

The Most Important Letter Ever Written

Romans 1:1 "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God,
² which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures,
³ concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh
⁴ and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord,
⁵ through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations,
⁶ including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,
⁷ To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Romans 1:1-7

WHAT BETTER WAY TO BEGIN the start of morning services together than with a study of the most influential book ever written? Romans offers to us the clearest and most profound statement of the gospel of Jesus Christ in all of

Scripture. The letter was written as a theological introduction to the gospel. Unlike other letters written to churches by Paul, he is not writing particularly to clear up some heresy or moral crisis in a church that he had founded. Rather, Paul had never even been to Rome. He was wanting to visit them to see how their growth was progressing, and in this letter Paul is giving the Romans perhaps the first systematic theology book the church ever had.

Many of you have gone through Romans many times. But one should never tire of hearing it read or preached. Listen to the words of Martin Luther: *“Every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, and occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of his soul.”*¹ If all of God’s word is a juicy piece of medium-rare prime-cut filet complete with all the fixings and served on fine china, then Romans is the silver fork and steak knife that allows you to cut into bite sized pieces the Scripture so that you can digest it and savor its flavor. Once you begin to understand the book, its impact on your life can never

¹ **Martin Luther**, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. J. Theodore Mueller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), p. xi.

be the same. Its words used by the Holy Spirit gave us the greatest mind in the history of the church, Augustine of Hippo; and it sparked the Reformation.

Others of you are not really very familiar with Romans and so a careful study of it will be of fantastic benefit to you. And still others have a sketchy knowledge of it, but are perhaps unprepared to interpret it because its major themes are at times difficult to comprehend. Of the misapplication and misunderstanding of Romans there is perhaps no end. Consider one Sunday School class I attended where the topic of the second half of chapter one was taught. This chapter is about the comprehensive nature of sin that effects all humanity. In this class, however, the application of total depravity was not to those sitting in the class including the teacher but to “those terrible people *out there*.” As if the book was not addressed to believers and only speaks to unbelievers.

The outline of the book can be viewed as follows: Before we start, I want to address two things. First, Let me give you a brief outline of the book of Romans.

1. Salutation 1:1-17
2. Condemnation 1:18-3:20
3. Justification 3:21-5:21
4. Sanctification 6:1-8:39
5. Predestination 9:1-11:36
6. Application 12:1-15:13
7. Termination 15:14-16:27

I want to call your attention to something very important in this outline from the outset. Some of you have heard me say this before. 1 Cor 3:2 says, “I gave you **milk**, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it.” Heb 5:12-13 says, “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to **teach you the elementary principles** of the oracles of God, and you have come to need **milk** and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to **the word of righteousness** (not acquainted with the logos consisting of righteousness), for he is a babe.” Notice that in the book of Romans, and in fact in every one of Paul’s books and all the rest of the letters of the NT, “application” texts come last after the doctrine has

been taught first. We are going to need to deal with a great deal of theology and doctrine in the book of Romans before we ever get to so called “application” or ethics.

Now, I have heard it said too many times to count that doctrine divides. Theology is irrelevant to what the people “really” need. When people disagree over something like the man in Romans 7 or the debate between predestination and freewill, rather than tackling the issue head on as Scripture does, many today will claim that “baby” Christians cannot handle learning about these things “yet” because this is the meat of God’s word. They still need milk. And since, for example, they can’t even get along with each other yet, we need to teach them “how to’s” until such a time as they can get along and learn the “deeper truths” of theology.

Such nonsense does two things. It creates an elite class of Christians who are allowed to “know” the truth of a particular theological doctrine because they are obviously mature while others are “left out of the know” because they are too immature. Rather than creating

unity, you can see how this elitism will actually create class envy and discord of all kinds.

Second, and more important, treating doctrine as meat and ethics as milk is exactly the opposite thing that the NT writers do. If the milk is total depravity, justification, sanctification, and election then why tell them to the people you are writing to before one word of how you are to treat each other is mentioned? It is because biblically speaking, the meat is the ethics – which is why most people do not ever learn how to treat each other responsibly and with love while the milk is the theology that transforms one’s heart, mind, and will in such a way that the ethics can actually have fertile soil upon which to grow in a person’s life. You see, it is the gospel in the form of a person (Jesus Christ our Lord) and as taught to us in the form of doctrine that transforms us so that our natures are even capable of hearing and applying the ethics to each other. Hear this well, if you don’t want doctrine, you are in the wrong church. If you don’t want to hear the gospel message repeatedly and would rather hear about how you need to improve yourself with great illustrations to motivate you, go

someplace else. Romans is about transforming your mind so that your feet and hands will follow.

