

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Romans - Jesus' Gospel Sets You Free¹

(Studies in Paul's letter to the Romans)

The Power of the Gospel

(Romans 1:1-17)

Study #1

Introduction: From a bald-headed, bow-legged apostle, with love...

Roughly nineteen hundred and fifty years ago, a fifty-something year old man sat down to write a letter.² He is described by an elder in an Asian church of the second century who may have actually known him this way.³

“He was small of stature, with a bald head and crooked legs, in a good state of body, with eyebrows meeting and nose somewhat hooked, full of friendliness.”

¹ There is reason to believe that this letter was to have been sent to other churches. Chapter 16 is missing from many, but not all, of the most ancient copies, indicating that chapter 16 (full of personal greetings) might have only been included in the actual letter to the Romans. One of my commentators actually titles this book, “The Letter to the Romans and Other Places”.

² Unlike many of the New Testament letters, virtually no one doubts that Paul wrote Romans. The secretary (amanuensis) to whom Paul dictated Romans breaks in and signs his name, Tertius, at 16:22.

³ It is virtually impossible to guess at Paul's age. He must have been an adult (at least age 30) when he was admitted to the Sanhedrin, and we know that he was on the Sanhedrin council when he was assigned primary responsibility for persecuting Christians (Acts 9). As ironic as it seems, Paul and Jesus were likely born within the same decade.

The letter this man sat down to write was sent to some friends he had never met in a city he had never visited.

The man was the Apostle Paul and the letter he wrote ended up in our Bibles. The letter takes up, in my Bible, just under twenty-two pages.

This letter was written near the height of the Roman Empire's grandeur, when the city of Rome itself was a hustling, bustling, cosmopolitan metropolis.

When Paul wrote, the Empire was ruled by a teenager named Nero. Religious and cultural diversity was the order of the day.

You could choose from a variety of Mystery Religions, Emperor Worship, Greek, Roman, or Persian mythologies, or one of the philosophical schools - Cynicism, Hedonism, Skepticism or Epicureanism.

Today, the Mystery Religions are dead, as is Nero, as are the philosophical schools, as is Rome itself, at least as Paul knew it.

But, because of the truths contained in the letter Paul wrote to a struggling band of Christians in the city of Rome, faith in Jesus Christ thrives twenty centuries later.

It is easy to argue that Paul's letter to the Romans is the most weighty, most thoughtful, most influential of all of Paul's epistles, and today we begin a journey through Romans.

Historical background to the book of Romans

The church at Rome and occasion for the letter (and date)

Paul was commissioned by God to be the apostle to the Gentile world and had spent the decade of AD 47-57 in intensive Gospel ministry to the territories that bordered the Aegean Sea.

During this decade of travel and ministry, he led what we refer to as the First and Second Missionary Journeys.

In the winter of 57-58, Paul was living in the port city of Corinth.⁴ While in Corinth, staying in the home of a man named Gaius,⁵ he sat down to write a letter to the believers who lived in the city of Rome.

Paul had never been to Rome. But he was deeply concerned for the spiritual welfare of the Christians who lived there. He considered all the churches outside Palestine to be his apostolic stewardship.

And there was this church in Rome, fourteen hundred miles away from Palestine. It had no doubt been established by Jewish believers who had gone to Rome with the message of Jesus.

By the time Paul wrote to them, the church was not a homogenized group of Jewish Christians. No, both Jews and Gentiles were active in the church at Rome, serving, worshipping, and growing together.

So, if you're Paul, what do you write to a group of people you don't know much about? Paul addressed himself to the themes of "basic Christianity."

He wanted to ensure that they were grounded in the essentials, so the themes he writes about in Romans are the brass tacks of our faith.

Themes of Romans

In this letter he establishes the sinfulness of all people everywhere and outlines the mess sin has made of everything (chapters 1-3). Then, he lays out the incredible solution to the problem of man's sin by showing God's Gospel plan in all its beauty and simplicity. (chapters 4-5)

He next takes some time to explain how the Christian life "works" (chapters 6-8), and follows that up by addressing what in the world God is doing with His chosen people, the Jews. (chapters 9-11)

In the last several chapters of the book (chapters 12-16) Paul builds on the theological foundation he has laid a superstructure of personal holiness and practical wisdom for living.

Because of the themes Romans addresses we might expect that the letter would have profound effects on those who read it - and indeed it has had profound effects, through the centuries.

The effect of Romans

The great church father, Saint Augustine, was brought to faith after reading Romans 13:13-14.⁶

The same was true for Martin Luther, who sparked the Protestant Reformation. Luther came to understand the doctrine of justification while teaching the book of Romans.

