

Good News for Sinners: The Message of Romans 1-8

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This morning we're going to make sure we haven't lost the forest for the trees. We've been taking our time examining this great letter verse by verse. Last Sunday I finished the great chapter 8. And now, before moving on to a brief series on Proverbs, and then coming back to Romans and continuing in chapter 9, I want to pause and spend this morning considering an overview of Romans 1-8.

And by the way, I love being part of a church where people are asking me, "When are we going to get to Romans 9." This is a very unique place to be! And I love it. I'm so happy to be in a church where people are hungry for God's Word, where we cherish God's sovereignty and where we want to wrestle with the deep truths of God's sovereign purposes.

Well, let's see if we can cover 8 chapters this morning. Let's talk about this Good News for sinners. I'll start with a very brief overview, and then we'll talk about sinners, and then the Good News. And under the heading "Good News" we'll look first at justification, and then sanctification, and finally, the sovereign grace of God.

We have to remember that this letter was written, not just as a theological treatise, but as a missionary support letter. Paul, the missionary, the church planter, was writing to the church in Rome, asking for their support to launch him on his way to Spain. This letter makes clear to them the Gospel he preaches—the Good News which is for both Jews and Gentiles. It is to go out to all the nations.

We also need to remember that Paul wrote this letter under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit such that this letter is not merely a human document. It is the very word of God to us.

Paul begins the letter with a greeting, and right away he is speaking about the gospel. And then, in verses 16-17 of chapter 1, he gives the thesis statement of the letter, which is then unpacked in the chapters that follow.

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed

from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”” (Romans 1:16–17, ESV)

Then, from 1:18 to 3:20 Paul teaches about the reality of sin, which finally leads to the glorious Gospel statements at the end of chapter 3. “[A]ll have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.” (Romans 3:23–25, ESV)

Chapter 4 continues to unpack the idea of justification by faith alone by going back and examining the Old Testament character Abraham who “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:6). Paul teaches the concept of imputation, the crediting of Christ’s righteousness to those who believe.

Chapter 5 goes into further detail on this, contrasting union with Adam and union with Christ. And then chapters 6 and 7 respond to objections. Does justification by faith alone mean that people can just continue in sin? And if we’re not under the law anymore, does that imply that the law is sin? Paul responds to those important questions in chapters 6-7.

And then chapter 8 gives us great assurance of this salvation. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. And there is no separation. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. God saves, by His sovereign power and love, and He will work all things for our good and see us through to the end.

Sinners

What is your view of human nature? Many view humankind to be essentially good. We are born innocent, and we all have a disposition to do good and to be kind to others and to live honest and sacrificial lives. That would be a very optimistic view of human nature, and very naïve as well. There is such a thing as common grace, by which God restrains sin and often causes even unbelievers to lead peaceful and helpful and sometimes even heroic and sacrificial lives. What we need to understand, biblically, is that any good thing that is done by a believer or an unbeliever, is a result of God’s grace. We are not essentially good. We are not spiritually healthy.

If you were to go out on the street and ask people, “What are the main problems in the world?” what kind of responses do you think you would get? Well, people need more education. It

they just knew more, they would be able to make a better life for themselves. Or, people need better health care. If we could just find cures for certain diseases, and find ways to bring those cures to the masses, then the world would be a much better place. Or, we need more jobs so that everyone can work and make a good living. Or, we need better ways of producing and distributing food around the world to all those who need it. Or, we need better security measures so that terrorists can't harm us.

We can point to many problems in the world, and we can think of many ways to address those problems. But what I hope you can realize is that these problems I've mentioned, and many more that we could list, are only the fruit and result of something much deeper. You see, our fundamental problem as human beings is not lack of education or lack of health care or lack of jobs or lack of food or lack of security. Our fundamental problem is sin. Sin affects each and every one of us. It's part of our human nature from birth, and it's far more serious than we would like to admit.

God's Word, in this letter of Romans, tells us that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And it's not just that we mess up here and there, but we are born with a sinful nature.

Adam was the head of the human race, and when he sinned, he sinned on behalf of the entire human race. Therefore, even before we commit any sins of our own, we are already guilty because we are Adam's descendants. We have inherited his guilt.

To speak of it another way, Adam's guilt has been imputed to us. It has been credited to our account. His sin is considered to be ours. God looks at us as sons and daughters of Adam, and He sees us clothed in Adam's sin and guilt. This is devastating. This is the curse of sin, the guilt of sin, spread to all people. We're not born innocent. We're born guilty. Before we even do anything wrong, before we tell a lie, or gossip or lust or cheat or steal, before we intentionally transgress the law, before we commit a sin, we are already guilty, simply because we are part of Adam's family.

