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Interpreting Romans

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Lesson 1: Paul's Greeting to the Romans

Romans 1:1-7

- 1. From** ¹ Paul,
 a. a bond-servant of Christ Jesus,
 b. called as an apostle,
 c. set apart for the gospel of God,
 1. ² which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures,
 2. ³ concerning His Son,
 a. who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh,
 b. 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 Lord,
 d. 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, ⁶ among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ;
2. To ⁷ to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called *as* saints:
3. Blessing
 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

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Introduction to Interpreting Romans

In high school my pastor decided to lead our Sunday School through Paul's letter to the Romans. I remember sitting in chairs set around in a circle with my pastor expounding from Romans. I also remember that I did not understand a single word he said. To be fair, my mind was quite muddled at the time. I did not have a clear grasp of the gospel. After that I left Romans alone for about 8 years. Towards the end of college, I remember debating with my brother Charlie about whether or not Paul in Romans 7 is speaking from the perspective of a non-Christian or a Christian. I do not remember which side I took. I do remember thinking afterwards that to understand chapter 7, I need to understand the flow of the argument in chapter 6 and in chapter 8. But then I began to realize to understand chapter 6 and 8, I needed to know the flow of 5 and 9. And on and on to the whole letter. That led me to doing my own inductive Bible study of Romans over the next couple of years. I determined to observe the argument of Romans from beginning to end, and to not look at any commentaries until after I had made my own observations, comments and questions. I did not figure Romans out after that first in-depth study. That's not generally how Bible study goes. You have to leave it alone and come back again several times.

I did become convinced that Paul's argument in Romans is a powerful, logical presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ worth knowing forwards and backwards. So, I have come back again to Romans over the past 30 years to be strengthened in my understanding of the gospel.

I eventually made it to the commentaries to check my observations and to be disciplined scholars who have spent much time and effort in Romans. The commentary that spoke to me most was Douglas Moo's from the New International Commentary series. I give him credit for challenging me and helping me to put more pieces together.

I would not encourage you to start with the commentaries. Nor to depend on a teaching series like this one. Make your own observations. Take up your Bible and get a notebook and pen or laptop and word file and start observing. Observe the whole, how the whole letter is organized into major divisions and observe the parts, how Paul's thought flows from one paragraph to the next. Write down what strikes you as important or interesting or strange. And write down the questions that come to mind. Wrestle with the Bible yourself. That's not just an intellectual exercise. It's a spiritual exercise where your bring your heart and mind to God's word and trust him to work on you and speak to you.

Do you want the gospel of Jesus Christ to transform how you think and how you live? Then get to know Paul's letter to the Romans. This series is intended as an aid to you as we observe the word together.

Let's get started.

The Nature of a Letter

The Letter of Paul to the Romans. What makes a letter a letter we might ask? What do you think? What is required for a piece of writing to be designated a letter? A letter is a message written from somebody to somebody. Or from multiple people to other multiple people. Some of the New Testament letters might be written in the form of letters without having been sent to one specific person or group. Maybe that is true of Hebrews and James. But for Paul, when Paul writes letters he is usually writing with a person or church in mind to whom he sends the letter. Which means there is always some kind of context. This is not abstract Christian truth. This is truth at work. Truth in life. Truth from a seasoned pastor and missionary to a group of people living, working, raising families in the major urban center of an empire.

The Greeting of the letter gives a chance at the beginning to ask who are these people and why was this letter written?

On the highest level, the structure of Paul's letter is simple. The first half of chapter 1 is introduction. The last half of chapter 15 along with chapter 16 are conclusion and everything in between is the body of the letter. The body of the letter contains two parts, beginning with theology or right thinking in chapters 1-11 and ending with ethics or right practice in 12-15. From orthodoxy to orthopraxy or from gospel truth to gospel transformation. Paul first expounds the true content of the gospel then exhorts us to transformed living of the gospel.

We will consider the letter's structure with a little more detail when we come to the thesis in verses 16-17.

We have this basic structure of intro, body and conclusion. We are going to spend three lessons in the introduction. For the introduction Paul uses a standard Greek letter introduction of greeting, blessing, thanksgiving and prayer. As a skilled writer Paul takes the standard form and makes it his own. For the sake of our study, we will divide the introduction into three parts, in this our first lesson we will consider the greeting and blessing, where we will primarily ask, who are these people? Next time we will focus on the thanksgiving and prayer in verses 8-15, asking, why did Paul write this letter? In the lesson after that we will look closely at the thesis of the letter in 16 and 17.

So, who are these people?

Let's read the text and as we do notice that we have who the letter is from, who it is to and the standard blessing at the end. [Read Romans 1:1-7.]

The basic gist of that is that we have a letter from Paul and it is to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints. With this final blessing. Grace to and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. But in the from section Paul packs in a ton of phrases that we are going to need to unpack, but they are not all about him. It is about the content of his gospel.

1. From Paul

The first three phrases establish Paul's ethos or credibility with the Romans. He has not been to Rome, so who is he to be writing the Romans.

a. A bond-servant of Christ Jesus

First, he is a bond-servant of Jesus Christ. The implication is that Paul does not act on his own account. He is a servant who has a master. He is acting at the call of his master.

b. An apostle

Second, his master has called him to serve in the role of apostle. An apostle is one who has been sent out. The term could apply generally for messengers of the gospel, evangelists or missionaries who go out in Jesus' name, proclaiming the good news.

However, the term seems to have taken on a specific, technical meaning very early in the life of the church when the remaining disciples sought a replacement for Judas in Acts 1, they set requirements that the new apostle should be one of the disciples who walked with Jesus during his earthly ministry and a witness to the resurrection of Jesus.

Paul seems to understand that he is filling a special role, though somehow lacking in the requirements, when he says of himself in 1 Corinthians 15:7-10, “he appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as it were to one untimely born, he appeared to me also. For I am the least of the apostles, who am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God, I am what I am.”

Paul is a servant who has been sent out as an apostle, a messenger. And a messenger needs a message.

c. Set apart for the gospel of God

So, third, Paul sees himself as set apart for the gospel of God. The gospel of God is his message.

In verses 2-4 Paul takes a little detour to introduce his gospel message, which God “promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures.”

Paul is letting us know here that this good news is not religious innovation. It's not Paul's idea. The gospel Paul has been commissioned to proclaim comes from God, being announced ahead of time in the Old Testament. There is a lot of new about the new covenant. Paul will be clear about that. There is discontinuity. To understand the mission and structure of the gospel wholly on the pattern of the Old Testament would be pouring new wine into an old wineskin. It will not hold. That's the wrong way to do the gospel. There is newness in the new covenant. Perhaps, because there is such significant newness, Paul continues this concern through the letter to show that his message is not only discontinuous with the Old Testament, but also continuous with the Old Testament. There is both continuity and discontinuity. His message flows out of the Law and the Prophets, while unashamedly bringing about significant change in Jesus Christ.

For this is the gospel of the son! That's the point of verse 3. Promised by God, concerning his son.

And notice who this son is. Two things. He is human. He is of the flesh. Truly human. And not just any human. He was born as the rightful heir to the throne of David. That is why we call him Christ. Christ means Messiah, anointed one, the King! He is the king foretold.

Even more, he is divine, the son of God! He was declared so with power when he was raised from the dead. John told us what Jesus said before he died, “No one has taken my life away from me, but I lay it down on my own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again (John 10:17-18).” Who says that but God? And we do not have to get into was it the Father that raised Jesus, was it Jesus that raised Jesus, was it the Spirit that raised Jesus. Yes! Do not have time to get into the Trinity right now. But here is a basic claim of Christianity. Power over death shows off the true nature of Jesus Christ. He is both God and man.

Through his ministry, Paul's message has been Christ-centered. Luke gives a glimpse into Paul's preaching in Acts 17:2-3. Having arrived in Thessalonica, Paul begins his ministry in the synagogue. Luke writes, “And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.’”

Though Paul's gospel message is always Christ-centered, Paul is not going to argue in Romans that Jesus is the Christ, that he had to die and raise again and that he is both God and man. Paul assumes these truths. This is all we are going to get on these truths. Just 2 verses in the greeting. Since Paul is able to assume these truths, I believe that he assumes the Romans agree with these truths. He is being clear about his understanding of who Jesus is. At the same time, he builds common ground with his audience. If they wonder what Paul's gospel is all about, they can rest assured it is all about Jesus Christ who is man, Messiah and God.

The letter of Romans is not going to be about the who of the gospel, but the how of the gospel. For the who of the gospel, we could go to John and do a study on the nature of Jesus and the nature of faith in Jesus. That was John's concern in writing his gospel. In Romans, Paul assumes agreement on the who and moves on to argue the how. How is it that faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ brings about God's righteous plan of salvation? But that is skipping ahead of ourselves to the thesis.

d. Apostle to the Gentiles

In verse 5 we get a fourth bit of information about Paul the apostle. Paul understands that he has been given a special gift or grace from Jesus to be an apostle to the Gentiles. This agrees with what Jesus told Ananias at Paul's conversion, "he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel (Acts 9:15)." It also agrees with Paul's missionary work over the last ten years in Asia Minor, Macedonia and Greece (also see Galatians 1:7-10).

In describing his special ministry to Gentiles, Paul uses here the curious phrase "obedience of faith." This is his goal in taking the gospel to the Gentiles. For the sake of the name of Jesus, he endeavors to bring about the obedience of faith. The phrase in English keeps some of the ambiguity of the original Greek. We can narrow the meaning down to two possibilities. Either faith itself is the obedience or faith is the source of the obedience. If faith is the obedience, then the phrase would mean that Paul is seeking to bring about among the Gentiles the obedient act of faith. His goal is belief in Jesus. If faith is the source of obedience, then Paul's desire is to bring about life change among Gentiles which flows out of faith in Jesus. Obedience of faith is, then, that obedience which comes from having believed in Jesus.

I lean toward the second. I think Paul understands saving faith as the beginning of a transformed life. In 6:17 Paul is going to give thanks to God that the Romans "have become obedient from the heart."

It is an obedience of faith accomplished by a new internal reality brought about by the gospel, a new way of seeing and living out the will of God.

It is the circumcision of the heart promised by Moses in Deuteronomy 30:6; one of the new realities of the new covenant. But we will have to wait until we get into the body of letter to consider more deeply how Paul envisions this obedience of faith working out in the lives of Gentiles.

Moving to verse 6, Paul addresses his audience for the first time, "among whom", that is among the Gentiles, "you also are the called of Jesus Christ."

Paul's last word about himself as apostle to the Gentiles is also his first word about the Romans.

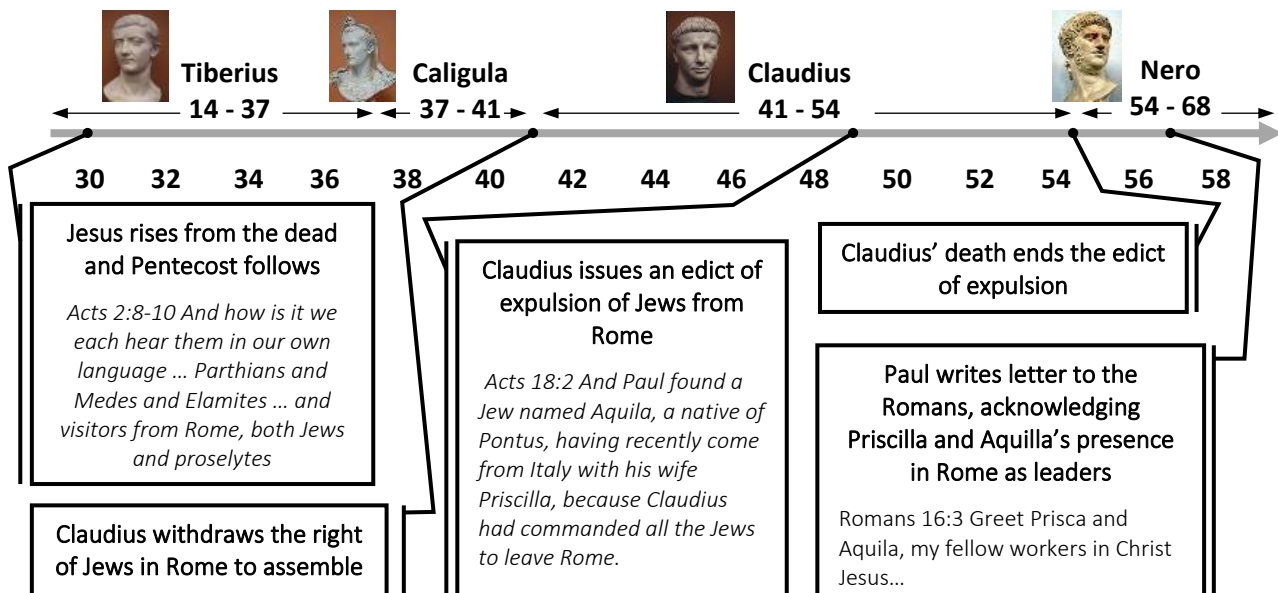
2. To the beloved of God in Rome

Paul primarily addresses the Romans as Gentiles. And yet, there is quite a bit of Jewish reference in Romans. Paul's literary antagonist in chapters 2, 3, 6, 7, 9, 10 and 11 is certainly Jewish. Paul refers often to the Old Testament. The discussion about issues of conscience in chapter 14 addresses disagreements stemming out of old covenant practices. And several of those greeted in chapter 16 have Jewish names. How should we understand the make up of this church.

Here are some important considerations.

Acts 1:10 mentions specifically that Jews from Rome were present at Pentecost when thousands believed the message of Jesus. We might assume that in the months to come some returned to Rome and the early Christian movement began in the synagogue.

In AD 41, at the beginning of his reign, emperor Claudius removed the right of assembly from Jews. If they had not already been doing so, this may have pushed forward the practice of the Roman Christians to meet in homes.



Eight years later Claudius expelled Jews from Rome. Luke mentions this edict of expulsion in Acts 18:2 as the reason Priscilla and Aquila left Rome. Presumably the edict was relaxed when Nero replaced Claudius as emperor in 54 AD. By the time of Paul's writing around 57 AD Priscilla and Aquila are back in Rome as house church leaders.

It is possible that during the five-year expulsion of Jews from Rome, Gentile believers stepped into roles of leadership and the Christian movement continued to grow, though more Gentile in terms of both members and culture. This does not mean there are no Jews present among the Roman recipients of the letter. As evidenced by Paul's comments to several fellow Jews in chapter 16, some Jewish leaders were able to enter back into positions of service and leadership. And yet, Paul is able to characterize the whole movement as Gentile. Addressing the Romans as you who are among the Gentiles. And in verse 13 when he can say, "I want to obtain fruit among you, even as among the rest of the Gentiles."

What we have in Rome then is a community that began with Jews and still includes Jews and at the same time is primarily Gentile with a mix of Gentile and Jewish leadership. So what? Why does it matter? A basic principle of biblical interpretation is that the author is communicating to an audience. The meaning of the text is the meaning that the original author, inspired by God, intended for the original audience. Understanding the audience to whom Paul wrote and understanding the circumstances of the writing, can help us at times to interpret the meaning of the text.

For example, in chapter 2:17, Paul writes, "But if you bear the name 'Jew', and rely upon the Law, and boast in God...you who teach another, do you not teach yourself?" This is a strong, negative challenge to those who bear the name Jew. When he makes that challenge is he addressing all the members of the church in Rome. No. His Christian audience is primarily Gentile. Who then is he addressing? Is he calling out Jewish members of the church? That's not likely either, since he is affirming of the Roman believers throughout the letter, both Jew and Gentile. We can conclude, with this reference and others, that Paul has set up a literary antagonist based on real antagonism he has experience from his own people who oppose the gospel of Jesus Christ. We will see that through the letter. Knowing the audience helps us to understand what Paul is doing here.

Knowing the audience will help us with other challenges to interpretation. There is a tension in the letter between acknowledging the Jewish source of the gospel and allowing the gospel to be free from Jewish religious and cultural practices. Paul remains aware that he is writing a community that is born out of Judaism and that has both Gentile and Jewish believers. That awareness, we presume, will affect how he communicates the gospel and how he exhorts the Romans to live out the gospel. As we go through the letter, interpreting the letter, we keep in mind, "What does this mean or what

could this mean for the original audience?” And we know a little bit about them. For interpretation, the audience matters.

One more assumption we see Paul make about his audience is that they are Christians. That’s in verse 7. They are “the beloved of God” and “called as saints.” For Paul, saint is not a term for an especially holy believer, but a term for any true believer. A saint is one who has been made holy by God and set apart for special service. For Paul, this is true of every believer.

3. Blessing

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. This is Paul’s typical blessing. He usually asks for grace and peace, and he usually refers to both God the Father and Jesus Christ. These could be platitudes. Stock phrases that a good Christian minister sticks on to the end of a greeting.

But I believe that we know this is not the case with Paul. He really wants God’s grace to be on you. He really wants you to experience peace with God. And he believes deeply in God the Father and in our Lord Jesus Christ to bring about these blessings in your life.

Reflection questions

Whether you use these questions individually or with a group, be willing to spend time on questions 1 and 2 considering your own observations. For a group discussion, go around in a circle and encourage everyone to share a personal observation or two.

1. What stands out to you as important or interesting or helpful when you consider this teaching on Romans 1:1-7 or when you consider your own observation of Romans 1:1-7?
2. What stands out to you as confusing or questionable? What is left unclear or what questions would you like answered?
3. What stands out to you in Paul’s description of the gospel of God in verses 2-4? What does Paul’s emphasis suggest to you about our understanding or proclamation of the gospel today? What application might you take away from these verses?
4. How do you personally identify with Paul’s phrase “obedience of faith”? If the phrase means the act of obedience is faith, how have you experienced that idea in your life? If the phrase means obedience that comes out of your faith in Jesus,
5. Consider how Paul described himself as a bond-servant (servant or slave) and how he described the Romans as beloved of God. How are different areas of your life affected when you remind yourself that you are a servant of God? How about when you remind yourself that you are beloved of God?

Lesson 2: Paul's Thanksgiving and Prayer for the Romans

Romans 1:8-15

Thanksgiving

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

Prayer

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.

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. 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.

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.

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Thanksgiving and Prayer

Like any good letter, the letter to the Romans starts with an introduction. This is our second of three lessons on Paul's introduction. In the first lesson we considered Paul's greeting and blessing. In this lesson we will look at his thanksgiving and prayer. Through our series we will stay focused on one particular passage with each lesson, observing and interpreting that passage. The difference is in the introduction.

Observing the introduction provides a good opportunity to pick up as much as you can about the context of the letter. Who wrote it? Who received it? What was the purpose? In our first lesson, I ventured outside of Romans chapter 1, mostly to Acts to gain more context about the author Paul and about the Roman recipients.

In this lesson, I will again be going outside of Romans chapter 1, looking also at the end of Romans. We can get a lot of context by looking at the beginning and the end before getting into the meat of the message. Also, in the case of Romans, there are significant parallels between the introduction and conclusion which will help us consider the question of purpose. Since I will refer often to the conclusion, before we read Romans 1:8-15, if you have your Bible with you, you might consider pausing the recording and reading yourself or skimming over the conclusion which is 15:14-16:27.

[Read Romans 1:8-15.]

The statement of thanksgiving in verse 8 is quite brief. "I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world." It is a very positive statement. Knowledge of the Roman community and their faith in Jesus has spread. I imagine that Paul means that the growing movement of Christian churches in and around the Roman empire have heard of the growing community of believers in Rome's capital. At the end of the letter, in Romans 16:16, Paul tells them, "All the churches of Christ greet you." By bringing greetings in his letters, Paul encouraged among the churches the perception that each one is part of something much larger than their own local community. Paul is thankful that the Roman community contributes positively to the growing Christian movement by being an example of faith in Jesus. It would have been encouraging for churches around the empire to know that in the central city there also existed a fellowship of believers walking with Christ.

Paul's mention of the whole world does not need to include North America or Australia. In context it communicates that knowledge of the Roman's faith is not limited to the Roman empire but has gone beyond its borders, spreading as the church spreads, spilling over the boarder of the empire into the wider world.

The prayer section of the greeting is more extensive than the thanksgiving, taking up verses 9-15. Paul lets the Romans know that he prays for them often, even unceasingly. And then Paul tells them about his personal prayer request that he might come to see them, to have a ministry among them. Paul knows that he has something to offer to the Romans to help strengthen them in their faith, to produce fruit among them. And he feels an obligation towards them as the apostle to the Gentiles.

One way to observe this section of thanksgiving and prayer is to consider, not only what Paul says, but also how Paul says what he says. In courses on communication and preaching, I was taught to consider three things in my introduction: ethos, pathos and logos. Ethos is the speaker's credibility. You are answering the question that your listeners are thinking, "Who are you to be talking to me about this topic?" Pathos connects to the heart, answering on the emotional level the listeners' question, "Why would I want to listen to you?" Addressing logos, the speaker answers the question, "What is it you want to talk to me about? What is your topic or message?"

The Greeks wrote the book on the art of rhetoric. Ethos, pathos and logos are all Greek terms. Our understanding of these ideas in communication starts with the Greeks. We noticed in the first lesson that Paul's introduction follows the Greek standard of letter writing, including a greeting, blessing, thanksgiving and prayer. Paul knew how to write a Greek letter. Paul would have also been aware of basic principles of Greek rhetoric. So, to gain insight into how Paul communicates, it makes sense to consider how Paul addresses the rhetorical questions of ethos, pathos and logos in his introduction to the Romans.

Ethos

We will start with the ethos question, "Who are you to be talking to us about this topic?" Church members familiar with their own pastor usually do not need a lot of convincing in regard to the first part of the question, "Who are you to be talking to us?" They understand that he is the pastor and it is his job to preach on Sunday. Usually church members, listening to their regular pastor, do not consider the second part of the question much either, "Who are you to be talking to us *about this topic?*" Though a young single pastor would be wise to take into account the question of credibility when preaching about how to parent your teenagers. The church members would understand his role to preach while naturally wondering who are you to preach to me about parenting.

Paul had never been to Rome. Nor was he involved in pioneering the work of the gospel in Rome. Understanding the importance ethos, Paul establishes his credibility right from the start of his greeting. In verse 1 Paul identifies himself as a servant of Jesus and also as an apostle. An apostle is one sent out with a message. The message for Paul is the gospel. This begins to move into the question of logos, "What do you want to talk to me about?" Clarifying the common ground of a message can also build ethos. I have learned this principle working in partnership with other Christians. We can be excited about plans and strategies and initiatives to care, to witness, to worship, and I can get excited about those things. But I am going to remain reserved until I know what a potential partner believes about Jesus Christ, about the Bible and about the gospel of grace. Are we coming from the same central beliefs, the same heart for Jesus? If we can establish that, then I can focus on the other details. Paul builds this common ground early. He tells the Romans that his message flows out of the holy Scriptures. And he describes this message as having to do with Jesus Christ, the son of God who is man, messiah and God. Paul's audience is Christian, so he builds common ground with them from the beginning by affirming the Bible and Jesus. This helps establish his credibility with his listeners.

Paul further answers the ethos question, "Who are you to be writing to us about this topic?" by clearly communicating his special commission from Jesus to take the gospel to the Gentiles. Verse 5, "we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles." He repeats this idea in verses 14, "I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and the foolish." And when he concludes the letter Paul will say in 15:15, "I have written very boldly to you...because of the grace that was given me from God to be a minister of

Christ Jesus to the Gentiles.” Paul has unique credibility that no one can really match. When asked, “Who are you to speak to us on this topic?”, he responds, “I am the one appointed by Jesus Christ to take the gospel to the Gentiles.”

Pathos

Establishing that you have credibility to speak to an audience on a particular topic, does not guarantee that your listeners will receive your message. They must want to listen to you. Pathos reaches out to the heart, motivating the audience to want to listen. For me, the most interesting element in how Paul communicates through his introduction is the element of pathos. It is interesting to notice the effort Paul makes to connect, not only to the mind, but also to the heart.

Priscila and Aquila, who had worked with Paul and who are now back in Rome (16:3), probably looked forward with great eagerness to hear Paul’s letter read. Not only because of the credibility he held in their eyes, but just as much, because of the close relationship they shared with one another. They would have wanted to hear from Paul, both because in their mind they knew him to be a gifted teacher and also because in their hearts they shared relationship with Paul. They knew his heart and trusted him.

But few of the believers in Rome had any relationship with Paul at all. Paul begins to build relationship by taking time in his introduction to express his feelings for the Romans. He mentions that he prays for them unceasingly. Though he does not know them personally, they are on his mind and in his heart. Consider these phrases he uses: (1) “if perhaps now *at last* I may succeed in coming to you”; (2) “For *I long to see you*”; (3) “*often* I have planned to come to you (and have been prevented thus far)”. He uses similar language in his conclusion, writing in 15:23, “I have had for many years *a longing to come to you*.”

Paul explains that his failure to come to Rome did not have anything to do with personal desire or feeling towards the Romans but everything to do with God’s call on his life. In 1:13 he explains that he has been prevented from coming to the Romans without explaining what prevented him. We see in the conclusion that it has to do with his obligation to the Gentiles. The same sense of calling urging him to Rome also required him to work elsewhere before being free to come to Rome. He explains in 15:19, “from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ...for this I have often been hindered from coming to you.” He could not come until he finished his work in the eastern half of the Roman empire.

Paul connects to the heart by communicating his desire to come and the positive reason for why he has not yet come. Paul also connects to the heart by communicating his desire to receive from the Romans. Though a skilled apostle with a special commission and years of missionary experience, Paul indicates his belief that he too has something to receive from the brothers and sisters in Rome. After writing that he wants to impart some spiritual gift to the Romans, he comments in 1:12, “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.” He expects not only to give but also to receive. Similarly, in the conclusion in 15:24 he writes, “I hope to see you in passing [on my way to Spain], and to be helped on my way there by you, when I have first enjoyed your company for a while”. Paul communicates two things in both of these verses. He communicates the expectation to receive from the Romans. And he communicates the expectation of encouragement through the fellowship of their company. Paul affirms the Romans by acknowledging they too have something to give him and by stating his expectation to enjoy being with them. Wouldn’t that make you feel good, to hear the apostle Paul say, “I look forward to the blessing I can gain from you and also to the enjoyment of just being with you.”

One final observation about pathos comes from Paul’s concluding greetings in chapter 16. Paul greets 24 believers by name along with several groups of believers. It is by far the longest list of personal greetings in any letter from Paul. If Paul has never been to Rome how is it that Paul knows more people here than anywhere else? Perhaps Paul has here named every single person he knows in Rome. Writing to the Thessalonians or Ephesians, Paul would not be expected to greet a long list

of people by name. He would have to greet everyone in the church. Greeting all these Romans he may be recognizing that relationship is often transferable. Acknowledging the relationships he has with several believers in Rome may open the hearts of others to hear his message. A brother in Rome may have thought, "I do not know Paul, but Priscilla knows him well and so do Ampliatus and Patrobas. If they approve of him, I guess I do, too." Mentioning all these relationships bonded through the work of ministry helps Paul build bridges of both pathos and ethos. It adds credibility and motivates the heart to listen.

Logos

A third question should be addressed early in the introduction of a talk or long letter, especially to an unfamiliar audience, and that is the question of logos. "What is the topic of your message? What do you want to talk to us about?" Paul's message is the gospel of Jesus Christ. The first mention of gospel is in verse 1. And in verse 2 we are reassured that the gospel is centered in Jesus. That this whole letter is going to be about the gospel begins to come out in verse 15, "I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome." Focus on the gospel carries into this thesis in 16-17, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel..." What Paul is going to say about the gospel is stated in the rest of the thesis, which we will look at in the next lesson. For now, it is enough to recognize that Paul forecasts to the Romans that the message he wants to give them concentrates on the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In answering the assumed questions of ethos, pathos and logos, the skilled communicator Paul prepares the way for his message to be heard. Another question that comes to mind as we interpret Romans is the question of purpose. "What are you trying to do through this message Paul? You have built credibility, you have connected to the hearts of your listeners, you have announced that you want to talk about the gospel, to what end? What do you hope to accomplish?"

I will give you four possibilities of purpose. And we do not need to limit ourselves to one of them. A skilled communicator can accomplish more than one purpose in one letter.

Purpose

1. Introductory

The first purpose of Paul's letter to the Romans is introductory. Paul uses Romans to introduce himself and his message in preparation for his coming to Rome to have a fruitful ministry among them. Paul directly states his intentions of coming to Rome and engaging in ministry, "I long to see you that I might have fruit among you." This letter helps prepare the way.

While introduction in preparation of future ministry clearly comes through as one of Paul's objectives, it hardly explains the length of Romans. This is Paul's longest letter according to the Greek word count. Why would he write such a long letter, if he only intended to announce to the Romans his plan to come to them? Certainly, there is more to it.

2. Missional

As a second possible purpose, we also recognize that the letter is missional. This may be hinted at in the introduction when Paul indicates the scope of his calling, "to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles." The missional intention comes out clearly in the conclusion when Paul communicates that he has preached the gospel from Jerusalem all the way to Illyricum and intends to go to Spain. Paul is on a mission to take the gospel to the Gentiles. Having completed a stage of ministry in the eastern territory of the Roman empire, he is now ready to turn to the west.

When considering the completed mission, Paul refers to the Roman province Illyricum which covered approximately the territory of the Illyrian peoples. The province had stretched in the south from modern Albania up northwards through Dalmatia in modern Croatia. Romans are famous for their roads. One of the more famous roads, the Via Egnatia, began after crossing the Adriatic sea from the back heel of Italy over to the modern city Durres in Albania. Beginning at Durres, the Via Egnatia crossed from West to East through Macedonia to Thessalonica and then on to Byzantium which is now Turkey's Istanbul. Built to extend Roman control over the area, the Via Egnatia served Paul in

the spread of the gospel at least on his journey from Philippi to Thessalonica. It is not clear how or when Paul took the gospel to Illyricum. Possibly, on his third missionary journey, during an unrecorded period, Paul followed the Via Egnatia up to Durres and so carried the good news to Illyricum's border.

Having spread the gospel throughout the eastern Roman Empire, leaving churches to continue the witness, Paul now has his sights turned to Rome and beyond Rome to the rich fields of Spain, rich in wheat and wine and olive oil. Spain is an important Roman possession in the west. Explaining his desire to go there, Paul states for the Romans in 15:20 his personal ministry strategy, "I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named, that I might not build upon another man's foundation." According to this strategy, Paul is not planning to set up shop in Rome, where the gospel foundation is already laid. As further explains his plans in 15:23-24, "but now, with no further place for me in these regions, and since I have had for many years a longing to come to you whenever I go to Spain – for I hope to see you in passing, and to be helped on my way there by you when I have first enjoyed your company for a while." Paul's vision is to preach the gospel in Rome for the benefit of the already established church and then to continue on to Spain. And he wants the Romans to help him on the way.

We can conclude that Romans is the most theologically sound support letter ever written. Paul is asking the Romans to join him in the mission, helping him on the way. Why, then, go into such a long explanation of the gospel? One reason is to create vision among the Romans, vision for a worldwide proclamation of the gospel. The more excited you are about the gospel for yourself and your own community, the more passion you have for others to know the good news. It is really good news! We are called to proclaim it. As Paul writes in 10:14-15, "How shall they believe in whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring glad tidings of good things!'" Paul wants to proclaim the gospel to all the Gentiles. And he wants fruit. He wants to see the obedience of faith working in their hearts. He is coming Rome to go to Spain. He does not just want help. He wants to create enthusiastic support and vision among the Romans for the mission. What better way than stirring up their hearts with the gospel and inviting them to join in.

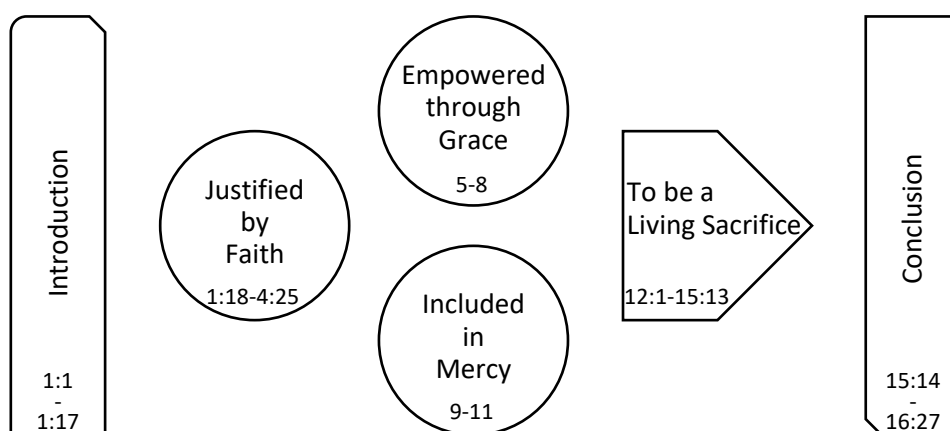
This missionary purpose of the letter is clearly stated in the conclusion. And we can see how an explanation of the gospel enhances the invitation to join in. Yet, we come back to the same issue as before, "Why such a long explanation of the gospel if the purpose is simply to stir up hearts for the mission?" That could be accomplished with a much shorter letter like others Paul had written.

3. Apologetic

Another possible purpose of Romans is apologetic. Paul's style and structure indicate that he is concerned with providing a defense for the gospel that he is preaching. That is what apologetic means in this context. Apology is not saying sorry, but providing a defense for what you believe. In regard to style, Paul creates a literary antagonist that he uses throughout the first 11 chapters. The purpose of the antagonist is to raise questions against Paul's argument, so that Paul can then answer for us those questions. For example, at the end of chapter 2 Paul concludes that being a Jew outwardly is not what counts, but having a changed heart that leads to obedience, that is what counts. The literary antagonist then asks in 3:1 "Then what advantage has the Jew?" It's a good question. One that Paul answers briefly in chapter 3 and then more fully in chapters 9-11. In chapter 6 we get the classic criticism of the gospel of grace, when Paul's opponent asks, "Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase?" Paul's typical short response follows, "By no means!" Then he gives a longer defense, explaining how it is that grace brings about righteousness. Those are just two examples of the way Paul raises questions against his own message, so that he can then provide the answers. This stylistic use of a literary antagonist suggests that Paul's purpose is apologetic. He wants to provide a defense for the gospel.

The structure of the letter supports the idea that Paul is making a defense. Chapter 1:16-17 give us the thesis that God's righteousness is revealed in the gospel. In chapters 1-4 Paul states the foundational truth of this gospel, that a person is justified or declared righteous through faith when they accept the grace of God in Christ. That foundational truth of justification by faith raises two major objections, which I alluded to in the earlier examples. If righteousness is a free gift then no one will try to live righteously. That is the major objection Paul addresses in chapters 5-8. The second major objection asks, "What about the law of Moses and the place of the Jews?" If grace matters and not law, then does God show himself unfaithful to his Old Testament promises. That second major objection is addressed in chapters 9-11.

So, in the argument section of the letter, Paul states his case in 1-4 and then proceeds to answer two major objections in chapters 5-8 and 9-11. In his argument section he is providing a defense of the gospel. I have included a chart in the notes at observetheword.com if you would like to check that out.



Through style, using a literary antagonist, and through structure, stating his case and answering major objections, Paul presents a defense or apology for the gospel. Perhaps Paul, on his way to Jerusalem and not knowing what will happen there, has taken time to write out this defense for the sake of future believers. However, even though there are apologetic elements in the letter, classifying the whole letter as apologetic does not best fit the context of the letter, nor even the content of the argument. Paul is not using Romans as an occasion for the writing a general apologetic tract or theological tract about the gospel for future believers or believers in general. Paul's letter to the Romans is contextualized. He is writing to the Roman church, acknowledging them and even addressing in chapters 12-14 specific issues that apply to them. Also, when we look closely at the way Paul answers his literary antagonist, we will see that the answers are not intended primarily to convince a non-believing sceptic of the validity of the gospel, but to provide deeper understanding for those who have already accepted the gospel as truth.

4. Pastoral

There is another possibility. The fourth possible purpose is pastoral. Paul has announced his intention to come to Rome to have a gospel ministry among them. Why does he then write such a long letter about the gospel? Because, knowing that he still has a long trip to Jerusalem ahead of him (15:26) and not knowing when he will eventually make it to Rome, Paul is not content to wait until he gets to Rome. Paul's eagerness compels him to begin preaching the gospel to the Romans in written form. I believe I can best show the pastoral purpose of the letter by bringing your attention parallel themes in the introduction and conclusion. The themes Paul addresses at beginning and end help us to understand what he hoped to accomplish among the Romans; not only after arriving, but even before that through the teaching in this letter.

The repeated themes are especially apparent between the introduction and the last three verses of the letter. Let's consider those last three verses carefully. 16:25 begins "Now to him..." Paul does not complete that thought until the end of verse 27. "Now to him...to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen." This is the benediction of the letter to the Romans and the overall purpose of Paul's life. To God be the glory through Jesus Christ! Amen! Packed in between the "to him" and the "to God", Paul repeats four themes already raised in his introduction. They are (1) the center of his message, (2) the continuity of his message, (3) the scope of his message and (4) the purpose of his message. It is that purpose we want to recognize. The center of Paul's message is Jesus Christ. As in 1:2, he repeats here in 16:25 "according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ." His gospel is the preaching of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the center of the message. The continuity of the message was also affirmed in 1:2 and again here in 16:26, "by the Scriptures of the prophets." Paul's message now revealed flows from God's earlier revelation in Scripture. It has continuity with all the covenants and promises that preceded. As with 1:5 the scope here in 16:26 is "all the nations." It is a worldwide scope. So, the center is Jesus, the continuity is from the Old Testament, and the scope is all nations. The repetition at the end of the letter of center, continuity and scope shows us that Paul is coming back at the close to repeat major overarching themes he indicated at in the opening. This is true also of his purpose.

I am going to point out two phrases that Paul uses only in the introduction and conclusion. He does not mention these two phrases anywhere else in the letter, just once in the beginning and once in the end. (1) The first phrase is obedience of faith. We saw this phrase in 1:5, and we see it again in 16:26, "[the gospel] has been made known to all the nations, leading to an obedience of faith." Paul desires to see a transformation in the lives of Gentiles that flows out of faith in Jesus Christ. This is the overall structure of the letter to the Romans. First, we have the gospel message in 1-11 and then gospel practice in 12-15. Deep understanding of true faith in Jesus Christ leads to life transformation, to true obedience. Obedience of faith. We need an ever increasing understanding of our faith that we might have ever increasing practice of our faith. Paul is not content to begin that process with the Romans until after he has arrived among them. He starts the process with this letter. With the eager heart of a pastor, Paul explains the gospel to change the way the Romans think and the way the Romans live. That's the purpose of this letter.

That purpose is confirmed in the second phrase repeated only in the introduction and the conclusion; not really a phrase but a word. In 1:11 Paul says, "I long to see you that you may be *established*." And in 16:25 he writes, "Now to Him who is able to *establish* you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ." Instead of "established", your Bible might have "strengthen." As in the ESV, "I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to *strengthen* you." And, "Now to him who is able to *strengthen* you..." The Greek word means strengthen, establish, confirm or support. That is what Paul is about here. To strengthen or establish the Romans by the written preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Interestingly, Paul is eager to preach the gospel to the Romans who he has already called "beloved of God" and "saints." Nowhere in the letter does Paul question the orthodoxy of Roman belief or the reality of their faith. Of course, Paul wants to preach the gospel to non-believers. That's why he went to Spain. We see here that he also recognizes the importance of preaching the gospel to believers.

Two things I have noticed in Christian ministry about the need to preach the gospel to those who have already believed. First, I have noticed a fuzziness among believers about the core truth of the gospel. Recently, I taught at a Christian conference in another country, where I had the opportunity to get into a conversation with a young Christian woman who had just completed Bible school. She was able to share with me her own experience of coming to faith in Christ, and I could sense in her a genuine relationship with Jesus. As we continued in conversation, I asked her how she would answer the question, "Why did Jesus have to die?" I found it interesting that she really struggled to answer the question. And I was pleased that she and another participant made an appointment with me

later to talk about how to answer this question. What I have noticed is that many Christians who are walking in a living relationship with Jesus struggle to communicate clearly the how of the gospel. They know it has to do with sin and grace. But often the answer is a bit fuzzy, not precise or specific or confident. There is a struggle to clearly explain why Jesus had to die and what his death and resurrection accomplish. And if you have trouble communicating concepts that have to do with the gospel, that suggests you could benefit from closer examination and teaching of the gospel to better understand your faith.

The second thing I have noticed is how good evangelical churches and movements can be at communicating grace to non-believers and yet how poor at living out grace in Christian community. We are better at offering grace to outsiders while often requiring law from those on the inside. This is not surprising. Human nature and human society are legalistic. We know of no other way to live. Grace is counter-intuitive and counter-cultural. Though the gospel message is simple and understandable, really available to all, that does not mean it is easy to apply. There is some deep work that has to happen in us if we are to live out the gospel. Work that takes time and some struggle.

The gospel message is elegant. It can be faithfully expressed in terms simple enough for a child to receive and yet, speak with power into the deepest nature of God and man. I love the booklet I use to share the gospel with people. Even if I don't use the booklet, I have the outline memorized, and I have the app on my phone. It is simple and biblical and powerful. It helps me present the core truths of the gospel message in a clear way. While I love using a simple presentation of the gospel, I do not want my understanding of the gospel to remain simplistic. This is what I love about the letter to the Romans. As we maintain the simple expression of the gospel, Paul is challenging us to think more precisely and more deeply about gospel truth and how that truth plays out in gospel living.

Paul wrote Romans to introduce himself to the Romans, to invite the Romans to join in the mission to the nations, to answer some of the challenging questions proposed by sceptics. But when asked, "Why did Paul write Romans, the whole long message from beginning to end." I answer, "Paul wrote Romans from the heart of a pastor who believes in the transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. As a pastor who recognizes that believers need to be pushed to go deeper into their understanding of the gospel to be established in their faith, strengthened for transformation." That's why Paul wrote Romans. And that's why we study Romans. We put in some tough work of observation and interpretation, to go deeper in gospel truth, that we as individuals and as churches would have our worldview shaped by the gospel and our lifestyle transformed by the gospel. And we do this for God's glory. Its not just about us. It is about faithfully representing the glorious gospel of our Father in heaven and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Reflection questions

1. In Romans 1:8, Paul thanks God that the faith of the Romans is proclaimed throughout the whole world. Do you feel connected to a worldwide movement? What helps you connect with the reality that you are part of something much bigger than your local church?
2. What do you think was the reality of Paul's prayer life? How do you imagine that he prayed unceasingly for the Romans? What might that look like practically? Why do you think the Romans were so strongly on Paul's heart?
3. Who has God put on your heart to pray for? Is it a person, a group of believers, a nation, a people group?
4. Read the last three verses of Romans, 16:25-27. Identify the center of the message, the continuity of the message, the scope of the message and the purpose of the message (or purposes).
5. Paul is excited to preach the gospel to Christians in Rome. What excites you about the gospel? What aspects of the gospel do you preach to yourself or what aspects of the gospel would you love for your family and friends to really get?

Lesson 3: Paul's Thesis for the Letter

Romans 1:16-17

- ¹⁵...I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. (Why so eager?)
1. ¹⁶ For
I am not ashamed of the gospel, (Why not ashamed?)
2. for
it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, (Why is it God's power for salvation?)
to the Jew first and also to the Greek.
3. ¹⁷ For
in it *the* righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; (How is God's righteousness revealed?)
as it is written, "But the righteous *man* shall live by faith."

NASB

Introduction

Today we focus on the thesis of Paul's letter to the Romans. This is our third out of three lessons on the introduction, the part where Paul tells us what his letter is about. In the original Greek of chapter 1:16-17, Paul uses the word "for" to logically connect three statements. Let's read it starting with verse 15.

[Read Romans 1:15-17.]

We can imagine the flow of thought by inserting questions to which Paul is providing an answer and by changing the word "for" to the word "because" to help us get the logical flow. Paul has just commented in verse 15, "I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome."

We might ask, "Why, Paul, are you so eager to preach the gospel to we who are in Rome?"

"Because I am not ashamed of the gospel!"

"Why are you not ashamed of the gospel, Paul?"

"Because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."

"Why Paul is the gospel God's power of salvation?"

"Because in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'But the righteous man shall live by faith.'"

"Okay, Paul, how is God's righteousness revealed in the gospel?"

"Well, if you have some time, I will explain that to you."

And that is what Paul does for the rest of the letter. He explains how the gospel of Jesus Christ reveals the righteous plan of God and is thus the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.

Let's consider each phrase of the thesis individually. And then at the end, I really want to spend some time on Paul's quote from Habakkuk.

1. I am not ashamed of the gospel.

"I am not ashamed of the gospel." I have heard the apologist Michael Ramsden come at this statement with the question, "What makes us ashamed of the gospel?" Paul is not ashamed. Why might we be ashamed of the gospel? Have you ever felt ashamed and so, have not spoken up about the gospel? Or you felt shame when you were speaking about the gospel? Why is that?

Shame happens when you speak or act in such a way that people around you reject you, put you down, devalue you because of what you have said or done. They laugh at you or they morally judge you. You put yourself out there, and you are rejected. As a result, you experience this feeling we call shame. What are some reasons that we feel shame because of the gospel?

Intellectual shaming

There is intellectual shaming.

“You are going to tell me that you believe in all this stuff. God. Heaven. Sin. Hell. You actually believe there was a real Jesus and that it matters that he died on the cross. You can be a Christian, but don’t you get that Jesus is just a metaphor. It does not matter that he really died on the cross. It is just metaphorical. He is a symbol of love. That’s what it’s all about. Nobody really believes all that actually happened or that there is really a hell. Next thing you’re going to tell me is that you believe in a worldwide flood. You are so naïve. Science has taken us past all this primitive stuff.”

That’s intellectual shaming. A significant element of society will try to shame you intellectually if you hold to the truths of the gospel.

Religious shaming

There is also religious shaming.

“Wait a minute. Our family has been Christians for generations and now you’re telling me that you have a special, personal relationship with Jesus that I don’t have, and your dad does not have, and grandfather does not have. It’s just by grace through faith. Who are you all the sudden to figure out that everyone else is wrong? That your family, your society, people of all these other religions, that none of us get it. Why are you trying to be so holy, reading your Bible and talking to Jesus and trying to be better than everybody else?”

A religious element of society, often coming from family, will shame you when you question the religious rituals and practices, assumptions and behaviors that are accepted as the norm. When the gospel leads you to act differently, to believe differently religiously, then you might experience religious shaming. Who are you to be different?

Moral shaming

You can also experience moral shaming. This comes in two versions. You can be shamed morally when you begin to live right, when you begin to live in the way you believe the gospel is calling you to live. When you come to Christ and your life changes, your friends might not love it. And it is normal for them to try to shame you into your old behaviors or into behaviors that maybe you never had.

“Woah, you’re a virgin. Wow. You’re suppressed. Here, have a drink, have a puff. What, we are not good enough for you anymore? You’ve found better friends? You hang out with your Christian friends and you can’t hang out with us? One beer, what’s one beer?”

There is a shaming of your gospel morals. You try to stand up, take a stand for Christ, and you get shamed. There is another type of moral shaming that’s even harder to deal with that insists your view of God makes God out to be ugly or unfair, unjust, unrighteous, unloving. This can get to some of the really difficult questions.

“If your God is so loving and he is just and he is all powerful then why does he let innocent little children suffer, die, have leukemia? God doesn’t care about the children?”

“What about the person who has never even heard of Jesus? You are telling me that the only way to get to heaven is through Jesus? So, all these people who have not heard of Jesus are going to hell, right? So, God locks out everybody who isn’t a Christian? God is that intolerant? Your view of God is ugly.”

This shaming shames you for your gospel worldview. This is tough. This is where some of the really hard questions come up. You are being rejected because of your view of God and your view of people and your view of salvation.

Paul is aware of all of this kind of shaming. He faced intellectual shaming from philosophers in Athens; he faced religious shaming from his family and countrymen; he faced moral shaming from

the pagan culture around him that tolerates everything and every god. The deep objections that call into question Paul's vision of God, he has faced it all, and he believes in a robust gospel. He believes the gospel answers the intellectual questions. It answers the religious questions. It answers the moral questions. So, he says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ!"

Furthermore, Paul's sense of honor and shame does not come from the society around him. They are trying to put on him a sense of shame for his gospel beliefs, but Paul knows his honor comes from God, and the shame that worries Paul is the shame of being counted unrighteous when he stands before the judgment of God. That's the shame Paul cares about. In Romans chapter 10 verse 11, Paul is going to quote Isaiah, saying, "And whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." Paul has found a way that he can stand before God on that day and not be put to shame. And that way is the gospel. It is future oriented. I cannot tell you that you will not be *shamed* for your gospel belief. I can tell you that you do not need to be *ashamed* for your gospel belief. Friends, coworkers, family members, educators will try to shame you intellectually, religiously, morally for your belief in God, for your belief in Jesus Christ. But God will not shame you. Your life will be affirmed by God. If you trust in the gospel, you will not be put to shame.

Paul, fully out of his heart and conviction says, "I am eager to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome, because I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes!"

2. The gospel is the power of God for salvation.

Why is Paul not ashamed? Because he really believes there is power in the gospel to save us. He does not say here what we need saving from. But whatever it is, the gospel is God's power to do that saving. The gospel is not just words. The gospel is an unleashing of power. The gospel is not some philosophy made up by man. The gospel is an act of God that brings healing into our brokenness.

Most people can agree that things are not the way they should be. People are broken, lost, lonely, searching, unfulfilled, guilty, condemned. We know inside that there is a problem, and we need a real solution that recognizes the real problem and has real power to overcome that problem. The gospel is God's power for the salvation we need.

Paul adds two further emphasis. First, this power of salvation comes to those who believe. Belief is a critical component for experiencing God's power of salvation. Second, belief is available universally, "to *everyone* who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." Paul will maintain these two truths throughout his argument; that the gospel is applied to those who have faith and it is available to be applied universally. Everybody can believe.

Paul states the claim here, "the gospel is the power of God for salvation." He is not explaining that claim, yet. This is his thesis. We will have to wait to see how his argument unfolds. How does the power of God bring about salvation?

He is going to give us one clarification. The gospel brings about power for salvation by revealing the righteousness of God.

3. The gospel reveals the righteousness of God.

"For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith."

A lot of recent scholarly discussion has revolved around this phrase "righteousness of God." This is going to get a little detailed, but it is worth it for right interpretation as we go through Romans. I'll give you four options for what "righteousness of God" could mean. First, we ask, "Is the righteousness of God something that applies to God, does God own it, or is it something that applies to a person?" In Paul's use here who does the righteousness of God apply to? If the righteousness of God applies to God then we can ask a second question, "Is it an action of God or is it an attribute of God?"

(1) So, righteousness of God could be a statement about God's character, a virtue (attribute). The righteousness of God is his righteous character and that righteousness character is revealed in the gospel. We will see this use in Paul's argument. Opponents accuse Paul of making God out to be unrighteous. "Your gospel Paul is unfair. It shows God as unfaithful." Paul is going to argue that the gospel actually presents God as wholly righteous. So, in one sense Paul is going to say the righteousness of God is something that applies to God and that it applies to his character, to his nature.

(2) But then it is also interesting to note how often in the prophets the righteousness of God is depicted as action. It is not connected to who God is, but what God does, and often in context with the word salvation. For example, Isaiah 56:1, "Thus says the Lord, 'Preserve justice and do righteousness, for My salvation is about to come and My righteousness to be revealed'" (see also Isaiah 51:5 and 45:21b-25 and Habakkuk as discussed below). Something is about to happen, and when that something happens it is the coming of my salvation, the revealing of my righteousness. God is doing something that is righteousness. Here salvation and righteousness are actions of God that are about to be seen. God acts righteously in history to judge and to save. We will also see this idea in Romans. The death of Jesus on the cross is the righteous act by which God saves.

These two interpretations are possible if the righteousness of God applies to God. On the other hand, can the righteousness of God be something that belongs to a person? If it is then is the righteousness of God a status that God gives to a person, or is righteousness of God a virtue expressed by the person?

(3) If righteousness is a status then that means the person has a righteous standing before God. When God looks at that person, he considers them to be righteous. And that righteousness comes from God. It is the righteousness of God, not the righteousness of Michael. The source is God. God bestows righteous status. It comes from him.

(4) If righteousness of God is a virtue or quality expressed by a person then righteousness of God is the type of righteousness approved of or defined by God and then lived out by a human being. That is not righteous status conferred by God. That is righteous life or righteous character. This idea is expressed in Deuteronomy 6:25, "It will be righteousness for us if we are careful to observe all this commandment before the LORD our God, just as He commanded us." In this sense the righteousness of God applies to a human being living according to a righteousness defined by God. We will see both the ideas in Romans, that the righteousness of God is a status given by God to a person and that righteousness of God is practically lived out. We see both. It is essential that we get the order correct.

Four Options for Interpreting Paul's Phrase "Righteousness of God"

God	Person
Righteous character of God	Righteous status given by God
Righteous action by God	Righteous character approved by God

I may have just cheated. I have just said that all four senses of righteousness of God appear in Paul's argument. We have to pay very close attention to the context to see which is which. Some scholars insist that an argument cannot stand if the author changes the meaning of a word or phrase as he goes. I think that is a fair principle in communication. I think that is the norm. When people are making an argument, they need to keep their terms consistent. But it is untrue to the way that authors actually write. Authors like to be clever. An author very well may employ one term with multiple meanings to make a concise argument if that author clearly communicates the meaning of the phrase as he goes. I believe Paul has done this very carefully and with great insight in regard to the term righteousness of God. What we are going to see is that God has manifested his righteous character through righteous action to provide a righteous status that brings about righteous behavior in those who believe. And each one is the righteousness of God.

We will test this interpretation of Paul's thesis by going through his argument and letting Paul develop our understanding of how the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel. That is up to Paul. We are going to have to follow it through.

One last thing we notice here is that Paul again connects God's action to faith. The righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith. Again, faith plays a role here. Some have pointed out that the word faith could mean faithfulness, so we could translate the phrase as from faithfulness to faith, meaning the faithfulness of Christ to the faith of man. That is an interesting interpretation. I am tempted to understand the phrase as from beginning to end the righteousness of God is experienced by faith. However, the phrase is ambiguous enough here in the thesis that I am comfortable not trying too hard to interpret it. I will just wait and see how Paul brings faith or faithfulness into his argument.

Paul concludes his thesis with a quote from Habakkuk 2:4. What Paul does here is really fantastic. We need to take a closer look at his quote.

4. The righteous man shall live by faith. (Habakkuk 2:4)

Paul is not doing here what is called proof texting. He did not search through the Old Testament to try to find some verse that had righteousness or faith in it because that would really work in his thesis. It is what we would do if we were writing a term paper or essay on faith. We just need a good Scripture, so we google it, and find it. We pull it out of context and just plug it in. That's proof texting. That's bad use of the Bible. There is a lot more going on here. Paul's use of Habakkuk 2:4 is importing the entire prophecy of Habakkuk into his thesis. He did not just select any verse. He selected a key verse from a prophet whose theology lines up with the argument Paul is going to be making about the gospel. People who knew the message of Habakkuk heard this and did not just think of one verse. The one verse echoes the whole of what was going on in the prophecy. It is more like a hyperlink. You just click on this one verse and the whole message pops up.

When we look at Habakkuk, we are going to see two things. We see God justifying his plan of salvation to Habakkuk. "This is the plan of salvation Habakkuk, and this is why it is righteous." And we also see that the right role of the righteous person is to trust God in his plan, no matter how crazy it sounds. Trust God. Believe in Him. Have faith. These are the two things in Habakkuk. Paul does the same thing in the argument section of Romans. Paul is going to show us that God is just. He is righteous in his plan of salvation. And then Paul is going to tell us that the right role of the righteous person, when faced with this plan of salvation called the gospel, is to trust God. Have faith in the plan. Have faith in the author of the plan.

Habakkuk is only three chapters long. Let's look at the whole prophecy of Habakkuk. It is not too hard to find in your Bible if you just go to Matthew and go back four books. It is a short prophecy. It is also one of the easier prophecies to get into, because it is kind of like wisdom literature. There is this back and forth going on between God and Habakkuk.

We start with Habakkuk complaining to God to do something about the wickedness in Judah. This is a couple of generations after the northern kingdom of Israel has been destroyed by Assyria and exiled for their wickedness. Now there is all this sin going on in Judah. Habakkuk has risen up as a prophet. He is incensed. He is angry at Judah and is calling on God.

Habakkuk 1:1-4

¹The oracle which Habakkuk the prophet saw.

²How long, O LORD, will I call for help, and You will not hear?

I cry out to You, "Violence!" Yet You do not save.

³Why do You make me see iniquity, and cause me to look on wickedness?

Yes, destruction and violence are before me; strife exists and contention arises.

⁴Therefore the law is ignored and justice is never upheld.

For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore justice comes out perverted.

So, this is Habakkuk's condemnation on the nation of Judah. There is violence and wickedness, strife and contention. "The law is ignored and justice is never upheld. For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore, justice comes out perverted."

God responds in 1:5-11. It is not what Habakkuk wants to hear.

Habakkuk 1:5-11

⁵"Look among the nations! Observe! Be astonished! Wonder!

Because I am doing something in your days— You would not believe if you were told.

Now that sounds good. It sounds like we are getting ready to get a good plan of salvation. "Be astonished! Wonder! You would not believe if you were not told!"

⁶"For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that fierce and impetuous people
Who march throughout the earth to seize dwelling places which are not theirs.

⁷"They are dreaded and feared; their justice and authority originate with themselves.

⁸"Their horses are swifter than leopards and keener than wolves in the evening.

Their horsemen come galloping, their horsemen come from afar;

They fly like an eagle swooping down to devour.

⁹"All of them come for violence. Their horde of faces moves forward.

They collect captives like sand.

¹⁰"They mock at kings and rulers are a laughing matter to them.

They laugh at every fortress and heap up rubble to capture it.

¹¹"Then they will sweep through like the wind and pass on.

But they will be held guilty, they whose strength is their god."

"But God, what's this? I am asking for just on Judah, and your plan is to bring this wicked, powerful, violent nation Babylon to come and wipe out Judah and to carry them off into exile. That's your plan, God?" Habakkuk is not too pleased. We get Habakkuk's response to God's plan of salvation in 1:12-2:1.

Habakkuk 1:12-2:1

¹²Are You not from everlasting, O LORD, my God, my Holy One? We will not die.

You, O LORD, have appointed them to judge; and You, O Rock, have established them to correct.

¹³Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, and You can not look on wickedness with favor.

Why do You look with favor on those who deal treacherously?

Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up Those more righteous than they?

¹⁴Why have You made men like the fish of the sea, like creeping things without a ruler over them?

¹⁵The Chaldeans bring all of them up with a hook, drag them away with their net,

And gather them together in their fishing net. Therefore they rejoice and are glad.

¹⁶Therefore they offer a sacrifice to their net and burn incense to their fishing net;

Because through these things their catch is large, and their food is plentiful.

¹⁷Will they therefore empty their net and continually slay nations without sparing?

Habakkuk describes the Babylonians as these fishermen that catch nation after nation in their nets. They gather up peoples and destroy them. Even worse than that, they do not give praise to God, but give praise to their nets, their own power, to their swords, to their chariots, to their strategies, to their armies, to their plans. The Babylonians praise themselves for their victories. God is calling this sinful people to come deal out justice on Judah, but that people is arrogant and proud, rejecting God even as they are doing his will. "You are holy God. This cannot be the righteous plan. How can this be right." Habakkuk responds.

¹I will stand on my guard post and station myself on the rampart;

And I will keep watch to see what He will speak to me, And how I may reply when I am reproved.

Habakkuk takes his stand. I am reminded of when I had little girls. There were those times when I would say, "Come." Or I would say, "Do this." And that little person would look at me and would plant their feet solid and would not move. They stood and waited to see what I would do. And here we have Habakkuk. God has said Babylonians will come. And Habakkuk says, "I am going up on the watch tower. I am going up on the wall. And I am going to plant my feet. I am going to stand. Because I don't believe God, that you who are righteous, can use an evil army to punish Judah. This is my answer, and I am going to wait and see how I might reply when I am reproved." He is expecting God to reprove him.

Habakkuk 2:2-4

²Then the LORD answered me and said, "Record the vision and inscribe it on tablets,
That the one who reads it may run.

³"For the vision is yet for the appointed time; it hastens toward the goal and it will not fail.
Though it tarries, wait for it; for it will certainly come, it will not delay.

God says, "This is my plan. You can write it down. And you can give it to a messenger to run it to the armies. Because it is happening. It is coming. You wait for it." Then comes our key verse.

⁴"Behold, as for the proud one, his soul is not right within him;
But the righteous will live by his faith.

"Habakkuk, we know the Babylonians are proud. Are you proud. Do you stand in pride against my righteous plan of salvation? Or will you trust me? Will you stand on the rampart in faith, trusting to see what I will do? If you want to live with me, if you want to live as righteous, you trust me and my plan of salvation."

Habakkuk 2:5-20

God goes on to give a longer explanation of what is going to happen to the Babylonians. He gave a hint in 1:11 that his use of the Babylonians is not a justification or a vindication of the actions of the Babylonians. God is able to use the wicked to bring about good. But the wicked are still responsible for their wickedness. For example, this was true of the Jewish leaders who handed Christ over for crucifixion. It is true of Pilate and Herod. They were all used by God to bring about his plan of salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That plan was good. And those men were still held accountable for their evil behavior. Here in a similar way, Babylon is going to be used by God to bring about righteous punishment, but they are held accountable, since they do not turn in faith. They do not yield to God. They do not accept the fact that they are a holy instrument, while God is the one who wins the battles. The hint of this in 1:11 says, "They will sweep through the land like the wind and pass on. But they will be held guilty, they whose strength is their God."

The judgment on the ones God used to judge gets described in length in 2:5-20. I am not going to go into all the details of how God holds Babylon to account. It is a series of five woes, so I will just read the woes:

2:6 Woe to him who increases what is not his.

2:9 Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house.

2:12 Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed.

2:15 Woe to you who make your neighbors drink, who mix in your venom even to make them drunk.

The last woe has to do with the idols. It is a cursing against the false religion of the Babylonians. One of the root problems of this arrogance that arises out of man is the turning away from the true God to the making of false gods to worship. This sixth woe is in 2:18-20.

¹⁸"What profit is the idol when its maker has carved it, or an image, a teacher of falsehood?
For its maker trusts in his own handiwork when he fashions speechless idols.

¹⁹"Woe to him who says to a piece of wood, 'Awake!' To a mute stone, 'Arise!' And that is your teacher?

Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, and there is no breath at all inside it.

This picture of idolatry is of these created things that men call to awake and speak. Then you get to verse 20.

²⁰“But the LORD is in His holy temple. Let all the earth be silent before Him.”

The Lord is going to speak. The idols are called to speak, but they are silent, dumb, powerless. God is in his holy temple. God is going to speak. It is not God who is silent, rather all the earth is silent before him. Mankind is silent when the true God speaks.

Habakkuk 3:1-19

This last woe makes a good transition into chapter 3. What we have in chapter 3 is a vision of a new faith perspective. All Habakkuk saw before of God’s plan was wicked Babylon. The vision of chapter 3 describes the coming of God as a judge, an avenger to punish Judah. Habakkuk no longer sees the army of Babylon. He sees God. In verse 2 he says, “Lord, I have heard the report about you and I fear. O Lord, revive your work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy.” I see you, Lord, coming to judge. In your wrath remember mercy.

Then Habakkuk describes the chariots and the rage of the Lord coming. I will skip ahead to verse 12. “In indignation you did march through the earth; in anger you did trample the nations. You did go forth for the salvation of your people, for the salvation you your anointed. You struck the head of the house of evil to lay him open from thigh to neck.”

We have a beautiful ending at the close of the chapter, made well known by the book *Hinds Feet on High Places*. We see Habakkuk now standing on the ramparts, waiting for the Lord to come. He is waiting in faith. He believes that this is God’s righteous judgment but that does not make it easier. This is difficult faith. It is hard to trust God in what has to happen to Judah. So, in verse 16 he says, “I heard and my inward parts trembled, at the sound my lips quivered. Decay enters my bones, and in my place I tremble. Because I must wait quietly for the day of distress. For the people to arise who will invade us.” That idea of waiting quietly takes us back to chapter 2 where Habakkuk was standing on the ramparts, and God told him to wait. The righteous lives by faith. And now we see faith in Habakkuk as he considers the incrementally increasing destruction of Judah. He is going to trust.

In verse 17, “Though the fig tree should not blossom,” so there is no fruit on the trees, “and there be no fruit on the vine.” The fruit is gone but with that is also wine. What you drink. “Though the yield of olives should fail,” and you have no oil for cooking or to bring light. “The fields produce no food,” so, not only is the fruit gone, the grain for bread, for basic sustenance, is gone. “Though the flock should be cut off from the fold,” which takes away meat and wool for clothing. “And there be no cattle in the stalls,” again no meat, milk or the cattle to help us work the land. Everything is gone.

Verse 18, “Yet I will exult in the Lord, I will rejoice in the good of my salvation.” It is not just a patient waiting. There is also a joy in relationship with the God of his salvation. “I will exult or boast in the Lord.” That word “exult” will come out three times in Romans 5 which echoes Habakkuk here. “I stand in grace. Not only am I not ashamed of the gospel, but I boast in my God and in Jesus Christ.”

Verse 19, “The Lord God is my strength and he has made my feet like hind’s feet and makes me walk on my high places.” God has lifted Habakkuk up above the destruction of Judah and the judgment of the wicked. And has given him solid ground, a sure salvation, where he stands by faith.

Paul has used Habakkuk to forecast for us his program in the argument section of Romans. Habakkuk was given the righteous plan of God. “This is the plan of salvation Habakkuk. Do you receive it or do you stand in pride and reject it?” Now Paul is going to give us 11 chapters where he lays out God’s plan of salvation in Jesus Christ. It is going to be counter-cultural. It is not going to be acceptable to the intellectual. And it is not going to be acceptable to the religious. It is radical grace through faith in Jesus Christ. That is the plan of salvation. Do you turn away and reject it? Or by faith do you say, “Yes! That is what I am staking my life on. That’s my rock.”

That is where Paul wants to take you. He wants to give you this understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ, so that by the end your heart will be bursting, and you will want to proclaim with Paul, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for I see that it is the power of God for salvation to everybody who believes, to the Jew first and to the rest of us, for in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith. Just as Habakkuk said, ‘The righteous man shall live by faith.’”

Reflection questions

1. Would you describe yourself as being like Paul, eager to share the gospel with whomever, wherever? Or do you sometimes hold back from taking opportunities because of shame? What led you to the feeling of shame, what do you think is behind that emotion for you?
2. Take a look at Paul’s thesis in 1:16-17. What theme or phrase stands out to you, either as important or especially interesting? Or what questions are raised for you?
3. Habakkuk stood on the rampart, disbelieving that the suffering to come could be from God. When in your life have you struggled to believe that your circumstances were part of God’s good plan.
4. Habakkuk undergoes a change in faith perspective from chapter 1 to chapter 3. In chapter 1 he could not see God in the plan. That all changed in chapter 3. He saw the coming of the Babylonians as the coming of God, both to punish and to save the faithful. Reflect back on your own experience with the gospel. What change of faith perspective did you experience, whether as a non-believer who came to see the truth of the gospel or as someone who grew up believing, but then came to see the reality of the gospel for yourself. Reflect on and describe when, how and what it was like for you to “see” the gospel of Jesus Christ through a new faith perspective.

Lesson 4: Indictment of the Pagan Man

Romans 1:18-32

Paul charges people who reject God with wicked behavior and suppression of the truth.

¹⁸ For the **wrath** of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, ¹⁹ because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.

People suppress the truth about God.

²⁰ For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. ²¹ For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. ²² Professing to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

God gives people over to their own fallen nature.

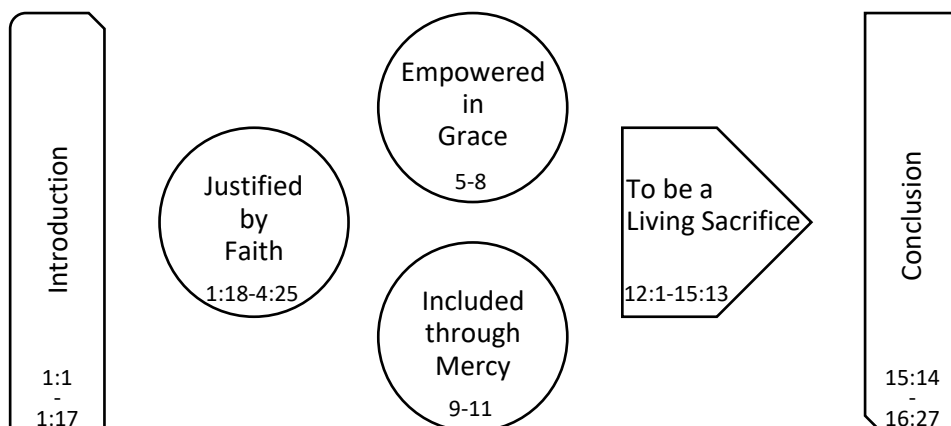
²⁴ Therefore **God gave them over** in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. ²⁵ For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

²⁶ For this reason **God gave them over to degrading passions**; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, ²⁷ and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.

²⁸ And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, **God gave them over to a depraved mind**, to do those things which are not proper, ²⁹ being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; *they are* gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹ without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; ³² and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.

NASB

Overview of Romans 1:18-4:25: God justifies by faith



We have completed Paul's introduction to Romans in the first 17 verses of chapter one. And now we are moving into the meat of the text, the body of the argument, which according to our organization is going to be separated into three parts. The core of the gospel message is in 1:18 through the end of chapter four. And we are going to call that "God justifies by faith" or "Justified by faith." After that Paul addresses two issues that arise out of the gospel. The first issue is in 5-8. We are going to call that "Empowered through grace." The second issue is in 9-11. We will call that "Included in mercy." After finishing the argument section, Paul moves into the application section, which we will see as a

call to worship as a living sacrifice. Interestingly, that call to worship as a living sacrifice connects with today's text, because in today's text we are going to see humankind turning their back on God, rejecting true worship of God. After we get through the whole gospel argument of Paul and begin the practical section, it is a turning back to true worship with our lives. So, there is this enveloping or connection that has to do with worship from the beginning accusation to the final exhortation.

Today we are on lesson four. This is our first lesson in the first major section of the argument, "God justifies by faith." In this section Paul uses a lot of legal language, the language of a courtroom. What we are going to see is Paul bringing an indictment or a charge against all mankind. And then there is going to be a verdict. It is kind of a surprise verdict. And then we end up with a precedent which is supporting the verdict.

In the indictment section, we will break this into three indictments. We will start with the indictment against pagan man. Then we will move to the indictment against the moral man. And then we will move to the indictment against the religious man. Sometimes I forget where I get things. I do not know if I have come up with the idea or if someone else has come up with the idea. To give credit where credit is due in this case, I am pretty sure it was back in college on a spring break trip that I heard Josh McDowell teaching on Romans, and he used this indictment of the pagan man, moral man, religious man structure. It stuck with me. I find it very helpful.

Today we are looking at the indictment of pagan man in Romans 1:18-32.

There is a major division in the text at the end of verse 25 which is clear, because Paul says, "Amen." When you are saying, "Amen," you are concluding something. In this case, the "Amen" ends the indictment. Paul has made his major point, but then he goes on to develop something that he says in the indictment. He says that God has given mankind over to his own desires. Paul is going to develop that idea of being given over in verse 26-32. I am going to just read right now verses 18-25 and end with the "Amen." Then we will read 26-32 when we get there.

Let's read Romans 1:18-25.

[Read Romans 1:18-25.]

I. Paul charges mankind with wicked behavior and suppression of the truth (1:18-19).

Paul's claim or charge is that mankind is ungodly and unrighteous. And for that reason, God's wrath is being revealed against mankind from heaven. It is not only that mankind is unrighteous. It is not only wicked behavior. There is something more here. Paul charges mankind with a suppression of truth. And he goes on to say in verse 19, "that which is known about God is evident to them," because God made it evident.

Paul charges mankind with being culpable or responsible for knowledge about God. We cannot just say, "We didn't know. How could we know there is a god out there?" Paul says that we are responsible for that knowledge, and we have repressed it. So, our first evil, our first against God is to push down truth about God and then to act in whatever way we want to act which ends up being wicked and ungodly.

Notice how that idea of wrath revealed connects back to the thesis. Paul had said in the thesis, in verse 17, that the righteousness of God is revealed through the gospel. Well, something else is being revealed here, the wrath of God is being revealed. It is the same kind of language, so we should ask, "What's the connection between the righteousness of God and the wrath of God?"

So, what is the connection? Well, they are the same thing. The wrath of God is the righteousness of God. It is a dangerous thing to ask a righteous judge to act righteously. It is even more dangerous to ask a righteous king to act righteously. And in this case God is both judge, he judges us guilty of breaking the law, but he is also king who is going to execute punishment. We see this in Habakkuk. Habakkuk cries out for justice in Judah, and he got it. He did not get what he wanted. He got the revelation of the wrath of God on Judah in the form of an invading Babylonian army.

The idea that a loving God would not act in wrath makes the Bible pretty non-sensical. Its not possible to read the Bible and not get the fact that God is wrathful, that God holds people accountable for sin. It is one of the clearest aspects of the narrative from the beginning to the end, starting with Adam and Eve. God did not just ignore their sin. He banished them from the garden of Eden. And then we follow that up with the flood and with Sodom and Gomorrah and with the Babylonians crushing Judah and you get this narrative that God, however patient and however merciful he is, he will not ignore sin.

