

Today we begin a new study in the Book of Romans.

Why Romans...? Because it may be the most influential document ever penned.

No one... who has ever studied the history of the church... would dispute that the Book of Romans... has been the most powerful and influential book... used by God... in His church. Romans has been the written force behind some of the most significant conversions of church history. St. Augustine (the most brilliant theologian of the early centuries)... came to conviction of sin and salvation after reading some verses from the thirteenth chapter. ... Augustine became the greatest figure in the early Christian church... between the apostle Paul and Martin Luther.

And speaking of Martin Luther... He was a pious... earnest monk — an apparent Christian. ... But Luther had no peace of soul. He wanted to please God... to be accepted by him. ... But the harder he worked... the more elusive the salvation of his soul seemed to be. ... Instead of growing closer to God... he found himself moving away from Him. ... Instead of coming to love God... (which Luther knew he should do)... he found himself hating God for requiring an apparently impossible standard of righteousness of human beings.

In desperation Luther turned to a study of Paul's letter to the Romans and there... in the seventeenth verse of chapter 1... he found the solution:

Romans 1:17 (ESV)

For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

Luther realized that the righteousness he needed was not his own righteousness... but a righteousness of God - freely given to all who would receive it. ... Furthermore... this was to be received... not through any works of his own... but by faith only (*sola fide*). ... Faith meant taking God at his word... (believing him.) ... Luther did this... and as he did he felt himself to be reborn.

And then... On May 24... 1738... a discouraged missionary to the American Indians went "very unwillingly" to a religious meeting in London. ... There a miracle took place. "*About a quarter before nine,*" he wrote in his journal, "*I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.*"

That missionary was John Wesley. ... The message he heard that evening was the preface to Martin Luther's commentary on Romans. ... Just a few months before... John Wesley had written in his journal: "*I went to America to convert the Indians; but Oh! who shall convert me?*" ... That evening in Aldersgate Street... his question was answered. ... And the result was the great Wesleyan Revival that swept England transforming that nation and our own!

Time will not allow for me to mention the many other examples... that show the immense impact that the Book of Romans has had. But let me just say that Martin Luther believed that "*every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, [and] occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of his soul.*" ... And the great Swiss theologian... F. Godet... whose Bible

commentaries are in every Christian college and seminary... wrote: "*every great spiritual revival in the church will be connected as effect and cause with a deeper understanding of this book.*"

But is that really true? ... We live in a skeptical age... and it is not unreasonable to think that many who hear a statement like would challenge it.

"Com'mon... Maybe Romans changed the life of Saint Augustine... and then he went on to significantly impact the early church. ... And maybe Martin Luther was lit on fire by it... and I'll even give you John Wesley... But each of these were a long time ago! Augustine lived from A.D. 354 – 430... Luther was in the 1500's and John Wesley's time was before America was even born as a nation. ... Times have changed since then. Is there any reason to expect such an impact from a study of this ancient letter – today...?"

My answer is "yes!" There is every reason to expect it... (You see!)... The fundamental human problem in the church of every age... is not to understand what our actions and behavior needs to be. (Generally we know that quite well.) ... The problem is... that we do not WANT to do... what we know we should do. ... And... we even seem incapable of doing it. ... So many of us remain at war with God. ... And we do not want him to rule over our lives. ... Romans shows how God deals with this problem.

Imagine! You and I are about to study the same inspired letter that brought life and power to Augustine... Luther... and Wesley! ... And the same Holy Spirit who taught them can teach us! ... You and I can experience revival in our hearts... our homes... and in our church... if the message of this letter grips us... as it has gripped men of faith in centuries past. ... [P A U S E]

As we turn our attention to its opening verses... let me ask... What do you say to a church you have never met... but one that is facing a serious situation and desperately needs your help? ... How do you introduce yourself and your intentions... in a way that will gain their trust... and get their attention?

In the opening verses of the letter... Paul introduces himself to the believers in Rome. ... Some of them must have known him personally... judging by the way he greets them in the final chapter. ... But most of them he had never met. ... So... in these first seven verses... Paul begins with an introduction which is longer than usual. ... It is more theological and personal... than any of his other epistles' introductions. In his introduction... Paul introduces the themes that he will launch into... through the rest of his letter.

