

*Slave of Christ Jesus: Romans 1:1*  
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This morning we embark on a great adventure and a great spiritual journey as a church. We're going to be studying the book of Romans, starting today and going on for some time. I'm not sure exactly how long this sermon series will be, but I do know that Romans is not a book I want to go through quickly. It's not a book I would be *capable* of teaching through quickly, because there's still so much here that I need to study and meditate on and pray over, and so much here that I want us to benefit from.

Spending a significant amount of time in this book goes right along with our mission statement as a church, which you see on your worship folder each week. "We exist to delight in the beauty of God's greatness, to proclaim the truth of God's Word, and to ignite a joyful passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ among all the peoples of Pittsburgh and the world." This is who we are and what we feel called to pursue. We could summarize this with the three words: Worship, Word, and Witness. And it's my prayer that meditating on this great letter of Paul to the Roman church will spur us on in all three areas.

In terms of worship, we will continually be presented with the beauty of God's greatness. And it's my hope that God will revive our hearts and cause us to praise Him and delight in Him and give thanks to Him. In terms of the Word, as we proclaim the truth of this portion of God's Word, it will help us in our understanding of all of God's Word. So many massive theological themes are expounded here, and so if we can mine the precious truths here, we can have a deeper grasp and a greater appreciation of all of Scripture. And finally, in terms of witness, this is a missionary letter. Paul was a missionary, planting churches in many places, and he wrote this letter wanting to get to Rome, with the hope that they would help him on his way to Spain. And he wrote clearly and at length about the great Gospel of God that will go to all the nations. This is an amazing document that bears witness to the Good News and also is full of passion for taking this Good News to all the world.

So I'm excited to dig down into the riches of this great letter, with the hope that our time spent here will bear long-lasting fruit in terms of worship, Word, and witness. If the Lord tarries, it should be the desire of all of us that this church will continue to be faithful to the Gospel long after we've all passed on and are with Jesus. That's my hope and prayer. I pray for the Lord to come soon, and I also pray that if He doesn't come soon, that He will preserve the witness of this church for generations to come. And I

believe that a lengthy study of the book of Romans is just the kind of thing that will help to produce that kind of faithfulness. To understand the Gospel, to understand sin, to understand justification and sanctification, to understand God's sovereignty in election, to understand the glory of God, to understand the Christian life, these are all things we need to grasp in order to have a firm foundation, and they are all things that Romans presents for us with profound insight.

At the beginning of this series, I want to ask for your prayers—for me, and for our church as a whole. Pray for me, that God will illumine my mind and revive me and embolden me and give me a great excitement about the truths that I'll be preaching on. And pray for our church, pray that these things will not be mere theological points for us, but reason for rejoicing. Pray for repentance and revival among us. Pray for spiritual awakening, as unbelievers hear the Gospel. Pray for children in our midst, that they will understand the Gospel truths of this book. Pray for future pastors and missionaries to be raised up among us. Pray that God will do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think. Pray that He will glorify His Name among us, in our personal lives and families, and in the fellowship of this church, and through our witness in this neighborhood and city and region, and even to other parts of world.

I am just filled with anticipation and eagerness as we embark on this journey together. I don't know all that the Lord has in store for us. But I'm certain of this, if we come before His Word humbly and eagerly, we will be absolutely amazed at the power of the Gospel. Romans has had a major impact on the church down through the ages, in the lives of figures like Augustine, Martin Luther, John Wesley, John Bunyan, and many others. Many of us here could testify to the powerful way that God has used Romans in our lives. And I pray that God will continue to use this letter to have a profound impact on us, here in this church, at this particular time in history.

Let's get started, then, with the first verse. I don't plan on taking only one verse per Sunday, but for this morning, the first verse is a good way of introducing the historical context of this letter, and its author. Next week, we'll look at the rest of the greeting in verses 1-7.

The first thing we should know is that this follows the typical format of an ancient Greek letter. When we write a letter (or an email) we begin by identifying the person to whom we're writing (Dear Mr. So-and-so). Then we write the body of the letter. And finally, at the end, we put some kind of greeting along with our name (Sincerely, Ben). Letters in ancient Greece were different. The custom was to put your own name first, then to

identify the recipient, and then add a word of greeting. So the standard format would be: Ben, to Mr. So-and-so, greetings. And, if you notice, Paul follows that customary format, but what's striking is the length of it. Paul can't even address the envelope without launching into the Gospel and the significance of the Gospel for his ministry.