It would be wrong to connect God's wrath only with the Old Testament. Jesus refers to the doctrine of hell as much as he does any other doctrine. You can not make sense of the teaching of Jesus if you remove the doctrine of hell. You are just taking one side of the story if you just focus on the love of Christ. The cross makes no sense. If wrath and punishment for sin is unnecessary, then what in the world is the cross? What did God do to Jesus if it was not necessary for a just God to punish sin?

If you do not think there is wrath in the New Testament, then just ask Ananias and Saphira or just check out the lake of fire in the Book of Revelation. The Bible is consistent from Old to New. The Old Testament highlights the grace of God and the justice of God or the wrath of God, just as the New Testament the love of God and the wrath of God.

We do not detach one characteristic or attribute of God from the other attributes of God. God is perfect in his knowledge, in his power, in his wisdom, in his holiness and in his justice. We do not get to pick and choose one attribute. God is not a concept that we make up. God is who he is. We receive him as he is.

Paul adds the reason for that wrath to be revealed. And it is not just that men are ungodly. It is that men suppress the truth about God which leads to ungodliness.

II. Paul further explains the charge. (20-32).

A. People suppress the truth about God (1:20-23)

Paul is going to develop these two ideas, the suppression of truth and the wrath of God. He starts in verse 20 with this idea of the truth suppressed.

1) 20 What truth is suppressed? Invisible attributes – eternal power and divine nature

In verse 19 Paul has said that what is known about God is evident to people, because God has made it evident. And he goes on to describe that a little more specifically in verse 20. He says, "For since the creation of the world, God's invisible attributes," these attributes about God we can not see, such that if we are going to know about them God must make them known, Paul says, "these invisible attributes, his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that men are without excuse."

God the Master produced a master work called the creation or the universe and in that universe, he imprints himself. So, we are to look at the universe to conclude that there is a god. Philosophers have taken this assertion of Paul in two directions. There is the argument from design which states that we should see the incredible complexity and design in the universe and conclude that there must be a designer. The second is the argument of origins or the ontological argument. That argument states that since there is matter, since something exists, and since it is against science to assume something comes out of nothing, we should conclude that there was someone who brought it into being.

a) A Rational Response to the Evidence for God in Creation

There has been so much growth in science and understanding of our physical universe since Paul wrote these words that it is fair to ask, "Does the indictment still stand?" Our sense of the immensity of the universe just continues to increase. Scientist number something like 4×10^{22} as the number of stars that exist. That is billions and billions and billions. That is how big our universe is. You can go the reverse direction and wonder at how small our universe is. Some scientists estimate that there are 7×10^{27} atoms in one human body. So that too is billions and billions and billions. Seven with 27 zeros,

that is how many atoms there are in your body. So there is both this vast complexity and huge immensity to our universe.

In light of that knowledge and in light of our understanding of scientific processes does it change our basic argument that since we have something it must have come from somewhere, that if there was a beginning there must have been a beginner? Matter does not just pop out of nowhere. And does it change the argument that design points to a designer? I would say, "No. It doesn't." In fact, science is supporting our understanding of the argument of design and our understanding of the argument of origins.

Antony Flew ended the twentieth century as the philosopher of the new atheism. He had written a book called *God and Philosophy* which established an atheistic viewpoint a response to theism or belief in God. He was a member of the Socratic club with C. S. Lewis which is a debate club for theists and atheists. Flew seemed to be impressed with the argument that if you took a bunch of monkey's and put them in a room with typewriters. Given enough time, millions and millions of years, they would eventually produce Shakespeare by banging on the keys.

This is what we might refer to for atheists as the God of time. Anything will happen if you give it enough time. But as we pass the turn of the century and learn more about DNA and information theory, some enterprising scientists decided to test out this popular notion that is getting thrown around that monkeys would produce Shakespeare. Apparently, the British Royal Society of Science tried it out by actually putting monkeys in a room with typewriters. What they got was not one word. That is very interesting that they got not one word since you consider in English that there are at least two words that are only one letter. The monkey's produced no words. It was calculated that the math of getting one sonnet by monkey's randomly banging on typewriters, in order to produce one Shakespearian sonnet, precisely, the chances of getting that is 1×10^{690} . That number is so massive there is no way to understand it. The number of particles in the universe is 1×10^{80} . So, the chances of getting a sonnet is zero. There has never been enough time in the universe, and there never will be, for monkeys to randomly type on a typewriter and produce a Shakespearian sonnet. So, given all the time in the universe, a bunch of monkeys are not going to produce one sonnet, then how do random proteins come together in something much more complex than a poem, in a DNA chain by random chance?

What we see in the universe around us is a high level of design, a high level of information. You take one cell in your body, just one cell in the tip of your finger. That one cell has your DNA. It is the same DNA as every other cell in your body. In that DNA is the information necessary for every other cell in your body. So, the cell in your fingertip has the information necessary for the cell in the pupil of your eye or for the cells in your heart muscle or the cells in your blood vessels. All of this information is gathered in such a tiny space. The incredible reality is that each cell somehow knows exactly which information it needs. The cell does not *know*. But it has been designed to work only off the information that it needs to function. The cells in my finger have all the information necessary for my heart to function and exist. But they do not use that information.

The amount of information necessary for all of the systems of the human body has been compared to the amount of information that is in the Library of Congress. So, with all the books that are written in the United States and registered in the Library of Congress, it is as if the cell in my finger goes into that library and pulls out the one book about my thumb. And it only uses that information. And it ignores all the rest of the information about my brain and my stomach and my heart. There is amazing complexity in the information that is stored and used for life to work.

This information science, when it was really studied and thought through, had an effect on Antony Flew. In 2007 he wrote a book called *There is a God*. He is no longer one of the famous atheists suggested by the new atheism. His name has been removed from the website. He did not become a Christian before he died. But he became convinced that there must be a designer. He wrote this in the book *There is a God*, "If the theorem won't work for a single sonnet, then of course it's simply

absurd to suggest that the more elaborate feat of the origin of life could have been achieved by chance (There Is A God, 2007, p. 78).” <<<https://creation.com/review-there-is-a-god-by-antony-flew>>>

b) An Emotive Response to the Evidence for God in Creation

There is a fine-tuning of our universe that suggests somebody designed it. We can come at this idea that the knowledge of God is evident in the universe rationally. We can sit here and make philosophical arguments. But we don't really need to. When we think about the immensity of the universe or when we think about how tiny things are inside of us, that might not really move us. It is too big or too small to even think about. But you get it by standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon or skiing in the alps or sitting at the bottom of a 100 year old oak tree and looking up. You get this sense of bigness or immensity. That there is something more. You feel it on the sea when the waves are crashing. You get a sense of power. You feel it when you are laying on your back, and there are no lights around, and you are gazing up at the stars. The smallness, the delicateness, the design, you see it when you look at a baby's hand. Or you see it staring at a spider's web or line of ants marching across the concrete or the most delicate flower growing out of this ancient moss. There is something in human beings that is attuned to God's creation such that the creation stirs in us these ideas of power and design and beauty and wonder that there must be something behind it. And it is that stirring that should move us to seek to understand rationally, to look for a word from God that will help us to explain this.

2) 21 divine nature – honor God and give thanks to God.

It is the suppression of that truth moving in us that Paul is calling us to account for. He says in verse 21, “even though they knew God, they did not honor him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations and their foolish heart was darkened.” We have this eternity in our hearts, as the preacher in Ecclesiastes says (3:11). There is something in us that believes there must be something more, and it is evident in the creation, but it goes beyond that. There is a sense where we ought to rightly give thanks to God and honor him as God.

It is not only God's eternal power that is evident, but there is something about his divine nature, his goodness. With all the sin and suffering and difficult in the world, I still recognize fundamental joys of being alive. I believe in love. I experience beauty. I see things that amaze me. I look at my little baby girls who are growing into beautiful women. And that should move me to give thanks.

Interestingly, you here this purposeful language from atheists or agnostics or spiritual people. They want to give thanks to mother earth or to the cosmos or thank the universe that this has happened. It is that eternity in us. That sense that there is something more that makes us want to attribute that purposefulness or mind or personhood to something that is inanimate. People sometimes cannot bring themselves to say God, to acknowledge God. But they want to speak of the universe as though the universe designs, has purpose, gives meaning.

I think John Lennon was quite wrong on this point. I don't think it is so easy to “imagine there is no heaven above us.” I think it is easy to imagine that there is no heaven of the renaissance kind with naked baby angels and harps, sitting on clouds singing for eternity. That is easy not to imagine. But it is hard for a human being to imagine there is no meaning, no value, no purpose. There is no eternity. To accept the truly atheistic narrative that you die and that is it. Not only you. But that is the truth of the universe. At some point the last star, the last light is going to flicker out. Energy will be fully dissipated through the universe. Everything is cold and dead and lifeless. You never here atheists talking about that narrative. It is a narrative that does not fit with the human heart.

In our suppression of truth, we do not suppress that which comes from God; the idea of love, the idea of justice, the idea of purpose. We want to hold onto these things. But we do want to suppress the idea that there is anyone to whom we are accountable for those things. Whether we admit it or not, that is the basic impulse that Paul is charging us with. There is this impulse towards rebellion,

towards turning away from God. “Even though they knew God, they did not honor him as God.” There is a desire to reject God as Lord, to reject this idea that I am dependent on him, to reject the fact that I have any kind of accountability to him, to his morality, to his law.

The famous author who wrote *A Brave New World* was a famous atheist and a honest atheist. He wrote, “For myself, as no doubt for most of my contemporaries, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation. The liberation from a certain system of morality. We objected to the morality, because it interfered with our sexual freedom” (Ends and Means, p. 270). There is this desire to hold on to meaning in life, love and justice, but also there is this desire for moral freedom, to be our own lords and masters, to be accountable to none.

3) 22-23 Instead of turning from Creation to God, Mankind turned from God to Creation

This turning away from God is described in verses 22 and 23. “Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.” The intention is that the creation would show off the glory of God, and we would wonder, then we would turn to God and see his glory more fully. But the opposite happened. Mankind looking at the glory of God and rejecting him as Lord turns their back on God and worships the creation.

John Piper imagines this passage as similar to a person looking into the bright glory of the sun. When we turn our back to the sun long shadows are cast with the form of man, and we see the shadow of the trees or the shadow of the animals, and those shadows stretch out before us. Mankind has done this. He has turned his back on the brightness, the heat, the glory, the holiness of God to gaze at the shadow of the creation. And we have knelt and worshipped the master’s work with our own shadow in the very center.

The list of creatures Paul mentions here takes us back to the Genesis 1 and the creation. We have the creation of man and the animals and the birds and the things that crawl. And reminds us of the long list of idolatries worshipped through human history. The gods of the ancients were greater reflections of themselves, powerful, self-absorbed, lustful and warlike.

I gave some mention earlier to prominent atheists of the past century like Flew and Huxley. We could consider the new atheists, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris. But I do not see atheism as the primary persistent problem for mankind. So many so-called atheists are not really atheists. They believe in something more, something spiritual, some purpose, something real that is not material. The belief in no god takes quite a bit of faith. Atheism is not the natural state of a human being; not even the natural state of a fallen human being. We are created to worship. We are created with souls. Paganism is much closer to our natural state and lines up with our fallen heart.

The new paganism of the West worships the environment, worships freedom, worships love, worships choice. We call people spiritual. And we praise this idea of being spiritual without really having any kind of theology or background or book that grounds our spiritualism. It embraces spiritualism in nature and song, or in some sense of morality or some sense of the other as long as that spiritualism does not make us subservient. We do not want lordship. But if it can bring us control over life’s events, if it gives pleasure, purpose, peace, power, that kind of spiritualism we can live with, we are attracted to. That is basic idolatry. We may have a little more subtle idolatry, but it is basically the same thing.

We have exchanged the glory of incorruptible God, not for no god, but for corruptible things, lesser things, things that help us believe in more without making us believe too much, things that promise what our hearts yearn for, even though they cannot deliver. We seek satisfaction in relationships, in advancement, in nature, in popularity, in position. We have our idols.

B. Paul explains the punishment: God gives people over to their own fallen nature (1:24-32)

1) God gives pagan man over to himself (24-25).

God is punishing humanity for rejecting him as creation and attributing his glory to the creation. We have rebelled against the true Lord and king. His wrathful response is surprising. It is not active wrath like that which fell on Sodom and Gomorrah. When we think of wrath that is more what we think. But here we have a passive wrath. God does not actively do something. He simply draws himself out of the picture. He draws back. He pulls himself back from people and from the creation. God is no longer our compass. He is no longer our center. He is no longer our source of life, which means the source of life has been removed. There is none. We become our center. Things revolve around us. And we no longer have a true north. Without God our desires and thoughts have become polluted, so that our own behavior is our punishment. There are consequences to the way we live without God. So, while we are seeking fulfillment, we are going in the wrong direction. We are embracing the corruptible to give us the incorruptible. And that will never work.

Turning our backs on God we are no longer lifted up towards him, to truly becoming human. Instead, our humanness is lowered down to the corruptible and fallen. We have exchanged the truth for a lie. We worship and serve the things of the created realm. The idols of humanity.

At this point in the text Paul gives his Amen. But he decides to develop a little more this idea of being given over. In 26 and 27 he explains what it means to be given over in our desires. And in 28-32 he describes us as given over in our minds.

2) God gives pagan man over to his own desires (26-27).

²⁶ For this reason **God gave them over to degrading passions**; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, ²⁷ and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.

In developing the idea of being given over to sinful desires. Paul gives the example of homosexuality. He is not saying that homosexuality is the worst of all sins. And he certainly does not want to approve of heterosexual immorality, which for biblical Jews and Christians would be any sexual practice outside the covenant of marriage. He is saying that homosexuality is an example of sinful human desire, showing how far our hearts can be from God's moral vision for mankind.

Turning from right worship of God to idolatry has a lasting moral effect. The very first echo of turning from the glory of God into idolatry occurred in the garden of Eden. Adam and Eve listened to the serpent and turned away. That turning from God immediately affected the heart and mind of Adam and Eve. They began to have desires out of line with moral reality. Paul's use of the words natural and unnatural in reference towards homosexuality take us back to the creation. Something was created with an intended order. We were created in a moral state where a man desires sexual intimacy with a woman. Homosexuality is unnatural to human beings in a biological sense. A man's body is made to fit into a woman's body. Sex is natural between male and female. Along with the wonderful pleasure God designed into sex, sex serves a reproductive function that is only natural between male and female. We could also argue that man and woman were created as moral beings in the image of God, so that there is a natural goodness to sexuality expressed in marriage between a man and a woman that flows from the character of God's moral nature.

Paul is saying that homosexuality gives us an example of how turning from God and falling into a state of human sinfulness has an effect on our passions and desires that move well down the road away from what God originally intended for us. And in this case, in sexual sin. That homosexuality is moral wrong was clearly understood by Jews and early Christians. The clear prohibition comes from Moses in the book of Leviticus.

The commandment in Leviticus for a man not to engage sexually with another man occurs twice in chapter 18 and chapter 20. There is an intentional repetition of laws regarding immoral sexual

practices. The first list states the prohibition. “What is wrong and immoral?” The second list adds the civil punishment. “How should this immoral behavior be punished?” The lists create a sandwich around chapter 19, which is the key passage in Leviticus on personal morality. The foundation idea of chapter 19 is that we serve a holy God and so, we ought to strive to be holy even as he is holy. This is also the chapter Jesus quotes from when he gives us the second great commandment that you should love your neighbor as yourself (19:18).

These three chapters in Leviticus teach about personal moral behavior. They are separated off from religious laws about Jewish worship and from civil laws about governing the nation. These three chapters are about personal morality. And while we can make a case in transition from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant that the religious and civil aspects of the Old Covenant have been changed by the New, they have been fulfilled in Christ, so no longer apply in the New Covenant. We cannot make that same claim for the moral law which continues in effect from the Old to the New as an expression of God’s own moral nature. This is what is right. It is not a religious convention or a civil convention. It is moral reality. For example, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with eating shrimp. It only became wrong for Jews to eat shrimp when God included that command as a part of his civil covenant to set his people off from the people around them. Adultery, on the other hand, comes out of the moral law section, coming out of the heart of God. When a man commits and promises in a covenant to a woman and engages in sexual intimacy with the woman, that is to stay within the covenant of marriage. That is a moral reality. It is true in the Old and true in the New. What is our vision of sexual morality. It does not change between the Old and the New.

Three things from the lists in Leviticus help us interpreting Paul’s comments here and even suggest that Paul had in mind not only the creation, but he had in mind the moral law given by Moses.

First, both Leviticus 18 and 20, while prohibiting immoral sexual practices, also prohibit certain practices of idolatry. There is a connection between false worship and immoral sexual behavior. That connection continues on into the prophets, and we see it here in Paul. That turning away from God, false worship, has an effect on our moral vision, particularly in our understanding of our sexual desires.

Second, homosexuality is placed toward the end of each list in Leviticus in a way that suggests that homosexual desire is a move further along the line away from the good sexual desire and practice that God intended when he created man and woman.

Third, though homosexual practice, by degrees, may be further away from God’s vision for human sexuality, adultery is on the list and carries the same penalty as homosexuality. In fact, all sex outside of marriage is considered to be grievous sin to God, who created male and female to enjoy monogamous, sexual intimacy in the context of a faithful marriage. So, we are not setting homosexuality off in its own list as though it is an especially perverse sin. Homosexuality is part of a list of sins which include heterosexuality. There is a continuum of sin moving away from God’s natural moral vision for intimacy between a man and a woman.

For Christians, when we understand the moral vision that comes through in the Mosaic code, we understand that this moral vision applies also to us. But in case there is any confusion, Paul restates prohibition to homosexual practice. Obviously, there is what we have right here in Romans. Paul repeats the prohibition in 1 Corinthians 6:9, if we want another example. Interestingly, in that list of sins, homosexuality is lined up with idolatry and also with adultery. There is heterosexual sin, homosexual sin and both paired with idolatry. Turning away from a true vision of God leads to a turning away from a true vision of ourselves. We cannot accurately see who we are, if we do not accurately see God and receive his vision for who we are.

God gave us gender identity in Genesis 1 and 2 as a central aspect of his creation. “And God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them; and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it and rule over it.’” Male and female equally share the intrinsic value of being created in God’s image.

We are image bearers. God gives us our identity. The identity of being human includes bearing God's image, holding a special position of greater value than animals and being given a gender of either male or female.

In turning away from the creator, our modern society, or modern paganism has lifted freedom above all virtues, claiming the freedom to define who we are, essentially who we are. It is claimed that we give ourselves value, even choosing our own gender. What an incredible burden we are placing on children. "You have no identity. You must come up with it on your own." In this freedom we are creating confusion. And it is a lie. You do not get to define who you are. You do not get to define your value. There has got to be something that is objective or it all depends on the strength of our mental abilities to convince ourselves of something that may or may not be true.

"Who am I?" If we do not base the answer to that question according to the vision of God, there is no objective answer to the question then it is a figment of our own mental games. "Who am I?" is not a question that you get to answer or that you even have to answer. Not foundationally. You get to build on the foundation of who you are. You get to make choices and choose your own unique expression. But fundamentally, you are a child of the king. You are an image bearer of God. And you have been created male or female. And unfortunately, you have fallen in that image. You have a twisted image.

We have to move on to Genesis chapter 3 and the original turning away from God. Rather than judging the creation, the serpent, Adam and Eve were willingly deceived. And the most obvious, immediate result of their sin was a loss of intimacy. They hid their bodies from each other and they hid themselves from God. There was an embarrassment, a hiding, followed by judgment and blaming of one another. There was a twisting of their desires. Their moral vision became polluted. And the effect was spiritual, emotional and physical as God withdrew himself from his creation and gave them over to their own desire to define for themselves what is good and what is evil.

The older homosexual message of the last 40 or 50 years has been, "We are born this way. We have these desires from birth. How can it be wrong? How can you tell us we are sinful if we have desires we are born with?" Which is an interesting argument. It is a little confusing to me why Christians fall for that, because a basic principle of Christianity is that we are twisted in our very desires. All of us are born with desires we ought not act on. If it is true that you are born with homosexual desire, if that is true it still does not free you to act on those desires.

Interestingly, however, the message is changing. The modern homosexual is becoming increasingly varied. To be political correct, I think I should call it the LGBTQ message, but things are moving so fast, that label is probably already outdated. The new message is that we choose. "Birth does not define us. I define me." It is an overturning of the old message. It is no longer the desire to say, "I am born this way.", but the desire to say, "I define me." And I can change that definition whenever I want to. That is the voice of modern paganism. A new kind of spirituality that embraces a new sexual vision based on personal choice. And it is further and further from the true vision that comes when we see through the eyes of God.

As a Christian, I do not think it is critical to decide whether someone can be born with homosexual desire or whether it came through socialization. I think it could be either. We do not have to choose between nature and nurture in assessing the idea that homosexual desire is a twisting away from the natural moral vision that God gives us in the creation. I am born with greed and pride and selfishness. I was born with confused wiring regarding sexuality. I am given over. There is a fallenness that comes with that. I am twisted from birth. That is a basic assertion of Christianity. On top of that my socialization has created other desires or taken me down other roads where I have built on those sinful desires to increase them to get further and further away from God and his moral created order.

Homosexuals are called to turn back to God for identity. Let God tell you who you are. For all of us that includes laying your desires before God and saying, "This is what I desire. What would you have

me do, my Lord?" And God will call them to not act on homosexual desire. God may remove the desire. He just as well may not. This is true for all of us. The one who struggles with pornographic desire may be freed of that desire in Christ or may struggle through life. The one who is greedy, alcoholic, prideful, lustful, might be freed, he might not be. God deals with each of his servants individually in this process of becoming who he is created to be. We are being restored into the full image of Jesus Christ. Each man, each woman has their own set of struggles. It seems to me that homosexual desire is an especially heavy struggle for a Christian brother or sister to have to bear. It is a very difficult road to walk; to be a believer and to have homosexual desire that you are not permitted to act on. You cannot let that desire lead you into intimacy. That is hard. If God does not remove the desire, then God does not remove the desire. Still, we must name that desire as God sees it. We follow God's moral vision. We do not choose for ourselves. So, the person who with the desire is an image bearer of God. That is your identity. That is your value. You bear the image of God. You are valuable. God died for you. The desire, the sinful, sexual desire that you cannot act on, that comes out of your fallen nature. That is also part of who you are. It is not who you will be forever, because God is renewing us into the image of Jesus Christ. But right now as you struggle as a believer, that is part of who you are. The practice of that desire is sin. It is an act of sin. And God calls us not to go there. God has given us over to degrading passions, passions far from his natural vision for man and woman in their practice of sexual intimacy. If we go there, then we receive in our own persons the penalty of our error. There is an effect

We see the pollution of the image, not only in the effect on our heart desires, but also in the way we rationalize or justify our sin. We have been given over to a depraved mind.

3) God gives pagan man over to his own mind (28-31).

Verses 29-31 contain a long list of sinful behaviors that we can easily recognize in our own society. There may be some organization to the list. In Greek the first four attributes have the same ending and the last five words begin with the same prefix. The effect comes out a little in my English version "untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful". The main point of the list is to show the immorality of mankind. We see these on the news every day. We see them in our neighbors, we see them in our friends, in our children, in ourselves. Not all of them everyday and not all to the worst extent. But these are undeniably fruits that come out of the human heart.

This list strengthens Paul's indictment against pagan man. This is what he was talking about in verse 18 when he said the wrath of God is being revealed against the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth. In the previous verses the suppression of truth was a denial of the impulse in our hearts to recognize God from the creation. Here is another kind of truth suppression. Paul says in verse 32. "although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them."

It is not quite clear who Paul is referring to. Adam and Eve knew the disobedience leads to death. The Israelites knew the commands of God and that disobedience leads to death. And though maybe not as clearly as those who have special revelation, people in general, when they are honest and objective, look at this list of attributes and agree this is wickedness. This is bad. This deserves punishment. Especially when someone acts this way against me and mine.

And yet, while trying to affirm some kind of humanistic morality on one side, we still justify our behavior on the other side. It makes me think of the move by companies and entertainment groups right now responding to the #metoo movement by asserting their pro-woman credentials while continuing to use feminine sexuality in advertising and entertainment to sell their products. From the outside the hypocrisy seems clear. They are trying to assert the value of women on the one hand, while they continue to objectify women for their business purposes. But that it is clear to me from the outside, that is part of the problem. The hypocrisy of someone else can be so glaringly obvious, while my depraved mind excels in the mental gymnastics necessary to justify my own behavior. I see

it in them. I don't see it in me. Part of that justification involves urging others to the same practice. Sin loves company. If I get you to do it, it justifies me. If I get society to agree, we are justified together. So, while our depraved heart urges us to sin, our depraved mind justifies that sin.

Paul has made his charge against pagan man. Mankind has acted wickedly by turning away from God and has compounded that wickedness by suppressing truth about God, truth that is evident in the creation. God has expressed his wrath against sin in the present by giving mankind over to his own wishes. We want to turn from God and God allows it. The effect, which is also its own punishment, is a perversion of the desires and a darkening of the mind.

This is the indictment against pagan man.

Reflection questions

1. What stands out to you in Romans 1:18-25 as strange or interesting or confusing or important?
2. Does the way God reveals himself in the Old Covenant and the New Covenant feel consistent to you or does it feel to you like the God of the Old Covenant is more wrathful and the God of the New Covenant more gracious? Can you explain why you think you feel that way?
3. Paul makes the claim that all people are accountable for knowledge about God because the creation makes God known. It has been suggested above that this can be true in a rational way as we consider arguments from the origin of matter and the design in creation. It can also be true on a more emotional level in how we experience creation. Which do you feel calls more strongly to your soul, the rational response to God's revelation of himself through creation or the emotive response to God's revelation of himself in nature?
4. Paul charges pagan man with turning away from God to worship idols in forms that come out of the creation. Does that charge still stand? What kinds of idols do people turn to in your society to express worship or seek power over life's circumstances or find satisfaction, fulfillment and pleasure?
5. Paul says that God's wrath is being revealed against mankind, not in an active way, but through a "giving over". God allows a separation to exist between himself and mankind which results in a degrading of man's moral desires and moral judgement. To show how human passion has been twisted, Paul uses the example of homosexual desire. Why do you think Paul uses homosexual desire here as his example of darkened desire? What does that teach us in general about our desires and passions?
6. Along with the claim that our desires are fallen, Paul also says that our rational ability is affected in the moral area. He says that human kind has a depraved mind. When you look at the examples of immoral behavior in verses 29-31, and think about your own society, do any examples stand out to you as particularly relevant?
7. How good are you at rationalizing your own sin? Can you think of an example from your own life when you engaged in activity that now seems clearly sinful, yet at the time you were able to rationalize?

Further study

For further study on the connection between the general revelation of God in the creation and the special revelation of God through his Word, study Psalm 19 and Isaiah 40.

Lesson 5: Indictment of the Moral Man

Romans 2:1-16

Paul charges those who trust in their own moral standing with breaking moral law.

¹ Therefore you have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. ² And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things.

(1) ³ But do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment on those who practice such things and do the same *yourself*, that you will escape the judgment of God?

(2) ⁴ Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?

⁵ But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up **wrath** for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God,

Paul explains the way a moral defense will be judged.

God will judge impartially based on a person's actual deeds.

⁶ who will render to each person according to his deeds: ⁷ to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; ⁸ but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. ⁹ *There will be* tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek, ¹⁰ but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹¹ For there is no partiality with God.

Doing moral law, not knowing moral law, is the basis of judgment.

¹² For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law, and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law; ¹³ for *it is* not the hearers of the Law *who* are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified.

The principle of moral judgment based on the doing what is morally right is present in those who do not have God's revelation of moral law.

¹⁴ For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, ¹⁵ in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, ¹⁶ on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.

NASB

Paul charges those who trust in their own moral standing with breaking moral law (2:1-5).

In the 11 chapters of the main argument of Romans, Paul takes us deeper into our understanding of the gospel by first establishing that a person is justified before the court of God by faith. Justification by faith, this is chapters 1-4. In these chapters, Paul takes the role of prosecuting attorney. The first phase of his prosecution goes after all human beings who reject God as Lord.

He does this in chapter 1:18-32 where he charges human society with turning from God, suppressing truth about God, and engaging in a whole range of immoral activities. People are selfish, disrespectful, dishonest, greedy and sexually immoral. Paul's audience got it. Atheists and pagans, old and new make up their own morality. The passions of their heart are degrading and the moral judgment of their minds is depraved. They have an amazing tolerance for their own sin as they justify their selfish, prideful, greedy behavior. That is human society. If you have felt that moral judgment on the wickedness of your fellow man, on the depravity of society; if you feel things are bad and getting worse, then Paul's next words are for you.

[Read Romans 2:1-5.]

The prosecutor Paul has now turned his sights on the real target. The real target is not pagan man. The real target is moral man, the person who is self-satisfied with their own moral standing. Making a moral argument against humanity in general is no real challenge. But what about the moral man? -

the man who claims to be good. Paul includes moral man in his indictment, charging that those who trust in their own moral standing fail to keep the moral law. That charge is leveled in Romans 2:1-5. Paul goes on in 2:6-16 to explain how God judges the person who comes to his court and makes a defense based on their own morality.

Let's address the charge first and then move on to the clarification.

Essentially, you do what they do (2:1-2).

In verse 1, Paul proclaims that you who judge others do the same thing. For Paul's charge to work, he does not need to show that you, the moral person, break the exact same moral laws as the pagan in the same way with the same intensity. You may not visit a prostitute but instead enjoy sexually explicit movies or television. You may not murder but instead make degrading remarks about your neighbors. You may not steal, but you are not precisely honest with your tax returns.

Even as I suggest examples, you may think, "That's not the same thing." Or you may think, "I don't do that." I grant that I may be missing the mark for you. So how about we do this. Imagine that you have a digital recorder in a pendant around your neck. This recorder captures everything you say. Now imagine that we go through your life and keep only the moral judgments that you make about other people. Every time you judge someone for the way they drive, the way they dress, the way they parent, the way they act, what they say; we record anytime that you pronounced judgment on the behavior of another person. And imagine that, standing before the court of God, the recorder is played. God says here is the standard by which you will be judged. And surprisingly, you hear your own voice pronouncing moral judgments about the behavior of other people. The standard by which you judged others is the standard by which you will be judged. How do you think you will do?

If you do not understand immediately that you will condemn yourself, then you lack self-awareness. Your own words will condemn you. You do not live up to your judgment of other people. And that would be enough. If you come before the court of God, and you say, "I am moral. Judge me according to my own morality." And God actually plays the standard of your own morality. You will fall short. But that is not going to be the standard. The standard in God's court is not your sense of morality but his. If you can't even keep your own moral standard for other people, do you think there is any possibility that you keep God's moral standard? Paul writes, "You have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself."

The problem is not that our moral standard for others is wrong. Definitely, we are sometimes wrong. Often, we are right. Verse 2, "We know that the judgement of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things."

Active wrath is a future reality for everyone (2:3-5).

Our problem is that we forget the old adage, when you point your finger at someone you have three pointing back at you. Try that out. Point at someone and look where three of your fingers are pointing. We do not think about our self when we point at others. We make moral judgments which we somehow disconnect from our own thoughts, our own words, our own behaviors from our judgments of other people. Paul tells us we better remember ourselves. Verse 3 "Do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment on those who practice such things and do the same, that you will escape the judgment of God?"

The moral person so often feels safe within their own conception of goodness, especially when life is going well. It is possible to grow up in a good family, religious or non-religious, to grow up being taught the difference between right and wrong, to be held to a standard of honesty, goodness and civic duty. It is possible that your personality responded to that kind of upbringing and that you benefited from your morality. You never cheated. You are honest. You worked hard. You got a job, married, had children. You have friends. You get respect at work. You mow the yard on the weekend, do the shopping, make sure the kids get to their activities. Life works. Life is good.

Why is life good? Is your life a sign of God's approval for your good behavior? A sense of moral pride would be quite natural at this point. I have done well. I am getting what I deserve for my hard work and honest life. I am basically a good person.

Paul says, "Think again." Verse 4, "Do you think lightly of the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?" There is a natural benefit that comes from living a moral life. Good moral decisions often bring positive, practical consequences. Sociologists have theorized that following the "success sequence" of finishing high school, working full-time and getting married before having children is a major contributing factor in avoiding poverty. Wise moral choices often produce positive results over time. Whether you are Christian, Jew, moral atheist, if you follow the moral law of God, generally, you will experience blessing in your life. Not as a guarantee, but as a general rule. So, a lot of people experience the blessing of following a moral pattern based on Judeo-Christian values.

Is the blessing, the benefit you receive in life, a sign that God is pleased with your moral behavior? That's not the lesson Paul says we should learn. He says that God's kindness should not lead us to pride or arrogance. It should not lead us to think that we have attained moral approval. Rather, God's kindness should lead us to repentance as we recognize God's mercy to us who do not live up, even to our own standard of righteousness, much less his. If I take the moral high ground and I say that I deserve this life because I have been good then verse 5 applies, "because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God." You are only focused on your good days, your best days, when you were decently moral. And somehow you are blocking out all those thoughts, all those words, all those actions that are storing up for you the wrath of God on that day. God may be pleased with your attempt at living morally. He is not pleased with your selfishness, your pride, your lust, your hurtful words. He may kindly bless you. Not to say you have attained moral approval for your life. Instead, to extend mercy to you in what you are doing well, so that as you honestly confess how far you still fall short, you might turn to him with a heart of confession and repentance and gratitude.

Two words in verse 5 connect us back to something we have already seen. Here in verse 5 God's righteous judgment will be revealed, and it will be a day of wrath. "Because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in that day." In chapter 1:18, we were told, "the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven." Its helpful to ask, "What's the difference between the wrath here in chapter 2 and that wrath there in chapter 1?" The wrath in chapter one was against pagan man who rejects the idea of moral accountability to God. The wrath here is against the moral man. Also, the wrath there is being revealed in present history. The wrath here is to come on a future day of judgment. The wrath there is passive; a giving over of man to himself, such that the consequences of his own depravity are the punishment. The wrath to come is active punishment, according the righteous judgment of God.

Paul has charged moral man with sin and tells him to expect wrath. Following God's moral law to some degree may protect a person from certain practical consequences of sin in this present life, but a failing attempt at morality does not free a person from accountability to the judgment of God.

Paul goes on in the next 11 verses to explain the idea of moral defense before God. If I am going to choose to stand before God, saying, "Judge me according to my own basic goodness", then I better know how God will evaluate my case? If you still think, "I am good enough." even after verses 1-5, then pay close attention to what will be required of you. You get to choose whether you make a moral defense when you stand before God on the day of judgment. So, you better be clear on what is required to make a successful moral defense.

So, let's look at Paul's clarification in the next 11 verses.

Paul explains the way a moral defense will be judged (2:6-16).

God will judge impartially based on a person's actual deeds (2:6-11).

The first thing you need to know is that God will render judgment with complete impartiality, according to the deeds a person has committed during his or her lifetime. These two truths, that it is according to your behavior and that it is impartial, occur in verse 6 and verse 11. They form an inclusio or we could say bookends to this section of the text. Traditionally, 6-11 causes some confusion for interpretation. In fact, verses 6-11 are highly structured, and when we recognize the structure Paul's point comes more into focus.

- A ⁶ who will render to each person according to his deeds:
B ⁷ to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality,
C eternal life;
D ⁸ but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness,
E wrath and indignation.
E' ⁹ *There will be* tribulation and distress
D' for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek,
C' ¹⁰ but glory and honor and peace
B' to everyone who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.
A' ¹¹ For there is no partiality with God.

The structure Paul uses here is called a chiasmic structure or a chiasm. It is a parallel structure where the first element parallels the last element, the second element parallels the second to last element the third element parallels the third to last element and so on. I want to explain this to you because it is important for this passage and because we will see this structure more than once in Romans. A simple American example comes from President Kennedy. "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." The word "country" links the beginning and end of the saying. The word "you" links the middle phrases together. We have country, you, you, country. That is chiasm. "Country" on the two ends. "You" in the middle. The name of the Swedish group ABBA provides a famous European example. The first letter of each member's name Agnetha, Bjorn, Benny and Anni-Frid make up the ABBA pattern. The ends are parallel, and the middle is parallel. When you see photos of the group, you notice they usually stood with the two guys on the outside and two girls on the inside which really is BAAB, since Bjorn and Benny are on the outside but BAAB is not nearly so nice a group name as ABBA.

Hebrew writers used chiasm throughout the Old Testament and carried into the New Testament. The flood narrative is arranged chiastically with rising and lowering of the water. There are a lot more numbers in there than just 40. Those numbers are arranged chiastically. The book of Deuteronomy is arranged chiastically. A number of Psalms use the pattern. For example, Psalm 145:2 reads, "Every day I will bless you, and I will praise your name forever and ever." The first phrase "every day" parallels the last phrase "forever and ever", while the second phrase "I will bless you" parallels the second to last phrase "and I will praise your name." That's the chiasmic pattern which we will see again in Romans, though for now I need to show it to you in verses 6-11. And I do need to warn you, that your English translation may have changed Paul's Greek word order. If that is true, the chiasmic structure may not show up the Bible version you are using. I am using the NASB which works hard to keep the Greek structure. If you want to see my example, you can go to observetheword.com and download the resource notes for this lesson.

One way you notice a chiasm in Scripture is to pay attention when words or phrases or ideas stand out by being repetitive. In verse 7 and 8, the phrase "to those who" is repeated. And in verse 9 and 10, the phrase "of the Jew first and also of the Greek" is repeated. Noticing repetition does not guarantee a chiasm, but it does challenge you as an observer of Scripture to look closer to see what

the author is doing. Why the repetition. Here we see two groups of people both mentioned twice. “Those who persevere in doing good” are morally good people. Those who are “selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth” are morally bad people. Then we have “every soul of man who does evil” – obviously bad people. And “everyone who does good” – the good people. Our pattern in the text is good people, bad people, bad people, good people. That is a basic chiasm.

There is more. We also get the reward or punishment for each group whether good or bad. The reward in verse 7 is “eternal life” and in verse 10 “glory, honor and peace.” The punishment in verse 8 is “wrath and indignation” and in verse 9 “tribulation and distress.” So, our pattern now is good, reward, bad, punishment, punishment, bad, reward, good. Finally, to the front of the pattern we add the introduction in verse 6 “who will render to each person according to his deeds” and to the end we add the conclusion in verse 11, “for there is no partiality with God.” Here is the pattern: “Who will render to each person according to his deeds”, good, reward, bad, punishment, punishment, bad, reward, good, “for there is no partiality with God”.

These verses can be summed up like this, “The one who stands before God based on his own morality will be judged by his own deeds. If his deeds are good, he receives reward. If his deeds are bad, he receives punishment. And the judgment will be made without prejudice.” This is a basic, clear explanation of what will be required of the moral defense. If you stand before God based on your own morality, then your deeds will be evaluated. Good is rewarded. Bad is punished. And there is absolutely no partiality shown in the evaluation of deeds.

This does not sound like grace. This sounds like works. Some scholars want to address that problem by interpreting the good person in verses 5-10 as the new covenant believer. They suggest that Paul is here describing what Moses predicted in Deuteronomy 30, that God would do something new inside the new covenant believer, so that the new covenant believer could indeed live out the moral law of loving God and loving his neighbor. By living in the power of the Holy Spirit, they are the ones who persevere in doing good, and so receive the reward of eternal life. They would say that Paul supports this view by later, in this chapter, emphasizing that a Jew is one who has been circumcised in the heart by the Spirit. The regeneration of the Spirit enables the good person to live a morally worthy life.

I affirm that the work of the Holy Spirit enables new covenant believers to truly live for God. But verse seven is describing the means by which a person obtains eternal life. By perseverance in doing good an individual is found righteous and so granted eternal life. Is that the new covenant idea of how a person gains righteous standing before God? Does God enable us to do moral righteousness so that we can be justified before his court according to our own moral behavior? That’s a good question. I do not want to spoil Paul’s presentation. The short answer is “By no means!” That is not what Paul is arguing here. It is not by our own moral behavior that we are going to be found righteous in God’s eyes. I am jumping ahead to Paul’s verdict in chapter 3. Let’s not run ahead of Paul.

Concerning this text, I do not believe Paul has in mind the Christian here. I believe that Paul is stating the requirement for moral judgement. He has not stated whether anyone meets that requirement. He is simply making clear the standard. The standard is not being better than the next guy. The moral person who stands in judgment over those who are more immoral, should think very carefully before choosing to make a moral defense before God. A feeling of moral superiority over a secular person, atheist, or modern pagan does not help establish a credible defense in God’s court of justice. God is impartial. You will be judged on your own works alone; not in any comparison with anyone else. God does not grade on a curve. Moral judgment declares that if you have persevered your whole life in doing good, then you can expect eternal life. If you have done good, you will receive glory, honor and peace. But if you have not, you should expect wrath, indignation, tribulation and distress. This is true of Jew or Greek, Christian or atheist, Muslim, or Hindu. Each of us must ask the question, “Have I met God’s moral standard through my good behavior, throughout my life?”

In answering that question, we remember the two main points of the passage. First, there is no partiality with God. That's verse 11. It does not matter what kind of family you have grown up in, how often you have gone to church, whether or not you are a missionary, how much money you have or do not have. There is no partiality of any kind. The moral defense before God only takes into account your own moral behavior. Second, it is perseverance in doing good that is taken into account. Your whole life will bring the evidence for you or against you. You do not get to make an album of your best possible moments and put that on display. This is not Facebook or Instagram. God has the whole film. He has your inner thoughts on record. He will make a fair and impartial judgment of you based on the sum total of your life's works and thoughts.

Do you want to take the moral defense? "Judge me God on what I have said, thought and done. Judge me by my goodness, according to your standard of what is morally good."

Doing moral law, not knowing moral law, is the basis of judgment (2:12-13).

Paul continues by reminding us that it is not our knowledge of the law that counts, but our doing of the law. Verse 12, "For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law, and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law." That Paul has general moral law in mind seems clear by the comparison of the moral person to the pagan person. You judge those pagans who do not obey any objective standard of moral law, and yet, you break the same law you hold them to. That was the accusation at the beginning when we moved from pagan man to moral man. Paul will make that point again in our last two verses. Moral judgment extends beyond keeping the Old Testament law to a general requirement of all mankind. Still, Paul's reference here to law is not moral law in general but to Torah, that high expression of moral law possessed by the Jew's. Torah is the instruction included in the first five books of the Old Testament. It is the covenant made with Israel through Moses that provided the basis for the rule of later kings and the exhortation of later prophets.

The word Paul uses for law is *nomos* in the Greek. Most often when we see the word law in Romans, Paul is referring to Torah, which is a specific expression of moral law from God. Here Paul has in mind the Torah, and we see that when he was thinking of the moral man judging the pagan, he was thinking of the moral Jew judging the pagan non-Jew. In our day, we can very easily think of the law as referring to the new covenant commands, and we can imagine the target of Paul's indictment to be the cultural Christian who stands in moral judgment over the non-Christian. We can imagine our day that the one with the law is the Christian who has this idea of biblical morality, judging the non-Christian who does not accept the Bible as a standard.

Paul says, think not about yourself in relation to your neighbor. Think about whether you are doing or not doing the law. The one who sins while possessing the law is judged for his own sin. The one who sins while not possessing the law is judged for his own sin. It is not knowing the law but doing the law that counts. Verse 13 is sometimes problematic for Christians who have been taught that we are justified by faith. If that is so, what do we do with Paul's proclamation, "not hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law will be justified"? The idea that "doers of the law will be justified" supports Paul's explanation of the moral defense that we saw in verses 6-11. There are two ways for a person to be declared just before a just judge. Either the person is not guilty and so declared just. Or the person has been found guilty and has paid the punishment required, thus having been justified before the court. If you are caught speeding and there is a fine to be paid, and you paid it, having paid the penalty you are not justified before the court. On the moral defense, a person is not pleading to be justified based on having paid the penalty. On the moral defense, a person is asking to be found innocent or justified before the court if they have persevered through life in doing righteous deeds. The one who does what is right is justified according to the moral defense. They have not broken the moral law. Therefore, they are not condemned.

Paul here emphasizes that truth of the moral defense. Doers of the law will be justified, declared to be in the right. Paul still does not yet explicitly answer the question of whether anyone has actually

persevered in keeping the law. But he does not need to answer that question. He can live it to us to answer. We know we have not.

The principle of moral judgment based on the doing what is morally right is present in those who do not have God's revelation of moral law (2:14-16).

In our last three verses, Paul describes the moral nature of man. All people through all cultures through all time recognize some reality of right and wrong. Our understandings of morality have not always agreed. I believe C. S. Lewis made the point that even cannibals recognize how immoral it would be to eat a person in one's own tribe. Though twisted there is a moral impulse there. A definition of right versus wrong. All people recognize the existence of some right and some wrong which is why guilt is a universal human feeling. Unless a person is truly psychotic, then he recognizes right and wrong, and feels guilt for having done wrong. And we do not lift up the psychotic person, void of morals, as the aim of an evolving society. We recognize the psychotic person, the person who has no sense of right and wrong and no feeling of guilt, we recognize that person not as a superior human being, but as an undesirable aberration. We are moral, and we think people ought to be moral. That is how we feel.

This universal moral impulse is evidence of the fact that all people are created in the image of God. In the case against pagan man, Paul argued that the creation implies a creator. We could argue as well that this universal sense of morality implies a law giver. Where does this sense of morality come from? And why do we believe we ought not try to escape it, at least not completely? We want to redefine morality, but we do not want to do away with morality. We want there to be a right or wrong that people are accountable to. That people do not agree on the details of morality follows Paul's earlier argument that by turning away from God, the moral image in us has become fractured. Or as he put it in 1:21, "They became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened." That darkness may have twisted the moral impulse in us, but it has not removed it.

So, Paul argues in verse 14 that people who do not have the special revelation of God's law still "do instinctively the things of the Law." People still feel that it is right at times to help others out without receiving anything back, to tell the truth, to be courageous, to speak gently to a child in tears, to provide for those in need. Of course, Paul is not saying that all people feel all those things at all times. Paul does not argue that people understand these things with clear moral vision. Nor does he argue that people are consistently successful. In fact, he indicates that people are not consistently successful in keeping to the moral standard they believe in. He writes in verse 15, "they show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing, or else defending them."

On the one hand, the person without the law brings judgment on the person who has the law when the person without the law is the one who does what is required by the law. Some non-Christians are simply nicer people than many Christians. Some non-Christians shame Christians by behaving more in line with the teaching of Christ. This is true. And it is evidence of an internal moral impulse. On the other hand, every non-Christian is also condemned, "everyone without the law", by their own conscience for their failure to do good. Again, this does not mean they feel guilty about all they should feel guilty about. If their heart is darkened, their conscience is not a sure guide to their own moral state. But enough of the image of God remains that each one recognizes a moral standard, and each one recognizes deep inside that they have failed in keeping to their own standard. Guilt is universal. And western people spend an enormous amount of money and energy trying to rid themselves of that guilt without admitting to their own sinfulness as the source. The entertainment industry thrives as it distracts us from the troubling truths of our internal turmoil. The psychiatric industry thrives in the effort to convince us, contrary to our inner voice, that we are good and everything is okay. No, it is not. We know it is not.

Paul's point in verse 16 is future oriented. He looks towards that day of wrath he mentioned in verse 5. He tells us that men and women will be judged by the standard of the gospel of Jesus Christ. That

is the standard that states, the immoral man must die on a tree. The gospel affirms that the wages of sin is death. Secretes will be made known. Our conscience will alternately defend us, alternately accuses us. Even without the moral standard of God, the digital recorder of our own standard will be played. And we know in advance that we will not live up. We cannot even plead that we misunderstood the standard. Enough of the moral impulse is left in each of us that, were we honest, we would not dare take a moral defense in the court of God. If it is the doers of the law who will be justified, each of us has access to the fact that we will not be justified. For we have not even done the law we know in our hearts we ought to do, much less the law God would require from us. The moral defense fails. There is no good news here. Not yet.

Reflection questions

1. As you observe the text of Romans 2:1-16, what are a couple of things that stand out to you as strange or interesting or confusing or important?
2. What are some examples of judgments you can hear yourself making against other people that would come back to convict you if you were held up to your own standard of judgment?
3. What in verses 1-5 convicts you in regard to your view of people in society who are not really trying to be moral (as in 1:18-32)? As you point your finger at them, what are the fingers pointing back at you saying? What do you see in these verses you can personally identify with? How do you feel about verse 4?
4. Have you seen chiastic structure in the Scripture before? Was it helpful for your understanding of verses 6-11 to see the text arranged in a chiastic pattern? What stands out to you in these verses?
5. Describe a non-Christian you know who lives out some aspect of the law of Christ. What are traits you admire in him or her?
6. How would you summarize Paul's charge against the moral person in these verses? Is Paul saying that we should strive harder to be doers of the law, so that we might be justified (2:13) or is he saying something else? What is his conclusion?

Lesson 6: Indictment of the Religious Man

Romans 2:17-29

I. Knowledge of God's will lead the religious person to a false sense of security undermined sin.

A. The religious person becomes confident in their position with God because of their knowledge of the Bible.

¹⁷ But if

you bear the name "Jew"

and rely upon the **Law**

and boast in God,

¹⁸ and know *His* will

and approve the things that are essential,

being instructed out of the **Law**,

B. The religious person's confidence emboldens them to teach others the worldview they have received in the Bible.

¹⁹ and

you are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind,

a light to those who are in darkness,

²⁰ a corrector of the foolish,

a teacher of the immature,

having in the **Law** the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth,

C. Yet, the religious person does not live out the moral vision received in the Bible.

²¹ you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself?

You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal?

²² You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?

You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?

²³ You who boast in the **Law**, through your breaking the **Law**, do you dishonor God?

II. Indictment: Religious knowledge and ritual do not make up for failure in moral practice.

²⁴ For "the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you," just as it is written.

²⁵ For indeed **circumcision** is of value if you practice the **Law**;

but if

you are a transgressor of the **Law**, your **circumcision** has become **uncircumcision**.

²⁶ So if

the **uncircumcised** man keeps the requirements of the **Law**, will not his **uncircumcision** be regarded as **circumcision**?

²⁷ And

he who is physically **uncircumcised**, if he keeps the **Law**, will he not judge you who though having the letter of the **Law** and **circumcision** are a transgressor of the **Law**?

²⁸ For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is **circumcision** that which is outward in the flesh.

²⁹ But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and **circumcision** is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.

NASB

Introduction: The Three Circles of the Religious Defense

Paul declared in his thesis to the Romans, "I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes for in it the righteousness of God is revealed." Paul is excited about the gospel as the source of salvation. Salvation implies the need to be saved. There is a great problem that must be solved. Before Paul can offer the solution of the gospel, that is how is it that God's righteousness is revealed, he must first establish the dilemma. What do all people need to be saved from? The answer is that we all need salvation from our own sin. Though we can equally say that we need salvation from the wrath of God which must come on those who have sinned against him." Do I really need to fear the wrath of God? Or I am basically good. God is loving. Aren't I safe?

Paul recognizes that he must disarm us of the illusion of our own goodness and safety before a holy God. So, he has taken us to court. He started his prosecution with the pagan person who has turned

his back on God. But then he included in the moral person who stands in judgment over the pagan, yet, does not live up to their own moral standards, much less God's moral standards. The moral person might adjust their defense to say, "I stand not only on my moral behavior, but on my moral and religious behavior. My religion makes up for any moral failure."

Being a skilled prosecutor, Paul addresses the religious defense in our present passage, Romans 2:17-29. Before we get into the text, let's think a little more about the position of the religious person.

We can imagine that the defendant in this section of Romans is being asked to answer the following question. "If you were to get hit by a bus in the next five minutes and go to the gates of heaven, and God were to ask you, 'Why should I let you come in and enjoy eternal life with me?', what would your answer be?" It's a thoughtful question. In fact, you might want to pause right here and think what your own answer would be to that question. If God asked you, "Why should I let you into heaven?", what would you say?

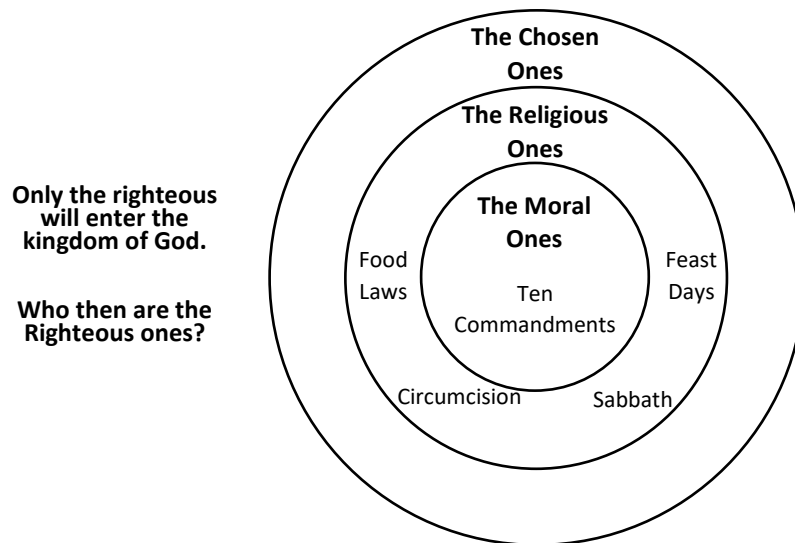
When I ask this question, I get three different types of answers from religious people. (1) First, some religious people have the expectation that they are going to get in simply because they are a member of a certain people group or denomination. They are not really sure how to answer the question. They have not thought it through theologically. They would say, "Well, I am Orthodox. My whole country is Orthodox. I may not be the best person, but I do believe I will go to heaven." Or, "My family is fourth generation Methodist. I grew up in the church. I think I am okay." (2) The second group of people senses that there must be more to it than just belonging to church or an ethnic group. You have to be at least a little religious. One might say, "I am not a nun or priest or anything, but I was baptized, and I was confirmed, and I go to church and confession on important occasions, so, I am pretty sure I am going to heaven. Who can really be sure? But I think I am in." Another might say, "I read my Bible and pray every morning. I only listen to Christian radio. And I go to church twice a week." That's the religious answer. I will get in because I do religious things. (3) The third person senses that there must be even more to it than religious ritual. You must actually try to be a good person, give to the poor, take marriage seriously, be honest in business practice, act kindly, and promote justice. Often the response I get is a mix between the options number 2 and 3; a mix between religious and moral behavior. "I have never killed anyone," which, by the way, is a really low bar. I have never killed anyone. Yeah, good for you. "I try to do what is right, to be honest, I go to church, I believe in Jesus, I pray."

Some mix of those three options is what you usually get from a modern religious person. Paul is not addressing a modern religious person. Paul is addressing a first century Jew. So, to interpret Paul correctly we need to think about what is the Jewish perspective that he was addressing? Though we should probably say perspectives. I imagine there were also various options, moving from a less religious Jew to a more religious Jew or from a Pharisees to a Sadducees to a scribe. There was certainly some mix of perspective in first century Judaism.

We do know that the question of who enters the kingdom of God was a common question under discussion for religious Jews in the first century. So, when Jesus raised the issue with Nicodemus in John 3:3, regarding who gets into the kingdom of heaven, he raised an issue of common debate. Nicodemus already knew the answer to the question. The accepted answer of who gets into the kingdom of God was the righteous man. Everybody pretty much knew that. The real debate was over the clarifying question, "Who is righteous?" Jesus, however, threw Nicodemus for a loop when he skipped over the definition of the righteous man and instead proclaimed that the one who is born again is the one who will enter the kingdom of heaven. That was a pretty strange answer to a common Jewish question. So strange that Nicodemus got flustered, was unable to make sense of the conversation, and pretty quickly just stopped talking.

To understand the common Jewish perspective, it is helpful to imagine three concentric circles, one inside the other. The biggest circle, or the outer circle, would define the righteous man as the Jew. If you are a Jew you are in, if you are a Gentile you are out. This fits for the less religious, less moral

person, your averaging working guy. You do not have to over think your relationship with God. If you are born a Jew, then you are part of the people of God. That makes you righteous. You are okay.



Many Jews in Paul's day would reject that idea. They would say there has to be more to it than that. Not only do you have to be Jewish, you also have to obey the ritual law. You have to watch what you eat, keep the Sabbath and circumcise your baby boys. As long as you keep the main markers of the law, then you are in. You are considered righteous. This is the middle of our three circles. It is the religious circle.

The Pharisees were a good example of a third Jewish perspective, which reasoned, "Yes, the first two circles are necessary. You need to be a Jew, you need to keep the covenant rituals, but you need to go further than that. You need to live a moral life. You need to follow the ten commandments, in fact, you need to follow the whole of the law." The righteous man is the one who keeps not only ritual law, but also moral law. How righteous do you have to be in your behavior? In John's account, Jesus did not use the language of righteousness with Nicodemus, but Jesus did use righteousness language throughout the sermon on the mount in Matthew 5-7, notably in Matthew 5:6 when he said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." Jesus affirms that this is a good question to be asking. If the righteous enter the kingdom of God, and you are seeking to enter the kingdom of God, then you should hunger and thirst after righteousness. But Jesus holds up a really high standard for righteousness. In Matthew 5:20 he says, "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven." That would have shocked Nicodemus. Your righteousness must be more moral than the most moral among you.

The three circles that give us the first century Jewish perspective, line up pretty well with modern religious perspectives. The less demanding outer circle simply says that you need to belong to the right group. As long as you are Roman Catholic or Orthodox, Moravian or Methodist, Baptist or Brethren. If you are in the right church, you are good. That's the main thing. The next circle asserts, "No, there must be more to it than that. You need to take being a Methodist seriously, you need to attend church regularly. Or as a Catholic, you need to take mass more than twice a year. Or as a Baptist you need adult baptism and need to read your Bible daily." This middle circle says that doing the right religious rituals or habits or disciplines puts you in right standing with God. The final circle goes further, "No, being a member of the right group is not enough and doing the right religious activities is not enough, you actually have to live a moral life."

Paul forced us into that third central circle in Romans 2:1-16. If you are going to stand in judgment of immoral, secular people, then you must meet the moral requirements yourself. Paul concluded, however, that no one does meet the moral standard required by God. On the day of judgment our

thoughts will alternately defend and accuse. If we take the moral defense in the court of God, we will lose our case. We are guaranteed a guilty verdict.

The natural move is to fall back on the second middle circle, the religious circle. We all know that we are not basically good, if we are able to rationally think about it. We are sometimes good. We are often selfish, rude, judgmental, prideful, uncaring, lustful, and greedy. When we own up to our own moral failures, religious ritual provides a first line of defense. If the moral defense fails, what about the religious defense. "I may not be perfect, but surely, God takes into account my religious actions." That's the question before Paul. Will my religious ritual and disciplines cover over my moral failure? Paul is going to say, "No."

Romans 2:17-29 has two main sections. In 17-23 Paul sets up the charge, telling the religious Jew that that their knowledge of God's will has led to a false sense of security undermined by their behavior. Then in 24-29 Paul brings home his charge that religious behavior and ritual do not make up for moral failure.

I. Knowledge of God's will lead the religious person to a false sense of security undermined by sin (2:17-23).

Paul goes after the religious person's security with three lists, coming in quick succession. The first two list are positive. The third is not. Listening, we get the feel of a prosecuting attorney on the attack. I will read all three and then come back to each one in turn.

[Read Romans 2:17-23]

A. The religious person becomes confident in their position with God because of their knowledge of the Bible (2:17-18).

The Law here refers to Torah. It is the Pentateuch or first five books of the Bible. This is the set of books that Moses left with the second generation of Israelites out of Egypt. It is much more than a list of dos and don'ts. It includes history, poetry, theological explanation. And it answers for the early Jewish nation three essential questions, "Who is God?" "Who am I?" "What's our mission?"

This first list identifies truths about the believer in God who has received the special revelation of his word. Through God's covenant they have the special identity of "Jew." They know who they are. They know the good and bad of their history. They are also able to "rely on the Law." They have a sense of purpose from the Law directing them how to live individually, how to live in community, how to order their religious life and even how to order their civil society. They can also "boast in God" which again goes to identity. They are connected to someone much greater than they are alone on their own. And they "know his will." Their God is not a fickle, chaotic pagan god whose will is undiscernible. In the Law, God made his will known. They know what he expects. "They can approve the things that are essential" for relationship with God and for life in family and community.

The special revelation of God in his Word enables the Jews a to see things as God sees them. They have access to an accurate worldview. They are wonderfully blessed in their religion.

In our new covenant age, Paul's argument can be updated by inserting Christian for Jew and Bible for Law. It still works.

[Reread Romans 2:17-18, replacing Christian for Jew and Bible for Law.]

Paul's argument through the whole passage applies to the people of God who have received the Word of God.

B. The religious person's confidence emboldens them to teach others the worldview they have received in the Bible (2:19-20).

The next list of five items in verse 19-20 describes the religious person's advantage over the non-religious person. Again, this is not a negative list. All these things should be true of someone who truly knows God and has access to his word. Because they accepted God's revelation, the Jews had a superior worldview. The pagan nations surrounding Israel lacked insight into God's character, into

the value of human beings, into accurate moral definition of what is good and what is evil, into the orderliness of the created world, the nature of history and time, the reality of the soul and of the afterlife. The Christian has the same advantage in the Bible, even a greater advantage, since we now have the revelation concerning Jesus Christ. The world makes the most sense when Jesus is at the center of our worldview and when we trust the Bible to fill out the details. Of course, we may not understand the Bible accurately. But pursuit of accurate understanding leads us to more accurate understanding of how life works, spiritually, morally, relationally. Paul would not have us apologize for the blessing of the Bible, and he would certainly approve of the responsibility believers have in communicating biblical truth to a world that is without hope, separated from God.

At the same time, Paul is quite aware of the sinful heart's tendency to turn religious knowledge into a sense of superiority, and even worse, into hypocritical superiority. After these two positive lists, Paul's charge comes in the next list.

C. Yet, the religious person does not live out the moral vision received in the Bible (2:21-23).

[Read Romans 2:21-23]

The problem is not the possession of religious knowledge. The problem is thinking that the possession of religious knowledge is somehow enough to earn God's approval, when we know our behavior does not match up to our teaching.

It is not clear why Paul uses the examples of stealing, adultery, and robbing temples. Stealing and adultery both bring to mind the ten commandments, such that we should probably feel free to add in the whole list of ten; the two examples implying the whole. We should also keep in mind that the ten commandments provide a moral continuum. Jews understood the ten commandments as a general summary of the whole law of Moses. Every specific law was somehow captured by one of the ten. If that is true, then we need to understand murder and stealing and adultery more broadly.

Jesus taught a broader view of the ten commandments in Matthew 5. Jesus taught that if we call someone a fool, we commit murder (Matthew 5:22). Murder is the supreme negative behavior forbidden by the commandment. To murder someone is to disain their life to such a degree that you are willing to take their life to fulfill your own agenda. If the actual taking of life is at the far end of the continuum of murder, then hateful thoughts, hateful words and deeds make up the continuum leading to murder. To hate a person in my heart, to degrade a person with my words, to spit on, hit or scratch another person. These are the sins of murder.

For the case of adultery, Jesus says that lust for a woman that is not your wife is the sin of adultery (Matthew 5:28). It starts in the mind, then moves to words and actions before being fully consummated in sexual intercourse. The example here of stealing is interesting, because it is the one example in the ten commandments where the outward action and the internal formulation of the sin are both included. The outward action is forbidden in the commandment "Do not steal." The inner sin is forbidden in the commandment "Do not covet." Coveting starts in the mind and moves toward the outward action of stealing.

So, even though Paul uses the more concrete behaviors of stealing and adultery, his argument includes coveting and lusting. Who are you to teach others to be faithful in marriage when you do not resist the lusting in your own mind or when you are watching internet pornography? And who are you to teach others not to steal when your heart is full of jealousy for what you do not have?

I have to admit that I am not sure what Paul is talking about when he says, "You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?" One thought would be that he is addressing those who speak out against idol worship, but do not pay their own tithe for the upkeep of the temple. The problem with that interpretation is that Paul uses the plural for temple, and the Jews only had one temple. Another possibility is that Jews in Rome received some kind of benefit from pagan temples, such that with their mouths they spoke of the evil of the temples and with their hands they took their share in the

benefit offered by pagan temples. Or maybe some really robed temples. Whichever it is, Paul had in mind some hypocritical practice that the Romans would have understood.

Paul's conclusion comes out quite clear. Confident in their religious knowledge, Paul charges religious Jew with bringing dishonor on God by not living up to their own teaching.

II. Indictment: Religious knowledge and ritual do not make up for failure in moral practice (2:24-29).

This brings us into the second section of the text, after we have these three lists. In the rest of the section Paul brings in the central Jewish ritual of circumcision. To sum up Paul's indictment, he declares that religious knowledge and ritual do not make up for failure in moral practice. Paul makes his point here with three consecutive "for" statements. The word "for" may or may not occur in your translation. It is there in the original Greek that Paul used. It is at the beginning of verse 24, 25, and 28. You will hear it in the English translation I am using.

Let's take them one by one.

A. For... (2:24)

[Read Romans 2:24]

Verse 24 supports the statement made in verse 23. This is the basic indictment. In verse 23 Paul asks the rhetorical question, "You who boast in the Law, through your breaking of the Law do you dishonor God?" We could follow that up with the question, "How does our breaking the law dishonor God?" Paul's response is verse 24, "Your breaking the law dishonors God, because 'the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.'" When religious people preach one thing and then behave contrary to their teaching, non-religious people take note. And not only does the inconsistency cause them to think badly of the religious people. It also causes them to think badly of the God of those religious people.

Often religious people are guilty of communicating superiority over non-religious people. "We know the truth, we are better." That comes out a lot. At other times, religious people communicate humbly, yet, their claim to special knowledge is still heard or interpreted as a claim to superiority. Either way, non-religious or less religious people are aware that Christians claim to have a special sight into what is morally right and what is morally wrong. They know we preach to not commit adultery. So, what do they think when a famous minister is caught in adultery? They know we preach the Bible is true, and the Bible says to turn the other cheek to the aggressor, do not take your Christian brother to court, care for the widow and orphan, love your neighbor and love the foreigner. When we fail in these areas, we look like hypocrites, and our God looks like a judgmental, abusive, small minded god. A claim to religious knowledge combined with failure in living out the moral claims of that religious knowledge smells awful. One pastor calls it theological body odor. Good truth, bad practice. Its very evident to the non-religious person, and it brings dishonor on the God that the religious person claims to follow.

B. For... (2:25-27)

The next "for" introduces the point made in verses 25-27. Paul refers to circumcision in this point. Circumcision was the sign of the Abrahamic covenant instituted in Genesis 17. The Mosaic covenant, building on the Abrahamic covenant, continued the requirement of circumcision. Circumcision provided a physical marker for Jewish boys and men that distinguished them or set them apart from non-Jews.

Paul has said in verse 24 that the behavior of the Jewish people has caused non-Jewish people to talk bad about the God of the Jews. We might again ask Paul, "How so?" "How is it that inability to live up to our teaching causes non-Jews to blaspheme God." To summarize Paul's point in 25-27, he is going to say, "Your failure to live out your own teaching causes non-Jews to speak badly about God because you have set yourself apart by your religious ritual, but not by your behavior, such that you act like you are not the people of God while non-Jews who are not set apart by the religious ceremony of circumcision at times fulfill the teaching of God."

[Read Romans 2:25-27]

Paul has refused to accept the religious defense. It is not enough to be circumcised. You actually have to obey the law. He has maneuvered us back to the moral argument. The religious defense wants to argue that possession of religious knowledge, the Law, and performance of religious ritual somehow make up for our moral failures. Paul says, "No, they do not." Those who have not been ritually circumcised sometimes do better at fulfilling the law than you who have been circumcised. Though the Jewish person feels like they are a guide to the blind in verse 19, here it is the non-Jewish person who judges the Jewish person. The teacher is not the one who knows the right thing to do. The teacher is the one who does the right thing.

Jews and Christians often make the same mistake in understanding the religious rituals of the Bible. We have circumcision, food laws and various commands to sacrifice in the Old Testament. In the New Testament the two big rituals are baptism and the Lord's supper, taking the bread and wine. The mistake is to believe that somehow these rituals cover over our moral sin.

There is a popular perspective or way to look at it that God judges based on the scale system. All our sins are put on one side of the scale and all our good works on the other side of the scale. Whichever way the scale tips decides the judgement. The moral indictment from the beginning of the chapter ensures us that the scale will always tilt towards guilty. Our sin always outweighs our good works, because God takes into account thoughts and words as well as actions. This is the point in the argument where the religious person takes a step back from trying to make their defense purely on their moral behavior. They want to add their religious knowledge, rituals, and habits onto the good side of the scale. "But I was baptized. I went to church and took communion weekly. I prayed daily. I gave a full 10% of my income. That has got to count for something. If I put all that on to the good side of the scale won't it tip it over in my favor?"

There are at least three problems with this line of thinking.

First, even if religious ritual did tip the scales, are you truly doing those things out of love for God or are you simply trying to buy your way out of sin? If your heart is not pure in your ritual, then the action is not pleasing to God? Does it really go on the good side, if you are only doing it to try to get out of sin? As David prays in the confession of his sin in Psalm 53:16, "God, you do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; you are not pleased with burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." David understood that the religious ritual does not have value if the heart is not right.

Second, God does not judge us on this scale system. No judge does that. You may be given some credit for good behavior before a court of law, being a descent guy is not going to get you off for murder. You will be judged before the court based on your moral thoughts, words, and deeds, one at a time. Each sin you commit is a grievous offense against the moral nature of God. Paul is going to say in Romans 6:23 that "the wages of sin is death." The penalty for one sin is death or eternal separation from God. Holy God cannot be in relationship with sinful man. He must judge sin. If we put on one side of the scale all the truly good and selfless, loving acts you have done in your life and put on the other side of the scale one sin. The verdict of a just judge must still be guilty for that one sin. You are guilty of that one sin. Adding all your religious knowledge and action on the good side does not change the fact that you must pay the penalty of that one sin.

Third, the Bible does not teach that the penalty of sin is good community service. If the offence were lighter, then perhaps the penalty would be to say three prayers and go to church for a month. Though it is truly a shame if you feel like talking to God in prayer and going to church are penalties. But the offence is not light. The offence tarnishes the image of God in which you were made. The offence disqualifies you for relationship with a holy God. The result is eternal separation from God. The penalty of sin is death. You do not pay that with your good religious behavior.

We will come back to this understanding of judgment when we get to the verdict at the end of chapter 3. For now, it is enough to know that Paul does not accept religious ritual as efficacious for removing the guilt of sin.

C. For... (2:28-29)

We can ask, “How so?”, one more time. How is it that the ritual of circumcision does protect us from our moral failures? Paul’s answer has to do with the function of circumcision. Circumcision was not intended as a ritual act that somehow conferred grace on a Jewish boy. If that were the case, we should truly fear for the salvation of all the Jewish girls. Circumcision was a symbolic ritual pointing towards an internal reality. Circumcision symbolized both a curse and a blessing. Through the ritual of circumcision parents declared a curse on their own seed or their own descendants, essentially declaring, “If we do not walk faithfully with God, if we turn away to worship other Gods then let our descendants be cut off from the people of Israel (Genesis 17:9-14).” The symbolic idea is a cutting off. Circumcision also communicates a blessing, symbolizing the need for God to work internally in the heart of a person, so that they might be able to love him and serve him. Circumcision of the heart is a cutting away of the old flesh or sin nature. Moses promised in Deuteronomy 30:6, “The Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live.” Now let’s read the text.

[Read Romans 2:28-29]

Trusting in circumcision to make oneself acceptable before God is to miss the whole point of the ritual. Circumcision is meant to call Jews to commit to faithful service with God that comes out of a heart for God. Circumcision does not make up for moral failure.

Paul’s example here is the Jew. The same argument applies to all cultural Christians. We could insert baptism for circumcision. Baptism carries into the new covenant very similar symbolism as circumcision. There is both a curse and a blessing. Recognizing the need to die for sin, baptism takes the Christian under the water, symbolizing death. That’s the curse. And recognizing the need for God to do an internal work in the heart, baptism takes the Christian up out of the water, symbolizing new life. That’s the blessing. Baptism does not make up for moral failure. Baptism points to an internal reality. The religious Christian who trusts in their knowledge of the Bible and their various religious practices fails in their defense before God, just as much as the Jewish person.

Who is righteous before God? Going back to our three circles, the outer circle says it is enough to simply be a member; be a Jew or be a Christian in the right denomination. That’s it. You are in. But certainly, there has to be more than that. You have to be religious; be baptized, take the Lord’s supper, go to church. Others say, that is not enough. You have to go further. You have to keep the moral law. The righteous one is both religious and moral. Paul agrees. But he also agrees with Jesus. Your morality must exceed the morality of the most moral among you. You must be without guilt. How that can be Paul has not yet told us. We must wait a bit more. He hints in verse 29 that he is going to talk about something new. A work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. But he is not ready to go into that now.

Paul’s last words challenge us to a right perspective. In verse 17 the religious person is described as boasting in God. He is secure in his own knowledge about God. A dangerous reality in the sinful human heart when mixed with religion, even good religion, is that we become self-satisfied with our own religious knowledge and practice. The human heart is terribly legalistic. We feel as though we know God and are good with God because of our status as a member of the right group and because of the paltry commitments we make in the name of religion. The legalistic human heart also craves the praise of others. “See what I have done. Recognize that I am worthy.” Praise from man strengthens our sense of security in our own righteousness. It is wonderful to gather around us people of like mind, people who approve of our religious ritual, because they convince us that we are okay.

But the person who truly seeks God and truly loves God, is not proud in his own knowledge and behavior and he does not depend on the praise of other people. As Paul writes in our last verse here, “But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.” “His praise is not from men, but from God.” You see, it is not so important what you think about God as what God thinks about you. It is crucial to hear God say, “Justified. You are innocent before my court. Enter into relationship with me.” False security in religious works hinders the pursuit of open and honest relationship with God. As David said, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

Before we find the answer to the question, “What makes me right in the eyes of God?” We must desire the answer. When we recognize that we are indeed poor in Spirit, when we mourn over our sin, when we become meek before God, when we begin to hunger and thirst after his righteousness, then we are on the right path. Then we are no longer seeking man’s answer to how to be right before God, but we have begun to seek God’s answer. We see that we have no answer in and of ourselves. We seek God’s answer. And those who seek will find.