(You see)... The apostle is tremendously concerned that this group (made up primarily of strangers to him) won't "turn him off" before they have read his arguments. ... So... he reveals himself **and** his theology right up front... hoping that if they understand something of who he is and what he believes... they will give him a hearing.

Romans 1:1

He begins his letter by formally presenting his credentials. He first calls himself Christ's slave. (But let's stop right here...) ... For a Roman citizen to identify himself as a servant was **un**thinkable.

Paul could have introduced himself to these Romans with a long list of accomplishments. He could have written: "*Paul – your fellow Roman*

citizen”... that might have established a bond with them. ... He might have cited his ancestral tree... his degrees... his success in founding churches... or even the letters that he had already written to other churches. ... This all might have established his credibility with them. But Paul does not do this. Why? ... Because *what he is most concerned about*... simply overshadows all of that! Above everything else... Paul expresses his absolute devotion and subjection to Christ Jesus.

Paul's description of himself as a servant... emphasizes that his primary purpose is service. This is worth noting... because “a servant of Jesus Christ”... is a proper description of what it means to be a Christian. That is why Jesus said:

Matthew 20:26-28 (ESV)

²⁶ It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, ²⁸ even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

And it is why Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 6:19-20 (ESV)

¹⁹ Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, ²⁰ for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

No matter who we are — pastor... church leader... or regular church attender... if we are a believer... we must be a servant.

William Barclay wrote in *The Letter to the Romans*.

No person is a true follower of Jesus Christ unless he is *enslaved by Christ*. In fact, it is *impossible* for a person to belong to Christ unless

he is *enslaved by Christ*. This is the shocking message Paul wants to get across to the believers at Rome.

Paul identifies himself (first and foremost) as a servant. Second... he says that he is an apostle... but not by his own designation. He writes that he was called to this position. ... God called him! ... How essential this was to Paul's ongoing service. ... Whenever things got rough... he could always reflect upon the truth that God had summoned him... (the fact that this was all God's doing.) ... What a comfort—what a motivation!

I wrote my doctoral dissertation on the subject of God's calling to full-time Christian service... and I surveyed hundreds of evangelical pastors about their sense of call. I was AMAZED at how many did not have any sense of a call... and many did not even believe that God calls men in this way today. (One was a close personal friend ... Oh how my heart hurts for him. He is no longer in full-time ministry.) Knowing that you are called... is such an anchor... for when the stormy winds of ministry are swirling and howling. Christian worker! I don't care what your ministry is – you need to know that God has placed you there. You didn't decide on your own to do it. If you can't affirm this... you should earnestly seek a sense of God's calling you to it.

Paul was called to be an apostle. ... What is an apostle? ... The best passage for understanding the meaning of the term *apostle* is Acts 1:15-26... in which the eleven apostles elected a twelfth to complete their ranks after the treachery and death of Judas. ... As Peter explained... it was necessary for the replacement to have known the risen Lord... and to have been chosen by Him for this office. So an apostle was to be a witness to

the resurrection of Jesus Christ... and he specially chosen and equipped by Jesus... for the job of laying the foundation for His church (according to Eph. 2:20).

This role is why I do not believe we have apostles today. The foundation has already been laid. And once a foundation has been laid... that's it. You only do it once... and you do it BEFORE you build any other part of the structure. (LISTEN!) Christ has been building His church for nearly 2000 years. We are not still laying its foundation. In reading chapters 2-3 of Revelation... we can see that we are at the brink of the church's end. We are near the end of the church period... of which the foundation was laid during the first century... by the apostle's teaching (much of which was recorded in Scripture.)

When I was in California... every once in a while... an old white-haired disheveled man with a long beard would stop by the church to visit me. He claimed that he was an apostle and would imply that his authority extended over our church. He would tell me that he had a message for us... and wanted to speak to the whole church. (I would of course tell him "no" and warn him about claiming an authority that God could not possibly have given him.)

By calling himself an apostle... Paul legitimately informs the Roman church that he is writing as no mere ordinary man... but rather as one who is engaged in laying the foundation of the church. The book of Romans has served as part of the strong foundation from which the church has been (and is) being built up.

Paul was called to be an apostle for the gospel of God. This very gospel had been promised long ago by God and was not made up by Paul or anyone else. It was rooted in God's promises in the Old Testament to his people through His prophets.