John Wesley was one of the sparkplugs of the revivals in Great Britain and North America during the early 18th century. He felt his heart "strangely warmed" while listening to the introduction to Luther's commentary on Romans at a meeting on Aldersgate Street in London. Wesley always looked back on this experience as his genuine conversion.

Karl Barth, a very influential German theologian of the last century wrote a commentary on Romans (1918; *Der Romerbrieft*), which broke the chokehold of liberal theology in Europe.

Romans is a powerful, life-changing book. As Bible scholar F.F. Bruce says, there is no telling what may happen when people begin to study Paul's letter to the Romans.

There was no telling for Augustine, Luther, Wesley, and Barth - and there is no telling what may happen to you and me.

⁴ We know that he stayed in Corinth for about a year and a half, preaching, teaching, and generally helping to establish the church there. (Acts 18:11)

⁵ A Corinthian convert mentioned in 1 Cor. 1:14; cf. Romans 16:23.

⁶ [13] *Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. [14] But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make to provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.*

Who knows what growth and stability and maturity of thought and energizing spiritual reviving may come our way through the truths of this book?!⁷

So, without any further delay, let's jump into our study now. The introduction to Romans is content-heavy, very personal, and long.

The Content of the Gospel (1:1-7)

The Gospel of Jesus (vv. 1-4)

[1] Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as 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 born of a descendant of David according to the flesh, [4] who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord⁸

Paul, a servant-apostle (v. 1)

THAT's a loooong greeting! It's longer than that found in any of Paul's other letters. Why so wordy? Because he and they have never met. He wants them to know who he is.⁹

But, we notice, too, that there is a slightly different emphasis in this greeting from his other letters. In most of his letters, the first self-identifying reference Paul makes is to his apostleship.

But here, he begins by calling himself a "servant" of Christ Jesus.

It was important for Paul that we know that, first and foremost, he was satisfied being in submission to Jesus.

⁷ The English reformer, William Tyndale urged that all Christians should know Romans by rote (memorize it).

⁸ "*Jesus*" fixes His historical identity and expresses His Saviorhood. "*Christ*" points to His official work as the Anointed One. "*Lord*" indicates the sovereignty to which He is exalted at the right hand of the Father by virtue of which He exercises all authority in heaven and on earth.

⁹ As a matter of fact, the whole salutation is one long sentence stretching all the way through the end of verse 6!

Paul was a Jew, and the Jewish concept of a "bond-servant" was of someone who was so content in his position. The bond-servant would volunteer to continue as a servant, even after the required period of time for servitude had passed.¹⁰

That's Paul. Jesus' servant.

In addition to being a servant, though, Paul was also "*called as an apostle, set apart for the Gospel of God.*"

An apostle was someone who had a special stewardship from God to evangelize, to establish believers in the faith, and to plant churches. As we know, Paul was especially gifted to do all of these things. Paul himself claims to have been "set apart" for this stuff.

He was set apart as an apostle but there are others in the New Testament who are said to be "set apart." They are Pharisees.¹¹

The Pharisee set himself apart from ordinary men. He was aloof and he distanced himself from others because of their sinfulness. Before he became a Christian, Paul had been a Pharisee, a man set apart from others.

Now, as an apostle of Jesus, he has been set apart for the Gospel. And people who are set apart for the Gospel are drawn toward others.

You and I are living in the twenty-first century, not the first. We are Americans, not Romans. And we certainly aren't Paul.

But in his self-identifying, there is something I find compelling.

Today, each of us has many "masters." We sometimes speak of being slaves to our schedules, slaves to our jobs. We serve our families and our mortgages. We are servants to the state.

¹⁰ In the Roman world, the slave was consigned to abject servitude, regardless of his happiness, welfare, or prospects. And, some have believed that Paul is using this picture to emphasize his complete submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. I think it more likely, though, to understand Paul to be making reference to the Jewish conception of the servant, the bond-servant, who had a healthy relationship with his master.

¹¹ From the Hebrew, "pharash" - to separate.

But we hear Paul boast that he is a servant of Christ Jesus and inwardly say, “*Yes! Me, too!*” It is in submitting to Jesus that we find the abundant life He promised.

And Paul was one of a select group of Christ-followers known as apostles. We aren’t “apostles” in the sense that Paul was.¹² But we are set apart, just as Paul was.

Just like Paul, we are not set apart in a pharisaic way FROM others. We are set apart FOR others. God has set each of us apart so that others will hear from us about Jesus and so that others will see in us the Jesus who has saved us as we “bring our friends to Jesus.”