Reflection questions

1. As you observe the text of Romans 2:17-29, what are a couple of things that stand out to you as strange or interesting or confusing or important?
2. What stands out to you as interesting or important or surprising in the first two of Paul’s lists in 2:17-20?
3. What are one or two examples of the biblical worldview that your culture needs to understand? In other words, what message from the Bible would be helpful at this point in time for your society to hear?
4. What are one or two examples in your society of the how the behavior of Christians prevents the positive message of the Bible from being heard? In other words, what examples come to mind of how the words or attitudes of Christians undermine their own teaching?
5. In your church or circle of Christian friends, what are some of the expected rituals, disciplines or behaviors?
6. Take an example or two from question 5 and answer the following question. How do you understand the purpose of that particular religious ritual or discipline? Why is it important?
7. What does it mean to claim from verse 29 “It is more important what God thinks about you than what you think about God”?

Lesson 7: Two Objections Raised and Deferred

Romans 3:1-8

I. The First Objection

¹ Then what advantage has the **Jew**? Or what is the benefit of **circumcision**?

² Great in every respect.

First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God.

³ What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it?

⁴ **May it never be!** Rather, let God be found true, though every man *be found* a liar, as it is written,
“That You may be justified in Your words and prevail when You are judged.”

II. The Second Objection

⁵ But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the **righteousness of God**, what shall we say? The God who inflicts **wrath** is not unrighteous, is He? (I am speaking in human terms.)

⁶ **May it never be!** For otherwise, how will God judge the world?

⁷ But if through my lie the truth of God abounded to His glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner?

⁸ And why not *say* (as we are slanderously reported and as some claim that we say), “Let us do evil that good may come”?

Their condemnation is just.

NASB

Paul has Challenged Our Religious identity

At the end of Romans chapter 2, Paul rejects the religious presumption that identifying as a Jew and participating in Jewish ritual, such as circumcision, will make a person acceptable to the court of God on the day of judgment. And we should be careful to not read back into this any kind of anti-Jewish sentiment. Paul targets the Jew as the person with the best possible religious argument. The Jews truly have received promises from God and truly received ritual practices from God. Paul is not looking down on the Jew. He is saying that even though you can claim to be an actual member of God’s people and to have followed God’s ceremonial law, you still do not stand before God on that basis. Your religious acts do not make up for your sin. The scale of justice still tilts guilty.

But I am a Jew! That does not matter in this court. But I am a Baptist! Does not matter. I am a Roman Catholic! Does not matter. I am Methodist, Orthodox, Brethren, Bible church, Presbyterian, Anglican, Non-denominational, Undenominational, free spirit...It does not matter. Your religious identity does not count a whit in this court. Have you or have you not consistently and thoroughly lived out the moral will of God in your life? Does this court have any righteous claim that can be brought against you? That is the question of justice.

But that does not seem fair. It may make sense to reject the pagan or the Hindu or the Muslim, but to reject the Jew or the Christian whose circumcision, baptism, communion comes from the Word of God. That does not seem right. Paul is pausing here at the beginning of chapter 3 to entertain 2 objections against his prosecution of the case so far. The first objection in chapter 3:1, “Then what advantage has a Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision?” contains a deep emotional complaint that is best understood when we put ourselves into the place of the Jew in Paul’s argument. This is about religious identity. Before we go further in the text let’s try to enter personally into the problem Paul is addressing.

You have a religious identity. As you have grown up and developed your understanding of God and how to relate to him certain values and memories and presuppositions have become part of who you are. Whether you have embraced your childhood exposure to religion or rebelled against that early teaching; whether you are a traditionalist or a free spirit; whether you have stayed consistent in your path or have experienced a dramatic conversion; whatever the case, you have a religious identity and religious values. You have a way of approaching God that feels right to you. You feel secure with God or insecure with God because of how you view God and how you view yourself. You have your own story. I have my story. I will share with you a bit of my story by way of example.

I grew up in the Moravian church, a protestant denomination that came before the protestant reformation. The Moravians came from Moravia which is part of the Czech Republic. The Moravians passed through a renewal in Germany before coming to America. So, there is both a Czech and a German background. Moravian traditions have settled deep in my soul. I smell beeswax candles at Christmas, a brass band makes me think of Easter sunrise service, I catch myself whistling the tune to “Jesus Makes My Heart Rejoice” and “Christ the Lord, the Lord Most Glorious”, green mountains take me back summer camp memories, and ginger cookies never live up to the paper-thin Moravian cookies we got at Grandmother and Granddaddy’s house.

In college, I began to get interested in my roots. Being the church archivist, Granddaddy gave me access to old, dusty books that contained the story of Moravian missions. Our history stretched back past Martin Luther to the Slavic reformer Jan Hus, martyred in 1415 for holding up the Bible as the Christian’s highest authority and for claiming the right to preach to Czech people in their heart language. When the Moravians came to Germany in the 1700s, God did an amazing work in that small community, sending missionaries through Europe, to Greenland, Africa, the Caribbean, even Palestine. More important to me was the arrival of my great, great, great, great, great, great grandfather who joined the community of believers at Friedland Moravian Church in North Carolina, where I grew up going to church. That was 250 years ago. I have this religious heritage and experience that is part of who I am. And I want to believe that it matters.

I used to think that 250 years was a long religious heritage, which, for America it certainly is. That was before I moved to Croatia. But living in Croatia, I walk by buildings that are 250 years old and there are families who claim to have been Roman Catholic for 1000 years, easily outdistancing my heritage. And they have stories of holding on to their faith through war and persecution. For so many, to be Croatian is to be Catholic. Their religious identity is deeply intertwined with their cultural and ethnic and political identity. That is getting closer to Paul’s case with the Jew. Their culture outdoes Protestant and Catholic and Orthodox. They claim a heritage 4000 years back to Abraham. They have suffered more than any through war and persecution. Theirs are the prophets. Even the Christian writers of the New Testament are Jews. In Paul’s day to be a Jew was a religious statement intertwined with culture, ethnicity and politics.

And yet, here Paul argues that it just does not matter in the courtroom of God. It does not matter if you are a Jew. His point is not that it just does not matter for the Jew. It does not matter for the Jew or for whatever identity you claim. Whether your heritage is as old as Abraham or whether you were the first in your family take the road you are on. Paul would strip you of all your religious dress; all your sacraments and ordinances; your baptism, your Lord’s Supper, your Christmas and Easter celebrations, your confirmation, your Bible reading, your prayer, and your fasting. All your rituals and your self-definition, traditionalist, conservative, moderate, free spirit, progressive, future oriented, of Moses, of Peter, of Paul; however you define yourself, that too will be stripped away.

Paul’s insistence that we will be judged in the moral court of God based on our own thoughts, our own words and our own deeds takes us back to the garden of Eden, where the only questions that count are, “Why are you hiding and what have you done?” No matter what religious identity and traditions we would use to cover our nakedness, no matter what bush we try to hide behind, God sees. God sees through to the heart. King David acknowledged, “You desire truth in the innermost being and in the hidden part you will make me know wisdom (Psalm 51:6).” I cannot package myself in such a way that I come out looking good to God. He sees me, truly, exactly as I am.

We are left with this at the end of chapter 2. Paul has condemned the Pagan man, the Moral man and the Religious man. He pauses now to raise these two objections that regularly come against the gospel. If religion does not suffice in the court of God, then, “What about the Jew?”, and secondly, “What about sin? If no religion are we free to sin?” We will address each objection in turn starting with “What about the Jew?” in chapter 3:1-4.

The First Objection – What about the Jew?

[Read Romans 3:1-4]

“Paul, if religion does not matter, if we stand naked before God, then what is the point? Why did God call Abraham in the first place and promise a son and save Israel from Egypt and make them a nation? Why did God give them circumcision and command ritual obedience?”

That’s the objection. And the objection can be raised both emotionally and theologically.

The Objection Understood Emotionally

Emotionally, Paul’s presentation of the gospel attacks our sense of religious identity. That is what I have been setting up. This is deep in us. We feel this. I gave you a bit of my story. Here is another.

I once met a student who had switched from the University of Zagreb to the University of Split. He originally came from the coast of Croatia. Moving to Zagreb he got into a party crowd, drinking some drugs, not much studying. So, he moved to Split to start over. The emptiness did not go away. One night he called out to God, “If you exist, let me know who you are?” The next day, he met some friends that I had set up in an English class. They went to coffee. He heard that he could have a personal relationship with Jesus. He prayed to God that night, and his life was changed. He was one of those who experienced a dramatic transformation, from being empty and lost to experiencing joy and purpose. He could not get enough of the Bible. He spent time with Jesus. The partying stopped. No more drinking, no more drugs. He started to study and do well in college.

So, his parents took him out of the University in Split. There was an island near his home with a cross on it. He would go there to pray. His parents noticed this difference. He had grown up Roman Catholic but had never prayed or read the Bible. Now he could not stop talking about Jesus. They became afraid that he was losing his identity, so they took him out of University again. My friend from Split called him and his mom answered his phone. She said, “Look, I know you are a good person. I know you helped my son stop drugs and get his life together. But he was born a Catholic, raised a Catholic and he will die a Catholic. Do not ever call him again.”

She was feeling this deep threat to identity. That was so important to her that she could not see that her son was beginning to develop a true relationship with Jesus Christ. The primary issue is not about being Roman Catholic, being Jewish, being Protestant. The issue is about, knowing Jesus, walking with Jesus, trusting in Jesus. Sometimes our religion is so deeply a part of who we are that we cannot hear the voice of Jesus calling, knocking on the door. We are afraid to listen, afraid of what we might lose. The objection is not rational, but even more powerfully, it is deeply emotional.

“Who are you to say, Paul, that it does not matter if we are Jewish or circumcised? You are a traitor to the faith. You have given up on your own people. You have thrown away precious tradition forged through centuries of suffering. What do you mean there is no advantage in being a Jew who is circumcised? You are crazy Paul. You are an outcast.”

Paul experienced this kind of emotional response from people in his ministry. For example, Acts 17 records Paul being pleasantly received by Jews of the synagogue of Thessalonica. Initially, his teaching about Jesus was given a hearing and some joined him. But when it became clear that the message was also for non-Jews, uncircumcised Gentiles, a powerful, emotional backlash followed, and Paul was driven from the city. Their identity as the special people of God had been threatened.

Paul’s proclamation of the gospel strips away the presuppositions of our moral and religious identity. We are not safe in who we have defined ourselves to be.

The Objection Understood Rationally

The objection of verse 1 can also be understood rationally or theologically. There is a rational problem with Paul’s gospel message. God really did make special promises to the Jewish people. “But now, thus says the Lord, your Creator, O Jacob, and he who formed you, O Israel, ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine (Isaiah 43:1-2)!’” What name has God

called his people? “O Jacob, O Israel.” God knows their name. He gave them the name Jew. He made promises to Abraham and to Moses and to David. “You may stumble, you may suffer, you may be exiled. But you are mine O Israel. I will not forsake you. I will bring you back. You are my people. I am your God.”

If we simply ignore and wipe away all significance of being a Jew and the value of Jewish ritual, then the Old Covenant becomes very confusing. It makes no sense. God took those things very seriously. Paul is not rejecting the Law, Writings and Prophets. Paul carefully communicates both the discontinuity and continuity inherent in moving from the Old Covenant to the New. Claiming the birthright of the Jew and holding to all the traditions will not save you from a just and holy judge on the day of judgment. But that is not the same thing as saying that there is no value in the name Jew and the rituals instituted by God.

So, what is the advantage of being a circumcised Jew? Verse 2, “Great in every respect.” And the very first advantage is that the Jew has been “entrusted with the oracles of God.” Jews are not wrong to claim access to the will of God. They are not wrong to claim to be a light to those who are in darkness. The word of God is a precious, precious possession, enabling the Jew who receives it to see the world as it really is; to see God and people and relationships from God’s own perspective.

And that is all Paul has to say right now on this which is a bit disappointing, really. It’s a solid objection that he is being asked. The Old Covenant emphasizes the value of being a Jew and performing circumcision. But Paul claims it does not help on the day of judgment. Unpack that for us Paul. But he does not unpack it. Instead, he gives what I call the Dad answer: short, a little confusing, and definitely unsatisfying. Paul starts with, “First of all.” And what should naturally follow later after “First of all?” At some point we should have “and second...and third...” Paul starts a list that he never finishes. What’s going on here? Is Paul distracted? Does he not know how to answer the question? Is he frustrated that anyone would dare raise a point. No, no and no, that is not what is going on. When we study the rest of the letter to the Romans, we find out that Paul gives a detailed answer to this question. The whole of chapters 9-11 answer this question, “What about the Jews?”

Paul is an experienced evangelist. He knows that his presentation raises problems for people listening to him. He acknowledges the problem and gives a short answer to show he is not avoiding the question, but he needs to finish the basic message of the gospel before he can turn to a new topic. Especially in this case, because understanding the foundational truth of the gospel is necessary to answer the question, “What about the Jews?”

The short answer here is that even though simply being a Jew does not justify a person in the court of God, there are great advantages, like possession of the Word of God. Furthermore, in verse 3, God’s faithfulness to his promises will not be overturned simply because some Jews did not believe. “What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it?” The theological objection argues that Paul’s gospel makes God out to be unfaithful in his promises to the Jews. Paul responds, “Lack of belief by some will not overrule God’s faithfulness.” He emphasizes that with his emphatic, “May it never be!” If Paul’s version of the gospel is correct, then it will show God to be true even if every person claiming to be a member of his people turns out to be a liar, a hypocrite. In verse 4 it is God who is on trial and God who is justified. The God of Paul’s gospel is judged for not giving appropriate value to religious identity and ceremony. He is judged as an unjust judge or as a breaker of promises. That is why Paul asserts himself so emphatically. “May it never be! That God would be unfaithful or break his promises.” Paul is refuting the claim that his gospel shows God to be unjust, arguing that in fact his gospel is the only way to show God as just. “Let God be found true, that he might be justified in his words and prevail when he is judged.”

The gospel is necessary to reveal the righteousness of God in his plan of salvation. It is necessary to help us understand his promises to the Jews and not only to the Jews, but also to the Christian church. Paul will address the question of God’s faithfulness to his people in chapters 9-11. For now, he wants to mention another objection and then get back to his gospel presentation.

The Second Objection – What about sin?

[Read Romans 3:5-8]

We might find the second objection a little convoluted, but it is an objection that comes against the gospel regularly in various forms. This objection begins by claiming that our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God. What unrighteousness is Paul referring to? Well, in the context it is the unrighteousness of the religious person who depends on outward identity and ritual, while not living up to their own creed. God sees through religious hypocrisy and is shown to be righteous in his judgment of religious man. But if God knows that man falls short and man's falling short only affirms the righteousness of God, then why does God punish man for falling short? Our sin reveals his righteous glory. Therefore, our sin adds to his praise. God is glorified by our sin, so it is wrong for him to punish us.

Sophistry is a smart sounding argument that twists words around to deceive, or it is the attempt to win an argument through clever, but false reasoning. This is sophistry. The objection is a twisting of Paul's language from the beginning of his gospel presentation back in chapter 1. Paul had declared that the gospel reveals the righteousness of God, that's in 1:17. God also reveals his righteousness in his wrath against sinful man, that's in 1:18. This objection twists that around to suggest that the sinfulness of man reveals God's righteousness, and so, God is unrighteous to inflict the punishment of his wrath, since the end result of our sin is glory to God. If you follow that, the basic idea is that we sin, that shows God to be right. God receives glory. If he receives glory through our actions he is not just in punishing us.

Paul is pretty quick to denounce this argument, using his favorite emphatic phrase again in verse 6, "May it never be!" The whole idea of judgment would be lost if somehow our sin is added up as a positive. One thing that is quite clear in the Bible from the garden of Eden to the new Jerusalem is that God judges sin. A just God must judge sin. Our just God does judge sin.

Verse 7 and 8 repeat the sophistry. "If through my lie the truth of God abounded to his glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner?" The gospel radically affirms that the law cannot save because people cannot live up to the law. Opponents to the gospel hear that the law cannot save and in their minds they twist that assertion, either purposefully or mistakenly, to say that these Christians oppose living the moral life exhorted by the law. If Christians reject salvation by law, then Christians must be lawless.

This is a valid objection here. If you take away the law as the standard that justifies, then what motive is there for living a righteous life? That is a significant challenge to the gospel. And to be fair, a lot of Christians have added fuel to the fire. If grace means we can live however we want in our behavior towards others, in our business practices, in our sexuality, then it looks like the gospel declares people righteous while promoting unrighteous living. To religious outsiders looking in, it sounds like we are saying, "Let us do evil that good may come?"

Paul rejects the logic. He concludes that the condemnation of the unrighteous is just. Again, he gives us an unsatisfyingly short answer to an important question. This does not mean that Paul does not recognize our need for better understanding here. This is critical, and he will come back to this objection with a long, in depth answer in chapters 5-8. For now, in regard to both of these objections, Paul goes ahead and gives us his short answer. He is a good evangelist. He knows that he has to finish the basic presentation of the gospel before he answers these more difficult questions. He does not leave us in doubt about his conclusions, but he does defer the longer answer until after he has completed his initial gospel presentation. Is God unfaithful in his promises to the Jews? May it never be! More on that later in Romans 9-11. Does the gospel of grace promote sin? May it never be! More on that later in Romans 5-8. But first, let's finish with the indictment of all men so that we can move on to the salvation that has been made available to all men. Let's establish the gospel and then we will come back to these two important issues.

The Two Questions of Covenant

The separation of these issues is quite important for us. There is a lot of confusion or lack of clarity among Bible believing Christians over the role of good works in our lives as believers. It is a confusion of the roles of law and grace. This is one of the major motivations for carefully walking through the whole of Paul's gospel presentation in Romans. To understand how the gospel saves and to understand how the gospel empowers us for life, we need clarity on the issues of law and grace.

Paul's refusal to address these two questions about the Jew and about sin at this stage in his presentation indicates how foundational chapters 1-4 are to understanding the gospel. This is basic arithmetic. We cannot move on to higher mathematics until we have absolute clarity, regarding the foundational truths.

Here in the conclusion of this lesson, I am going to give you two questions. Understanding the gospel answer to these two questions will enable you to frame the issues correctly. I am not going to give you the gospel answer to these questions, not yet. We will let Paul do that in his time. For now, it is key just to recognize which question we are dealing with. One reason our thinking gets muddled on law and grace is that we are not clear on the question we are trying to answer.

I call these two questions, "The Two Questions of Covenant." The biblical history shows that God chose to relate to his people from Adam through Jesus, using the concept of covenant. In the Ancient Near East, in the context of Abraham and Moses and David, the nations surrounding Israel used covenant treaties to define their relationships with one another. A great king would make a covenant with a vassal people to define the basis of their relationship and the expectations he had in that relationship.

God used this cultural idea of covenant to help people understand their relationship with him. He made special covenants with Abraham, Moses, David and, of course, Jesus with the New Covenant. We are not worrying about the details right now of the covenants. We are just thinking about the big picture, there are two essential question to covenant. question number one is "What makes me acceptable to be in relationship with God?" We can ask that question slightly differently, keeping in mind our current moral and legal context of Romans. Paul is talking about justification before the court of God. So, we could ask question number one like this, "What makes me righteous before God?" That is the question of acceptability before a holy God. "What makes me acceptable or righteous before God, so that I might have a covenant relationship with him?" That is the first question of covenant.

A lot of confusion about the gospel of Jesus Christ has to do with the role of grace and the role of law. So, let's apply to the first question of covenant law and grace. What role does grace play in making me acceptable to be in relationship with God, and what role does law play in making me acceptable to be in relationship with God? Here by grace I mean that which is completely dependent on God. What does God do for me that I simply receive as a gift of grace? By law I do not mean here the whole of the Torah but rather the stipulations of covenant, the dos and the don'ts. These could be the moral dos and don'ts like do not steal, do not lie, love your neighbor, show hospitality. These are easy to find in the Bible. They are through the Old Testament and New Testament. We can also include in the dos and don'ts of law religious rituals and behaviors. Do not eat shrimp, do read your Bible, do pray, do not work on the Sabbath, and so on. Essentially grace is what God does for us and law is what we do.

Here is the question for you to answer before our next lesson. "What makes you acceptable to be in relationship with God?" And you do not have to answer this precisely, just make an estimate. Use percentages. What percentage is the first question of covenant answered by grace and what percentage by law. So, if it depends half on God and half on you then your answer would be 50% grace, what he does for me, and 50% by law, that is what I have to do in relationship. And remember, law in this case is not bad. Law is the ten commandments and the sermon on the mount and Romans 12-15, the dos and don'ts of covenant, whether you are thinking Old Covenant or New Covenant.

I think I will not tell you what the second question of covenant is because I do not want to influence your answer to the first question of covenant. That can be your extra credit question. Along with answering the first question of covenant, you can try to come up with what you think is the second question of covenant. I will give you a couple of lessons to think about that. We will just stay with the first question of covenant because this is the question Paul is dealing with in Romans 1-4. This is what we have been talking about. “What makes me acceptable to be in relationship with God?” “What makes me righteous in his eyes?”

When we can clearly understand this answer, it prepares us up to go much deeper into understanding and living out the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So, do not listen to the next lesson until you have written down your answer for this question: “What makes me acceptable to God? What percentage is grace, God’s action, and what percentage is law, my action?”

We will answer that fully in our next two lessons.

Reflection Questions

1. Religious identity is often positively affirmed in the Bible as long as that identity does not create the wrong assumptions. Reflect on your own identity. Make sure that you are in a quiet place. Take a deep breath. Relax. Now ask yourself the question, “Who am I?” Write down different words as they come to mind. Do not analyze the words. Just write them down.

2. To add to the list from question 1, answer these questions. For now, list anything that brings you pleasure as it comes to mind. Or anything that feels significant or important to you.

a. What are some traditions or disciplines that you appreciate about the church you currently attend? What do you do regularly as a community?

b. What are some spiritual habits in your own life that you find important to your walk with God?

c. Think back to your childhood. What traditions or practices do you appreciate from your past?

3. Now imagine that you stand in the courtroom of God. God sees you. He sees all that by which you define yourself. His eyes see you as you truly are. He sees the good of his image in you. He sees also the selfishness in your heart. Along with the beauty in you, He may see greed or pride or lust or pettiness or jealousy or apathy. He sees whatever is truly there. For a moment all the good things about who you seem to be set aside and of no account. The bad is brought forward as an accusation against you.

Now you are ready to ask the question in 3:1. Instead of “Jew” or “circumcision” you can fill in the blank with the words of your own spiritual identity and practice. “If my identity and practices do not help me to stand before God under his judgment, then what advantage is there in being _____ or what benefit is there in _____?”

4. What stands out to you as interesting or important or confusing in 3:1-4?

5. How would you paraphrase the objection and Paul’s answer in these verses?

6. What stands out to you as interesting or important or confusing in 3:5-8?

7. How would you paraphrase the objection and Paul’s answer in these verses?

8. What percentage would you assign to the role of grace and law in answering the first question of covenant, “What makes you acceptable to be in relationship with God?”

What percentage is grace, God’s part?

What percentage is law, your part?

Lesson 8: Closing Argument – Indictment of All Men

Romans 3:9-20

⁹ What then? Are we better than they? Not at all;
for we have already charged that **both Jews and Greeks are all under sin**; ¹⁰ as it is written,
“There is none righteous, not even one; (Psalm 14:1-3, 53:1-3 and Eccl. 7:20)
¹¹ There is none who understands,
There is none who seeks for God;
¹² All have turned aside, together they have become useless;
There is none who does good,
There is not even one.”
¹³ “Their throat is an open grave, (Psalm 5:9)
With their tongues they keep deceiving,”
“The poison of asps is under their lips”; (Psalm 140:3)
¹⁴ “Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness”; (Psalm 10:7)
¹⁵ “Their feet are swift to shed blood, (Isaiah 59:7-8)
¹⁶ Destruction and misery are in their paths,
¹⁷ And the path of peace they have not known.”
¹⁸ “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” (Psalm 36:1)
¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law,
so that **every mouth** may be closed and **all the world** may become accountable to God;
²⁰ because by the works of the Law **no flesh will be justified in His sight**;
for through the Law *comes* the knowledge of sin.

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Paul as a Lawsuit Prophet

The primary role of the Old Testament prophets was to call God’s people back to covenant faithfulness. The prophets saw how princes, nobles, priests, business men and women, and normal men and women lived their lives. The prophets saw the hearts of the people veer away from God, and they saw how the behavior of the people followed. Lost relationship with God always results in a degrading of moral behavior. The opposite is also true. A degrading in our moral behavior results in loss of vision for who God really is. The prophets saw these problems in society and were tasked with holding people accountable to covenant relationship with God, warning them of dangers ahead if they continued on their road away from God and providing hope if they would return to enjoy the blessing of being in relationship with God. These prophets are known as lawsuit prophets. They make a case against the people for breaking covenant. You hear it in Micah 6:2, “Listen, you mountains, to the indictment of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth, because the Lord has a case against his people; even with Israel he will dispute.”

The scope of the lawsuit prophet was primarily in calling Israel back to covenant relationship. But God is not a regional, pagan god, tied only to one people in one locality. This, too, comes out in the prophets. Each of the major prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel contain prophecies targeting the superpowers of Babylon and Egypt as well as prophecies targeting the regional powers like Tyre, Ammon, Edom, Moab and Philistia. In the short prophecy of Amos, chapters 1 and 2 lead up to a prophecy for Israel by first aiming at six non-Jewish nations. Two of the other shorter prophets, Jonah and Nahum, both focus in on Assyria. My point is that the prophets of God understand that he is king, not only over Israel, but king over all the nations of the earth. The special covenant with Israel that came through Abraham and Moses does not set aside the universal covenants with all people established through Adam and Noah. All men, all women are accountable to God. We see this in the Old Testament prophets and we see it here in the first chapters of Romans.

Paul has taken on the role of covenant lawsuit prophet. We are in a courtroom, and he is the prosecuting attorney. He sees the path of men and women. He sees that path is taking them away from relationship with God. And he is calling us back universally. He is not just calling Jew. He is

calling Jew and Gentile. Paul sees God as king of all people. He has taken us to court and we have been studying the indictment. The Pagan person, the moral person, the religious person have all been accused. Now, Paul delivers his closing argument.

9 Paul clearly states the intent of his case so far.

Just in case we are not sure about what Paul was doing in chapters 1 and 2, he has summed it up clearly for us here in verse 9.

[Read Romans 3:9]

Paul is not setting up the Jew as better or worse. Paul is not setting up the Christian as better or worse. Paul's charge against mankind is universal. When he uses the term Greek here, Greek applies to Greek culture, not just the Greek person, and it was the dominate culture of the Roman Empire. Western culture might be a modern parallel to the concept of Greek or Hellenistic culture in Paul's day. To call someone Western is a broad span of culture. When Paul says, "Jew and Greek" here, it is like saying, "the Religious and the Pagan are all under sin," or like saying, "East and West are all under sin." It is a universal statement. Everybody. Paul continues the charge with a song of condemnation in verses 10-18. He is going to get poetic.

10-18 Paul embellishes his charge with a song of condemnation.

The composition of the song seems to be original with Paul, but the words are not. He is drawing mostly from the Psalms using poetry to drive home emotionally and rationally his charge that "there is none righteous, not even one." Depending on words of the Palms adds the weight of Old Testament authority to the indictment.

[Read Romans 3:10-18]

10-12 There is none.

The first stanza of the song in verses 10-12 contains two sets of three versets. To produce this stanza, Paul reworks the first three verses of Psalm 14 and possibly draws from Ecclesiastes 7:20 to bring in the word righteous, which works so well with Paul's courtroom language.

- | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| "There is none righteous, not even one; | (Psalm 14:1-3, 53:1-3 and Eccl. 7:20) |
| ¹¹ There is none who understands,
There is none who seeks for God; | |
| ¹² All have turned aside, together they have become useless;
There is none who does good,
There is not even one." | |

The phrase, "there is none," occurs five times in this first stanza. (The last phrase "there is not even one," uses the same Greek, *οὐκ ἔστιν*, as the other examples.) Paul clearly emphasizes the universality of sinful human nature. The idea that everyone is basically good works in the Bible only until you get to Genesis chapter 3. It works for two chapters. From there on, the Bible teaches that all people are fundamentally sinful, made good in God's image, but twisted, fallen, distorted. Every human being is affected by a sinful human nature. The result: "There is none righteous, not one."

13-14 The witness of our words

The second stanza in verses 13-14 is a little shorter, comprised of two sets of two versets, composed from Psalm 5:9, Psalm 140:3, and Psalm 10:7.

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|---|---------------|
| ¹³ "Their throat is an open grave,
With their tongues they keep deceiving," | (Psalm 5:9) |
| "The poison of asps is under their lips"; | (Psalm 140:3) |
| ¹⁴ "Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness"; | (Psalm 10:7) |

Each verset here emphasizes the sinfulness of our words. Before Paul, Jesus taught that our words reveal darkness inside. In Matthew 12:33-37 Jesus said,

³³ “Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. ³⁴ “You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart... ³⁷ “For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

You here that text in Paul’s language. What person has not said things they wish they could take back; words that reveal a self-focus or bitterness or anger or jealousy that exists in the heart; words, which we say we did not mean, but, in reality, we only wish we did not mean them. Because our words reveal our heart.

15-18 The witness of our actions

Like the second stanza, the third stanza in verses 15-18 contains two sets of two versets. The first three versets come from Isaiah 59:7-8. The concluding verset comes from Psalm 36:1.

¹⁵ “Their feet are swift to shed blood, (Isaiah 59:7-8)
¹⁶ Destruction and misery are in their paths,
¹⁷ And the path of peace they have not known.”
¹⁸ “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” (Psalm 36:1)

This stanza moves from the words of the second stanza to action. We have not only spoken forth evil words from our heart, but have walked down paths of selfishness, immorality, greed and anger. The last verset declares, “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” It is a very poetic way to say that we have this attitude in our hearts, “I will do what I will do. I do not care what God thinks about it.” We have all said this, “Forget it God. I am going to do what I going to do.” If we have not said it in so many words, we have said it with our choices, we have said it with our actions.

Back in the early-80s, Mike Wallace, host of the news show 60-Minutes, interviewed a man named Yehiel Dinur. He was a concentration camp survivor. Dinur had been scheduled to testify at the Nuremburg trials in 1961 against Adolf Eichmann, an officer in the SS and one of the principal architects of the Holocaust. Upon entering the courtroom and seeing Eichmann for the first time since Auchwitz, Dinur broke down in sobs and fainted. Later in this interview, Wallace asked Dinur why he broke down. Was it fear or loathing? What did you feel when you saw Eichmann? Dinur gave a sobering explanation. He was not overcome with fear or hatred. Instead he realized upon seeing Eichmann that this man was not a superman; he was not godlike; he was an ordinary man. Dinur told Wallace, “I was afraid about myself. I saw I was capable to do this. I am exactly like he.” Those words stunned Wallace into silence, and a moment later he finally summed up the interview with this statement “Eichmann is in all of us (Chuck Colson *Who Speaks for God*, p. 137).”

The ugly truth about sin is that it is a universal condition. We are not basically good. That is a false band-aid we put over our conscience to sooth our soul into believing everything is all right. But we are not basically good. And it helps no one to pretend that they are. If a man has cancer, he needs to know the truth, so that he can seek a cure. Sin is a cancer of the soul. It does no good to pretend we are not sick, much worse, if we do not know we are sick, we will not even try to seek a cure.

19-20 Paul gives his closing argument.

Moving from the song of condemnation in verses 10-18, we come to 19-20. This is Paul’s closing argument against mankind. So, let’s read this. Romans 3:19-20.

[Read Romans 3:19-20]

Paul argues that what the law says, it says to those under the law, “so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God.” What’s the logic there? How is it that speaking to a select group results in holding the whole world accountable. The more popular argument you usually hear from people is, “How can God hold accountable those who do not know about his law.”

Paul is saying here that if we hold those who do know accountable, that covers everybody. About holding people accountable who do not know, we addressed that idea in chapter 2. Those under the

law and those not under the law, are both aware of a natural moral law. We each have some moral standard we live by. There is a moral principle in all of us. And none of us lives up even to our own moral standard. Sometimes our conscience defends us and sometimes it condemns us. We all know guilt. It is a human reality. In the end, every human being is accountable to what we could call general moral revelation.

Paul makes a different point here. The point here is about special revelation, the revelation of God's moral will through Scripture, specifically through the law of Moses. Who has the best chance to live in accordance with the moral will of God? The Jew does; the one who has access to the revealed will of God has the best chance of living out the will of God. And yet, every single Jew has fallen short of the moral will of God. Every Jew will be declared guilty in the moral court. Paul is not degrading the Jewish person here. Paul is saying that the Jewish person, of all people, has the best chance in God's court. Without the law of God teaching us his will, we have no hope of living up to his standard. But if no Jew, who has the special revelation of God, has ever lived up to the standard of God, how can anyone without special knowledge of God's moral will, hope to have live up to that standard? So, consider who we may be talking about, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Daniel, Mary. No Jew, even with the possession of the Bible, has ever lived up to the moral will of God. And if those who know God's will cannot live up to God's will then clearly those who are not even trying to live according to God's expressed will cannot live up to it. As a result, "every mouth is shut and the whole world is accountable to God."

Paul's closing argument ends here. No pagan man or woman, no moral man or woman, no religious man or woman who stands before the court of God and says, "Judge me by what I have done," will be declared righteous. All will be declared guilty. As Paul says, "By the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in his sight." Moral law cannot justify. Human religion is an attempt to ignore the cancer inside, to hide the fact that we are at the core sinful, to dress ourselves up on the outside in the hopes that God will not see through the charade.

In our last session, I introduced the two questions of covenant. A covenant is an agreement that clarifies the history and the expectations between two parties. When we enter into a covenant relationship with God, there are two essential questions we need clarified. The first question of covenant is this, "What makes me acceptable to be in relationship with God?" Using Paul's courtroom language here we could also ask it this way, "What makes me righteous so that I might be in relationship with God?" "What makes me righteous? What makes me acceptable?" I asked you to think about this question in terms of what is your part and what is God's part. Your part we are calling "law". Those are the dos and don'ts you are expected to do. God's part we are calling grace, which is what God gives to you. We need to clarify the first question of covenant by asking, "What percentage of the answer involves grace, God's part, and what percentage of the answer involves law, my part? What makes me acceptable to be in relationship with God? How much of that is grace and how much of that is law?"

Paul's closing argument invalidates law as an option for making anyone acceptable in the eyes of God. "By the works of the law no flesh will be justified in his sight for through the law comes the knowledge of sin." So, I am not made acceptable before God by my religious and moral works. Not only me. No one. Not Abraham, not Moses, not Mother Teresa, not Martin Luther King, and not Billy Graham, no one is acceptable before God on the basis of good deeds. And if none of these, then certainly not me.

We are getting closer to the answer of the first question of covenant, "What makes you acceptable to God?", but we are not there, yet. We have to wait until the verdict. That comes in our next lesson. I will go ahead and give you the second question of covenant, so you can think about it. Having become acceptable to God, in however we end up answering that first question, I then ask the second question. "How do I live in a way that is pleasing to God?" This is not asking how I establish relationship with God, but rather, how do I live out the relationship with God that I already possess. And here again, we can try to clarify by asking how much of this involves grace and how much

involves law. What percentage in how I live for God depends on what he does for me or in me and how much depends on what I do? I will also leave the answer to that question until next time.

For now, though, consider Paul's words in verse 20 and how those words relate to each of the two questions of covenant. Paul has concluded, "by the works of the law no flesh will be justified in his sight; for through the law comes the knowledge of sin." Is Paul saying that the only point of the Mosaic law is to show us that we are sinful? Is that the only use of the law? Does the law have no pedagogical purpose to teach us, for example, about the nature of God? Or does the law have no moral value to spur us on to live in a way that is true and good? The answer depends on which question we are dealing with. Are we here dealing with the first question of the covenant or are we dealing with the second question of covenant? Is this about becoming acceptable before a righteous God? Or is this about me living in such a way that is pleasing to our God?

We are not yet addressing issues related to the second question of covenant. In fact, the objections raised in 3:1-8, "What about sin in the life of the believer?" and "What about the Jew?", both of those questions relate to the second question of covenant, "How do we live out our relationship with God? How do we please God with our lives?" That is why Paul put off his more detailed answers to those questions. Before moving on to issues of the second question of covenant, "How do we live out relationship?", we have to clearly answer the first question of covenant, "What makes us able to have relationship in the first place?" This courtroom scene that Paul has created in Romans 1-4 is designed to solidly establish the gospel answer to the first question of covenant, "What makes me acceptable or righteous in God's eyes?" And so, Paul's answer in verse 20 stands. The law does not help you at all in answering the first question, because the only assurance you have with the law is that you are going to break it. If this first question depends on the law, you are eternally lost.

This does not mean that there is no value or usefulness for the Christian in the law of God. This means there is no help from the law in answering the first question. But there was never meant to be. In relation to the first question the law was only ever intended to reveal to us the insurmountable problem of our own sin nature. The law teaches us that we cannot live up to God's standard of righteousness. Paul is clear. No works justify. The law shows you your sin. But we do not want to jump ahead of Paul's argument. Paul has eliminated the law as an answer to the first question of covenant, but he has not yet addressed the question of the law's role in the second question of covenant. That will begin in chapter 5. So, it is left to you for now to think about it. What percentage does law play in fulfilling the second question of covenant, "How do I live out my relationship with God in a way that is pleasing to him?" And then also, how much does grace play in answering that question?

Let's end up our consideration of Paul's closing argument by being crystal clear about the problem Paul has charged humanity with.

My brother lives in Texas. Everything is big in Texas. Well not everything. I heard a Texas pastor tell a story once of a family that went beach down in Galveston on the Gulf of Mexico. While on vacation, they found a small, wet, half-starved dog that was apparently abandoned by its owner.

As kids will do, the kids asked to keep it. The parents, losing their minds, said, "Yes." So, they took it home with them back from their vacation. They gave the dog a bath and fed it. They named it Sparky and even put a blue ribbon around its neck. Sparky lived happily with the family for a couple of days, until they came home and discovered their cat dead and half-eaten in the back yard. This made the family worry about Sparky. Could he have eaten the cat? So, they took Sparky to the vet to find out if anything was wrong with him. The vet responded, "There is nothing wrong with your dog, except that he is not a dog. It's a gigantic African rat." Apparently, the rat had travelled aboard a cargo ship from Africa, swam ashore in the Gulf of Mexico, and was found by this nice family.

The moral of the story is that you can take a rat home, clean it up and even put a nice blue ribbon around its neck. But that does not change the fact that a rat, is a rat, is a rat.

Here is my problem. The only way for me to believe that I can be justified by the law is to not take the law too seriously. If the law means going to church occasionally, being decent most of the time, taking out the trash without being asked, and saying a prayer at night, then I maybe I will be able to feel okay about myself. It also might work if, when I look at God's will in the Bible, I only apply it to other people. This is how my neighbor should behave, this is how my wife should love me, this is what my children should do to be obedient. I am all for this. But as soon as I look intently into the law of God and try to apply it to myself, I am in trouble. "Love your neighbor as yourself." I am lost right there, but let's go a little further. "Love your enemy. Love your wife as Christ loved the church. Love God with your heart, mind, and soul. Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth but only what is useful in building others up." Enough, that's enough. I don't do it, okay. "By the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in his sight *for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.*"

Honest, open-eyed pursuit of holiness, according to God's definition of holiness, is a mirror into my true condition. You can wash me. You can dress me up in religious clothes. You can teach me to say, "Please," and "Thank you." You can give me a new circle of friends. And you can tell me that I am a basically good person. Just do not ask me to live a holy life of love. Keep the mirror away. As soon as I truly try to live the law with internal honesty and sincerity, that law reminds me that a rat, is a rat, is a rat. I am not basically good. There is a principle in me that moves me to do what I ought not do and resists doing that which I know I should do. It is the sin nature. The harder I try the more apparent that sin nature is.

Let's be honest. I have a cancer of the soul. Let's not try to pretend otherwise. You have it, too. We need a cure that is outside of ourselves. It is not within our capacity to cure ourselves of this cancer. We cannot save ourselves. Without a cure we are hopelessly and eternally lost. The moral defense before God can never work. Paul has brought us to the very end of ourselves. If we are to be saved from ourselves, we are going to need a miracle.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as important, strange, confusing or interesting in Romans 3:9-20?
2. How does Paul's song of condemnation (3:10-18) strike you? Do you see yourself in Paul's words or do you feel this is too negative to describe you? What stands out to you in this song?
3. The popular worldview of Western society typically makes the claim that people are basically good. What are some reasons we want to believe that people are basically good? How does the biblical point of view expressed here by Paul make you feel?
4. Describe your experience with the Law of God. How has the Law of God served as a mirror to show you your own sin? (You do not have to think about this with the Old Testament exclusively in mind. You can also think about the commands of the New Testament, for example, you can think about the sermon on the mount in Matthew 5-8 or about the commands Paul gives in Romans 12-14. When you consider these commands in relationship to your own life, do they have the result of bringing to you the knowledge of sin as Paul writes in verse 20?)
5. Consider again this question from the last lesson: What percentage would you assign to the role of grace and law in answering the first question of covenant, "What makes you acceptable to be in relationship with God?"

What percentage is grace, God's part?

What percentage is law, your part?

6. Now consider the second question of covenant. What percentage would you assign to the role of grace and law in answering the second question of covenant, "How do I live out my relationship with God in a way that is pleasing to him?"

What percentage is grace, God's part?

What percentage is law, your part?

Lesson 9: Surprise Verdict

Romans 3:21-30

²¹ But now apart from the Law *the righteousness of God* has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, ²² even *the righteousness of God* through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ being **justified** as a gift by His **grace** through the **redemption** which is in Christ Jesus; ²⁵ whom God displayed publicly as a **propitiation** in His blood through faith.

(1) *This was* to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed;

(2) ²⁶ for the demonstration, *I say*, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

²⁷ Where then is boasting? It is excluded.

By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith.

²⁸ For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.

²⁹ Or is God *the God* of Jews only? Is He not *the God* of Gentiles also?

Yes, of Gentiles also, ³⁰ since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one.

NASB

The Righteousness of God Revealed in the Gospel (3:21-25a)

We are finally getting to the good news. The bad news is really, really bad. The man stands on trial. The prosecutor has done his job well. The law of God's court is clear. "By the works of the law no flesh will be justified in God's sight, through the law comes the knowledge of sin (Romans 3:20)." The man has made a feeble defense. His family and supporters hang their heads. The judge's decision is clear. By all the rules of goodness and justice the man should be declared guilty, then condemned to punishment. The man is me.

I can imagine back when boys sold newspapers on the street corner. "This just out. Read all about it, read all about it! Surprise verdict! Guilty man freed of all charges. Declared righteous in the court. Family rejoices. The opposition vows an inquiry into the judge's ruling. Get the news here. Read all about! Surprise verdict!"

It's really shocking. It runs contrary to all the evidence that we have seen in chapters 1, 2 and 3. Is it a travesty of judgment? Or is there some deeper law of justice at work? How do we get from so clearly guilty to innocent? How is the news good? This is Romans 3:21-30. This is one of the most important texts in the New Testament about the gospel of Jesus Christ. We get the details of what happened on the cross elsewhere. Here we are told how it works. How is it that the cross of Jesus Christ saves sinful man from the justice of God without God himself being guilty of unrighteously ignoring sin. This is a critical passage in our Bibles; one we must not underestimate. It is also a passage loaded with theological terms, especially in the first half. So, I am going to divide the text into two parts 21-25a and 25b-30. In the first part we will consider five important theological words or phrases that help us understand how it is that the gospel saves. Then we will conclude with the second part of the text. So, the first part, five terms, these are going to be (1) the righteousness of God, (2) grace, (3) justified, (4) redeemed and (5) propitiation. Five theological words all in the first part. We are going to go through that.

So, let's read the first part, 21-25a.

[Read Romans 21-25a]

Righteousness of God (3:21-23)

In Paul's thesis for Romans in 1:16-17, he declared that the reason he is not ashamed of the gospel is that it is power for salvation and the reason it is God's power for salvation is that in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed. That is our first theological phrase: righteousness of God For a discussion on the different meanings of righteousness of God go back to that lesson on 1:16-17, the third lesson of our introduction, the thesis lesson.

The most important part of that discussion is to recognize that righteousness of God can be something that applies to God and something that applies to man. And Paul uses it both ways in the first four chapters of Romans. He is either talking about the righteousness of man or the righteousness of God. N. T. Wright offers a

helpful illustration as long as we recognize the limits of the illustration. He points out that in a courtroom the righteousness of the judge is different from the righteousness of the defendant. A judge is shown to be righteous if he is upright, fair, and just in his judgment. He is righteous if he takes no bribe and shows no bias. A defendant is righteous in court if he is innocent. Either he is innocent before the court or he is found guilty and is able to pay his fine, then he is declared righteous in the eyes of the court. So, you are either innocent or you pay the fine.

The way this illustration has been taken too far is to point out that these two types of righteousness, that of the judge and that of the defendant, and to say that they are so completely different that it is impossible for the judge to give his righteousness to the defendant, and in that conclude that it is impossible for God to take his righteousness and give his righteousness to man. If we take this illustration, which is helpful, too far to say that it is not possible for the righteousness of God to be applied to man then we are missing out on an essential teaching that is coming in this passage, which is that the righteous status of God is something received by faith. It has to be able to apply to man if we receive it. The mistake is in limiting God's role to that of a judge. It is helpful in the illustration, but God is not just a judge. God also became man and lived a righteous life and died on a cross. So, it might be right to say the righteousness of the judge does not apply to the defendant. But that is not the righteous substitution. The righteousness of God that applies to the defendant is the righteousness of the second Adam who fully lived out a human life, who died on a cross, who rose again, who is eternal. He becomes our substitute and that is the righteous status that is credited to us.

It can be hard to get our minds around the full range of meaning in Paul's one phrase the righteousness of God. We see the range through these chapters. Consider this. The righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel by the righteous decision to demand payment for sin, by righteous character lived out as a man, by righteous action in the cross and by righteous status offered freely to the sinner.

How does this work? Let's follow the text to see.

Verse 21 starts, "But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested..." This is that language from back in 1:16-17, "The gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes ... for in it the righteousness of God is revealed (or manifested, or made known)." The "But now apart from law" implies two things that are true. First, the Law has never fully manifested to us how it is that the righteous action of God will save mankind. Paul does say, it is witnessed to "by the Law and the Prophets." The mystery is hinted at or foreshadowed. It is just not clearly manifested. The Passover lamb described in the Law of Moses witnesses to the need of a true lamb of God to take away the sin of the world (Exodus 12:12-13). Or in an example from the Prophets, Isaiah indicates that the glorious Messiah will also be the suffering servant, "pierced through for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities (Isaiah 53:5)." And though we might get all that now. As we look back we understand. The lamb of God is Jesus. The suffering servant is Jesus. But nobody clearly saw in the Old Testament how God is going to do this. They did not see that God himself was going to come as a man and die on a cross in order to satisfy justice. "But now apart from Law," we see it. It has been made known to us by the witness of the apostles in the New Testament. We have a new manifestation of the gospel that explains how it works through Jesus on the cross.

Second, not only is this righteousness manifested or made known apart from the law it is also a righteousness of God that comes to man apart from the doing of the law. The law holds up a vision of the righteous character of God. When you look at the law you can see the righteousness of God that he calls us to live out. But it is a righteousness we cannot obtain. "But now apart from law," a different righteousness of God has been made known clearly known. There is another option. Another way. Which is a good thing because the righteousness of God described by the law was never fully attainable. This righteousness apart from the law is not new. That would be a mistake to think there was a righteousness of the law for Old Testament saints and now there is a righteousness by grace for New Testament saints. That is not right. Paul is going to argue in chapter four that this way is the same way that Abraham was declared righteous. The way of grace is not new. The way of grace has always been the way at least since the fall of Adam and Eve. The way is not new. What is new is that the way has now finally been accomplished. Before it was promised. God would make a way. Trust that God will make a way. What way? We do not know. There is going to be a way. It is something to do with sacrifice, something to do with a lamb. I do not know. But he is going to make a way and we have to trust him. Now the way of grace is both made known and also accomplished. It has been completed in Jesus Christ. The new way is not just a promise, now it is a reality.

Verse 22 tells us how this righteousness of God comes to be applied to a human being. It has been made manifest. And it is through faith in Jesus that it applies to us. Faith is a central term in this crucial passage of

Scripture, being mentioned eight times in ten verses. It sounds here in verse 22 like Paul is even being redundant about it, “the righteousness of God through *faith* in Jesus Christ for all those who *believe*.” Why add for all those who believe? It sounds like the same thing twice. It is for faith to those who believe. But he is not saying the same thing twice. In the restatement he adds that phrase, “all those.” That is where we should put the emphasis on the second part of the verse. We should say it like this, “The righteousness of God comes through faith in Jesus Christ not just for some, not just for Jews and not just for Gentiles but for all those who believe.” Just as all men, every single one, has “sinned and fallen short of the glory of God,” so also the potential to receive the righteousness of God is open to all those who would believe.

Justified (3:24)

Our next theological term is justified. This is a term we have been using a lot already. In fact, I have titled this section of Romans from 1:18 through 4:25 “God Justifies by Faith.” There is good reason for that. It would be wrong to say all of Romans is about justification by faith. All of Romans is about the righteousness revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. So, it is broader than justification. Paul uses the verb to justify 15 times in Romans. Nine of those uses are in this section. All of the other six uses are in chapter 5, which serves as a transitional passage from this section to the next. After chapter 5 the verb justify does not appear in Romans. We can safely say that justification is a major theme of this first section, chapters 1-4. The same is also true for the word faith. Paul uses faith 60 times in Romans with over half of that, 34 times, in the first four chapters. That is not to say that faith is not important through the whole letter. It is simply to point out that this first section of Romans places particular emphasis on that fact that God justifies human beings by faith.

We have already used the term a lot, but we have not yet defined it precisely.

In English the word “justify” and the word “righteousness” look and sound like two very different words. Justify and righteousness, no connection there. In Greek the two words come from the same root δίκαιος (righteous). So, justify is δικαίωω and righteousness is δικαιοσύνη. You can hear the δικαί in both. The verb justify means to make or declare righteous. Here in Paul’s courtroom context the meaning is not to make righteous but to declare righteous.

There are two ways for a defendant to be declared righteous. Either the judge finds that the defendant is not guilty of any crime or the judge finds that the defendant has paid the penalty for his crimes. In either case, the person is declared to be in the right in the eyes of the court, that is to be justified.

We are certainly not innocent, so the first does not apply. But then we also cannot pay our penalty and still be in relationship with God. According to Romans 6:23, the penalty of sin is death, not just physical, but spiritual, resulting in separation from God. If the penalty the court demands is my separation from God, I cannot pay that penalty, being separated from God and also be in relationship with God. I cannot pay my own penalty.

That leads us to the next important theological word. Grace.

Grace (3:24)

Grace is a very religious word that every Christian is familiar with. What does it mean? Verse 24 says that we are justified “as a gift by God’s grace.” That gives us the definition. Grace is a gift that we receive. It is something God does for us. That does not at all mean it is cheap or inexpensive. The gift may come at an extremely high price but if it is offered by grace it is offered free of charge to the recipient.

This moves us a step further along. We are declared righteous not because we are innocent and not because we have paid the price, but as a gift of grace, someone else has paid the price on our behalf.

That brings us to our fourth word, the word redemption.

Redemption (3:24)

The word redemption means to buy back, to buy back a slave. This is less of a legal word like justify and more of an economics word. Our modern English uses the word when you pawn something. So if you have ever seen Pawn Stars, if you pawn something and you want to get it back you have to redeem it. You have to buy it back. In the legal context here, a payment must be made to the court for our sin. There is a price set on our freedom. God can only justify or declare you righteous if your debt is paid. But you cannot pay your own debt. The price is eternal death.

This idea of redemption has some biblical richness, going back into the Old Covenant. God created an analogy for us in the Mosaic law. He described his deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt as a redemption (Exodus 6:6; 15:13; Deuteronomy 7:8; 19:26; 13:5; 15:15; 21:8; 24:18). His people were forced into bondage, and God redeemed them. God adds on to this idea as the Israelites prepared to leave Mount Sinai. There is a story in Numbers 3:40-51. God told them that they owed him for every first-born son that he did not kill when the angel of death passed over Egypt. Which is interesting. You remember that their first-born sons were killed in the last plague, but the first-born sons of the Israelites were not killed because the Jews were told to sacrifice a Passover lamb and put the blood above the door. When the angel of wrath passed over, he saw that the blood covered the Israelite household and so, the first-born's life was not taken.

But in Numbers chapter 3 God has a further lesson to teach. There is further symbolism he wants to add to redemption. The blood of the lamb did not really protect the first-born sons of Israel. The sacrifice was symbolic, but not effective. God added on an additional symbol to make his point. He told the Israelites that you need to set aside all the men from the tribe of Levi as payment for all these first-born sons. One man for one man. The Levites would be the substitute. There was a bit of a problem with the plan, since there were 273 more first-born Israelite sons than there were Levite men. But since it was only symbolic anyway, God let them get out of it with a financial payment for the excess number of first-born sons (Numbers 3:40-51; 8:17-18).

What God did here was to invest the word redemption with theological meaning. God is the one who rescues out of slavery. God redeems with his righteous power, but he also demands payment, a life for a life.

Who can pay our debt? What does verse 24 say? We are "justified as a gift by God's grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." Notice that it is not quite correct to say here that Jesus pays our debt for us. It is more correct to say that Jesus is the payment of our debt. I guess it would be fine to say both. Jesus pays, and he pays by offering up himself as a sacrifice of atonement.

This brings us to our final theological term.

Propitiation (3:25b)

The NASB translates verse 25, "whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in his blood through faith." The NIV has, "God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement." And the NET Bible has, "God publicly displayed him at his death as the mercy seat." So, English Bibles are giving us three options for translating one word. We have propitiation or sacrifice of atonement or mercy seat. So, how do we understand this.

The word Paul uses here *hilasterion* (ἱλαστήριον). It is not really a Geek Word. It is just spelled out in the Greek from a Hebrew word used in Leviticus 16:15 to describe the cover over the ark of covenant. The word does not mean cover. Sometimes it is called the mercy seat. But it really refers to the sacrifice of atonement that took place in connection with the ark. Atonement carries both the meaning to cover over sin and to satisfy the wrath of God against sin. That's what propitiation means. To propitiate means to satisfy or turn away the wrath of God.

The sacrifice of atonement described in Leviticus 16 took place once a year to atone for the sins of Israel. One goat was released into the wilderness and that symbolized God removing sin from the camp. A second goat was sacrificed, and its blood taken into the holy of holies. That was the innermost room in the tabernacle of God, the most holy room where the high priest only entered on this one day for this one sacrifice. The holy of holies symbolized the throne room of God with God's presence above the ark of the covenant looking down on it. The ark contained the covenant law of God, placed there by Moses. As God looked down on covenant he judged his people Israel. And he judged them unfaithful. They were covenant breakers.

On that day, when the high priest came in, he sprinkled the blood of the second goat on the mercy seat. It made a covering over the law. And God looked down and he saw the blood. He saw the

people deserved death. But he saw that a death was paid. As a result, the holy and just wrath of God was propitiated, satisfied, atoned for, paid.

Did the blood of the goat truly pay for the sins of men? No. Neither did the lamb of the Passover nor the trade of one Levite for one first-born Israelite, neither does baptism, neither does the Lord's Supper. Our rituals teach us and point us to the true sacrifice, which is Jesus Christ.

To take our place and pay for our sin, we need a man for a man. But no man can pay for my sin, because he has got to pay for his own sin. We need a sinless man. But one sinless man would pay only for the sins of one other man. If we are all going to be saved, we need an infinite man. We need a man who is God. We need Jesus. For we are "justified as a gift by God's grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in his blood through faith."

That is what happened on the cross. The blood of bulls and goats and lambs has always been symbolic, never effective; always reminding us that death is owed, and death must be paid, and God would find a way to pay it.

How is the righteousness of God revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ? It is revealed by our God who will not declare a man righteous unless that man's sin has been paid for, and so, he offered himself as payment for man's sin. That is the gift of grace. Priceless. Yet, offered without price. That is the righteousness of God revealed – his righteous character leading to a righteous judgment followed by a righteous action, in which he is the righteous sacrifice, resulting in righteousness being credited to sinful man by grace through faith.

Two Questions of Covenant

Now we can answer our two questions of covenant that I raised in the last two lessons. The first question is, "What makes me acceptable to be in relationship with God?" I asked you to think about this in terms of grace, what God does, and law, what we do. What percentage would you give to grace and what percentage would you give to law in answering this question, "What makes me acceptable to be in relationship with God?" In our last lesson, the middle of chapter 3, Paul made quite clear what percentage we are to attribute to law: 0%. "By the work of the law no flesh will be declared righteous." Now we have the percentage for grace: 100%. That is the answer to the first question of covenant. We are declared righteous and made acceptable to be in relationship with God 100% by the free gift of grace that he offers to us and 0% by our own moral or religious works.

Someone might say that the law has a role because, as verse 20 says, the law reveals our sin. That's a good point. The law has a role. But that agrees with my answer. The question was about our doing the law. How much of our doing the law contributes to our righteousness or acceptability in the eyes of God? And that is 0%.

Either we take the moral, religious defense by which we show ourselves good enough. Or we take the grace defense. The moral defense says, "I will pay the penalty of my own sin." But that lowers the holiness of God and lowers the penalty of sin, as though some good works, prayer, sacrifice, Bible reading or taking the Lord's Supper could somehow pay for my sin against an eternal and holy God. The moral defense always fails. It reminds me of that proud or tragic song of the twentieth century, "I Did It My Way." Yes, you did. And so are lost forever.

We have been given another option, a second defense, the grace defense. "Lord God, I am guilty. I have no hope of paying the penalty of my sin. I believe that Jesus paid that penalty for me. I accept your gift of grace. Please count me righteous based on what Jesus has done, not on what I deserve." Is that the attitude of your heart? Do you have that faith? Is that what you believe? Do you see that? Has God opened your eyes to see that? Listen again, and if this is the attitude of your heart, you need to say this to God, because the grace of God, the status of righteousness comes by an act of faith, an act of will, when you receive what he is offering. He is offering it. He is holding it out to everybody. But if you do not take it, you do not receive it, then it is not true of you. If you do not receive grace,

you are standing on your own moral, religious defense. But when you say that will not work and are willing to receive his grace, then his righteousness applies to you. Let me read it again, and if this is the attitude of your heart say this to God. And if you are not sure whether you have said it to God, then say it to God. Be sure. Here it is. Listen to this.

“Lord God, I am guilty. I have no hope of paying the penalty of my sin. I believe that Jesus paid that penalty for me. I accept your gift of grace. Gratefully, I accept it. Please count me righteous based on what Jesus has done, not on what I deserve. Amen.”

Upon receiving the gift of grace through faith, you are declared righteous. 100% grace, 0% law.

There is no wiggle room here. We are tempted to add things to grace. We feel like we have got to do something to make ourselves acceptable. The human heart wants to make it grace plus. Paul comments on that idea later in Romans 11:6. I will quote it here just to be clear right now, “But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace.” You cannot have grace plus. Grace plus anything else is law. The only right answer in the court of God is 0% law, nothing I do, and 100% grace. It fully comes from God. Which of your sins did Jesus not die for? What sin did he not cover? Is his substitution, his sacrifice for you incomplete? If you have received the gift of grace, then he has paid for every sin 100%. That is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Any other answer is a misunderstanding or rejection of the gospel of Jesus.

Now on to the second question of covenant. “Having been accepted by grace into relationship with God, how do I please God?” This is the heart of the one who has saving faith. Faith is seeing God and receiving the gift of grace he has offered. Faith moves the believer to respond. So, the believer asks the second question of covenant from a grateful heart, “How do I please you? In other words, how do I show my love to you as my heavenly Father, how do I worship you as my God, how do I serve you as my King?”

This question is admittedly is a lot messier than the first question. That is because the first question occurs in a legal context. There is a right and wrong, black and white answer. 100% grace and 0% law. No wiggle room. The second question is asking how we live in relationship with our gracious God. And relationship is always messier. I do not even like answering this question in percentages, but since I am the one who told you to answer it that way, I have to give you an answer. So, I will give you what I call the marriage conference answer. Pleasing God with our lives involves 100% grace and 100% law. That is, God gives 100% of himself; you give 100% of yourself. I know that sounds like cheating, and it is bad mathematics, but that is what we are going to go with, because any idea like a 50 – 50 idea in relationship never really works. Because each person never feels like the other person is ever giving their 50%. Even if we make it 80 – 20 or 10 – 90, we never really feel like the other person is living up and it becomes a business relationship or a legal relationship. Then we are going to have to get the lawyers involved again to prove who has done what, but let’s be done with the lawyers. This is family relationship. This is love relationship we are in now with God. He is our father. He is our king. He is our God. How do we live out that relationship?

We can be sure God gives 100% of himself. What God gives is complete. It is not always in the way we want, and not always in a way that is obvious, but always in the way that is best, good and truly loving. Then on our side, for our part, we never give 100%. God is calling us to press ahead, to be involved in who he is creating us to be, to pursue him with all our mind, heart, soul and strength. All we have. Not to earn relationship, but to express relationship and to experience relationship.

We cannot do this in our own flesh. That is one of the messy things. So, when I use the word law here, if I mean by law that this is something that we accomplish out of our own strength, then I am wrong. You can critique me. I should not have said it. I would be wrong. Law does not mean I do it out of my human flesh. But by law, what I am trying to express is obedience to command. That there are things God has called us to do. We are called to participate. It is what Jesus says in John 14 that is we really love God we are going to obey his commandments. We have to figure out some way to get the commandments into our life of grace. Otherwise we can’t make sense of the sermon on the

mount or Romans 12 – 14 or all the dos and don'ts in the New Covenant. There are two mistakes we can make. One mistake is to say that grace leads to no law. In the sense of no obedience to commandment. We are so happy about being free that we give no place to the dos and the don'ts. Another mistake that we can make is to create a new Christian law, something that feels and smells and tastes very much like Old Testament religion. Maybe not so serious or so ritualistic, but we are creating all these dos and don'ts that you have to do to live up to in order to be accepted. But there is a narrow path between the two, a living in the grace of God. a living out the grace of God, the new way of the Spirit. How this works is messy. It is relationship after all. It is going to be messy. I will not go into it more now, because Paul addresses this whole issue in Romans 5 – 8. So, we will get there. And we will spend a lot of time there. How to we live out grace, very important.

First, we need to conclude chapter 3, and then we are going to have to move into chapter 4 where Paul gives his precedent, his support for this surprise verdict in chapter 3. Let's finish out chapter 3.

Implications of God's Righteousness Revealed in the Gospel (3:25b-30)

We are going to conclude with some implications of the gospel that Paul highlights in the second half of the passage, 25b-30. The gospel of grace presents a very serious problem. It is the problem of the righteous judge. If God freely forgives us of our sin, does that make him unrighteous? Does God have the right to forgive the evil man without requiring payment or restitution from that man. Is it allowable for God to offer us grace freely? There was a famous twentieth century book called *Sunflower*, written by Simon Wiesenthal where he raises this question, "Who has the right to forgive an evil man?"

Simon Wiesenthal's Sunflower

In the book, Wiesenthal describes being taken one day from his prison camp to work in a German hospital. As Wiesenthal was working a nurse came up and asked, "Are you a Jew?" He said, "Yes." And she motioned him to follow her. She led him to a room and instructed him to enter. Lying alone was a man whose face was completely bandaged.

Wiesenthal went over to the man who then took his hand. The sick man whispered, "I have not much longer to live. I know the end is near. My name is Karl. I joined the SS as a volunteer. I must tell you something dreadful."

Wiesenthal began to worry that he would be missed and only wanted the nurse to come back. But the soldier clung to his hand and continued with his story. He described growing up in Germany. His father was a social democrat and his mother was very religious. She brought him up in the church. But when he joined the Hitler Youth he stopped going to church. His mother and father became nervous around him, not knowing if he would repeat to the Hitler Youth what they said. After completing his training his company was sent to Ukraine to fight the Russians.

In one city we were taken to a square full of Jews. Karl explained, "There were a hundred and fifty of them or perhaps two hundred, including many children with anxious eyes. A truck arrived with cans of petrol which we unloaded and took into a house. Then we began to drive the Jews into the house. I would not believe it possible to crowd them all into it."

The story sounded too familiar to Wiesenthal so he stood up to leave. Karl, his body shivering, pleaded, "Please stay, I must tell you the rest."

"Another truck came full of more Jews and we crammed them into the house. We removed the safety pins from hand grenades and threw them through the windows. We heard screams and saw the flames eat their way from floor to floor. We had our rifles ready to shoot down anyone who tried to escape. I saw a man with a small child in his arms and a woman jump from the building."

Karl fell silent. Exhausted. Wiesenthal stood to go, but Karl gripped his hand fast. Karl explained how later a bomb had nearly hit him sending shrapnel through his eyes, face, and body. He was blind and dying.

Karl continued "I am left here with my guilt. In the last hours of my life you are with me. I do not know who you are. I only know that you are a Jew and that is enough."

"I want to die in peace. I have longed to talk about it to a Jew and beg forgiveness. I know that what I am asking is almost too much for you but without your answer I cannot die in peace."

What did you think Simon Wiesenthal did? Actually, Wiesenthal wrote the book to ask that question what should he have done? In the book there is a second section which has all these letters of different people offering answers. Who has the right to forgive a wicked man.

In asking that question it is first posed to human beings, but it rises up to the court of God. A man who has done such despicable evil, does God have the right to forgive such an evil person. How does God remain just if he forgives this person freely by grace without demanding that person to pay anything? Well, I am Karl. I may not feel it that way. Certainly, I do not feel it. I do not feel my sin the way I feel Karl's sin. But I know God feels my sin. My sin rises up before God. And does he have the right to forgive me? Is it just of God to offer me righteousness as a gift by faith?

That is what Paul has just shown us that the gospel of Jesus Christ reveals the answer to this question. And only the gospel of Jesus provides an answer to this question. How is it that holy God can extend love to man while remaining fully righteous in his judgment?

The gospel declares that man's sin can be paid for by God himself. The king can die for men. The cross is where love and justice kiss. God has paid the penalty. God has remained just. God can offer salvation freely as a gift, and in fact, it cannot be offered any other way because there is no other way that man will be able to live up to it and receive it. It is by grace or not at all.

Paul concludes this section 25b-30 with a few implications of the gospel. I will just comment on them as I read the text.

The 1st implication of the gospel is a vindication of God's forgiveness of Old Testament believers (3:25b).

So, 25b, he has just described the gospel and God has displayed Jesus as a sacrifice of atonement.

"^{25b} This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed."

You see, in the past, from Adam all the way up to the disciples God had not paid for the penalty of the sin of believers. The blood of the animals did not pay for it. None of the rituals actually paid for it. But they still had to trust God. They had to cry out to the grace of God and trust in God for their salvation. They just did not know what the payment was going to be. But God made a promise, "I am going to pay." And God was good on his promise. We do not see the righteousness of God. It is not revealed until the cross. He has not paid the price, yet. But at the cross he paid the debt of every single one of his people, everyone he has given freedom to, given grace to, that he has forgiven of their sin, he made good on that debt. He took their debt himself, and he paid it on the cross. So, everyone in the past was looking ahead to the payment being made.

The 2nd implication of the gospel is a vindication of God's forgiveness of New Testament believers (3:26).

"²⁶ for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time."

So, God also has to show himself right for the people now who would believe in Jesus, "so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." And he does. So, from now on, all of us who get accepted as his children, who get accepted into his family, that are declared righteous by him, all of us. God has paid our penalty on the cross. We look back to the payment. The saints of the Old Covenant looked ahead to the payment. We look back to the payment. The price is paid. God is just. He is proved righteous in his grace.

The 3rd implication of the gospel is the undermining of religious boasting (3:27-28).

Then there is another implication. This one applies to us. "²⁷ Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith."²⁸ For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law."

Religion always creates pride. Human religion creates pride. I have attained the righteousness of God. It also creates judgment on those who have not attained to the righteousness of God. It also creates doubt and insecurity in us because we are not sure if we have attained to the righteousness of God. But when we are moral, we can boast. But verse 27, where then is boasting? It is excluded. Who can boast over the other man. Which one of you paid the penalty? Which one of you lived up to God and became acceptable based on your righteousness? Which one of you? Which one of you is the good servant that stands out above everybody else? Nobody? Where is boasting? There is none because we are all on the same playing field. We all receive it by grace.

The 4th implication of the gospel is that it is available universally to all people (3:29-30).

And then finally, the final implication in verses 29-30 is that it is for everybody. “²⁹ Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, ³⁰ since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one.”

It does not matter what country you are from, it does not matter what ethnicity you are from, it does not matter what sex you are, it does not matter what class you are, God is one. It is a free gift. It is available to everybody who would receive it by faith.

And this is where we will end today. And the question for you is, “Have you received the gift of grace?” Have you done that. If not, you need to go have a conversation with God. And if you have, “How is your heart doing? Do you see how priceless this gift is that God has given you? Do you see it? Priceless? Reflect on the amazing grace, the amazing price that has been paid for you. It is truly, truly wonderful what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.”

Reflection Questions

1. What are one or two new ideas that stand out to you in this passage? Or if not a completely new, what are one or two ideas that stand out to you more clearly or in a new way?
2. What are one or two ideas in this passage that move you emotionally? Either you are excited about them or intrigued or bothered?
3. Why did Jesus Christ have to die?
4. How is the first question of covenant answered in this lesson and what do you think or how do you feel about that answer?

What percentage would you assign to the role of grace and law in answering the first question of covenant, “What makes you acceptable to be in relationship with God?”

What percentage is grace, God’s part?

What percentage is law, your part?

5. How is the second question of covenant answered in this lesson and what do you think or how do you feel about that answer?

What percentage would you assign to the role of grace and law in answering the second question of covenant, “How do I live out my relationship with God in a way that is pleasing to him?”

What percentage is grace, God’s part?

What percentage is law, your part?

6. In your experience concerning Christian community or other religious community, what are some of the circumstances that lead to religious or moral boasting? What are some possibilities of what is going on in the heart that leads to religious or moral boasting?
7. How might you apply the message of this passage to your heart and mind to eliminate moral or religious boasting?

Lesson 10: Precedent, part 1

Romans 3:31 – 4:8

³¹ Do we then nullify the Law through faith?

May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law.

¹ What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? ²

For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.

³ For what does the Scripture say?

“Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.”

⁴ Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due.

⁵ But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness,

⁶ just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works: ⁷ “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven,

And whose sins have been covered.

⁸ Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account.”

NASB

The Question of Consistency: Do we nullify the law through faith?

One summer I was sitting at the beach in Zadar, talking to a small group of college students about the gospel. There were five or six of us sitting on concrete slabs on a rocky beach. The apparent leader of the group of friends was quite relaxed and confident. I asked if he believed in God. He thought God was more of a power source. I commented that to see God as a power source would mean God could not love us nor we love him. It eliminates love. He said he believed God was a power source and that God loves us. We moved on. He claimed to believe Jesus was from God and was not from God. That hell exists and does not exist. That nobody and everybody goes to heaven, except that there is no real heaven. The problem was not that he lacked consistency in his thought, but consistency didn't seem to even occur to him as a value. He had this smorgasbord faith. It was like we were at a buffet of Christian ideas, Hinduism, Humanism and Agnosticism. He would look over the buffet and fill his plate with whatever looked good to him. And he claimed to believe it.

I think what really frustrated me was that he kept disagreeing with me while insisting that he was agreeing with everything I said. There was no coherence, no consistency to the whole range of his beliefs.

Biblical Christians pride themselves on their consistency. It all comes from the Bible, right? The Old Testament must agree with the New Testament. Well, the Bible being consistent is one thing. We as Christians understanding that consistency is quite a different thing. We can really argue anything we want to argue by pulling a verse from here or a verse from there. We can end up with this same kind of smorgasbord faith.

Paul has just made some pretty strong claims. He has claimed that human beings are declared righteous by faith. And he has claimed that this was witnessed to by the law and the prophets. But was it, what then was the whole point of the law? What was God doing with Moses?

Isn't it really correct to say that Paul has nullify the Law through this gospel of faith? That's the charge being leveled in Romans 3:31. Have we just voided out the first five books of the Bible with the surprise verdict of the gospel. The law is not necessary. The law is not effective.

How does Paul answer this charge? Well, it is telling how he does not answer this question. He does not say, “You know, that's right. We have moved on to grace. Don't worry about the Old Testament. Don't worry about all the things there that trouble you. You have got the New. Let's just start and go from there.” Paul is not going to say that, because he is not just making this up as he goes along. The Old Testament is the word of God. If his gospel does not agree with the Old Testament Scriptures, then his gospel is not from God. He has got a big problem. On the other hand, if his gospel does

agree with the Old Testament Scriptures, then he has the support of biblical authority in what he is teaching us.

Paul is going to reach back into biblical history to provide a precedent for the argument of the defense. And not just any precedent. He is going back to the precedent of Abraham and the first covenant with the not yet nation of Israel. Paul is going to show us that justification by faith has been God's way and God's plan all along.

Let's read Romans 3:31 – 4:8.

[Read Romans 3:31-4:8]

Paul's Proof of Consistency is the Precedent of Abraham (Romans 3:31-4:8)

We start with the challenge followed by Paul's short answer. "Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the law."

