

RECEIVE THE LETTER OF ROMANS
(SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 6, 2011)

SCRIPTURE READING: 10 COMMANDMENTS; ROMANS 1:1-7

I have an application called *Wall Street Journal House of the Day*, though it probably only updates once a week or so. I occasionally look at the beautiful pictures of multi-million dollar homes, many of which have beautiful views of oceans or mountains. I wonder if people who live in such amazing homes grow accustomed to living with such scenic surroundings and to some degree lose the sense of awe and splendor that they initially enjoyed.

The truth is that we don't always appreciate what we have. We have the inspired, infallible, and authoritative Word of God. We have a treasure far greater than any mansion with miles of beachfront property or views of the most majestic of mountains. And the truth is also that it can be very difficult for us to appreciate the blessing we have been given. And everyday that we sort of, half-heartedly read or study the word of God is a testimony to this.

Today we begin a study on the book of Romans that Lord willing we will complete some time in 2013. My initial plan is to cover the book in approximately 60 sermons, but I can't make such a guarantee at the beginning of our study. My goal is that our study will not be like taking a ride in a rollercoaster that travels at 500 mph, where you are glad to be finished and not sure of all the details of the ride. Nor is my goal for our study a 5-year slow-moving trek, looking at every detail, but unable to put together the larger picture. I would like to bring together a proper sense of movement in our study, with Lord willing, a real understanding of the purpose of this great book.

Receive the letter of Romans as the authoritative Word of God for this church and your life.

The first challenge is to know and study this great book of Scripture.

The second challenge is to live according to God's sovereign Word.

There are many things that we need individually and as a local church. Scripture provides that which we need. And the book of Romans is one of the best single deposits of the truth that you need.

We will look at the first seven verses of Romans 1 in three parts, v. 1, vv. 2-6, and v. 7.

1. PAUL, A SLAVE, APOSTLE, AND SEPARATED TO THE GOSPEL, V. 1

I have provided you some background material to Romans in a handout; there is much more background that could be covered. Let me just provide a few points here.

Paul is obviously the author of the book of Romans. Romans 16:22 identifies Tertius as the one who actually put pen to paper, the amanuenses or secretary that Paul used. Even theological liberals have to concede this clear truth concerning authorship.

Why is Romans placed where it is in our Bibles? Romans is the first of the epistles not because of when it was written but because of its length. It is Paul's longest letter. It would have been a very long letter by first-century standards.¹ The introduction to this letter, the prescript, is also quite long. The length of this introduction and its rich theology in part can be explained by the fact that Paul was introducing himself to a church that he had neither established nor visited.²

Paul wrote the book of Romans after over 25 years of ministry for Jesus Christ.³ While we believe entirely that Scripture is not the mere product of man, Scripture comes through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and yet God used the background, knowledge, and abilities of the authors of Scripture. This we see in the book of Romans.

Romans was written in approximately the year A.D. 57 from the city of Corinth. Paul was hoping to make it to Jerusalem by the Feast of Pentecost in the spring of that year. Paul was later arrested in Jerusalem on false charges. For the next five years he was imprisoned in Caesarea and then later Rome.

Turn with me to Romans 15:20-25.

Romans 15:20 And so I have made it my aim to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build on another man's foundation, **21** but as it is written: "*To whom He was not announced, they shall see; And those who have not heard shall understand.*" **22** For this reason I also have been much hindered from coming to you. **23** But now no longer having a place in these parts, and having a great desire these many years to come to you, **24** whenever I journey to Spain, I shall come to you. For I hope to see you on my journey, and to be helped on my way there by you, if first I may enjoy your *company* for a while. **25** But now I am going to Jerusalem to minister to the saints.

Paul did make it to Rome, but not exactly as he desired. The end of Acts shows that Paul did have a significant ministry even under house arrest in Rome. We also have good reason to believe that Paul later did travel to Spain after his 5 years of imprisonment and before he was arrested for the second time and then executed in approximately the year A.D. 65, 8 years after writing the book of Romans.