Romans 1:2-4

David was perhaps the most illustrious of the kings of Israel. The promise to him was... that there would always be a man to sit on his throne (1 Kings 2:4, 8:25, 9:5) The Jews have always understood this to be the Messiah.

So much about Messiah-Jesus was revealed in the Old Testament. ... Who would Jesus' mother be? (A virgin.) ... Of what lineage was he to be? (Of David.) ... Where would he be born? (Bethlehem.) ... What name would he be given? (Immanuel.) ... What death would be his? (The cross—piercing the body without breaking his bones.) ... Where? (At Jerusalem, outside the city.) And there is so much more from the prophets that accurately describe Jesus.

But most significant about verses 3 and 4 is that Paul's revealed task was to preach that Christ had two different natures... that He is both God and man. Verse 3 stresses Christ's humanity by saying "as to his human nature He was a descendant of David." ... This implies... of course... that he had *another* nature (as well.) While He was a man... He was also something else.

Verse 3 spotlights His human nature... and then His divine nature is emphasized in verse 4... which is described as "*the Spirit of holiness...*" This is not a reference to the Holy Spirit.

The expression "*spirit of holiness*" suggests that the Lord Jesus lived a life of victory over the *power of sin*... and indeed... His life was perfectly holy. He never looked with lust. ... He never uttered a hasty... unkind... untrue or frivolous word... and He never entertained an impure thought. ... He was never inflamed by a wrongful passion... never out of step with the will of God. ... His time was never wasted... His talents never corrupted for selfish ends... His influence never bad... His judgment never wrong. ... He never had to apologize for anything He did... or retract a single word He said. ... He was never too late (or too soon)... never upset... never shallow... never afraid. ... He lived on earth approximately twelve thousand days... and every one of them was a marvel of holiness. - He had absolute victory from the moment He first drew breath in that Bethlehem barn... until the moment He closed His eyes in death on the cross of Calvary. (Folks!) He was "declared to be the Son of God (having all the characteristics of God) with power - according to the spirit of holiness."

But what declared His divine nature most loudly was His resurrection. ... During the time of the French Revolution... a certain man named Lepeau complained to Napoleon's chief diplomat (Talleyrand) that a new religion of his... (one he considered a great improvement over Christianity)... had failed to catch on with the people. He asked Talleyrand for some suggestions. Talleyrand dryly said... "*Masur Lepeau, to insure success for your new religion, all you need do is have yourself crucified and then rise from the dead on the third day!*" [P A U S E]

There has been a natural and significant climax at the end of verse 4 in the words "Jesus Christ our Lord."

If Jesus is - Who the apostle Paul declares Him right here... there is no other reasonable or right option open to you and I ... than total allegiance.

If Jesus is Lord... then He is not only Lord of our minds... wills... and morals... but he is also Lord of our resources such (as our time... and possessions.) ... He is Lord of our careers and ambitions. ... We cannot plan our lives... as if our relationship to Jesus is somehow detached from those plans and irrelevant to them. (Verse five has much to say about this... ... It has to be my favorite verse in today's passage!)

Romans 1:5

Notice the two words that appear together – “grace and apostleship” ... Grace comes before apostleship... (salvation before service.) ... Jesus says, "*Come unto me,*" before He says, "*Go into all the world.*" ...

Commitment to the TRUTH comes before commitment to the TASK. ...

Many well-meaning people have failed to see this. ... John Wesley had already served on the mission field before discovering that he himself was unsaved and in need of a Savior.

Being an apostle is an act of God's grace. So are all ministries. Christian worker(!) Do you know this...? Serving God and His people in specific ways is a product of God's unmerited favor toward us. ... Only because God both calls us to minister **AND** gives us the grace to do it... can we accomplish anything worthwhile.

And don't miss what the aim of the gospel is. Paul was an apostle of the gospel – to bring about what (?) ... to bring about the obedience of faith.

... Faith and obedience are inseparable. Real faith will always lead to obedience. Real obedience comes from faith.

