3:25). They served the creature rather than the Creator...” Therefore (v. 26) God gave them over to what they wanted rather than God. I concede that “glory of God may relate to the image of God man was created to bear, but I would argue that the reasons sinners don’t want to bear the image of God is because of their antipathy for God himself.

C. By nature, you don't want God, you want no part in bearing his image.⁶

8. Oh, you would never say it like that- not even to yourself! But the fact is that you don't treasure God, you don't love God, or delight in God. His holy presence makes you uncomfortable. His commands provoke you to flee.⁷ You don't want Him telling you how to live. You want him to stay OUT of your bank account, your bedroom your leisure time, your TV watching, your You-tube surfing or Instagram feed. To be sure, you like the idea of a god who gives good things, and you like the thought of heaven, but if you were honest, you would have to admit that if the God of the Bible is there when you arrive, it's going to be a VERY uncomfortable eternity!

9. You see, your biggest problem is that you could have had a personal, thriving relationship with Almighty God, but you keep him at a safe distance. You have buried him under a veritable avalanche of other things you love more than Him. Paul confirms this earlier (1:23), where he explains that the reason the wrath of God is revealed against people is because "they have exchanged the glory of the immortal God for idols." What idols, you may ask? Anything you love and cherish more than God. Maybe you love

- money more than the glory of God
- Sex more than the glory of God
- Entertainment more than the glory of God
- Friendship more than the glory of God
- A promotion more than the glory of God.

10. And notice that this is written in the present tense. In other words, you're doing it right now! I suspect some of you are even uncomfortable with this sermon right now. You want to turn it off or get out of your seat and leave! Paul says, All have sinned and willfully "lack" the glory of God. This is what defines a lost sinner. They...

- Don't prize what is most precious
- Don't Love what is most lovely
- Aren't awed by what it most awesome
- Their lives seem unaffected by the glory of God, the word of God, the people of God, and the spirit of God.

11. Friends, the Bible repeatedly portrays the substance of idolatry and sin as forsaking God - the "fountain of living water in favor of broken cisterns that can hold no water" (Jer. 2:13).

⁶ F. F. Bruce, *Romans: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 6, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 108.

⁷ Adapted from John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory*, (Wheaton, Crossway, 1998), 36

12. But I should tell you, these realities are NOT unique to you. Your first parents, Adam and Eve, did the same thing in the garden when they rejected God's counsel, ate what was forbidden, and hid themselves from Him. In that moment of rebellion, they believed the lie that their own appetites and impulses were a better guide than God. And that's what every man, woman and child are hard-wired to believe from birth. That's why Paul is so emphatic when he says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23)

- A. In chapter 1 Paul argues that the godless are under God's wrath because of sin.
- B. In chapter 2 he argues that the religious are under God's wrath because of their sin
- C. In chapter 3 he concludes, therefore, that ALL have sinned and fall short of the glory of God because in reality, they don't want God.
- D. Let me speak to the children for a moment. Children, what did your mom and dad do to teach you how to disobey them? Did they promise to give you a treat if you would disobey? How did they teach you to be disobedient?

13. But the problem gets worse. If we jump ahead to Rom 6:23 Paul takes it a step further by revealing the consequence of sin. Paul says NOT only that everyone has sinned but that (Rom. 6:23) "the wages of sin is death."

14. What is death? The kind of death Paul is speaking of is separation from the life-giving, joy-producing, Christ-exalting goodness of God forever. So, don't be shocked when you hear the apostle say that the penalty for sin is death.

15. People who do not desire the presence of the God of the Bible now will one day experience the fullness of what they desire; namely, eternal separation from the presence of God. But perhaps the reason they don't want God is they have the wrong idea of what it will be like when they truly are separated from God

- Consider the experience of Jesus on the cross; Forsaken of God, bearing the guilt of sin, plunged into darkness wracked with unrelenting pain. The whole thing sound strangely like the Bible's description of Hell. And Jesus bore all of this – the full measure of the wrath of God – alone, apart from the presence of the Father.
"My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?"
- But no one in Hell will ever ask that question. Every soul in Hell will be excruciatingly aware that their eternal separation from God is exactly what they always wanted.
- In that God-forsaken place (Rom. 2:8 says) there will be "wrath, fury, tribulation, and distress."
- Elsewhere in Scripture it is described as a place of "outer darkness" where there is relentless weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth. Where the worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched."
- O my friend! Hear the word of God...

