

Romans: Greetings from an Apostle

Romans 1:1-7

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans, chapter 1, as we begin our study in this great what we could call the gospel of Paul to the Romans. And the book of Romans, as we have already mentioned this morning, has been used mightily by God over the course of church history. Many examples come to mind. One, more than 1500 years ago, a young man named Aurelius Augustan born in North Africa, swallowed up with a particular philosophy called Manichaeism, made his way to Rome with some of his friends who were also committed to that particular philosophy. And they wanted to go here a man who was considered to be the greatest orator of their day, a man named Ambrose, who happened the bishop of the church in Milan. They wanted to go hear him speak. They didn't care what he said, they wanted to hear how he said it. So they went and they listened to him for a few days and Augustan's friends grew tired of it, but Augustan's heart was gripped by Ambrose's exposition of the book of Genesis. Ambrose was working through the early chapters of Genesis when Augustan was there. Augustan found his heart moved however by the message that Ambrose was preaching, not the way in which he said it. And soon in his reading of the epistle to the Romans Augustan's heart was changed, and he converted to Christ; a lifelong prayer of his mother. And he became a man who impacted the rest of the history of Christianity, especially western Christianity. And it began in large measure with his encounter with Paul's presentation of the gospel and the epistle of the Romans.

You can think a thousand years after the time of Augustan in the life of Martin Luther, a young man who was a professor of New Testament in the City University in Wittenburg, had been wrestling with the idea of the justice of God. In fact, he tells us when he came to Romans 1:17, it just made him hate God because that passage spoke of the justice of God, the righteousness of God, and Luther knew he had no righteousness himself to offer to God. And so he felt as if he were undone and destined to be rejected, no matter what he did. And he did everything that the Roman Catholic church of his day told him to do to be right, to feel right with God, and he had no peace. And he tells us that when he finally understood what Paul was talking about in Romans 1:17, it was as if the gateway to heaven had been opened to him. And the rest, as Paul Harvey would say, is

history. Five hundred years of Christianity impacted by the grasp of this Augustinian monk's understanding of Romans.

And so we come today to study the epistle to Romans together. Now I want to mention just in passing before we read the section that is our text today, I just want to mention that this is the longest greeting of all of the apostle's letters. Ninety-three words of greeting he brings in the epistle to Romans. But one thing I want you to see even in these first seven verses that we look at where Paul is basically saying I'm Paul and I'm sending this letter to you. Notice how, though he doesn't give us a definition of the gospel, already in the first seven verses of the epistle, everything in his greeting surrounds and is infused with the gospel itself. In the very first words of greeting in this letter, Paul is already talking about the gospel of grace. So let's hear God's holy and inspired word here in Romans, chapter 1:

Romans 1:1-7

Our Father, so many of us come with preconceptions about the gospel and about You that blind s us to Your glory and to the sheer extravagance of grace in the gospel. We pray that by the work of the Holy Spirit You would not only enable us to understand the truth of Your word as Paul sets it forth; but that You would take from our eyes the scales which prevent us from appreciating the glory of this tree, enable us to see, to believe, to trust and obey. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

Now I want to state my agenda up front and clearly. It's my hope that as we study the letter of Paul to the Romans together that it is going to challenge your understanding of Christianity, that you will see as we study this book together just how radical the gospel of grace is and just how radical are the claims of truth which Paul presses here. And in the passage before us today, in particular, I want us to begin looking at the gospel immediately, and if you look at the passage in three parts, in verse 1, I think you're going to see Paul telling you something about the authority of that gospel.

Then if you look at the end of verse 1 and all the way down to verse 6 you're going to see Paul telling you something about the nature of the gospel itself. The gospel is rooted in the Old Testament. The gospel is Christ-centered. The gospel is for all the nations.

And then if you look at the end of verse 5 and all the way down to verse 7 you're going to see Paul saying that the gospel is radically transforming. It defines who we are and what we are for. And so those are the sections that I'd like you to look at in this opening word of greeting that is before us today.

I. Paul's ministry, authority and purpose.

In verse 1 we see Paul describe his ministry position, his ministry authority and his ministry purpose. In verses 2 through 6 we see Paul set forth before us three great things that we need to know about the gospel. And then at the end of verse 5 and down to verse 7 especially, Paul tells us several important things that we need to know in order to have a proper self-understanding as Christians, as the body of Christ. So let's look at these verses together today. First, in verse 1 where Paul opens up by introducing himself to these Roman Christians telling them what his ministry position is, telling them what his authority is in ministry and telling them what his own purpose is in ministry.