He first identifies himself – Paul. Then he gives these descriptions of himself – a slave of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God. Then he spends 5 more verses expounding on this gospel of God. In verse 7, then, he identifies the recipients. And to this, too, he attaches theological explanation – to all those in Rome *who are loved by God and called to be saints*. Finally, the greeting, again with a rich theological dimension to it – grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

These 7 verses make up the greeting of the letter. Taking just verse 1 for this morning, I'll break this into three pieces. First off, Paul – who was this man, what was his personal testimony, and how did he come to write this letter? And then we'll look at these descriptions he gives of himself – one the one hand, the very humble description, “slave of Christ Jesus,” and then also a reference to his apostolic authority, “called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God.”

## **Paul**

Paul was not always known as Paul. When we first meet him in the narrative of the book of Acts, he is called Saul. And when he first enters the story, he is not preaching about Christ, he is not planting churches. Rather, he is opposing Christ, persecuting Christians, and trying to destroy churches. The first time we read the name Saul in Acts, it's right after the first martyrdom. [Acts is the book right before Romans, and you can turn back there if you'd like] In Acts 7, Stephen was stoned to death because of his faith in Christ, and it says in 7:58 that “the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.” And a couple verses later, in 8:1, it says that “Saul approved of the execution.” Then it goes on to tell of the persecution against the church, and verse 3 says, “Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.” This guy was passionate and ruthless in his hatred of the church. He was zealous for Judaism, and so he wanted to stamp out this new movement that seemed to threaten everything he held dear.

Well, then, what happened? How did this persecutor of the church become one of its greatest leaders? This is the miracle of the Gospel. This is the power of the Gospel that Paul not only

wrote about, but experienced first hand in his own life. Acts 9 gives us the account of his conversion. At the beginning of the chapter, he was still “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.” And he was on his way to Damascus, for the purpose of arresting Christians, when the Lord appeared to him.

"Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”" (Acts 9:3-6)

His life was never the same after that. His life was set on a whole new course. He was so different, in fact, that many people were suspicious. The Lord told Ananias to go and help Saul, but Ananias was fearful because of all the horrible things he had heard about Saul. And then Saul began to preach Christ, and the people were amazed and confused, because this was the very thing Saul had just been trying to oppose so vehemently. Now he was proving that Jesus was the Christ (9:22).

It didn't take long until the persecution Saul had been inflicting on others began to be inflicted upon him. He had most clearly and definitively switched sides. His previous passion for defeating the message of Jesus Christ was now exceeded by an even greater passion to proclaim the message of Jesus Christ, come what may. And he suffered tremendously because of his commitment to Christ.

What a testimony! And as we consider the Lord's radical transformation of this man's life, I want us to realize that the Lord is still in the business of doing this very thing. Maybe you walked in here today feeling hatred toward the Christian faith. Or maybe apathy toward the Christian faith. Or maybe you are consumed with religious zeal, like Saul was, but it is misguided. You're trying to be a good person, but Christ is not part of the equation. God can save people like that. He can save you out of your gross immorality. Or he can save you out of your presumed morality. He can save you out of the most appalling vices. Or he can save you out of a life of apparent virtues.

Saul, in a sense, was on both sides of this spectrum at the same time. He was living a life of apparent virtues, at least in the eyes of many. He was well thought of by his peers in Judaism (Galatians 1:14). He was passionate about his religion. And out of that ungodly, Christless, religious zeal, sprang murderous intentions. He wanted to imprison Christians and put to death this new movement of Jesus followers. And this is the very man whom God set apart to be an apostle to the Gentiles.

I hope we will all be moved by this, and encouraged by this testimony of God's grace. If you're an unbeliever, I pray that this morning may be a Damascus road moment for you. There may not be a light from heaven flashing around you, and the Lord may not speak audibly to you, but the Lord is speaking to you through His Word, even at this very moment. He is speaking to you in the testimony of Saul. Turn from your wicked ways, turn from your self-righteous religion, and humble yourself before the Lord Almighty. I pray that right now the scales will fall from your eyes so that you can see the glory of Christ. There's nothing greater in all the universe than knowing Him and being about His work.