It's this sinful nature that produces the specific acts of sin in our lives. It's not the other way around. We don't become sinners because we commit sins. It's not as though we're born innocent and then become sinners when we commit a sin. Rather, the reason we sin is because we are sinners. We are sinners from the very beginning of our lives. And because we are sinners, we inevitably sin.

The point is to see our sin in terms of our relationship with God. Ever since Adam and Eve fell in the garden, there has been something fundamentally broken about our relationship with our Creator. Instead of enjoying Him and reflecting His glory, we turn away from Him and seek our pleasure in rebellion against Him.

The Gospel

Let's start in 1:16-17. Paul says he is not ashamed of this Good News. He is not ashamed of it because it is the power of God. One of the reasons we're tempted to feel ashamed of the gospel is because it highlights our own weakness. The gospel is not a message of my strength. It's a message of my weakness, and how God's power saved me. This is the radical paradigm shift that has to happen to us. Rather than boasting in ourselves, we boast in the Lord. And rather than being ashamed because we're weak and needy, we can actually boast of our weaknesses because it's a way of boasting in God's power.

An amazing thing about this good news is that it is for *everyone* who believes. This is what is so astounding, and utterly unique, about the Christian faith. It is not by works. It doesn't say that the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who works for God, for everyone who lives up to the standard, for everyone who comes to church regularly, for everyone who is a nice person. No, it says "to everyone who believes."

There is a historical context to the gospel, in that it was promised beforehand through the prophets in the holy Scriptures (as Paul said earlier in verse 2). There is a Jewishness to this message, and Paul was deliberate to go to the Jews first with this message. But this message is not only for the Jews. It is for all the nations, all the people groups, all the ethnicities of the world.

Verse 17 had a radical impact on Martin Luther in the 1500s, and then had such a radical impact on the history of the church. Luther wrestled desperately to figure out the meaning of Romans 1:17. Luther was a troubled soul, as you know, if you've read anything about his life. He was very troubled by his sin. He was hyper-sensitive to his failings. As hard as he tried to be righteous, he found himself falling short again and again. He would confess his sins, and then discover more and more sins he needed to confess. And he lived continually in the fear of God's judgment. That's how he understood this verse. The righteousness of God (or justice of God) was something he found to be terrifying. Because, as he understood it, when this verse says that "the righteousness of God is revealed," he took that as a reference to God's punishment of sinners. For God's justice to be revealed

must mean that God is going to unleash His wrath against those who are unjust. And Luther was so aware of his own sin, he knew he would fall into that category of unjust.

So, then, how could this verse speak of God revealing His righteousness as something that is good news? How could this be gospel? And then Luther had his great discovery, which changed his life forever. It was 1515 when he was lecturing on Romans, and came to see that the righteousness of God here is not a reference to God judging sinners, but rather a reference to a righteousness from God which He bestows upon sinners when they believe. And, of course, that is very good news.

As Luther knew so well, and hopefully you see this about yourself as well, we are not righteous. We are the opposite of righteous. We are sinners. And sinners cannot stand in God's presence. The only solution to this dilemma is for God to grant to us a righteousness which we could never achieve on our own. And this He does by crediting Christ's righteousness to those who believe.

Justification

Moving to the great paragraph in chapter 3:21-26, we see how God upholds His glory and His justice and His righteousness, while at the same time justifying sinners. He does not wink at sin. He does not sweep it under the rug and pretend like it didn't happen. He deals with it fully. He punishes all sin in such a way that there will be no doubt about whose glory is preeminent in the universe. There will be no doubt about His perfect moral character. Many, sadly, will be punished for their own sin, eternally in hell.

Others, though, as this passage speaks of, will be justified and redeemed through Jesus Christ. Here's what happens in their case: God's wrath against their sin is directed toward Jesus Christ as He died on the cross. God punishes all sin. But the good news for those who trust in Jesus is that our sin was punished on the cross. God unleashed His fierce anger against sin upon His own beloved Son.

The term "justification" is a courtroom term. To be justified is to be declared righteous in the courtroom of God. So imagine yourself standing before God in His courtroom. You know that you're a sinner. The law has shown you that ever so clearly. You know that you deserve only punishment from God because of your treason against Him. You fear what will happen

to you when the gavel pounds the desk, and you prepare to hear the word, “Guilty!”

But instead, the gavel sounds, and to your amazement you hear the judge declaring, “Not guilty.” But how can this be! How can a just judge pronounce such a verdict for one who is guilty beyond the shadow of a doubt? This is the objection that might be brought against God’s justice. If He justifies the ungodly, how can He still be just?