Notice Paul's words. He says three things in this little verse. First, that he is a servant of the Messiah. That's who he is. I'm a servant of the Messiah who is Jesus, the Messiah Jesus, Christ Jesus is my master. And so Paul introduces himself to the Romans as a servant. Now that is an important balancing truth to the next truth that he announces to them. Because the very next thing he's going to say is that he's not only a servant of Christ but he is a called apostle. That is, God Himself, and Paul could say specifically the Lord Jesus Christ, visibly and audibly met him and called him not only to salvation but to service as an apostle. You remember when Paul was encountered on the way to Damascus by the Lord Jesus Christ, Paul was going to persecute Christians. Not only did the Lord Jesus humble him, bring him to repentance, convert him, but as Jesus Himself spoke to the Christians who had gathered around Paul and were a little bit wary about Saul of Tarsus being welcomed into the Christian community in Palestine, the Lord Himself said, I will show him how much he must suffer for My sake. From the very beginning of his conversion Paul was set apart called by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself to be an authoritative messenger and representative of God. And so Paul says, I'm a servant of Christ. I'm not here, as it were, to lord it over you.

But you need to know at the same time that I am an authoritative messenger, a called apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. And Paul gives us some inkling of what that means in I Thessalonians, chapter 2, verse 13. Would you look there with me. In I Thessalonians, chapter 2, verse 13 he gives a compliment to the Thessalonian Christians. He says, "And for this reason we also constantly thank God that when you receive from us the word of God's message, you accepted it not as the word of men but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe." Paul is saying to the Thessalonians, I want to thank God for you that when you heard me proclaim the truth you understood that my words were not just men's words, they weren't just my opinions, my thoughts, my reflections, my experience. It was God's word. You accepted it for what it is. And in this way the apostle is saying here to the Roman Christians, I am an authoritative messenger, a representative of God.

And then he goes on to say, and I'm a man wholly devoted to proclaiming God's good news. I am set apart for the gospel of God. Yes, Paul can say it's my

gospel elsewhere. But ultimately, it's the gospel of God. Paul is here to serve another's agenda. And that other's agenda is the Lord Most High. It's God's gospel that Paul comes to serve.

And you need to understand the radical implications for what Paul is saying, even in this first sentence. Not only for the Roman Christians who first heard this 2000 years ago, but for us today. We need to understand the radical truth claims that Paul is making here, and the radical authority claim of the gospel. We live in a day and age where people are uncomfortable with authority and with truth. Many of you who are students, and many of you who are not have heard even recently someone say to you, as I once had a Russian history professor say to me, something that goes like this. We were studying the Soviet Revolution, and he said to us, "The Bolsheviks are a lot like Christians. They think they've found truth with a capital T." And then he stopped to give us some pastoral advice about this. He said, "If you ever run into anybody who believes in truth with a capital T, you run in the opposite direction as fast as you can." You see the world is very uncomfortable with absolute truth claims because the world is afraid that that's going to restrict its freedom to do as it pleases. Now, of course, it's right. It is going to restrict to a certain extent its freedom to do as it pleases.

But let me tell you something, authority is the only thing that will save you from authoritarianism. It is only the belief in a transcendent truth that does not change, that saves you from the tyranny of the fifty percent plus one majority. If a man tolerates you only because he believes that there is no truth, or that what truth exists is relative, he can change his mind tomorrow. But if a man tolerates you on transcendent principles that cannot change, you have a relationship which can have some endurance to it. But you take away belief in transcendent truth, you are in trouble. And the apostle Paul comes with truth and authority.

But let me say that the truth and the authority that he comes with is a freeing truth and authority. And it's so important for us to face up to those authority claims. He is wanting us to see the consequences of the truth that he presses. When he says, I am an apostle, and I've got a message from God for you, he wants you to understand that his message has consequences for the whole of your life; for the way that you think, for the way that you live, and for the place that you will spend eternity. Paul is claiming to address us directly on behalf of God. Paul is saying, now this is not the church's opinion. He's not saying, this is the church's opinion, this is the community of faith's opinion, this is my individual opinion, this is the result of my private mystical encounter with God. He is saying, no, this is God's word for you. This is the good news of God. And my friends, it is vital for us to face up to that challenge. We must embrace, my Christian friends, we must embrace the gospel, not because we think it's good for us, but because it's true. And if it's not true, it's not good. And we live in a day and age that is not comfortable with truth. We're much more comfortable with well that works for me. But that's not how Paul presents the gospel. He doesn't present the gospel as one of many options that might work for you. He presents it as the one and only

truth of how God relates savingly to sinners. If it's rejected, it means eternal damnation. If it is embraced, it means eternal bliss. It's that simple. That's not popular, but that's what Paul is saying. And I want you to feel something in the force of that in this relativistic, pluralistic age in which we live. Paul is laying down the gauntlet, and he is saying, this is God's message for you. There's one way, one gospel, one hope, one Lord. And so the gospel that Paul preaches is authoritative.