“The wages of sin is death.”

This is the wrath of God

And the only thing holding you back from falling into the righteous wrath of God is the sovereign mercy of God.

14. You may ask, “But wait! Is there any hope? What do I need to avert the righteous wrath of God? This is exactly where Paul is taking us...”

He leads us from

II. Man’s Biggest Problem

To

II. The Sinner’s Greatest Need:

1. What would a sinner need to be saved from the holy wrath of Almighty God? In a word, he would need righteousness. Listen to the sobering words of Jesus.

Matt. 5:20 “I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Then at the end of that same chapter he quantifies that righteousness by saying:

Matthew 5:48 “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” In other words, you must be as good as God. You must be as righteous as Christ is righteous.

2. You see, friends. What you need is for God to see you NOT as an unrighteous sinner but as one who is as righteous as God? But where can you get that? It’s too late to start being good! The Jews thought they could attain it by diligently keeping the law of God. But Paul declares (Rom. 3:20) “By the works of the Law, no one will be justified in His sight.” And consider Rom. 3:10.

Quoting from the O.T. Paul writes,

“as it is written: ‘None is righteous, no, not one; ¹¹ no one understands; no one seeks for God (i.e. no one wants God). ¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.’”

3. According to Scripture, no one is capable of meeting God's standard of righteousness. So, whether you are a Jew or a Gentile, you are in the same predicament. There is a righteousness you desperately need, don't have, and can't earn.

4. This is a seriously hopeless situation.

The first 3 chapters of Romans reveals...

- Man's Biggest Problem
- The Sinner's greatest need. Then, just when it seems all hope is lost, Paul reveals...

III. God's Saving Solution!

1. What is God's Saving solution to man's biggest problem and the sinner's greatest need? Paul offers a magnificent answer!

2. God's Solution is what Paul calls "Justification." What is meant by Justification?

A. To be justified means to be "Declared Righteous."

B. The Moody Handbook of Theology defines Justification as...

"a legal act wherein God pronounces that the believing sinner has been credited with all the virtues of Jesus Christ.⁸

(read again)

C. In other words, God reckons you as perfect, even as Jesus is perfect - even as your heavenly Father is perfect. That is, He he declares you **RIGHTEOUS**

3. The million-dollar question, then, is How Can I Obtain God's Justification?

Look with me at Rom. 3:24-25.

Read Rom 3:24-25

...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith...

4. Every phrase in this text has been Cherished by Christians for more than 2,000 years: ⁹

⁸ Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2014), 751

⁹ This section is adapted from a John Piper sermon on Romans chapter 7 – an overview of the first seven chapters.

- A. Justified is a cherished word because it means that the solution to my unrighteousness is that God declares me legally righteous in his sight despite the fact that I have been so unrighteous. Charles Spurgeon once told his church, [Christians] are so righteous in Jesus Christ that they are more righteous than Adam was before he fell, for he had but a creature righteousness, and they have the righteousness of the Creator.¹⁰
- B. "By his grace" is a cherished phrase because it means there is something else in the heart of God toward sinners besides wrath! His justice requires payment for the crime, but his grace offers us what we don't deserve (DK) The grace of God shields the sinner from the wrath of God!"
- C. "As a gift" is a cherished phrase because it means that while you can't earn righteousness; you can't work for it; you can't deserve it; you CAN receive it if you want it. Robert Mounce rightly observes that while "We want to earn; God will only give. God's way of providing righteousness has nothing to do with human performance. It is "apart from law"¹¹
- D. "Through the Redemption" is a cherish phrase because it means my sins have been paid for - not by me but by Jesus. "Jesus paid it all! All to Him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain - He washed it white as snow!"
- E. "That is in Christ Jesus" is a cherished phrase because it tells us that all of this is ours because God has united us with His Son. This righteousness is not my own, it is Christ's righteousness. Roman's teaches us that we fly to Christ for Righteousness! It's not my obedience to the Law, its Christ's fulfillment of the law. It's not my dying for my sins, it's Christ's dying for my sins.
- F. "Whom God displayed publicly" is a cherished phrase because it tells us that what Jesus did for us is HISTORY! It took place out in the open. In the O.T. God described how he would provide both Forgiveness and Righteousness one day, and then he did it for the world to see! It's not some kind of eastern mythology. It really happened and there were many witnesses who attested to it. They saw him alive; they saw Him dead, and they saw him risen
- G. "As a propitiation" is cherished phrase because it points to "The removal of Wrath." And that was man's biggest problem to begin with! All of us live under the wrath of God. But in Christ, God's wrath is satisfied. All the punishment you deserve has been poured out