Let us give attention to verse 1.

Romans 1:1 Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called *to be* an apostle, separated to the gospel of God.

Here Paul identifies himself in three significant ways.

¹ Moo, 40.

² Moo, 40.

³ It is estimated that Paul wrote Romans in approximately the year A.D. 57. His conversion can be estimated to the year A.D. 31. William Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveler and Roman Citizen*, 48.

First, Paul is a slave or bondservant of Jesus Christ. A number of the words used in these opening verses are found in other key parts of Romans. The word slave is used four other times in Romans in chapter 6.

Rom. 6:16 Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin *leading* to death, or of obedience *leading* to righteousness?

All men and women are slaves – either to sin and Satan or to righteousness and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul likely called himself a slave of Jesus Christ in connection with the OT expression of a slave of Yahweh as Moses, Joshua, Nehemiah, and especially David were known.⁴

Ben Witherington wrote:

In any case, Paul is making it clear that he is a man who belongs to and is under the authority of Jesus. His will is not his own, and his mission, his apostleship, is a task to which he has been called and assigned. Paul does not see himself as one who is free to do as he pleases. He is called to be a missionary among the Gentiles.⁵

I have mentioned before the important issue of identity – how you see yourself and what you seek to communicate to others about who you are. Do you identify yourself also as a slave of Jesus Christ? Do you live consciously realizing that you are not your own?

You might not go around telling others, “I am a slave of Jesus Christ.” That might not communicate today in the same way as it did 2000 years ago, but others should know from you that you are totally dedicated to the service of Jesus Christ. This before all things is what other people should know about you.

Second, Paul is an apostle. In Romans 11:3 Paul speaks of being an apostle to the Gentiles. The word apostle can mean more generically one who is sent with a purpose. But here Paul speaks in a more restricted sense. He is one among a unique group in a special way appointed by Jesus Christ Himself to be part of the foundation of the church of Jesus Christ even as we read in Ephesians 2:20.

This is not a calling that anyone should or can claim today. The apostles had a special authority that today is established in the New Testament Scriptures.

Third, Paul stated he had been separated to the gospel of God.

The word gospel is the key of the whole book of Romans. The word is used a total of 9 times. But it is not word count that determines its importance. It is here in the

⁴ Moo, 41. See also footnote 7.

⁵ Ben Witherington III and Darlene Hyatt, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. Kindle Edition, 31.

introduction and then in the end of the book that we see clearly that the entire book of Romans has as its focus the explanation and application of the message of the gospel.

Today the word gospel doesn't seem to carry any political overtones like it did in the first century world. The word gospel was used of Roman emperors at their births or when they accomplished something they wanted everyone to know.⁶ Increasingly we live in an age where the good news is what Washington or Springfield declares they will do. We certainly live in age where most people find good news in entertainment, in sports, in their own hobbies, or in science. The good news is whatever message you are looking for and want to hear.

But right from the beginning, Paul declares that his life is focused on the gospel of God. His life is totally dedicated to God's act of salvation in Jesus Christ.⁷

{Two aspects of the gospel}

You are not to see yourself as having the identical calling as Paul. You are not an apostle. It would wonderful if some here were called to serve on the mission field. But there is a great need that we see that at the heart of all that God calls us to do is a separation from simply living according to the pleasures of the world and being separated unto the gospel message. This is the path of true joy, meaning, and purpose for life.

2. FOUR TRUTHS ABOUT JESUS AND THE GOSPEL, vv. 2-6

Romans 1:2 which He promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, **3** concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, **4** and declared *to be* the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead. **5** Through Him we have received grace and apostleship for obedience to the faith among all nations for His name, **6** among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ;

Paul's writing style is perfectly logical but not always easy to break up into simple points. Verses 1-7 form one long sentence in Greek. I think we could call Romans poetic theology. Every word is specially chosen. The words beautifully are linked together. But it is important to see what are the main and supporting points.