II. The gospel

And then if you'll look with me at the end of verse 1, all the way down to verse 6, you'll see the three great things that Paul says that those Roman Christians need to know about the gospel. Three great things that we still need to know about the gospel. He says the gospel is rooted in the Old Testament Scriptures. He tells us that the gospel is Christ-centered, and he tells us that the gospel is for the Gentiles. Look at what he says here in these verses.

He tells us, first of all, that the gospel of God was promised beforehand through the prophets, in the holy Scriptures. He's telling us that the New Testament gospel is rooted in the Old Testament Scriptures. The New Covenant presentation of the grace of God in Jesus Christ in the gospel is the fruition of, the fulfillment of, what God had already set forth in the Old Covenant Scriptures spoken through the Old Covenant prophets. Paul really is picking up right where Matthew left off as he presents to us the gospel. So the gospel is something rooted in that Old Testament revelation. He's saying to these Gentile Christians that you can't just ignore the Old Testament. You can't say, oh, it's wonderful, we've got these New Testament revelations, and we've got these New Testament books and we've got these gospels, we don't need to bother with Genesis anymore. We don't need to bother with Isaiah any more. Paul is saying, no, the gospel that I am preaching is rooted in the Old Testament. You can't forget the Jewishness of Christianity, he says.

And then he goes on to say, the gospel is supremely about God Himself. Notice that it's concerning His Son. It's the gospel of God concerning His Son. It's supremely about God Himself, and especially His redemptive plan as it's revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. And that's a message that we need to hear today.

So often you ask a person, "Well what is the gospel?" The gospel is that you're to repent and believe in Jesus Christ. Nope. You've started with a response to the gospel. The gospel is, though you are under the righteous condemnation of God by virtue of your sin and rebellion and your participation in Adam's original rebellion, God in His mercy and grace has sent His Son to die on your behalf, that you might become the righteousness of God in Him. That's where the gospel starts. Not with our response. Until you understand that the gospel is about God

and His initiative, you don't have a full view of the gospel. And so Paul begins by saying the gospel of God concerning His Son.

And notice the things that He says that it concerns about His Son. First of all it's about His Son's person. Look at verse 3. He says that His Son is truly human, and that according to the flesh, He is descended from David. And therefore, even genealogically, He is rooted in the Davidic hope and promises and all those promises of the Messiah to come through the line of David.

Notice again in verse 4 he speaks of Christ's exaltation. He was revealed who He claimed to be the very Son of God by the resurrection, by the testimony of the spirit of holiness, the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity. He was exalted in our eyes.

Notice again that he goes on to say in that same verse that He is in fact Jesus, the Messiah, who is our Lord. That is He is our God, and He is our Master. He is the One, Paul goes on to say, who has called me into service to bear testimony to the Gentiles.

And then Paul goes on to say, having said that the gospel is rooted in the Old Testament, having said that the gospel is about God and especially about His redemptive plan in His Son, now he goes on to say that the gospel is for all nations through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for His sake. And Paul again is announcing something radical here. He is the apostle to the Gentiles, and even as we read in Isaiah 10, God's judgment of the nations because of their wickedness. Here Paul is announcing the good news of God to the nations. Not only is his message good news for the Jews who believe, to the Jew first and also to the Greek, but it is to all the Gentiles, to the Greek, because God is bringing together Jew and Gentile, slave and free, barbarian and Scythian. He's bringing them all into this kingdom that He is building up. The gospel is for all nations.

And my friends, in light of what Paul says even in this introduction, we need to radically relearn what the gospel is. If we view the Old Testament as basically irrelevant to our Christianity, we don't understand Paul's gospel. Paul says that the Old Testament is the very foundation for our Christianity. If we view the gospel as primarily about something that we do, we need to rethink it in light of what Paul says. Paul says the gospel is about God. It's about what He is and does. And that it's about what the Lord Jesus Christ is and does for us. And if we think that the gospel is simply something that's fine for other people, people that need a religious crutch, people that are just not quite all there psychologically, and need a little something to help them through the trials of life. But if we're self-sufficient, we don't need it. Then we need to radically rethink what the gospel is because Paul says this gospel is for all nations. "That's fine for you" is not an option in response to what Paul says. It's not an option to say, "Look, if it works

for you, that's great. I just don't need it." This is the one gospel for all nations, the apostle Paul says. Now Tom Houston has hit the nail on the head when he says the gospel begins and ends with what God is, not with what we want or think we need. We need to radically rethink the gospel in light of what Paul says here.