¹⁰ C. H. Spurgeon, *2,200 Quotations: From the Writings of Charles H. Spurgeon : Arranged Topically or Textually and Indexed by Subject, Scripture, and People*, ed. Tom Carter (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 178.

¹¹ Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, vol. 27, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 114.

in fullest measure upon Him!

- H. "In His blood," is Cherished phrase because it tells us what Jesus did. Yes, the wages of sin is death, but that's why Jesus laid his life down on the cross. He died as our substitute. His blood instead of ours.
- I. "Through Faith" is a cherished phrase, because it tells how sinners like you and me can become the beneficiaries of all that God has done for us in Jesus. And the only way to get it, is to receive it by faith. By faith and by "Faith Alone."

In the first three chapters of Romans Paul reveals, Man's Biggest Problem, the Sinner's greatest need, God's saving solution, and finally...

IV. Christ's Glorious Invitation:

1. Oh, my friend! Is this NOT glorious Good News? Your biggest problem finds it's eternal resolution in the very Person you have been running from for so long. Your enemy has become your Savior! No wonder Paul says in Chap. 1 verse 16 "I am NOT ashamed of the Gospel of Christ for it is the Power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes..."

6. Do you believe this gospel? Today, will you humble yourself before God and confess that you have nothing to offer Him but your sin? Will you ask him to forgive your sin and grant you the saving righteousness you can only receive by faith from Christ? If you come to him, he will not turn you away. In fact, the invitation you are hearing right now is His invitation. He says, "Come to me all who are weary and burdened with a heavy load. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me and you will find rest for your soul" (Mat. 11:28).

6. This morning you have heard the gospel of Jesus Christ! I plead with you, do NOT harden your heart. Fly to Christ for the righteousness and forgiveness you need to be reconciled to God.

Now, as for the rest of Romans, we have covered the first three chapters. And chap 4: belongs with chaps 1-3 because in it Paul argues that Abraham was justified by faith even before the Law was given. Paul writes, "To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his Faith is counted as righteousness.

Chaps 5-8: God's righteousness brings peace with God along with magnificent assurance and I can't wait to get to chaps 5-6 and talk about the fact that sin is NOT sovereign! It is no longer your master. The righteousness of Christ causes you to become more and more like Christ.

This is also the section where we read "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" and "Those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of His son."

- A. In light of this magnificent security and hope Paul asks, are we then free to sin as we please (licentiousness)? No! Then should we devote ourselves to law-keeping (Legalism)? No! Rather, we should walk in the Spirit.

Chap. 9-11, Paul addresses God's sovereign election and Israel's place in his redemptive plan; how Israel's rejection of their Messiah has opened the door for the Gentiles and how in the end God's righteousness will result in all Israel being saved.

Paul ends that section with his great doxology, "O the depths of the riches and the wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord and who has been his counselor? Or who has ever given to Him that he should be repaid. For from Him and through Him and to Him is everything. To Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Chapter 12-14 Paul exhorts those who have already embraced this gospel on how God's righteousness should affect one's everyday life. This is where the gospel is brought to bear on the practical issues of life.

The reformers declared that the Faith that saves is Faith Alone, but the faith that saves is NEVER alone. In other words, True saving faith is always accompanied by a changed life. Not a perfect life, but one that growing more and more into the likeness of Jesus.

So, Paul teaches us about submission to authorities, loving one another, and how to relate to one another when there is conflict over the gray areas of life.

Finally, in Chaps. 15-16. Paul lays out his plan for taking the Gospel of God's Righteousness where it has not been proclaimed; specifically, to Spain. He is coming to Rome and he wants the church there to help him reach Spain for God. The final chapter then, Paul uses to send personal greetings and exhortations to 28 beloved friends and fellow workers.

This is going to be a marvelous study. And I promise to make every effort to finish it before... I retire or die.