Consider four main truths presented in these verses.

First, the gospel was promised before through the OT prophets, a message which has been recorded in the OT – the Holy Scriptures.

Salvation has always been by God's grace through faith in God and belief of His promises. The fullness of the gospel message was not known in the time of the OT but the

⁶ Witherington, 31-32.

⁷ Moo, 43.

promise of the gospel was given clearly in the OT Scriptures beginning with Genesis 3:15. The gospel is not some second plan of God hastily thrown together after Jesus was rejected. No, the work of Jesus Christ in His life, death, and resurrection is the fulfillment of God's purposes.

Not surprisingly Paul quotes frequently from the OT throughout the book of Romans. There are at least 55 OT quotations in Romans. The book of Isaiah is quoted 18 times alone.⁸ In Romans 15:4 Paul states that whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.

So here in verse 2 we have two key themes in the book of Romans – the theme of promise and the OT foundation for the work of salvation found in Jesus Christ.⁹ For example, Romans 4 speaks of the promise that was given to Abraham as well as the OT foundation for justification by faith alone.

Second, from verses 2 and 3, Paul shows that the gospel is about God's Son.

Let me make a note concerning translation. In the KJ and NKJ the words **Jesus Christ our Lord** appear at the beginning of verse 3. However, the Greek text used by these versions as well as other Greek texts place the words **Jesus Christ our Lord** at the end of verse 4. They are a wonderful summary statement. I don't know why these words have been moved.

So look carefully at verse 3. The gospel which was promised beforehand concerns the Son of God.

And then two key points are made about God the Son in the rest of verse 3 and verse 4.

God the Son was born of the seed of David according to the flesh. And then God the Son was declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, the Holy Spirit, by the resurrection from the dead.

Paul doesn't speak a great deal about Christology in the book of Romans like you find in other NT writings. But here in these two verses we find the two of the essential truths of what we believe about Jesus Christ our Lord.

Douglas Moo in his commentary on Romans states that the verb translated as born in the NKJV doesn't simply mean "give birth." It is a more general term which suggests more than a simple birth was entailed in God the Son coming to earth as a baby.¹⁰

We should note from verses 3 and 4 two key words found throughout the book of Romans – flesh and Spirit.

Flesh is used 26 times throughout the book of Romans. Importantly it doesn't always have the same meaning. Flesh can but not always refers just to the human body. In Paul's

⁸ <http://www.biblewheel.com/wheel/CitationsInRomans.asp>

⁹ Moo, 44.

¹⁰ Moo, 46.

writings it often refers to the totality of who you are but dominated by sin.¹¹ You sin not because your physical body merely made you sin. Your sinful nature is a complex combination of everything you are both body and soul.

Listen to Romans 8:4-6.

Rom. 8:4 that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the **flesh** but according to the **Spirit**. **5** For those who live according to the **flesh** set their minds on the things of the **flesh**, but those *who live* according to the **Spirit**, the things of the **Spirit**. **6** For to be carnally [**fleshly**] minded *is* death, but to be **spiritually** minded *is* life and peace.

Here in verse 3 we are not to see a negative meaning for flesh but we should keep in mind that the incarnation though essential for our salvation was part of the humiliation of Jesus Christ. We also are to see an element of weakness in verse 3 noted by the contrast in verse 4.

Jesus absolutely had no sin, but he was still subject to weakness as a man. He was tired, hungry, thirsty, affected by sorrow and pain. And all of this was essential for our salvation as we read in Hebrews 2:17.

Jesus throughout His ministry of course showed His incredible power through His miracles. But after His resurrection, Jesus declared to His disciples, All power has been given to me in Heaven and in earth. So there is a contrast to between the ministry of Jesus before and after His resurrection.¹²

2Cor. 13:4 For though He was crucified in weakness, yet He lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, but we shall live with Him by the power of God toward you.