Paul is going to have to explain that short answer. How is that the gospel of faith establishes or fulfills the law? The long answer is going to come in chapters 5-11 when Paul answers the two questions raised at the beginning of chapter 3. Paul is almost ready to start in with those questions. But not yet. First, he wants us to know that the premise is all wrong. The gospel is not a rejection of the law, the gospel is the establishment of the law. There is newness here, but it is not wholly new. It is the newness of fulfillment. This is what the law was looking forward to.

To that we might respond, "Okay, Paul. Prove it." To which Paul answers, "Great, I will."

And this really is great, because we now get Paul helping us to understand Old Testament covenant and how Old Testament covenant fits together in the gospel.

"What then shall we say that Abraham our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God." Paul's contention is that no flesh can be justified in God's sight by the good moral or religious works they do. So, let's look back at Abraham. How was it for Abraham.

"What does the Scripture say?" Paul's authority is the word of God. That's the foundation for Paul's understanding of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done. "What does the Scripture say?" Paul tells us. The Scripture says, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." That is a quote from Genesis 15:6 from the life of Abraham. The basic idea here is the same as the gospel. There is a way for righteousness that is not accomplished by what we do but comes through belief.

The word "reckoned" is key for Paul in this chapter. It occurs eleven times. Five times here in verses 3-8 in what we are looking at. So, we need to understand what this word means. English Bibles tend to translate the word here as counted or credited. Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. I like reckon, probably because I am southern. But it does a good job carrying the double meaning of the Greek. The word could mean to consider. "God considered Abraham's belief as righteous." It has to do with God's thought towards Abraham. That's the most common use of the word today. "I reckon he is an okay guy." It means that I think he is okay. I consider him okay. An older use of the word reckon is to count. You can reckon up someone's bill. "Hold on, let me reckon that." That means to count it up. It's an older use, but it fits this Greek word well. It means to count or credit something to someone's account. It is an economic term.

Paul wants to make sure that we understand the term, so he clarifies in the next verses. If you get a job and are paid for that job, then your wages are not reckoned to you or credited to you as a gift. Your boss is not doing you a favor. You worked. You deserve to get paid. And if you want to boast about it, that's fine. You did the work. But there is another way. Verse 5, "But to the one who does not work, but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness." This is not the case of the lazy person looking for a hand out. This is the case of the drowning man caught in a pit of mud who cannot get out. There is no way out. We are unable to earn our righteousness. If we are willing to trust God, righteousness can be reckoned to our account.

Paul adds on another Scriptural support. This time he is quoting David from Psalm 32:1-2. “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account.” It is a great passage to support the idea of the atonement from 3:25. Our sins have been covered by the sacrifice of Christ. “Blessed is the man whose sin is covered.” It is a great verse for Paul to quote for another reason. The phrase at the end of verse 8 is probably translated in your Bible as “whose sin the Lord will not take into account.” The original text is using our word for reckon. Literally, it is “whose sin the Lord will not reckon.” The word provides a literary link between Genesis 15:6 and Psalm 32:2. And Paul has picked up on this link. But even more importantly, he is emphasizing a conceptual link. Genesis says it positively, “Righteousness is reckoned to you by faith.” The Psalmist says the same thing, but in the negative form, “By faith, sin is not reckoned to you.” So, positively righteousness is reckoned to you. Negatively, sin is not reckoned. Both are good things. It is good to have righteousness reckoned and sin not reckoned.

The text of Genesis 15:6 clearly and powerfully supports Paul’s contention. By clearly teaching that righteousness comes by faith and by teaching that this was true of Abraham. Still, if we want to get the full force of Paul’s precedent with Abraham, we need to go back to the original story. Just like the quote from Habakkuk back in 1:17, Paul’s use of the Old Testament is not proof texting where somebody wrenches a verse out of context to prove a point. Paul’s use comes from understanding the much broader context from which he draws out a representative or key verse. That verse is intended to stand alone in Paul’s context. We do not have to go back to Genesis 15:6 in order to understand Paul’s point in Romans 4:3. The words he uses work here. But it does invite us back to the original context for even more insight.

Abraham’s story establishes God’s plan to provide righteousness by grace through faith (Genesis 15:1-21)

1. Four covenant moments

So, let’s follow Paul back to Abraham’s story in Genesis. I’d love to look at the whole life of Abraham. That is Paul’s broad context, but that would be overdoing it a bit right now. Instead, I will limit myself to the major covenant moments in the Abraham narrative. There are four. I am thinking about the covenant promise in Genesis 12:1-3, the covenant ceremony in Genesis 15, the covenant sign in Genesis 17 and the covenant test in Genesis 22. I am going to briefly mention the covenant promise and then focus in on the covenant ceremony in chapter 15. I will leave the covenant sign and text for next time.

God calls Abraham to leave his family and go to a new land at the beginning of Genesis chapter 12. This is a new chapter in covenant history with God. Prior to Genesis 12 God has made covenant with all of human kind, first through Adam and then he renewed that through Noah. At the Tower of Babel, God switches to a divide and conquer strategy. He decides to work from within one special covenant people and from them reach out to the rest of mankind. Not wanting to start with any nation already proud in their own identity, God chooses an older couple unable to have children and makes covenant with them.

This is what he promises Abraham. [Read Genesis 12:1-3] It is great news for Abraham. God promises the blessings of land, children, provision, protection, and purpose. Through Abraham all the nations of the world will be blessed.

There is no reference to the making of covenant in Genesis 12:1-3. What we have here is God’s promise, but we do not yet have a formal covenant. The word covenant is not going to come until chapter 15. Genesis 12 is like a betrothal that can come a long time before the marriage ceremony. We do not have the ceremony yet, but we have the promise.

2. Understanding the cultural idea of cutting covenant

Let's go now to covenant cut in chapter 15. This is where we find our key verse Paul quotes in Romans 4:3. I am calling this covenant cut, because whenever you read that God made a covenant in the Bible, the verb translated "made" is actually the Hebrew word "cut." You do not make a covenant, you cut a covenant. The reason for this is that ancient covenants were ratified by a symbolic act of sacrifice. Today we ratify a marriage covenant today by the signing of a document before witnesses. Which is a lot less messy. They ratified covenant by killing animals, though there was a symbolic meaning involved.

We have thousands of tablets from the Ancient Near East giving us examples of covenant that are outside of the bible. Here is just one example. This is from a treaty between Ashurnirari V of Assyria and Mati'ilu of Arpad, a smaller city-state which was north of Israel. Ashurnirari was the great king. He was over an empire, and Mati'ilu was his vassal. The treaty required ratification by sacrificing a lamb and cutting its head off. Messy. The treaty explained the symbolism of the sacrifice this way. "This head is not the head of a lamb, it is the head of Mati'ilu, it is the head of his sons, his officials, and the people of his land. If Mati'ilu sins against this treaty, so may, just as the head of this spring lamb is torn off, and its knuckle placed in its mouth, [...], the head of Mati'ilu be torn off, and his sons [...]. (ANEAnth 1:49)."

The sacrifice performed by the vassal was what is called a self-imprecatory curse. You are calling a curse on yourself when you go through a ceremony.

It's not that different from a shotgun wedding. A boy gets a girl pregnant and daddy says, "You're going to do right by her aren't you boy?" And boy says, "Yes, sir." Just to make sure the boy understands his responsibility, daddy brings his 12-gauge to the wedding. The symbol is a curse. "If you break your oath to my daughter, then you get to meet my shotgun."

Another way of symbolizing the covenant oath in the Ancient Near East was to cut the sacrificial animals in two and require the vassals to walk through the pieces, declaring, "If we break covenant with you O King, then let us be cut in two like these animals." We can hear the threat of that kind of covenant oath being carried out in Jeremiah 34:18-20. "I will give the men who have transgressed My covenant, who have not fulfilled the words of the covenant which they made before Me, when they cut the calf in two and passed between its parts— the officials of Judah and the officials of Jerusalem, the court officers and the priests and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf— I will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their life. And their dead bodies will be food for the birds of the sky and the beasts of the earth." Covenant cut ratifies a covenant through sacrifice which is a symbolic curse that you bring on yourself. "Let this happen to me if I break covenant with you great king."

3. Faith and Grace in Genesis 15

That sets us up for Genesis 15. We had covenant promise in Genesis 12. The next stage of actually cutting covenant or ratifying covenant is now going to happen in Genesis 15. The dialogue that precedes the cutting of covenant is where we find Paul's key verse, "Abraham was reckoned righteous by faith." In fact, that verse comes in the very center of the dialogue. On either side of that verse we have a parallel pattern. In verses 1-5, God is going to speak, then Abraham is going to speak, then God is going to speak again. In verse 6, Abraham faith is reckoned as righteousness. Then in 7-21 we get the pattern again. God is going to speak, Abraham is going to speak, God is going to speak again. God, Abraham, God, faith, God, Abraham, God. That is the pattern of the text.

A God restates the promise	15:1
B Abraham questions about a son	15:2-3
C God affirms with an illustration	15:4-5
X Abraham believes	15:6
A God restates the promise	15:7

B Abraham questions about the land 15:8

C God affirms with covenant 15:9-21

Let's walk through it. In verse 1, God speaks. [Read 15:1]

Now, Abraham is going to speak. Listen to Abraham's words and think about whether it sounds like faith to you or not. [Read 15:2-3] How does that sound? Does that sound like faith? ... This is one of the challenges of biblical narrative. The words someone speaks do not always give you a clear read on his or her heart. This could be a lack of faith with Abraham not believing God to fulfill his promise to give him descendants. Or it could be something else. It could be the weakness that comes with being a human being. We are dependent. We don't see what is going on. Its taking so long. It has been almost 10 years since God made the promise. How long Lord? When Lord? How are you going to fulfill the promise of descendants if I have no child? Is it really going to be through a servant of mine? How is this going to work out.

Often in biblical narrative, it is the response of God that gives us insight into the heart of a person. God sees inside. God understands how the words we speak relate to what is going on inside. It is significant that God does not rebuke Abraham right now. God sees into his heart, and it is as though God puts his arms around Abraham's shoulders and guides him outside to look up at the sky. And God says this. [Read 15:4-5]

Notice here that God does not answer Abraham's question of how it is going to work out. Abraham still has to choose to believe. But God does speak to Abraham's heart, and he gives him reassurance. "Your descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky."

So, Abraham believes the promise of God. That is where we get our key verse, verse 6. [Read 15:6]

The assertion of Abraham's faith in verse 6 causes what comes next to stand out. We are going to have God speaking again, and then Abraham speaking, then God speaking. God starts by restating the promise again. So, listen to this. [Read 15:7] The first half of the dialogue was about descendants. Now we are talking about the land. As you listen to Abraham's response, again ask yourself, "Does it sound like faith?" [Read 15:8] Does that sound like faith? ... Same problem. I love it. It is so human. "How Lord?" Abraham has no land at all. He is surrounded by other peoples, wandering around with his flocks, looking for water and pasture, trusting the good will of his neighbors. But he owns none of it. Before he dies the only land to his name is going to be the cave he was allowed to buy in which to bury Sarah. "How Lord? I do believe, but I cannot see it."

There is a deeper question here. A question that is not expressed directly by Abraham but is addressed in God's answer. Since God addresses it in his answer, we can be sure it is something that God sees in the heart of man. God knows what needs to be spoken. It's like the rich young ruler who came to Jesus wanting to know how to get into heaven. And he claimed to have held to all the law. Jesus saw the pride in that young man. He saw that the only hope for him was to be shaken. So, he spoke a challenge straight into his heart, straight into his internal identity. And he said, "All you have to do is sell everything you have and follow me."

God saw into Abraham's heart. The words may have been saying, "How are you going to accomplish this Lord?" But there is a deeper how question. The deeper how question for each one of us is, "How are you going to accomplish this Lord through me?" Isaiah, the righteous prophet, saw a vision of God and immediately cried out, "I am undone. I am under the curse. For I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips." Who can say, "Here I am Lord, I will be your man!" and have any hope of living up to the calling of God. Isaiah was overwhelmed by the very nature of God and the reality of his own sin. So, the biggest part of the how question is not, "How is God going to do it?" but, "How am I going to stay faithful to God, so that the mission can be completed?" I am sinful. I cannot continue on faithfully. Whether nobody else sees it or not, I know in my heart that I do not have what it takes to be God's man, good and faithful and true and pure. "You are holy God. How do you complete your promise through me?"

Well, for Isaiah, God took his fears away by touching his unclean lips with a burning coal, telling him, “Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven.” God took care of his sin, so that he could be God’s man. The next thing he said was, “Here I am Lord, send me.” God has the same message for Abraham, but a different way of communicating it. “How can it be you ask. Let me tell you, not in an illustration, but by a formal cutting of covenant.”

Now what we are going to get next, the whole of verse 9 to the end of the chapter, is all going to sound strange to us but only a part of it would have sounded strange to the Israelites following. Here is the part that would have made sense. When they hear this, they know exactly what is going on. [Read 15:9-11] The people hearing this, they know what this is. Abraham is preparing for a covenant sacrifice. This is the cutting of covenant.

But then things start to get strange. [Read 15:12-18]. Verse 18, “On that day God made a covenant with Abram.” What does the Hebrew literally say? It says, “God cut a covenant with Abram.” But what was Abraham doing during this covenant ceremony? He was asleep. He was as passive as you could possibly be without being dead. But this makes no sense. Abraham is supposed to walk through the sacrificed animals. We understood. He is preparing a covenant ceremony. Instead we have a fiery torch and smoking pot go through the pieces. And when we ask what smoke and fire symbolize in the books of Moses, we know immediately. The fire and smoke on the burning bush, the fire and smoke on the top of mount Sinai, the columns of fire and smoke leading the Israelites through the wilderness. Fire and smoke is the presence of God. The presence of God passes through the pieces.

Again, this makes no sense. The great King never walks through the covenant animals. The vassal does that. The point is for the vassal to bring a curse on himself, saying, “If I break covenant with you great king, then let it be done to me what has been done to these animals.” And yet, here we have God walking through the cut up animals. Verse 12, “a deep sleep fell over Abram, terror and great darkness fell upon him.”

How are you going to keep covenant with me Abraham? You are not going to. If left to you, the only guarantee is that you would break covenant with me. No flesh will be justified by his works. You must lie passively in deep slumber. You have no role here. I will walk through. The way you keep covenant with me is that I die. I take the covenant curse on myself. God is making a promise. He is offering himself as payment for our debt. Two thousand years later, darkness is again going to cover the land. This time at the sixth hour. Those who saw it were afraid. God himself died on a cross, making payment, fulfilling the promise that he established so many years before.

That is the answer to the deeper question of how this is going to work. Not by works, by grace. My substitution for you. Given by grace, received by faith.

The center of this chapter records the faith of Abraham. The end of the chapter records the grace of God. The faith is human, questioning. The grace of God provides the anchor, the sure foundation. Grace and faith work together like ice on a lake. It takes faith to step out onto the lake. If you have such great faith that you run and jump out onto the lake, what happens if the ice is only two inches thick? You shoot right through. If the ice is a yard thick, but your faith is weak, so that with great fear you edge inch by inch out onto the ice, will it hold you? Yes. The strength of your faith is not what holds you up. Weak or strong, whether you crawl out or jump out, you do need faith. You have to step out onto the ice. You have to receive the gift offered. But it is not the strength of your faith that ensures your salvation. It is the strength of God’s arms that hold you. His arms have done the job, stretched out on a cross. Those arms don’t break. They don’t grow weary. They have done the work that must needs be done. Death is required for our rebellion against our holy and righteous God, for our sin. So, death he paid.

Those arms are still stretched out, stretched out to you. All you have to do is say, “Yes. Into your hands I commit my spirit.”

“What shall we say that Abraham found? What does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.”

Abraham provides Paul with the precedent for his defense. We have his main point. Righteousness came to Abraham through faith in God, Genesis 15:6. In the rest of chapter four Paul develops for us the implications of this main point in this key verse. We will look at how Paul does that in our next lesson. But we will stop there for now.

Reflection Questions

1. What is something that stands out to you as important or interesting or confusing or strange in Romans 3:31-4:8?
2. Refresh your memory on Abraham's story. List 10 different episodes from the life of Abraham. Try to get 10 before looking back for help. Then skim over Genesis 12-25 to see how you did.
3. Put your list of Abraham episodes into order. Where do the four covenant moments in the life of Abraham from this lesson fit into the list you have made?
4. What stands out to you in Genesis 15? Is there something new here that you have not noticed before?
5. We are told in Genesis 15:6 that Abraham had faith and it was reckoned as righteousness. Yet, he questioned God twice (15:2-3 and 15:8) after God had restated his promise. What do you learn about Abraham, what do you learn about God and what do you learn about faith from this interaction?
6. How would you explain the relationship between faith and grace? Which is more important? How do they relate?
7. How would you answer the first question of covenant for Abraham, according to the story in Genesis 15. What percentage would you give to the role of grace and what percentage to the role of law in answering for Abraham, “What makes me acceptable to be in covenant with my righteous God?”

Lesson 11: Precedent of Abraham, part 2

Romans 4:9-25

Concept #1: Covenant requirements follow covenant acceptance.

⁹ Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, "FAITH WAS RECKONED TO ABRAHAM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." ¹⁰ How then was it reckoned? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised?

Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised; ¹¹ and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be reckoned to them, ¹² and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised.

Concept #2: God's promise is secured by God's grace.

¹³ For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith.

¹⁴ For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified; ¹⁵ for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there also is no violation. ¹⁶ For this reason *it is* by faith, in order that *it may be* in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, ¹⁷ (as it is written, "A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS HAVE I MADE YOU") in the presence of Him whom he believed, *even* God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist.

Concept #3: Faith is the assurance that God will perform what he has promised.

¹⁸ In hope against hope he believed, so that he might become a father of many nations according to that which had been spoken, "SO SHALL YOUR DESCENDANTS BE."

¹⁹ Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb; ²⁰ yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, ²¹ and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform.

Concept #4: The promise to Abraham set the precedent for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

²² Therefore IT WAS ALSO RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS. ²³ Now not for his sake only was it written that it was reckoned to him, ²⁴ but for our sake also, to whom it will be reckoned, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, ²⁵ He who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification.

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The Law is fulfilled by the principle of faith

After declaring the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, that believers are declared righteous by grace through faith, Paul faced an objection to that good news. In Romans 3:31, "Do we then nullify the law through faith?" Paul, says, "No way! By no means! Instead we establish the law or fulfill the law by faith. Paul then goes on to explain by offering up Abraham as a precedent for his gospel of faith. We looked at Abraham as precedent in our last lesson and are going to finish up in this lesson. We are going to finish up with Romans chapter 4.

To get started in this lesson, let's think about what it means that the law is fulfilled by faith. There are two different contexts in which it can be said that the law is fulfilled by faith. How the law is fulfilled by faith depends on which context we are in, which question of covenant are we talking about. Are we talking about what makes me acceptable to be in relationship with God? Well then, faith fulfills law in a special way for that question, "What makes me acceptable?". Or are we talking about the second question of covenant, "How do I please my God with whom I am already in relationship?"

Faith still fulfills law for that question but in a different way for this question. We need to keep those questions straight, so we do not confuse the answers.

The Law fulfilled by faith in the first question of covenant

In Romans 4 we are still talking about the first question of covenant. What makes me acceptable to be in covenant relationship with a holy God. And what we find with Abraham is the same thing we find with Jesus. The same way we answer, "What makes me acceptable?" is not changed in the gospel. What's new is new is that we now see how it works. God made a promise. He signed for a debt, but that debt remained unpaid. Old Covenant believers trusted that God would follow through with his promise to clear the debt.

God made this promise to Abraham in Genesis 12. How could he know it would be fulfilled? What is the weak link in the promise? God or Abraham? Abraham is the weak link. How could Abraham know that the promise would be fulfilled if he could not know whether or not he would keep his part? God had something radical to communicate to Abraham. God was going to communicate to Abraham that the keeping of this covenant is not dependent on you. And to make this clear, God used a known form of communication. It was this idea of a suzerain-vassal treaty or a treaty that a great king makes with a lesser king. The vassal makes a covenant with his greater king through a sacrifice. That is the oath. He cuts covenant. In doing so, he calls a curse on himself, "If I break covenant with you great king, let it be done to me what was done to these sacrificial animals." That's the ceremony God set up with Abraham in Genesis 15. When he was told to cut the animals in half, everyone reading that culturally knew what was going on. We are setting up a covenant treaty. God sets up the known to communicate radical good news. Rather than allow Abraham to follow through with the oath of covenant, God put Abraham into a deep sleep and God himself performed the covenant oath. God passed through as fire and smoke. God passed through the sacrificial animals effectively saying, "If you break covenant with me Abraham, then let me die!" Amazing grace how sweet the sound! "You don't know how you can keep covenant with me? You don't have to keep covenant. You have to believe me to keep covenant."

The promised blessing of provision and protection and purpose can be fulfilled because God willing assumed the debt of covenant unfaithfulness. In the day of Christ Jesus, God called for payment of the debt, and then he himself paid that debt.

Thus, the first question of covenant, "What makes me acceptable, how can I be recognized as righteous?", that question is answered for us in the exact same way it was answered for Abraham: by grace through faith. And that is how faith fulfills the covenant law in regards to the first question of covenant. What does it mean to say that faith fulfills or faith establishes the law? The law demands justice. Death must be paid for the wages of sin is death. The law demands this. The righteous requirement of the law is established or fulfilled when we place our faith in Jesus.

The Law fulfilled by faith in the second question of covenant

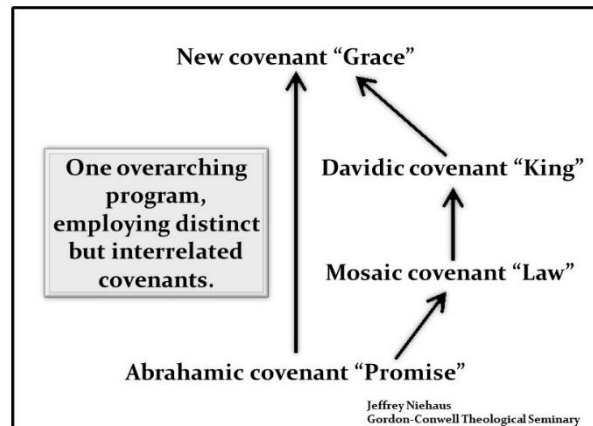
But we have not addressed the second question of covenant, yet. The second question of covenant asks, "How then shall we live?" What is the role of Old Covenant Law in answering that question? The Mosaic Law does not have a primary role in answering that question. It will still have much to teach us. But we do not please God by obedience to the Mosaic Law. That's not our covenant. That was true of Old Covenant believers. When they asked, "How do we then please our God?", they looked to Mosaic Law to get instruction from God for how they ought to live. But when Jesus came, Jesus was the mediator of a new covenant. The writer of Hebrews calls it a better covenant. We are under a new and better covenant. So, if I want to know, "How am I to live for my God? How am I to please my God?", I am looking to the New Covenant for my instructions.

The Language of Covenant – Promise, Law and Grace

I need to clarify some language that may be confusing. I have used the language of law when talking about the two questions of covenant as synonymous with commandment or stipulation or good

works. I have used it basically to refer to the dos and don'ts of covenant relationship. In that sense there is law in the Old Covenant. There are lots of do's and don'ts. And there is law in the New Covenant. There are lots of do's and don'ts in the New Covenant. That is a valid way to use the term. But Paul uses law in the next several chapters almost exclusively to refer to whole Mosaic covenant. And he uses the term grace to refer to our new covenant reality. So, I want to fit my language with Paul. So, from now on, unless I say differently, I am going to use Law to refer to the Mosaic covenant, and Grace to refer to the New Covenant and, following Paul's language here in chapter 4, we will use Promise to refer to the Abrahamic covenant. I will use the words commandment or stipulation or requirement to refer to the specific dos and don'ts of the covenant. The do's and don'ts of the Promise. The do's and don'ts of the Law. And the do's and don'ts of Grace.

My basic understanding of the relationship between the covenants is that the covenant of Promise made to Abraham established for us the answer to "How do I become acceptable to God." We are reckoned righteous by grace through faith, whether we are in Abraham's family under the covenant of Promise, whether we are an Israelite with Moses under the covenant of Law or whether we are a New Testament believer under the covenant of Grace. All of those covenants have the same problem, as Paul said in 3:21, "by the law no flesh is justified." No covenant can give us a list of stipulations or requirements that we can live out and so be justified by God. It's not the problem of the covenant. It is the problem of our flesh. We are going to break covenant. So, grace is the only way to answer this question for human beings. So, even though we are going to call the New Covenant "Grace", using Paul's language as we go forward, grace is foundational to all of the covenants.



The Promise established the answer to the first question of covenant. Then when God called forth the nation of Israel from Egypt, he brought them to Mount Sinai and gave them what was for them a new covenant. The covenant of Moses was new at the time. God answered for them how to live out the relationship of grace established by the promise. They were saved by grace through faith just like Abraham. But then they were asking the question, "How do we live this out as a people, as a nation?" They should live it out according to the Mosaic Covenant of Law.

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A new mediator of a new covenant has come for us. And Jesus has established something new for us. The first question of the covenant is the same. We are saved by grace through faith. But when we are thinking the next question, "How then do we live for our God?", we have something new. The foundation is still the Promise. We are still saved by grace through faith. That promise is still fulfilled in Jesus. But the Mosaic Law has fulfilled its purpose in answering the second question of covenant. The Mosaic Law's purpose was for the nation of Israel as the people of God. The New Covenant of Grace has now taken that role for us, for believers who are under this new covenant. "How do I please my Lord?" Not by following the Old Covenant design for life. That would be trying to put new wine back in and old wineskin. We are not trying to live out New Covenant through the wineskin of the Old Covenant. We please God, not by seeking to live according to their covenant, but by seeking to live according to our covenant. This is where Paul is going in chapters 5-8. "What's new about our new covenant in relation to the second question, how then shall we live?" If it really is a new wine skin, then we are really are going to have to pay close attention to what's radically different, what's new about the new covenant in answering the question, "How ought we live?"

We are almost done with the first question of covenant. We are establishing the precedent of Abraham. And during the rest of Romans chapter 4, Paul has four concepts for us to finish drawing

out, to understand of the covenant of Promise and how that helps us to understand the covenant of grace. These concepts are going to help us to finish up the precedent, to finish up the first question of covenant, “What makes me acceptable?”, so that we can really dig in in the next four chapters into this question, “How then ought we live?”

Rather than go through verse by verse the rest of chapter four, it is quite long, I want to cover a concept at a time. These are the four concepts I see Paul drawing out of the life of Abraham.

Concept #1: Covenant requirements follow after covenant acceptance.

Concept #2: God’s promise depends on God’s grace.

Concept #3: Faith is the belief that God will perform what God has promised.

Concept #4: The promise to Abraham set the precedent for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

That is just a summing up of what we have already seen in that fourth concept. Let’s start with the first concept. We are going to need to read chapter 4:9-12.

Concept #1: Covenant requirements follow covenant acceptance (4:9-12).

[Read Romans 4:9-12]

Okay. That might be confusing. It feels confusing when I read it out loud. But when we go through it slowly, there is really a basic point that is being made here. Covenant requirements follow covenant acceptance. Let’s remind ourselves of the story.

Genesis 12-25 tells the story of Abraham’s life. Well, it does not really tell us the story of Abraham’s life. It is only 13 chapters after all. It is frustratingly short. I would love to know more about the story of Abraham’s life. And we start the story when Abraham is already 75 years old. Better to say that Genesis 12-25 gives us significant moments out of Abraham’s life. God was doing something new with Abraham. He shifted from covenant with all people, in Adam and Noah our covenant was all humanity, then at the tower of Babel we come up on a divide and conquer strategy. God has broken all the people out into many nations and cultures. And he is going to reach all of them through one. He made a special covenant with one people, they are not even yet a people, to bless all nations. The glimpses we get of Abraham’s life show a story of struggle, a story of faith, and a story of covenant. We are going to note four critical moments of covenant. We talked about these in the last lesson. There is covenant promise, covenant ceremony, covenant sign and covenant test. And these four show up in Genesis 12, Genesis 15, Genesis 17, and Genesis 22.

In the last lesson we really focused on the covenant of promise moment in Genesis 12 and the covenant ceremony moment in Genesis 15. That promise came in Genesis 12, the ceremony did not come for another 10 years, when God actually cut the covenant with Abraham and reaffirmed the promise that he initially gave Abraham up in the land of Ur. And in the cutting of covenant he established that this promise is going to be fulfilled by grace. You receive it by faith. It is not fulfilled by your ability to keep it. So, God took the covenant curse on himself while Abraham was passive. Abraham slept.

Paul points out in this little bit confusing passage that I just read the idea that the covenant sign came much later after the covenant was cut. From promise to covenant ceremony we had 10 years. But from covenant ceremony to covenant sign, we have had another 13 years. Ishmael was not even an idea in Abraham’s mind in Genesis 15. Well, there was the hope of a son, but not the way they were going to get Ishmael, because he had to be 13 before he gets circumcised. But it’s good news for us. Paul’s point is that there is clear separation between first question of covenant and second question of covenant. Abraham was declared righteous by grace through faith in Genesis 15 long before God communicated any specific requirements to live out that covenant. He may have communicated them to Abraham. I assume Abraham knew some idea of how God wanted him to live it out. But in the story that we have received in Genesis, there is an intentional delay in giving us any of those stipulations. There is no question about whether circumcision was necessary or not. That

gets confused later by Jews for whom circumcision has become so important. But Paul is saying, “Go back to the original story. Go look at Abraham.” Abraham knew he was accepted 13 years before God even told him about circumcision. Circumcision is not necessary. It is the same problem some people have today thinking that baptism is necessary for salvation. No. It is a beautiful sign of something that has to happen spiritually. It is a sign of the faith that we do have in Jesus. But it is attributing much more to the sign than God ever intended if you think that the ritual somehow saves.

By waiting 13 years, God made it very clear that Abraham’s acceptance is based on his faith. Abraham is accepted by grace through faith. Paul’s pointing this out to the Jews of his day. “As much importance as you guys might want to attach to the symbolic ceremony of circumcision, you can’t argue from Genesis that that is what made Abraham acceptable.” There is too big of a gap between Genesis 15 and Genesis 17.

It was a powerful symbol. Like with all cutting of covenants, this is a special cutting that each family that has a baby boy performs. It is the calling of a curse on oneself. “If we, as a family, turn away from the worship of Yahweh, then let our family, our seed, be cut off from the tribes of Abraham.” That is what circumcision communicates. It is a literal cutting of covenant and it is the calling of a curse, like walking through the animals, but this curse is, “Let our seed be cut off if we become a family rejects Yahweh. If we become worshippers of pagan gods cut us off from the nations.” That is what we are doing with circumcision.

Moses also picked up, with the negative symbol, the calling of curse, there is also a blessing inherent in the idea of circumcision. Moses talks about this in Deuteronomy 30. This recognition that what we need is for God to circumcise our hearts. This outward sign needs to be a symbol of something that happens to us inwardly. If we are really going to love God with all our heart and all our mind and all our soul, we need God to cut sin away from our inner being and to bring forth new birth or some kind of spiritual fruit.

Circumcision was a powerful covenant sign, both in the idea of calling curse, but also in the idea of expressing blessing. But it is not necessary for salvation. It is not necessary for acceptance. And this is what Paul is pointing out when he writes that this is something Abraham received, “Not while circumcised but while uncircumcised.” And he later received the sign of circumcision, but that was a sign of the faith he already had while he was uncircumcised.

God adds circumcision as a covenant stipulation, and it goes with the promise. And much later it would be taken up in the Law, the covenant of Law. And it belongs to the second question of covenant. “Now that we are accepted by faith, how should we live out our covenant with you O Lord? How do we please you?” Genesis 17 is giving part of that answer. God is saying, “You know what, this is what I want you to do. I want you to circumcise all of your boys as a sign of the covenant relationship we have established by grace through faith.” And if God chooses to change the requirements of his covenant, he is free to do that. If he wants to give Moses covenant stipulations that include circumcision, then great! And that is what he did. Circumcision was part of the covenant with Abraham, that was an expected stipulation. And then it carried right on over into the covenant of Law and the Israelites were expected to continue. So, believers under the old covenant who want to know how to live for God, they know that this is one of the things they ought to do. They should circumcise their boys. That shows that they have a heart to obey God, a heart to please God. Hopefully, they get the symbolism of what they are doing. But if God decides not to include the stipulation of circumcision as part of a new covenant like the new covenant he made with Jesus, then great! You know those of us under the new covenant, we are asking the same question, “What do you want us to do God? How do we live for you?” And part of God’s answer for us is, “You know what, don’t be circumcised. That’s not your covenant. You be baptized! That is the covenant sign I want you all to perform under this new covenant. This is a new wineskin. So, we need to make some changes. And we are going to make some of our changes in ritual. It’s great that they were circumcised, but you be baptized.”

Paul, taking us back to Abraham, he is showing us that it is not the covenant stipulations that are essential for entering into relationship with God. Circumcision is not essential. Baptism is not essential. What is essential is God's grace received by faith. So, whether we are talking about a Jew who feels like he still ought to be circumcising his baby boy or a non-Jew who has absolutely no plans for circumcision whatsoever. Both can call Abraham Father, if, like Abraham, both depend by faith on God's grace for inclusion into the family. Abraham is the father of the circumcised and the uncircumcised because of this concept: covenant requirements follow after covenant acceptance.

Concept #2: God's promise is secured by God's grace (4:13-17).

We are going to see this in Romans 4:13-17. It is a point that we have already been making. When look at the covenant ceremony of Genesis 15, the faith of Abraham is placed in the center of the dialogue, in the center of the chapter. So, we get God and Abraham talking and later we get God and Abraham talking, but right in the middle of all that it says his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness. Faith is in the center of that covenant moment in Genesis 15, but grace is the anchor, that covenant moment of God walking through those animals and declaring, with Abraham asleep, and God saying, "If you break covenant with me, then let me die." That idea of grace is the anchor. It is not the strength of the faith that counts, but the strength of the one who is offering the gift. We need to pay close attention to Paul's language here, because he introduces a concept that is going to come back several times through the letter. So, as we get ready to read these next few verses, let's pay attention. Let's not miss it. We are going to read Romans 4:13-17, and also notice the repetition of the word promise. This is why we are calling Abraham's covenant the covenant of Promise. So, here we go, 4:13-17.

[Read Romans 4:13-17]

Alright. Let's go through that again and take it verse by verse. And point out some things.

"¹³ For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith."

I think by now we've got that. The promise is not on the basis of living up to the law, but on a declaration of righteousness that comes by faith. Paul goes on to make a really strong statement we need to pay attention to.

"¹⁴ For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified;"

This is strong. It is not just that faith is a good idea, but if the promise was a covenant of law, some kind of religious contract, then the promise would be nullified. Paul's turning this language around from the original question. The original objection was that faith nullifies the law. Paul says, "No, no. If you think the law was the basis of covenant, then by law you have actually nullified the promise." Faith does not nullify law. Law nullifies promise if you misunderstand law. What do you mean Paul? How so? What are you talking about?

"¹⁵ for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there also is no violation."

This is what we have been saying. If the promise depended on Abraham to live out the law of God, then at some point Abraham would have stumbled. In fact, he did stumble didn't he. Remember those two times he said, "Sarah is not my wife. She is my sister." Well, that was not a complete lie. She was his half-sister. But I cannot believe God approved of him allowing his wife, the mother of the covenant child, to be taken by Pharaoh and then again by Abimelech. Like any man Abraham stumbled. Abraham fell. And like any man, if forced to make a legal defense before God, Abraham would be judged guilty. "for the law brings wrath" on sinful men and all men sin, therefore the law always brings wrath.

So, consider the next part of the verse, verse 15. "but where there is no law, there also is no violation." This language is a little odd. Is there no law in the court of God? Are there no righteous requirements? That's not what this means by "no law." What this means is that when the standard of the law is not applied. If it is possible for us to approach the bench of God and ask, "God is there

some different way? If you judge me by law, I am dead. Is there no other way that I can be evaluated?" And if there is some other way, if there is some way that I can be evaluated other than by law, then there will be no violation of law taken into account. That is what this means that there is no violation. There is no violation if we are not even using law as a standard by which I am judged. And that is exactly what God has done for us. He allows us to make a defense based on grace. So we are not even going to consider the law. Not that the law is ignored but the law has been satisfied in Jesus Christ, which makes it possible, since he has already paid my penalty, it makes it possible for me to be evaluated not on the basis of law where there is going to be violation but on the basis of grace where law is not even taken into consideration. There is no violation, not because we have not violated righteous law, but because it is no longer a question of moral law. It now becomes a question of grace. And now verse 16,

"¹⁶ For this reason *it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants,*"

The only way for God to make a promise with Abraham and his descendants and any human beings, for that matter, is for that promise to be based on grace received by faith. The strength of the promise is based on the giver of grace. We now simply receive the gift offered, or we reject the gift offered. That is the only way to guarantee the gift – the gift depends on God and not on us. And Paul goes on to repeat that the implication that if it is a gift offered by grace and received by faith, then it is available universally to all who would receive the gift. Continuing in verse 16,

"not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham,"

So, when he says "not to those who are of the Law" he does not mean those who are righteous because of the law. He means those who are seeking to fulfill the second question of covenant by law. So, those who are under Mosaic Law. And as they seek to live for God under law, the promise is guaranteed to them by faith, but also "to those who are of the faith of Abraham," who are not seeking to fulfill the covenant of Law,

"who is the father of us all, ¹⁷ (as it is written, "A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS HAVE I MADE YOU") in the presence of Him whom he believed, *even* God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist."

This is concept #2. God's promise is secured by God's grace. Grace is God's side of the promise. The next concept Paul draws from Abraham looks at our side of the promise, the human side of the promise, which is faith. Let's read 4:18-21.

Concept #3: Faith is the assurance that God will perform what he has promised (4:18-21)

[Read Romans 4:18-21]

Faith is the human correspondence to grace. We do not want to either overestimate or underestimate the nature of Abraham's faith. For Abraham to experience the reality of relationship with God, he had to trust that God would fulfill his promises. Paul describes that faith in verse 21. He says that Abraham, "being fully assured that what God had promised, he was also able to perform." That was the nature of Abraham's faith. He truly believed that God would fulfill the promises that God had made. That true belief was shown by choices and actions that Abraham made in his life. It is quite difficult to understand what someone means by saying, "I believe in God." when that belief does not change how he or she lives out their life. If you claim to have faith in God, and yet, your faith does not significantly impact your calendar or your wallet, then what does it even mean to say you have faith? James says the demons believe in God and shudder. We are not talking about some assent that God exists. Demons assent that God exists. Faith is more than mere belief. Faith is throwing in with God, stepping under his banner, trusting him in what he says is true and what he says he will do. Trust is show in action. You can say you trust that a chair will hold you up, but if you still refuse to sit in it, your words contradict the reality of your heart. You might be saying, "I trust."

But your actions are saying, “I do not trust.” Our inner faith, if we really trust God, that is going to compel us to action at different points in our life.

You can ask yourself that question, “What life decisions have I made or what life decisions am I making that would cause a neighbor or family member or co-worker to say, “What in the world are you doing? Why would you do that?” And you say, “I think it’s what God wants me to do?” And they say, “You can’t know that.” And then you just shrug because you don’t really have anything else to say, because you are really trusting God. Whether it is rational or not, it makes sense to you, because you think this is what God wants you to do. You are basing it on his promises, and that’s it.

What’s an example of that? I don’t know. We could think of all kinds of examples. It could be your refusing to do something questionable at work even if it might get you in trouble or get you fired. Maybe it’s a change of jobs. Or you decided to homeschool your kids. Or you are going on a mission trip. You decide to buy somebody a car. You regularly visit the neighbor no one can stand. You read your Bible every day before work. You volunteer. You enjoy worship. You put your money where your mouth is and you make space in your calendar. If you really believe that God is king of all, that he is holy, that he loves you, that he promises to care for you and keep you and make you a blessing, then how can there not be an effect on the way you live life? True faith is trust in God, and real trust in God produces life change or produces life action.

What did it look like for Abraham? So, let’s notice first two things. We are looking at this moment. It says Abraham was 100 years old. And he “did not waver in respect to the promise.” I think we are talking about right at this moment when God said, “You are going to have a child and it is going to be through Sarah,” that Abraham did not waver. But that not wavering is a characteristic I think we see through Abraham’s life. I am going to have to defend that, because it certainly looks sometimes like he is wavering. I think he did not waver in respect to the promise. But there is something else that is being said here, and that is that he “grew strong in faith.” And if I am right that Abraham didn’t waver in his belief that God was going to fulfill his promise, then it is also right to say, “but he was weak in faith at some point, because here he grows strong in faith and that implies he was weaker in order to be able to grow stronger.” Even if he is able to have a consistency in his faith from the first moment of receiving the promise, there is still a process of growth. I think Paul is giving us a lens here by which we can look at life of Abraham. We could interpret his actions in a variety of ways. That is a problem of biblical narrative. You look at what people do and say, and their struggles, and their sin and you wonder, or we talking about a Saul who struggled, but didn’t seem to have a heart for God at all, or are we talking about a David who really struggled, but he really inside had a heart for God. Paul is giving us a lens for Abraham’s narrative that he really had faith, even though there were moments of struggle. And he grew strong in that faith, unwavering, but in need of growth.

Something real had clicked in Abraham’s soul. We are not sure about his family to be honest. He does go to them to get a wife for Isaac and they know who Yahweh is. But Joshua, at the end of his book, he also lets us know that Abraham’s family back up there by the river, by the Euphrates, they worshipped gods beyond the river, and that means they worshipped the gods of Mesopotamia. Sounds like there was some good and bad going on. There was a little mixing of true worship and culture. There was a cultural-ness to his family background. But for him, something clicked in his soul. He heard God. He believed God. And because he believed God, because he had true faith, he picked up his family and he moved. His trust in God caused him or compelled him to action that made a difference in his life.

I mean, God had given him a great news. We have to be honest about that. “I am going to bless you with provision, with protection and purpose, with land, with children. That’s a great gospel for anybody. But the gospel’s great in Jesus when we first give it. All you have to do is receive it by faith, and then you are in the family of God. And God is going to protect you and make you into who you were created to be. And you are going to live with him forever. That is awesome. And yet, how many people say, “No. No thank you. I like my life that way it is. Thanks, but no thanks.” Abraham did not

say, “Thanks, but no thanks.” Abraham said, “Yes sir. Thank you so much. I trust you. I believe you are going to follow through on your word. And so, I am following you.” I can only imagine what his family thought when he tried to explain to them that God told him to move down south and that Sarah, his old lady, was going to have children. I see them smiling. They are all smiling and standing there waving at him as he goes off, and they are whispering to each other, “That boy ain’t right. Religion’s gone to his head. It’s fine to believe in God, so long as it don’t change nothin’. But, bye now. Y’all come back.”

Abraham heads on, because Abraham believed God and that faith really did not waiver through the whole story of his life. Or did it? I said I was going to have to prove this. There are high moments. Abraham trusted God to show him where to settle. Abraham braved a rescue mission. He went and fought and brought Lot back when he had been captured. Abraham, unlike Lot, avoided Sodom and Gomorrah. He let God lead him in the land. But he did compassionately argue on their behalf. So, he has some high moments. But on the other hand, we already mentioned he lied about Sarah, twice, putting her in two very compromising situations with foreign rulers. He questioned God during that covenant cutting ceremony moment, “How can I believe God I am going to have children? How can I believe God I am going to have land?” He gave in to Sarah’s suggestion that he have a child with her maidservant. So, what does that mean if it does not mean that he wavered?

We notice these things in Abraham’s life. Where ever he went, he built altars. So, he arrives in the promise land, and he builds an altar and he praises Yahweh. Then he goes down to Egypt, and he comes back. He builds an altar and he prays to Yahweh. He has got this consistent worship of Yahweh. Another thing we notice is that Abraham always responds positively to the direct word of God. When God says something Abraham is like, “Yes, sir! I trust you. I am doing it. This is good. Let’s go with it.” When he understood what God wanted clearly, he did it. Abraham was basing his life on the promises of God, but in reality, he was often confused about how it ought to be worked out. And sometimes he was afraid. Maybe he was lustful. Maybe he was impatient. So, he is helping God out with the promise, both because of his confusion and also because of the sin of his heart.

At times that means it looks like he does not really believe. I think the reality is that he did, but even in his belief, he was overcome by his flesh. Doubting is a reality in the life of people who truly believe. Abraham always came back to the central truth that God is real, God has made a promise, God always keeps his promises. And that affected how Abraham lived his life.

So, our fourth covenant moment in Abraham’s life comes almost at the very end. It is in Genesis 22. And it is about 35 years after God gave Abraham the promise. God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son. I am convinced that God never, ever would have asked the Abraham of Genesis 12 to sacrifice his son. That Abraham had true faith. But he did not know God that well. And he did not know himself that well. His faith was fresh and young. That is very positive, but it was also naïve and weak. He would have thought that God was asking for a human sacrifice. He did not know God that well. He knew the culture. And he would have thought, “This is what people do. If you really want to please God, and he has made this promise. And I really want to show God I believe he is going to give me descendants. I am going to sacrifice my first born. I am going to kill my first born and give him up to this god, so this god will really want to bless me.”

He could not have understood in Genesis 12 what he understood 35 years later with such strong conviction. Thirty-five years later, he knew that the promised child is the one who comes from me and Sarah and that his name is Isaac. And that from Isaac, nations are going to come. And God always keeps his promise. Therefore, Isaac must live. Whether that is rational or not, no matter what God is saying, Abraham knows that God keeps his promise. And the promise was through Isaac. He knows that now. Through his failures and successes, he has grown strong in faith. We get a little help from the writer to the Hebrews in chapter 11, he tells us what Abraham believed, that Abraham believed that even if it was necessary to go through with the sacrificing Isaac that God would raise him back from the dead. He told his servants, “You guys wait here until the boy and I return.” He was serious

about that. He really believed he was coming off that mountain with Isaac. That does not mean that it was not hard to go up the mountain. He was still having to trust God. But his trust gave him this real assurance and this conviction that he was coming down. And it is not trust he would have had 35 years ago. But he had grown strong. And he was convinced.

He did not waver through his many years with God in his faith, but he did need to grow. Through that growth he was now ready to experience a much greater trial. It is one that God knows he is going to pass. What God is doing here is that God is inviting this more mature believer up into his own heart, so that Abraham can experience briefly and incompletely what God would be going to experience fully. When God walked through those sacrificial pieces in Genesis 15, God was making this great amazing statement, "If you break covenant let me die." At that moment, Abraham, if he understood, he could receive it with joy, but he does not feel what God feels. You know that is a moment of pain and joy for God. But here God is giving Abraham an opportunity to experience both the pain and joy of offering up your son. And Abraham is not actually going to have to have to go through it. It is one more remainder to Abraham that he and his seed deserve the wrath of God for their sin. They deserve to die. But a ram was given in their place. God gave Abraham this symbolic substitute in anticipation of the day when God really would go through giving up his own son as a true substitute.

There is a significant difference there in that Jesus is also fully God. So, it is not God choosing for his son without his son having a say. The Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit have made a plan of love where the Son is going to willingly, just as the Father offers the Son willingly himself. And Abraham just barely got to taste what that would be like in the heart of a father to have to willingly give his son in the place of another.

This was a covenant test. And Abraham passed. The test did not make Abraham worthy of God. The test showed Abraham's faith to be true. It was a moment that helped Abraham himself to see that, "Wow. I really believe." That is often the result of our trials. We pass through the trial and it is not that God needs to see we have true faith. God knows we have true faith. But it helps us to see that we have true faith. It is like ore when it is passed through the intense fire, and the fire shows, in the case of Abraham, that that ore is true gold. When he passed through the fire, his faith was shown real.

True faith means something has clicked at the core of our being. We know that God is real. We know that God is good. We know that we should base our life on his word. But there is still the reality that we struggle and fail. We let fear override what we know to be true, like Abraham did. Or we help God out without asking God how we should help him out. We just make our own strategies and bulldoze ahead. We just maybe don't talk to God for a while, because we do not want him to interfere with the plan. And hopefully we are growing from those failures. Hopefully we do not waiver in the belief that God is real, and God is good and that our life is in his hands. If you have true faith, you have got that down in the core of your soul. You know he is good. You know he has got you.

Abraham is our model. This is the human side of the covenant relationship. God's side is grace. He offers us grace. And we receive it by faith. And faith is this belief that God will do what God promises he will do.

I want to finish with the fourth concept real briefly, so let me just run through these four concepts that we get here in this second part of chapter 4.

Concept #4: The promise to Abraham set the precedent for the gospel of Jesus Christ (4:22-25).

Concept #1: Covenant requirements follow covenant acceptance. Circumcision, baptism, whatever God tells us to do under the second question of covenant, that follows the acceptance we have in the first question of covenant. Covenant requirements follow after covenant acceptance.

Concept #2: God's promise depends on God's grace. God's promise does not depend on your ability to keep the covenant requirements. And it does not depend on the strength of your faith.

Your faith does not make God's promise secure. God's grace and his strength to do what he said he was going to do, that is what makes it secure. And your faith, even if it is small as a mustard seed, if it so weak, but you do belief then you are safe. But concept #3, that faith does need to be real. Even if it is weak, and you are often confused, and you have fear and are still struggling with trying to grow in your faith, faith does need to be real. There is some real reception of grace.

Concept #3: Faith is the belief that God will perform what he has promised.

Concept #4: The promise to Abraham set the precedent for the gospel of Jesus Christ. Just as it was for Abraham, so also it is for us in Jesus. So that is how we will wrap up. This whole chapter has focused on that one verse that Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. We have been developing that. And God has been drawing out these concepts based on that idea. So, let's sum up how Abraham has been a precedent for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let's just read the text. It is Romans 4:22-25.

[Read Romans 4:22-25]

Reflection Questions

1. What two or three observations stand out to you in verses 9-25 as particularly interesting, important, confusing, or strange? Record your observations either as a statement or as a question. (Questions are a great way to record observations: Why did Paul say that? What did Paul mean by that? Who is affected by that? How does that work? And so on.)

2. What did God accomplish in the life of Abraham and in our theological understanding of covenant by allowing so much time to pass between each of the four major covenant moments in Abraham's life? (The years are close approximations.)

Covenant promise **A** Covenant ceremony **B** Covenant sign **C** Covenant test
Genesis 12 **10 yrs** Genesis 15 **13 yrs** Genesis 17 **12 yrs** Genesis 22

What can be significantly learned by the passage of time between covenant promise and covenant ceremony (A); between covenant ceremony and covenant sign (B); and between covenant sign and covenant test (C)?

3. Express in your own words Paul's point in verse 14-15, "For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified; for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there also is no violation."

4. What does Paul mean by saying that Abraham "did not waiver in unbelief?" What moment is Paul describing in Abraham's life.

5. You might disagree with Michael who says that Abraham did not waiver in his faith through his life. If Abraham did waiver, when would you say he waived and how would you define that?

6. What are moments of faith growth you see in Abraham's life?

7. What are a couple of faith tests or faith growth moments that you experience in your life? When have you passed through the fire to realize on the other side, "Wow. I really do trust God!"

8. In the end, how does Paul's example of Abraham support his point from 3:31 that faith fulfills the law? (Would you make a distinction in your answer regarding how faith fulfills the law with respect to the first question of covenant and how it fulfills the law in regard to the second question of covenant? If you are not sure about the second question of covenant answer that is fine. Paul tackles the second question of covenant in chapters 5-8. For now, you should focus on answering how faith fulfills the law in respect to the first question of covenant.)

Lesson 12: Secure Hope I

Romans 5:1-11

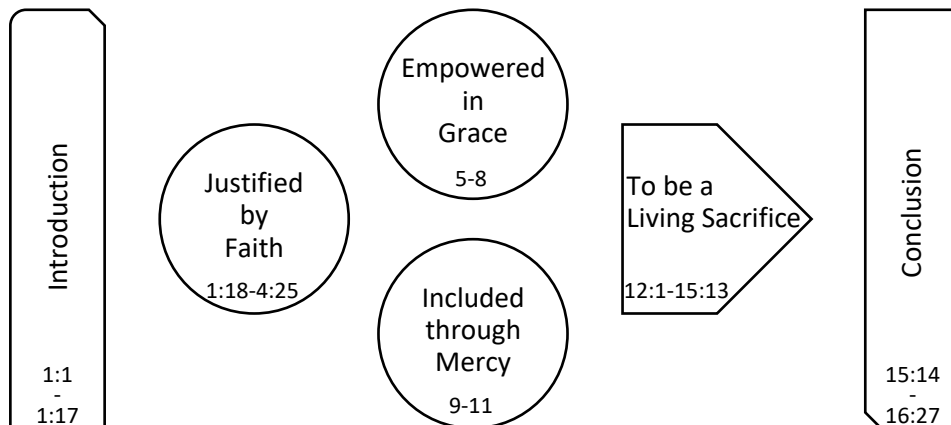
- (1) ¹ Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we **exult** in **hope** of the glory of God.
- (2) ³ And not only this, but we also **exult** in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; ⁴ and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, **hope**;
- (a) ⁵ and **hope** does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.
- (b) ⁶ For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die.
- ⁸ But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.
- ⁹ Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. ¹⁰ For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.
- (3) ¹¹ And not only this, but we also **exult** in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.

NASB

Introduction to Romans 5-8: God Empowers in Grace

The question of practical righteousness

Today we are making a major shift as we move from chapter 4 to chapter 5. We could call it a shift from the issue of justification to the issue of sanctification. Or a shift from positional righteousness to practical righteousness. Or to use the language of this course on Romans it is a shift from the first question of covenant to the second question of covenant.



Paul raised two questions at the beginning of chapter 3. “What about sin?” And “What about the Jews?” The problem arises from how Paul has answered the first question of covenant, “What makes me acceptable to be in relationship with God?” Accusing human kind before the court of God, Paul asserts that there is another way. You can be declared righteous by grace through faith in Jesus. This is a passive righteousness. Meaning you do not do anything to attain it. It has also been called a positional righteousness, because it depends on your position or union with Christ. It has also been called a forensic righteousness, because it is a legal declaration; a declaration made by the court of God in spite of your lack of formal righteousness. You are not actually, practically righteous but have been declared so in Christ Jesus.

Here is the problem. If the Law is fulfilled, completed, ended in Christ Jesus then what keeps people from sinning? And furthermore, what about all the promises God made to Israel? These are two

serious problems created by the shift from the Old Covenant of Law to the New Covenant of Grace. And we cannot ignore the questions. We cannot just ditch the Old Covenant and move on. If we cannot depend on the Old Covenant as the word of God, then why do we have any confidence in the New Covenant as the word of God. The veracity of the New depends on the truthfulness of the Old. We have to answer the questions and not just because we have to show the harmony of the Old and the New, but also because the questions are critical to living out the New.

We start with the first question, “What about sin?” This is the question of chapters 5-8. The opposition argues that grace leads to sin and assumes that the God of Paul’s gospel does not care about practical righteousness. He is okay declaring his people righteous but does not really mind how his people choose to live. Grace provides freedom to sin. This objection also assumes that without the fear of the law, people will choose sin. Grace fails to motivate towards righteousness. Without the big stick of the law and the fear of punishment, religion cannot practically work. That’s the assumption. And to be honest, it is one I see at work in a lot of Christian churches and organizations that affirm grace. They affirm grace, but they still feel the need to motivate by law and fear, pressure and judgment. People need to feel bad, or they will not do good. That’s the argument. Or maybe it is deeper than an argument. It is a presupposition, an assumption, a feeling that we have.

We reject both assumptions of the opposition. We reject the assumption that the God of the gospel of Christ Jesus does not care about the righteousness of his people. And we reject the assumption that grace does not motivate and empower for righteousness. The point of grace is practical righteousness. We have been declared righteous that we might truly become righteous. We are forgiven to be transformed.

We are now into answering the second question of covenant. We have been accepted, so how ought we live? We should live according to the grace of Jesus. A difference with the first question is that we are passive in answering the first question of covenant. We are declared righteous on the basis of the work Jesus did. We cannot add to it. But now, considering the second questions of covenant, we are called to be fully active. We are called to practical, lived out righteousness. And we are to do it in the special way of the gospel of grace. This is what we need Paul to teach us. What is new about the new covenant of grace in answering the second question, “How do we live it out?” How do we live out the gospel?

The structure of chapters 5-8

We will benefit by recognizing the whole structure of Paul’s answer in chapters 5-8. Quite a few commentators group chapter 5 back with chapter 4. I understand why. The word justification is still a theme in the first half of chapter 5. This section definitely serves as a bridge from what is behind to what is coming. I will give you three good reasons to see chapter 5 as the start of new major section. (1) The biggest indicator comes in 5:1 where Paul writes, “Therefore having been justified by faith...” Justification is now a past accomplishment. Justification is not a progressive reality in the Christian life. You are not being justified. Justification is a once for all event that happens at the moment we place our faith in Christ. Justification speaks to our declared righteousness not our practical righteousness. We would do better to use the word sanctification to talk about the process of becoming more and more righteous. The shift to past tense in 5:1 suggests that we are moving on from the first question of covenant to the second question, “Having already been declared righteous, how do we live it out?”

(2) A second reason to recognize the move to a new section in chapter 5 is that the topic of God’s love is introduced here in 5:8. While chapters 1-4 treated with God’s wrath and our precarious position as breakers of the law. The reality of our justification moves us into a new kind of relationship with God. We are no longer in the courtroom. We are now in the household. We have been received into the family. We are sons and daughters. This new tone occurs especially at the beginning of chapter 5 and the end of chapter 8.

(3) Which brings me to the third reason for recognizing chapter 5 as the beginning of a new major section, namely, the structure. I believe Paul employed a chiasmic arrangement in the ordering of the material of these chapters. When we recognize this arrangement, we see better Paul's main themes of how grace empowers us to live for God. I will draw that out as we go. If you want to see a detailed chart of the chiasmic structure, go to observetheword.com and check out the chart on the resource page. I will give you the basic idea now. If you were to read the first half of chapter 5 up to verse 11 and then jump over to the second half of chapter 8, starting in verse 18, you would find that chapter 8 continues on the same themes you were reading in the first part of chapter 5. There are a set of words that are only used at the beginning of chapter 5 and end of chapter 8, but do not occur in the middle chapters and verses. The words are glory, tribulation, perseverance, save, love and justified, all of which belong to the theme of our assurance of relationship in Jesus Christ. We also see the trinitarian work of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in both of these sections. The next frame of the chiasm occurs in the second half of chapter 5 and the first half of chapter 8 where we get two contrasting pairs: Adam versus Jesus in chapter 5 and flesh versus Spirit in chapter 8. The inner frame consists of a double argument for the strength of grace in chapter 6 and a double argument for the weakness of law in chapter 7. Finally, the first 6 verses of chapter 7 provide a central point to the chiasm, emphasizing the new way of the Spirit over the old way of the written code.

This is what Paul is going to teach us. In Grace we have a power for righteous transformation that Law could never provide. He starts his argument here in chapter 5:1-11, teaching us about our new status in Jesus Christ. This is our text for this lesson. In the passage Paul uses a threefold repetition of the word exult, which may be translated in your Bible as exult or rejoice or boast. That word is going to give us our structure. The first use of exult is in verses 1-2, the second is in verses 3-10 and the third wraps us up in verse 11.

1-2 Exult in hope

Let's get started. We start in verses 1-2 with our first use of the word exult. So, let's read those two verses.

[Read Romans 5:1-2]

Our justification is past tense. We have been justified. "Therefore, having been justified, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Without being securely justified as a concluded reality, we cannot have peace with God. Our relationship remains tenuous at best. Having been justified as completed fact, we do have peace in our ongoing relationship with God.

I remember the first time I preached this passage. I originally came at the word "peace" thinking it describes our emotional state, something we feel, the opposite of anxious. Then I realized that is not what this is talking about. The peace here is a cessation of hostilities between two warring parties. Verse 10 is going to reference our former state, saying, "while we were enemies." That is the human condition. "I did it my way," means I did not do it God's way. My way is a state of rebellion. I can expect his wrath. But through Christ, God has achieved peace, putting us into a new state of relationship. We have switched sides.

Paul goes on to add, "we have peace with God, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand." This is our position with God. We stand in grace. We have been made acceptable to be in relationship with God. We do not stand by our own merit, which is unsure. We stand in his grace, which is sure.

And here is the result. "We exult in hope of the glory of God." Notice the three ideas here. We have exult. We have hope. And we have the glory of God. The glory of God includes the setting of all things right. We will see that developed in chapter 8. The brokenness of the world will be made new. We his children will be made new. Justice will reign. God's plans fulfilled. His wisdom vindicated. The glory of his character and plans and might and wisdom realized. We hope in that glory. All things made right. Heaven established on earth. God making his presence alive and real among men. We do not just

wish for it. We hope in it with a sense of conviction and assurance. This indeed will be. We believe in the truth that God's glory will be realized. We have seen the glory of the cross, and we believe in the future consummation of his kingdom. That is our hope. It is the hope we exult in.

I love this word exult. I think it captures together the sense expressed in the two other words English translators use for this Greek word. Some use rejoice, "We rejoice in this hope we have." Others use boast, "We boast in the hope." Exult brings both ideas together.

Croatia beat England today in the world cup semi-final game. Croatians are exulting. They are boasting in the team as though they were somehow a part of the victory. Not only do they boast in the victory, but the victory gives them great joy. Everybody is jumping up and down, and everybody is screaming, and everybody is throwing beer and water in the air and lighting off flares and going crazy. And everybody is wearing red and white checkered shirts and hats and scarves, displaying the glory of Croatia. I am in on it, and I am not even Croatian. My girls have shirts, my dad has a shirt, my brother has a shirt. We've got the Croatian flag up. We're putting photos of us cheering on Facebook. We are all exulting. We are boasting. We are rejoicing.

As believers we get to exult in something so much grander, eternal, of greater consequence. We exult in the Jesus Christ. He is our boast and he is our joy. We exult in what he did on the cross. In that victory he won over the legions of hell. We did not do. He did it. But we are on his side. And it is not really parallel to winning a sport championship. It is more parallel to D-Day. To the invasion of Nazi held Europe. Jesus has won the decisive victory all on his own. He is taking back ground. And we exult, we boast in his goodness and his power and his mercy and wisdom. We boast in the kingdom that is coming, that he has already won.

Another difference to the sporting analogy is that I have no idea if Croatia will beat France on Sunday to win the World Cup on Sunday. The end is unknown. I wish for them to win. But I do not have a sure hope. I don't know. After 90 minutes or maybe 120 minutes, the whole nation could be raised to the heights of exultation or crushed in the agony of defeat.

But with Christ, we know the end. When he won D-day on the cross, he won V-Day. Victory is sure. Our hope is not wishing. Our hope is believing in the power of God to complete what he has started. It is a sure hope and an everlasting exultation. Jesus has won. Jesus will win. We stand in Christ and "exult in the hope of the glory of God."

What about suffering? How does suffering fit in? We have won in Christ. And we look ahead to the full establishment of his kingdom. But what about now? What about the suffering we go through now? What does that do to our boast and our joy? Good question. Let's look at the next use of exult in verses 3-10. I am dividing this into two sub-sections, so let's just read 3-5 first and then we will get into 6-10. So, Romans 5:3-5.

3-10 Exult in tribulations

a. The subjective feeling of love

[Read Romans 5:3-5]

Here is our second use of the word exult, "we also exult in our tribulations..." We can make a helpful distinction between happiness and exultation. We ought to really. Our modern world is quite keen on promoting happiness and avoiding suffering. This is where some branches of Christianity go quite wrong. Suffering is a promise for the Christian. God left us in this world to identify with the world, just as Christ did. As he suffered, so too will we. There is a happiness that lives on the surface of our emotions, connected quite closely to our circumstances and the present moment. We cannot engage with our world and maintain this kind of surface level happiness. Engagement requires mourning with those who mourn.

Deeper in, there is a joy that comes from God. We take the suffering but look ahead to hope in what will come. As we look to God in faith through the suffering we are able to experience a satisfaction of

the soul that lies much deeper than our circumstances. It is not something we can create. It comes from fixing our eyes on Jesus and is produced by the Holy Spirit.

Habakkuk talked about this deeper experience in his prophecy, the one Paul connected us back to in his thesis in Romans 1:16-17. Remember that Habakkuk heard of God's plan of salvation and disliked it at. The plan meant suffering for Israel. Chapter 3 revealed a change in Habakkuk as he saw God's plan through the eyes of faith. Habakkuk could see the coming judgment on his beloved homeland. He describes it this way, "Though the fig tree should not blossom, and there be no fruit on the vines," and on he goes detailing the coming destruction. But he ended with these words of faith, "Yet, I will exult in the Lord, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength, and he has made my feet like hinds feet, and makes me walk on my high places." God had become Habakkuk's boast, joy, exultation. How much more for us is Jesus and the hope of his coming our boast, joy, and exultation even when our outward circumstances bring pain.

Paul sees faith working this way: we follow tribulations with the perseverance of faith and when we do so, we experience proven character, and the result is again hope. When we persevere in faith as Abraham did going up the mountain, once the trial is over, our character is proven, both in the sense of being revealed as true and in the sense of being strengthened.

Still, we have to be careful not to make this into a Christian formula - You know, we can exult and then we are going to have tribulations and so we are going to persevere, and then we are going to have proven character and then we are going to have hope. And this is the way it works if you are a real Christian. It is always going to work like this. And everything is going to be good. And you can be happy. – That is formulizing the faith. But suffering is a process that we sometimes pass through with faith and sometimes not. I remember one stressful day, where I consciously remembered this passage. I quoted Romans 5:3 to myself. The trial was burdensome. But I turned my eyes on Jesus and chose by faith to persevere. I held my anger in. I continued in faith. Then I spilled my coffee into my laptop. And I lost it. No faith. No perseverance. Just the wrath of the flesh. I just want to toss the laptop. I feel like it happens to me quite often. I lose it just at that moment right before the trial is over. If I had only held on another 10 minutes or another hour or another day. I persevere, persevere, persevere, and then I give up and then the trial ends. At least I am learning humility. Or I hope I am learning humility.

Suffering is a process that we need to learn to handle as Christians. Being unhappy is not the worst thing. Not even necessarily unspiritual. Sometimes we ought to be unhappy in the Spirit. We need to think about this more, and since I know we will do just that in chapter 8, I will move on for now.

The key idea here is that exultation is deeper than happiness and stronger than suffering. We exult because our suffering leads us back to our hope, "knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope," and as Paul says, "our hope does not disappoint us."

Though, I could imagine a hope that would disappoint. I have had before hopes that disappoint. If heaven means living with naked baby angels on clouds strumming harps, that hope would be disappointing. It is amazing how boring depictions of heaven can be. We fail to look forward to heaven when our imagination fails to consider the glory of the kingdom of God and the deep satisfaction and joy that come from bring truly and fully alive in him and with him.

A bland and boring hope could easily disappoint. But Paul declares, "hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us." Paul wrote in another place, "I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord (Philippians 3:8)." And the apostle John wrote, "This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." When we begin to experience, even just to taste, the fulfillment that comes from relationship with God, then we get a hint of how our deepest longings might be met in him and the idea of heaven begins to draw us onward and upward.

Notice here that Paul is speaking about a subjective experience. This is not something that you just imagine or think about. This is something you feel. It is also not something you can create for yourself. The love of God is, “poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit.” When we get to know Jesus, yield to him, and seek him, God does a spiritual work in our hearts to love him.

C. S. Lewis described this experience in his autobiography, “Surprised by Joy.” Seeking deeper satisfaction in the soul, Lewis found his happiness always fleeting and wanting. Being drawn closer and closer to God, Lewis famously described his conversion as a prodigal son brought in “kicking, struggling, resentful.” And yet, when he gave up his search for joy and yielded to Christ and looked to him, joy finally came. Then, when he took his eyes off Christ to hold on to the joy, the joy faded away. Again, turning to Christ, he found the joy return. Joy is the product of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Joy is not the goal. When our eyes are fixed on joy, we lose joy. When our eyes are fixed on Jesus, then the joy will come. Jesus is the goal. Joy is a product of relationship with him.

The love of God, however, is not grounded in subjective experience. It does not depend on our feelings. I might question whether I truly believe if I never experience the work of the Holy Spirit in my heart, if I am never tempted to exult, boast, rejoice in Jesus. Can I know Jesus, and yet, feel no love for him or no joy in him? That is a fair question. Yet, it is not the case that if I love Jesus I will always feel the joy of knowing him. Human emotion is too variable.

Joy follows true faith, but true faith is not equal to joy. Habakkuk made a choice to trust in God, even as his circumstances churned fear in his stomach. Before the declaration of faith that led to his exultation in God, he confessed, “My inward parts trembled, at the sound my lips quivered. Decay enters my bones, and in my place I tremble. Because I must wait quietly for the day of distress, for the people to arise who will invade us (Habakkuk 3:16).” This is not a description of joy. Sometimes we have to choose in faith to exult in God and allow God to bring the feelings later.

The prospect of suffering did not bring joy to Jesus. He agonized in the garden. He endured the cross for the joy set before him (Hebrews 12:2), a joy to come after.

We experience melancholy, apathy, depression, distraction, anger, sadness, bitterness. Our faith is not grounded in our ability to subjectively feel the love of God. I do not believe that God loves me because I feel that God loves me. I believe that God loves me because God in fact loves me regardless of my feelings on the matter.

b. The objective proof of love

Paul goes on to clarify the objective ground of God’s love in 6-10.

[Read Romans 5:6-10]

God chose to die for us while we were his enemies. We believe he loves us, because he has said, “I love you!” and backed his words up by taking our place on a cross!

I have been asked what distinction Paul is making between the righteous man and the good man in verse 7. I do not think there is any distinction. This is classic Hebrew parallelism. Paul’s restatement emphasizes the wonder of it all. “For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” “Amazing love! How can it be, that my king would die for me!” (Chris Tomlin *Amazing Love*, and before him Charles Wesley in *And Can It Be*.)

God’s love for you is objectively established by his death for you. That’s why he did it. Whether you believe it or not, God deeply, deeply, deeply loves you. So, believe it. Preach it to yourself. I feel so sad when I hear Whitney Houston’s song, “The Greatest Love of All.” For two reasons. First, she sings “Learning to love yourself is the greatest love of all.” No. It’s absolutely not. The greatest love of all is the love of God who died for you when you could care less. He loved you, and he loves you. And no love in heaven or on the earth or under the earth can ever come close to his love. That is the greatest love of all. The second part of that song that makes me sad is the claim that “The greatest love is easy to achieve.” That is absolutely not true. And the untruth of that played out in Whitney Houston’s life.

On the contrary, it is surprisingly difficult to love yourself with a true and gracious love. Love is not the same thing as self-absorption. But to truly see yourself and still love yourself. It can be quite tough. At least I would say that has been my experience. For me, loving myself starts with accepting the fact that God loves me. And accepting that fact regardless of my emotions to the contrary. Praise the Lord that the reality of his love does not depend on the reality of me feeling his love.

The objective fact of God's love is my assurance of future security with him. If God went through the cross for me even while I was a sinner, justifying me by giving his life, his blood in my place, then I know I will be saved from his wrath on the final day of judgment. If Jesus has already brought about reconciliation between me and God, if he has already established peace by removing the one barrier to God's love, my guilt, then having now been reconciled, do I not know that I will be saved by the life of Christ?

I know that he has put me in a safe place. I stand in grace. Which of my sins does the cross not cover? Which transgression did his blood not pay for? What future sin will I commit that stands outside the saving grace of atonement? I stand in grace. I know I am not going to face wrath. I am safe. I am secure. He loves me and has done the work necessary to bring me home. I know how the game is going to end. I know.

11 Exult in God

So, we exult, we exult, and Paul returns a third time to exult in verse 11.

[Read Romans 5:11]

This last verse is not a third example of exultation, but a summing up, a restatement of how Paul started. The work of Jesus has brought about a reconciliation between us, the prodigal sons and daughters, and God, our heavenly father. He paid the ultimate price. And his motive is love. God loves you. He wants you to be in his family. And he wants you to know that you are secure in your relationship with him. In Christ, you have assurance that on the day of judgment and wrath, you will be received as a beloved child.

And so, we exult. We boast in what he has done. How great is our God?! There is no God like our God. No savior like Jesus. Like a young soldier rejoices in his hero. Like a new bride exults in her groom. We exult. We rejoice in Christ Jesus.

Paul chose here at the beginning of chapters 5-8 to start his argument on the power of grace by emphasizing to us two things. We have a secure hope and we have the joy of his love. This is the same way that Paul is going to end chapter 8. This is where the new way of grace starts. This is the context, the environment of the new way. Before we dig in and begin the challenge of living out the Christ-like life, before we begin the struggle of doing, we need to know that we are secure.

I once heard of a kindergarten with a large grassy play area by the school. When the kids went out to play, they would always play in the field close to the building. They would never venture out to the edges of the play area. Then the school installed a fence around the playground. After that the kids played all over, near the school, by the fence, everywhere. The fence provided a sense of security that gave the kids confidence to play.

When you know you are secure in your relationship with God, you might abuse that security. But on the other hand, you might feel free to fail, free to try, free to fall down and get back up and try again. Free to take risk, free to take responsibility. That's the kind of children God wants to raise. The children of grace. That's the power of grace, the power of knowing you are loved and will not be cast out. It's the power of a secure hope.

That hope is further strengthened by a work of the Holy Spirit. As we pursue God in grace, he works in our heart to give us the joy of loving him. Have you heard the phrase, "the joy of the Lord is your strength?" If so, do you know where that comes from? It is in Nehemiah 8:10. Nehemiah and Ezra had just lead the people of Jerusalem in a spiritual revival. They were deeply convicted of sin. Which was good. But Ezra does not want them to dwell in their guilt. He tells them to go and rejoice. "This is

a day holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” This is also the power of grace. God has dealt with our guilt. When we recognize sin, it is right for us to feel sorrow and confess it. Then we thank Jesus for dying for us. And we move on. He does not want us to remain in the grief of our sin. He wants us to exult in the glory of Christ and the joy of our salvation. Grace allows us to do this. To acknowledge our sin and move on. Which is critical in the struggle against sin. We cannot defeat sin by constant resistance of unholy desire. We need a new desire. To resist sin, we need to be able to turn from the unholy desire to a new and pure desire. When we experience the true joy of the Spirit, we are not even thinking about the desires of sin. A new desire has replaced the old. The joy of the Lord is our strength. Grace does not condemn us for not yet fully experiencing this joy. Grace gives us space to pursue Christ and to grow in our joy of knowing him.