I also want to bring to your attention that the very nature of preaching *from the NT* is going to be different from preaching *from the OT*. Finding and preaching Christ from the NT is different than finding and preaching him from the OT because in the NT he is revealed fully. He is not hiding in shadows and types, but is made manifest to us in the form of a person. But even though we are in the NT, we still need to be thinking with the same historic/redemptive thinking caps, just as we would if we were seeking to understand Christ from the OT. We need to think “eschatologically” as much as we are ethically or doctrinally. Romans comes after the resurrection and before the second coming. It will therefore have to deal with the tension of living as a Christian between two great ages, exactly as you and I do now. We live between times, when the age to come is entering into and pressing upon this present age. But the coming age, the Day of the Lord is not here fully and so we are much like Israel was in the wilderness, after

their salvation through the sea, but before they entered into the Promised Land.

Why do I bring this up? The error with interpreting the OT is to forget that Christ is revealed in its pages. But the error with the NT is to treat Christ's first coming as if it has nothing to do with his second or to treat the second as if it has nothing to do with his first. In this way, anything in the NT that tells us about Christ's work 2000 years ago is given either to inspire us to be better (moralism) or to teach us what to believe for salvation (doctrine) but it is NOT given to show us how Christ is using both ages in our lives today to usher us through the wilderness in safety finally into the promised land. I know this is difficult to understand. Think of it like this. Isolating the first coming from Christ from his Second coming ultimately ends up isolating you the believer from the pages of redemptive history. You are not found in the text through the people of Scripture anymore because history is not a long story of God working through his people until the LAST day, but is instead just a series of events that have no connection. If the stories in Scripture have no connection with each other, if

Christ's comings have no connection in how they interact with each other, then you have no connection with them either. And all you are left with either learning about the text or applying some wisdom from it rather than actually seeing yourself in the text and watching how God is bringing you up out of sin and misery over the course of time. Your growth as a believer is therefore up to you and not God and this misses the whole point of Christianity!

We get so caught up in WWJD or some particular doctrine that these becomes the end all, not realizing that the doctrine is only the light that you turn on in order to see the room which contains all that Christ is doing in your life as a believer and in the church local and universal. Christ is the end all, not what he did or what you are to think about him!

Let me give you a perfect example of this. Take the doctrine of predestination. I am convinced that this doctrine is the all important key that allows us to see that, as I mentioned last week, history has been determined in all of its detail from beginning to end, and it therefore has purpose. If we believe in freewill events,

then we must of necessity believe that history taken as a unit is purposeless and random for there is no possible way that 10 billion humans could coordinate at least 6,000 years of history in such a way that all of it (or even most of it) would have any coherent connection. The only meaning you could derive from history is an individual one as you learn how to act or not act by the particular individual you are studying. Notice then how your doctrine informs your hermeneutic. Notice that it is a freewill doctrine that contributes to the individualistic interpretation of Scripture and the moralizing of the text that is so prevalent in our day. Notice that with a predestinarian doctrine, history must have meaning and we are allowed to walk through the door of a Christ centered hermeneutic where he is more than just a moral example, but he is the culmination of the ages where all of God's plans come together in exactly the way they had been promised ahead of time.

You see, the danger of ethics alone is that it forsakes doctrine and eschatology for the sake of becoming a better individual. The Scriptures are reduced to a highly advanced Bernstein Bears children's story. The "Ethics

alone” interpreter becomes a lover of the flesh filled with a prideful humanism that says I really can “just do it.” The danger of “doctrine alone” is that it becomes an end to itself, devoid of the person and work of Christ. It becomes esoteric, intangible, speculative, mystical, and irrelevant when it never leads to anything else. It can become a haven for pride because “I know more than you know.” It can become a stuffy and musty place where Christians sit in their doctrine and never get beyond their own lives in order to reach out to others in the church, in the community, the poor, the downtrodden, in the sort of love that Christ commands us. The only cure for this sort of a thing is to consider them in their proper order (doctrine first followed necessarily by the ethics) and with the rubric of eschatology or “how God is making all things new through Christ” as its guide. We will see exactly this even in these few brief verses that we are looking at tonight.