Jesus did not become the Son of God, but in His work as Redeemer, the Resurrection “was a unique and momentous event.”¹³

We should also then see from verse 4, the work of the Holy Spirit in the resurrection of Jesus. The Holy Spirit in this passage is called the Spirit of Holiness, the only place in the NT where this reference is used. Some commentators don’t see this as referring to the Holy Spirit.¹⁴ But I think it makes sense to see this as a reference to the Holy Spirit. Part of this reason for believing that Paul is referring to the work of the Holy Spirit in Jesus’ resurrection, is that we see the work of the Holy Spirit at the other key moments in the work of Jesus.

¹¹ BDAG, s.v. “σάρξ,” 915.

¹² David MacLeod, “Eternal Son, Davidic Son, Messianic Son: An Exposition of Romans 1:1–7.” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162, no. 645 (Jan 2005), 89.

¹³ Letham, 39-40.

¹⁴ Robert Reymond, 242.

God the Son took on human flesh through the work of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit came upon Him, showing His anointing as the greatest of all the prophets, priests, and kings. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus worked His miracles. In His resurrection, then we see the power of God through the work of the Holy Spirit raising Jesus to new life and with new power.¹⁵ After His resurrection, Jesus spoke to His disciples in a way that He never had before. In John 20:22 we read, “And when He had said this, He breathed on *them*, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

Because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ we now also live according to the Spirit of Holiness. We live in a new age of redemptive history, the age of the Spirit.

The **third** main truth in these verses is found in verse 5. Paul speaks of receiving grace and apostleship for the obedience of faith in all the nations for His name.

The **we** in verse 5 is best understood as being editorial. While we all have received grace from Jesus Christ we are not to claim to be apostles using the same definition that would have fit Paul’s use of the word.

Paul has already stated in verse 1 that he is a slave and apostle. So here there is some degree of repetition but it is important. Paul is now speaking specifically of what his ministry means to the Romans and to all people. Paul, though a Jew, was called specifically to serve and minister to Gentiles.

And there is little exaggeration in Paul’s expression of all nations. Today there are many people who claim to have world-wide ministries. And because of technology and travel one person can have an influence in many different countries. But Paul was not boasting about the size of his ministry. Truly, and I think unlike anyone else since, he did minister in all of the known world. And he wasn’t driven by ego or for the sake of ministry donations, no, this was how Jesus Christ determined to use Paul.

Unlike many so called-evangelists of today, Paul did not try to go and gather large crowds of people for a one-night sermon or even week of ministry. No, Paul patiently labored by seeking the establishment of local churches. And what do you see from verse 5 was the purpose of his apostleship? It was for obedience to the faith.

This is a difficult expression and different definitions have been given.

John Calvin suggested the obedience of faith means the true receiving of the gospel message – a message that is obeyed by faith. This is certainly a possible definition. Others have suggested that obedience that is the result of true faith.¹⁶ I think this definition is very much in line with the book of Romans. Salvation is always through faith in Jesus Christ. True salvation must be shown through obedience to Jesus Christ.

And then as we see at the end of verse 5, all of Paul’s work was done for the glory and benefit of Jesus Christ. He was truly the slave of Jesus Christ.

¹⁵ MacLeod, 91.

¹⁶ Witherington, 35.

And this is such a freeing aspect to true ministry. There are always difficulties in ministry. Working with people and for the sake of other people is always difficult – no exceptions. But when your main determination is to bring glory to Jesus Christ in all situations, you have a basis for dealing with the other difficulties that come. You may receive absolutely no credit or recognition. But you do it – because your focus is on bringing glory to Jesus Christ. No reward can be as great as doing something for His name.

Fourth, Paul in verse 6 reminds the Christians in Rome of their place in His work.