This is the new way of grace. The gospel way. The law motivates by fear and insecurity. Grace motivates by joy and assurance.

“Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in the hope of the glory of God!”

Reflection Questions

1. What are two or three things that stand out to you as important or interesting or curious or confusing when you observe Paul’s words in Romans 5:1-11?
2. What do you boast about and rejoice in when you think of Jesus Christ? Write out a few things.
3. How have you experienced the process of suffering described in 5:3? Can you think of an instance you have gone from tribulation to perseverance to proven character?
4. What do you think it looks like to “exult in tribulations?”
5. Why does your hope not disappoint you? How do you imagine heaven? What attracts you?
6. In his writings, Paul uses the verb “to save” for Christians in the past tense, present tense and future tense. The context decides the meaning. What verbs are past tense in 5:10-11 and what is future tense?
7. What happened to decide that which is past tense? What is the future tense looking forward to? (When considering the use of wrath, think back to the uses of that word in 1:18 and 2:5.)
8. How secure do you feel in your relationship with God through Jesus Christ? Are you sure that you will be invited in when you stand before God? Why do you think you feel this way? What is the basis for your assurance or lack of assurance?

“If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world.”

C. S. Lewis, [*Mere Christianity*](#)

“It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*

“And yet all loneliness, angers, hatreds, envies, and itchings that (Hell) contains, if rolled into one single experience and put into the scale against the least moment of the joy that is felt by the least in Heaven, would have no weight that could be registered at all. Bad cannot succeed even in being bad as truly as good is good.”

C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*

“We know nothing of religion here: we only think of Christ.” (A person explaining heaven.)

C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*

Lesson 13: Kingdom Transfer from Adam to Jesus

Romans 5:12-21

Paul prepares to make a comparison of Adam to Jesus

¹² Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned—

Clarification #1 in the comparison – Death reigned from Adam, not from Moses (extent of sin)

¹³ for until the Law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law.

¹⁴ Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come.

Clarification #2 in the comparison – Jesus' grace is greater than Adam's sin (extent of grace)

¹⁵ But the free gift is **not like** the transgression.

For if by the transgression of the one the many died, **much more** did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many.

¹⁶ The gift is **not like** that which came through the one who sinned;

for on the one hand the judgment *arose* from one *transgression* resulting in condemnation, **but** on the other hand the free gift *arose* from many transgressions resulting in justification.

¹⁷ **For** if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, **much more** those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.

Paul makes the comparison between Adam and Jesus

(1) ¹⁸ So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men,

even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men.

(2) ¹⁹ For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners,

even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous.

(3) ²⁰ The Law came in so that the transgression would increase; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more,²¹ so that, as sin reigned in death,

even so grace would reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

NASB

Does Grace Produce life?

Why do I do good things? I know there is an impulse in me to do good things? But why do I do good things? Especially if I believe what Paul is teaching me at the beginning of Romans 5 that I am secure in my relationship with God because of grace, even if I sin. What motivates me to actually, practically ignore what I want to be doing and instead to do things that prove loving to my neighbor? What's the motive?

In Romans 5:1-2 Paul described the completed reality of our justification as putting us into a position of grace in our relationship with God. "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we now stand." This new position we have of "standing in grace" brings along with it a new assurance of life and blessing in our relationship with God. Paul concluded in Romans 5:10, "For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life." Our salvation is assured. We are secure in grace.

One of the great questions for Paul is whether this position of grace is more than simply a legal declaration of righteousness. Does grace produce a change in the one who believes? Does grace bring about goodness, righteousness, life? Is grace merely a theological solution for sin or does grace actually move us to live in a new way? Can grace do that? Or now that we are saved, do we really need to go back to Law in order to live? Do we need law to curb human sin and get Christians doing what they ought to be doing? Do salt and light only truly come about through the pressure of Law?

In our passage for this lesson, Romans 5:12-21, Paul describes our movement from judgement to grace as a kingdom or realm transfer. And he does it using the broadest possible terms for humankind. Placing our faith in Christ brings about a transfer from the realm of Adam to the realm of Jesus. We especially pick up the idea of a realm transfer by Paul's employment of the word "reign" through the passage. In verse 14, "death reigned from the time of Adam to Moses." In verse 17, though "death reigned through [Adam]...the gift of righteousness will reign in life through...Jesus Christ." And then one more time in verse 21, "as sin reigned in death...grace would reign through righteousness to eternal life." There are two reigns; two kingdoms; two powers.

The kingdom of the first Adam is marked by sin, disobedience, death. The kingdom of the second Adam is marked by grace, righteousness, life. Paul is saying that placing our faith in Jesus Christ to receive his gift of grace is not merely an intellectual exercise. It is an action of the will that brings about a realm transfer. It is like the proverbial choice between the red and blue pill. Take the blue pill, and you can remain self-deluded in the kingdom of Adam living a life that is really death. It is a kingdom of zombies. It's the living dead. Or, take the red pill and there is no turning back. You have transferred to the kingdom of the second Adam, which is not a kingdom free of suffering, not yet, but it is the place where you truly become alive.

Our whole text is a comparison between the action and subsequent consequences of the first Adam and the action and subsequent consequences of the second Adam. Let's read the whole text and then we will walk back through it again section by section.

[Read Romans 5:12-21]

The structure of the text breaks out into four sections. We have the introduction in verse 12. This verse is a little odd because it is an incomplete sentence. It is a contrast that begins "just as through one man...", but the thought breaks off before Paul tells us about the second man. The comparison is incomplete and left hanging. My Bible version helps me see this by putting a hyphen at the end of verse 12. I don't know if yours does that. It does not help me see where Paul picks back up on the comparison. It's going to be down in verse 18-21 where we get three parallel statements of contrast between Adam and Jesus. In between the introductory statement and the comparison in 18-21, we get two clarifications; one about the extent of sin in 13-14 and another about the extent of grace in 15-17.

That structure of the text sets up the structure for this lesson. We will start with the introductory statement, then address the clarification about sin, then the clarification about grace and end with the comparison between Adam and Jesus.

We start with the incomplete introductory sentence in verse 12.

1. Introduction to the Comparison (5:12)

[Read Romans 5:12]

Paul lets us know in verse 14 that the one man he is speaking about here is Adam. And through that one man, sin and death enter the world. I want to focus on three observations here.

(1) First, the historicity of Adam and his sin is Paul's explanation for the reality of human death. Adam is no myth. Christians have a robust worldview able to explain how evil can exist in a world created good by a holy and good God. Our answer is that God created beings with freedom of choice who had the potential to rebel against his goodness. The rebellion began with the angels, thus we have Satan as the tempter in the garden, and the rebellion continued with Adam and his fateful choice.

If we reject the historical fact of Adam's creation and later sin, then we reject the biblical account of how evil, suffering and death entered the world. Belief in human evolution is a rejection, not only of the clear reading of Genesis 1 and 2, but also a rejection of one of the pillars of the Christian worldview. Adam and Eve were created good, without sin. Adam and Eve chose to sin. The presence of death and much suffering in the world is a result of their abuse of the freedom granted by God at the creation.

Furthermore, the rejection of the first Adam really brings into question our belief in the second Adam. If we cannot believe that God created Adam and Eve, why do we find it believable that God became man, died on a cross, and was raised again to life. If science creates a problem for one, it certainly creates a problem for the other. If we believe that Adam is a myth, what is our rational justification for not believing that Jesus is a myth. If we reject Adam, not only do we lose our explanation of death and evil, we bring into question our explanation of redemption and life. If Christ did not die and raise again, our faith is a subjective story created in the minds of people to make them feel better about themselves, but with no connection to reality outside of wishful thinking. If Jesus is a myth our faith is in vain. If Adam is a myth the cross comes into question.

Finding it easy to believe in the resurrection and hard to believe in human creation is not very scientific; it is not intellectually consistent. Either God exists with all power and all wisdom, in which case he can raise the dead, and he can create Adam and Eve. Or God is fictional or limited and cannot act miraculously in the world, either to create or to resurrect.

But we do believe that God does act in this world. And that God has revealed to us a coherent world view. God created Adam good and free. Adam sinned. The consequence of sin is physical and spiritual death for human beings.

(2) A second observation I would make here is, "What about Eve?" Didn't Eve sin first and then encourage Adam? Why does Adam stand alone here? Well, it is not clear that Eve sinned first. Apparently, Adam was present during the temptation or during the eating of the apple. At least that is how I read Genesis. Adam was present, but passive, sinning by his silence, sinning with Eve. God had directly given him the commandment to not eat of the tree or he would die, yet Adam says nothing to Eve as she eats.

But the key to interpretation here is not dependent on whether Adam was present or not; on how we interpret Genesis on that point. Paul consistently presents Adam as the head in his relationship with Eve. And that is the key. Genesis 1 clearly depicts Adam and Eve as equally created in the image of God and equally given the commission to reign over the earth. Then in Genesis 2 we see Adam as first-born. He has a special role as leader in his relationship with Eve. Paul recognizes Adam's accountability as a leader. Eve is not held accountable for the sin that brings death into the world. Adam is.

Paul is not letting Eve off the hook here. He is making a specific point. In 1 Timothy 2:14 he is hard on Eve for being deceived. And in that Paul departed from prejudicial first century thought. Like Jesus in his relationship with Martha and Mary, Paul assumed that women could understand spiritual truth, could be expected to take intellectual and spiritual responsibility, and could be rebuked for failure. I think 1 Timothy 2:14 indicates respect for Eve by pointing out her accountability. Just as it would be wrong to read 1 Timothy in a way that puts most of the blame on Eve, it would be wrong to read Romans 5:12 as placing all the blame on Adam. Each passage should be read in context, according to point being made with an awareness of the other passage. Eve is accountable for her part. Nevertheless, it is Adam, as the representative head of all humankind, who is particularly accountable for sin and death entering the world.

(3) A third observation. The most discussed piece in verse 12 is the concluding phrase, "because all sinned." To simplify the theological discussion, it is a debate between whether all humankind is seen as having sinned in the sin of Adam or whether the consequence of Adam's sin is that all human beings become creatures who themselves inevitably sin. The first option sees Adam in the role of a federal head. He represents all of humanity, so we are all seen as having sinned with him or in him when he made that first sin. For this reason, death comes to each one of us. We sinned in Adam. This option fits well the language of the passage. And it fits the contrast with Jesus well in whom all believers are said to participate in his death with him. Just as we are included into the action of Christ, who is our federal head, we are also included in the action of the first Adam.

Though the language can be understood this way, I feel like there is too little here to develop a firm theology of federal headship just from Romans 5. At most we could say this text is suggestive or the text could agree with it. But it is a bigger theological debate, and Paul is not addressing it so much here, I do not think. Looking outside the context here into chapter 2 and chapter 6, what we do see from Paul is his emphasis that condemnation and death follow the actual sins of individual human beings. This is the clearer interpretation to me. It does not deny the federal headship of Adam but puts more emphasis on what seems to be clear in the argument in Romans.

The result of Adam's sin is that we are all born with a sinful nature. We are born spiritually separated from God. We sin. And though Adam's sin has had the special, tragic effect on all of his seed that they would be born with God's image but polluted, twisted, marred, still, we each individually affirm the sentence of death by willfully choosing to sin ourselves. I think that is the key point. Death entered the world through the sin of one man and has "spread to all men, because all sin."

Paul breaks off his comparison between Adam and Jesus before he even gets to Jesus. He does this to make two clarifications. The first comes in verses 13-14 and has to do with the extent of Adam's sin. Let's read those two verses.

2. Clarification #1: The Extent of Sin - Death Reigns from Adam (5:13-14)

[Read Romans 5:13-14]

The phrase, "sin is not imputed when there is no law" is similar to the phrase in chapter 4:15, "where there is no law, neither is their violation." For there to be a violation, there needs to be a law to violate. To impute is to charge to someone's account. For sin to be charged, there must be a law to sin against. The difference between the context of 4:15 and 5:13 is that the absence of law in 4:15 comes when a believer is evaluated by grace. Under grace, law is not taken into account. In 5:13 the absence of law happens because the law of Moses has not yet been given and so, cannot yet be violated. The problem Paul is addressing here is how the sin of law breaking can be imputed or charged against someone before the giving of the Law of Moses. Paul does not really answer that question. Instead, he points out the obvious point that sin must have been taken into account because from the time of Adam to the time of Moses all men died. The consequence of sin is in effect.

We could make an argument from chapter 2 and the idea of natural law. Paul argued there that those who sin apart from the law are still held accountable because human beings have a sense of natural moral law hard-wired into their conscience. It is enough to break that law, even without begin aware of Mosaic Law. This would agree with the point Paul is going to make down in verse 20 that "the Law came in that the transgression might increase." The Law did not introduce sin into the human race but had the effect of increasing sin. That means that sin was already going on, but the introduction of the law increased transgression. Sin is a human constant. All you need are parents, and you will be introduced to lawgivers against whom you will break their law. The Mosaic Law increased the obligation of the Jews, and so, increased their disobedience to those obligations. More Law does not produce more righteous behavior. More Law increases transgression of Law.

"The likeness of the offense of Adam," is the transgression of special revelation. God had specifically said, "Do not eat of the fruit from that tree." God made a specific prohibition. The Law of Moses introduced much, much special revelation to Israel, providing many opportunities to sin against a clear command as did Adam. Prior to the Law there was less opportunity to sin in that way. Still, people sinned against the natural revelation of morality they knew to be true in their own nature, even if they did not transgress a specially revealed command.

At the end of verse 14, Paul indicates the comparison that he is setting up. Adam is "a type of him who was to come." We can develop the comparison on our own by thinking about the story of Adam and the story of Christ. Adam was the first head of humankind, the first king, who was given the commission to rule over the domain God gave to him. God set up a tree of judgment in the garden. Satan came in the form of a serpent as a representative of the created order over which Adam was

supposed to rule. For whatever reason, Satan's desire was to destroy the kingdom of God, the one he had set Adam over, by luring its king and queen into rebellion. It worked. At the tree of judgment, Adam failed to decree the just condemnation of Satan. Adam failed to do the job of a king. He failed to rule. Even worse, he added to his failure his own rebellion against God, taking all human kind with him.

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus turned to the word of God when Satan tried to pull the same ploy on him. Unlike Adam, however, Jesus stood strong and put Satan in his place. At the end of his earthly ministry we find the second Adam in a garden. At a certain level, he does not desire the cross. He desires that the cup would pass. He asks this of God but concludes with his deeper desire, "not as I will, but as you will. Your will be done (Matthew 26:39, 42)." These were the words expected of the first Adam when faced with the fruit of tree. But because he failed to reign as God's chosen human king, the second Adam came to fulfill what was lacking. And so, he went to the tree of judgment, both as the king who judged all humanity on that tree, and also, as the savior who died for all humanity on that tree. In this way the first Adam was a type of the second Adam who was to come.

Paul has clarified here that the extent of Adam's sin is universal, covering all people for all time, including the period from Adam to Moses and certainly beyond the period of Moses. The evidence for this is the universal reality of human death.

We have just considered the first clarification Paul wanted to make, the extent of sin. The second clarification considers the extent of grace by contrasting the action of Jesus and the action of Adam.

3. Clarification #2: The Extent of Grace – Grace Overcomes Sin (5:15-17)

The action of Jesus is described as the free gift; the action of Adam as the transgression. Twice we are told that the free gift is not like the action of Adam. Three times a contrast is made, once in each verse. Listen for the contrasts as we read 15-17.

[Read Romans 5:15-17]

Paul's key point here is that though the extent of sin is universal and severe, the extent of grace abundantly overcomes the effects of sin. I have heard it said that any jackass can kick down a barn, but it takes a carpenter to build one. Destruction is easier than creation. Rebellion is easier than obedience. The fall is easier than restoration. The work of sin came much easier than the work of grace. And even though the one sin led to billions becoming sinners, the one act of grace covers them all. And not only are we covered. The work of grace that comes through Jesus Christ enables human beings to reign in life; something that did not happen with Adam and Eve. Somehow the work of Jesus leads to a secure and eternal state of life, from which God's children will not fall again. The work of grace overcomes the work of sin and enables the kingdom of heaven to be populated with people who will always choose life and never choose death. In this, the kingdom of the second Adam far exceeds the original kingdom of the first Adam.

Grace outdoes sin. That's the clarification here. Having made two clarifications regarding the universal extent of sin and the overwhelming abundance of grace, Paul is now ready to complete the thought he began in verse 12.

4. The Contrast Between Adam and Jesus (5:18-21)

Verses 18-21 contrast Adam and Jesus. Again, we have three contrasts. Here we need to listen for the "even so" language; "So then...even so..." and "for as...even so..." and "so that...even so..." So, listen for those contrasts as we read verses 18-21.

[Read Romans 5:18-21]

The first set of contrasts in verse 18 is paralleled by a restatement of that contrast in verse 19. "One transgression" in verse 18 is restated as "the one man's disobedience" in verse 19, while "one act of righteousness" in verse 18 is restated as "the obedience of the One" in verse 19.

The restatement in verse 19 that parallels verse 18 is similar to the kind of parallel restatement Paul would have been so familiar with in the Hebrew poetry of the Psalms and prophets. As in Hebrew

poetry, restatement tends to add something that you would not get from merely repeating the same words over again. We get something additional in the restatement of verse 19 that was not said in verse 18. Let's consider the first statement in verse 18 and then we will look at what is added in the restatement in verse 19.

In verse 18 we get the end result of the transgression, which is universal condemnation and we get the end result of the one act of righteousness which is universal justification. Just to make a note here. Paul is using Hebrew parallelism when he employs the phrase "justification of life to all men" which parallels "condemnation to all men." This phrase can sound like universal justification applies to all men, but we have to read it as potential universal justification to keep with the thought of Paul through Romans. Paul is very, very, very clear that those who stand on their own moral works will still be condemned and that the justification that comes from the grace of Jesus only applies to those who receive it by faith. The parallel structure used here should not be taken to undo the clear argument Paul is making. It should be understood as parallelism and then interpreted as a justification that has been accomplished for all people but applied only to those who receive the gift by faith.

In verse 18 we see the results of the work of the two Adams as "condemnation to all men" and as "justification of life to all men." The restatement shows more of the effect of those results on us. In the case of the first Adam, "through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners." We were not made sinners simply through Adam's representative action. We were actually made sinners. The effect of Adam's sin was a disconnection from God that applies to all future human beings. It is the point of the whole genealogy in Genesis chapter 5. Though Adam was made in the image of God, Genesis 5:3 tells us, "When Adam had lived one hundred and thirty years, he became the father of a son in his own likeness, according to his image, and named him Seth." Seth was not said to be born in God's image, but in Adam's image, meaning that Seth shared Adam's fallen nature. The consequence is that Seth was made a sinner, being born as the kind of creature who would inevitable choose to sin.

Then we look at the effect of "the obedience of the one" as described in verse 19. The text says, "the many will be made righteous." Justification is a declaration of righteousness made on behalf of the one who has received the gift. But here Paul seems to be saying that the effect of justification is that those under the reign of Christ will actually be made righteous. The gospel intends not only to declare us righteous, but to make us righteous.

Our last contrast in verse 21 declares that "sin reigned in death." But now, through the work of Jesus, grace leads to a new reign. We are no longer resigned to the reign of sin and the result of death. Now grace reigns. That reign is "through righteousness to eternal life." Based on chapters 1-4 we might argue that Paul only has the righteousness of Christ in mind or the declared righteousness that applies to human beings. It is his righteousness that reigns to eternal life. That is true, but there is more. We are going to see in the following chapters that from here on out, Paul connects our declared righteousness together with our practical righteousness. He had to be so clear about disconnecting practical righteousness from declared righteousness when dealing with the first question of covenant, such that we might be tempted to hold on to that disconnection. We should not. Now that we are secure in our position with God and have turned to the second question of, "how ought we live?", Paul connects our state of declared righteousness together with our practical lived out righteousness.

A New Vision for Life

Paul sees lived-out righteousness as essentially connected to the concept of life, eternal life. Grace reigns through righteousness to eternal life. The gospel vision is a vision of what true life really is.

During my early elementary years, I grew up in Winston-Salem on Brightwood Ct. Our house sat at the end of a cul-de-sac with several other homes around the circle and more homes lining neighborhood streets all around. As a kid one of the absolute best days of the year was Halloween.

Because, as a kid, life was candy. Candy, candy, candy, give me candy. To learn that one day of the year was dedicated to getting free candy just by knocking on a neighbor's door was mind blowing. That was awesome. We did not take baskets for our candy. We took pillow cases, sturdy and large pillowcases for our candy. Because the adults were going to give us candy!

Now that I am an adult, though I still really like candy, I am wanting even more out of life. What words comes to your mind when you think of life? More than candy. What is life giving to you? What is fulfilling to you? What does the word abundance mean to you? What do you want an abundance of?

You can think of your own words. There are words we can use to describe what it means to feel alive? Refreshing. Exhilarating. Creative. Freeing. Meaningful. Purposeful. Soul-stirring. Breath-taking. Awe-inspiring.

I think that one of the last words that would come to mind to define life would be righteousness. It is such a religious sounding word; a fun-dampening word; a restrictive, choking word.

We need a new vision for the word righteousness. Paul wants us to catch that in his gospel, because in his gospel, grace leads to righteousness and righteousness to eternal life – not eternal existence; eternal life. The doing of righteousness is living. It is life-giving.

The commands of God are restrictive in the sense of restricting sin. Positively understood, the commands of God free us for life; to direct us in how to truly experience and how to live out the life we were created for; the abundant life Jesus promises.

In our passage here, Paul says that the Law came in with the purpose of increasing transgression. This does not mean that Moses was unaware of the life-giving purpose of the commands. Referring to the commands of Law in Deuteronomy 30:19-20, Moses gives this final exhortation, "Choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the Lord your God, by obeying his voice, and by holding fast to him." Moses, however, is not sanguine about their ability to do so. He knows they will choose death.

The way the ten commandments are expressed suggest that, even though the principle of life is present in the commands, the need for Israel was a law that would make transgression clear, restrict harmful behavior in society, and be enforceable as civil law. As a result, the ten commandments are expressed in the extreme negative form. "Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal." But is do not commit murder really a command designed to bring out life-giving righteousness in people who want to be faithful to God? Is God happy with me if I am just successful at not committing murder? Am I experiencing all that life has to offer if I just get by not killing anyone? Is that as high as the bar goes? Or how about adultery? Is that all my wife wants from me? "Hi honey. I did not commit adultery today. Aren't you pleased with me?" Is that the abundant life of relationships? We know there is more.

The New Covenant of grace assumes that we want more than an enforceable legal code. We want to pursue a kind of righteousness that gives life. Jesus exemplifies this shift in his teaching on the Ten Commandments in Matthew chapter 5. He is drawing out the principle of life that is present in the teaching of Old Covenant Law, but not attainable. Jesus indicates that the Ten Commandments should be understood as communicating a continuum. Teaching about murder, Jesus says that if you hate someone in your heart or call someone a fool, then you have broken the command, "Do not murder." There is a continuum that starts with our thoughts, moves to words, then actions, to the most severe of actions. To murder is to disdain another person's life so much that you are willing to remove it for your own gain or convenience. All thoughts, words, and actions that disdain life break the command do not murder.

The teaching of Jesus, however, did not focus only on the negative side of the commandment. He taught us to turn our backs on sin and face forwards towards him, towards life. Life-giving righteousness is not merely avoiding the negative side of the continuum, but more importantly, engaging the positive, life-giving side. So then, we need to ask, what is the positive opposite of, "Do

not murder”? What lies on the other side of the continuum? The typical answer I get when I ask this question is, “Love. Love is the opposite of murder.” To which I say, “Let’s be more specific.” Murder is disdaining life so much that you are willing to remove it. I think Jesus gives us the opposite in John 15:13, “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.” To esteem someone’s life so much that you would give up your own to preserve theirs, is the opposite of murder. And it lies on a continuum that includes thoughts, words, and actions. When we think, speak, and do things that give life to other people, then we are living out the kind of righteousness that gives life, and not only to those we are blessing but also to our own souls.

We will get to think more about how this works practically in Romans 13. I brought up the Ten Commandments here to illustrate a righteousness that leads to life. If we focus on righteousness merely as the curbing of sin, then that kind of righteousness will not lead us to life. The righteousness of grace occurs when we turn our backs on sin and turn our face towards Jesus, and we pursue him, trying to live life as he lives it. Not to attain some religious prize, but because we are beginning to have a new vision for life. To pursue the righteousness way of Jesus is the road to becoming who God created us to be. It is the road to abundance and purpose. It is the road to real life. That is a new vision.

This is Paul’s claim. In the gospel, we experience a realm change. We are moved from Adam – sin — death to Jesus – grace — life; life that is true and abundant. That’s a claim Paul is going to have to prove. He knows that. He has set us up now to face the critical objection of grace. Paul says that grace leads to righteousness and life, but his opponents are skeptical. They still question, “If you give them grace, won’t they just sin?” We have all heard that. “You give them grace, and they will sin.”

Does grace really do more than declare us righteous? Does grace make us righteous? Does grace bring about a life-giving, exhilarating, soul-satisfying, salt, and light practical righteousness in the lives of we who try to follow Jesus? Or does grace just provide license to sin?

That’s the question we pick up next time in the first verse of chapter 6.

Reflection Questions

1. Why do you do what is good to do, especially the things that take a bit of sacrifice on your part? The truth is that you are motivated to good for a variety of reasons. What are some of your motivations? Try to list at least a couple of good motivations and a couple of not so good motivations for doing good.
2. What stands out to you as interesting or important or strange or confusing in Romans 5:12-21? What are some questions that the text raises for you?
3. Do you agree or disagree with Michael that it is critical to the Christian worldview that we reject an evolutionary explanation for the origins of human beings and accept Adam and Eve as the first created human beings? Why or why not?
4. For many people Christian religion is a repression of life. Adam chose freedom. What are some of the attractions of the “kingdom of Adam?” Why does sinful behavior feel like life?
5. Paul declares the kingdom of Jesus to be a kingdom that reigns through righteousness to bring life? How have you personally experienced righteous living as bringing about a deeper, more satisfying experience of life? How has life without Christ been different for you than life with Christ? Come up with two or three specific, practical examples.

Lesson 14: The Strength of Grace I

Romans 6:1-14

Invitation and Objection

¹ What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase?

Short answer

² May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?

Long answer (We die in order to live.)

³ Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His **death**?

⁴ Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into **death**, so that as Christ was raised from the **dead** through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of **life**.

(1) *We died with Christ...*

⁵ For if we have become united with *Him* in the likeness of His **death**, certainly we shall also be *in the likeness* of His resurrection, ⁶ knowing this, that our old self was crucified with *Him*, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; ⁷ for he who has **died** is freed from sin.

(2) *...in order to live with Christ.*

⁸ Now if we have **died** with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, ⁹ knowing that Christ, having been raised from the **dead**, is never to **die** again; **death** no longer is master over Him. ¹⁰ For the **death** that He **died**, He **died** to sin once for all; but the **life** that He lives, He **lives** to God.

The Logical Application (Consider and Present)

(1a) ¹¹ Even so consider yourselves to be **dead** to sin,

(1b) but **alive** to God in Christ Jesus.

(2a) ¹² Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, ¹³ and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness;

(2b) but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.

¹⁴ For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace.

NASB

Introduction

1. Paul raises a classic objection to grace.

There is a classic objection to the good news of grace. When you share the gospel with someone, it goes something like this, "God loves you. But you are sinful and separated from God. Jesus died to pay for your sins. All you have to do is receive his forgiveness by faith. There is nothing you can do to gain his forgiveness. It is by grace; a free gift. You just have to trust him." What is one of the classic responses to that message of grace?

"So, you are telling me that if I believe in Jesus and receive his forgiveness today, then I could go out and kill someone tomorrow, and I would still go to heaven?"

And you really want to say, "No." But you know that the gospel answer is, "Yes."

I feel like the dog of a friend of mine. Whenever he would say to the dog, "You want to go for a walk? Are you ready to go outside? You want to go?" His dog would go get his leash and stand by the door. The key was not in the words. It was in the tone of voice. If my friend said, "Let's stay right here. Let's not go anywhere. Let's just keep on sitting. Ok?" The dog would still go get his leash and stand by the door. Sitting there with my friend and not moving, the dog's head would begin to tilt and he looked at us quizzically. You knew what he was thinking. "Why are you sitting? You just said we are going outside. Why aren't you getting up and going out? This makes no sense."

That's what I feel like when I explain grace and the person responds, "So you are telling me that I can trust in Jesus and then go and live in sin?" I hear what they are saying, but my head begins to tilt, and I stare at them quizzically, because something does not make sense with the words they are using. "Trust in Jesus means I can live in sin, right?" Something is wrong with that question. Wrong with that perspective.

It is the question Paul is addressing in Romans 6. He phrases it this way in 6:1, "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase?" Paul has just finished contrasting the kingdom of Adam, fallen man, with the kingdom of Jesus. In that contrast he describes the universal effects of sin being overcome by the even more abundant power of grace. The objection in 6:1 presents the classical objection to grace in the terms Paul has just used. "You just said that grace abundantly overcomes sin. So, the more we sin, the more opportunity for the abundance of grace. Where in this Paul is the motivation for righteousness? If we follow your logic, why not continue in sin so that grace may increase?"

This is where our heads begin to tilt, and we start to look confused. "Logically that sounds right Paul, but I know it is not right. So, how do you answer?" Lucky for us, Paul answers.

One of the things that strikes me about Paul's answer is what he does not say. There are two simple answers to the question; two quick responses that would put the objector in his place. (1) First, Paul could have said, "Oh, you misunderstood me. It's not just by grace. It's grace plus doing good things. You have to do good to stay in." Paul is not going to say that here. (2) Second, Paul also does not say, "Be careful. It is by grace, but there is a limit. If you sin too much or you commit a sin that is too wicked, you lose your salvation." Paul also does not say that here.

The simple answers are answers of law. Paul is committed to giving an answer of grace even if grace is harder for people to get. If someone objects to your presentation of the gospel by telling you that your explanation of grace will lead people to believe they are free to go out and sin, do not think that there is something wrong with your gospel message. Something is wrong with your gospel message if no one ever objects to grace. If you try to protect grace by emphasizing works or questioning our security in our relationship with God, then through protecting grace, you are likely to lose grace. If no one ever says, "You are just letting people get away with sin," then you have not emphasized grace enough. You are not preaching the same gospel that Paul preached.

A right presentation of the gospel of grace will lead to this misconception. It means that you are presenting the gospel like Paul presented the gospel. And that is a good thing. Grace is dangerous. Grace opens up the possibility of abuse. It's like handing your teenage son the keys to the family car. What guarantee do you have that he will not wreck the car? Or that he will not make a bad decision? Risk is inherent in grace. Grace communicates trust in believers to live out of a new heart. Grace presumes that we have a new desire to live as children of the king and calls us to live according to that desire, knowing full well that we also continue to desire what is sinful and that we lack wisdom and experience. Still, grace does not bind us with the law or threaten us with rejection from the family. Paul does not go there in his defense of grace. Where does Paul go in his defense of grace? Before we look at the text itself, it will be helpful to recognize the pattern of the text.

2. Paul uses a consistent rhetorical pattern.

Paul repeats a rhetorical pattern through Romans 6 and 7. It is similar to the pattern Paul used in Romans 3:1-8 and which he will use again in Romans 9-11. Paul's ongoing use of the pattern in Romans makes it worth paying attention to.

The pattern is made up of several rhetorical questions.

We start with an invitation, "What shall we say then?" Then we get the objection, also in the form of a question, "Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase?"

Then we get the two parts of Paul's short answer. The first part is Paul's standard, emphatic rejection of the objection. "May it never be!" The emphatic rejection may be followed by another rhetorical question, "How shall we who died to sin still live in it?"

Finally, we get to a question which introduces a longer answer. This question starts with the phrase "Do you not know" and introduces some example or illustration that reinforces Paul's point. In this passage the reinforcing example is baptism. The introductory long answer question for this passage is, "Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?"

We see this pattern four or four and a half times in Romans 6 and 7. The pattern introducing our text for this lesson is in 6:1-3. Here it is once again.

Invitation: "What shall we say then?"

Objection: "Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase?"

Short answer: "May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?"

Long answer introduction: "Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?" Following this introduction question, we have the more developed long answer. And in this passage Paul follows the long answer with application. Let's address the long answer first in Romans 6:3-10 and then we will consider Paul's exhortation to application in 6:11-14.

Let's read the long answer in Romans 6:3-10.

Paul's answer to the objection: We die in order to live. (6:3-10)

[Read Romans 6:3-10]

1. Our baptism symbolizes a union of death and life.

In response to the objection concerning grace, Paul develops his answer around the reality of baptism. Paul's language through the passage indicates that something more than the legal declaration of righteousness happens to the person who places faith in Jesus Christ. Justification as a gift of grace does not require a spiritual change in the one declared just. It is simply a legal declaration. A statement that God has proclaimed over the one who believes.

Paul points to something more here. God's gift of grace includes the legal justification but goes on even further. There is a spiritual effect, described here as union with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection. I disagree with the interpretation that baptism is merely symbolic, though I need to make a distinction. I do believe that the ritual of baptism is symbolic. Baptism is an identification with the one in whose name you are baptized. Begin baptized in the name of Jesus Christ is to be identified with Jesus. I believe that baptism is the sign of the covenant of grace, just as circumcision was the sign of the covenant of Law. There are two sides to both circumcision and baptism. Circumcision symbolized both the cutting off of the sinful, fleshly heart and the work of a new righteous, spiritual heart. Baptism symbolizes unity with Jesus both in his death, going under the water, and in his life, coming up out of the water. The believer dies to sin and is raised to new life.

I believe that the ritual of baptism symbolizes a real, spiritual baptism that happens when the believer truly trusts in Jesus. We are spiritually united with Jesus in his death and life. I see this as more than symbol because Paul is going to argue that unity with Jesus gives us access to spiritual life and power that we did not have prior to belief in Jesus. There is a real, spiritual effect in our union with Christ. We participate with him in his life.

In fact, Paul says in verse 4 that life is the point of grace, "We were buried with him through baptism into death...so that we too might walk in newness of life."

This is Paul's answer. We die to live. The reason that the non-Christian response to grace sounds so strange is that saving faith is a new perspective. We do not simply choose to have faith. Faith is more

than a choice. Faith is spiritual sight; spiritual understanding. We move from the kingdom of Adam to the kingdom of Jesus when we see our sin as wrong, destructive, deathly, and we see Jesus as righteous, holy and life-giving. We might not understand the theology so clearly. But we see somehow that our sin is wrong and distasteful, and we see that Jesus is good and desirable. That is saving faith. It is a new perspective; a new way of seeing, that moves us to accept the gift of grace being offered.

This is why the question about grace sounds so strange. “If you receive grace today and kill someone tomorrow would you still be saved?” “Yes, you would, but why would you want to?” The question is being asked as though sin is desirable for life. **The non-believer sees grace as freedom to sin. The believer sees grace as freedom from sin.**

We still have desire for sin as believers. But we have begun to realize that those desires are deceptive. The desire for death may be a fun desire, but it is not healthy and wholesome. As Jesus taught us in his explanation of the Ten Commandments, there is a continuum on one side of which are thoughts, words, and deeds of spiritual death. When we come to Christ, we turn our backs on death and face forward towards life; towards Jesus. There is a new desire growing in us that does not want freedom to do the deeds of death. This new desire has a taste for life. This is not merely the adoption of a new, positive philosophy. This is the spiritual effect of faith; of being united with Jesus in his death and in his resurrection.

The challenge of explaining the gospel to a non-believer is that, by definition, that person has not yet come to see with the spiritual eyes of saving faith. Their perspective is skewed. We dare not try and fix that by changing our message to fit their misconceptions. We continue to offer grace, knowing that it is contrary to their nature, yet all the while, asking God to give them eyes to see Jesus, so that they can receive his gift.

Paul further develops his answer by emphasizing the reality of our union with Jesus. Verses 5-7 emphasize our death with him. Verses 8-10 emphasize our life with him. So first, the reality of our death with Jesus in Romans 6:5-7.

2. We died with Christ...

[Read 6:5-7]

Paul teaches us that our old self was crucified with Jesus. The intent is to do away with the body of sin and be released from slavery to sin. Somehow, death frees a person from the power of sin.

The next verses emphasize unity with the life of Christ; Romans 6:8-10.

3. ...in order to live with Christ

[Read 6:8-10]

Paul’s statement about Jesus in verse 9 that “death no longer is master over him” is a reference to his resurrection. Jesus temporarily submitted himself to the human curse of death. After three days, with a display of unbelievable power, he took up his life again. We can see how union with Jesus Christ is the ground for our hope in new life after physical death. Just as he died and was raised again, so also, we will die and raise again. But Paul is talking about a process that begins in this life. We are not just looking to our future resurrection. Our union with the death and life of Christ brings the potential for life into the here and now. Understanding how that works takes some thought.

Paul proclaims, “He who has died is freed from sin,” “that we would no longer be slaves to sin.” How much of this is already true of us and how much is not yet true? Are you no longer a slave to sin? Do you still struggle with sin? Paul says that we were crucified with him. If you still struggle, what is wrong with you? Why is it that sin still masters you? Which is it? Are we still worms, forgiven by grace, but hopelessly sinful until our glorification in heaven? Or are we saints who have triumphed over sin able to live lives of perfect love and holiness in Christ now?

Those are the two extremes. “I am but a worm” and “I am free from sin.” Both of these extremes of triumphalism and defeatism contain some truth, though neither successfully comes to grips with the mixture of victory and struggle that we experience in our **already**, but **not yet** state. Notice the language of verse 6, “knowing this, that our old self was crucified with *Him*, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin.” What is true in verse 6 is that our old self has been crucified with Christ. That happens when we place our faith in Jesus. But the phrase “that our body of sin might be done away with” occurs in the Greek in what is called the aorist subjunctive tense. The right interpretation here seems to be that something has happened in the past with ongoing effect pointing towards an intended future goal; “that the body of sin might be done away with...[and] that we would no longer be slaves to sin.” It is **already** true that we have been crucified with Christ, but it is **not yet** true that the body of sin has been done away with or completely done away with.

We find ourselves in a struggle to become that which Christ has already won for us. We can experience the victory of new life in our present state. But we will also experience the failure of sin. The Christian is something like a caterpillar. Sometimes you look and feel like a worm, but you are not. You are a **not yet** butterfly. And there is something about our struggle against sin in this present life that makes us more beautiful when we come out of the cocoon. Help a butterfly too much to come out of its cocoon and it will fail to spread its wings and fly. The struggle against sin is part of our present reality. God has left it to be so. This does not justify our sin but should help us to view ourselves with grace when we fall down in the struggle. God is not unaware that we are going to fall. He invites us each time to stand up and live.

That Paul envisions our new life as not completely triumphant can be seen in his exhortation to application in the last four verses of our passage. If it was simply a natural process for Christians to begin living a new life of grace without sin, then Paul would not need to exhort us to do so. We have been freed, not from all effect of sin, but from the mastery of sin.

We live with strong mental and emotional patterns of brokenness. The sin principle of our natures still works to enslave us. We have been given the power to enter the struggle for life. And it is a struggle that we must engage if we want to experience the life that is available to us.

4. We can sum up Paul's answer as a new perspective and a new union.

Ok. That brings us to the end of Paul's answer to the question, “Are we to continue to sin so that grace may increase?”

In his short answer in verse 2 Paul said, “How shall we who died to sin still live in it?” That question sums up our response. Two things happen to the true believer. The person who has moved from the kingdom of Adam to the kingdom of Jesus has a new perspective and a new union. Both are spiritual realities. Our new perspective is spiritual sight or saving faith. We have seen our guilt. We have seen sin as death. We have seen Jesus as life. We come to Jesus in order to die to sin. So Paul says, “How shall we who died to sin still live in it?” From our new perspective dying to sin to live in sin makes no sense. Not only do we have a new perspective or new way of seeing things, we also have a new union with Jesus Christ that enables us in our new perspective. Unified with Christ we not only see sin as death, we begin to experience sin as death. And not only do we see Jesus as life, but we also begin to experience Jesus as life. There is a change in our desires and a change in our ability to choose according to those desires.

This is how we answer the person who objects to our gospel. They say, “So, I can believe in Jesus today and go out and commit murder tomorrow and still go to heaven.” We respond by saying, “It depends on what you mean when you say you believe in Jesus. If you mean just repeating some words about Jesus, then no. You were not saved in the first place. And you will not be saved if you kill someone. But if you mean that you truly feel sorrow over your sin, you believe you need a savior and you believe that Jesus is your savior; if that is the desire of your heart; in other words, if God has opened the eyes of your heart to see Jesus, then that is saving faith and if you have saving faith, you

truly see Jesus and believe in him then yes, if you believe today and sin tomorrow then you will still be safe in Jesus. And when you do believe in Jesus, he will also begin to work in your heart. You will be unified with him and you will begin to desire to live for him. That is the power of his grace.” So, something like that. That is our answer.

Paul does give us this answer for the objection. Though, I believe that Paul’s purpose here is primarily pastoral not primarily apologetic. What I mean is that Paul does not raise objections to grace primarily to equip us as Christians to be able to answer the questions of non-Christians. Paul has raised this question so that we as Christians will better understand our own gospel and be better enabled to live it out. That is why Paul is not yet done.

He has explained to us our new union with Christ; that in Jesus we have the ability to engage in the struggle for life. Now he wants to exhort us to apply our new perspective and our new union to life.

Paul’s exhortation to application: Consider and present. (6:11-14)

There are only two commands in the first eleven chapters of Romans. Paul wants us to understand the gospel well before he urges us to apply the gospel in our lives and communities. Here we have Paul’s two general commands for living out the gospel. They are the same two general commands he is going to repeat in Romans 12:1-2 before he gets into specifics. Paul is telling us here how we should approach the second question to the covenant of Grace. If you want to know, “What does God expect from me? How do I live in response to his love and forgiveness?” This is it. These are your first two commands. Let’s read Romans 6:11-14.

[Read Romans 6:11-14]

The two commands are consider and present.

1. Consider as true your union with Jesus.

It is not enough for us to be united with Jesus in death and life. We need to mentally consider this to be true. When sin rears its ugly head in our minds, we are to reject it as no longer essentially a part of who we are. We say in our minds, “I am dead to that. That no longer represents who I am. I reject that thought. I am united to Jesus in his death. I am dead to that.” We cannot deny what we feel. We have to be honest that the desire for sin is strong, sometimes overwhelming. It is not a figment of our imagination. But we can resist it. We can turn our back on it. We can claim the truth that sin is not central to who we are in Jesus. One day we will be without sin. It is not who you are. It is part of who you are now. But it is not who you are becoming and certainly not who you one day will be.

You have died with Christ to sin, so turn your back to sin and face forward towards Christ. Not only are you to consider yourself dead to sin, but to also consider yourself alive to Christ. The spirit of life is in you. You have been born again in Jesus. You are united with him. This is the truth of the gospel. So, preach the gospel to yourself. Consider what Jesus says is true of you that you are “dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

2. Present yourself to God.

Then follow up preaching the gospel to yourself with action. Paul says, “Present yourself!” This is the second command: consider and present. He says it in both the negative form and the positive form. “Do not present yourself to sin.” That’s the negative; the do not. “But present yourself to God.” That’s the positive; the do. Paul uses slightly odd language here. He does not just say do not present yourself or do present yourself. He says do not present your members and do present your members. By members he means feet, hands, tongue, eyes and ears. “Do not use your eye as an instrument of unrighteousness. Do not use your hand as an instrument of unrighteousness.” And so on. Or positively, “Do use your tongue as an instrument of righteousness. Do use your feet as an instrument of righteousness.” The body language makes the presentation of ourselves very physical, very real, very practical. Paul brings us into the physical realm of real things and real people; real relationships. This is not just a spiritual concept. The gospel gives you power to be the master of your body. You now have power to choose how you present the members of your body in this present

world, whether as instruments for corruption or instruments for health; whether as instruments for impurity or instruments for cleanliness; whether as instruments for death or instruments for life. Consider what is true about you in Jesus and live it out.

In verse 12 Paul says, “do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts.” Here is your first line of defense, consider in your mind and present with your body. This is how you engage the struggle to prevent sin from reigning in you. You consider these things to be true about yourself. You say, “I am dead to sin and alive to God in Jesus.” You say it over and over and over to yourself as long as you need to. This is not self-help. This is not psychological fiction. This is truth. And you move past the mental struggle to the struggle of action. You refuse to present yourself in action to sin and you choose to present yourself in action to God.

Paul’s going to help us more on understanding this struggle and how to live in the victory of Christ as we go through Romans. And there are times where we have to call on others to help us. Nobody does this successful on their own. But this is a starting point. Consider and present.

Verse 14; “For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace.”

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as interesting or important or strange or confusing in Romans 6:1-10? What are some questions that the text raises for you?
2. How does union with Jesus in his death and life answer the objection to grace raised by Paul in 6:1?
3. What does Paul say is already true about you in your union with Jesus? What is not yet true? How can it be that we are no longer slaves to sin, and yet, we still sin? How do you understand this tension?
4. Considering the command in verse 11, what does Paul want you to consider as true? What does it mean to consider these things as true? What mental action is Paul encourage you to take? When would it be important to consider these truths?
5. What stands out to you in Paul’s exhortation to present yourself to God in Romans 6:12-13?
6. Does the language, “Do not present yourself to sin...present yourself to God,” affect how you think about your actions, whether good or bad? How do you think about “presenting” yourself? Or how do you feel about “presenting” yourself?

Lesson 15: The Strength of Grace II

Romans 6:15-23

Invitation and Objection

¹⁵ What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?

Short answer

May it never be!

Long answer (New Master)

¹⁶ Do you not know that when you **present** yourselves to someone *as* slaves for **obedience**, you are slaves of the one whom you **obey**, either of sin resulting in death, or of **obedience** resulting in righteousness?

Already true (New Heart)

¹⁷ But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became **obedient** from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸ and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. ¹⁹ I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh.

In process (New Trajectory and New Process)

For just as you **presented** your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in *further* lawlessness, so now **present** your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification.

(1) ²⁰ For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ²¹ Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death.

(2) ²² But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life.

²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

NASB

Part Two of Paul's Explanation for Why Grace Does Not Lead to an Increase of Sin

Paul is not yet done explaining the power of grace to produce righteous living. He gave us part 1 in the first half of chapter 6. He gives us part 2 in the second half. He also uses the same literary or rhetorical pattern.

So, we have an invitation, "What then?" Then we have an objection to grace, "Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?" Then we have Paul's short answer, "May it never be!" There is no follow-up question to that statement like there was in 6:2. Paul moves from the emphatic short answer straight into the "Do you not know..." question which introduces his long answer. "Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?"

Each time Paul answers an objection in chapters 6 and 7, he uses one primary illustration. In the first half of chapter 6, he used the experience of baptism to illustrate his point. Here he uses the analogy of slavery to illustrate his point.

So far Paul's argument that grace produces strength for life includes the New Perspective and the New Union of grace. Faith in Jesus is a new way of seeing the kingdom of Adam, man, and the kingdom of Jesus. We see our own behavior in a new light. We see God in a new light. We see Jesus in a new light. We see grace in a new light. Saving faith is a New Perspective. The non-believer sees grace as freedom to sin. The believer sees grace as freedom from sin.

Not only do we have a new perspective of Jesus, we also have a new union with Jesus. Spiritually united to Jesus, we have died to sin and been raised to new life. This is a spiritual reality that empowers the one who stands in grace. We have not experienced overwhelming transformation. We still struggle with sin. We still need to choose to consider what is true and to present ourselves to God. Our New Union with Jesus empowers us to enter into that struggle.

In the second half of chapter 6, Paul is going to further develop these ideas and then bring in some additional thought.

Let's read the whole passage and then walk through the argument step by step.

Read [Romans 6:15-23]

Invitation and Objection (6:15a)

We start with the invitation and the objection. ¹⁵ "What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?"

Here Paul poses again the classic objection to the gospel. "Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?" The difference between this version of the question and the version in 6:1 is that the previous version built on the explanation of the gospel in chapter 5. It talks about sinning so that grace may increase. Paul had restated the gospel in the universal terms of Adam and Jesus. There are two kingdoms, one of fallen man and one of restored man. Grace abundantly overcomes the universal problem of sin and death. Attacking this expression of the gospel, the objection in 6:1 asked, "Shall we sin so that grace may increase?"

Paul could have answered that question by falling back into a new Christian law. But he did not. He maintained his confidence in grace to produce righteousness. Law uses fear and insecurity to motivate. Paul did not threaten our status under grace. He did not say that if we sin we will lose our acceptance. In this sense, his opponents had heard him correctly. His argument truly is that grace overcomes sin and provides security in our relationship with God. The first question of covenant is answered radically. We are accepted 100% by grace. And future sin does not change that. Not only the first, but also the second question of covenant, "How then shall we live?", must be understood according to our new standing in the grace of Jesus. Paul really does argue that the new covenant of grace initiates a new way of living out our relationship with God.

We are no longer under law, not even a new Christian law. We are under grace. The objection here in 6:15 is picking up on that law/grace language. "Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?"

Short answer (6:15b)

Paul is emphatic in his short answer. "May it never be!" This is clear to Paul. The right response to grace is not sin. Grace does not provide freedom or motivation or even logic to sin. So, we are clear, the answer is, "Certainly not!" Paul does not leave us with that. He is going to help us think about why not with a longer answer.

Listen again to the introductory question of that long answer. Along with bringing about a New Perspective and a New Union, Paul argues that grace places the believer under a New Master.

Long answer (6:16-22)

New Master and New Heart (6:16-19a)

1. Our New Master and the Reality of Authority

Verse 16, "Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone *as* slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?"

Paul is making a statement about reality that we need to take a moment to consider. This may not be how people would like things to be. But this is how things are. Power and authority exist. We are under obedience to some source of power or some person of authority. We have a master, whether the master is sin, or the master is God, we cannot get out from having a master.

Paul is coming back in this verse to two ideas he introduced in the previous passage. There is the idea of slavery. He already said that the point of our being crucified with Christ is that we might be free from sin. The second idea is the idea of presentation. As the believer, the right action for you to take in response to your new reality in Jesus is to present yourselves to God.

A change here is that Paul claims that presenting yourself as a slave is not necessarily negative. There is a negative slavery and a positive slavery, depending on the one to whom you present yourself. In that Paul's language is a bit jolting, because we would rather not consider ourselves as slaves to anyone. We want to see ourselves as independent, free agents. Queen's 1984 hit "I Want to Break Free" echoes the human heart. I guess that is why it keeps playing on the radio. "I've got to break free. God knows, God knows I want to break free." God does know. God knows we want to break free.

Paul's slave language is the language of obedience. He asserts that regardless of whether you sin or whether you do good, either way, you are choosing to obey one principle or the other. You obey sin, or you obey righteousness. Human nature resists this, imagining an existence where we can break free from any authority.

The Christian, however, with our new perspective begins to see the world or sees the world in a different way. There is a Lord. He defines good and evil. He has authority. It is right and good to be under his authority. The centurion who asked Jesus to heal his servant understood a universal hierarchy ordered by right and lawful authority. He told Jesus, "You do not need to come to my house. I am a man under authority. My word is obeyed. You have authority. Your word will be obeyed. Simply say the word and my servant will be healed." Right authority was part of the centurion's worldview. He understood what it was to be under a master. And he sensed that was good and right. It was the correct order of things.

The idea of authority over good and evil takes us all the way back to the garden of Eden. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was not set in Eden to prevent Adam and Eve from knowing about good and evil. It was their job to rule the creation, judging right and wrong. That was part of the commission from God. They had to learn about good and evil. The tree created a dividing line of authority. Who defines what is good and evil? Do you taste it and decide for yourself? Or do you submit to God's word, trusting his definition.

So, there was some truth in Satan's charge that God does not want you to be like him. That is true. God does not give up his place as the one who defines good and evil. In fact, it would be evil for God to give up his responsibility as the one who is authority over morality. Right and wrong are defined out of his nature. He does not produce a standard of morality. He himself is the standard of morality.

When Adam and Eve chose the tree, in direct contradiction of God's authority, they proclaimed the right to determine good and evil for themselves. Rather than go to God to receive instruction, going to the tree they rejected God's claim to authority. This is the heart of the human impulse we call sin. It is a form of pride. It is a rejection of God as the source and definition of what is good.

And yet, to break free from God is to become something less than human. Here is Paul's argument from way back in chapter 1:18-32. Turning away from God does not leave a human being unaffected. We were created as beings who would thrive in a union with our creator. Relationship with him is a necessary component for human life. Paul described in chapter 1 a darkening of human desires and an effect on human thinking. Separated from God, heart and mind become clouded and begin to desire things that lead to death. God is life. Without God we become a shell. Even worse, we become slaves to desires that harm, dehumanize, corrupt, wound. We become slaves to sin.

We were designed for a certain existence. A diesel, powered car does not work when filled with gasoline. It just stops. Unfortunately, I know from personal experience. It's not a good thing. It's not the car's fault. It's not the manufacturer's fault. It was my fault for ignoring the essential design of the car. We have been designed as men and women to live in relationship with God who is our authority. We can only function as we are created to function when we are in right and loving relationship with the one who has authority. When we trust in Jesus, we are acknowledging God as the true judge and king. We present ourselves to him as individuals under authority. We acknowledge that he is the one who defines what is right and true; what is evil and degrading. He

decides. Not us. Presenting ourselves to God is presenting ourselves to obedience. We submit to his definition of good and evil.

You see, when we chose sin, we become a slave to the power of sin. We are in obedience to sin. When we chose God, we willingly place ourselves under his authority. We are in obedience to God. In the end, we are slaves to one or the other.

Paul's slavery illustration includes both that which is already true of the believer and that which is becoming true. There is a sense where we are already slaves. And there is a sense where we have to choose to present ourselves as slaves. There is both a starting point, and there is a process.

Verse 17 focuses on that which is already true. The starting point. Let's read that.

2. The Reality of the Believer's New Heart

Verse 17, "But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed,¹⁸ and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness."

I believe Paul's reference here to "the form of teaching to which you were committed" is the apostolic proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ that the Romans had already heard from someone else. Paul writes the Roman believers not to introduce them to the gospel but to establish them more firmly in the gospel. Paul recognizes that they have been taught the gospel of Jesus Christ. This has been his assumption throughout. He will write later in 15:14 "[you are] filled with all knowledge, and able also to admonish one another...I have written very boldly to you on some points so as to remind you again." He is reminding them. He is establishing them. Paul treats the Romans as Christians because they have already heard the message of grace and responded in faith to that form of teaching. Saving faith is not merely understanding. It is understanding that moves a person to trust in God, to become committed to the truth of the message. So, he describes it as the form of teaching to which you were committed. He further describes their commitment to that teaching as coming out of the heart. "You became obedient from the heart."

In John 14:21, the apostle records Jesus as teaching, "He who has my commandments and keeps them is the one who loves me." This is obedience out of the heart. A skeptical person could twist that around to make it sound like manipulation. "If you really love me then you will do what I want. If you love me, you will do ____." That is manipulation. And that is not what Jesus is saying. Jesus is making a statement of fact. If you really do love God, then you will express your love through obedience. You do not know and love God without wanting to obey him. This is not the way that a friend shows love to a friend. Unless maybe it is a friend who works at the shop of his friend. Then you have to obey him as your boss. Usually friends are not in an authority relationship. Obedience is not a natural requirement to the kind of love that friends have for one another. Obedience is a right response in a relationship of authority. A son obeys his father. A knight obeys his king. A person obeys his God. When that obedience comes out of a willing heart, then that obedience is a right expression of love. "Sure Daddy, I will do that...Command me my king...Your will be done my God!" That is loving obedience in right relationship.

There is a stark contrast between the slavery that comes from the power of the sin and the willing submission the believer offers from the heart to God. And it is similar to the contrast between human religion and relationship. Human religion can feel like manipulation in two directions. The god seeks to manipulate his follower by promising reward for obedience while the follower obeys to get what he wants. C. S. Lewis describes it as a mercenary approach. The religious person who seeks reward from obedience to God, is not in relationship to know God. God himself is not the reward. That person is in relationship for gain that is not inherent to the relationship. It is like a marriage for money. It is a pretend relationship acted out to acquire a reward that does not correspond naturally to the marriage. The believer who obeys God from the heart recognizes the fruit of relationship with God as the right reward of the relationship. Knowing God and the joy of knowing God and the peace

of knowing God and sense of purpose that come from knowing God, that is the right fruit of relationship. That is reward. But it is reward inherent to relationship. The religious mercenary wants other rewards from God, not God himself. God seeks from his followers a willing submission that comes out of a heart that loves God. And to love God, is to recognize him as he is, as the right authority, as Father, as King, as Lord, as Master. That is the heart of the worshiper.

Grace places us into relationship with a New Master in line with a New Heart of obedience. This New Heart is one of the things that is new about the new covenant. It is the circumcision of the heart by the Spirit Paul referred to in chapter 2:29. It is the promise made by Moses in Deuteronomy 30:6. It is the new heart of the new covenant promised in Jeremiah 31:33. And it is not something that will be true of the Romans. It is already true of the Romans. The believer who stands in grace has submitted to a New Master out of the obedience of a New Heart. Like our New Union with Jesus, the New Heart is a spiritual reality that comes with the gift of grace. This is already true of us.

3. The Appropriateness of the Language of Slavery

Now, considering the language of slavery, there is something about that language not appropriate to our new relationship with God. In 8:15 Paul is going to say, "You have not received a spirit of slavery." He does not want to use the slave language in the context of chapter 8. Here Paul finds the language helpful or maybe even necessary to help us understand our reality. Still, he seems to regret having to use it.

In verse 19 he says, "¹⁹ I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh."

This is not an easy verse to interpret. When Paul says he is speaking in human terms, I believe that does point to his use of the slavery analogy. The institution of slavery in Paul's day was a social reality familiar to everyone. It was not a pleasant reality. It was an accepted reality.

Paul says he uses the human terms of slavery because of "the weakness of our flesh." The most natural understanding of the weakness of our flesh would be the sinful desires natural to human beings in their fallen state. That's the weakness of our flesh. Our fleshly desires work so powerfully in us darkening our desires and confusing our thinking that we are by nature in a state of bondage to our passions and perceptions. The slavery analogy aptly describes the relationship between our will and our weakness. We cannot consistently will what is good. We are slaves.

On the God side of the analogy, slavery does not describe everything about our relationship with God. But the analogy of slavery does present us with a faith challenge on one essential point. Are we willing to acknowledge that God has all authority? Are you willing to acknowledge that? That God rightly commands every aspect of your life? He is your right authority in everything. Are you willing to submit to God in all things as a slave would to his master? The non-believer struggles to accept that reality that submission can be right and good. The non-believer mistrusts God's power and God's will. The New Perspective of faith in the believer recognizes God as the rightful Master and understands out of the New Heart how a servant can love his or her king with complete submission to his will.

We have received a New Heart and have yielded to a New Master. This is already true. The believer has also been set on a New Trajectory that initiates a New Process.

New Trajectory and New Process (19b-22)

Let's consider the second half of verse 19, "For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in *further* lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification."

The second half of verse 19 repeats the exhortation to "present the members of your body" that Paul made in our previous passage in verse 13. You can see immediately this is not talking about what is already true but exhorting you to future action.

Just like before, Paul here refers to both the negative side of presenting and the positive side of presenting. He describes the negative presenting as presenting members to impurity and lawlessness. He describes the positive side as presenting your members to righteousness. What Paul

adds here in verse 19 are the results of the presenting. Before he just said, “Don’t present your members to sin and do present your members to God.” He just gave the command. Now he is telling us that we can expect an effect, either negatively or positively when we present ourselves. We do not remain neutral. We have to present ourselves one way or the other, and we are affected according to our choice.

1. The Old Trajectory versus the New

We’ll start with the negative side. Presenting the members of your body to impurity and lawlessness leads to further lawlessness. It is interesting that Paul describes the result of sin as lawlessness. In chapter 1, he described giving into impurity as leading to degrading passions and a depraved mind. He could have used that language again here. You know, that the result of our impurity is degrading passions and a depraved mind. Instead he uses a word here that points back to the objection, “Shall we sin since we are not under law, but under grace?” The word Paul uses here literally means without law, lawlessness. Lawlessness can include acting outside of civil law, but the emphasis here should be taken as acting outside of the moral law of God; to be unrestrained by God’s definition of good. Interestingly, it is the objection being made against grace. Grace leads to lawlessness. The claim is that we need law to keep people in the law. If people are set free from law by grace, then that freedom of grace will lead to lawlessness. Paul is telling us that it is the sinful desires of our own flesh pushing us towards moral lawlessness. That is the natural trajectory of the human heart. We are slaves to sin which leads to impurity which leads to lawlessness which leads to further lawlessness. Paul’s detractors have a point. If the forces in our flesh naturally take us down a road to lawlessness, then removing law, naturally leads to sin. What we have been saying, though, is that grace is not simply removing law. Grace makes a real change in us. So, for grace to not promote sin, grace must change our natural trajectory.

Grace has done that. Grace has set us on a New Trajectory. On April 11, 1970, NASA launched the Apollo 13 mission to send three astronauts to the moon. Fifty-six hours into the mission came the famous transmission, “Houston, we have a problem.” An oxygen tank had exploded. The explosion made a direct return to earth impossible. Apollo 13 was on a trajectory that would pass the moon and continue floating endlessly away from the earth. Ground control calculated course corrections that would take Apollo 13 into the moon’s gravitation pull, swinging the astronauts around the moon, setting them on a new trajectory; a trajectory home.

Human beings separated from their creator, slaves to sin, are on a trajectory away from home, hurtling into emptiness. As life support runs out, we continue floating forever in the direction of our rebellious heart, away from God. But when you place your faith in Jesus Christ and receive his grace, when you enter into his orbit, you are swung around to a new trajectory; a trajectory home.

Unlike Apollo 13, our trajectory is not a straight path home. The New Trajectory sets you on a path for home, but that path is neither straight nor automatic. It is a journey. Someone once said, “You step onto the road, and if you don’t keep your feet, there’s no knowing where you might be swept off to.” Entering into grace embarks the believer on a new journey. On this journey you can still be negatively affected by your choice to sin, but you can also be positively affected by your choice to do what is right.

2. The New Process of the New Trajectory

That comes out in Paul’s use of the imperative in the last part of verse 19. Just like he urged us in the previous passage to consider and present, he exhorts us here saying, “present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification.”

Grace empowers us to present the members of our body to righteousness with the positive result of sanctification or holiness. To be holy carries with it two ideas, the idea of being set apart for special use and the idea of being purified or cleaned. A cup used in the Jewish temple was a special cup, used for a special purpose. It had to be kept clean of impurity in order to be fit for use. To be made holy is to be made fit for use in the kingdom of God; set apart, purified. We could also say that to be

made holy is to be made fit for heaven. We need a cleansing and realignment of our desires. I imagine that to experience heaven while still being dominated by my fleshly desire for sin would be like the Greek mythological figure Tantalus who was forced to stand under a fruit tree in a pool of water where the water always receded if he tried to drink, and the fruit always remained just out of reach. I could never be satisfied in heaven if my sinful desires were still with me because those sinful desires would want things that could not be obtained in heaven.

Heaven offers that which is real and good and pure and holy. If our hearts do not desire those things, then our hearts cannot enjoy heaven. As C. S. Lewis describes it in his book *The Great Divorce*, to be made holy is to be made fit for heaven and to be made fit for heaven is to be made more real. We already caught this idea in Romans 5 when Paul told us that our hope does not disappoint us because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. God has begun already to work in us to desire him. And desire for God is the primary desire of heaven. Being sanctified or made holy is not just some stuffy, religious kind of idea. It is a remolding of our desires and thoughts, so that we would desire that which is good and think that which is true.

To motivate us to participate in this process of our becoming more and more truly human, Paul elaborates in verses 20-22 the negative consequences of a trajectory away from God and the positive consequences of a trajectory towards God. Let's read that, verses 20-22.

²⁰ For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ²¹ Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death. ²² But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life.

We have a new perspective now on sin. Sin is that which brings about corruption and death. We are now ashamed that we embraced those things. Submitting into a relationship with God as our rightful and good master sets us on a trajectory of life. We begin to be made fit for life with God, to be made holy. The life that starts now in our relationship with Jesus continues on after death. It is true, spiritual life; eternal life.

If this is all true and we have already been set free from sin, why does Paul have to exhort us to live it out? That's the final question I want to address. It's an excellent question. It's a hard question to answer. If we have already been set free from sin, if we have already been giving a new heart, if we have already submitted to a new master, why do we struggle so much with living free?

There is a famous story about a slave from Alabama. In 1865, the Emancipation Proclamation set free America's slaves with the adoption of the 13th amendment to the United States Constitution. Newspaper headlines throughout the States proclaimed, "Slavery Legally Abolished." And yet, the majority of slaves in the South who were legally freed continued to live on as slaves. Asked by a reporter about his thoughts on President Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation an Alabama slave responded, "I don't know nothing about Abraham Lincoln, except they say he set us free. And I don't know nothing about that neither."

It is one thing to be set free. It is another thing to learn how to live free. To live in grace. It was the problem of the first generation of Israelites out of Egypt. They had powerful mental and emotional patterns of slavery. When we come to Christ, we have powerful mental and emotional patterns of slavery to sin. We do have something they did not have. We have a New Heart. But sometimes I wonder why God did not make the desires of the new heart stronger or more automatic.

What if we only desired healthy food? Imagine the effect on your body if you just wanted greens. Or what if we only desired things that we need? Imagine the effect on your bank account? What if we only ever desired our spouse? Imagine the removal of sexual tension from your mental life and relationships.

Whatever his wise reasons are, it is evident that God wants us to be in a process of growth. He takes us in wounded and prideful, set in our habits, unaware how deeply sin affects our thoughts and

desires. He takes us in with all kinds of baggage. And he does not remove the struggle for us. Instead, he calls us to embrace the struggle, to participate in becoming who we are created to be. He calls us to consider what has already become true of us and to present the members of our bodies to righteousness which results in sanctification with the outcome of eternal life. This is our New Process as we follow our New Trajectory home.

Reminder: Eternal Life is a Free Gift, not a Reward for our Effort in the Process of Sanctification (6:23)

Paul makes one last reminder in verse 23.

²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We play a part in the journey home, but so we do not begin to think that our work in the process of sanctification is necessary to earn eternal life, Paul reminds us here that God is the one who brings us home. God is the one who brings about the life. “The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” It is still 100% grace. It is a free gift. The work we do is not to earn the gift. The work we do is to join in with what God is doing. Our New Perspective causes us to see sin and holiness differently. Our New Union with Jesus gives us power to engage in the struggle to live for God. Our New Heart is growing in the desire to obey our New Master who has established us in a New Process along a New Trajectory.

This is the power of the gospel to save. Not only power to save us from the guilt of sin, but to save us from the mastery of sin. Power that enables us to live. This is the righteousness of God revealed. Not only are we declared righteous by grace. We are also enabled to live righteously by grace. God is making his children fit to enjoy him forever. This is the strength of grace.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as interesting or important or strange or confusing in Romans 6:15-23? What are some questions that the text raises for you?

2. Does believing that you are under grace lead to increased sin? That is the charge. Paul develops his understanding of “being under grace” through the use of a slavery analogy which brings to light several realities.

a. New Master – What verse(s) indicate that grace puts the believer under a New Master?

How do you feel about the slavery analogy being used in the case of both the old master and the new master? Does this analogy work for you or does it raise problems for you?

b. New Heart – What verse(s) indicate that grace provides the believer with a New Heart?

How is the New Heart of the believer revealed in your experience?

c. New Trajectory – What verse(s) indicate that grace sets you on a new trajectory? What verses indicate the old trajectory?

What is your new trajectory? How would you explain this idea?

d. New Process – What verse(s) indicate that grace sets you on a new process? What do you observe about the old process that is natural in human beings? What do you observe about the new process of the one who stands under grace?

3. What is your role in the New Process? What is God’s role? Which verses support your thoughts about your role and God’s role?

4. What in Paul’s answer to the objection to grace here in 6:15-23 fits with your personal experience as a believer under grace? Have you been living your Christian life with an awareness of these truths of grace or would you say that you have lived much of your Christian life out of obligation to fulfill a new Christian law? What here is new for you? Or a good reminder?

Lesson 16: The New Way of the Spirit

Romans 7:1-6

Introductory Question for the Long Answer, part 2 (Answers the Objection in 6:15)

¹ Or do you not know, brethren (for I am speaking to those who know the law), that the law has jurisdiction over a person as long as he lives?

Illustration of Marriage

(1) Two simple points about marriage

² For the married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is living; but if her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning the husband. ³ So then, if while her husband is living she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from the law, so that she is not an adulteress though she is joined to another man.

(2) Comparison to law and grace

⁴ Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God.

The New Way of the Spirit

⁵ For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were *aroused* by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death. ⁶ But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.

NASB

What is New about the New Covenant?

What's new about the new covenant? Let's make a list.

First, its not salvation by grace alone through faith alone. Paul was clear about that in chapter 4, using Abraham as his precedent. The biblical answer to the first question of covenant, "What makes me acceptable to be in relationship with God?", is 100% grace, whether we are talking about Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Moses or David. The first question of covenant is always the same for God, always by grace through faith.

What is new about the New Covenant comes in answering the second question of covenant, "How then shall we live?" The answer to that changes from covenant to covenant. There is some consistency between covenants because of God's unchanging moral character. But there are also major differences. Here are four significant differences between the Old Covenant under Moses and the New Covenant under Jesus.

First, the Old Covenant used ritual symbols of sacrifice to look ahead to the one true atoning sacrifice. The New Covenant looks back to the cross as the one true atoning sacrifice. In the New we do not look forward to an event that must happen. We look back to an event that has happened. We look back to the cross.

Second, the Old Covenant people of God had their locus or center in the geo-political nation of Israel. The people of God were defined by their geography with Jerusalem as the center of the nation and the temple as the center of Jerusalem. They were also defined politically as a nation with a king. To be connected to God meant being connected to and looking to the nation of Israel and the temple as the center of worship and teaching. The New Covenant people of God no longer find their center in a geographic or political nation, but in Jesus Christ himself. Our center is spiritual, not institutional. The church is the people of God, and the church is found in all nations where ever true believers gather.

Third, the laws of the Mosaic covenant included not only moral law, but also civil and ceremonial law that was specific to the people of Israel who were defined geographically and politically. So, with a new spiritual definition of who are the people of God, we need a new set of covenant stipulations. The New Covenant people of God are not given civil law because we are not a political entity. We can

speak into politics. But we do not have our own set of civil laws in the New Covenant. We also have very little in the way of ceremonial law, not much other than baptism and the Lord's supper. We are no longer defined by a central temple institution. The moral law, however, stays much the same because it comes out of the nature of who God is. It would be the same no matter the covenant. The change of the cross and the change in our definition as people who believe in Jesus, requires a new set of stipulations or commands in the New Covenant.

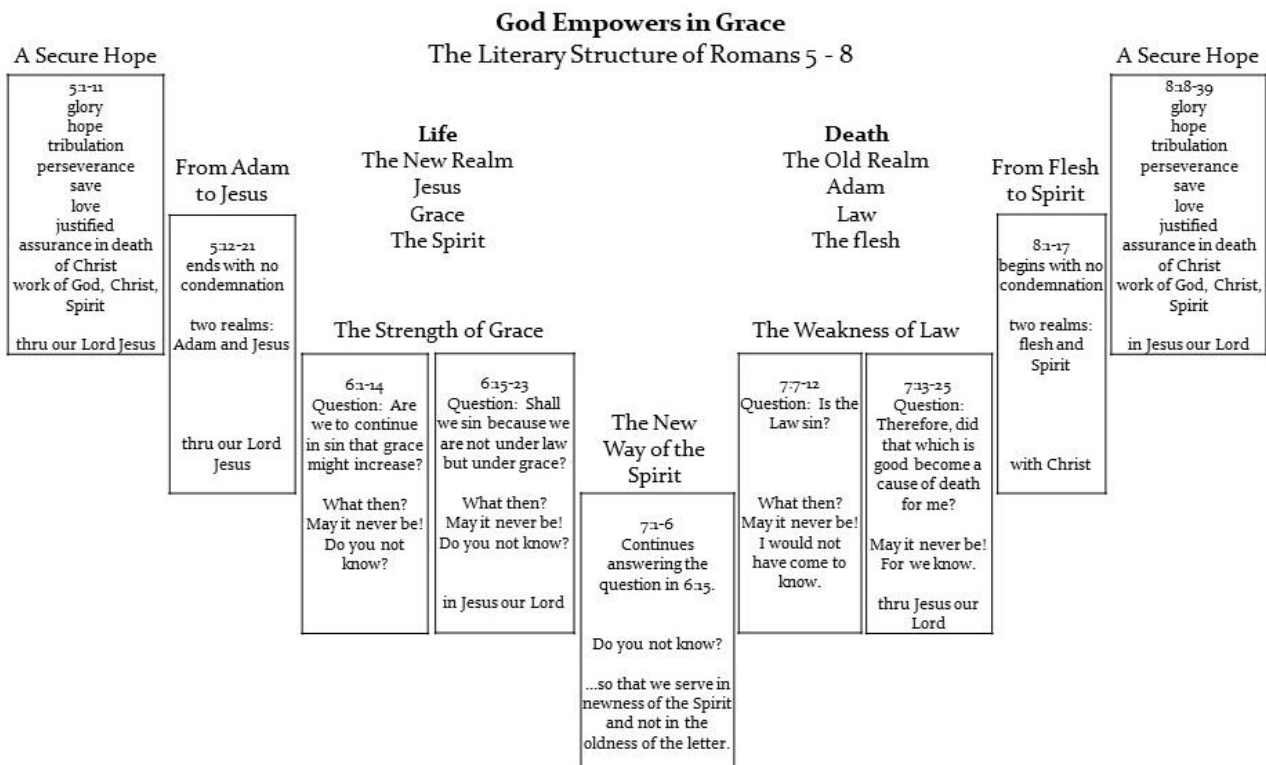
Fourth, and extremely important, the Old Covenant people of God were given an external written code and called to live up to it. The New Covenant people of God are indwelt with the Holy Spirit and called to live through him.