And how do we bring our friends to Jesus? By sharing with them the message referred to throughout Romans as “the Gospel.”

As Paul says here, the Gospel message is both new in Jesus AND it has been a long time coming.

Gospel continuity (vv. 2-3)

There is great continuity between the New Testament and the Old Testament as we get hints of the Gospel scattered throughout the prophets.

That Old Testament/New Testament continuity is highlighted by the fact that, as verse three tells us, Jesus was descended from the line of David, the greatest of the Jewish kings.

So, Jesus, our Savior, came from the line of kings and was born of the virgin, Mary. The Jesus we celebrate and worship every Sunday was a flesh and blood, fully human, man AND He was the Son of God.

Jesus’ death and resurrection IS the Gospel (v. 4)

Had Jesus simply lived an exemplary life, and died a tragic death, He would have been numbered among the great, heroic people of history.

But, He didn’t merely live an exemplary life and He didn’t merely die a tragic death. He lived a perfect life and He died a perfectly horrible, sacrificial death and then beat death by rising from the dead!

So, in a nutshell, this is the Christian Gospel:
Jesus, the God-man (David’s son and God’s Son), spent a perfectly sinless thirty three years on earth, died on the cross for our sins, and was raised from the dead, proving that He is just who He said He was - Messiah, Savior and Lord.

This is the Gospel and the Gospel is the theme of the book of Romans. Paul was the author of Romans and he had a special call from God on his life. It was a Gospel call.

Paul - A (surprising) Apostle of Jesus (v. 5)

[Romans 1:5] through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for His name’s sake

We begin to read about Paul’s life in the 7th chapter of the book of Acts. There, he is a bystander nodding with approval as the church’s first martyr, Stephen, was stoned to death.

The spark of that stoning set Paul on fire against Christians. He became, for a time, the most dangerous enemy of the followers of Jesus.

But then, a short time later, (Acts 9), Jesus Himself confronted Paul on the road to Damascus in a blinding vision. Jesus allowed Paul (then “Saul”) to see that He really was the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

And when Jesus placed His hand on Paul, Paul placed his faith in Jesus. When he believed and received the gift of God’s amazing grace, Paul was forever changed.

God *forgave* Paul and eternally *saved* him, which is wonderful. But what may be equally wonderful is that God also *used* Paul. He gave to Paul an apostolic ministry.

¹² Although the word “apostle” means, literally “one who is sent” - and we are certainly *sent*.

We learn from Paul's experience that nobody has sunk so deeply in sin that they are beyond the grace of God to be saved. And we also learn from Paul that no Christian is ever beyond being used by God in service.

This very long introduction (actually one sentence in the original Greek) concludes as Paul prays for God's rich blessings on those in Rome.

Grace and Peace to You! (vv. 6-7)

[Romans 1:6] among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ; [7] to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Moving forward Paul does what he often does in his letters. He goes from greeting to thanksgiving, expressing his gratitude to God for the progress these Roman believers have made in Jesus.

A Heart for the Gospel (1:8-15)

Paul's Relationship to the Roman Christians (vv. 8-13)

Paul is grateful for the Romans' faith (v. 8)

[Romans 1:8] First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world.¹³

While he had never been to Rome, Paul had heard plenty about how the church there was reaching out.

They were having impact in Rome and beyond, much as impact is being felt here in San Antonio and beyond by the churches - including our own! - who are "on mission" for the Great Commission.

Much more could always be done, of course. But, food is given to needy people. Resources are given to those in need. The Gospel is shared with people who are far from God.

¹³ "Whole world" need not be understood in an absolute sense, as if Paul was saying that the Roman Christians had reached out to South America. © There are other instances where this type of terminology has less than a universal reference.

Ministries are popping up (Faith Builders, the Refuge, Bread and Water) and ministers (YOU!) are boldly living for Jesus.

By your giving here, you get to reach out to those who are serving in North Africa, India, the Middle East, and Sweden. You are helping support church planters, providing for persecuted Christians' most basic needs, training Christian workers, and evangelizing around the world!¹⁴

That is some of how we are having a world-impacting ministry, and things like these were evidently happening through the church in Rome.

Every letter contains a personal touch, and Romans has its share of those. One is seen here at the beginning when Paul tells his readers how he has long desired to come to Rome and to visit them. Not that everything was exactly working out as planned...