We are introduced to the human writer of Romans in 1:1. He is, “Paul, a servant/slave of Christ Jesus.” This Paul is the same man who earlier in his life was called Saul of Tarsus who had dedicated his life to the

eradication of all Christians. In Acts 9 we learn of Saul's dramatic conversion. We are told that he saw a great light, fell to the ground and was instantly converted. *'He is a **chosen instrument** of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel.'* It isn't hard to see here why Paul regards himself as a servant or a slave of Christ. He was persecuting not only the church, but Christ himself. But then when God had mercy on him, completely apart and opposite from any personal seeking of Christ by Saul, this new Paul is forced to conclude that he is a servant of the living God.

Paul is thus called to be an apostle. He is set apart for the gospel of God. This calling was irresistible. That is, Paul simply could not resist the calling and was compelled by the Holy Spirit to become a Christian himself. But he is also called to be an apostle. There is much bad theology regarding this term in our day. I saw one movie called "the Apostle" starring Robert Duval where the character proclaims himself an "apostle" and then baptizes himself in a river. No apostle in Scripture ever did this. Rather, they were called by God, not themselves.

In the Bible, the main use of the term is one who is specially set apart by Jesus Christ himself for one particular office. There were only 12 Apostles chosen By Christ. When Judas died, Matthias replaced him in number, but Paul makes it clear that he replaced Judas in weight and authority. We never hear from Matthias again, but from Paul we have a dozen letters all inspired words of God spoken through him. The office of Apostle has ceased since Christ is no longer with us and since the purpose of an Apostle was to lay the foundations of the church upon which ordinary pastors/teachers like Timothy were to uphold until Christ returns. If you ever hear anyone calling himself “apostle” beware! For they know nothing of Scripture and even less of Christ for they prove that they are unwilling to submit to the biblical apostles who themselves were the first and last to hold the office.

Paul is set apart *for the gospel of God*. That is, Paul’s mission in life is to be a messenger (apostle in the general sense of the term) of the gospel which comes from God. This term gospel occurs six times in the first 17 verses of the book of Romans. It is not only one of

many important themes of the book, it is THE theme of the book. Gospel means “good news.” As the term suggests, and as Paul has already shown us (through the use of the term messenger/apostle) it is news that must be proclaimed or told forth by someone.

The gospel is not in anyone by nature by virtue of the fact that it must be *told to you*. This week one of you told me that he was camping in the wilderness the day of Sept. 11, 2001. At some point he realized that there were no planes in the sky. He was able to read the signs that pointed to the fact that something was wrong and he even concluded that DIA must have been shut down. But until he heard the news – he was completely unable to surmise that *all* airports in the entire nation had been shut down because of the terrible disaster that took place in New York City. He had to have this news proclaimed to him. It was not in him by nature and the little bit that he could figure out was not enough to get him to the truth of the matter.

The gospel was actually announced before the writing of the book of Romans, before the resurrection of Christ, and even before the birth of Christ as we learn about

“through the prophets in Scripture.” Again, here at the very beginning of Romans we see the hermeneutic of CHRIST CENTEREDNESS that the disciples and early Christians all had when they read the OT. Paul is going to give scores of OT quotes in this book in order to justify his views on Christ. They come not only from the prophets, but from Moses, the Psalms, the prophets, and the history books as well. How is he able to do this? He is not justified in doing this if the OT is NOT about Christ but is rather just a bunch of unrelated stories that give helpful advise. James Boice asks, “Where did the apostles get this important OT approach to the gospel, particularly since none of their contemporaries seem to have read the OT books in this fashion?” “There is only one answer,” he says, “They got it from the Lord Jesus Christ, their master, who saw his life as a fulfillment of Scripture and also taught his disciples to view it in that way.” “This is the key to understanding the entire OT. It is the key to understanding the NT. It is the key to understanding all history – God’s saving men and women through the work of his Son, the Lord Jesus

Christ, as he announced “beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scripture.”²

As we will learn next week, this gospel is omni-important to Christianity, for without it, no one can be saved. The message has its source in the mind of God. It has its plan in the design of God. It has its culmination in the work of God. But it has its action in time in the person of God, Jesus Christ. *This is why the gospel concerns God’s Son. That is, the gospel is about God’s son.* The gospel is not just any old announcement. It is the announcement about God’s Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the announcement that he has been born of a virgin through the Holy Spirit of God. It is the proclamation that he has brought the kingdom of God to reign on earth. It is the broadcast that he has come to judge the earth and that he commands all people everywhere to repent. It is the news that he was vindicated by God through the resurrection from the dead.

Let us take a look at verses 3-4, because they offer a parenthesis on this announcement of the person of

² James Montgomery Boice, *Romans: Justification by Faith*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991-), 33.