And for all of us here, we should be encouraged that whatever our lives were like before the Lord changed us, He can use us in amazing ways. Some people might think, "Oh, God can't use me, I've lived a horrible life. I've done such wicked things, and I still struggle with sin: how could God use me for anything good?" Listen, Saul didn't just sit around moping because he had done such terrible things. He did come to understand how wicked he was, but he also came to understand that Jesus Christ a great Savior. And so he poured out his life to make Christ known. God can use you, friend. If He has done a work in your life to draw you to Himself, then you have something absolutely amazing to share with others. No matter what you've done, and no matter how inadequate you may feel even now, it's not about you, it's about our great Savior. Let's make Him known.

I'll fast-forward here a bit, and bring us from the time of Paul's conversion to the time when he wrote this letter. In Galatians 1-2, Paul describes some of the things he did immediately following his conversion. He spent some time in Arabia, and then came back to Damascus. Then after 3 years he went to Jerusalem and spent 15 days with Cephas (that is, Peter), and he also saw James, the brother of Jesus. After 14 years he went to Jerusalem again, this time with Barnabas and Titus. Then there were the three missionary journeys, which are recorded in Acts. And it is supposed that on the third missionary journey Paul wrote this letter to Rome. There was a point on that trip that he spent 3 months in Greece (this is recorded in Acts 20:2-3), referring to the province of Achaia, which is where Corinth is located. And it seems very probable that Paul wrote this great letter during those 3 months in Corinth, probably in the year 57 AD. This would have been just over 20 years since his conversion on the Damascus road.

### **Slave of Christ Jesus**

Now let's look at these descriptions that Paul gives of himself in verse 1 of the letter. The first is "slave of Christ Jesus."

Most of the translations read “servant of Christ Jesus,” but that softens the phrase in a way that fails to capture what Paul actually said. There are other Greek words he could have used if he wanted to say servant. He uses those in other places, even here in Romans, in fact (see 13:4; 14:4; 15:8; 16:1, for example). But here he uses the word slave (*doulos*). The first thing he says about himself is that he is a slave of Christ Jesus. That’s an offensive word. It makes us cringe, because it brings to mind the horrors of slavery. When a human being is reduced to property and is owned by another human being, that is an injustice that rightfully causes outrage. We can see, then, why most translators would want to avoid that horrid word—slave—and use “servant” instead.

But there’s an important difference between a servant and a slave. A servant provides a service and works for another, a slave is owned by another. Murray Harris, in his book *Slave of Christ*, observes that in contemporary Christianity “we have replaced the expression ‘total surrender’ with the word ‘commitment,’ and ‘slave’ with ‘servant.’”<sup>1</sup> I don’t think the point is to say that commitment or servant are bad words to use, but simply that they don’t fully grasp how radical it is to be a Christian. It’s not simply about having a commitment to Christ, however that may be thought of. And it’s not simply about being a servant, one who provides some service for another. To be a Christ-follower involves total surrender to Him. It is summed up in the description, “slave of Christ Jesus.”

Murray Harris also tells of Joseph Tson, a Romanian pastor who had been imprisoned in the late 1970s, and then exiled in ’81. It was his desire, when he went to speak places, to be introduced simply as a slave of Jesus Christ. But Pastor Tson remarked that there are very few people who are willing to introduce him in that way. Instead they will call him a servant of Jesus Christ, but not a slave. So there’s this tendency we have to shy away from this slave language.

The theology of slavery is important to Paul. He will talk about it at length in Romans 6, where he contrasts being a slave of sin with being a slave to righteousness. You either have one master or the other. And his words in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 capture the significance of the metaphor, when he writes, “You are not your own, for you were bought with a price.” That’s the master-slave relationship. The master buys the slave and owns the slave. Now, when a human is the master, and another human is the slave, this is despicable. But when Christ is the Master, and I am the slave, this is the best news in the world.

In our study of Hosea, which we just concluded last week, we saw this same imagery. Hosea’s wayward wife, Gomer, had

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<sup>1</sup> Page 18.

become a prostitute and sold herself into slavery. She was in bondage to her sin, and to a human master. But Hosea went and bought her, redeemed her, and brought her home. That's what Christ does for us. He redeems us out of our captivity to sin, and He makes us His own. Therefore rather than chafing against His absolute authority over us, we ought to rejoice. Who else would we want as our Master, than the One who laid down His life for us? So it's with great joy that Paul describes himself as a slave Christ Jesus.