Paul and the Romans (v. 9-13)

A passionate desire to visit Rome

[9] For God, whom I serve in my spirit in the preaching of the gospel of His Son, is my witness as to how unceasingly I make mention of you, [10] always in my prayers making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you... [13] I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that often I have planned to come to you (and have been prevented so far) so that I may obtain some fruit among you also, even as among the rest of the Gentiles.¹⁵

Paul wanted to visit Rome. And that makes sense to me. And he could see no reason why God would not allow such a visit. At the same time he also knew of no guarantee from God that such a visit would occur.

¹⁴ This through the support of Voice of the Martyrs, International Training Partners, Crossway, International.

¹⁵ Some hold that the "fruit" Paul was hoping to get from the Romans was financial assistance for the poor believers back in Jerusalem, for whom he was collecting money. (Not the famine relief fund of Acts 11)

And his efforts to get to Rome had been repeatedly thwarted.¹⁶ (As far as we know, he never made it to Rome until he was taken there to stand trial and was put to death by Nero.)

Do you find it fascinating that the great apostle to the Gentiles knew what it was to have plans that didn't work out? Paul, the author of the letter to the Romans (!), knew all about unanswered prayer requests.

Praying for something that appears to be good and right is good and right - but there is no guarantee of a "Yes" answer. Paul's experience here shows me that prayers are not answered and plans are not fulfilled in direct proportion to our spiritual maturity.

The second thing to notice about Paul's longing to visit Rome is that he wanted it for their sake AND for his sake.

Reciprocal ministry

[11] For I long to see you so that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established; [12] that is, that I may be encouraged together with you while among you, each of us by the other's faith, both yours and mine.

Paul had a perspective on life in the church that we today would do well to learn. It is a theology of "give and take" - the doctrine of reciprocity.

On the one hand, he longed to be an instrument of blessing from the Holy Spirit to the believers in Rome. But, he also knew that they would bless him.

That's right. These young believers, untaught and relatively ungrounded in truth, will encourage the great Apostle Paul by their faith, just as he would encourage them by his faith.

¹⁶ A new vision for the future was forming in Paul's mind as he wrote this letter: that of going as a pioneer missionary to Spain, the oldest Roman colony in the west. Going to Spain would afford him the opportunity to visit Rome (cf. Romans 15:20ff). We don't know if Paul ever made it to Spain.

Now, this is the kind of comment that we might tend to overlook as Paul's introductory fluff, stuff he said before getting into the "meat" of the book. But I think there is meat here to chew on.

One of the most basic principles of life in the Body of Christ is that of reciprocal ministry between young and old, between mature and less mature.

Ministry is not just a "top-down" thing where the older Christian pours into the life of the younger. No, the road of ministry is a two-way street.

The New Testament model is that all of us minister, serve, edify, and build up each other AND all of us are served, ministered to, edified, and built up by others.

Sometime, poke your head into a classroom to hear four year olds sing a song about Jesus and see if your heart doesn't respond with worship to God. Spend time with someone who has recently come to know Jesus and listen to his immature ramblings about how much Jesus means to him. Your spirit will soar!

There are no super-saints who don't need anything from other believers. Nor is there any Christian so immature that he or she doesn't have something valuable to offer to the rest of the Body.

So, both to be a blessing and to be blessed, Paul simply cannot contain his enthusiasm about coming to Rome, whenever that might be. And when he gets there - in fact whenever he gets anywhere! - he's going to be all about the Gospel!

Paul, Obligation, and the Gospel (vv. 14-15)

[Romans 1:14] I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. [15] So, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

God had commissioned Paul to take the Gospel wherever he could by whatever means possible.

God had drafted him to proclaim the Gospel to all, without distinction of nationality or cultural development. The culturally elite Greeks and the primitive barbarian were both on Paul's radar.

But he didn't carry out this stewardship the way I carry out the garbage on trash day. *"Well, I guess it's got to be done, so I'd better get this 'preaching the gospel' thing out of the way."*

No way! What he had been given to do was exactly what he wanted to do. He was EAGER to preach, to teach, to proclaim, to share Jesus.

And why was he so eager to preach the gospel? He explains in what is the lynchpin verse of the whole letter.

The POWER of the Gospel (1:16-17)

The Gospel is Powerful - To Save! (v. 16)

[Romans 1:16] 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.

The priority of the Jew

First, let's note the reference to the Jews and the Greeks. As you know, the Gospel went to the Jew first.

The Jews were the chosen people of God. They received the Old Testament. Jesus was a Jew Himself.

And on the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit fell with power, of those first three thousand who put their faith in Jesus, all were Jews. The Gospel, rightly, went to the Jews first.