We would love to know more about first century Christians in Rome. We know very little of how the gospel was first planted except that Jews who heard the gospel perhaps in Jerusalem and shared the gospel with others. For a time Jews were expelled from Rome under the emperor Claudius in the year A.D. 49. When Jewish Christians were able to return to Rome, there may well have been a different dynamic in the house churches in Rome.¹⁷ Verse 6 would seem to indicate that the Roman Christians were mainly Gentiles. From the nations then, they were also called of Jesus Christ.

What a beautiful description this is.

Rom. 8:28 And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose.

3. GREETINGS TO CHRISTIANS IN ROME, v. 7

Romans 1:7 To all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called *to be* saints: ¶
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Do you see anything special in the expressions **beloved of God** and **saints**? They are common expressions found in the NT, but importantly they have a foundation in the OT. They are expressions used for Israel. Here they are used speaking of both Jews and Gentiles, united by one common faith in Jesus Christ.

We live in an age where the love of God is widely spoken in some cases it is even abused. But it would be terrible to downplay these words. They may not give you a chill like the first time a person you hoped to marry said “I love you,” but are there more important words that you could hear?

One commentator has observed, “God’s love is not like a heat-seeking missile directed by something inherently attractive in the target audience. It is, rather, that which makes a person lovely and loveable. Such a person is transformed by God’s love.”¹⁸

If you are trusting in Jesus Christ, then rejoice in the sure knowledge of His love for you. The Romans were also identified as called to be saints, called to be holy.

¹⁷ D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd; Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 396.

¹⁸ The comments in part of V. P. Furnish noted by Witherington, 36.

When the children of Israel were gathered before the LORD at Mount Sinai, they were told in Exodus 19:5-6

Exodus 19:5 Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth *is* Mine. **6** And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These *are* the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel.”

Holiness is not a status that any sinful person could ever earn. But you are to live in terms of holiness as God’s Word defines it.

Holiness doesn’t simply mean moral purity but also the idea of usefulness and service of God.

These opening words relate to the familiar words of Romans 12:1.

Rom. 12:1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is* your reasonable service.

There are, as you know, many churches that define holiness based on man’s standards. A Christian never may drink, smoke, play cards, go to movies, dance, etc. There are still many Christians who live in these terms.

We recognize that they are man-defined terms.

But as dangerous as it is to simply define holiness using man-centered terms it is extremely dangerous for any Christian church to not be focused on God-defined holiness both in terms of moral purity and usefulness in service. God doesn’t just want you to be a little bit better than your pagan neighbor.

As others would consider the Church of Christian Liberty, would they see a people focused on holiness or merely our own pleasures and interests? What does the pattern of your life show?

Always keep in mind, you cannot make yourself holy. This is the work of God in Christ. But are you seeking sincerely to live according to the calling you have been given?

CONCLUSION

The book of Romans like every other letter written by Paul includes at the beginning a reference to grace and peace.

In writing letters to different churches and people, Paul used at least in part the standard of his day. But unlike the typical letter, Paul expressed his greetings with rich and profound language.

Grace and peace are not just catchwords but they are the essence of the Christian life. They are what you need every day of your life.

You need the reminder of God's love and what He has accomplished for you in Jesus Christ.

Romans 5:1 Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Rom. 8:33 Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? *It is* God who justifies.
34 Who *is* he who condemns? *It is* Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us.

God ministers His grace to His people through His Word – the reading, preaching, and teaching of His Word. Your response of prayer and seeking God is another means that God uses to minister His grace. And God has also determined to use baptism and the Lord's Supper as means of encouraging you to know the grace and peace that is found in the work of our Triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The book of Romans is a great and glorious book. If this church is to truly understand and live according to the truth it proclaims then we will need an abundance of the grace and peace that God can only give.

Let us now in seeking the grace and peace of God celebrate in a manner worthy the Lord's Supper.

Closing Hymn: 359

Benediction and Commission – Heb. 12:1-2

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares *us*, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of *our* faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.