Recap: what is new about the new? These four things: the cross, the people, the stipulations and the Spirit.

The New Way of the Spirit

Here in Romans 7:1-6 we have come to the central point of Paul's teaching on life under the New Covenant of grace. This is the center of chapters 5-8. We have come to a key idea in this central section at the end of verse 6, "having died to the law by which we were bound, we serve in the newness of the Spirit and not the oldness of the letter." We have come to the new way of the Spirit.

This is not our first encounter with this idea in Romans. Paul alluded to the need for a spiritual work in the heart of believers back in 2:29 when he said that the true Jew "is one inwardly; and



circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter." Since that verse, Paul has chosen not to speak in terms of the Holy Spirit. In chapters 1-4, I believe Paul wanted to establish our justification before he began to talk about how we should live. And he wanted to do that with a focus on Jesus Christ. The gospel for Paul does not begin with an emotional or miraculous or empowering work of the Holy Spirit. As important as the work of the Holy Spirit is, the gospel begins with the death of Christ on the cross as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Paul keeps the two questions of covenant separate. I was taught the same thing when I was first taught how to share the gospel. I was taught following the order we see Paul using; to first share the gospel of Jesus focusing on our justification by grace through faith; and then, after a person had placed their faith in Christ or I

realized they were already a Christian, only then would I share how to live in the power of the Holy Spirit.

This is what Paul has done in Romans. The first question is answered by Paul exclusively in terms of Christ's atoning work on the cross. And even in his answer to the second question of covenant Paul mostly holds off on references to the Holy Spirit until chapter 8. He chooses first to establish the strength of grace in terms of our relationship with Jesus. But now, here in 7:6, Paul refers to this new union we have with Jesus as the "newness of the Spirit" contrasting it to "oldness of the letter." Grace initiates a new way of life best described as union with Jesus Christ or living in the newness of the Spirit. It is the same spiritual concept, Christ in us, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. We just get this one mention of the Holy Spirit here in 7:6. It is a key idea to grace, to what is new about the new covenant. Paul is going to develop the idea of life in the Spirit in chapter 8. But before we get to that, he has more to say about law, grace and sin.

Paul's argument that grace does not lead to sin insists that grace does more than forgive sin. Grace initiates a new reality in the heart. Grace changes the person who believes. There is a strength in grace to free the believer from sin and to bring about a fruitful life. Paul's concern is both to help us understand life under grace and to also help us better understand life under law.

As the central point of Romans 5-8, Romans 7:1-6, serves as a bridge from Paul's treatment of grace in chapter 6 to his treatment of law in chapter 7.

Let's read the passage: Romans 7:1-6.

[Read Romans 7:1-6.]

7:1 Introductory Question for the Long Answer, part 2 (Answers the Objection in 6:15)

6:15a Invitation and Objection: *What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?*

6:15b Short answer: *May it never be!*

6:16-23 Long answer, part 1: *Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves...*

7:1-6 Long answer, part 2: *Or do you not know, brethren (for I am speaking to those who know the law)...*

This passage does not follow Paul's rhetorical pattern that includes an invitation, objection, short answer and long answer. But when we look at the first verse, we see something familiar. "Do you not know..." and then Paul goes on to develop a point around an illustration of marriage. This is the way he started his long answer in 6:3 "Do you not know..." and then he illustrated his answer with baptism. Then the next long answer in 6:14, "Do you not know..." and he illustrated by slavery. This passage fits in with the long answer part of Paul's pattern.

So then, what question is he answering? What is the objection? The most reasonable answer is that he still answering the objection put forth in 6:15. We had an invitation, "What then?", followed by an objection, "Shall we sin because we are not under law, but under grace?" Paul gave his short answer, "By no means!" And then he started his long answer, "Do you not know..." That was long answer part 1. What we have in 7:1-6 is long answer part 2 to that objection, "Shall we sin because we are not under law, but under grace." First, he develops and answer using the illustration of slavery. Now he is adding to the answer using the illustration of marriage.

The passage is not only a second part of a two-part answer. It also concludes the argument for grace and prepares to move us in to the discussion about law. So, its finishing up chapter 6 and moving us into chapter 7. When you think about chapter 6, neither of the two passages address issues of law. Both address issues of grace, righteousness and sin. In chapter 6, Paul is considering life under grace. For believers, does grace promote sin or promote righteousness? He did raise the idea of being under law in the objection that was in 6:15, "Shall we sin because we are not under law, but under grace." But he did not mention the law.

Once we get into chapter 7, Paul is no longer explaining grace, righteousness and sin. He turns to explaining law, righteousness and sin. Paul argues the power of the gospel, not only by showing the

strength of grace, but also by showing the weakness of law. We get a bit of both in 7:1-6 because we are transitioning from the discussion of grace to the discussion of law.

Let's walk through the passage.

7:2-3 Two simple points about marriage

Paul's dominating illustration here is marriage. He starts out telling his listeners that he knows that they know how law works. Verse 1, you know "that the law has jurisdiction over a person as long as he lives." It is not clear if Paul is talking about Mosaic law or the civil Roman law. And it does not seem to matter. A living person is under the rule of law whether in covenant with God or in relationship to civil society, unless he dies. And then the law ceases to have jurisdiction. So far, it is just a simple point. When you die the law no longer has jurisdiction.

Then in verse 2 and 3 Paul builds on this simple idea using the case of marriage. When I teach this passage of Romans, it is not unusual for someone to ask me about divorce and remarriage. At that point I ask everyone to take a pause. This is an illustration about marriage being used to make a biblical point that is not about marriage at all. We would have to be very careful interpreting this illustration to help us consider issues like divorce or re-marriage. Recently, I saw this passage quoted in a document making a case that remarriage is not allowed if the other spouse is still alive. That is one argument, but I believe it is poor biblical interpretation to try to make that argument from an illustration being used by Paul. For example, considering divorce, Mosaic law allowed for divorce. Jesus taught in Matthew 19:4-9 (also see Matthew 5:32) that the certificate of divorce in the Old Covenant was not the ideal will of God but a civil concession made to curb sin among the Israelites. Jesus went back to Genesis 2 to make his argument that God's ideal will is that what God brings together let no man separate. But then Jesus did make an exception for adultery, saying that adultery was a valid ground for divorce. So, we could interpret Jesus' teaching that divorce is not the ideal, but adultery may be grounds for it. But if I just take Paul's words here, the illustration does not allow for divorce at all. It is only death. The problem is not that Paul disagrees with Jesus. The problem is that Paul is using marriage as an illustration by which he makes a point he assumes to be obvious to his readers. That is why you use illustrations. Most people can readily connect with what you are saying. The illustration is not to complicate. The illustration is to help simplify something else that is complicated. Paul does not mention divorce and Paul does not mention remarriage. The illustration does not express Paul's thought on either topic. If we want to know Paul's thoughts on marriage we need to go somewhere like 1 Corinthians 7. But not here. We might glean something useful here, but only very carefully and tentatively. This is not teaching us about marriage any more than chapter 6 was trying to teach us about the institution of slavery. This is making a point about the readers' common understanding of marriage to teach us about law, grace and sin.

So, we should be asking, "What is the simple point of the illustration?" Let's look at Romans 7:2-3.

Romans 7:2-3, "For the married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is living; but if her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning the husband. So then, if while her husband is living she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from the law, so that she is not an adulteress though she is joined to another man."

Two simple points, really. First, when two people are married by law and one dies, the other is freed from the covenant of marriage. Second, if two are married by law and the wife joins herself to another, presumably sexually, she is an adulteress. But to emphasize again the first point, if her husband has died, she is not an adulteress.

7:4 Comparison to law and grace

Using this simple summary of marriage law, Paul makes his spiritual point in verse 4. This is what he was getting at originally.

Verse 4, “Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God.”

You died through Christ, so that you might be joined to Christ.

I do not think that Paul is just speaking just to Jews here when he talks about the law. Jews were clearly under law, under the law of Moses. So, Paul’s comments on law through chapter 7 have specific relevance and application to Jews under Old Covenant law. The Jew is still Paul’s best case for someone trying to live by law because the Mosaic law is law revealed by God. But Paul’s use of law continues to also carry with it the more general application of the moral law that proceeds out of the character of God. Paul argued in chapters 2 and 3 that those who are not under the specially revealed law of Moses are still held accountable to a general principle of moral law. We could argue that all human beings are under the general covenants made with Adam and Noah, while the Jews came under the special covenants made with Abraham and Moses.

All human beings, then, are under moral obligation to God. We are under covenant, or we could say that we are under law. The marriage illustration helps Paul make his point. The only way out from being under the law is to die to the law. Law must be fulfilled, or the penalty of law must be paid. We have failed to fulfill the law, so the second option applies. We must pay the penalty of death. Through faith in Jesus we are united with him in his death. His death applies for us. We have died. Died to the law. We are no longer under law.

We are now free to enter into a new kind of relationship with God. Not only are we joined to Christ in his death, but also in his life. We have a new kind of spiritual, emotional intimacy with God through our spiritual union with Jesus.

Remember that Paul is still responding here to the objection in 6:15, “Shall we sin because we are not under law, but under grace?” The marriage analogy affirms the description made by the objection. It is true to say that we are not under law, but under grace. And this is not unjust. This is not adultery.

The faithful Jew may remember the harsh words in Ezekiel 23 or Jeremiah 3 that describe the idolatry of Israel and Judah in terms of spiritual adultery. Speaking of Judah, after the fall of Israel, Jeremiah says, “Her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but she went out and was a harlot also...she polluted the land and committed adultery with stones and trees (Jeremiah 3:8-9).” The stones and trees are the spiritual places and idols set up in the land to a host of gods and goddesses. Turning from the law of Moses, breaking the command to “have no gods before me” and to “fashion no idols”, entering into the worship of other gods was recognized as a form of spiritual adultery. You could image Paul taking this view towards the new Christian movement when he was still called Saul, a Pharisee of Pharisees. Not understanding that Jesus fulfills the law, the younger Paul burned with zeal against fellow Jews who would leave the law of Moses to follow Christ. They were spiritual adulterers. How dare they take themselves out from under law. They had no right to do so. They were in covenant with God. They left, and they committed adultery.

Paul’s illustration of marriage defends against that charge in the case of those who follow Christ. To charge Christians with unlawfully or unrighteously abandoning the law of Moses is an unfounded charge because Christians are not in that category. Through faith in Christ, Christians have legally died to the covenant of law - the penalty has been paid, the law is satisfied - and have been freed to enter into union with Christ under the new covenant of grace.

And notice the end of verse 4. God’s point in releasing his followers from law and joining them to himself in Jesus is that “we might bear fruit for God.” It is the same as 6:4. We were buried with Christ in death, “so we too might walk in newness of life.” Fruit for God, newness of life, it is the same idea. The goal of grace is a new kind of fruitful life for those who trust God. Grace is counterintuitive to the religious person in his or her natural human state. The way you get people to bear fruit for God is by defining moral behavior through a set of rules and requiring the faithful to live

by those rules upon threat of shame, exclusion, expulsion or damnation. The external law guides the faithful to righteous living.

Paul says, “No. You’ve got it wrong on two fronts. First, you misunderstand the strength of grace to produce righteous living. But it’s not just that. You also misunderstand the weakness of the law. The law really is not as good at producing righteous living as you think it is.”

My daughters have listed what they want in a husband. Ability to throw a frisbee is at the top of the list; spiritual maturity, sense of humor, hard working. Can you imagine being married to the perfect man? If you make your list, what would it be like to be married to the perfect man? The perfect man knows you truly and deeply. He knows your secret thoughts. He knows what you do, say and think every moment of the day. He never makes mistakes, but he is aware of every mistake you make. And he lets you know it. You make an insensitive remark. He points it out. You use your time selfishly. He comments with his eyes. You are harsh with your child. He observes that you do the same kind of thing you just rebuked your child for doing. And then points out your inconsistency in discipline. And then gives you three rules to follow to be better next time. Each time you fail to do what you should or succeed at doing what you shouldn’t, you are reminded by his tone, his eyes, his silence that you are not the perfect woman. You do not live up. You are not acceptable. You are not worthy. Though he will permit you to keep trying.

Would you like to be married to that perfect man?

That man is the moral law. He evaluates you dispassionately, accurately, severely. Either you live up, or you do not. Your acceptability depends on your performance. There is always a phantom wife floating out there, the potential perfect you who you never succeed at emulating. Your perfect husband’s presence reminds you every day that you never live up, are never acceptable, never worthy, never truly loveable. That is what it is like to be married to the perfect man. That is what it is like to sincerely pursue life under a perfect moral law. You never live up.

But in Christ you have died to the law, so that you might be joined to another. The other is also a perfect man. But he accepts you by grace, not by performance. He finds you valuable, loveable, likeable, enjoyable. He died to make the legal payment, so that you could enter into a free union with him. He sees your failings, your every thought and word and action. And he desires for you to grow and mature. But not to earn his love. You have that. He understands, he cares. He gives himself. He enters into a deep spiritual and emotional union with you to help you become who he knows you can be. He has a lovely vision of you. And he is sure of it. What does Paul say in Ephesians 5:25, “Christ also loved the church and gave himself up for her; that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water and the word that he might present to himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless.”

When he looks at you, his eyes do not frown, his forehead does not wrinkle, his mouth does not purse. When he looks at you his eyes twinkle and shine from the joy in his heart. When he looks at you. When he looks at you, he sees purity, no spot or wrinkle. He sees loveliness. He sees the glory of his bride. He knows the journey still may be long and painful. He is not naïve. He is wise. He sees what lies ahead, and he trusts implicitly in his commitment to you and in his strength to follow through. In him you are loved, you are secure. He is prepared to give a lifetime to bring you home. And in him you find power and desire to enter the process of becoming all you are created to be.

How about that perfect man? How would you like to be married to him?

You have been released from the law, so that you might be joined to another, to Christ Jesus himself, the perfect man.

The New Way of the Spirit

Paul has contended through chapter 6 that there is a strength of grace that comes from a new union with God through Jesus Christ. Paul is getting ready in the rest of chapter 7 to prove his second

contention that the law is weak. We get a summary of both the strength of grace and the weakness of law in verses 5 and 6.

[Read Romans 7:5-6]

“For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were *aroused* by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death. But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.”

Paul describes our state under law as being in the flesh. The flesh is not necessarily a sinful state, at least not in the case of Jesus. In 1:3 Paul describes Jesus as “born of a descendant of David according to the flesh.” It just means human. Adam and Eve also existed in a state of human flesh that was without sin. But since their fall, the principle of sin described by Paul in chapter 5 has afflicted every person. We are not only of human flesh, we are of fallen, sinful human flesh. Our natural human state includes a darkening of the mind and the desires. We are born into this. And while we are in the flesh, Paul tells us that the sinful passions are aroused by the law. Those passions at work in the members of our body, our mind, our eyes, our tongue, our hands, our feet, bear fruit for death. This is the slavery to sin described in chapter 6. What Paul adds here is the idea that the law actually arouses those sinful passions. Rather than curbing sin, the law becomes a catalyst, stirring up sin. Paul will follow up on that idea in the passage to come.

To end the section Paul turns back again to the power of grace. We have been released from the law, “so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.”

The newness of the Spirit speaks to the reality of our union with Jesus under the covenant of grace. Through Moses God handed down a written code and challenged us to live according to that code. Through the covenant of grace, God calls us into union with Jesus Christ to live through him. This is the New Way of the Spirit. This is what is so new about the new covenant. He has written his word in our hearts by the presence of the Spirit. He has invited us into a new kind of intimacy, a new kind of joy, a new source of power. We do not bear fruit for God working out of our flesh. That is the struggle of human religion, straining to work against our fallen desires and broken thoughts to produce for God an honorable life. We can’t do it. We need God, not only to address the guilt of sin, that’s critical, but to also address the power of sin in human flesh. God addresses both of these needs in the covenant of grace in a way that was only symbolized or foreshadowed in the covenant of law. Now through the death and life of Jesus Christ, we have forgiveness of our guilt and we have new power through our new union with him.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as interesting or important or strange or confusing in Romans 7:1-6? What are some questions that the text raises for you?
2. The beginning section of this lesson lists four new things about the New Covenant in comparison to the Old Covenant. Review the list. Do you agree with the list? Does any item stand out to you as particularly interesting or important or helpful?
3. Paul uses the illustration of marriage to demonstrate two important truths. (1) Christians leave the covenant of law in a way that is morally upright. (2) Having left the covenant of law, Christians are able to enter into a new covenant which includes spiritual union with Jesus Christ.
In this lesson the analogy of marriage is extended to consider what it would be like to be in marriage to the perfect man who is “Law” and what it is like to be married to the perfect man who is Christ. How does this illustration help you think about life under law versus life under grace?
4. Paul says that the law arouses or brings out the sinful passions of the flesh. How do you understand what Paul is saying? How does the law interact with human nature to bring out sin? In what way is this true to your experience?

Lesson 17: The Weakness of Law I

Romans 7:7-12

Invitation and Objection

⁷ What shall we say then? Is the Law sin?

Short answer

May it never be!

Long answer

The Law increases awareness of sin – personal example

- (1) On the contrary, I would not have come to **know** sin except through the Law;
(a) for I would not have **known** about coveting if the Law had not said, “YOU SHALL NOT COVET.”
(b) ⁸ But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind;
(c) for apart from the Law sin is **dead**.

The Law enlivens sin – personal example

- (2) ⁹ I was once **alive** apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became **alive** and I **died**;
(a) ¹⁰ and this commandment, which was to result in **life**, proved to result in **death** for me;
(b) ¹¹ for sin, taking an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it **killed** me.

Conclusion

¹² So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

NASB

Introduction

In Romans chapter 6, Paul defends the gospel as a means to righteous living, disagreeing with his detractors that grace leads to sin. Paul argues that grace motivates and empowers for life. Paul does not stop with showing the strength of grace. He turns the argument around to show that, contrary to human religious assumption, which says, “If you do not give them Law, they will sin,” Paul argues that the Law is not all that good at producing righteousness. In chapter 7, Paul’s emphasis is on this side of his argument, the weakness of the Law. He has to be careful here. He does not want to attack the Mosaic Law. He wants to explain truth about the Law without bringing into question the goodness of God who gave the Law.

Just as we have two passages in chapter 6 defending the strength of grace, we now have two passages in chapter 7 showing the weakness of the Law. We are covering the first of those two lessons here in 7:7-12. Let’s read our passage.

[Read Romans 7:7-12]

Is the Law Sin? The Invitation objection and short answer (7:7a)

Paul follows the same rhetorical pattern he used in chapter 6. So, we start with an invitation, “What shall we say then?” And the objection, “Is the Law sin?”

Let’s clarify why that is the objection. Why is the objector asking, “Is the Law sin?”

In our last lesson we looked at the transition passage of 7:1-6. It is the bridge that moves us from considering the strength of grace to considering the weakness of Law. Using the illustration of marriage Paul argued that it is both right and good that we have moved out from under the old covenant relationship of Law and have moved into the new covenant relationship of grace. Our death to the Law in Jesus Christ justifies the move. Paul further argued that the move was necessary for the sake of righteous living. The Law has a negative effect on us. In 7:5 Paul says, “While we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death.”

That comment motivates the objection we have in 7:7. “What are you saying, Paul? If you are claiming that the Law stirs up sin in our hearts, what are you saying about the Law? We know what

stirs up sin in people's hearts. Sinful things stir up sin. Adult movies stir up sin. Spring break parties stir up sin. The lure of easy money stirs up sin. Are you putting the Law of Moses in that category? Is that the weakness of the Law? The Law is actually flawed, and in its flaw, it encourages our sin nature?"

It is an interesting charge. The moral and religious systems of law developed by people do tend to make concession to human desires. An obvious example is the paganism of the Roman Greek world that Paul ministered into. Worship of gods and goddesses could include temple prostitution, drunkenness, they could promote pride and rivalry. In our day, a cultural Christianity, seeking to conform to the morals of society, makes moral compromises in its moral code, redefining the moral law of the Bible. That compromise promotes sin. So, what is encouraged as good is not actually good. Is that the weakness of the Law? Is Paul saying the Law of Moses is morally compromised? If the Law stirs up sin, then isn't Paul saying the Law itself, in some way, is sinful?

In the middle of verse 7, Paul gives us his short answer to this charge that the Law of Moses is sinful. He writes, "May it never be!" It is his classic short answer. He outright rejects the idea.

Paul is not saying the Law itself is sin. He is saying that what is not sin, the Law, interacts with sinful human nature to stir up sin. He is going to explain this in his long answer in 7b-12. In these verses he makes two main assertions. First, he argues that the Law increases awareness of sin and second, that the Law enlivens sin. We are going to look at both in turn.

But also, notice the slight change in Paul's rhetorical pattern here at the start of his long answer. Three times he has used the phrase, "Do you not know..." to introduce a longer answer to an objection. And here in 7:7 we still have the verb "know" in the introduction, but it is not put forth in a question, and it is not put to the reader as "you know" but is rather a statement from the author. He says, "I would not have come to know." This switch to the first-person pronoun "I" goes along with a change in the type of illustration that Paul is going to give. In the earlier three examples, we had the illustrations of baptism, slavery, and marriage. In 7:7-12 the illustration is presented as Paul's personal experience. So, we will also need to keep that in mind as we observe the text.

Let's start with the first assertion that Paul makes in 7:7b-9. The Law increases knowledge or awareness of sin.

I would not have come to know sin except through the Law. The Long Answer (7b-12)

[Read Romans 7b-9]

(1) The Law increases awareness of sin. (7b-9)

Paul states that "he would not have come to know sin" without the help of the Law. Then he makes three separate points.

(a) First, he restates that main point in a way that moves from the general observation to a more specific case. He said he "would not have come to know sin except through the Law." Now he takes the 10th Commandment to make his case more specific, using the case of coveting, which is to desire what is not rightly his.

He is not going to give away why he chose the specific sin of coveting as his example. Though if you are going to choose one of the 10 Commandments, this is an interesting one to choose because it is the only one that forbids an internal desire, rather than an outward action. And it could be argued that the sin of coveting is one of the primary motivating sources for the other sins. "Do not murder;" "Do not commit adultery;" "Do not steal;" are all outward actions. They are all on the extreme end of the sin continuum of thought, word and deed. These are the extreme deeds of sin. The sin of coveting, once fully formed in the human heart, has the power to move a person to murder, to adultery, to theft. Paul's choice of examples both takes us to the 10 Commandments, the core summary of the Mosaic Law, and takes us inside the human heart to the struggle of human desire. The struggle of coveting.

(b) Paul next points out in verse 8 that sin responds to the command against coveting by coveting. "But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind."

I want to think about Paul's words more precisely in a moment. His example raises a number of questions that are hard to answer. But in looking to the details, I do not want to miss the most direct and simple point being made by Paul. Paul is simply affirming a truth that every caretaker of a pre-school child recognizes. If you want to create the desire in a child to act in a certain way, simply tell the child that they are not allowed to do it. Reverse psychology depends on a negative internal reaction to Law. We don't want to do what we are told to do. Of course, we wise up pretty quickly to reverse psychology. But the internal reaction to Law remains as a basic principle of human nature.

Let's say you have a nice grassy Lawn outside your school or outside your office. You walk by it every day. You have never walked across the grass or sat on it to eat your lunch. You never thought about it. You simply walk by. Then one day coming out of your building, you turn to walk by and notice a new sign on the Lawn which reads, "Keep off the grass." As you read that sign, what is the first desire of your heart?

I can take a guess. My guess is that your first desire would be to walk over and step your foot onto the grass. What we cannot do becomes more desirable simply by being told we cannot do it. Human nature responds adversely to moral law.

We want to have what we are told we cannot have. We want to do what we are told we cannot do. That's the simple general point being made here about human nature. Law increases our awareness of sin by confronting our nature with specific moral definition and authority, which then creates a response against that Law. If we are able to honestly and accurately assess our inner response, we see that the Law of life draws out an opposing response of death.

We have talked about how Jesus challenges our claim to goodness in the sermon on the mount. It is not unusual for a person to claim to be basically decent by saying, "You know, I have never committed murder or adultery or theft."

"Really?" Jesus teaches us that these things are the extreme actions on a continuum. To have never murdered is also to never hit, to never torn down with your words, to never thought hateful thoughts of another person. Are you really so good that you have never done these things?

Paul is taking this a step further. He is saying that it is not only a problem with moral education. In the sermon on the mount Jesus gives us a higher understanding of morality. Paul tells us that the lack of education is not our problem. The more we understand the actual requirements of moral law, the more we understand what we ought not do, the more we want to do that which we ought not do. I have latent desires in me that I have never considered. And the Law brings out those desires.

Not only do I have latent desires for things that are immoral. I also have a basic desire to define for myself what I can and cannot do. My nature resists moral law that comes from outside me. The more you tell me I cannot do, the more I become aware that I want to do what I am told I cannot do. The more defined the Law is, like the Mosaic Law, for example, the better equipped that Law is to bring out the rebellion in my soul.

There are ways out of this. I can reject the moral law. I can call the Bible a flawed human document bound by its own culture. And then, I can go command by command to redefine moral law. By defining the Bible as relative, I remove its authority over me. I am the judge of which moral commands apply and which do not apply. That relieves some of the pressure coming from inside of me. I am no longer disobedient to moral authority, because I am the moral authority.

Another way to remove the tension that moral law creates in my soul is to reject the Lawgiver. If I claim that God cannot be known or that God does not communicate or that God does not exist, then I free myself from confrontation with any moral standard.

Another way is to acknowledge God above but keep him at a distance. Religious ceremony can be very helpful with this. I go to church, I say my prayers, I follow the ritual. And I keep my head down. I

live out my life as best I can, trying not to call attention to myself. It's also helpful if I do not go in much for internal reflection. Just live and let live.

However we do it, by removing or lessening moral law, we can feel better about our own condition. The less we try to live according to a standard, the easier it is to convince ourselves we meet the standard. We still share in the experience Paul describes, but we can be quick to discount it, or stuff it down or shove it aside.

But if I truly try to follow God's moral law according to his moral definition, including thought, word and deed, the more I try, the more I will be confronted by the struggle within.

Paul indicated this purpose of Law back in 3:20. He stated, "through the Law comes knowledge of sin." Here he is telling us that it is not only the educational quality of Law that makes us aware of sin. Being faced with Law triggers sin in us, and so, makes us aware of the sin within through our own experience. We know we are sinful because of how our heart responds to moral law.

(c) Paul's third point about the awareness of sin emphasizes this truth that the Law interacts in way with human nature to bring about an experiential awareness of sin. He says in 8a, "for apart from Law sin is dead."

Sin lies dormant like a snake in cold weather. The Law is a stick. When poked the snake is stirred to life.

(2) The Law enlivens sin. (7:9-11)

This moves us into the second main assertion about the Law. The first is that the Law increases awareness of sin. The second is that the Law enlivens sin or brings sin to life. As I just said, Law does not make us aware of sin simply by teaching us. Law makes us aware of sin by reacting with our fleshly nature in such a way as to enliven the rebellion in our soul. This assertion comes in 9-11.

[Read Romans 9-11]

The specifics are going to be a little more challenging to interpret. What does Paul mean that he was "alive apart from Law"? We will get to that. But like with the first assertion, I think there is a fairly straightforward idea here about sin that we can identify.

Paul claims in verse 9 that without the Law he was alive. When the commandment came sin was enlivened. The result is that Paul died. He then makes two specific points about this assertion.

(a) The first specific point in verse 10. And it states that the design of moral law was to provide life for the one who would live by it. The commands of Mosaic Law are lifegiving commands. We are not talking about a flawed moral Law. We are talking about a moral law that will protect human beings from damaging and destructive actions and require human beings to act in such a way that provides positive life experiences. Ironically, this Law that is designed to protect and provide ends up resulting in death.

(b) The second specific point in verse 11 identifies sin as the problem. Paul repeats the same language from verse 8. "Sin, taking an opportunity through the commandment deceived me and through it killed me." The culprit is not the Law. The culprit is sin. It is sin responding to the commandment.

We might wonder whether or not human beings are morally neutral. It is like looking at a flask of clear liquid in a chemistry experiment. Is the liquid good? Is it bad? Is it healthy? Is it toxic? It is tough to tell by sight. We need a catalyzing agent to drop into the clear liquid to let us know what we are dealing with. Drop a catalyst into heroine and it turns purple. Moral law serves as a catalyst for the human soul. It makes evident the sin within. We are faced with a Law that is good. But the desire of sin tells us the opposite is good. It deceives us. When we act on those desires we turn from God and experience the consequences of our actions. We experience death as our souls die to God, as our lives play out as a physical husk separated from the life of God within, and ultimately through physical death and eternal separation from God. Sin has won. It has deceived, and it has killed.

(3) Conclusion: the Law is holy. (7:12)

Paul concludes in verse 12 with his view of the Law. "So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good."

Back to where we began. Paul's opponents heard him say in the earlier passage that the Law arouses sinful passions. They then suggest that Paul is calling the Law sin. Paul argues here that the Law is not sin. The Law is holy, righteous and good. The problem is with fallen human nature. The Law serves as a catalyst which induces rebellious desire. So, though the Law was designed to provide and protect human beings, the sin nature of human beings interacts with moral law in such a way that we sin even more. This catalyzing effect that Law has when applied to sinful human nature brings to life the sin within, making us more aware of our sin.

That I think is the simple point of this passage. Law, though good, brings out the sin within.

Whose experience is this?

Now we need to consider the challenge this passage presents to interpretation. Looking at some of the details of the passage, interpreters struggle to understand whether Paul is really talking about himself or whether he is using the first person to talk about someone else.

Paul:

For example, Paul says in verse 8 that he would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "You shall not covet." When did Paul not know about coveting? He was a Jewish boy. And he was taught at home by Jewish parents. He was taught in school by Jewish Rabbis. How old would he be before he learned the 10 Commandments? 5 years old? 7 years old? 3 years old? We don't know, but we have to guess it was pretty young.

Also, what does he mean by saying in verse 9 he was "once alive apart from Law?" When was little Paul ever apart from Law? And what does he mean by saying he was alive apart from Law? He argued in chapter 5 that from the time of Adam to Moses and beyond that all sin and all experience the consequence of sin. Do we need to assume an age of accountability in order to understand what Paul is saying? Is he suggesting that he was innocent until he could comprehend Law? What age would that be? And why does he not explain that more clearly?

Historic Adam:

Some scholars have noticed potential historic allusions in the text. At first, verse 9 seems to fit with Adam's experience. "I once was alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died." The reference to deception also makes us think of Adam and Eve being deceived to eat. It is not a perfect allusion though. Adam was alive apart from Law. But sin did not come alive in Adam until after he broke the commandment. Adam and Eve are the two people for whom it does not seem right to ascribe sin as the internal motive.

Historic Israel:

Some have noticed an allusion to Israel. Saved out of Egypt, Israel received the Law at Mount Sinai and quickly broke that Law. Then God's anger burned against Israel. He stated his desire to wipe them from the book of life, though instead showed them mercy. Is the idea that Israel did not sin as Adam did by breaking specific commands, but when the Law was given at Mount Sinai sin came to life? I think an allusion to Israel fits even less than an allusion to Adam.

I am willing to recognize the possibility of some historic reference to Adam or Israel in Paul's choice of language. But if it is there intentionally, I think it is in the background only. Thinking on the sin of Adam and of Cain and of David and of Israel, they all enrich the experience Paul is talking about. But none fit really well with the experience he described.

Everyman:

I like Douglas Moo's interpretation that Paul is speaking about Law and sin from his own personal experience. He has felt what he describes. But he has framed the experience in a way that matches general human experience. Moo calls it the experience of Everyman. And I like that. I think that fits with Paul's language.

That Paul is speaking somewhat metaphorically is clear. He continues to personify sin as he did in chapter six. He speaks about sin as though it has a life of its own. He makes sin the culprit. It is sin that took the opportunity afforded by the commandment. It is a literary way of describing the internal struggle of the mind and soul that goes on in a person.

Paul's use of alive and dead are also metaphoric. How is sin dead or alive. And how is Paul dead while still alive. Paul's language is almost the language of poetry though he is clearly using prose argumentation. I am not saying that it really is poetry. But I am reminded of poetry by the effort Paul is making to describe human experience. Calling sin dead describes our lack of awareness or struggle with sin. It is the dormant snake within. We go through some days feeling pretty good about ourselves without any apparent moral struggle. Sin seems dead. On other days, the struggle is miserable. We desire, and we resist. We desire, and we give in. We feel sin alive in us.

I think that Paul has framed this passage in the first person to bring us into the realm of personal experience. It is experience that Paul is aware of himself. Yet, he also uses more general language that cannot be attributed to a specific time or event in Paul's life. By using this more general language he describes the experience of Everyman.

I also think that Paul's specific focus on Mosaic Law does not limit his argument to Mosaic Law. Mosaic Law is the highest form of Law that we might encounter because Mosaic Law was communicated by God through Moses. Christians and Jews recognize Mosaic Law as Bible, as the very word of God. If the Mosaic Law is weak in this way, then all Law is weak in this way. While the principle Paul argues here is made specifically in regard to Mosaic Law, I believe it is to be understood as a broader principle. Genuine moral law has this effect on people, whatever the source. It is a problem for all religions and for all moral authorities. People do not like to be held morally accountable. The sin within Everyman resists.

The Broccoli Illustration

However we understand the specifics of the experience Paul describes, we have to come back to the main question he is answering and to the conclusion he draws. Paul is answering the objection that his perspective makes the Law out to be sin. Paul, says, "By no means. It does not make the Law out to be sin." His point is simple. The Law is good, holy and righteous, meant to produce life. But because of fallen human nature, when human beings are exposed to righteous moral command that command serves as a catalyst to stir up sin. We become aware of sin in our souls by the natural rebellious response in our hearts. The Law is not sin. It is sin that takes opportunity through the commandment to bring about death.

I'd like to end with an experience that came to me as a Dad that affirmed to me the teaching that we are not born morally neutral. In our family it is known as the broccoli example. I asked Julia's permission to share it with you.

Julia was about a year old. I know because we were still living in Zagreb at the time. She was a sweet, sweet baby, observing the world with big blue eyes. She smiled easily and often. She went to sleep without a fuss. The perfect little girl.

Sitting in her high chair, I was watching over her as she ate her dinner. And she knocked her broccoli off her tray onto the floor. You know, no big deal. I put it back and said, "Julia, don't play with your broccoli." She knocked it off again. I said, "Julia, don't do that again." She knocked it off again. "Julia, if you knock your broccoli on the floor one more time, I am going to have to give you a spank, spank on your hand." I put the broccoli back. And at that moment Julia's face turned very serious. She

picked up a piece of broccoli, slowly held it out over the floor, and with her big blue eyes starring right into mine, she let it drop.”

It was the clearest example of defiance I had ever experienced in my life. My sweet little girl. The Law came from me and sin, taking the opportunity through the commandment, deceived her.

This is our universal experience as fallen human beings. The Law is intended to produce life but because of our sin nature, the Law stirs up desires of death. Moral law, though good, righteous and holy, is not enough to bring about life within fallen human beings. It can help curb a number of outward symptoms. But our internal problem is at a critical level. Moral law reveals sin without effecting essential internal transformation. We need more than the health regimen that is moral law. We need heart surgery and that only comes through the covenant of grace.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as interesting or important or strange or confusing in Romans 7:7-12? What are some questions that the text raises for you?

2. Paul concluded in 7:1-6 that it is better for us to move from the covenant of Law to the covenant of Grace because of a problem with the covenant of Law. He said that Law arouses or stirs up sin in us. That could result either (1) from a problem with the law – the law is flawed, the law is sin or (2) from a problem in us. Paul concludes that the problem is not in the law but in our fallen human nature. The problem is sin within.

That does not mean that the question was not a good question. It is possible for moral law to be flawed. Consider these two questions”

(a) What are some commands in the Mosaic Law that people today might call immoral or sinful?

(b) What are some moral ideas promoted in your culture (the religious culture, Christian culture, or secular culture) that you might consider immoral or sinful?

3. What are one or two examples from your personal experience that help you identify with Paul’s main point that when people are confronted with moral law, their fallen human nature resists? When have you experienced this?

4. Paul’s argument does not require that we resist obedience to a moral command every single time a moral obligation is put on us. There are times that we are quite willing to go along with a moral command. Why do you think a person is more likely to obey than to resist a moral command? Is it personality? Is it upbringing? Is it what they hope to get out of it? Is it something else?

Lesson 18: The Weakness of Law II

Romans 7:13-25

Objection

¹³ Therefore did that which is good become *a cause of* death for me?

Short answer

May it never be!

Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, so that through the commandment sin would become utterly sinful.

Long answer

Cycle 1: A. I am of sinful flesh. B. I desire good. C. I do evil. D. Not I, but sin does it.

¹⁴ For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. ¹⁵ For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I *would* like to *do*, but I am doing the very thing I hate. ¹⁶ But if I do the very thing I do not want to *do*, I agree with the Law, *confessing* that the Law is good. ¹⁷ So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.

Cycle 2: A. I am of sinful flesh. B. I desire good. C. I do evil. D. Not I, but sin does it.

¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good *is* not. ¹⁹ For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. ²⁰ But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.

Cycle 3: A. I am of sinful flesh. B. I desire good. C. I do evil. D. Not I, but sin does it.

²¹ I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. ²² For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, ²³ but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.

²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin.

NASB

Introduction

In Romans 7:13-25, Paul masterfully describes the inner struggle of the conscious and particularly the weakness of the will to do the good he knows he should do. Scholars through the ages have argued back and forth whether Paul is describing here a Christian experience or a non-Christian experience. I have preached it both ways. I changed my mind about what Paul is doing in this passage.

In interpretation, context is king. In this passage arguments in the text exist for interpreting it as a Christian experience or as a non-Christian experience. The mistake we do not want to make is the mistake of interpreting the text based on our own personal experience. We don't want to say, "I felt this as a Christian therefore I know this is a Christian experience." Or, "I felt this as a non-Christian therefore I know this is a non-Christian experience." That is importing our own experience into the text as a basis for interpretation. We also don't want to assume an interpretation based on our theological system. "Christian's don't struggle like this, so this cannot be a Christian experience." How do we know Christian's don't struggle like this? If Paul is teaching that this is a Christian experience, then that's how we have to take it.

Paul gives us the means for interpreting the passage by paying close attention to the context. He has repeatedly used the same rhetorical pattern by putting forth an objection, giving a short answer to the objection and then giving a longer answer for why he rejects the objection. We have the same pattern here. So, our interpretation starts with understanding the objection. And then determining how this passage serves as an answer to that objection.

Objection

This passage does not start with an invitation, a “What then?” It moves directly into the objection question. “Therefore did that which is good become *a cause of* death for me?” Paul previously stated in 7:5 that the law arouses sinful passions and produces fruit for death. This negative take on the law motivated two objections. The first objection, “Is the Law sin?”, we addressed in our last lesson in 7:7-12. Paul said that it is not. The flaw is not in the law but in human nature. Paul concluded that the Law is holy and good. This current objection takes his remark that the Law produces fruit for death and suggests that Paul, though calling the Law good, is making the Law out to be the cause of death. Paul has a short answer for that claim.

Short answer

“May it never be!”

As he did back in 6:2, Paul elaborates a little on his short answer before moving into the long answer. He writes, “May it never be! Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, so that through the commandment sin would become utterly sinful.”

Sin is the culprit. This is consistent with 5:12, “through one man sin entered into the world and death through sin, and so death spread to all men.” The sinful impulses of human nature effect our death when confronted by moral law. This will happen with or without a specifically revealed covenant of law to live by. But without clear moral obligation, we can live in a state of self-denial regarding our own nature. The fuzzier our moral vision the more likely we are to convince ourselves and to claim to be basically good. Faced with a higher, clearly defined law to follow the sin in us becomes utterly sinful. The people of Israel, through the whole 1500 year period from Moses to Jesus, teach humanity that no social moral agenda will produce righteous people. God told them ahead of time through Moses that they would break his covenant and bring the full extent of curses on themselves, even to the point of banishment from the land, that’s Deuteronomy chapters 30 and 31 (Deuteronomy 30:1-6; 30:19-20; 31:14-22). Generation after generation the curse of sin worked in the lives even of those who believed. Given the best possible opportunity to live according to a covenant of law, human beings cannot do it. Believing Israelites were saved by grace yet continued the struggle to live for God. When a person attempts to live the Law from the inside out, their sin within is shown to themselves to be utterly sinful.

Paul’s long answer does not focus on the theological perspective of Israel under Mosaic Law. We are not speaking theoretically here. And we are not looking at the experience of a whole community. As he did in our previous passage, Paul takes us inside a human being to the inner struggle of individual experience.

Long answer

Just as with all our previous long answers, this long answer begins with a sentence using the verb “know”. Paul changes it up slightly. In the first three long answers he used the second person plural “you know,” in the previous long answer he used first person singular “I know,” and in this long answer he uses the third person plural “we know” but then shifts back to the first person singular “I”. The long answer starts, “For we know that the Law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh...”

The structure of the long answer in 7:14-25 repeats four truths over again in three cycles. Let’s walk through the text first and then we will come back to the question about whose experience Paul is describing, the Christian or non-Christian. The four truths repeated three times are these.

A. I am of sinful flesh. B. I desire good. C. I do evil. D. Not I, but sin does it.

By cycling through these four truths three times Paul builds up the experience of frustration. It’s a cycle that cannot be broken. You get the feeling of being stuck. Being powerless. I am going to read it quickly with that frustration in mind.

[Read Romans 7:14-25]

The three cycles occur in 14-17, 18-20 and 21-23. With a double conclusion in 24-25. The four truths come out rather clearly. First, I am of sinful flesh. Paul says it these three ways in the three cycles. (A) "I am of the flesh, sold into bondage to sin."; "I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh."; and "I find then the principle that evil is present in me."

This first truth comes out of Paul's recognition of the next two truths. He knows he is of sinful flesh because he desires good yet does evil. This is how he describes his desire for good. (B) "If I do the very thing I do not wish to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that it is good."; "the wishing of good is present in me...the good that I wish, I do not do."; and "I joyfully concur with the Law of God in the inner man." Though he recognizes what is good and desires to do good, Paul confesses his inability to do good and his inevitable doing of evil. This is how he describes his actions. (C) "That which I am doing I do not understand for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate."; "The doing of good is not present in me...but I practice the very evil that I do not wish."; and "I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind, and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members."

Paul recognizes a fourth truth. He says he wants to do good. He confesses he does not. This led him to the conclusion that he is of sinful flesh. But while acknowledging the sinfulness of his own flesh, he also personifies sin and blames sin. This is how he describes sin. (D) "So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which indwells me."; "I am no longer the one doing it but sin which dwells in me." And "I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind, and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members."

These are the four truths of his individual experience. When attempting to fulfill the Law this is what he sees in himself.

A. I am of sinful flesh. B. I desire good. C. I do evil. D. Not I, but sin does it.

Whose experience is this?

Under what circumstances does this person feel this way? Whose experience does this describe? The easy answer is, "Paul's. It describes Paul's experience." I agree. I think it describes Paul's experience, while also describing Everyman's experience. It describes your experience and it describes my experience. That's why we readily connect to this passage.

We still have to determine what the circumstances of this experience are. Is this the experience of the Christian or the non-Christian? And we are using those terms in the way Paul would use them. We are not thinking of a nominal or cultural Christian. So, to rephrase, we could ask whether this is the experience of one who has been made alive in Christ or one who has not been made alive in Christ? In his commentary on Romans, Douglas Moo (*NICNT: The Epistle to the Romans*, 445.) provides solid lists for both sides. Here is a summary of his lists, five points for each.

We could make this argument to say that Paul is speaking of one already made alive in Christ.

1. The pronoun "I" must refer to Paul himself, and the shift from the past tenses of 7:7-13 to the present tenses of 7:14-25 can be explained only if Paul is describing his present experience.
2. Only the regenerate "delight in God's law" (7:22), seek to obey it (7:15-20), and "serve" it (7:25); the unregenerate do not "seek after God" (3:11) and cannot "submit to the law of God" (8:7).
3. Whereas the "mind" of people outside of Christ is presented by Paul as opposed to God (1:28), the "mind" of the person in this text is a positive medium, by which the person "serves the Law of God."
4. The person must be a Christian because only a Christian possesses the "inner person" as used in 2 Cor. 4:16 and Eph. 3:16.
5. The passage concludes, after Paul's mention of deliverance wrought by God in Christ, with a reiteration of the divided state of the person (7:24-25).

Or, we could make this argument to say that Paul is speaking of one who is not alive in Christ.

1. The connection of the person with the flesh points back to 7:5.
2. The person throughout this passage struggles “on his/her own” (7:25) without the aid of the Holy Spirit.
3. The person is “under the power of sin” (7:14), a state from which every believer is released (6:2, 6, 11, 18-22).
4. As the unsuccessful struggle of 7:15-20 shows, the person is a “prisoner of the law of sin” (7:23). Yet, 8:2 proclaims that believers have been set free from this same “law of sin (and death).”
5. While Paul makes clear that believers will continue to struggle with sin (6:12-13; 13:12-14), what is depicted in 7:14-25 is not just a struggle with sin but a defeat by sin.

If you would like a copy of that list, you can get it in the notes on the resource page at observetheword.com. I am not going to take the time to go through the argument point by point. I will give you my opinion though. I do not like the framing of the question as Christian or non-Christian. If pressed, I would say non-Christian, meaning one not yet made alive in Jesus Christ.

In my very first lesson in this series on Romans, I mentioned that my study of Romans began after a debate with my brother Charlie about an issue in Romans. This was the passage, and this was the issue. I don’t remember which side I took. And I don’t remember which side he took. I remember having the realization that we could each make a pretty good list from the text like the two lists above. But evaluation of the lists needed to happen with an understanding of Paul’s argument in chapter 7 but then also in chapters 5-8 but then also the argument of 1-11. Understanding the whole argument gives us the context of this particular passage. I think I have an understanding of the larger argument and the place of this passage in that argument.

The argument of Romans 1-11 is that the righteousness of God has been accomplished through the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is our big picture argument. In 1-4, we were shown that God reveals himself righteous by making a way to declare his followers righteous through grace received by faith. Paul continued in 5-8 to argue that God did not only want forgiven followers but transformed followers. He wants followers who are not just declared righteous but who begin to live righteously. In chapters 6 and 7, Paul is showing that grace is the plan for producing transformed believers who live righteously. Under law, believers are inevitably handicapped by their own sinful flesh. Even with the desire to live for God, we cannot do it. In this immediate passage, the charge is that the law is a cause of death. Paul answers, showing us these two things. (1) Sin is the cause of death. (2) No matter what our understanding or desire for the Law may be, we do not have the ability to live it out. Paul is writing about the experience of the internal struggle of one under law because that is what this argument is about.

I do want to mention a couple of the points in the lists above. I do not find a problem with Paul speaking in first person present to describe a general experience of one under law. I think Paul is using this as a literary choice as a preacher might do, entering first person to explain a past event in a way that draws his listeners into the experience.

I do find the argument that a non-believer cannot delight in the law of God to be one of the strongest reasons to see this experience as a Christian experience because Paul says in 8:7 that the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God and does not submit to God. But I believe it is a bit more complicated than that. There are a number of times in the Psalms where David says things like, “I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your Law is within my heart (Psalm 40:8).” That gives Paul justification for describing a person under law who can delight in the Law of God, yet not overcome the sin nature of the flesh.”

I also find the language of this person as a “sold into bondage to sin” directly contrary to Paul’s argument for grace in chapter 6. By grace we are “no longer to be slaves to sin”, commanded to not let sin “reign in our mortal body”, and told that “sin shall not be master over you.” Yet, this person

claims he is unable to present the members of his body to God because he is “a prisoner of the law of sin which is in his members.”

Paul describes in this passage the person under the law. In doing so, he highlights the power of sin and the weakness of the law to effect change in the inner person.

The Person Under the Law

Still thinking about whose experience this is, we can say that all people live to some degree under law, even if it is only a law of their own making. To some degree everyone experiences something like this. Christian, non-Christian, Muslim, Jew, Atheist. We explode in anger or give way in lust, and we don't like it. We tell ourselves that is not us. We don't want to behave that way. We will do better next time. Maybe we have some success, but eventually we do the same exact thing we said we were no longer going to do. And in that, this is a universal experience.

But the intense internal awareness shown in this experience is not common to all. And the continual bondage to sin is not true of believers who are growing in grace. Let's consider several examples of people living under law and then end with the example of a person growing in grace. We'll start with the self-righteous legalist.

Self-righteous Legalist – Older Brother

The self-righteous legalist may not possess clear inner awareness of his moral failings. He would say he “delights” in the law of God because he knows that is the spiritual way to say it, though in truth he delights in an external version of the law that provides him a sense of inner worth and outward status. He feels successful in his obedience and superior to the disobedient.

Jesus' story of the two sons in Luke 15:11-32 gives us an example of the self-righteous legalist. It's not the younger son who goes off to live as he wants to live. Pastor Tim Keller does a great job showing how both sons live according to the law. The younger son according to a law that says you have to follow your heart and the older son a law that says you have to stay home. Search Tim Keller, [The Prodigal Sons](#), to listen to a great sermon on that. The primary target of Jesus' parable happens to be the self-righteous legalist, the pharisee, it is the older brother.

The older son stays home and accepts all the moral obligation of a son. Yet, at the end of the story, the older son finds himself bitter, standing outside, refusing to join the celebration. He dishonors the Father. The Father has to come out to him. The older son has appeared to obey the moral obligation of a son but that obedience is not motivated by love for the Father. The older son is jealous of the calf, the ring, the robe given to the younger because the older son sees those things as his right. He has been obedient not out of love but out of gain. The Father owes him for his obedience. He feels the right to make demands on the Father. Though he stayed home in obedience, his heart was far from the heart of the Father.

As a self-righteous legalist, he believed that he had succeeded in conforming to the law without ever addressing the issues of the heart. He never cried out as Paul did, “Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?” The Father was the problem. The younger brother was the problem. He never came to the realization of his true state. In the parable he is left standing outside the house, excluded by choice from the celebration.

So, though Paul's description applies to a person under the Law, I think we have to conclude it does not apply to every person under the Law. It is possible to be self-deluded as a law keeper that we are doing just fine.

Sadly, many who call themselves Christians will identify more with the older brother than with Paul's experience in Romans 7. They are first question legalists, who believe that Christian law makes them acceptable to God. They do not depend on the grace of God for their salvation. For them it is faith plus the doing of the Law. And they are going to be left outside the wedding feast.

Tortured Legalist – Martin Luther

There is another kind of first question legalist who believes that the Christian law is the means of salvation and yet is aware of his or her inability to live up to that law. He is not a self-righteous legalist. He is a tortured legalist. He has a high awareness of the requirements of the law and of his inability to live out the law. But he has no understanding of grace. The young monk Martin Luther was a classic example of the tortured legalist.

Martin Luther paid close attention to the system of penance he was required to follow. He understood the Church's teaching that confession was not valid if the one confessing did so only to gain the reward of heaven. Confession was only valid if it was motivated from the heart by love of God. That idea nearly drove Martin Luther mad. He realized outward obedience did not fulfill the law of the Church, unless his inner motivation was love for God. It would be hard to find a young monk who did a better job of outwardly obeying Church law. Yet famously, he once spent six hours in confession with the vicar of his order Johann von Staupitz, confessing the insincerity of his confession. Luther wrote, "I was myself more than once driven to the very abyss of despair so that I wished I had never been created. Love God? I hated him!"

As a tortured legalist, Martin Luther could have agreed with Paul's description of life under the law. He could have cried out, "Wretched man that I am, who will set me free from the body of this death?" But he did not know the answer.

Concerned about young Luther, Dr. Staupitz made an interesting move. He assigned Luther to the post of Bible teacher at Wittenberg University. Required to teach the *Letter to the Romans*, Luther mulled over the meaning of Paul's argument, paying particular consideration to the thesis in Romans 1:17. Luther later wrote about the moment when God opened his eyes to the gospel.

"Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection of the righteousness of God and the statement that 'the righteous will live by faith.' Then I grasped that the righteousness of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise...If you have a true faith that Christ is your Savior, then at once you have a gracious God, for faith leads you in and opens up God's heart and will, that you should see pure grace and overflowing love. (Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand, A Life of Martin Luther*, 49-50)."

Now Luther could at last finish Paul's statement, crying out not only, "What a wretched man I am."; but also adding, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

Second question Legalist – King David.

Not all legalists are first question legalists. Perhaps King David would identify closely with this experience Paul has described, but I would call David a second question legalist. He knew that the first question of covenant, "What makes me acceptable?" was 100% grace. But he would have rightly answered the second question of covenant, "How then should I live?" by pointing to Mosaic Law. In Psalm 119, he refers to his delight in the Law of God over and over. He says things like, "Make me walk in the path of your commandments for I delight in it (119:35)." In his mind, David loved the Law of God. In his life, he struggled to live according to the Law of God.

Paul's concluding two verses in 7:24-25 fit David well, with one exception. I can easily imagine David writing in the Psalms, "Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin."

The one exception is that David could not yet have cried out, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" It was his lot in life to be born under the Mosaic Covenant. With all the blessing that provided, like the prophets of old, he could only yearn for the coming day of Jesus Christ. He could not experience the fruit of spiritual union with Christ that comes through the covenant of Grace.

The Christian Legalist

The experience that Paul has described can apply to Christians both as first question legalists and as second question legalists. Martin Luther's earlier life is an example of a person who calls himself a Christian but comes from a tradition or a personal understanding of Christianity that essentially rejects the gospel of grace.

Paul's experience can also apply true Christians who have placed their faith in Jesus and, having been born again, enjoy union with Jesus. Like David they know that they are accepted 100% by grace, but also like David they believe that the second question is answered in following a covenant of law. They are living out the new covenant as though it is the old wineskin of law.

This is not an unusual path for a true believer in Jesus. In fact, I believe this is the most natural course for people to take when starting out in Christian faith because we are naturally legalists at heart. Even though God tells us we are completely accepted by his grace because of his love, we still feel inside the need to prove ourselves. We feel valuable because of our success. We feel loveable because we do what is right. When we fail, we feel unlovable, we feel unworthy, we feel bad about ourselves and our relationship with God. We feel this way because at heart we define our worth and lovability on the basis of works we do, not the grace we have received. This is the natural direction of our fallen nature. In conjunction with that, the natural direction of our fallen nature is also to try to be obedient in our own power, out of the strength of our human flesh. Fallen nature misses these two truths of grace: our worth is in Christ and our strength is in Christ.

The way of grace must be learned. We need to be disciplined into it. We need it taught. We need it modeled. We need to see it lived out.

Unfortunately, we often create communities of Christian law. Many churches and movements that do well preaching grace to non-believers, bringing them to the cross, after the cross, communicate to believers a way of Christian law. This can be taught strongly, or it can be taught by omission. If we only hear what we are supposed to be doing and not doing, then our hearts will naturally pick up on the law. We also need to hear the teaching of grace. We need to hear who we are in Jesus. We need to hear of our security in him and his love for us. We need to hear about our new union, our new hope, our new heart, our new power. We need to hear about grace, so that we can put the commands of the new covenant into the right context.

Is it possible for Romans 7 to describe the experience of a true Christian? Yes. Though, if this experience is the defining, ongoing experience of a believer, as a slave to sin unable to do good, I would say he or she is not growing in understanding of the covenant of grace. The Christian who lives like this is a Christian under a covenant of law, even if it's Christian law.

The Person Growing in Grace

Let's conclude, considering the experience of the believer growing in Grace. Here is an important distinction. I do not believe that Paul is describing the normal, ongoing experience of a Christian who is growing in grace. I do believe that all Christians growing in grace have this experience at times as they grow. The norm for Christians growing in grace should not be one of consistent failure described as bondage to sin. Grace brings about victory in the struggle, not absolute victory in the struggle. At least not yet in this life. We will all fail. But we will also experience victory and a growing peace even in the struggle.

If you are walking with Christ in grace, then yours is not the experience of the tortured legalist. You will still grow, still suffer, still struggle. That is going to bear out in chapter 8. But you will not be defined by your slavery to sin as Paul defines the experience here. Romans 8:2, "The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death."

If you believe you are walking with Christ in grace, and yet also define your ongoing experience as Paul describes here, you should share your experience with a mature believer you know who seems to walk with the peace and joy of Christ. Learning to walk in grace is very much a learning process. We often make the mistake of starting out at a run, not realizing we are running the way of law.

Often, we need to start over. We need to learn to sit up and then to crawl. This might come easily. But to stand and walk requires encouragement, instruction, and a helping hand. Running and jumping comes after walking. It's a process of growth in grace. It does not preclude stumbling or tiring out or falling back into our old stride. And there are also always future challenges. Walking by grace as a single person is different than walking by grace as a married person which is different than walking by grace as a parent. Walking by grace as a student is different than walking by grace as a working person which is different than walking by grace as a manager. Walking by grace in your 20s is different than walking by grace in your 40s which is different than walking by grace in your 60s. Life keeps bringing new races to run, new paths to walk, new challenges for trust, and new needs for the fruit of the Spirit.

There are other special reasons why the walk of grace may be a struggle for you. Reasons that go deeper than just the natural process of spiritual growth and the changes of life circumstances. Our sinful desires and habits are developed and affected by a variety of issues that can include emotional woundedness, genetic disposition, chemical imbalance, spiritual oppression and addiction. It is possible that your struggle has complicated causes. A relationship of grace with Jesus is the solution. Still, we all need help getting there. Because of these potential complications, it really is necessary to find an older believer you can trust and to find a small group community you can be part of. We grow in grace in community with members of the body of Christ.

The Personification of sin – who is responsible?

Let's close with one of the outstanding aspects of Paul's description here in Romans 7. I think Paul is giving us mental health at its best. I was once told that if we could release people from their deep sense of guilt, we could free 50% of the people currently in mental institutions.

Freedom from guilt does not come from denial of guilt. This is part of the mental problem. Western mental health teaches us to deny guilt and to deny responsibility. Yet, as moral creatures we know we are guilty and responsible. We may shove it aside for a time, but the inner voice can't let go.

Out of context, we could read Paul's personification of sin as supporting a victim mentality that rejects blame. Take verse 17, "So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which indwells me." Is that what Paul is doing? Is he shifting blame away from me the person.

No. He is not. Honestly opening our heart and our soul up to the requirements of law is like holding our inner self up to a mirror. When we see ourselves as we are, we come away crying with Paul, "Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?" Mental and emotional healing starts with an honest assessment of our spiritual state. It starts with saying, "I cannot live up to this. I have not lived up to this. I have sinned. I cannot stop sinning." That's not victim mentality. That is honestly facing up to the reality of your fallen human nature.

The "I" in Paul's description takes personal responsibility. "I" do these things. "I" am wretched. "I" am guilty. "I" do evil. That is personal responsibility.

With that personal responsibility comes this interesting truth that "I" am not sin. It opens the door to hope. This is what we get from the tension Paul creates by identifying the center of sin in my own flesh, but then also repeating this idea, "I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me." Sin is somehow outside of what is essentially me. The essential me is not sin. Sin is in my flesh. Sin is a power in me for which I am responsible. Sin is not me. It is somehow other; not essential to my nature.

The vision for that truth is heaven. You will one day exist in a transformed state. The desires, urges, thoughts, power of sin will no longer be true of you as a human being. Sin may be natural to the fallen human state, but it is not natural to God's conception of what it means to be whole as a human being. To be truly human is to be without sin. Our ultimate vision is still not yet. It comes in heaven.

But we have a vision of this life that is working toward that ideal. Sin is no longer your master if you are under the grace of Christ Jesus. The person of Romans 7 grasps his wretched state. He grasps that he cannot save himself. He needs help. He needs a savior from both the guilt of sin and from the power of sin. He cries out. “Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to Jesus Christ our Lord!” Then he sums up again his human state under law. “So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other with my flesh the law of sin.” But he is not going to stop there. Having recognized the weakness of the law and having seen the strength of grace, he is ready now to begin to walk in the newness of the Spirit and the assurance of the love of the Father in Jesus Christ.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as interesting or important or strange or confusing in Romans 7:13-25? What are some questions that the text raises for you?
2. What is the objection Paul has raised, and in your own words, summarize how the long answer responds to the objection?
3. Is it helpful to you to think of the personal experience described in this passage as the experience of a person under the Law. How is this a helpful way to describe this experience? Is it unhelpful or confusing to describe this as a person under the Law?
4. This experience can also describe the occasional experience of the Christian. Under what circumstances you would say that this experience describes a Christian experience?
5. How do you address this struggle in your own life of knowing what you ought to do, but not being able to consistently do what you ought to do?

Lesson 19: Kingdom Transfer from Flesh to Spirit

Romans 8:1-17

The Gospel Restated and Including the Holy Spirit

¹ Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. ³ For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God *did*: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and *as an offering* for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Contrast between the Fallen Human State of the Flesh and the New Gospel Reality of the Spirit

(1) ⁵ For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.

(2) ⁶ For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace,

⁷ because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able *to do so*, ⁸ and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

(3) ⁹ However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.

¹⁰ If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness.

¹¹ But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.

(4) ¹² So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— ¹³ for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

¹⁴ For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. ¹⁵ For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶ The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him* so that we may also be glorified with *Him*.

NASB

Introduction

God’s purpose through the good news of Jesus Christ is not merely to provide forgiveness. God’s plan goes further to make us his children and to transform us into the image of Jesus Christ. But the gospel does begin with forgiveness.

We saw this in chapter 3. Paul focused on our justification when he stated the gospel in terms of law and grace in Romans chapter 3. Then in Romans chapter 5 Paul restated the gospel in the universal terms of Adam and Jesus. He did this to emphasize the universal human problem of sin which leads to death and the universal divine solution of justification which leads to life. Again, Paul’s focus there is not on our obedience as followers of Jesus; not on our righteous actions. His focus is on the obedience and righteousness of Christ. As in chapter 3 he establishes again the answer to the first question of covenant, “What makes me acceptable to God or righteous that I might be in relationship with him?” The righteousness of Jesus makes us righteous.

Chapter 5 ends with the claim that grace was given so that “grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Is Paul only talking about the righteousness of Jesus and the eternal life of heaven? Or does the gospel affect the here and now? Is the way of grace only a future hope or is the way of grace intended to bring about practical righteousness and a new quality of life in the followers of Jesus?

The second question of covenant, “How then shall we live?” is left hanging at the end of chapter 5. We know what Christ has done on our behalf. We do not know what we are then expected to do ourselves. We ask, “Saved by grace, how then shall we live?” Shall we live by a new law or by no law?

Paul's short answer to that is, "Neither!" He proceeds to explain to us in chapters 6 and 7 another option, a new way. It is not a way of no law if we mean by no law no commands, no effort, no obedience. But it is also not a new law in the sense that moral obligation is imposed from a new external code as though we are children being watched over by an ever-present tutor. There is a new way of obedience that comes from union with Christ. Paul teaches us about this new way in chapters 6 and 7. Through his rhetorical pattern of invitation, objection, short answer and long answer, he describes for us the strength of grace and the weakness of the law, claiming in 7:6 right at the center of his argument, "that we serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter." Not the way of the no law, not the way of law, but the new way of the Spirit.

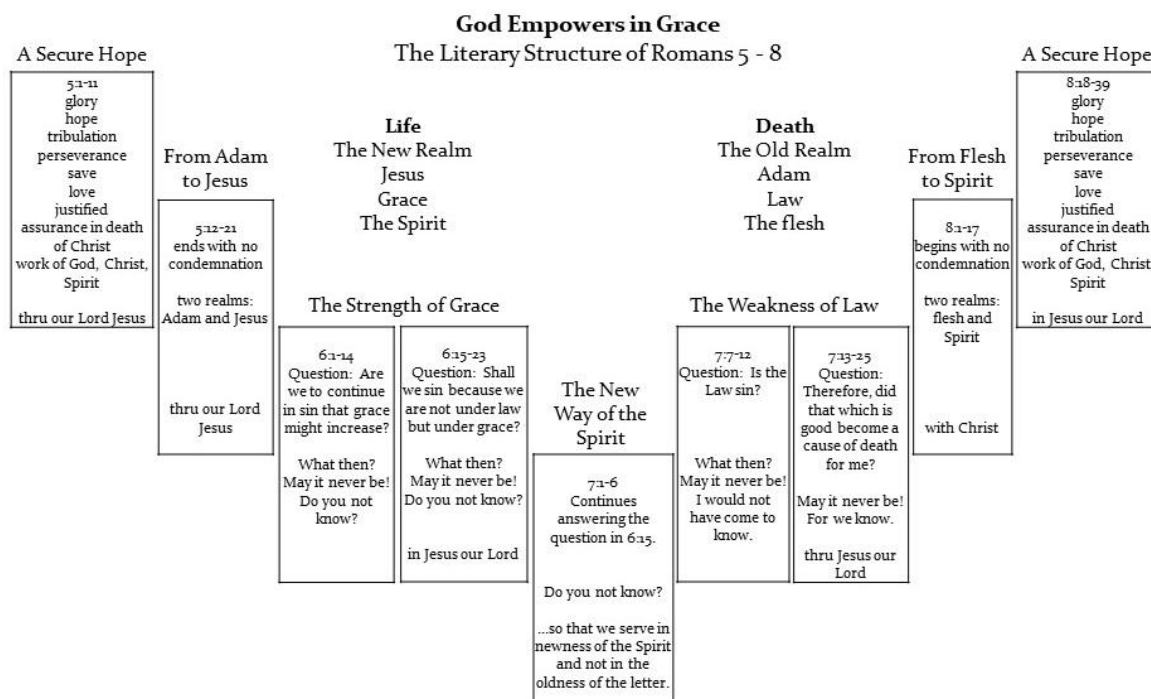
Paul holds off in chapters 3 and 5 from bringing the work of the Spirit into his description of the gospel so that he might establish the reality of our justification in Jesus Christ. As Jesus said in John 16:14-15, the Spirit comes to glorify the Son and the Son to glorify the Father. Jesus must remain at the forefront of the gospel message. But Jesus also said in John 16:7 that it is better if I go away, so that I might send the Holy Spirit to you. Jesus should remain as the focus of our gospel message, and the work of the Holy Spirit is an essential part of that message.

Having described in chapter 7 the new way of grace as living in the newness of the Spirit, at the beginning of chapter 8 Paul now restates the gospel again, this time in terms of the Holy Spirit. Let's read that in the first four verses of chapter 8.

The Gospel Restated and Including the Holy Spirit

[Read Romans 8:1-4]

Now as we move into chapter 8, we need to remind ourselves of the structure of chapters 5-8 so we continue to get the flow of Paul's argument. You will remember that Paul has employed a chiasmic or parallel structure for these four chapters. And Romans 7:1-6 and the new way of the Spirit is right at the center of the structure. The two parallel sections on either side of that center are the two arguments for the strength of grace in chapter 6 and the two arguments describing the weakness of the law in chapter 7. Then moving out from the center one more step, we have the second half of chapter 5 and the first half of chapter 8. These two passages parallel one another by describing a realm or kingdom transfer that occurs through faith in Christ. In 5:12-21 Paul described this kingdom transfer by contrasting Adam and Christ. We move from Adam to Christ. Here in 8:1-17 Paul describes the kingdom transfer by contrasting fallen human flesh to the Holy Spirit. We move from flesh to Spirit.



In addition to the two contrasts of Adam to Jesus and flesh to Spirit, these two sections connect like puzzle pieces at the ending of chapter 5 and the beginning of chapter 8. We could read Paul's argument through chapter 5, skip over chapters 6 and 7, and smoothly pick right up in chapter 8. Chapter 5 ends declaring in verse 18, "through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men."; and in verse 21, "as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." Now at the beginning of chapter 8, we start with the proclamation, "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus"; and the promise that "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death." Two key ideas in there connect in these two passages: condemnation and life in Jesus. The only two uses in these four chapters of the word "condemnation" occur at these two places in 5:18 and 8:1. So, they link together. And the idea that grace reigns in life through Jesus Christ in chapter 5 is now described in chapter 8 as "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus."

The major difference in chapter 8 is that Paul has now brought in the work of the Holy Spirit as critical to the life-giving power of the gospel. And he has also clarified for us that eternal life in Christ is not only a promise for heaven, but a reality we begin to participate in immediately. Christ promised abundant life. The gospel forgives, providing eternal life. The gospel also transforms through unity with Christ to start a new quality of life now.

After this restatement of the gospel in verse 1-4, from verse 5 to 17, Paul contrasts flesh and Spirit. We are going to get to that contrast in a moment. Before we do, let's focus in more closely on the gospel statement in verse 1-4. There are three tricky issues of interpretation in these four verses that we need to look at.

(1) Use of the Greek word Nomos (law or principle)

First, we need to notice Paul's play on the Greek word *nomos* in verse 2. *Nomos* is the word translated in Romans as law. The word in Greek can mean law in the sense of legal code or law in the sense of principle. A law of physics, like the law of gravity, would be a principle stating truth about how the natural world functions. *Nomos* was also the Greek word used to translate the Hebrew word *Torah* which is the first five books of the Bible, the covenant given by God through Moses. So, we have three options for the one Greek word. It can mean principle. It can mean legal code. Or it can mean the Torah, the Mosaic Covenant. Reference to the Mosaic Covenant is the most frequent use of the word *nomos* by Paul in Romans. The interpreters of my English Bible point out when they think Paul is using *nomos* to refer to Mosaic Covenant by capitalizing the English word "Law". I don't know if your Bible does that.

In 8:2 the word *nomos* is used twice to refer not to Mosaic Code but to a principle of spiritual or moral reality. The law of the Spirit of life is not law in legal or covenantal terms. It is not a list of rules or commands. It is the principle that the Spirit of God is at work in a person united with Jesus to bring about life. Opposing the principle of the Spirit is the principle of the law of sin and of death. Again, this is not a legal law. This is the principle that human beings in their fallen state are slaves to their own desires and thoughts. The experience of this principle at work was described so well by Paul in our last passage. Even if we acknowledge what is good, the law of sin moves us to do evil, leading inevitably to death. That principle in us, that is the law of sin and death.

In verse 3, Paul returns to his normal use of *nomos* as the Mosaic Covenant. Listen then how those three uses of the word law read in these two verses. "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did..."

In chapters 2 and 3 Paul argued that the Law of Moses could not justify a person. And in chapter 7 he has argued that the Law of Moses does not enable us to live for God, even when we are forgiven. The Law of Moses is not the solution for the law of sin and death. The law of the Spirit is the solution.

Paul has said that that Law of Moses is holy and good. The weakness is not in the Law, but in the fallen nature, the flesh of human beings. The Law could not be the solution for our problem. Jesus had to be. So, verse 3 says, "For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh." This is the gospel statement of chapter 3. The Law demanded death from each of us for our breaking of the Law. Jesus offered himself as the payment, the sacrifice for each of us. We were condemned to death. But now there is no condemnation.

That is the first critical move of the gospel, to rescue us from the guilt of sin. The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus does that and more. We are rescued from the guilt of sin and also from the power of sin. This brings us to verse 4 and our second tricky point of interpretation.

(2) Fulfilling the requirement of the Law

It says, "He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us."

What does it mean that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us? Here is one thing it cannot mean and two things it could mean.

(a) This cannot be an answer to the first question of covenant, "What makes me righteous or just before God?" The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus is not the principle that he gives us the ability to live out the righteous requirement of the law in order that we might justified ourselves before God.

We do not go to church or participate in the Lord's supper or pray and read the Bible in order to gain the grace we need to become justified or to stay justified. That would overturn Paul's whole careful argument of Romans 1-4 and would counter the intent of chapter 5:1 in declaring justification as a past tense reality for the one who has believed. We are justified in Christ and by Christ. Grace is not the power to keep ourselves justified.

So, when Paul says that God "condemned sin in the flesh in order that the requirement of the Law might be met in us" he cannot mean that the gospel enables us to meet the requirement of Law through our own works in order to be justified.

What could this mean?

(b) One option is that Christ has fulfilled the requirement of the Law for us. The word requirement is singular, not plural, suggesting that Paul is not talking about the various requirements of the Law, the various commandments. The Law has two absolute requirements. Live it out completely or pay the penalty of death. Either one of those could be what Paul is referring to when he says, "the requirement of Law." Whichever he has in mind here, Jesus has done both. He lived a perfect human life. And he paid the required penalty of the Law for us through his own death. He fulfilled both requirements of the Law, the living it out and the taking of punishment. We could understand our union with him in his death as meeting the requirement of death and our union with him in life as meeting he requirement of righteous perfection. This then would be a statement referring to the first question of covenant. We are able to live righteously before God because he has fulfilled the righteous requirement of the Law for us in Christ Jesus. Now, I believe this interpretation is true to the gospel. I am not sure if it is the meaning Paul was getting at. There is another option.

What else could this mean?

(c) This could be a statement about the second question of covenant, "How then should we live?" In that Paul could be declaring that the law of the Spirit of life enables us to live out the requirement of the law, not in order to be justified, but as a way of giving glory to God and living a life as it is truly meant to be lived. If this is the case, the requirement of Law cannot mean fulfilling all the ceremonial and civil rules of the Old Covenant. When we think about the requirements of Torah Law, it is impossible to conclude that Paul is teaching that we are now equipped to live out all those regulations. There is another possible way to take what Paul is saying. In Romans 13:8-9 he writes, "He who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law...and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" This fits with Paul's teaching

about love, law and the Holy Spirit in Galatians 5. It would be a way of fulfilling the requirement of law without living under Law or being obliged to all the non-moral regulations of the Law.