Still, there is no discrimination in the reach of the Gospel. The Gospel was first delivered to the Jews, but the Gospel is also, in every way, also *for* us Gentiles!

So, what does Paul have to say about the message of the Gospel? In a word, ***"I am not ashamed."*** THAT is remarkable!

Paul is not ashamed

The Gospel was generally held in contempt by the people of Paul's world. To the Jews, it was an offensive stumbling-block. The Gentiles thought that it was foolishness.

Paul had personally been imprisoned in Philippi, chased out of Thessalonica and Antioch, pelted with rocks at Lystra, smuggled out of Berea, and laughed at in Athens.

Yet, here he doesn't only say that he is not ashamed. He boasts in the Gospel message. And, again, what is the Gospel message?

Jesus, the God-man (David's son and God's Son), spent a perfectly sinless thirty three years on earth, died on the cross for our sins, and was raised from the dead, proving that He is just who He said He was - Messiah, Savior and Lord.

So why was he not ashamed of the Gospel? Because ***"it is the power¹⁷ of God for salvation for everyone who believes."***

The Gospel is effective to save

For those who take the message to heart and believe it, the Gospel brings salvation. And Paul knew its saving power, firsthand.

Through many years of Christian service, he knew its power to transform the lives of those who would believe it. We have seen the same thing over and over and over again.

Jesus saves.

¹⁷ As you may have heard, the word that we translate "power" in verse 16 is the Greek word, *dunamis*. Sometimes, this word is linked to our word "dynamite" to show the power of the Gospel. But, more accurately, our word "dynamic" carries the thought of *dunamis* better than dynamite. The dictionary says that dynamic is characterized by energy, and pertains to change and process. It is opposed to "static" and "potential."

He saved me, many years ago, opening my eyes to my need for salvation and to the Gospel message before I even acknowledged that He existed.

After having heard and understood the Gospel, I prayed my first-ever serious prayer, by myself, late at night. I was fifteen years old when I asked forgiveness because of Jesus' death and resurrection. And God said, "Yes". He always says, "Yes" to that prayer; it's His policy.

And when you came to God, faithfully asking for eternal life in the Name of Jesus, He said "Yes" to you, too. You became a child of God, right then and there, no matter what your past had been.

Jesus saves whoever comes to Him in faith. He saves insecure fifteen year olds, Pharisees intent on killing Christians, moms and dads who have come to the end of themselves, college students who learn more about themselves in the first weeks of college than they ever wanted to know.

He saves eternally and He delivers here and now, from a wasted, purposeless life. Eternal life begins NOW and it is, as Jesus said, ABUNDANT!

Jesus fills life with meaning. He ushers us into the joint venture of Kingdom building. Step by step He changes us, from the inside out, core to crust, so that we reflect His holiness.

As we conclude, let's allow the words of Paul from Romans to be our final prayer and our final praise.

The Gospel is Powerful to Save - Those Who Believe! (v. 17)

Romans 1:17] For in it (i.e. - the Gospel) the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "BUT THE RIGHTEOUS man SHALL LIVE BY FAITH."

The Gospel reveals the righteousness of God

The Gospel lets us know about God's righteousness - but it is more than that.

The Gospel reveals how God's righteousness can become my righteousness, and how you and I can stand before God as justified sinners, with no fear of condemnation.

It is by faith. The life-changing, eternity-altering power of the Gospel of Jesus is only unleashed in the life of someone who believes.

The Gospel's power is made operative through faith

The Gospel does not save everyone, unconditionally and indiscriminately. Only those who believe are saved.

But, wherever there is trust in the Gospel of Jesus, there is salvation. That is why Paul quoted the Old Testament prophet, Habakkuk: ***"The just shall live by faith."***¹⁸

That is, it is the person who is justified before God by their faith who is saved! (As Paul used the terms, "life" and "salvation" are almost used interchangeably in Romans.)

So, like Paul, we can say with conviction, that the Gospel is still the power of God unto salvation to those who believe - and we're still not ashamed.

¹⁸ The New Testament uses Habakkuk's words in different ways in different places. For instance, in Galatians 3:11, the point of quoting Habakkuk is to show that it is not by the law that a man is justified before God, but by faith. In Hebrews 10:38, where the verse from Habakkuk is also quoted, the idea is that of the justified believer walking through life exercising faith (more to the point of Habakkuk's original meaning). Here in Romans, it is to say that the only way to live (be saved) is by faith. (This is the way most commentators take it - Bruce, Cranfield; however Murray holds that Paul is describing the kind of life - "faithful" - the one who has eternal life will lead.)