After all, Proverbs 17:15 says, “He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the LORD.” So it’s an abomination to justify the wicked. But that’s what God is doing here, isn’t it?!

Well this is why the idea of propitiation is so important. God poured out His wrath against sin when He put His own Son forward as a propitiation by His blood. It’s not as though the judge simply decided to ignore sin. But He put a substitute in our place to take the punishment we deserve. Jesus absorbed that wrath and appeased God’s just anger against sin. So even as the pronouncement is made, “Not guilty,” and you breath an amazing sigh of relief, the judge also pronounces, “My Son is sentenced to death on your behalf.”

In chapter 4 we learn the concept of imputation. Picture two robes. One is brilliant and clean, the other is filthy and tattered. Christ wears the spotless robe, signifying His purity and perfection and righteousness. We wear the filthy and tattered robe, representing our sin and guilt and shame. But at the moment one puts his or her trust in Christ, the robes are exchanged. Christ takes the tattered and shameful robe and goes to the cross to pay the penalty we deserve. And He clothes us in the pure robe of His own righteousness.

John Bunyan lived in the 1600s and wrote the famous Christian allegory *Pilgrim’s Progress*. He is a man whose life was changed by this doctrine of justification by faith alone, much like Luther. Here’s what Bunyan wrote about justification and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness.

“One day as I was passing into the field . . . this sentence fell upon my soul. [Your] righteousness is in heaven. And . . . I saw with the eyes of my soul Jesus Christ at God’s right hand; there, I say, was my righteousness; so that wherever I was, or whatever I was doing, God could not say of me, he lacks my righteousness, for that was [right in front of] him. I also saw, moreover, that it was not my good frame of heart that made my

righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my righteousness worse, for my righteousness was Jesus Christ himself, ‘The same yesterday, today, and forever’ (Heb 13:8). Now did my chains fall off my legs indeed. I was loosed from my afflictions and irons; my temptations also fled away; so that from that time those dreadful scriptures of God [about the unforgivable sin] left off to trouble me; now went I also home rejoicing for the grace and love of God.”

That’s justification, and the doctrine at the heart of that, namely, the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. Justification is being declared righteous. Sanctification is the process in the Christian life of actually growing in righteousness. We are conformed to the image of Christ.

Sanctification

Paul spends the first five chapters of this letter explaining God and sin and salvation by faith alone. In chapter six he spends the first ten verses telling us how we have died to sin and been raised to walk in newness of life because of our union with Christ. It’s only after all of these truths and promises that he tells us in 6:11 to reflect upon the reality that you are dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. And then, verse 12, “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions.” Verse 13 continues the instruction, “Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.” And then, Paul concludes that section with another promise. The commands are sandwiched between promises. The truth of Christ’s death and resurrection (and therefore our death and resurrection) comes before these commands, and the promise that sin will not be master over us comes after the commands. These promises give us the power to fight sin and grow in holiness.

As verse 12 says, we must refuse to obey sin’s passions, or more literally, sin’s desires. When we died to sin and were raised to walk in newness of life, God implanted in our hearts a new set of desires. Before God saved us, all we desired was sin. We desired sinful pleasure. We desired praise from other people. We were selfish and prideful and jealous and hateful. And we might have been very nice people in the world’s estimation. We might have been kind, helpful, successful, upstanding citizens, even upstanding church members. And yet everything ultimately revolved around self.

But when God saves a person, He gives that person a new heart—a new heart that has new desires. This new heart desires God. This new heart understands that sin fails to bring the pleasure it promises, but God offers pleasure that is infinitely greater. And once we have this new heart and new desires, living the Christian life is about striving to stoke the flames of these new desires and smother the old desires.

I love how Augustine described his conversion, because it captures the change in desires that God effects within us when He saves us. Augustine said, in a prayer to God: “How sweet all at once it was for me to be rid of those fruitless joys which I had once feared to lose . . . You drove them from me, you who are the true, the sovereign joy. You drove them from me and took their place . . .” That’s what happens when God sets us free from the cruel and deceptive slave master sin, and opens our eyes to see real beauty and to experience true pleasure. When He changes our hearts, we can see that the pleasures of this world are fruitless joys, and therefore we shouldn’t fear to lose them. God drives those desires from us and replaces them with a desire for Himself, who is the true, the sovereign joy. To know Him is the supreme joy. And to experience that joy is true freedom.