III. The implications of the gospel.

And then if you look at the end of verse 5 all the way down to verse 7 you'll see Paul show us here just how radical are the implications of the gospel for how we view ourselves. For our own self-understanding. He knows that these Roman Christians, he knows that you and I need to understand what the gospel does for us. The gospel is not a little dollop on top of our ice cream scoop. It's not a little dollop of whipped cream. You know it's kind of a nice thing to add to what you are. The gospel transforms you. It infuses your reality. It changes who you are. God's grace is transforming. The gospel defines what we are and are for. And look at four things that Paul says, just in this word of greeting. Four things that Paul says that the gospel means for who we are and what we are for.

First of all, if you look at the end of verse 5 and verse 6, Paul makes it clear that we are part of a united body that includes both Jew and Gentile, slave and free. We are now united by gospel bonds. God is doing a great work to bring the Jew and the Greek, Israel and the nations into one church and to unite us across all the things that separate us in an absolute unwavering conviction and confession of the Lord Jesus Christ in the gospel so that we have this gospel bond now which transcends every other distinction and differentiation. We are part of the united body. That's who we are. The gospel redefines it. It changes the way we look at one another. It changes the way we look at the world.

Notice again, look at verse 6. He goes on to mention specifically that we are called by Jesus Christ Himself. You are the called of Jesus Christ. Think of yourself that way. You are called by Jesus Christ. If you have responded to the gospel in faith as you have heard the word proclaimed, then you have heard Christ Himself speaking to you by His word, calling you into relationship to Himself. You are called by Christ Himself. Think about yourself that way, the apostle Paul says. You're not only brought into this body a Jew and Greek, all united in gospel bonds, you are called by Christ Himself.

Notice again. Look at verse 7. You are beloved of God the Father. Think how important that would have been for those Roman Christians. They were hated by the world around them. Many of them would die for their faith. They were thought to be part of a sect, a superstition, to believe incredible things. They were accused of all sorts of immoral behavior. They were hated by their contemporaries. But the apostle Paul says you are the beloved of God and later he will specify that that God is God, your Father. You are beloved of the Heavenly Father even if you are hated by the world. And Paul is saying,

Christian, think of yourself in these terms. This is who you are. The gospel means that this is who you are now. You are a person beloved by God the Father.

And then if you'll look, he goes on to say in verse 7, "You are beloved of God. You are called as saints." So he not only tells you what you are, he tells you what you are for now. He goes on to tell you that you are called by Christ as holy ones to the pursuit of holiness. Roland Hill, the great teacher said, "I don't care for any kind of Christianity that doesn't mean that a man's cat and dog are the better for it." He didn't care for any kind of Christianity that didn't bring about a transformation in the character and behavior of a person. And here Paul says Christianity not only changes who you are, it changes what you're for. You now are saints. You are saints. You are holy ones and you are created. You're created for the pursuit of holiness. You're created to become the image of God. You're created to walk in righteousness. It's changed everything that you are. It's changed your whole purpose for existence. The gospel changes everything. Even in his words of greetings, the apostle Paul presses home the authoritative character of the gospel, he tells you the nature of the gospel. It's rooted in the Old Testament. It's about God and especially about the Lord Jesus Christ. It's for all the nations, and it tells you that the gospel changes everything. You can't be indifferent about the gospel. It's an all or nothing proposition.

For those of us who live in a cultural context where it's very tempting to want to keep one foot in the world, and the other foot in the bounds of the body of Christ, the apostle Paul is issuing a tremendous challenge. The gospel is all-consuming. The gospel claims every area of your life. Gospel grace transforms every area of your life. And for those who in this culture, have bought into the relativism of this culture, which says everything is relative, there's no absolute truth, there are many ways up the mountain, the most important thing is that we not think that we have found absolute truth so that we can tolerate one another. The apostle Paul says that is the sure road to hell. That is the sure road to hell.

No, the only way into eternal saving fellowship with God is to recognize that there is one truth represented in one Savior who is the Lord Jesus Christ and having embraced the gospel of what He has done you find life eternal in the only way that there is to find it. Paul's words to the Romans are radical. And I hope that in the weeks to come we will see our own lives transformed by the radical grace of the gospel and so come to a new appreciation of what it means to be a Christian. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we pray that You would humble us and exalt the Savior as we learn the gospel together, in Jesus' name, Amen.

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