Jesus Christ. We are told “*who became [is born] the seed of David according to the flesh.*” Then we are told, “*who is marked out Son of God in power, according to the Spirit of holiness, by the rising again from the dead.*” I use the literal translation here for good reason. Notice how the language contrasts. “*According to the flesh*” parallels “*according to the Spirit of holiness.*” “*Descendant of David*” contrasts “*Son of God*” Paul is making a comparison here within the life of Christ. The question is, what is the comparison he is making, for the Greek grammar is difficult to figure out.

Let us take the first phrase. “***Who is come [became, is born] of the seed of David according to the flesh.***” The NIV says, “*who as to his human nature was a descendant of David.*” The NIV, being a translation whose purpose is to be readable and less literal obviously flows better. However, I believe it misses a couple of important things. Few translations actually use the literal “seed” of David and instead opt for “descendant” or something like this. But see how opting for such a word actually lessens to force of the OT connection in English. Think of Paul in Galatians where we are told that “*the promise given to*

*Abraham was given to him and to his **seed**" (sperma).* Jesus is the seed who was given the promise. He is not just any old descendant. He is The Seed of Abraham.

We also need to understand here that Christ became the seed *of David*. That is, while he has always been God forever past in eternity, he added a new nature to himself. Philippians 2:7 tells us, "[Christ] emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men." Christ thus became a man "according to the flesh." He was not always a man, but became one, never losing his divinity in the process. He is thus Messiah ~ God with us. Christ came from David as was promised in the Prophets,

JER 23:5 "Behold, the days are coming," declares the LORD,

"When I shall raise up for **David a righteous Branch;**
And He will reign as **king** and act wisely
And do justice and righteousness in the land. [6] "In His days Judah will be saved,
And Israel will dwell securely;
And this is His name by which He will be called,

'The **LORD** our righteousness.'

Well, this phrase about being the seed of David is contrasted with the next phrase *“who is marked out Son of God in power, according to the Spirit of sanctification, by the rising again from the dead.”* While Christ is in one nature the seed of David in the flesh, he is also in his other nature the Son of God. That is, he is Divine as we will talk about more when we come to Paul’s calling him “Jesus Christ OUR LORD!” Now this whole phrase can be taken in one of two ways. It can either mean, as the NIV says, *“through the spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by the resurrection from the dead.”* In other words, what the verse is saying is that the Holy Spirit proved to everyone with much power as a sort of apologetic or defense of the faith that Christ is really God because God raised him from the dead. While this is possible, it falls short for a couple of reasons. First, God raised Lazarus from the dead and will raise others as well. Does this mean that we are declared to be gods for the same reason? Second, the Bible nowhere (except for here) tells us that the Holy Spirit raised Jesus, but that

the Father did. Third, it destroys the grammatical contrast with verse 3 where “according to the Spirit” parallel “according to the flesh.”

We need to understand the text the way just about every literal translation (except the NIV) does. That is the text should read, “[Christ] was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead.” What does this mean? Rather than the Holy Spirit declaring that Christ is God by the resurrection, it is saying that **at the resurrection, Christ inherits the rights of the title Son of God**. Before, he while we was the Son of God, *“he did not consider equality with God something to be grasped.”* Before the resurrection, Christ came in humility, in flesh in order to become the sacrifice that is needed to take away sin. He was not here in power yet, but in weakness. After the resurrection, Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father, the position of power that the disciples wanted, but Christ would not allow. Now, he is putting all of his enemies under his feet. He is conquering the world through the church and one day he will make all things new. This understanding of this verse is profound. I think

it means two things. First, Christ indeed has two natures and for this reason he can be our high priest and God at the same time.

But more than this, Paul is giving us a threefold history lesson of how the kingdom of God is advancing in this world. First, it comes to us in shadow as it is announced through the prophets in the OT. This is the pre-incarnate stage of Christ. Next, it comes to us in flesh as the seed of David. This is the pre-resurrection stage of Christ. In our time, it comes to us in power. This is the post-resurrection stage. (One day, it will come to us in totality, when he comes back to reign on this earth as the rightful successor to the throne of David.)

Please notice how utterly Christological Paul is and how his view of Christ encompasses all stages of history, even in these first few verses. Many Christians in our day so easily compromise this. Christ is either not really necessary for salvation, or if he is it doesn't matter what you believe about him, or if you do happen to get the right belief you don't really need to talk about him all that much, or if you do he is talked about as if he were a

coach rather than the powerful king of the earth and savior of mankind.