One other thing to note here: some people have an odd way of describing their conversion and spiritual growth. And many of us may do this without even thinking of it. But listen to this terminology, and please notice how foolish it sounds next to this phrase "slave of Christ Jesus." Many have distinguished between relating to Jesus as Savior and relating to Jesus as Lord. The typical story goes something like this—when I was young I made a decision to accept Jesus as my Savior. I prayed the sinner's prayer and was forgiven of my sins. But my life didn't really change much. Then, sometime later, I decided to make Jesus my Lord, and at that point I really started living for Him.

That is an unbiblical way of thinking, and it's terribly dishonoring to Christ. When Christ saves a person, redeems a person, He is then that person's Lord and Master. It is impossible to have Jesus as your Savior and not have Him as your Lord. That's nonsense. We cannot stand before Him and say, "I'll accept Your gifts, but I won't submit to You." That's like children who say to their parents, "Feed me, clothe me, give me toys, but I'm not going to do what you say!" (And all the parents here are saying, Yeah, that's not right!) That's where discipline has to enter the equation, which is just what our Lord does with us. I bought you, I redeemed you, I made you my own, you *must* learn to obey Me. He is our Lord and Master, and we will do well to meditate on this description of being His slaves. It is not a degrading term in this context. It is humbling, but it's also a reason for rejoicing. For when it's Christ Jesus as the Master, it's a delight to be His slave.

### **Called Apostle**

The other thing Paul highlights about himself in this first verse is his apostleship. He is a called apostle. And there's something very apostolic here about the balance between humility and authority. He needs to assert his apostolic authority in order to stress the importance of all that is written in the letter. But as he is writing to these believers in Rome, whom he has not yet met, he wants to introduce himself not merely as an authority figure, but also as a humble slave of Christ Jesus. So he begins with the humbling term, slave, and then mentions his apostleship. And

even in mentioning the fact that he is an apostle, he emphasizes God's role in that. Paul is only an apostle because God called him to be an apostle, and set him apart for the gospel.

Earlier I read the passage where the Lord called Saul, in Acts 9. There Saul met the risen Lord and was then commissioned to preach Christ among the Gentiles (see Acts 22; Gal 1). He was unlike those apostles who had been with Jesus during His earthly ministry. Paul was appointed later. He speaks of himself in 1 Corinthians 15 as "one untimely born." He also says there that he is "the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God" (1 Cor 15:8-9). But he was an apostle, nonetheless, and his authority was on par with all of the other apostles, which he goes to great lengths to demonstrate in Galatians 1-2.

In Galatians 1:15, Paul uses these same two words: "called" and "set apart." He writes, "But when he who had *set me apart* before I was born, and who *called* me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone." This is something we have to understand about Paul's ministry. And it's something he knows is imperative for the readers of this letter to understand. This letter comes with apostolic authority. There is a divine and supernatural power to it. And therefore we must pay attention to these words, because they are not *merely* human words. They *are* human words, composed by this man Paul. But they are far more than that. God chose this man, and called him, and set him apart for this purpose, and spoke through him in such a way that these words are not only Paul's words, they are God's words. This is the very Word of God. Therefore to go against these words, to twist these words, to disobey these words, or to ignore these words, is not just an offense to Paul, but an offense to the Almighty God of the universe. As we embark on this study, we must realize that we are not just studying a piece of ancient literature, as interesting and as beneficial as that may be. We are studying God's revelation of Himself and His gospel, communicated through this man Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

It's remarkable to think that God chose Paul, of all people, to have this role in the early church, that Paul would be this great apostle to the Gentiles, and that he would write this great letter to the Romans, as well as many other letters that are also part of the New Testament. Paul, who was a persecutor of the church, was chosen by God before he was even born, for this very task. Paul's own life is a striking illustration of the grace he writes so much about.

This is the gospel of God, which we'll learn much more about next week in the remaining verses of this greeting. Paul, who had been chosen by God, called to be an apostle, and set apart for the gospel of God, not at all because of anything good he had done (he was persecuting the church and vehemently opposed to Christ!). This is God's amazing grace. This is the gospel of God, that He took someone like that and turned him around 180 degrees and used him in such a significant way to preach and defend the Gospel and to establish these early churches.

In closing, I return to this metaphor of slavery, and simply exhort us to humble ourselves before the Lord as slaves of Christ Jesus. Let's totally surrender ourselves to Him and acknowledge Him as our Master. He has rescued us from our bondage to sin, in order to work through us to make the Gospel known and one day to bring us home to be with Him forever.