If you are a Christian, if God has saved you from sin and given you the free gift of eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (as 6:23 says), if you are in Christ, then you are free from sin. You are dead to sin and alive in Christ. You are God’s slave, no longer a slave to sin. So act like it. Remember who you are. And become who you are.

Moving to chapter 7, Paul addresses the law. We are dead to sin. We are also dead to the law, which is a shocking thing for him to say. The law will not save you. The law will not sanctify you. The law will kill you. But if, by the Spirit, your heart is circumcised (2:29, which is a way of speaking of regeneration), then you will have life. And you will bear fruit for God. And you will serve in the new way of the Spirit. And if, by the Spirit, you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

There’s a short poem which communicates this so well. It’s usually attributed to John Bunyan.

Run, John, run, the law commands
But gives us neither feet nor hands,

Far better news the gospel brings:
It bids us fly and gives us wings

The law tells us what to do, but gives us no power to do it. The Gospel, on the other hand, enables us to obey (indeed, enables us to do the impossible), because of a change of heart.

Biblical Christianity is radically different than works based religion. It is a life giving relationship. It is new life. It is being set free from captivity and serving in the new way of the Spirit.

The Sovereign Grace of God

I want to conclude by reflecting on the sovereign grace of God, which is a huge part of what makes this such good news. I'll take us through the doctrines of grace here very briefly, following the acronym TULIP.

Total Depravity

This is not the good news. This is the bad news. But it's the bad news we have to understand before we can grasp how good the good news is. Paul describes total depravity in vv. 7-8. "*For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.*" (Romans 8:7-8, ESV) Paul is telling us that the person who is in the flesh is unable to submit to God's law. The unregenerate person, the unbeliever, is unable and unwilling to truly seek God. We're not just sick, we're dead apart from Christ. Nobody who is in the flesh will choose to follow Christ, unless God, in His sovereign freedom, chooses to do something.

Unconditional Election

This brings us to the good news. The good news starts in eternity past, when God predestined a people for Himself. "*For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son . . .*" (Romans 8:29, ESV) In His sovereign goodness and freedom, God freely, unconditionally, chose certain individuals to save. We can't grasp the mysteries of His good plans. But we know that He has purposed to glorify His Name and manifest His grace by redeeming totally depraved sinners. And He chooses to save sinners, not because of any inherent goodness in them, because there is none. It's not because of conditions we meet. He chooses unconditionally.

Limited Atonement / Definite Atonement / Particular Redemption

Christ's death was specifically designed to bring about the salvation of the elect. Christ did not die in a general sense for all of mankind, merely making it a possibility for individuals to be saved. No, Christ did not die merely to make something possible,

but to definitely accomplish the redemption of those who were predestined.

Look at verses 32-34 and note the word “us.”

“He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.” (Romans 8:32–34, ESV)

The “us” is the same group of people in verse 28, who love God and are called according to His purpose, for whom all things work together for good. These are the same individuals whom God foreknew and predestined, called, justified, and glorified. God gave up His own Son for that specific group of people—for the elect, for *all* the elect who will be from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

Irresistible Grace / Effectual Calling

Verse 28 refers to those who are called according to His purpose. Verse 30 refers again to those who are called. And this is not the general call of the Gospel that goes forth when we are sharing the Gospel with someone or when we’re proclaiming the Gospel to a group. This is God’s effectual call unto salvation. This call raises the dead. This call brings forth new life.

In these ways the doctrines of grace put a spotlight on God’s glory and sufficiency and kindness, that our salvation is totally attributed to Him. He predestines us, sends His Son to die for us, effectually draws us to Himself, and lastly, He causes us to persevere to the end.

Perseverance

The last link in the golden chain of v. 30 is “glorified.” Nobody will fall out of this chain. All those who are predestined will be glorified.

This is the hope we have as we put our faith in our sovereign God. Our salvation is not fragile, as it would be if it depended on our decision or our effort or our steadfastness. Our salvation is sure, because it depends on God’s omnipotent purposes to redeem a people for Himself unto the praise of His glorious grace (Eph 1:6).

Application

How, then, ought we to live, in light of this Good News to sinners? How do you think a person ought to act who has been given these amazing promises of the Gospel? God's wrath is no longer against us. Christ's blood covers our sin. Christ's righteousness is counted as ours.

In light of this Good News we ought to live as free people. We are not in bondage to sin. We are not in bondage to the law. We are new creatures, with a new Master who loves us and has given us a great inheritance. So let's live like it. Let us become who we are in Christ. Let us be emboldened to risk because God is on our side. Let us be freed from worry because God is in control. We can face affliction and suffering and persecution, because we know it's all for our good (v. 28), and none of it is going to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (vv. 35-39).