Faith (if genuine)... always has obedience as its outcome... and obedience (if it is to please God)... must always be accompanied by faith. ... Faith and obedience are two sides of the same coin. ... They should be distinguished... but they cannot be separated. ... Paul sometimes describes faith in terms of people “obeying” the gospel. ... **Romans 10:16** - *“But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?’”*

God did not save us merely to deposit a set of theological principles in our heads. We are saved in order to surrender our lives to Christ. (This will be a constant theme in Romans). ... And this has HUGE implications for us. We may need to correct some of the ways that we do evangelism... folks.

How is it that most of today's evangelism is conducted? ... Is it not true... that for the most part... the gospel is offered to people as something that (in our opinion) is good for them... and will make them happy...?

When the gospel is proclaimed... it must be given not merely as an invitation to experience life to the full... (which it will do.) ... But it must also be preached as a command to obey God! We are commanded to turn from our sinful disobedience to God and instead obey Him.

Salvation is always to be understood as a gift of God's grace that we receive solely by faith (not as a reward for our efforts)... But let's stop leaving verse 10 out of our quoting of Ephesians 2:8-9. Take it one verse further.

Ephesians 2:8-10 (ESV)

⁸ *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,* ⁹ *not a result of works, so that no one may boast.* ¹⁰ *For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*

True faith will always be expressed in obedience... for true faith can never be divorced from a serious attempt to live it out. ... So although we are saved by faith alone... true saving faith is never alone. ... Authentic faith is always life-changing faith that is reflected in our works (or how we live.)

In my opinion... the weakness of much of our contemporary Christianity can be traced to a deficiency of our understanding of the gospel. By failing to present the gospel as a command to be obeyed... we trivialize what being a Christian is... and we mislead some into thinking that all is well with their souls... when actually they are without Christ and are perishing.

[P A U S E]

So much for Paul's self-concept and divine commission. Now... as Paul closes his introduction of himself... in verses 6 and 7 he gives his view of the believers in Rome. Here is how they should regard themselves... and how we should regard ourselves.

Romans 1:6

Notice the repetition in verse 6 of the word *called*: Paul reminded the believers in Rome that they too were "the called to Jesus Christ". ... This is the essential definition of a Christian (a "Christ one"). A Christian is one who belongs to Jesus Christ. ... Nothing is more important than this in a believer's life.

Do you belong to Jesus Christ? ... If you do... you will live like it.

Romans 1:7

The most important thing is that God has loved us. ... We are Christians for one reason **only**... and that is because God has set his love upon us. ... Why *does* God love us? ... The answer is (drum roll please)... .. "because he loves us." ... There is just nothing to be said beyond that.

Do you remember how God put it in reference to Israel in the days of Moses?

Deuteronomy 7:7-8 (ESV)

⁷ It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, ⁸ but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

The only explanation of why the Lord loved them was that he loved them. ... He does not love you or I because we are so loveable. He does not love us because He sees such great potential in us. No. He loves us... because He loves us.

We are loved and called to be saints. The word saints -αγιοι- means those who are holy... or those who are devoted or consecrated to God. We are a people devoted (or set apart) to the service of God.

But a life of service to God will bring about struggles and hardship. The world will hate us... as it hates Christ. It requires the grace and peace of God each step of the rugged upward way.

"grace and peace... from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ," Paul's words are not merely a traditional... tired... and worn out cliché. He is wishing them what they (and we also) need every day. We have been saved by grace... and we must live by grace also. Just as we live moment by moment by drawing breaths of God's good air, so we must live spiritually moment by moment by drawing on His favor. ... Those who are in Christ and are drawing on Him for their strength... live peacefully in the midst of our certain hardship. ... [P A U S E]

The Apostle Paul didn't write his brothers and sisters in Rome... just to give them a neatly outlined notebook of doctrinal truths. ... He wanted them to cultivate lives so abundantly filled with grace... that obedience would be as natural to them as breathing.

But this requires balance. Our world of evangelical Christianity is teeming with people who know good doctrine... while giving very little attention to the graciousness of an obedient life. ... And it also teems with people who emphasize graciousness and love - apart from a solid doctrinal foundation. ... In both cases... it is worse than building a house on sand.

My prayer as we study Paul's letter to the Romans is that we may gain a balanced and genuine understanding of gospel truth... that results in an ever-growing obedience.

God loves us the way we are... but He loves us too much to leave us that way.