I also believe this interpretation is true to the gospel, and I am also not sure if this is the meaning Paul is getting at. I am undecided on this point of interpretation. I like both options, and I think both options fit the context. I suspect Paul had something like one or the other in mind, not both. I am not sure which. I am sorry about that, but I cannot give a confirmed opinion. Either it means that Christ has fulfilled the righteous requirement for us or it means that through the gospel we can now begin to live out the requirement of love that sums up the Law.

We have one more tricky phrase to consider in the second half of verse 4.

(3) Those who walk according to the Spirit

“He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.”

The challenge here is to understand why Paul describes us as those who walk according to the Spirit.

(a) It could sound like those who walk according to the Spirit are the ones in whom the requirement of the Law is fulfilled. In that case, Paul’s emphasis would be on how we fulfill the requirement of the Law. But that misses the focus of this passage on the Holy Spirit in my opinion. Paul could talk about the “how” of our life in the Spirit. He could talk about our need to walk in the power of the Spirit or to be filled with the Spirit. But through most of this passage he is not exhorting us to how we ought to live. Rather, he is describing for us what is already true about us if we have placed our faith in Jesus. The difference here is sometimes described as the difference between the indicative and the imperative. The indicative is the truth that if you are in Christ then you have been transferred from the realm of the flesh to the realm of the Spirit. The imperative would be the command to live according to the Spirit who indwells you. So, indicative states a truth and imperative states a command.

The emphasis in this section is not on the command to live in the power of the Spirit, but on the indicative that if you are in Christ, you are in the Spirit.

(b) I believe the emphasis in verse 4 is not that we fulfill the requirement of the Law by living according to the power of the Holy Spirit, but that we who have believed in Jesus Christ are those who do not walk according the flesh, but according to the Spirit. It is a statement of truth about we who are in Christ. And this emphasis will play out in the verses that follow.

Let’s turn now to the rest of the passage. In verses 5-17, Paul gives us four statements of contrast between the flesh and the Spirit. Since this is a lot of text, I will move more quickly hitting some of the major highlights.

Contrast between the Fallen Human State of the Flesh and the New Gospel Reality of the Spirit

[Read Romans 8:5-17]

(1) First contrast

Our first contrast is in verse 5.

⁵ For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.

The first contrast makes me feel like I am definitely not according to the Spirit. My mind is often on things of the flesh and not the Spirit. But then again, I know what it is to rejoice in Christ and to feel contrition and to desire God’s glory, so I cannot say that my mind is always set on the flesh. The contrast is set in strong terms all on one side or the other.

(2) Second contrast

The second contrast is a restatement and development of the first. It comes in verse 6 with the development in 7 and 8. The contrast is:

- ⁶ For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace,
⁷ because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able *to do so*, ⁸ and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

So again, the contrast sets up polar opposites. Paul develops the condition of the fallen human nature as hostile and impotent. Even if a person wanted to submit to God, he or she could not bring themselves to do so. This is the bondage of sin. The human will is unwilling and unable to submit. As a result, there is no way that a human being in his or her fallen state can please God.

There is a story about Abraham Lincoln riding in a coach. He is arguing with his companion about whether a human being could ever perform a truly selfless act. The coach forded a river. As it came out on the far bank the riders could hear piglets squealing, caught in the mud of the bank and unable to get out. Abraham Lincoln exits the coach. And he goes into the mud. And he rescues the piglets. As he re-entered the coach, his companion remarked, "You have made my case. The piglets offered you nothing in return. Your act was truly selfless."

Lincoln responded, "No. I just couldn't bear to hear them squeal." His point was that even if he did an act that looked good and selfless on the outside, he was still acting out of selfish motives of his heart.

Now, according to Romans 2:14, there is some moral impulse in human beings that moves non-believers to shame believers through their moral actions. Yet, Paul suggests here that something deep within the human heart brings into question even our outwardly good moral actions. Jeremiah claimed that the human heart is deceitful above all (17:9). Paul says here that as long as we are acting in the flesh, we cannot please God. It is not true submission to God. There is something deeply wrong in the fallen heart.

(3) Third contrast

Now we move onto the third contrast, and this comes in verse 9. To this point, we may not want to identify as being of the flesh, but also rightly hesitate to claim to be of the Spirit. Paul settles the matter in this third contrast. So, verse 9:

- ⁹ However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.

Paul's words clarify that when he refers to those who are of the Spirit, he is not talking to a particular class of Christian. This is not an extra-spiritual person. This is not a saint. This is not someone who has gone through a second or third spiritual experience. Paul is talking about anyone who has placed their faith in Jesus. It is what we want to mean when we use the word Christian. But it is possible to grow up in a home or culture that uses the label Christian, and yet, the person never truly places their faith in Christ. A person can claim belief in Jesus without understanding and responding to the gospel of grace. That is not who we are talking about. Paul is speaking of the person whose eyes have been opened to God by God in such a way that they see their sin, see their need for God, see the sacrifice of Jesus, see the gift offered by grace, and receive it. Something like that. Seeing Jesus and receiving his gift of grace, that is saving faith. Anyone then, who has this faith in Christ has been united with Christ and is the person Paul is talking about when he says, "You are not in the flesh but in the Spirit." He makes it clear by following up in verse 9 with the truth that, "if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him." It is not possible to be a Christian without being indwelt by the Spirit of God, and it is not possible to be indwelt by the Spirit of God without being a Christian. Union with Christ is what happens when you trust in him. And union with Christ is either synonymous with being indwelt by the Spirit, or it is contemporaneous with being indwelt by the Spirit. We are baptized in the Spirit when we place our faith in Christ. If we have not been baptized in the Spirit then we are not in Christ. This is why spiritual life is the expected outcome of the gospel. At the same moment we are forgiven of our sin, we are also born again through union with Jesus and the indwelling of the Spirit.

Having told us that we who believe have the Spirit dwelling in us, Paul goes on to tell us that the Spirit in us strengthens our hope in being resurrected. If he can raise Jesus from the dead, then this same Spirit can also give life to our mortal bodies.

¹⁰ If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. ¹¹ But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.

Almost certainly Paul wants us to think ahead to our resurrection into glory with Jesus. But I think he wants us also to think about the life the Spirit gives to our mortal bodies. The Spirit in us gives us hope for the future, but also hope for the now. It is through his power that we are no longer slaves to sin. It is through his power that we can begin to live the abundant life offered by Jesus.

(4) Fourth contrast

Paul's fourth contrast moves us from the indicative to the imperative, that is, from what is true about us in Christ to how we ought to live based on what is true about us. Verse 12 and 13:

¹² So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— ¹³ for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

We have an obligation to live according to the truth of who we are in Christ. In Christ we are of the Spirit, not of the flesh, therefore we ought to live that way.

Verse 13 troubles me. It sounds to me like Paul is saying that if we do not obey the imperative of living according to the Spirit then we must die. But if we succeed then we will live. This is not physical death he is talking about but spiritual death. Traditional theology tends to agree that Paul is here connecting the indicative with the imperative. We are of the Spirit in Christ, and we must put to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit if we are to live. Arminian theology would embrace this statement as evidence that true believers can fail to attain heaven. I cannot agree to that line of thinking because Paul argued a strong case for eternal security in Christ in 5:1-11 and he is going to argue an even stronger case in 8:26-39. So, I don't think Paul means here that if we fail to walk according to the Spirit we will die eternally.

Calvinistic theology tends to agree that this passage shows the necessity of the Christian actively putting to death the deeds of the body in order to attain to eternal life. So, the Calvinist would differ from the Arminian by asserting that all true believers will succeed, nobody is going to fail. If you are a true believer, you succeed in putting to death the deeds of the body in some way that is acceptable to God. That's the part I cannot get my mind around. From all of what Paul has argued so far in Romans, I cannot understand what level of spiritual effort is required for the believer to avoid spiritual death.

I would like to say that this verse is talking about our experience of death and life in our current state. We do believe that our effort in relationship with God affects our experience of the abundant life. When we follow the demands of the flesh, we who believe still suffer consequences of sin, and we participate in the corruption of death. Conversely, when we walk in the power of the Holy Spirit, we experience the blessing of truly being alive. And I believe that is a true description of our walk with Christ as believers. But Paul's language here is stronger. He has written that "if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live." That sounds like eternal death and eternal life. And it sounds like it is according to our effort in the Spirit.

A possible answer to the dilemma comes in verse 14. Paul indicates our obligation in verse 12. This is the imperative to live according to who we are. We are obliged to live according to the Spirit. I suggest that he moves back to the indicative in verse 13, to what is true about a person. This is what is true. If you are the kind of person who lives according to the flesh, then you can expect to die because your

own internal spiritual state witnesses to you that you are of the flesh. But if you are moved internally to put to death the deeds of the body and live according to the Holy Spirit, then you will live, because your internal state shows that you have true faith, that you to be a true child of God.

This is possibly what Paul is saying in verse 14. He follows it up with, “For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.” This is an indicative statement, not an imperative. He is not saying that as long as you are led by the Spirit of God he will call you his son and when you are not he will not call you his son. Rather, he is stating that the true mark of sonship is the internal leading of the Holy Spirit. If the Holy Spirit leads you then you know that you are a son or daughter of the Father.

The imperative becomes important in order to affirm who you truly are. If you do not exert effort in your becoming then the mess in your heart will continue to be a mess that is hard for anyone, including you to decipher. Are you a child of God? Hard to tell. You are not seeking to put to death the deeds of the body, you are not producing the fruit of the Spirit. It is really hard to tell what you are?

Paul does not really delve into this reality here. Paul’s focus here is on establishing us in what is true about us in Jesus Christ. Paul is teaching us about what accompanies true faith. If we want to ask how to know whether our faith is true, we would need to turn somewhere else, like the letter of James. That’s the question James struggles with. He sees those who claim to be Christians but by their lives he cannot tell whether they really are or not. This is one of the problems with spiritual growth. We can put a fruit tree seed into a pot of soil beside another pot and put a pebble inside that pot. We wait for the tree to show. Depending on the environment it may take a long time to see significant growth. And it might even be a weed that a weed pops up, and we are not sure, “Is that a tree or something else?” We can’t tell. We can’t prove that God is not working. There could be all kinds of growth under the soil, real growth that we can’t see. But we also can’t distinguish between the one in whom the true seed is planted and the one who has a pebble in their pot.

Paul does not develop this idea or this thinking here. But I believe it is the idea he has stated. We are obligated to live according to the Spirit because of who we are in Christ. And those who live according the flesh must die and those who put to death the misdeeds of the body will live, not because of their actions, but because the activity of the Spirit shows them to be what they truly are, a child of God.

We then have a double motive for living according to the Spirit. We are motivated to live according to who we are in Christ, and we are motivated to see the activity of the Spirit affirm who we are in Christ.

Back in chapter 5, Paul indicated both an objective and a subjective aspect to our assurance in Christ. We know that God loves us because the Spirit pours out the love of God into our hearts. That is a subjective experience that we have inside of ourselves. Only we can know if we have experience love for God. But our subjective experience is not always stable or consistent. Paul encourages us that our faith is not dependent on our subjective experience, but on the objective reality of God’s love. So he also tells us in chapter 5 that God died for us even while we were sinners. That is the truth. Whether you feel God’s love at this moment or not, does not change the fact that God loves you and has proven it by dying on the cross.

Here in chapter 8 we again encounter the objective and subjective. If you believe in Christ, you are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and you are being changed from the inside out. That is objective fact, whether you feel it or not. It is something God has done that you cannot affect or change. But there is also a subjective reality that speaks to our heart, affirming to us that we have indeed trusted in Christ. We sense the leading of the Spirit of God and in us he cries out “Abba, Father.” This is how our passage ends in verses 15-17.

¹⁵ For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶ The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him* so that we may also be glorified with *Him*.

Only you can know if the Spirit has cried out in your heart, “Abba! Father!” That is something you sense, something you experience. But our hearts are neither stable or consistent. We do not always hear or listen to the voice of the Spirit. Our emotions can drown him out, our lack of emotion can shut him off. We do not hear his voice, and we do fear. That lack of subjective experience does not change who you are. You are not a child of God because you hear the Spirit saying it. You are a child of God because you have been included into Christ. That is objective fact for all who have believed. God affirms that objective truth by speaking into our hearts with the subjective confirmation of his voice. “You are mine. You are my child.” To which we cry back, “Abba! Father!”

Personal Responsibility and the Invitation of Grace

I’d like to conclude with the challenge that Paul leaves us, if you noticed it at the end of verse 17. We have the good and comforting news that the Spirit affirms our status as son and daughter. We are children of the king! That’s something we can get excited about. Then Paul goes on to say, “fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.” Did you catch the word that is not so exciting? I’d not mind if the suffering part were left out.

Then I think about my own kids. I think initially every parent would say, “I don’t want them to suffer.” But is that really true? It’s not really true. I want my kids to be pushed academically and that is going to require some suffering, some late nights. I want my kids to engage in sports and physical activity and that requires some suffering, some falling down, some getting hurt, some learning how to get back up, learning how to push past the point of endurance. I want them to excel in their gifts and that requires some suffering. More importantly, I want them to grow in character, to become more patient, to become compassionate. I want them to learn to look past their own needs to the needs of others. And they can’t do that without suffering. I want them to have friendships. I want them to love. How do you do that without suffering?

I want that they even go beyond this. I want them to be like Jesus Christ who understands the suffering of the world and chooses to enter into our suffering in order to bring life into our darkness. And I want my kids to participate in that. Maybe not the surface of my emotions but deep inside I want my kids to participate in the suffering of Christ, with him and through him. And I know that God wants the same for me as a father. And he wants the same for you. He wants that we would experience life in this world even as he has experienced life in this world. And you can’t do that without suffering.

One of the secrets of grace is in the invitation. There is power in the invitation. God has made us new in Christ. He has indwelt us by his Spirit. He is changing our desires. He has called us sons and daughters. And he has decided not to impose on us from the outside the rules and regulations of the family. He has not given us a tutor to hover over us, making sure we live up to the family standards. That is how Paul describes the Law in Galatians 3, as a tutor ready to slap the knuckles and enforce the correct behavior.

Now that we are indwelt by the Spirit of God, he has chosen in grace to treat us as adult children. He is inviting us to step up. We have been invited to own who we are in Christ Jesus. We have been giving real responsibility to be salt and light in this world, but no one else can decide for you whether you will step into who you are. You have been given an invitation to abundant life, to real purpose, to being truly human. We have been transferred from the kingdom of Adam, flesh, sin and death and included into the Kingdom of Jesus, the Spirit, obedience and life. God knows the power of working from the inside out when it is truly your heart that desires the life and purpose that he is offering. He invites you to participate in becoming who he created you to be. And he is honest. This means suffering. This means effort. This means falling down and getting back up. But it also means life and transformation and living in a way that brings glory to God in Heaven. The way of the Spirit is the way of real life. Grace transforms you and now invites you. Here is the invitation of grace. Will you step into it?

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as interesting or important or strange or confusing in Romans 8:1-17? What are some questions that the text raises for you?
2. Based on Paul's teaching in chapters 6 and 7, along with this additional material in 8:1-17, how would you describe (a) the difference between the way of the Spirit and the way of law and (b) the difference between the way of the Spirit and the way of no law?
3. Paul does not develop our experience of living in the power of the Holy Spirit. His focus is more on the truth that if we are in Christ, we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. How do you understand or describe your experience of living in the power of the Holy Spirit? In what way does Paul's teaching here help you to define or understand your own experience? Does this passage change or challenge in any way your view of your experience?
4. How would you explain or describe the obligation of verse 12? What are we obligated to do and why are we obligated to do it? How does this obligation fit in with the covenant of grace?
5. Why does Paul contrast the spirit of slavery to the spirit of sonship in verse 15? Has this principle of being God's child had an impact on how you see yourself or how you relate to God? What does it mean for you that you have received the spirit of adoption?

Lesson 20: Secure Hope IIa

Romans 8:18-27

¹⁸ For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

(1) ¹⁹ For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² For we know that the whole creation **groans** and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now.

(2) ²³ And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves **groan** within ourselves, waiting eagerly for *our* adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. ²⁴ For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he *already* sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.

(3) ²⁶ In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for *us* with **groanings** too deep for words; ²⁷ and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to *the will of God*.

NASB

Introduction

“Why?” is the question of human suffering. “Why are you making me go through this Lord? Why did you let this happen? Why me? Why us? Why now? Why don’t you do something God? Why? Why?”

That’s what I wanted to know when Brenda suffered through a miscarriage before the births of our daughters. Why did you let this little one die Lord? Why allow life to begin and then end so quickly?

I learned a few things through that period of suffering. I learned that we had a lot of support from our Christian community. From our church, our staff team, from our friends and ministry supporters. I also learned that Christians can be really bad at writing sympathy cards. The intention of the cards was loving, but the words so often missed the mark of comfort. A common comment we received was, “Trust God. He will bless you with children.” It is a positive sentiment. Maybe even true. But we were not sad because we thought we might not have children. We were sad because a child had died. I saw in the notes a tendency of Christians to explain away the suffering, to give answers, to teach. “It’s God’s plan.”

“Well, I know it’s God’s plan because everything is God’s plan, but that does not do anything to address the heaviness in the center of my stomach.”

I was learning that I really did not want an answer to the question, “Why?” I wanted empathy. I wanted people to give me a sign that they saw my sadness, that they cared I was hurting, and that it is okay to grieve. Paul says in Romans 12, “Mourn with those who mourn.” That’s what I wanted.

That’s not to say we should not give some thought to the why of human suffering. We most definitely should. As Christians we badly need to develop our theology of suffering. As we do, we need to develop both our understanding of the intellectual questions of suffering and the emotional experience of suffering. Both are necessary for a biblical understanding of suffering.

C. S. Lewis addresses the intellectual and emotive aspects of suffering and pain in two very different books. In 1940, during World War II, C. S. Lewis wrote an intellectual answer to the question, “If God is all loving and all powerful, why does he allow so much suffering and evil?” That book is titled, *The Problem of Pain*. I highly recommend the book, though I recommend it be read while you are not going through grief. The intellectual answers to the “Why?” help much more when we have wrestled with the issues during a more neutral or objective period in our lives. Years after publishing *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis married American writer Joy Davidman. They came together later in life, Lewis being in his 50s and she in her 40s. After 4 years of marriage, Joy died of cancer. A year later, C. S. Lewis released a book called *A Grief Observed*, describing his journey through grief. *A Grief*

Observed provide one Christian man's reflection on the experience of his pain. I also recommend that book. It's a very different book. The first addresses the intellectual issues of suffering. The second addresses the emotional experience of suffering. We want to see both through God's eyes.

In Romans 8:18-27 Paul addresses both intellectual and emotive realities of suffering to help us understand that life in the Spirit does not mean life free from pain. We will start with two foundational issues in verse 18 and then address the three groanings that follow. I am going to pick up back in verse 16 from our last lesson to get the full context.

Two foundational truths of Christians suffering

[Read Romans 8:16-18]

(1) Christians suffer (18)

We start with this truth. To be united with Jesus Christ is to share in the suffering of Jesus Christ. Coming to Christ is not a means of escape from the pain of this broken world. God's plan for us does not include blanket protection from wasting disease, from the abuse of sinful people, from the pain and death of our children or from the consequences of our own sin. When Jesus Christ entered into this world, he made himself vulnerable to sickness, to injury, to abuse, and death. God does not save us out of these things. To serve as a witness for Christ, God has decreed that we will live in the same world as those to whom we would witness.

We do experience protection from pain in our relationship with God. Living righteously according to the wisdom of Scripture protects us from a lot of bad decisions and the consequences of sin. Living in the community of believers adds to that protection. And God does at times answer our prayers for safety and help. But at times he does not. And we are promised this here. Suffering is part of the plan.

If God's plan was to answer our prayers of deliverance every time we suffered, Paul would never have written that we rejoice in our tribulations. He would have written that we rejoice that God keeps us from experiencing tribulation. Of course, we should pray like Jesus prayed, "Take this cup from me." But we must not be surprised that sometimes God will decide not to take away the cup of suffering. And then we again pray like Jesus, "Not my will, but your will be done." Sometimes that will, that plan, is for us to suffer. Why? Maybe to wake us up. Maybe to provide for us the growth that could not come otherwise. Maybe to enable us to serve others who hurt and be witnesses in a broken world.

In September of 2017 Hurricane Harvey unloaded 27 trillion gallons of water on Texas and Louisiana, destroying 40,000 homes, mostly in the Houston area. Days after the hurricane, in his September 11 podcast of *The Briefing*, Albert Mohler reported on an article in the New York Times by a reporter astonished by the Christian response. This is from Albert Mohler:

Kevin Sack reports from Wharton County, Texas; He tells us about Jeff Klimple, "head bowed and eyes clinched, [who] had locked his meaty mechanic's hand into the trembly, creased fingers of his 80-year-old mother, Angie. She, in turn," we are told, "held the right hand of her 24-year-old granddaughter, Natalie."

Natalie is holding hands with someone else, and they are engaged in prayer. Why? Because Mrs. Klimple was amongst those whose homes had suffered a great deal of damage in the floods associated with Hurricane Harvey. And those with whom she was praying are those who, in the name of Christ, had gathered to help this woman not only because they were members of her family or members of her community, but because just in the name of Christ they cared. As Sack tells us,

"In all, there were 17 Texans linked in a ring on Angie Klimple's front yard last Saturday afternoon, a circle of prayer broken only by the hay wagon that would soon carry away the putrid, sodden remnants of 50 years of her life."

Kevin Sack writes about an army of Christian volunteers, not only from Texas, but from elsewhere in the United States, who'd gone to the aid of those in Texas who suffered from Hurricane Harvey, and that same army — not necessarily the same people but driven by the same urgency — will be soon streaming into Florida as well.

Sack goes back to Mr. Klimple's prayer as he prayed, "I thank you, Lord, for the things that you've given us, the grace and mercy that [we've taken] for granted."

Then Sack writes, "Since the days of the Bible, all manner of natural disasters — floods and earthquakes, pestilence and famine — have tested the devotion of the faithful and provoked the most fundamental theological questions. Is God benevolent or retributive or both? Why is there so much human suffering and why does it afflict the righteous as well as the unrighteous? Does everything," he writes, "in fact happen for a reason, and if so what divine purpose could there possibly be in leaving an old widow like Mrs. Klimple homeless?"

Speaking to those who were helping her in the wake of the disaster, Mrs. Klimple said, "We'll be all right with the help of the Lord."

Mrs. Klimple's own Christian worldview was evident when she also said, "When I first saw it all, it upset me," speaking of the destruction of her home. She said "But then I thought, you know, I needed to clean the house anyway. Too bad I just dusted everything."

According to Sack, "She nodded at a new set of volunteers who were prying out drywall and disinfecting the house with bleach. They were what mattered. 'When I saw the crew that came in, all those wonderful people and friends, I was just so thankful. ... 'I feel like the Lord's trying to bring people together. He wants us to be nicer to each other.'"

Clearly, the 80-year-old widow at the center of this story situates her own story within the Christian story, and in this Mrs. Klimple was not alone. As a matter of fact, the story in the *New York Times* expresses quite genuine amazement at so many people in Texas who had indicated that their faith was not only not shaken by the hurricane but was actually deepened.

As Sack writes, "Many of those in the prayer circle allowed themselves to wonder, but not for long. There was too much to do. And nothing that had happened, not the deaths or destruction of homes or loss of crops and livestock, had shaken their faith. In fact," he writes, "to a person, they said the flood and its aftermath had strengthened it."

(<https://albertmohler.com/2017/09/11/briefing-09-11-17/>)

When we accept our suffering as part of God's story, the Spirit works through the suffering to deepen our faith and witness to the world. Foundational truth number one is that Christians suffer.

(2) Christians hope in the glory of God (18)

Romans 8:18 gives us a second foundational truth for our theology of suffering. Christians hope in the glory of God. That is, we have deep conviction that God's glorious wisdom and power and love will be revealed one day in a new world, in justice achieved, in all things made right. And we believe that we will be drawn up into and included in his glorious resolution of all things.

Paul says, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us." When Paul says this, he is not speaking from an ivory tower. Paul has suffered. He knows what it is to be ostracized from his community, rejected, threatened, beaten, imprisoned. He knows what it is to be hungry and go without; to be cold and miserable. And when Paul reflects on these sufferings, when he considers the truth about them, he does not consider them to compare with what he expects to follow after.

We are on a road to something unbelievable. We are going to be drawn up into the glorious resolution of everything. The glory of God is the fame of his good name. We participate in his fame when He says, "These are my children whom I adore. These are my children, see how they resemble me!" The glory of God is also the light of his magnificent character. He alone shines in unwavering

justice and self-sacrificing love. And he will make all things right. He will love us unconditionally and eternally. He is drawing us further up and further into his character, into his glory.

Paul's conviction that our suffering does not compare to the glory to be revealed does not at all require that we make light of human suffering. He does not downplay our suffering. He holds that suffering up before the glory to come, and the light of that glory dispels the darkness of our pain and trials. In one sense this all that need to be said, "Evil will be swallowed up, every tear wiped away, so persevere and rejoice."

Yet, this is not all that God has to say on the matter. After reckoning that our sufferings do not compare to the glory yet revealed, Paul goes on to describe the groaning of our present reality.

There are three groanings. The first is in 8:19-22.

The Three Groanings of Romans 8

(1) The Groaning of Creation (19-22)

[Read Romans 8:19-22]

"The creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now." Paul does not see the creation as possessing soul and mind and emotion. He personifies the creation to emphasize the brokenness of our world. Paul is teaching us here that the plight of the physical realm mirrors the plight of mankind. Back in the beginning Genesis 1 tells the story of God creating an environment and then populating that environment. God orders his work on each day in a parallel way to reveal this theme. On day one God calls forth light. Then on day 3 he populates the realm of light with the sun and stars. On day two God separates the waters above and the waters below, creating the environments of sky and sea. On day four he populates the sky with birds and the sea with fish. On day three God separates earth from water creating the environment of land. On day six he populates that environment with all kinds of animals. Then taking the environment as a whole, light, sky, waters and earth with all the creatures filling them, God creates man and woman to represent him, to be his image as the rulers of creation. And as the preeminent display of God's glory, man and woman take their place over a kingdom created especially for them.

Now, when Adam and Eve sinned, God decreed that the environment he created would fall into corruption along with its king and queen. God did this in his wisdom. I suppose one of the reasons he did so was to constantly remind man of his need for salvation. Mankind already resists the idea of his need for a savior. The brokenness of our world continually prods us into looking outside of ourselves for help. God knew that a perfect environment would be no aid in helping man escape his own corruption. Paul writes of God's decision that, "the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it." God not only removed his Spirit from man. He removed his hand from the creation. Our world is not what it was meant to be. It suffers under "slavery to corruption." As mankind is corrupted, so too the creation. As broken people, we live in a broken world.

And we know it is broken. Everyone knows something is wrong. Cancers eats away the body. Viruses mutate and spread. Mudslides wipe out whole villages. Children die senselessly. Tornadoes and earthquakes and hurricanes rip up the land. Animals render and tear. There is a "not rightness" about the place in which we live. It is as though the very creation itself "groans as if in the pains of childbirth."

(2) The Groaning of we who have first fruits (23-25)

[Read Romans 8:23-25]

So, just as the creation groans, we who have the first fruits of the spirit, that is, we who are truly born again in Jesus. We groan. Paul does not expect that we would just paint on a happy face. He does not expect that our union with Christ means we will always live in joy and peace. He knows that we are going to groan. We groan at the brokenness of our world and the pain that brokenness brings. We groan at the pain that comes from the human evil that surrounds us; we groan at hunger,

sickness, injustice, oppression, loneliness, depression rejection, violence, rape. We read the news. We consider society. We look at families. And we groan. Not only this, it is not only the world on the outside of us that causes us to groan, we groan because of our own inner world. We groan because of the woundedness of our soul and the images in our minds. We groan because our own sin and depression and loneliness and woundedness. We who have the first fruits of the Spirit, we groan.

Paul's vision of grace so far has built up expectation for those of us who have been transferred. We have been transferred from the realm of Adam, flesh, sin and death to the realm of Jesus, Spirit, obedience and life. And most of Paul's language of grace points towards victory over sin and transformation in this life. We are in the Spirit and have our minds set on the things of God. His resurrection power is in us. His Spirit calls out with our spirit, "Abba, Father!" We are children of the king and citizens of a new realm. It is victorious. It is transformational. It is wonderful.

And yet here, in this passage of Scripture, Paul teaches us here to acknowledge the tension of our reality. We are already and also not yet. Our transformation is not complete. We are called to engage in the struggle of becoming. We may have been transformed from worms to caterpillars. But we are not yet butterflies. The outcome is guaranteed. We are going to get there. But right now, we are still caterpillars struggling in our cocoons, hoping one day to fly. Our full glory is not yet revealed. In the cocoon of this present life, we still struggle as we participate in our becoming of what we've been created to be.

So, when we look at the text, we notice Paul's already/not yet language. He can both say in 8:24 that "we have been saved," and back in 5:9, "we shall be saved." Or in 8:15, "you have received a spirit of adoption," and in 8:23 we are, "waiting eagerly our adoption." In 3:24 we are justified by the "redemption of Christ," and in 8:23 we wait, "the redemption of our bodies." Certain things are already true about us. We are declared righteous. Already true. And we are united with Christ. Already true. These present realities guarantee for us things to come. We have a secure hope in what will be. But the things to come are not yet, leaving us in a state of tension. Using the language of adoption, it is as though the papers have been signed. The legal work is done. You are adopted, stamped with the seal of the Holy Spirit as a guarantee. But we have not yet been brought to our true home. Our adoption has not yet been fully completed. With the language of redemption, we have been bought by Christ, redeemed by his death on the cross, but we have not yet experienced the redemption of our body. This is a great cause of groaning. The sinful habits of our mind and heart continue to plague us in the weakness of our current flesh. One of our greatest hopes is the flinging off of this inglorious body to be dressed in a new and glorious home, without the desire of sin.

We do not wish for these things to be true. Wishing is too weak a word. We hope. Not hope in the sense of wishing. We hope with a sense of conviction. We hope with an assurance that comes from the spiritual sight of faith. We know what we hope for. We have not yet seen it, but we know it to be true. And this secure hope we have gives us strength to persevere as Paul says, "with eagerness." WE have a readiness to get this groaning over with, to leave this broken world behind, to leave this broken body for the glory that waits for us!

(3) The Groaning of the Spirit

[Read Romans 8:25-27]

The creation groans because it is broken. We who have the first fruits of the Spirit groan because we are broken. The Spirit groans because he is broken. No, that's not right. The Spirit is not broken. The creation's broken. We're broken. The Spirit's not broken. So, why does he groan? Why does the Spirit groan?

Once when I asked this question a student responded, "The Spirit groans because he is grieved by our sin?" That threw me off, because that is not what I think is going on here. I thought about it. Paul does admonish the Ephesians in 4:30 to not grieve the Holy Spirit. So, it is possible to imagine the Spirit groaning because of our sin. But that is not what is happening here. The context here is pain and suffering in our already/not yet. Some of that suffering is from within and some from without.

The pain we feel moves us to pray. But sometimes we don't even know how to pray rightly about our pain. We just are groaning and calling out. We don't even know what to say. It's just emotion. And so, the Holy Spirit of God picks up the prayer for us, not just in words, but he picks it up with emotion comparable to our own, in a groaning too deep for words he intercedes for us to the Father.

This is empathy. The Spirit of God feels what we feel and groans with us in our pain. This is truly incredible. If anybody has the right to say, "Get up and shake it off," it would be God. God sees the whole broad perspective. He sees the joy set before us. He sees the eternity of heaven. And I can imagine God saying, "It's just cancer. Death is entry into true life. What are you worried about?" Or, "It's only 70 years. I know you have chronic pain. I get that. But it's only 70 years. That's nothing compared to eternal life. Your suffering is light. It's passing compared with the glory to come. Maybe you are lonely, maybe you're lost, maybe you're sad. Have you not read that 'to live is Christ and to die is gain?' You are going to come home and never be lonely again, never be sad again, never be lost. So, get up. Shake it off. Keep going. Act like a Christian. Believe." If anybody could say that, God could say that. And he would be right. And he would be just. But he doesn't. Not here. He doesn't say that. He sees the whole picture, and he doesn't just brush away the pain of our present. We groan. And so, he enters into our groaning with us. He does what he tells us to do. He mourns with those who mourn.

That makes me think of a 10 year old boy who comes home in tears because the love of his life has just broken up with him, through a text. And it's hard not to smile as he is so overcome. It's hard not to say, "Don't worry. There will be plenty more loves." You know he will be over it in a day or a week. You could say those things. "Shake it off. You'll get over with it. Here, have a snack." Or you could, for the moment, enter into his pain with him. You could recognize his sense of rejection. His disappointment. His loss. You could say, "I am really sorry, champ." And give him a hug.

That's what's happening here. In our context of weakness and brokenness and physical limitation, God hears our groaning, and even though he sees the big picture and knows it's momentary and light in comparison, he chooses to groan with us in our pain. And it is not merely a pretend groaning. The Spirit who groans with us is the Spirit of God, one with Jesus as Jesus lived this life on the earth and as Jesus went to the cross. He knows what it is to be rejected. He knows what it is to have one of his closest friends betray him. He knows what it is to have everyone run away and leave him alone. He knows what it is like to be spit on, to be beaten, to be laughed at, to be abandoned, to be whipped, to be crucified. He knows what it is like to die. He even knows in some mysterious way what it feels like to be abandoned by God, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." So, when he groans with us, his groans are real. He understands, and he enters into our pain. And if the Spirit of God is willing to enter into our groaning, then he is telling us that it is okay to groan. Yes, the fruit of the Spirit is joy. And yes, the fruit of the Spirit is peace. But those do not exclude the rightness of groaning when the pain of the world overwhelms or when the pain inside rises up. We might take a lesson from the book of Psalms. How many of our songs on a given Sunday lament the pain we feel? How many Psalms in the Old Testament song book were laments? Over 70. Almost half of the 150 Psalms are cries of the heart. We need a place as Christians. Even in the newness of the glory of grace to groan, to cry out, to express our sorrow, to hurt.

Conclusion

Who? not Why?

I began this lesson with the question of the sufferer, "Why Lord?" There is a place for the question "Why?" in suffering. However, making "Why?" the central question of suffering can drive a person away from God towards despair and bitterness. The "Why?" becomes a wedge hammered into our soul, prying us away from God.

To walk through suffering as a Christian, we do not need to be able to answer the "Why" question. We don't need to know why. But we do need to be able to answer the "Who" question. "Who is my God?" These are some things I know about my God. Do you know this about your God? Can you say

this? My God is good. My God is in control. My God sees me. My God loves me. My God has a plan for me. My God has suffered for me. My God is with me. And my God groans in compassionate empathy even as I groan.

Paul began his consideration of suffering in chapter 5. He wrote there in verse 3-4, “We exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope.” And if we just focusing on the progression that has benefit. It calls us to a positive kind of Christian grit. We will face our tribulations because the hard times give us a chance to persevere. And we want opportunities to persevere because that is how our character is tested and strengthened, proven. And when we see the strength of our character in Christ, our hope is affirmed in us. It’s affirmed in us. We need that kind of grit. But what motivates us to continue through life. Is not just our self-development. It may work sometimes that we have this vision that if we just stick it out we’ll become stronger. But there is a deeper motive here, a more important motive, a more lasting motive.

Before the progression Paul says, “We will exult in our tribulations.” That’s a word for rejoice and to boast. After the text he says that hope does not disappoint us because God has poured out his love into our hearts. See, we are motivated by the “Who.” Our exultation, our rejoicing, comes because we have seen God, and we know God, and we love him. The process of our suffering is bearable because we are walking with him and for him and we are going to go home to be with him. It’s our love for him that does not disappoint our hope. It’s our sense of relationship with God that motivates us. It’s the who that is in our suffering. Paul reaffirms these truths in chapter 8. He reaffirms that we will suffer, first of all. The process of tribulation is a guaranteed component of the Christian life. He also reaffirms that our hope does not disappoint, because we have a vision of the glory of God to be revealed. We are not disappointed. We have a solid, attractive, desirable hope. We know we are going home. But then he adds in here, not only does the love of God work in our hearts to sustain us, but the Spirit adds his groans to ours. He is with us in our grief and he mourns even as we mourn.

Because we have entered into relationship with God, and we know who he is, we can accept that this process of suffering is part of the plan. We affirm in our hearts the truth of Romans 8:28, “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose.” The text does not say that God makes all things good for those who love him. Everything’s not made good. It says that in the end he works together all things for the good. We can accept this because we are those who love God. Because of the “Who” in the midst of suffering. We trust his plan even when that plan includes pain.

Let’s end our lesson with the parable of the doughnut from William Barton

The Doughnut

Now I entered the Kitchen and would have passed through. But Keturah was there; so, I waited: and she cast many things into a Great Bowl, and she stirred them with a Great Spoon.

And I asked her, saying, “What do you have in the Bowl?”

And she said, “Sugar and Spice, and all that’s nice.”

And she took the Dough out of the Bowl, and she rolled it with a Rolling-Pin; and she cut it into round cakes. And in the middle of every cake was there an Hole. And a great iron pot hung above the Fire, and there was Fat in the pot and it boiled furiously.

And Keturah took the round Cakes of Dough and cast them in to the Iron Pot; and she poked them with a Fork, and she turned them, and when they came out, the smell of them was inviting, and the appearance of them was exceeding good. And Keturah gave me one of the Doughnuts, and Believe Me, they were Some Doughnuts.

And I said, “What is the purpose is the Hole? If the Doughnut be so good with a part Punched Out, how much better if the Hole also had been Doughnut?” And Keturah answered and said, “You Speak as a Foolish Man, who is never content with the goodness that is, but always

complains against God for the lack of what is not. If there were no Hole in the Doughnut, then though the Cake were Fried till the Edges were burnt yet would there be uncooked Dough in the middle. You would then break your teeth on the outer rim of every Doughnut, and the middle part would be Raw Dough.”

And I meditated much on what Keturah had told me. And I considered the Empty Spaces in Human life; and the loneliness of its Vacancies; and how men’s hearts break over its sorrows. And I pondered in my soul whether God doth not use these so that lives would not be brittle and unformed.

And I spoke of these things to Keturah, and she said, “My lord, I know not the secret of these mysteries. Yes, my own heart aches over some of the Empty Places. But he who does not use the good things which he has but complains against his God for what he lacks, is like a man who rejects a Doughnut because he does not know the Mystery of the hole.”

~from *Parables of a Country Parson*, William Barton.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as important, confusing, interesting or strange in verses 19-21?
2. Christians live in the tension between what is already true and what is not yet true. Thinking back over Romans and considering verses 23-25, what are some things that are already true of you in Christ and some things that are not yet true?
3. How does the tension of what is already/not yet contribute to the struggle and groaning of being a Christian?
4. What is the connection between the glory of verse 18 and the hope of verse 24? What do you notice about hope in this passage?
5. What stands out to you in verses 26-27 regarding the groaning of the Spirit? Why is the groaning of the Spirit significant?
6. Why is the “Who?” question more important than the “Why?” question during periods of pain and suffering? What has been your experience?

Lesson 21: Secure Hope IIb

Romans 8:28-39

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

²⁹ For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined

to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren;

³⁰ and these whom He predestined, He also called;

and these whom He called, He also justified;

and these whom He justified, He also glorified.

³¹ What then shall we say to these things?

If God *is* for us, who *is* against us?

³² He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?

³³ Who will bring a charge against God's elect?

God is the one who justifies; ³⁴ who is the one who condemns?

Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.

³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ?

Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

³⁶ Just as it is written, "FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE BEING PUT TO DEATH ALL DAY LONG; WE WERE CONSIDERED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED."

³⁷ But

in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

NASB

Introduction

We are at the very end of the second major section of Romans. The first major section of Romans answered for us the first question of covenant, "What makes me acceptable to be in relationship with God?" Paul taught in those chapters that a person does not make himself righteous but is declared righteous by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. You are acceptable 100% because of what God has done and 0% because of what you have done.

That answer creates a perceived problem. Paul's opponents insist that children accepted 100% by grace will abuse that grace. Grace produces spoiled and sinful children. Children of God must be put under law. They must be required to complete some action, some duty, some moral performance to earn or maintain their status in the family.

Paul turns to that problem in chapters 5-8, and he rebuts the false assumption that grace must produce rotten children. He says, "May it never be! In fact, grace is the only way to produce righteous children because in relation to human flesh, an external law is too weak to succeed."

Paul's desire in chapters 5-8 is not primarily to answer the opposition question. Paul is more of a pastor than an apologist. His answer is not developed for non-believers, but for believers, to help establish us more firmly in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Chapters 5-8 help us answer the second question of covenant. "Now that I am in relationship with God through grace, how then do I live under grace?" We can come at this question, "How then do I live under grace?", two different ways. We can come at it theoretically, or we can come at it practically. Here is the difference. Coming at it theoretically means to learn the theory or principles of living out grace. Coming at it practically means to learn the practices of grace. What do we say, and do, and think.

Normally, I would be for the practical, because there is often way too much talking and listening in Christianity and not enough doing. But in regard to living out grace, one of our biggest mistakes is

jumping into the practical without ever coming back to acknowledge that we don't really understand the theory of grace. Living out grace does not come natural to human beings. We are legalists at heart. So, if we are to live out the gospel of grace, we really need to stop and think about the principles of grace. The new covenant is a new wineskin. We need to know how this new wineskin functions differently than the old. That is what we have been doing in Romans 5-8. Paul is teaching us the principles, the theory of grace. That's why, even though this section is addressing the question, "How then do I live?", we have only received two commands in four chapters: consider and present. That's because this is Paul's theory or theology of living out grace. Paul would never leave out the practical. He is going to get there with the application of grace in chapters 12-15, but he does want to make sure we understand the theology of grace first, so that we do not jump into the practical and live it out as though we are under law. That is the big mistake I referred to early. We move from saved by grace to doing the commandments without considering how we should go about doing the commandments under grace. We jump to "show hospitality, pay your taxes, accept one another." And that is good. Nothing wrong with getting practical really early. But we need to take a pause in there at some point and ask, "What does it look like to show hospitality under grace? How is that different than showing hospitality under law? Am I doing this the right way, out of the right heart and with the right source of strength? How does grace motivate? How does grace empower?"

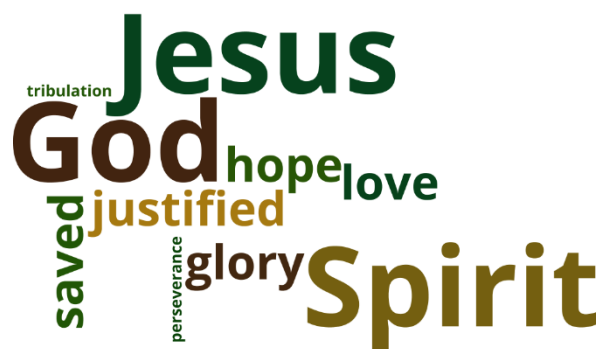
This is why Paul has written Romans 5-8. To help us understand what it means to live under grace. We need to come back to these principles again and again and again, so that they affect how we see the world and live in it. We come back to our new identity in Christ, to our new union in Christ, to our new invitation in Christ. I will remind you again of these things at the end of this lesson. But we are not quite at the end yet. We still have one of the most beautiful texts in all of Scripture to cover in Romans 8:28-39. And in doing so, we come back again to one of Paul's most emphasized principles of grace, our secure hope in Christ.

For Paul, embracing the new security we have in relationship with God is crucial to living out grace. We know it is crucial because it is how he begins the whole section in chapter 5 and it is how he ends the whole section here in chapter 8. Recognizing your secure hope in Jesus Christ is foundational to your ability to live under grace and not under law as a Christian.

Our theory of living out grace starts and ends with this wonderful truth. "You are safe in the love of Jesus." This was the theme of chapter 5:1-11, and this is the theme of 8:18-39.

Remember back in the lesson on 5:1-11 we recognized that there are certain words and ideas repeated at the beginning of chapter 5 and then only again at the end of chapter 8. And they indicate the parallelism of the two sections. They show us that indeed Paul is ending just as he began. The words are

justified, saved, tribulation, perseverance, glory, hope, and love. Along with those terms in both sections Paul highlights the trinitarian work of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. He is communicating to us that in spite of the ongoing suffering we will experience in our already/not yet state, our justification in Christ Jesus has made us safe in our relationship with God. We persevere in the firm conviction of our hope that we will one day enter into the glory of the Father. The Holy Spirit witnesses to our spirit by filling us with love for the Father and with experiential knowledge that we are sons and daughters. And though this work of the Spirit strengthens our hope it is not the basis of our confidence. Our assurance is grounded in the love of God and the sacrifice of Jesus. God is saying, "You are safe. You are loved." This is the message of the first question of covenant that Paul wants us to hear before he goes into answering the second question of covenant. Before we address the struggle of being righteous, he assures us that we are already declared



righteous in Christ and acceptable to the Father. And I love the literary structure of chiasm that Paul has used in chapters 5-8 that parallelism that goes through the whole section with these two sections of our secure hope being at the beginning and end of the section. To me it feels like the two strong arms of God wrapped around me his child as I engage in living out grace. I can step out and attempt to live in his Spirit and attempt to put to death the deeds of the flesh and attempt to present my members to him in righteous because I know, I know that I am held firmly in his loving embrace. I am secure. I might fall, often, hard. I mean I might seriously mess up. But I know, I know this, he is never going to let go of my hand.

We saw this declaration of security in chapter 5. Let's reconsider here in chapter 8 what it means to be safe in the arms of God.

We are looking at Romans 8:28-39. Verses 28-30 really go with our previous lesson. So, we will pick up with 28-30. That will be the first part of this lesson. And then we will turn to the second part in verses 31-39.

God's Sovereignty Over Our Salvation (8:28-30)

[Read Romans 8:28-30]

It is easy to allow a discussion about this text to be derailed by a debate on predestination. Interestingly with Paul, two of his main texts including predestination, this one and Ephesians 1:3-14, are presented to us without any consideration of a problem with the idea of predestination. Paul doesn't go into any kind of problem or how it works or anything about free will. But rather, he gives us the idea of predestination to encourage us as we reflect on the wonderful blessing we have in God. He just puts it out there.

And Paul intends here in Romans 8 to encourage us with the truth that God has all things under control. He does not give us the how of predestination. He gives us the truth of predestination to strengthen our conviction that God's wisdom and power will surely bring about what God has planned. We will address questions about predestination some in chapter 9 because that's where Paul gives us more to work with. That is where he addresses it himself. Here I want us to receive the comfort that Paul is offering without getting distracted by the philosophical questions of how does predestination work. But in order not to be distracted, I think I do need to make a couple of brief comments.

The question for predestination tends to revolve around whose will finally brings us into the kingdom of God. It is not a question about whether people have free will to do anything. It is a question about salvation. Does a person have the ability to receive God's gift of grace? Or is that something God must do for a person? Is faith an act of free will or is faith a gift of God? We can imagine a door with God on one side and an individual on the other side divided just by the threshold. God is calling the person to enter through the door. When that person steps through, whose will caused that step to take place? Whose will is primary? Did the person decide on their own to step through? Did God decide for them and cause them to step through? Is it somehow both? That is the big question of predestination and those are pretty much the three options.

When we come to Romans 29-30, we have this process. God foreknew, predestined, called, justified, glorified. Thinkers who believe that an individual's own will is decisive in moving them through the door into relationship with God have suggested that God foreknew those who would believe in him. In other words, he saw ahead of time who would step through the door. And then he determined ahead of time or predestined that he would conform those people to the image of his son those who chose to believe in Jesus. As a result, he called those he knew who would respond. They responded and so were justified and then glorified. That is a possible free will interpretation of this text. So, foreknowledge really is about God looking ahead to see who would choose him.

My thinking is that God's will is determinative in bringing us across the threshold into his kingdom, so I do not have a need to figure out how free will fits in to the process here of our salvation. Whatever

Paul thinks about the free will question, he does not explain it right here. And he did not offer this text to the Romans as a philosophical mind twister. I believe that Paul assumed his first listeners would receive this as an encouraging way to understand the suffering and struggle of their own Christian lives.

We touched on verse 28 in our previous lesson following the three groanings. The context leading up to verse 28 is the recognition by Paul back in 8:17-18 that Christians walking in the power of the Holy Spirit will suffer. That is a promise. We also recognize that this suffering is not worth comparing with the glory to be revealed in us once God has made all things right. This does not mean, however, that Christians are expected to be emotionally free from the pain of grief and suffering. The brokenness of this world and the brokenness of our own flesh cause us to groan as we look forward in hope to the glory that will be. Our groaning is validated by the fact that the Spirit of God groans with us in our present struggle.

Having recognized our struggle and our groaning in that struggle, Paul is now bringing us back out again from our individual challenges to this broader principle that “we know God causes all things to work together for good.” He does not say that all things are good. And he does not say that each thing will be made good. You might get fired and not regain your job. You might have a boyfriend cheat on you. You might have a child who dies of leukemia. Your house might be flooded or catch fire. God may choose to protect you from anyone of these things. Or he may choose to let it happen and to show you the good that’s happening through it. But he also may not. He may not protect you, and he may not reveal to you what he is doing. So, regardless of the present evil and regardless of what we see or know, this is our sure conviction that, in the end, God will have worked the good and the bad together for your good. You are being made fit for heaven. You are being made fit for eternal life with God. Your life affects the lives of other people. Your life is part of God’s plan to weave all things together in one glorious tapestry as he brings about the restoration of all things. And so, you can trust that all the good and all the bad will come together in God’s plan for your ultimate good.

Though in the text there is one caveat. God is doing this for those who love him and are called according to his purpose. This is not a promise for those who hate God, who reject God, who do not receive his gift of grace. For them, they cannot look ahead believing all is going to work out for good in their case. This is also not a challenge to love God more. He is not saying, “If you love me, I will do this.” He is saying that this is the truth about those who love me, and the ones who love me are the ones who have been called according to my purpose. If you have been called, you are indwelt by the Spirit. If you are indwelt by the Spirit, then the love of God has begun to take root in your heart. You love God if you are in the Spirit. Not all the time of course. But you are the ones who love God. It is not something you have to do, it is simply a fact about you. And those who love God are the ones who are going to experience this reality that he is going to bring everything together in the end for good. If you are in Christ it is talking about you. In fact, it is not so much based on you being the one who loves God, as it is based on God being the one who loves you. He foreknew you. He set his eye on you from afar. He predestined or predetermined in his mind that he would bring you home, and you can be sure he will accomplish this.

I believe the force of the word “foreknowledge” here lies in the idea of love, not in the idea of seeing ahead what might happen. It is in accord with Paul’s encouragement in Ephesians 1:4 that God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. The idea is that you are known by God in advance. Your love for him is a result of his having known you first. Having known and loved you even before you were born, he determined ahead of time that you would be conformed to the image of His son, that you would participate in the redemption and restoration of humanity.

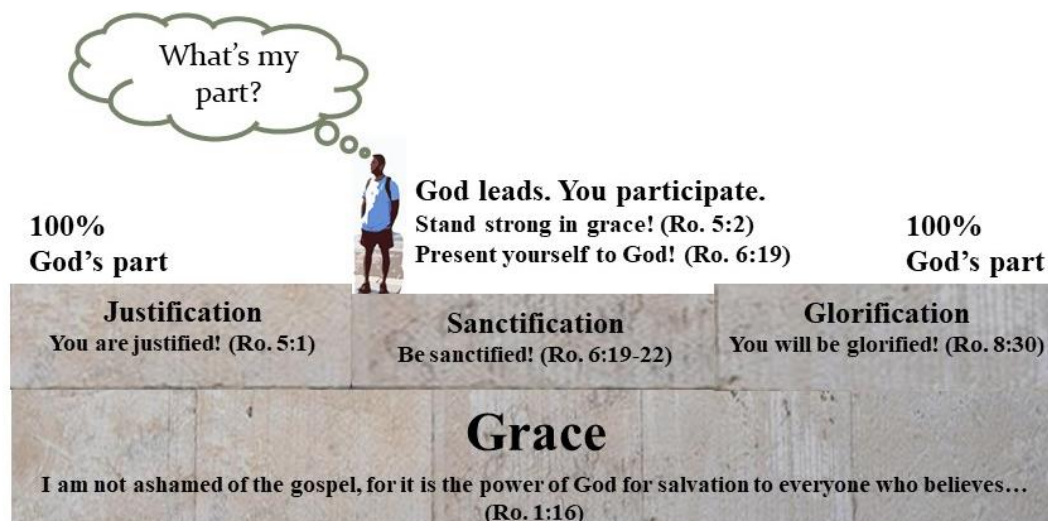
Let’s talk about that a little, about what it means to be conformed into the image of God. The image of God was the original glory of Adam. In a sense, our glory is secondary glory. We are like the moon. A full moon lights up the night, but not with any light of its own. The moon reflects the light of the Sun which is the true origin of the light. God is the sun, the source of glory, and we are to be little moons reflecting his glory as it shines out of us. By placing his own moral character into Adam and

Eve and giving them real authority and ability to rule and to love and to create and to judge, God made his own image to be reflected in them. This image was marred by the fall into sin. So, the second Adam came to reflect that image and to restore fallen man and woman, to bring us back into accord with our original purpose as image-bearers. This is the good that God is working in you, that you would be conformed to the image of Jesus, taking up your purpose as a true son of Adam or true daughter of Eve. Jesus Christ would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

Now, let's continue with the process in verse 30. Having predetermined that you would be part of this glorious restoration of humanity, God called you. That call awakened in you the eyes of faith. You saw Jesus and believed. Having been called, then, you were also justified, declared right. Having been justified you are also glorified. Interestingly, Paul puts this last term in the past tense along with the rest even though through this passage God's glory is something we are looking forward to in the future. We are not yet glorified but will be glorified in the new heaven and new earth. I think Paul uses the past tense "glorified" here to indicate the absolute surety of God completing the process. If you have been justified, then you will indeed be glorified. It is as good as already done.

Looking at this process that Paul lays out, it is worth asking, "Where is the human part?" The point of chapters 5-8 is to answer the second question of covenant, "How ought we live out this covenant of grace?" Paul gave us the commands of grace in chapter 6 to "consider" what is true about ourselves in Jesus Christ and to "not present" the members of our body to sin but to "present" the members of our body to righteousness. And again, in the first half of Romans 8, we are told to put to death the deeds of the body and live by the Spirit. So, having these exhortations here in these chapters to live out grace, it is interesting to note the omission of any human part in this process.

In between called and justified we might expect to see the word believed. That's the human part. And in between justified and glorified we might expect to see the word sanctified. Paul is focusing our attention on God's part; foreknown, predestined, called, justified, glorified. The implication of Paul's communication is that the beginning and the end are in the hands of God. After you are justified, yes, you are called to struggle, to engage your mind and your will and your heart, to make wise decisions, to pursue righteousness, to reflect the image of God, to participate in becoming who you have been created to be. And that is all part of your sanctification, your transformation, your growth, your maturity. And yet, in all your effort, do not misjudge who is the primary player even in that process. God is leading this dance. The beginning is 100% in his control. It is God who has justified you. And the end is 100% in his control. It is God who get you to heaven, who will glorify you. You do participate in between those two, in your already but not yet reality, having been saved, but not yet taken home. You participate, you are learning to rely on the Holy Spirit who dwells in you to guide you and empower you. But even then, God is still the primary agent. You participate, but He is the one working in you to desire and to do (Phil 2:13).



Paul has here described for us God's sovereignty over the process of our salvation and he intends for us to receive the reality of God's sovereignty as good news. Knowing that God is the one ultimately in control of every stage, strengthens us and reinforces us to engage in our part.

So, what conclusions can we draw from Paul's description of God's sovereign hand overseeing our justification, sanctification and glorification?

Well, let's read and see what Paul says in the final paragraphs of chapter 8.

The Secure Hope of Our Salvation (8:31-39)

[Read Romans 8:31-39]

Paul piles up for us a list of questions that work on our minds and our hearts. We can draw out and focus on three of these questions. First, "If God is for us, who is against us?" Second, "Who will bring a charge against God's elect?" And third, "Who will separate us from the love of God?"

If God is for us, who is against us? (8:31-32)

We start with the first question in verse 31. "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us?" Verse 32 gives us the idea Paul is driving at. "He who did not spare his own son, but delivered him over for us all, how will he not also with him freely give us all things?"

God made a plan to bring people back into relationship with him. That plan would cost the death of Jesus on a cross. Having determined to go ahead with the most costly part of the plan, did God not think it all through? Is he like the man who builds the tower and runs out of money half way through or like the king who goes to war without the ability to win? Was the death of Jesus just a role of the dice, risking all that God might redeem for himself a family, but might not? If God began the plan of the cross, would he not certainly have determined its end. The idea here is very similar to the idea in 5:10, where Paul says, "if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by his life." If we went this far, he is going to go all the way.

Paul asks, "how will God not also with Christ freely give us all things?" If God has made the gospel of Jesus Christ his plan of salvation for individual human beings, then what or who is going to prevent God from bringing his plan to fruition? If God foreknew you and called you and justified you, then what or who is going to prevent God from glorifying you?

That's the question Paul is going to answer with more questions. We have two more to focus on.

Who will bring a charge against God's elect? (8:33-34)

First, in verse 33, "Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns?" Who is going to stop God by condemning God's children? Who's bringing the charge? Who's going to condemn them?

There is one who condemns. The enemy of old, the accuser, Satan. I do not know if he will be allowed in the courtroom, but if he is, you can imagine he is going to join the prosecution against you. And in this he is not even going to need to deceive. As you stand on trial before God, you can imagine Satan, the prosecuting attorney, bringing in a big fat binder with your name on it. As Satan drops the binder on the stand before you, he opens to page one and commands, "Read this out loud." You look at the judge. He nods. You begin to read. Satan smiles scornfully as he instructs you, "A bit louder, please." The cold numbness of fear crawls up your legs and burrows into your stomach as you read line after line, knowing every sentence to be true, truer than you would ever admit to yourself; hypocrisy, laziness, impurity, harmful words, selfish deeds. Accurate in every word. After you finish the binder of sins that took place before you came to know Christ. Satan switches that with a new binder detailing the transgressions you committed after coming to know Jesus Christ. When the reading is over, the judge asks, "How do you plead?" As the word guilty begins to form on your tongue, the lawyer for your defense stands up. It says there that Jesus Christ is the one who intercedes for us. Jesus Christ who died and rose again. He submits one item into evidence, a

wooden cross. And nailed to that cross is the entire list of sins just read and over that list. And stamped on that list are the words, in blood, "Paid in full." The gavel comes down and the sentence is passed, "Righteous by means of grace."

"Who will bring a charge against God's elect?" When you have Jesus speaking for you, who can condemn you?

Actually, there is another accuser besides Satan who tries to condemn. It's you. Sometimes you yourself speak the loudest words of condemnation. It is true that you have a deep, personal awareness of your own limitations, failings, selfishness, hypocrisy. You may have stored up the evidence against yourself in your own heart. But you are now in the hands of God. You have received his grace. The voice in your head may be loud, but it is not loud enough to overturn the court of God's justice. He has paid in full. He has declared, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." The condemnation speaking so loudly in your own mind will be drowned out by one word, "Accepted. Accepted."

So, enter into the rest accomplished for you by the Son of God. No one can bring a convincing charge against you. Not you. Not Satan. No one. And God certainly will not, because he has already paid the ultimate price for you, and he has already sealed you as his own with the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of your inheritance, to the praise of his glorious grace (Ephesians 1:13-14)!

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? (8:35-39)

In verse 35 we come to another question asking who or what will prevent God from completing the purpose of the gospel. Paul states it this way, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?"

Paul has returned again here to the reality of our suffering in this broken world. That suffering which so often creates fear or doubt in our minds. Am I loved by God? Is he still holding me? Do these things that come against me in this broken world and as a result of broken humanity, do any of these things separate me from my relationship with God in Christ? Do these things show me that I am judged and cast out.

Paul says, "No." He just says it much more beautifully. But the answer is, "No. Nothing can separate us from the love of God." Let's read how Paul says it. It's wonderful.

"In all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Amen.

The victory that is ours is ours in Jesus. It is his victory. It was motivated by his love for us. Now that we are in him it is our victory, too. Paul is fully convinced in the security of this victory. Nothing can come between us and Christ. We will be with him in glory. The terms Paul uses should probably not be taken too specifically. He is painting here with broad strokes. Mostly the terms are in pairs. "Death" and "life" cover the normal way we think about our human existence, this life and the end which is death. "Angels" and "principalities" (or maybe you have "rulers" in your Bible). These seem to address spiritual beings, with angels possibly being reserved for the good powers and principalities for the demonic. Then we have "things present" and "things to come". And these take a temporal perspective. They consider time. And they cover anything that we can remember in the past or anything that we might conceive of in the future. There are different suggestions for why "powers" occurs unpaired. It is by itself. I am not sure if any of the suggestions are convincing. So, we have "powers." Then we have the pair "Height" and "depth". And it is also not very clear what these mean, but if we stick with broad terms, they are special. This is the spatial dimension. And if we take it physically it's the sky and then it's under the earth or figuratively it's heaven and hell. Then the last term "all created things" serves as a catch all in case we could conceive of anything being left out of the list so far. This covers it all, everything.

What can separate you from the love of Christ? Death cannot separate you from the love of Christ. Life cannot separate you from the love of Christ. An angel cannot separate you from the love of Christ. No demon can separate you from the love of Christ. Nothing in time, past or future can separate you from the love of Christ. Nothing in space can separate you from the love of Christ. No power at all can separate you from the love of Christ. Nothing in any form in this created existence can separate you from the love of Christ.

What can separate you from the love of Christ? Nothing. And to be honest, just from my own opinion, I think we must include you in there as well. I think the list is all-encompassing, implying that you cannot separate yourself from the love of Christ. You're his now. He's got you.

Conclusion

I once heard a doctor of child development speak to a group of future teachers. She said that there are two questions every child is instinctively asking of any adult who comes into their life. The first question is "Do you love me?" Or, "Do you care about me?" A child will easily dismiss an adult who enters a room and only talks to other adults. But an adult who looks the child in the eyes, bends down to their level, and speaks directly to the child, that adult catches their interest. Their brain, even though they do not know it, begins to instinctively ask about this adult, "Do you care about me?" That little child's brain is looking for signs that say, "You matter. I care. I will protect you. I will give to you. I will have fun with you. I love you."

The specialist said there is a second question that the child asks also instinctively of the same adult. "Maybe you do love me. But can I trust you? Can I trust you." That's the question. "Even if you do really love me will you keep your promises? Are you a promise-keeping adult? Are you trustworthy?" When I heard the professional teaching, I thought, "Those are the questions of the human heart. Those are the questions we are asking about God, whether we know it or not." I believe there is a longing in every human heart to have these questions answered. And we usually turn to other people to get them answered. We don't know to turn to God. And we say, "Do you love me? Can I trust you." But the questions come from a deeper place inside our souls. No human can fill that void or answer that longing. We long for God to fill this emptiness. The questions of our soul to God are, "Do you love me?" And, "Can I trust you?" And when we realize that those are the questions our heart, then we become ready to hear God answer.

Teaching in chapters 5-8 on the power of grace, Paul begins and ends by answering both of those questions. God says, "Yes. I love you enough to die for you when you could care less about me. I love you enough to adopt you as my child. And nothing in this world or any other world can prevent me from bringing you home. You can trust me."

As the voice of the Holy Spirit works to rebuild our hearts, to reform and transform. And as we receive this truth that we are loved, that we are safe in that love, it does something inside of us. It creates a fountain of emotional wealth. It empowers us to reject the voice of condemnation in our own minds and to reject the voice that says, "Worthless." Because we say, "No. No. I am loved by God. And he's got me. I am safe." It also empowers us to rest in God, to persevere through suffering with God, and also to turn our eyes from ourselves to others. We find that we begin to have emotional wealth to share, to care for the needs of others, to bear their burdens without grumbling or bitterness.

We have talked about the groaning that comes with the suffering of this life. And it is true that sometimes there will only be one pair of footsteps in the sand when God must carry you. He's got you when you have no strength. That, however, is not the whole story of grace. There will be other times when you are the ones carrying your brother or carrying your sister. There is a grit to grace, a Mother Teresa kind of grit, a resilience, a fortitude, a resolve, an inner strength. Paul was quite serious when he said that we, we are those who are able to rejoice in our tribulations, because those tribulations produce in us perseverance and that produces in us proven character and that produces

hope which excites us because we have the love of God in our hearts by the Spirit. So, we love hope. Because hope is pointing us home. This is by grace. By grace you are being made strong.

Let's remind ourselves again of the principles of grace. What makes us so powerful? Let's conclude with four things.

One, you have a New Identity in Christ: You are a child of God, declared righteous being remade into the image of Christ. Knowing that it is God who defines you, empowers you.

Two, you have a New Union with Christ: You are united with Jesus spiritually in his death and in his life. His Spirit indwells you so that you might pursue righteousness and experience fruitfulness in this life. As you live by faith, the Spirit of God empowers you.

Three, you have a New Security in Christ: No one can condemn you before God's court and no one can separate you from the love of Jesus Christ. Security in Jesus does not lead to sin but provides you with emotional wealth to be at peace with who you are as you live out this sometimes, painful state of transformation. That secure hope empowers you.

Four, you have a New Invitation: Grounded on your identity in Christ, your union with Christ and your security in Christ, you have received an invitation the invitation of grace to live as a new man or a new woman, as a grown child of the King. It is a command and it is an obligation, but there are no morality police standing over you to force you to it. God calls you based on the desire he has placed in your heart. The Spirit in you loves him. The Spirit in you calls him Abba, Father. So, regardless of what sort of obligation others may enforce on you externally, you have inside of you this deeper, truer sense of obligation to live according to who you are in Christ. It is the right duty of the worshipper, the servant, the child. It is the duty that comes out of a heart that loves God. You have been invited by grace to take responsibility, to step up and choose to be who you have been created to be. And that invitation empowers you.

This is the genius, the wisdom, the righteousness of God. This is the power of grace in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as important, confusing, interesting or strange in verses 28-39?
2. How are you encouraged by the process Paul describes in 8:28-30? Does God's control of the process feel limiting to you or freeing to you?
3. How are you encouraged by the way Paul describes your security in relationship with him in 8:31-39?
4. When you consider these four principles of grace: New Identity, New Union, New Security, New Invitation. Which one, at this moment of your life, feels most empowering to you? Explain some of your thoughts or feelings behind your choice.
5. Law does provide different motivations. Law motivates through fear of punishment. Law can also motivate through a desire for recognition as someone morally good. Law can motivate by providing a sense of worthiness or a sense of superiority over others.

Living under grace requires accepting your freedom from legalistic motives. You do not have to fear. You do not compare. We do not boast about doing better than someone else. Paul's opponents have said that without this motivation, Christians will be lazy and spoiled. And though Paul rejects idea that people will always or necessarily abuse grace, that does not mean that we will never abuse grace or take grace for granted.

We need to feed or encourage our grace motivations.

What motivates you as one living under grace and how do you feed or encourage those motivations?

Lesson 22: Paul's Lament Over Israel

Romans 9:1-5

¹ I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit,

² that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart.

³ For I could wish that I myself were accursed, *separated* from Christ for the sake of my brethren,

(1) my kinsmen according to the flesh,

(2) ⁴ who are Israelites,

(3) to whom belongs the adoption as sons,

and the glory

and the covenants

and the giving of the Law

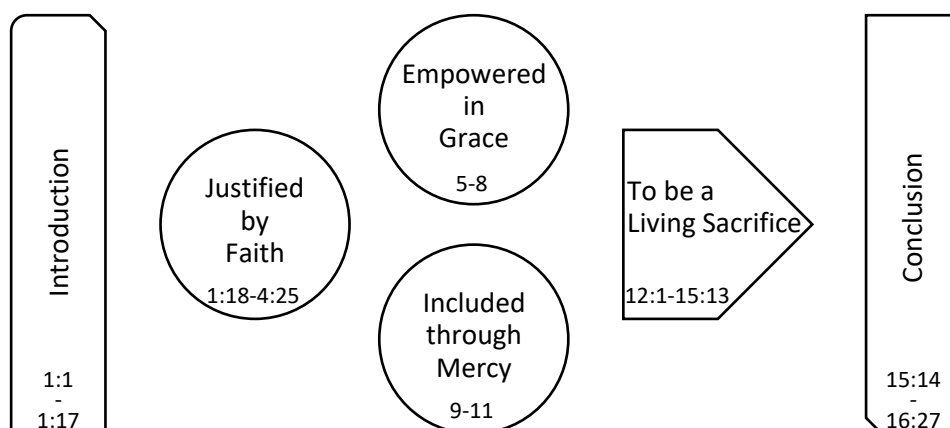
and the *temple* service

and the promises,

(4) ⁵ whose are the fathers,

(5) and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen. NASB

Overview of Romans 1:18-4:25: God Includes through Mercy



The first five verses of chapter 9 introduce us to the next major section of Paul's argument in Romans. We will get to those verses in a moment. First, we should take a step back out and broaden our telescope as it were, so that we can see where we have come from and where we are going.

Looking Back Over Romans 1-8

In Romans 1-11 Paul describes for us how God displays his righteous power through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Starting in chapter 12 Paul urges us to respond to the gospel by living out our worship of God. We start with the theology of the gospel and move to the practice of the gospel. The theology of the gospel in chapters 1-11 consists of three major sections. We started with the core message of justification by faith in the grace of Jesus Christ. That was chapters 1-4, our first major section. The two following major sections in chapters 5-8 and chapters 9-11 each address a significant question that arises out of the gospel claim of justification by faith in that first section.

So, remembering back in that section at the beginning of chapter 3, Paul had begun his initial presentation of the gospel. On his way to indicting all of humanity, Paul targeted the pagan person, then the moral person and then the religious person. It was pretty clear that the indictment of the moral person and the religious person was an indictment of the Jew, who, possessing the law of God from Moses, had the best potential for proving himself righteous through morality or religion. By indicting the morality and religiousness of the Jew, the one under the very Law of God, Paul indicted all morality and all religion.

In the middle of that argument, Paul took a pause starting in 3:1 and ending at verse 8. Paul knew that his message draws out these two major objections; first, “What about the Jews?” and second, “What about sin?” The person listening closely to Paul would have heard him say that obedience to the Law of Moses is not required. That would be good listening. That was the direction Paul moved along. But if the Law of Moses is not required, then what place do the people of Israel have in the gospel of Jesus Christ? And not only that, if the Law of Moses is not required, then how does the gospel intend to curb sin and promote righteousness? In the end, does the gospel of Jesus Christ make God to be unfaithful to the Jewish people and unfaithful to his own righteous character? Paul responds to both accusations of unfaithfulness with his famous short answer, “By no means!” He has acknowledged the questions, but barely answered them. There is reason for that. The answer depends on finishing out his argument for justification by faith. Concluding that argument at the end of chapter 4, Paul then turns to a more robust response of the accusations.

Paul starts with the question, “What about sin?” That was the major question being answered in the section we just finished Romans 5-8. If there is no Law, what motive do people have to live righteously. This question gave Paul opportunity to argue the power of grace to transform. Grace provides a new identity. We are free from the guilt of sin, declared righteous, adopted as children. Grace provides a new union. We are unified with Jesus in his death and resurrection, indwelt and empowering by the Holy Spirit. Grace provides a new security in Christ. God justifies. God glorifies. Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? Who will separate us from the love of Christ? We are empowered, knowing that we might fall down, and we might fail, but we will never be cast out. And grace extends to us a new invitation to live according to who God is making us to be, children restored into the image of Jesus Christ. The motive of Law is outside of us. It presses upon us. The motive of grace arises in us by the removal of guilt, by the power of the Holy Spirit, by the security of his love and by this invitation to responsibility. These are the motives of grace. Does grace lead to sin? By no means! Grace empowers for righteousness.

So now we stand facing the second major objection to the gospel. What about Israel?

This is not simply a historical question or a secondary theological question. It is the question about whether or not God is a promise keeper? Is God faithful? The powerful ending of Romans chapter 8 comes into question for us if God was not faithful to the Jews before us. Paul declares that we are safe and secure in the unshakeable love of Jesus Christ. What happened to that love for Israel?

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name; you are Mine!
“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
And through the rivers, they will not overflow you.
When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched,
Nor will the flame burn you. (Isaiah 43:1b-2)

Christians love verses from Isaiah. But those verses were not written to New Covenant believers. Those verses were written to the nation Israel. We just leave off the front bit, “But now, thus says the LORD, your Creator, O Jacob, And He who formed you, O Israel, Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine (Isaiah 43:1a)!” “Israel, you are Mine!” Certainly, after Romans 8 we can imagine God saying the same thing to we who are in Christ. But this “You are Mine!” He said to Israel.

So, what of the promises to Abraham and to Moses, affirmed by Isaiah and Ezekiel? What do you call a man who abandons promises made to his first wife to be united to a younger bride? And what confidence ought that younger bride have in the fidelity of her husband who has shown himself unfaithful to his first love? This is not just a historical question about Israel. At issue here is the character of God and our confidence in his promises.

The promises of the new covenant rest on the character of God. For the gospel of Jesus Christ to maintain the character of God, a just answer must be given to the question, “What about Israel?”

That's where we are standing now, at the beginning of chapter 9 and Paul's defense of the faithfulness of God in regard to Israel.

The Gospel is the Power of God for the Salvation of - Group or Individual?

We've looked back at Romans 1-8 to see how we got here. Before we look ahead to the overall structure of Paul's answer in chapters 9-11, I want to address a theological issue that has come up in recent studies on Romans associated with what is called the New Perspective on Paul. This is the place to address briefly, just briefly, an important perspective of interpretation.