For Paul, Christ is everything (not just thinking about him or what he did). He doesn't take for granted that because the people in Rome are believers already that they don't need to hear about Jesus. Paul isn't like the modern contemporary Christian music writer who only feels the need to talk about Jesus using the pronoun "him" or "you." Instead, Paul talks about Jesus over and over again in many ways right from the start. Jesus is "Christ," "promised beforehand," the "Son," "descended from David," "Son of God," "Spirit of holiness," "Lord," all in the first 4 verses.

Take a look at this word "Lord." He is Jesus Christ *our Lord*. Yahweh is translated by LXX as "kyrios" or "LORD." This is why our Bibles call God "LORD" in English rather than Yahweh. There is a song out there: "Jesus name above all names." But "Jesus" by itself is not above all names unless it is combined with Lord. There are a lot of Mexicans named "Jesus." Is their name above all other names?

There is a controversy out there that you can have Jesus as Savior but not Lord. Because Lord = Yahweh, this is akin to saying that Jesus can save you without being Yahweh. But Jesus IS Yahweh and to say that he isn't not Lord is to say that he is not God. You don't "*make* him lord of your life." He IS lord of everyone's life. The question not are you going to make him Lord, but what are you going to do with the fact that he is LORD and that he commands you to repent of your sin?

Paul tells us that he 'received grace and apostleship' from Christ in order that he might bring about the obedience that comes from faith among the Gentiles. Many people in our day believe that faith in God and grace from God results in absolutely nothing in the life of a believer. Rather, all faith and grace do is guarantee that you will go to heaven one day. But Paul tells us that **faith results in obedience** to God. In order to have obedience, one must have something to obey. And God has given us his standard in his law. Thus, the law is not irrelevant to the believer but is the guide that the Holy Spirit uses in a person's life that teach them to conform to the unchangeable standards of God's righteousness.

If you doubt that I am telling you the truth, then tell me how one can be obedient to anything if there is no validity to the law anymore? Obedience and law go hand in hand for the believer. Those who think they can do whatever they want in order that grace might increase are consistently dealt with in this letter and we will come back to this theme many times.

This obedience of the Christian is brought about in a believer's life, it is not brought about by the believer in his own life. The difference between these two things is the difference between salvation by works and salvation that results in good works. One leads to everlasting death and the other to eternal life. Obedience is given to the believer "for God's name's sake." In other words, our good works are given to us as a gift in order that God himself will be glorified. If your life is not increasingly filled with good works as a believer, then your life is mocking God and giving glory to the devil. You need to consider whether your profession of faith is even legitimate. Let the law do its work on your life to show you your need for a savior, even as a believer. Know that you will never be perfect in this life and that all the good

works that result in your life are in fact a gracious gift from your heavenly father.

I leave you with a question tonight. Are you “among those who are called to belong to Christ Jesus?” We are told that those in Rome who are loved by God are called to belong to Christ Jesus. Those who are saints are loved by God. Those who are not saints are not loved by God with any sort of a special saving love, no matter how much “lovey-dovey” preaching you have heard in your Christian life. This is the seriousness of my question to you. You don’t want to be on the side of God’s wrath, living as his enemy. Instead, I hope you can see the logic and complete rationality of wanting to be in God’s love. Like the prophet Ezekiel who was told to proclaim life to the dry bones that could not come to life themselves, I call out to you tonight to those of you who are not in God’s love “live dry bones.” Repent for the kingdom of God is near. The King of Kings, the Son of David has come and he is reigning in power. Today is the day of salvation. Do not harden your heart as you have done in the past. Believe upon this living Christ and look as your salvation draweth nigh.

“When Christ mandated that the disciples go and make disciples of all nations, he declared, ‘all authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth’ (Matt. 28:18). Peter, in his sermon at Pentecost, claimed that which God’s raising of Jesus from the dead, ‘all Israel’ was to acknowledge that ‘God has made Him both Lord and Christ’ (Acts 2:33-36). Christ is the Davidic King to whom the nations will be given as his rightful inheritance (see Acts 4:24-26). Or, as the Apostle Paul describes the Lord, he has been ‘declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead’ (Rom 1:4). Christ has now been given all rule and authority and power and dominion (Eph. 1:20-23; cf. Phil. 2:9-11). Therefore, he must ‘reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet’ (1 Cor. 15:25).”³

³ **Cornelis P Vanema**, *The Promise of the Future* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2000), 270.