Paul addresses as one of his themes in Romans, the relationship of both Jew and Gentile to the gospel. We have seen that starting in the thesis statement and moving through chapters 1-8. Some proponents of the New Perspective on Paul argue that we should interpret all of Romans through a group lens, rather than an individual lens. They would recognize the Jew/Gentile issue as the primary issue of the letter. They would also say that Paul's primary emphasis is on the different ways the gospel affects Jews as a group and Gentiles as a group.

I agree that the Jew/Gentile issue is one that Paul traces throughout his argument. I disagree that it is primary. The Jew/Gentile issue is the context into which Paul writes. But the gospel of Jesus Christ and particularly God's power and righteousness revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ is the primary theme of Paul's message in the letter to the Romans. We do not want to make the mistake of pulling the contextual background of Jew/Gentile into the foreground.

Paul emphasizes that the gospel applies to Jew and Gentile both the same. Jews and Gentiles come to the cross from different places, but the cross saves each person the same by faith in the atoning death of Jesus Christ. There is no difference. We can see that Paul has not been addressing groups in Romans 1-8. He has been addressing individuals. Individuals are held accountable for their sin. Individuals are declared righteous through the act of faith, an individual act. Individuals are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, adopted as children, and predestined to be conformed into the image of Christ. Though we might be able to communicate some of these realities as applying to a group, for example the Spirit indwells the body of Christ, and God may be said to predestine Israel, to this point in this letter Paul's message of salvation by faith has been clearly applied to individuals.

This is not to say that the gospel is individualistic. We are born again into a community. It is to say that the gospel applies at its most fundamental level to the individual. I can meet with an individual man or woman or child and share with them the wonderful news that Paul has communicated about the gospel of Jesus Christ in this letter to the Romans. And that man or woman or child then has a choice and an opportunity to receive by faith the grace of God as an individual act of the will.

I am reminded of the words of a Moravian missionary to the struggling Anglican priest John Wesley. Wesley was afraid during a storm on his way to the new world. The missionary asked Wesley a question, "Do you know that Christ has died for you?" Wesley responded, "I know that Christ died for the sins of the world." The missionary wisely came back, "Yes, but do you know that Christ died for you?" Wesley said, "Yes," but later wrote in his journal that the answer in his heart was, "No." This question does not get answered for us by our parents or our community. The gospel is not individualistic, but the gospel is intensely personal. God intends to remake you as a person. You have to answer for yourself, "Do you yourself know that Jesus Christ has died for you? And have you yourself accepted this gift of grace as an act of faith?" And if you have, you yourself can be sure, you can be secure in the love the Jesus Christ has for you. You yourself have an individual, personal relationship with your creator. We must be able to address the gospel to one another as individual human beings, who bear the image of God, and yes, who are being brought together in a new family and new community. We are individuals living in groups, families, and communities.

This may have seemed obvious to you over the course of our study so far. Good. I do not want to address a problem you do not have. I want to make you aware of a trend in studies on Romans. More importantly, I want you to get ready for a shift. Though the focus has been on the individual up to

this point, we are getting ready to talk about groups. Romans 9-11 addresses group and individual. It is a shift that makes sense now that we have come to the question, “What about Israel?” Israel is not an individual. Israel is a group or a corporate entity. We are talking about the people of God. That’s going to be our question, “Who are the people of God?” We will need to keep that in mind as we go. That’s all I will say about that now. I think our shift to talk about groups will make a lot of sense and become obvious once we get into chapter 9.

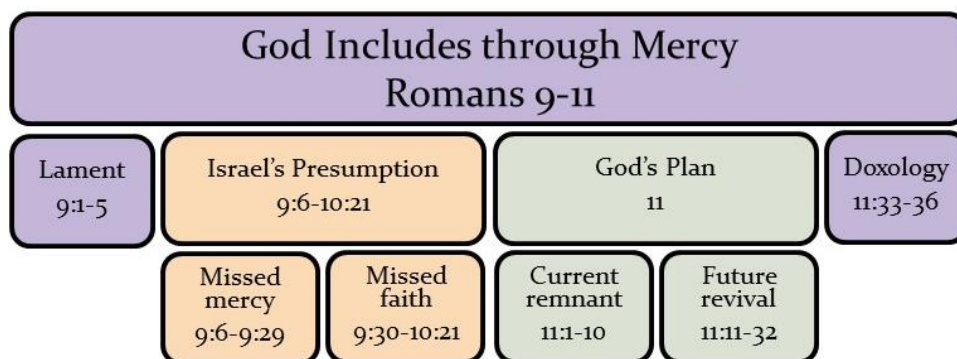
Looking Ahead Over Romans 9-11

We still have our telescope out broadly. We looked back at 1-8, now let’s survey 9-11. I again encourage you to check out the resources at observetheword.com. You will find an overview chart on Romans, and in the text for this lesson you will see a chart for Romans 9-11, the chart I am getting ready to explain right now.

I titled this major section “God includes through mercy.” We’ve had “God justifies by faith,” “God empowers in grace,” and now “God includes through mercy.” The word mercy is emphasized in this section. Even more than the special emphasis on the word faith in 1-4 and the word grace in 5-8, Paul reserves mercy for this particular context, for this conversation about Israel. Paul does not use the Greek word for mercy at all in chapters 1-8, 9 times in 9-11, and then only twice after chapter 11.

The use of the word Israel also helps us recognize our primary subject for this section. Though he refers to Israel 11 times in chapters 9-11, Paul does not refer to Israel at all before or after. It’s just these three chapters.

Paul starts the section with a personal lament for Israel, that’s in 9:1-5. And he ends the section with a doxology or statement of praise in 11:33-36. So, we start with a prayer and end with a prayer. In between these two short prayers, Paul addresses Israel’s presumption about their relationship with God in chapters 9-10. Then Paul addresses God’s plan for Israel in chapter 11. God’s plan will include both a current remnant and a future revival. Israel’s presumption will include their misunderstanding of God’s mercy and their misunderstanding of the role of faith.



Missed mercy, (3) Missed faith, (4) Current remnant, (5) Future revival and (6) Doxology.

Paul has some tough words for Israel in this section. They have presumed upon God his commitment to their position as the center of his people. The pride inherent in their presumption resulted in a hardness of heart and a misunderstanding of both God’s mercy and the role of faith. Paul is going to have to address such hardness of heart straight on. It will not sound nice at places.

But Paul does not jump into his argument with guns blazing. Israel is not his enemy. Paul starts with a lament. Let’s read that.

Paul’s Lament (9:1-5)

[Read Romans 9:1-5]

This is not a poetic lament, like one of the lament Psalms. It is a prose lament. A prayer that you would speak out loud to God that expresses the sorrow of a lamentation. Paul expresses deep

sadness over the religious state of his fellow Jews. He is getting ready to tell us that their presumption prevents them from receiving God's plan of salvation. They are like Habakkuk, calling for righteous salvation, but upon hearing God's plan, they take a defiant stand on the wall, exclaiming, "Surely this cannot be it. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not worthy of our righteous God." With two feet firmly planted, they reject the good news to await a plan they can endorse. Unlike Habakkuk, there is no move to humility, no change of vision, no seeing with the spiritual eyes of faith, no submission to God's outrageous plan.

And though Paul must expose this prideful presumption, he is not gleeful at the destruction of the Jews. He is not vindictive. He is not self-righteous. He knows that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of darkness (Ephesians 6:12)." His heart agrees with the heart of Jesus, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do (Luke 23:34)."

Paul wants us to know, before getting into his argument, that the argument does not come out of an emotional negativity against the Jews or any kind of intolerance. On the contrary, Paul's heart grieves that the vast majority of Israelites misunderstand the mercy of God.

Paul's Heart for Israel (9:1-3)

Reading Paul's lament, we need to keep in mind the emotional tone of the words. That's the reason for the piling up of phrases. The language of verses 1 and 2 sound like someone trying to convince his hearers of his inner state. "I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart."

I do not think Paul is worried about the Romans believing him. He knows they do not think he is lying. The repetition is not to convince them of the truthfulness of his statements, but to convey the reality in his heart. The repetition communicates to us emotionally. "I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit..."

They may have picked up a negativity towards the Jewish position in his argument so far. They may have heard from others that Paul is a man opposed to the Jews. He wants them to know this is not the case. He wants them to know the state of his heart, "I have great sorrow and unceasing grief." He wants us listen to what he feels.

He goes on to make a surprising, even shocking, claim in verse 3, "For I could wish that I myself were accursed, *separated* from Christ for the sake of my brethren..." I have heard discussion about this verse that centers on whether it is really possible for a true believer to desire himself cut off from Christ for the sake of someone else. I think that line of discussion veers off in the wrong direction. This is a statement of emotion from Paul. I think it is certainly possible for Paul to feel this way, especially when we think about who felt this way before Paul. Whose feelings do Paul's feelings mirror? I think we could say Jesus. How is it possible, rationally, to think of Jesus desiring spiritual separation from God? And yet for our sake Jesus did desire to be accursed and forsaken – and so he was. The heart of Paul reflects the compassionate heart of Christ.

Of course, Christ is in a category unique, all alone. But there is another who came before Paul whose heart expressed these same thoughts. Do you know before Paul expressed this desire to be cut off from life with God for the sake of Israel? Do you know who said that and where it was? It's Moses. Moses prays to God in Exodus 32:32, after the sin of the golden calf, "But now, if you will, forgive their sin – and if not, please blot me out from your book which you have written." He says, "Blot me out. Cut me off from your life." The interaction between Moses and God in Exodus 32 provides a classic example of how God draws the worshipper's heart up into his own through prayer, through prayer, through conversation and dialogue. After the golden calf incident, Moses comes down off the mountain, with his anger burning against his fellow Israelites. It is a just, but pale reflection of God's righteous nature. God allows Moses to experience more fully the burning anger of righteousness in his own declaration that he is going to destroy the nation of Israel. You want to know burning anger?

God can show you burning anger. He communicated to Moses his glory in the burning justice of his holiness.

And I think the effect is just as God intended. The heat of his wrath drew out an opposing emotion in Moses. Moses was angry, but when God was really angry, then Moses responds with compassion. When Moses' anger burned, God communicated to Moses the truth of righteous anger, the extent to which wrath must go to bring justice on those who spit in the face of the one true and holy God. Faced with the reality of burning wrath, Moses relents. His heart moves to compassion, and he begins to intercede on behalf of Israel.

The text actually says that God relents, that God changes his mind (Exodus 32:14). But that must be understood according to God's purpose with Moses, the dialogue. What was God doing. God certainly was always fully aware of the demand for justice and the need for compassion. Both realities are always ever present in the heart and mind of God. He chooses which to express and which to act on according to his own wisdom. I believe God intended to show the one in order to draw out the other. In this interaction between God and Moses, this dialogue or prayer, it is Moses' heart that undergoes transformation as he experiences the double reality of justice and compassion. The interaction between God and Moses continues from chapter 32 to chapter 33 all the way into chapter 34, climaxing as God reveals the truth of his character in the declaration of his name. The Lord proclaims his name, "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in loving kindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet he will by no means leave the guilty unpunished... (Exodus 34:6-7)." That is the tension of true justice and great mercy.

Paul has experienced a similar tension in his heart. The reality of the gospel brings together the grace and mercy of God with his righteous justice. He will grant mercy, but not to those who refuse to accept it. And so, Paul is grieved deeply in his soul as he thinks about all the blessings God has showered onto his fellow Israelites and the irony that, like the elder brother in the prodigal son story, the most blessed refuse to enter into the feast because it is too easy.

The Blessings Belonging to Israel (9:4-5)

Highlighting the tragic irony of Israel's rejection, Paul lists out these historic blessings on Israel. At first he lists a couple of items that affirm his relationship to the Jews. He says they are his kinsmen by flesh and blood. They are also Israelites, the descendants of Jacob who were of the same people. The third item in Paul's description of his brethren is the list of blessings that belong to the Israelites. The effect for Paul in piling up the items is to create this whole sense of blessing, that they have all of this, and yet, they have rejected Christ.

All these things were meant to point the Israelites to Jesus. They have the adoption of sons. They did not always do well with that. Isaiah says at the beginning of his prophecy, "Sons I have reared and brought up, but they have revolted against me." There was always this tension of being a son and not acting like a son. That's the question. The adoption begs the question, how can we who sin and rebel, how can we be accepted securely as sons and daughters of our God who is holy? How can we be sure of our position with God? And for generations God just said, "Trust me. Trust me. I have got you." But now in Christ he has shown the answer that the prophets longed to see. This is how you sinful human beings can be my children, how you can be made acceptable. This is it Israel. But Israel rejects the answer.

All the other items of the list came to Israel as shadows, wonderful shadows, but still shadows of a more wonderful reality. And yet, Israel would prefer to hold on to and define themselves by the shadow of the truth, rather than embracing the truth itself. They have the glory of God declared by the word of God to Moses in his name and expressed by light shining out of the tabernacle. But then God came in full expression as a man. John says it this way, "The word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld his glory (John 1:14)." The glory is Jesus. Everything else was pointing to Jesus. Along with the glory, Israel had the covenants made with Abraham and renewed with Isaac

and with Jacob. And then a new covenant with Moses. But all of these pointed to a better covenant, a better sacrifice, a better high priest, to Jesus. They received the righteousness of Law given through Moses. They answer to how they should live. But then when a new and better righteousness comes along in grace that introduces them to life of Jesus, they turn it down. They embraced the temple service but reject the true service of baptism in Christ and communion with him through the bread and the wine. They hold on to the promises made to Israel, while rejecting the fulfillment of those promises in Jesus. They rightly look back to their heritage. "We are those who come from the fathers." But then they miss the heart of the fathers. Jesus said, "Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and he saw it and was glad (John 8:58)." They reject the true glory of Israel. This is the true glory of Israel that the Messiah Jesus Christ chose to come to earth as a Jew. They turn their eyes from the goal of all these blessings, in order to hold onto the shadowy forms of their traditions. They would rather play at religion than enter into relationship with the heavenly father. And because of this, Paul experiences "great sorrow and unceasing grief...for the sake of [his] brethren." This is his lament.

Applying Romans 9:1-5 to Our Own Culture

The heart given over to God rightly responds at times to sin with righteous anger. When God is dishonored and people are harmed, it is right to be angry. I think it is even more right to be angry when the ones dishonoring God and harming his children claim themselves to be his people. The anger burning in Moses on Mount Sinai was aroused by fellow Israelites, not Egyptians.

The context for Paul is a cultural claim by his people, the Jews, to be the people of God, even while denying the gospel of Jesus Christ. We see that all around us. As an American, I want to like that the American dollar bill displays the claim, "In God we trust." But we don't really, not as a people. Not even if we only count those who proclaim to be Christian. America still has a majority claiming to be Christian, but the majority of that Christian majority rejects the truth claims of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We can look at another nation. Where I live, Croatians have their saying, "Bog i Hrvati." It means "God and the Croatians." And even though the majority of Croatians claim to be Roman Catholic Christians, still the majority of the majority reject the truth claims of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

If you live in a Christianized nation how do you feel about those who hold onto the name of Christ while rejecting the truthfulness of his teaching, both with their beliefs and with their behavior? How do you feel about those who politicize Christianity, connecting it with this party or that party or this nation or that nation? How do you feel about the cultural Christians in your society?

Here is the punch that hit my gut reading Paul. I'll ask you the same way that it hit me. Does your heart echo the heart of Moses, Paul, Christ when you pray for the Christian culture around you? Do you pray these words from the heart, "I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart for my fellow countrymen who claim the name Christian. I could wish myself accursed on their behalf that they would not rest on their cultural presumption even while they reject the gospel of grace in Jesus. They are my family, they are my neighbors, they are my countrymen. To them belong the church fathers, missionaries and preachers, the whole Bible, baptism, the bread and the wine, the testimony of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, the proclamation of the cross and of grace and the promised indwelling of the Holy Spirit. They claim the name little Christ, Christian. They are so close to eternal life with Christ and yet, their cultural Christianity has given them an inoculation, just enough Christianity to prevent them from catching the real thing. I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart for them."

We are called to proclaim the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are called to disagree with those who claim special relationship with God while denying the life, death, resurrection and grace of Jesus. But before we do, we need a heart check. "Seeing the people, Jesus felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36)." We are called to tolerance, but not the way the modern world uses the word. There is a great cancer that

eats away at the souls of men and women. “Human beings are at once the most wonderful and most miserable of all God’s creatures (Peter Kuzmić).” We see the image of God in every man, every woman, every child. We also see a cancer that eats away at that image, a disease of the soul that separates people from God. They cannot find a cure without accepting the fact of the disease. We cannot love them by blindly ignoring the tragic truth of their condition. We must speak.

The message of Paul that follows in Romans 9-11 may be taken as intolerance against Jewish people. It is not. It is intolerance against the state of sin that blinds his fellow countrymen to their own need and so, prevents them from drinking the true medicine of their cure, the clear, cool, living water of Jesus Christ.

That is the question we have to ask ourselves. Do I grieve over the condition of the sick around me? Do I love them enough to speak clearly about the problem, not to attack, not to demean, not to hate, but to love, to speak clearly in this society that Jesus Christ is the hope of every man, and every woman, and every child?

Reflection Questions

1. As a New Covenant believer, what is your own personal interest in addressing the question, “What about the Jews?” What kind of insight do you hope to get from Romans 9-11?
2. Re-read Romans 2:28-3:1-4. Why does it seem to you that Paul raises the question, “What about the Jews?” And what stands out to you in his brief answer?
3. Now, looking at chapter 9, what stands out to you as important, confusing, interesting or strange in Romans 9:1-5?
4. What is Paul’s intent with this lament? What do you think he intends to communicate about himself? What does he intend to communicate about Israel?
5. What are some of the blessings possessed by the religious culture in your society? You could answer this according to your own denomination and according to the broader cultural tradition?
6. How do you apply Paul’s compassion for the Jews to your own cultural and religious environment? Does the state of Paul’s heart challenge you?

Lesson 23: Presuming on God, Israel Misunderstands His Mercy

Romans 9:6-29

⁶ But *it is* not as though the word of God has failed.

I. God's people are defined by God's choice, not by human descent or human works (Patriarchs).

For they are not all Israel who are *descended* from Israel;

⁷ nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants,
but: "THROUGH ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS WILL BE NAMED."

⁸ That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants.

(1) ⁹ For this is the word of promise: "AT THIS TIME I WILL COME, AND SARAH SHALL HAVE A SON."

(2) ¹⁰ And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived *twins* by one man, our father Isaac; ¹¹ for though *the twins* were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to *His* choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls, ¹² it was said to her, "THE OLDER WILL SERVE THE YOUNGER." ¹³ Just as it is written, "JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED."

II. God's free choice of mercy is just because it depends on his desire, not on human action (Moses).

¹⁴ What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!

¹⁵ For He says to Moses, "I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION."

(1) ¹⁶ So then it *does* not *depend* on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.

¹⁷ For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH."

(2) ¹⁸ So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.

III. God's wrath rightly belongs to all, so God is free to show mercy or wrath according to his plan.

¹⁹ You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?"

²⁰ On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it?

²¹ Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?

²² What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? ²³ And *He did* so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, ²⁴ *even* us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles.

IV. God announced ahead of time his plan to harden Israel and to include Gentiles (Prophets).

(1) ²⁵ As He says also in Hosea, "I WILL CALL THOSE WHO WERE NOT MY PEOPLE, 'MY PEOPLE,' AND HER WHO WAS NOT BELOVED, 'BELOVED.'" ²⁶ "AND IT SHALL BE THAT IN THE PLACE WHERE IT WAS SAID TO THEM, 'YOU ARE NOT MY PEOPLE,' THERE THEY SHALL BE CALLED SONS OF THE LIVING GOD."

(2) ²⁷ Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, "THOUGH THE NUMBER OF THE SONS OF ISRAEL BE LIKE THE SAND OF THE SEA, IT IS THE REMNANT THAT WILL BE SAVED; ²⁸ FOR THE LORD WILL EXECUTE HIS WORD ON THE EARTH, THOROUGHLY AND QUICKLY."

(3) ²⁹ And just as Isaiah foretold, "UNLESS THE LORD OF SABAOth HAD LEFT TO US A POSTERITY, WE WOULD HAVE BECOME LIKE SODOM, AND WOULD HAVE RESEMBLED GOMORRAH."

NASB

Introduction

With the Israelites rejecting the gospel of Jesus Christ, both in Paul's day and in the majority through the centuries up to our present day, how do we understand the promises God made to Israel? And how do we explain that the vast majority of those who have believed in Jesus are non-Jews? What does it mean to be the people of God? Who are the people of God?

Paul starts off Romans 9 with his own personal lament over the hardening of Israel to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Now he is ready to take us into the Old Testament to explain how God's own Old Covenant people are largely left out of the New Covenant people. Paul's argument in Romans 9 and 10 covers the issue from God's side and from man's side. In the pride and presumption that has developed out of their special relationship to God, the people of Israel have come to misunderstood both sides. From God's side they have misunderstood the role of mercy, and from the human side they have misunderstood the role of faith.

In this lesson we address the misunderstanding of mercy. In our next lesson we will address the misunderstanding of faith.

To explain how Israel has misunderstood mercy, Paul will give us four main points moving from the Patriarchs in Genesis to Moses and the Exodus to the words of the prophets.

We begin with the Patriarchs in 9:6-13 where Paul starts with the assertion that God's people are defined by God's choice, not by bloodline or by human works.

I. God's people are defined by God's choice, not by human descent or human works (Patriarchs).

[Read Romans 9:6-13]

The first mention of Israel comes in the second half of verse 6. We need to establish what we mean by Israel right now before we go any further. It is possible to speak of Abraham as having spiritual children, and to speak of the church as a spiritual Israel. That is not what Paul is doing here. The argument follows quite clearly that Paul is clarifying the blood line that eventually produces the twelve physical tribes of Israel. With the possible exception of Israel in 11:25, all of Paul's uses of the term Israel in Romans 9-11, which are all of his uses of Israel in the entire letter, quite clearly refer to the actual people Israel. Paul does not use the term in Romans as a reference to a spiritual Israel. And he doesn't use it as a reference to the church.

When Paul says that not all descended from Israel are Israel, he is not trying to widen out who might be considered Israel. He is doing the opposite. He is narrowing in our definition of who is Israel. He presents two cases of two brothers in order to show that only one of the two brothers helps to father Israel. One brother is chosen. The other is not. Which brother is considered the promise child depends on God's free choice, not on human tradition. As Paul says in verse 8, "It is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants."

Paul starts with Abraham and Sarah in verse 9, and so, our two brothers are going to be Ishmael and Isaac. Years after God had promised descendants, they did not seem to be able to have a child. So, Abraham and Sarah decided to help God out through the culturally acceptable method of choosing a surrogate maid who would produce a child. This child would be legally designated as Abraham and Sarah's heir. Hagar had a child named Ishmael. God, however, refused to accept Ishmael as the promised child. He would not be held bound by Abraham and Sarah's plan or by human tradition. And so, even if it had not been clear up to this point, God made quite clear that his promise was not just that Abraham would have a child, but Abraham and Sarah would have a child together. Isaac became that child through whom God would fulfill his promise to Abraham.

So then, Paul moves on to Isaac's children in verses 10-12. In this case, Rebekah gave birth to twins with Esau narrowly beating out Jacob as first born. And, in spite of human tradition, God chose the second born. He chose Jacob. He renamed Jacob Israel and through his twelve sons the twelve tribes were born.

So, in neither Abraham's case nor in Isaac's case was God bound by human decision or tradition regarding who would father Israel. The choice was God's to make. This is the point Paul wants us to remember. God is in charge of who gets designated as his people.

We also need to recognize at this point that we are not talking about individual salvation. We are talking about how God chose Israel for their special role. It does not automatically follow that Ishmael and all of his descendants nor that Esau and all of his descendants are excluded from the eternal kingdom of God. It was possible under the Old Covenant to trust in God and receive his grace

without being an Israelite. We can think of Melchizedek or the Canaanite Rahab or the Syrian general Naman. We do have this harsh quote in verse 13, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” So, we need to talk about that a minute. It is probably helpful to recognize that hated does not necessarily mean in the Old Testament language that God felt hatred towards Esau but rather that he acted out wrathfully against Esau. It is even more helpful to note that Paul is not quoting from Genesis but from Malachi 1:2. It’s the last book in the Old Testament. Even as the name Israel can designate a person or designate a nation, so also the names Isaac and Esau can be used to either designate an individual or to designate the nation born of the individuals. And that is exactly what Malachi is doing. Malachi is using Isaac and Esau not as a designation of the two brothers, but as the nations that came from the two brothers, the nation Israel and the nation Edom. God’s hatred is described by Malachi as making Esau’s “mountains desolate” and “appointing his inheritance for the jackals of the wilderness.” It’s destruction. So, though the majority of people in Israel and the majority of people in Edom both deserved God’s wrath for their wickedness, God brought Israel back from the Babylonian exile and that is an expression of love through mercy, while he allowed Edom to be destroyed. So, Malachi describes the compassionate mercy shown to one wicked people, and that is love; and just wrath shown to the other which he describes as hate.

Recognizing the reference as nations instead of individuals fits with the corporate view that Paul now attends to. His examples indicated God’s choice of individual men. That’s true. He was talking about the choice of Isaac over Ishmael and the choice of Jacob over Esau. But then the point is that those individual men were chosen to give birth to the corporate groups. Edom was not the chosen people. Israel was. This does not mean that no Edomite entered the kingdom of heaven, either. It does mean that the special Old Covenant people was not Edom. It was Israel. So far, that is the election we are talking about. Who was chosen to be the people of God and what was the basis for that choice. Israel was chosen. And the basis was not their righteousness or their size. It was not that somehow Jacob was a better little baby than Esau was. And certainly in the story of their growing up, Jacob wasn’t a better person than Esau. It was not based on human tradition or human desire or human planning or human righteousness. God made the free choice of which people would fill this special role. That was God’s idea and God’s plan, God’s choice.

Paul’s next point is going to come to us from the time of Moses. He is arguing that God’s free choice of mercy is just. And it is just because it does not depend on human criteria. So, we see this in Romans 9:14-18. Let’s read that.

II. God’s free choice of mercy is just because it depends on his desire, not on human criteria (Moses).

[Read Romans 9:14-18]

Paul’s rhetorical language here reminds us of chapters 6 and 7 in Romans. He starts with an introductory question, “What shall we say then?” After that he uses a question to raise an objection, “There is no injustice with God, is there?” And he gives us the short answer, “May it never be!” Then we move on to a more developed answer.

The answer shows one of the challenges in making a clean distinction between God’s work through a group and God’s work through individuals. From the corporate sense, God chose to pour his wrath on Egypt, while he showed mercy to Israel. But from the individual sense, God’s purpose with the group Egypt involved his work on the individual who was Pharaoh over Egypt.

Paul first quotes from Exodus 33:19 where he says, “‘I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION.’” And here we are talking about Israel. This is in the immediate context of Exodus 32-34, God has just shown mercy to the people of Israel for breaking the ten commands in fashioning a golden calf. God chose not to destroy them. So, when it says God, “will have mercy on whom he has mercy,” that’s who he is talking about; his merciful decision not to destroy Israel after the golden calf incident. And it is corporate mercy. It is mercy to the whole group. It doesn’t mean that everyone in Israel at that moment has eternal life or has faith in God. It’s a mercy shown to the nation of Israel to not destroy them. We are talking about the group.

The next reference moves from mercy for Israel to wrath on Pharaoh. God calls both stubborn and rebellious, both Israel and Pharaoh in Exodus have a similar character (Exodus 33:3; 7:14). But God has a special plan for Pharaoh that does not include mercy. God plans to show his power through Pharaoh. The Exodus story rotates between reporting that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (literally, “made heavy,” Exodus 8:15; 9:32) and Pharaoh’s heart was hardened (literally, “strong,” 7:22; 8:19). The picture we get from the narrative this. It is a man opposed to God and opposed to Israel and he has absolutely no intention of ever submitting to God as God. We could imagine that it is possible that Pharaoh might give in out of weakness or out of defeat but not out of humility. His character is against God. And God strengthens Pharaoh according to that character, according to the character he already possesses, according to his sinful flesh. He strengthens Pharaoh to continue in his rebellion in opposition to God, so that the full measure of God’s wrath might come down on Egypt. So, strengthening Pharaoh’s already hard heart, ensures that the battle between God and the gods of Egypt will go to the full measure. All of the ten plagues will be done, and their will be the final destruction of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea. God enabled Pharaoh to live out the full extent of his wicked and rebellious heart. When it said that God hardened his heart that does not mean that God, at that moment, made him sinful and rebellious. It means he hardened an already sinful and rebellious heart.

Paul’s quote of the Exodus story should bring hearty agreement from a Jewish listener. God shows mercy on whom he shows mercy, and in this case Israel, and God hardens whom he chooses to harden, in this case Egypt. That is a pattern Israel can accept. Paul’s point here is that God is just in his determination of who receives mercy and who is strengthened in the hardness of their heart, because the determination has to do with God’s wisdom and not with human rights or demands. It depends on the desire of God.

And this brings us to Paul’s next point in 19-24 that God’s wrath rightly belongs to all, so God is free to show mercy or wrath according to the wisdom of his plan. This is Romans 9:19-24.

III. God’s wrath rightly belongs to all, so God is free to show mercy or wrath according to his plan.

[Read Romans 9:19-24]

Paul recognizes that he has not satisfied the question about God’s justice. In verse 19 Paul suggests an objection to his teaching that God has the right to show mercy to whom he wants and to harden whom he wants. A natural objection to such an assertion is this, “Why then does God still find fault? For who resists his will?” The objection follows from the idea that God is just in hardening Pharaoh’s heart. But if God hardens, how can man be held accountable?

Paul is going to come with an argument that feels at first glance fairly unhelpful. At first glance, it seems to be saying, “Just shut up and accept it.” I don’t think that is quite the right tone. But I think there is something similar to that. Paul says this, “On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, ‘Why did you make me like this,’ will it?” I believe Paul, he is telling us to step back. He is not telling us to shut up and be quiet. But he is telling us to think about what you are saying. Step back in your indignation and remind yourself who you are talking to. Who is really the better judge of what is just and right? Are we human beings, are we really qualified to call God out and to require him to explain his own actions? Do his desires and plans need to live up to our standard of what is just? Is my philosophy so sound that I believe that I can bring a complaint against God? I, being a sinful, self-absorbed human being, limited in knowledge about human nature, limited in the facts of history, limited in rational ability, limited in moral ability and limited in understanding regarding what true holiness is in the first place, am I claiming to have insight into the nature of justice to such a degree that I can take God to task and let him know that what he thinks is just is really not just? Is that the attitude I am coming at God with?

I think it is okay for us to not get it. If God is the one who mercifully has to draw people to himself and if God can harden a man’s heart, then does man really have choice in this? And if man does not have choice, how is it that God can hold him morally accountable? It is a fair question. It is just a

question we ought to ask with caution. We know the Bible teaches that God has the right to harden someone's heart. We know that the Bible teaches that God must work in a person if they are actually to have the eyes of their heart open so that they can see him and believe. We know that is what the Bible says. But we also know that the Bible holds men morally responsible for their actions. So, the Bible is teaching both that God must and that God does work in the hearts of men and women and that people are held morally accountable.

How do those two things work together? I am not sure, to be honest, how they work together. But I know that God is just. And I know that however it works out that God knows what he is doing and that God has the right sovereignly to choose to show mercy to whom he would show mercy and to harden whom he would harden. And I don't need to give up my philosophical questions. It is valid to hold questions. And to think, "Am I really understanding this correctly?" But if I am not able to approach it with a humility appropriate to my status. If I am not able to say, "You know what, I really am very limited in my ability to understand righteousness, holiness and justice. And God is God. If I can't come to the question with that much humility, I have no place calling God to account. Paul is saying, "Take a step back and consider who you are and consider who you are accusing of injustice, and maybe just maybe go read Job again, and see how it worked out for him."

But then after the rebuke, after Paul says, "Who are you to talk back O man?" He does give us an answer. He describes God as a potter and the nations as vessels, some designed for wrath and some for mercy. There are a number of points here we should pay attention to.

1. The clay God works with is not neutral material but sinful human flesh.

First, we should recognize in verse 21 that the same lump of clay God uses to make some vessel's for honorable use and some for common use is human sinful human flesh. As in the example with Pharaoh, God not starting with a good person and hardening him. He does not even start with neutral material. God starts with sinful material in every single case, and either is allowing it to continue in the direction it is already going, or he steps in to intervene. The common use appropriate to all vessels is wrath. That's our starting point. Mercy is the uncommon. Mercy is God withholding the just response due to all. Nobody has a demand on mercy. One reason we have to be very careful about demanding justice, if you demand justice, you just might get it, and you don't want it. You want mercy, not justice.

2. God has the right to bring wrath at any time and to show patience to anyone.

In verse 22 we notice that Paul starts an if/then statement which he does not complete. We have the "if", but we don't have the "then." I like Douglas Moo's suggestion that we should complete the sentence and that the natural completion of the idea would be to say something like this, "What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction"..."then should we not acknowledge the righteousness of God to act in such a manner?" That's the part he would add, "should we not acknowledge the righteousness of God to act in such a manner?" The idea turns our thinking around a little bit. Whereas we might question the justice of God exerting wrath, here Paul argues that God should be permitted to show patience. His argument is aimed towards the Jewish presumption of wrath on Gentiles. Paul's point is that God is righteous to show patience towards pagan Gentiles if he so chooses, and he is righteous to show patience towards an apostate Israel if he wants to.

3. Pronouncement of wrath in the Old Testament includes an implicit call to repentance.

The potter analogy used by Paul is reminiscent of Jeremiah 18:1-6, Isaiah 29:16, and Isaiah 45:9. The use of the potter like this was something very familiar in the prophets. So, you have to assume Paul had that in his mind. The strongest connection seems to be with the Jeremiah passage, Jeremiah 18:1-6, where the prophet describes God as a potter and warns Israel that God has the right to destroy this vessel he has begun and to start all over. Following that pronouncement by Jeremiah, God says to Israel, "Behold, I am fashioning calamity against you and devising a plan against you. Oh turn back,

each of you from his evil way, and reform your ways and your deeds (Jeremiah 18:11).” So what we see is that the pronouncement of wrath that God has the right to start over with the vessel is followed up by this call to repentance. “Pay attention to what is happening to you Israel. As this wrath is coming on you, let it be the sign and the motive to turn you around and come back to me.” And this seems to be an implicit principle whenever God decrees wrath. There is always this idea that that wrath is going to come and it is going to be on the people until they repent and turn back to God.

Even closer to our current context than Jeremiah, we can see this idea in Romans 2:4a that one of the reasons for God’s patience in holding off wrath is to give opportunity for repentance. That is what Romans 2:4 says, “Do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you toward repentance.” It is difficult to rule out the idea that God’s patience towards objects of wrath might include a merciful motive. He is providing time for repentance before he brings about final destruction. The coming wrath or the beginning of experiencing wrath or even patience before the wrath occurs all of that could be intended to provide opportunity for the one under wrath to repent and turn and receive mercy.

4. The primary theme of this passage is corporate choice, not individual choice.

We also need to remind ourselves again that Paul’s context here is about corporate choice, not individual choice. Just like with Jeremiah, the vessels are not individuals in this current context but nations. The vessel on the potter’s wheel was Israel, not an individual Israelite. We are talking about God’s choice of wrath or mercy on one of two corporate entities, we either are talking about Israel or Gentiles, or maybe some nation of Gentiles. And because we are talking about entire groups experiencing wrath, we also recognize that wrath on a group does not necessarily mean wrath on every individual member of the group. The wrath of God on a people often moves some in the group to repentance even if it is a small minority or small remnant. Those who repent receive mercy in the form of forgiveness and in relationship with God, even though they may still be included in the consequences that fall on the nation as a whole. Daniel and his friends are just such an example of individuals caught in a response of wrath to corporate Israel. The invading army of Babylon is fulfilling God’s punishment, and though Daniel and his friends do not escape the wrath of exile, they do experience the mercy of God in relationship with him and later in their life experience. So, wrath on a nation does not always necessitate wrath on every individual within that corporate people group.

Recognizing that the vessels of wrath are the corporate groups of Israel and Gentiles, it also means we have to be careful in how we apply the passage to our theology of individual salvation. The language of hardening and the language of mercy here could apply to individuals, but I have to be careful because how Paul is applying it right here is primarily towards groups.

I am not trying here trying to give us a way to get out of predestination. That’s really clear in Romans 8:29 where Paul is talking about individuals who are being reformed into the image of Christ. And he talks about them as being predestined, called, justified and glorified. And he is not talking about groups. He is not talking about nations. He is talking about individual people. That’s Romans 8. What I am saying is that we need to allow Paul to argue what he is arguing, and to then take care in how we apply that argument to related issues that are not Paul’s primary consideration. And right here Paul is talking about who gets designated as the people of God and within that his choice to show mercy to a particular people group or to show wrath to a people group. So, we are talking about corporate groups. That’s our primary focus here in this section.

5. Paul surprises the listener at the end by switching around the vessel of mercy and the vessel of wrath.

Moving on with Paul’s argument, we see in verse 23 that one of the reasons God might show patience to groups deserving wrath is to bring about mercy on others. A good Jew at the time of Paul might naturally interpret Paul’s words here with Gentiles in the place of wrath and Israel in the place of mercy. The Jew might understand the dominance of the Gentile Roman people over Israel as God showing patience to Rome, which is clearly vessel of wrath, to make known the riches of his glory to

Israel, God's vessel of. Up to this point that works with the argument. The Jew may be following Paul with careful agreement. Isaac's descendants are chosen for blessing, not Ishmael's. Good so far. Then Israel's descendants are chosen, not Esau's. Still good. Then with Moses, Israel receives mercy while Pharaoh and Egypt experience wrath. Amen to that. But then the shocker comes. Up to this point it is clear that the vessels of wrath are Gentile people, and the vessels of mercy are Israel. Israel is the one to whom God made known the riches of his glory. Israel is the one prepared beforehand for glory. Right. Wrong. This is where Paul completes a somersault in mid-air with a full twist and everything gets turned around. He declares in verse 24 that the vessels of mercy prepared beforehand for glory are, and this is how he says it, "even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles."

The vessel of God's mercy here is the body of Christ. It is not a we, and it is not a they. It is an us. We are the church among whom both Jew and Gentile are included. Sadly, at this moment in salvation history, Israel is the vessel of wrath. God bore with Israel patiently to bring about the death and resurrection of the Messiah, to bring about the birth of the church in Israel, and to bring about the spread of the church to the Gentiles. Even while Israel was in rebellion and deserving of wrath, God showed patience with Israel, so that the vessel of his mercy, the body of Christ, this group from many nations, might come to know the glory of his riches. These believers in Jesus are the ones prepared beforehand to experience the glory of the new kingdom. So, where he has been leading all along for the Jews to clearly see themselves as the vessels of mercy, right at the end we see it switching around, and it is at this point of time we are not talking about Israel, we are talking about the church.

God's institution of a new covenant brought about a reformulation of how we answer the question, "Who are the people of God?" We have a new orientation. It is not completely unexpected. God indicated the coming change through the prophets. And that's the fourth and final point of this passage, that God announced his plan ahead of time, his plan to harden Israel and to include Gentiles. That's in Romans 9:25-29. Let's read that.

IV. God announced ahead of time his plan to harden Israel and to include Gentiles (Prophets).

[Read Romans 9:25-29]

The new orientation prophesied here by Hosea and Isaiah involves not only the inclusion of Gentiles but a significant hardening among the majority of Israel; to be like Sodom, to be like Gomorrah, unless he had left us a remnant. There will be a remnant, but that is all.

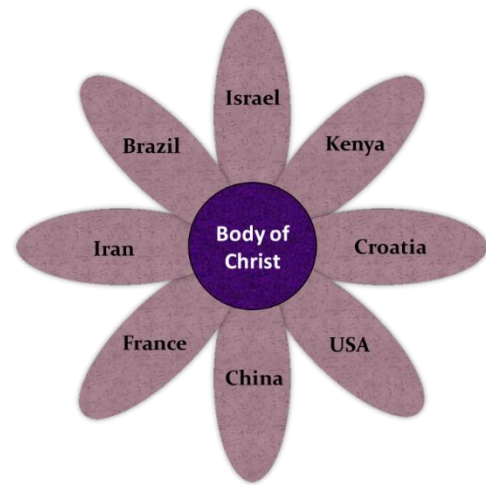
The word locus, it's a good word, it means the position or place where something is located or situated. And it is a helpful word in recognizing a shift from the Old Covenant people of God to the New Covenant people of God. There has been a shift in locus.

While the Old Covenant was in effect, the locus of the people of God was Israel, geo-political Israel. God's plan involved a nation that had a geo-graphic center and a political center, and that would be the place where right worship and right behavior would be defined by the Law of Moses. God told Israel in Deuteronomy 4:6, "Keep and do the words of this law, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.'" And though Yahweh was never a local God but always God of gods and King of kinds, he did decide to establish a people in a particular locality to shine forth his glory. They were to be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:6)." The plan was for one nation to stand out as special, and as such to be a witness to all other peoples. This was God's plan under the Old Covenant, but that covenant and that plan were always



meant to serve a temporary purpose, until the coming of Jesus Christ and a new covenant.

And that New Covenant is a new wineskin. You can't do the New Covenant just like the Old Covenant. And one way that it is really new is a shift in locus. The locus of the people of God has shifted to Jesus Christ. It is a spiritual locus. And locus who is a person, not a place. The people of God are a remnant from all nations, being comprised of every person who truly believes in Jesus Christ. As Jesus told the Samaritan woman, "An hour is coming when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall you worship the Father...but an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth (John 4:21, 23)." The locus of the people of God is Jesus Christ. And the people of God is now comprised of everyone who has truly believed in him and worships him in spirit and in truth. And the concrete expression of the people of God is now found in the local community of believers, the expression of the body of Christ.



This is what the Jews of Paul's day did not understand, could not understand, would not allow themselves to understand. God's plan involved disassociating the people of God from the nation state Israel and opening wide the doors of mercy to Gentiles. This Israel could not accept. In answering the question, "Who are the people of God?" They misunderstood that the compassion of God shown earlier in his choice of them was now being shown in a new way to include Gentiles. They missed mercy.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as important, confusing, interesting or strange in Romans 9:6-29?
2. In this passage we have mention of both individuals and groups. We have Isaac, Jacob and Pharaoh who are individuals, and we have Israel and Gentiles who are groups. Sometimes we have individual names like Israel and Esau that represent groups (the nation formed of their descendants). Do you believe that the focus of the passage is on God's choice of groups or God's choice of individuals? What is the big picture question being addressed in the passage?
3. Read Malachi 1:1-5. This is the last prophetic book in the Bible. The prophecy happens over 1000 years after the births of Jacob and Esau. How does this Old Testament context help you understand the harsh sounding quote in Romans 9:13?
4. Does it make a difference to you when Paul talks about hardening Pharaoh or about molding vessels of wrath that the starting material for any individual or group of individuals is sinful human flesh? What different does that make to this present passage?
5. Paul has shown through this passage that Israel was not chosen as a vessel of mercy to be God's people because of their own works or size or righteousness. God chose them against human tradition according to his plan (Isaac and Jacob), and God kept showing mercy in spite of their sinfulness (Israel at Mt. Sinai – 9:15). Now God has chosen to show that mercy to Gentile peoples, including them into his people with those Israelites who believe (9:24). In this Israel has misunderstood that they have stood by God's mercy and so should not be surprised or jealous with God's decision to extend mercy further. Why do you think it was so hard for Israel to accept the fact that God has now included Gentiles?
6. How do you think about the people of God today? Does the daisy chart help you to see that the body of Christ is a remnant from of believers from all tribes and tongues and languages? What are some significant differences between the people of God as formed under the Old Covenant and the people of God as formed under the New Covenant?

Lesson 24: Presuming on God, Israel Misunderstands the Role of Faith, part 1

Romans 9:30-10:11

Israel did not pursue the righteousness that comes by faith.

³⁰ What shall we say then?

That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith;

³¹ but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at *that* law.

³² Why?

Because *they did not pursue it* by faith, but as though *it were* by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone, ³³ just as it is written, “BEHOLD, I LAY IN ZION A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE,
AND HE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED.”

The Requirement of faith continues from Old Covenant to New Covenant

(1) ¹ Brethren, my heart’s desire and my prayer to God for them is for *their* salvation. ² For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. ³ For not knowing about God’s righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God.

(2) ⁴ For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

(3) ⁵ For Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on law shall live by that righteousness.

(4) ⁶ But the righteousness based on faith speaks as follows:

“DO NOT SAY IN YOUR HEART, ‘WHO WILL ASCEND INTO HEAVEN?’ (that is, to bring Christ down),

⁷ or ‘WHO WILL DESCEND INTO THE ABYSS?’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).”

(5) ⁸ But what does it say?

“THE WORD IS NEAR YOU, IN YOUR MOUTH AND IN YOUR HEART”—that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, ⁹ that if you confess

with your mouth Jesus *as* Lord,

and believe

in your heart that God raised Him from the dead,

you will be saved;

¹⁰ for with the heart

a person believes, resulting in righteousness,

and with the mouth

he confesses, resulting in salvation.

¹¹ For the Scripture says, “WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED.”

NASB

Introduction

Here is the problem. Where we left off last time in Romans 9:29, Paul concluded that Israel has become a vessel of wrath and the Gentiles a vessel of mercy. This makes no sense. How can the people of God who received the promise made to Abraham, who produced the Law and the Prophets, who returned from exile, who gave birth to the Messiah, how can the people of God not be the people of God? And how can pagan peoples who have long worshipped many gods and lived immoral lives, how can these people now be called the people of God?

This is the question we begin today in Romans 9:30-31. It starts this way.

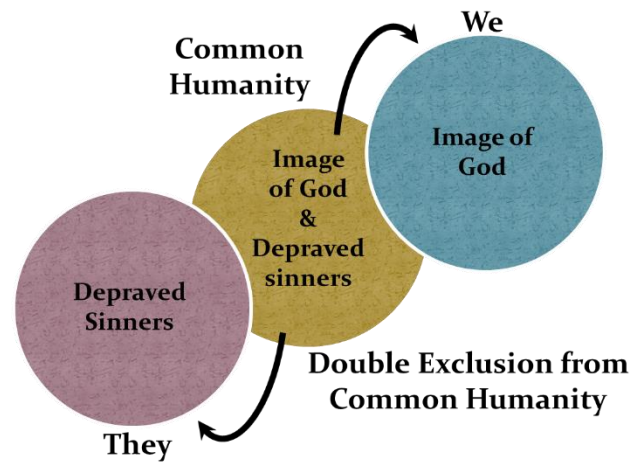
³⁰ What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; ³¹ but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at *that* law.

How can it be that the traditional people of God have been excluded and those not of the people of God have been included? Our lesson today focuses on Israel’s failure to understand why they were being left out, though the application remains very real for every faith, every denomination, every generation. It is not unusual in Christian history for God to move on from a church or movement long

before people realize that he has left, if they ever do realize it. We should take to heart the stock broker's axiom, "past performance does not guarantee future results." The faithfulness, spiritual vitality and insight of one generation does not necessarily translate to the next generation. In fact, Christian history suggests that every vital movement eventually becomes a lifeless institution.

The question, "Why did Israel not get it?" maintains its relevancy as a question. How do we know that we are included as part of the people of God?

In his book *Exclusion and Embrace* Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf claims this, "Forgiveness flounders because I exclude the enemy from the community of humans even as I exclude myself from the community of sinners (124)." Volf writes of a double exclusion. The enemy deserves to be excluded from shared humanity while I deserve to be excluded from common sinfulness. Reconciliation is possible when I reject both ideas; when I recognize my enemy as a fellow human being and when I recognize myself, in Paul's words, as among the worst of sinners.



Volf's insight helps us understand Israel's inability to accept a new covenant as good news. Israel has clearly defined markers. They see Gentile peoples as vessels of wrath, and they see themselves as a vessel of mercy. Without becoming Jews, Gentiles do not belong to humanity, not to the real humanity that will make up the eternal kingdom of God. Gentiles experience wrath, because they deserve wrath. Israel, however, receives mercy because mercy is her birthright. The Jews are the people of God. It is a double exclusion; excluding Gentiles from the common human family created in the image of God and excluding themselves from the sin of fallen human family. It is also a double mistake. In Romans chapters 9-10 Paul argues that God has included Gentiles, while the majority of Israelites are excluded. They exclude themselves by rejecting the scope of God's mercy and rejecting the necessity of salvation by faith.

First, Paul addressed Israel's misconception about mercy. This was our previous lesson. In Romans 9:6-29 Paul insisted on God's right to include the enemy. Going back through history Paul explains how Israel has been molded as a vessel of mercy. But why Israel? Paul makes a point that this is purely by the free will choice of God. Israel does not receive mercy because of human tradition or collective righteousness. It is an act of mercy. And because it is an act of mercy, dependent wholly on God's choice, God is free to extend mercy to those outside Israel.

Miroslav Volf argues that true understanding of the cross overcomes the double exclusion which insists that those outside our group are less than human, and we who are in the group are somehow excluded from the condemnation of sin. Volf writes, "But no one can be in the presence of the God of the crucified Messiah for long without overcoming this double exclusion—without transposing the enemy from the sphere of the monstrous . . . into the sphere of shared humanity and herself from the sphere of proud innocence into the sphere of common sinfulness."

This is what Israel failed to do. They failed to see Gentiles as sharing the image of God, also beloved by God. It is the sin of Jonah who grieved over God's mercy to Nineveh. Israel also failed to understand the depth of their own sinfulness. The gospel of grace in Jesus is not just a way to include Gentiles. It is not the law of Moses for Jews and the gospel of grace for Gentiles. The gospel of grace in Jesus is the necessary fulfillment of the law of Moses. As Paul stated back in 3:20, "by the works of the law no flesh will be justified in his sight; for through the law comes the knowledge of sin." Israel felt able to exclude the Gentiles because they felt that the works of the law made them righteous.

They did not understand the depth of their own sin. As a result, they misunderstood the requirement that righteousness must come by faith. They misunderstood faith.

Let's summarize: Israel misunderstood that their role as God's people came through God's decision of mercy. They were not better than the Gentiles, and they were just as bad as the Gentiles.

Misunderstanding mercy is a misunderstanding of God's perspective in determining who are the people of God. Israel also misunderstood the role of faith. They believed in faith plus law, that they somehow could attain a righteous standing in God's eyes. This was a misunderstanding from the human perspective of who are God's people. From God's perspective his people are those to whom he shows mercy. From the human perspective, his people are those who believe in and receive his grace by faith.

In our previous lesson, Paul focused on God's perspective, the perspective of mercy. In this lesson, Romans 9:30-10:11, Paul focuses on the human perspective, the perspective of faith. The change in perspectives from God's perspective to man's perspective also moves us from God's sovereignty to man's responsibility. Paul does not solve the predestination verses free will debate in these passages. He teaches us what is true without answering all our questions about how it is true. We see this complementary reality. God is free and sovereign in his right of choice. We see that in Romans 9:6-29. And we see here in Romans 9:30-10:11 that man is responsible to yield to God in faith. Both are true. God is sovereign in his choice, and man is responsible to receive God's offer of grace by faith. In this lesson we move from God's perspective in showing mercy to the human perspective of responding with faith.

As we move through the text, I will not repeat Paul's argument in Romans 1-4 that salvation comes by grace through faith in Jesus. Paul addresses the question of Israel, having already established that salvation depends 0% on our works and 100% on grace. He is now applying that truth to Israel and to the question, "Who are God's people?" Paul's whole passage on Israel misunderstanding faith should take us through all of chapter 10, but that is a bit too much to cover, so I will save part for later. We will address 9:30-10:11 in this lesson. And the rest in the next lesson. Let's read that text and then walk through it together. Romans 9:30-10:11.

[Read Romans 9:30-10:11]

In this passage about Israel's exclusion, Paul first states the problem that they misunderstood faith, and then he argues the continuity between the requirement of faith from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. We start with statement of the problem in 9:30-33. Israel did not pursue the righteousness of faith. We've already read this. I am going to read those verses one more time.

Israel did not pursue the righteousness that comes by faith.

[Read Romans 9:30-33]

We already addressed the problem in the introduction. Gentiles are in while Jews are out. The truth about Jesus is a stumbling block not just to Jews but to all traditionally religious people. Jewish, Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, Muslim, Hindu. Jesus' death on the cross says, "Your religion does not satisfy God." As soon as we become self-righteous in our religion, whether it is Christian or not, as soon as we start believing we deserve to be in and others deserve to be out, we have begun to lose the message of the gospel. Religion itself, even good religion becomes the barrier.

Paul does not say that the Jewish pursuit of obedience was bad. But it became a problem when they thought themselves to have arrived without the need of the cross of Jesus Christ. They pursued a false path. They misunderstood the way to righteousness. Not only did they misunderstand the way of faith necessitated by the gospel, they also misunderstood that this was the way necessitated by the law of Moses. The law pointed to a need for a savior, an atoning sacrifice. But Israelites had come to identify themselves more by the law they followed, than by the God they claimed. The new way of Jesus required admitting the weakness of the law. More than that, the new way of Jesus required giving up their traditions, or at least admitting that keeping those traditions was not necessary to be

in good relationship with God. Their special position was under threat. Their sense of moral superiority was under threat. Their sense of true theology was under threat. Their sense of identity was under threat. Belief in Jesus simply required too much. The rock of their salvation became the rock over which they stumbled over.

Having stated the problem. That Gentiles are in by faith, and Jews excluded because they refuse righteousness by faith, Paul moves on in 10:1-11 to show that this requirement of faith is a continuous principle from Moses through to Jesus.

The Requirement of Faith is Continuous from Old to New.

(1) Misguided zeal

Paul argues that faith in Jesus is not a new requirement. It has been God's way all along. The Jews have misunderstood the call for righteous in their law as the way a person becomes righteous in God's eyes.

Paul starts the section declaring that he has no ill will towards the Jews. His words in 10:1 echo the lament of his heart in 9:1-5, "Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation." Paul is not out to exclude Jews. Paul also acknowledges something positive about the zeal of religious people who seek to do what is right before God. He says in 10:2, "For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge." Lack of knowledge is an ironic charge. Truly religious people seem to know a lot about God. This is certainly true of Jews with all their biblical stories and religious customs and moral laws. Yet the Bible consistently attests that our primary knowledge problem is not a problem of intelligence or education. The greatest Bible scholars from the best religious studies departments in the most prestigious universities can completely miss the basic truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ; truths understood by the smallest child or most uneducated laborer. To give just one example from the Bible John 9 tells of the blind man cured by Jesus. The Pharisees saw only that Jesus made mud on the Sabbath, so they sought to reject him. The blind man saw that he saw and concluded that Jesus is from God. Religious knowledge, even right religious knowledge, does not guarantee the spiritual sight of faith. Spiritual understanding of the basic truth of the gospel is available to all people, young and old, educated and uneducated, religious and non-religious. While tragic, it is not unusual that Israel, with the whole knowledge of the Old Covenant, would fail to see Jesus. As John declared, "the light came to his own, and those who were his own did not receive him (John 1:11)."

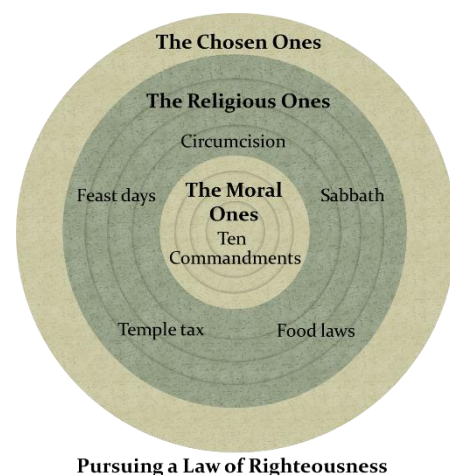
The Jews were zealous, but misunderstanding the way of God described in their own Bible, they failed to submit to that way. Verse 3, "For not knowing about God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God." The problem is not that the Jews mistranslated the moral commands of Scripture. At least the group of Pharisees that Paul came from tried very hard to live out the righteous code of Moses. Their error was misinterpreting the call to live out the code of righteousness, as a possible path to be affirmed as righteous God's eyes.

(2) The End of the Mosaic Law

Romans 10:4 declares the true way of righteousness.

For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

There are two interpretive challenges in verse 4. The first important interpretation question has to do with the word "end." In English the word end can mean the completion of something, such as "the end of the feast", or can mean goal, such as "he achieved his end." The Greek word *telos* being used by Paul has the same range of meaning as the English. So, which is it? Does "Christ is the end of the law" mean that Jesus is the goal of the law or does it mean that the coming of Jesus completes or



finishes the administration of the law? Interpreters are usually uncomfortable with double meanings, they prefer that we choose one over the other. But good writers do like to use double meanings at times. I think that is what Paul is doing here. We are supposed to understand Christ as both the goal of the law and the completion of the law.

This double meaning is like the double meaning found at the end of a race. We call the end the finish line because the race is over when runners pass that spot. We could also call the finish line the goal because the object of the race is to reach that point as fast as possible. So, it is the end both in the sense of fulfilling the goal and completing the race. Jesus has fulfilled the goal of the law and so brought to end the administration of the law. Jesus is the goal in that the law calls us to a higher righteousness, while also showing us our need for grace. The ceremonies of law consistently point us to the need for an atoning death greater than the symbolic death of sheep and bulls. The goal of the law is to prepare the way for the coming of Christ by showing us our need and foretelling the solution. Now that Christ has appeared that goal is complete, but so also the law is finished. Its time is over.

The second difficult point of interpretation comes from the little Greek word “for.” My translation is more word for word without helping us interpret. It says, “Christ is the end of the law for righteousness.”

What is Paul not saying? Paul is not saying that under the Old Covenant there was a way of works righteousness that has now come to an end in Christ. Remember from 3:20 that no flesh is justified by law. And remember that Paul concluded the gospel argument in Romans 1-4 with Abraham as his precedent for justification by faith. The possibility of being declared righteous by works never existed, so Jesus can’t be the end of a righteousness that comes from works. That cannot be the interpretation here. We cannot say that for the Jews under Old Covenant there was a valid way of righteousness achieved by moral deeds and religious ceremony, and Jesus has ended that way of righteousness. Such an idea conflicts with Paul’s declaration of the gospel in the letter to the Romans.

So, what is Paul saying? I think the NIV translates the verse well. “Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.” The Law itself taught that we cannot obtain righteousness by the law. It taught the need for atonement through the ritual of sacrifice, but the sacrifice of bulls and sheep and goats was always symbolic. In this the Law taught its own incompleteness. We awaited the true sacrifice of atonement that would actually take away sin, not symbolically but truly. We awaited the words of John the Baptist who saw Jesus and proclaimed, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” So as Paul argued in 3:25, God had passed over the sins of those who lived before Jesus without making payment for those sins. The death of Jesus was necessary that God might be shown just in forgiving sins already forgiven but not yet paid for. Jesus Christ met the need pointed to by the law, so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes, both those who believed before the death of Christ and those who believed after the death of Christ. Christ brought about the necessary end of the administration of law “so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.”

(3) The Call of Righteousness

In verses 5-7 Paul quotes Moses to clarify the distinction between the way of righteousness by deeds and the way of righteousness by faith. A critical point to note is that Paul does not quote Old Covenant and New Covenant when he compares the two ways. Paul quotes both points from Moses. He simply updates the second quote according to the further revelation we have of Jesus.

The first way is described in verse 5. “For Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on law shall live by that righteousness.” Paul could be thinking of Leviticus 18:5, “You shall keep my statutes and my judgments, by which a man will live if he does them.” Or maybe he thinks of Deuteronomy 30:15, “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, and death and adversity; in that I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways and to keep his commandments and his statutes and his judgments, that you may live and multiply in the land where you are entering to possess it.”

There are two ways that a law of righteous deeds brings life. One way a law of righteous deeds brings life is when that law is fully kept. In that way, when a man stands before God his judge, he is declared righteous with no penalty of death to pay. The law has been kept. He enters into everlasting life by virtue of a righteous life on earth. This way or righteousness has only ever been kept by one person, Jesus Christ.

There is another way that righteousness brings life. Righteous living results in the blessings of life. When we live by the wisdom of God, by the light of God, by the love of God, we experience human life as human life is meant to be experienced. Israel was called to experience this life through obedience just as Jesus called his disciples to obey his commands and experience the abundant life he offered. This pursuit of righteousness with its blessings is the answer to the second question of covenant, “How then shall we live?” But it cannot be an answer to the first question of covenant, “How can I be made acceptable to God?” Recognizing this tension in the law of Moses helps us to understand the call of righteousness. We are always called to righteousness as an answer to how we ought to live, even if the call to righteousness cannot result in establishing our acceptability. Recognizing this tension also helps us to understand Israel’s failure to understand faith. The Jews of Paul’s day took the call of righteousness in the Mosaic law as an answer to the first question of covenant. To the question “What makes us acceptable?” they gave the answer, “Keeping the law of Moses makes us acceptable.” And they argued amongst themselves regarding how much of the law of Moses must be kept to be acceptable, but they were confident that the solution was living out the Mosaic law.

So now, coming back to Paul’s assertion, Moses wrote that “the man who practices righteousness which is based on law shall live by that righteousness.” Paul is addressing the first question of covenant in this passage. It is the pertinent question for understanding, “Who are the people of God?” We are not yet asking, “How then shall we live.” We are asking, “What makes me acceptable?” In this case, the quote from Moses establishes the legal, moral truth. If a person seeks to be declared righteous according to the practice of law, then they must practice the righteousness of law. It is the same claim Paul made back in 2:13, “not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law will be justified.” Righteousness based on law requires successfully obeying the law. While establishing this moral principle of law, the law itself assumes that no one successfully fulfills this moral requirement. And so, the law includes another way.

(4) The Way of Faith in the Old Covenant

Now, if we focus in closely on the requirements of the law and the call to righteous living, we might miss the big picture. We might miss that there is another way. But when we step back to observe the Mosaic Covenant as a whole we see major monuments of grace throughout: we see grace at the covenant ceremony with Abraham in Genesis 15; we see grace at the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22; we see grace at the Passover ceremony in Exodus 12; we see grace at the declaration of God’s name in Exodus 34; we see grace at the day of atonement in Leviticus 16; we see grace at the curse of the snake lifted on a pole in Numbers 21; and we see grace at the promise of a new heart in Deuteronomy 30. In the entire sacrificial system described throughout the Pentateuch, we see that God never imagined that one of his sinful people would be able to prove himself righteous by his own deeds. A believer in God can only be declared righteous by faith through the atoning sacrifice of another. That is the clear big picture message of the Mosaic Law. Even Moses did not make it into the physical promise land. How much clearer can the Old Covenant be. The way of God is the way of grace received by faith.

So now, in verse 6 and 7 Paul quotes Deuteronomy 30:12-14 to illustrate the principle of faith from the Mosaic Law.

⁶ But the righteousness based on faith speaks as follows: “DO NOT SAY IN YOUR HEART, ‘WHO WILL ASCEND INTO HEAVEN?’ (that is, to bring Christ down), ⁷ or ‘WHO WILL DESCEND INTO THE ABYSS?’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).” ⁸ But what does it say? “THE WORD IS NEAR YOU, IN YOUR MOUTH AND IN YOUR HEART” —that is, the word of faith which we are preaching,

As Paul quotes, he updates the passage, according to the truth that we have in Jesus. But the original passage without that update still stands as a call to faith. In Deuteronomy, Moses follows the pattern of an ancient near eastern covenant, providing a historical prologue of how this generation came to be by the Jordan river, also providing general stipulations in the form of the ten commandments, providing several chapters of specific stipulations, providing the expected covenantal list of blessings for obedience and curses for rebellion, and then with all that recorded he comes to Deuteronomy 29:29 where he declares, “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.” This statement is a declaration of faith. God has given us what we need to know. Other things he has chosen not to reveal. We must trust God. How Israel will be declared righteous is one of the secret things not yet revealed. We are to trust God and obey, according to the word that has been given.

The in Deuteronomy 30 Moses goes on to give them the bad news that the Old Covenant will not prove successful to reign in the rebelliousness of Israel. Over time, following much patience by God and much rebellion by his people, God will exile Israel from the promise land. They will be treated as a vessel of wrath. But even then, God will show mercy and bring them back and provide for them something the law of Moses did not provide. Moses writes in Deuteronomy 30:6, “Moreover the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live.” The abundant life that comes from a righteous life needs a new heart. That is a new covenant promise which Paul alludes to in 2:29. Something new needs to happen. The law is not going to be enough. But that new thing is one of the secret things that God has decided to not yet reveal. Israel must trust.

Then in Deuteronomy 30:11 Moses writes, “This commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach.” Now that’s is a strange statement. Is Moses telling the Israelites that righteous living is not so hard after all even though he just said they would fail as a nation because they lacked the new heart that would enable them to live for God? You know, it is strange to promise failure and then claim that it is not too difficult. It sounds similar to Jesus’ statement, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light (Matthew 11:30).” What Christian thinks that living out the teaching of Jesus is a light and easy burden? Is the Sermon on the Mount easy? Is carry your cross light? Is loving your enemy easy? The commands of Jesus can only be understood as light and easy according to the principle of faith, knowing with complete assurance that we fall back on the first question of covenant with the words, “I am accepted! By grace through faith I have rest in Jesus.” That’s what makes it light and easy.

The way of faith was possible for Israel. It was up to them in their day to accept that the word they had was the word they needed. There was not more up in heaven, nor was there more under the earth. They did not need a new angelic vision from heaven nor a revelation from the dead. To live the way of the Lord they needed to believe in God by faith and respond to him by living out the covenant which was given to them. They needed to accept that they could not be righteous but were still safe with God because of the grace he provided.

That is why Paul quotes Deuteronomy 30:12-14. God had revealed his will. Israel was challenged to receive that revelation by faith. Within that revelation were the dual principals of salvation by grace and the call to honor God in righteous living. By quoting that verse, Paul is challenging Israel again to accept the revealed will of God now made known in the gospel of Jesus Christ. In his day Moses asked, “Will you accept the revelation given you?” Paul asks the same in his day, “Will you accept the revelation given you now in Jesus?”

(5) The Way of Faith in Jesus

In verse 9 and 10 Paul gives us a wonderful compact statement of that gospel revelation. The structure of the message is a simply and beautifully balanced chiasm. Remember that a chiasm is a parallel structure where the first thing parallels that last thing, the second thing parallels the second to last thing and so one. The chiasm here is balanced on the four words confess, mouth, believe, heart that are then repeated in reverse order heart, believe, mouth, confess. There is also a central

phrase that has no parallel element. See if you can hear the central phrase as we read the text. Let's read the two verses, Romans 10:9-10.

⁹ that if you **confess**
with your **mouth** Jesus as Lord,
and **believe**
in your **heart** that God raised Him from the dead.
you will be saved;
¹⁰ for with the **heart**
a person **believes,** resulting in righteousness,
and with the **mouth**
he **confesses,** resulting in salvation.

The parallelism focuses down to the central phrase “you will be saved.” Looking at the parts of the passage Paul does not want us to think that we are to confess one thing with our mouth and believe another thing with our heart. When we notice that the passage is chiasmic, we see that the paired components complement one another. Confessing with your mouth is not separate from believing with your heart but rather the outward response of true belief. Also, recognizing “Jesus as Lord” and “that God raised Jesus from the dead” are both parts of the same message. Both are to be believed in the heart, both are to be confessed with the mouth. Likewise, in the second half of the passage, the result of righteousness and the result of salvation are two parts of the same thing, both of which come from true belief in the heart which is confessed with the mouth. It is simple. It is beautiful. It is powerful. Paul is not attempting here to set down a formula. There is more we need to believe. But it is hard to imagine believing this much and not believing the rest. Do you know and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, that he is King of all, that he is both with God and he is God? And do you confess that God raised him from the dead, which of course means that you believe he first became man and died? This is the same brief statement of the nature of Christ that Paul gave us in 1:3 when he said, “who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh, who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead.” “Born a descendant of David,” that’s Messiah. That is to believe that Jesus is Lord. And, “Who was declared Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead,” that’s to believe that God has raised him up. If you accept God’s revelation of Jesus as the true Savior who died for you and was raised again, you will be saved.

In verse 11, Paul returns to one of his favorite Old Testament writers, quoting Isaiah. This is Isaiah 28:16, “Whoever believes in him will not be disappointed.” The full quote is up in 9:33, ““BEHOLD, I LAY IN ZION A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE, AND HE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED.” Paul connects the two ideas. For Jews, Jesus has become a rock of offense. They are ashamed of a crucified Messiah and they look down with contempt on the way of grace. But the one “who believes in him will not be disappointed.” The literal Greek word there is shame. “He who believes in him will not be put to shame.” It is opposite of the reaction prophesied by Isaiah which was fulfilled by the Jews. They felt the idea of Jesus shameful, a rock of offense. It brought them offense to think that this was their Messiah. And yet, Paul reminds them that Isaiah foretold that anyone who believed in this rock of offense would himself not be shamed. If you choose Jesus, then no matter what shame anyone might attempt to put on you, when you stand before the judgement seat of God, when you arrive before your Savior, you will not be put to shame. Your faith will be validated, not by the strength of your faith but by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. If you believe in him you cannot, in the end, be put to shame.

And this quote takes us all the way back to Paul’s original thesis in 3:16, “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.” I am not ashamed because in Jesus Christ I will not be put to shame. It’s also to the Jew first and also to the Greek. The Jew is not excluded by nature of the gospel. The Jew is excluded by refusing to accept Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the Law. Jesus is the one true answer to humanity’s greatest need. God does not exclude people from the blessing of life in him. Sin excludes people. We exclude ourselves. The gospel includes, inviting everyone to come and drink and be

satisfied. Israelites in the day of Paul had misunderstood these two truths: that no one is too far gone to receive mercy, and everyone is too far gone in sin not to need salvation by faith. The rebellious heart of sin excludes, the grace of God includes.

The Double Exclusion of Religion

As Paul declares in verse 12, “There is no distinction between Jew and Greek.” We are not done with the passage on Israel’s failure to understand faith. We will pick up in verse 12 in our next lesson. I want to end this lesson by coming back to Miroslav Volf’s assertion. He described a double exclusion. This double exclusion is strong in traditional religion. If salvation is earned through a religious system, then those who reject that particular system are excluded from being part of the new humanity made possible by that system. Also, those who are in the system exclude themselves from the sinfulness that overcomes humanity and affects everybody outside their system. Religion says, “Those others are out because they deserve to be out, and we are in because we deserve to be in.”

The temptation to this double exclusion exists in all forms of religion, even the forms holding most closely to the gospel of Jesus Christ. We cannot keep the temptation out of our communities because it is a principle of the human heart. We cannot help but believe that those who are in somehow deserve to be in and those who are out deserve to be out. It is hard not to believe that our group is somehow superior.

And yet, notice how the language of exclusion is contrary to grace. Exclusion claims some deserve to be in and others deserve to be out. The language of deserving is the language of the law. To deserve is to have earned by birthright or by status or by deeds or by wealth. The gospel of grace rejects the idea that anyone deserves the mercy of God. You do not deserve the mercy of God. Grace is a free gift. It is not obtained by works. When we accept the right of God to extend mercy to any human being, and when we acknowledge that we ourselves do not deserve mercy, then we reject the double exclusion. We acknowledge that everyone belongs to the human family for whom Christ died. And we acknowledge that we deserve to be excluded just like everyone else because of our sin. God’s mercy teaches us to look at ourselves in a new light. Having deserved to be excluded, we have been invited in. The right response to that is wonder and gratitude. God’s mercy also teaches us to look at others in a new light. Everyone else is a potential son or daughter of the King. The right response to that is invitation, proclaiming the gospel to every person and inviting every person to come in.

Who would we keep out? Who is not good enough to be invited in? Who can you envision not inviting into your home, sitting down together over a good meal? Who would you exclude from your fellowship? Sin excludes. Religion excludes. The grace of Jesus includes all who will believe and enter in.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as important, confusing, interesting or strange in Romans 9:30-10:11?
2. What does it mean to you that Christ is the end of the Law? Do you see Jesus as more the goal of the law or more the completion of the law?
3. From the perspective of an Old Covenant believer, what does it mean to pursue life through the law as an answer to the first question of covenant and what does it mean to pursue life as an answer to the second question of covenant? (Which is referred to in 10:5?)
4. What is confusing or odd to you about Paul’s quote of Deuteronomy 30:11-14 in 10:6-8? Does the context of Deut. 30 help you understand Paul’s use of the quote or just make it more confusing?
5. What stands out to you in the chiasm of 10:9-10?
6. Considering Miroslav Volf’s concept of double exclusion, Israel can be said to exclude Gentiles from the positive aspect of common humanity as fellow human beings made in God’s image and to exclude themselves from the negative aspect of common humanity also being depraved by sin. Who are the outcasts, the enemies, the depraved, the unworthy in your cultural setting? Who would not be welcomed into your home or church? What changes when you consider the outcasts as made in the image of God? When you see yourself just as fallen as them? Just as much in need of mercy?

Lesson 25: Presuming on God, Israel Misunderstands the Role of Faith, part 2

Romans 10:4-21 (12-21)

⁴ For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to **everyone** who **believes**.

I. The Principle of Law: You Must Do

⁵ For Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on law shall live by that righteousness.

II. The Principle of Faith: You Must Receive

A. Faith requires believing in the revelation God has given (the principle of Deut. 29:29 and 30:11-14).

⁶ But the righteousness based on faith speaks as follows:

"DO NOT SAY IN YOUR HEART, 'WHO WILL ASCEND INTO HEAVEN?' (that is, to bring Christ down),

⁷ or 'WHO WILL DESCEND INTO THE ABYSS?' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead)."

B. The word of faith given that must now be believed is the gospel of Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:17; 3:21)

⁸ But what does it **say**?

"THE **WORD** IS NEAR YOU, IN YOUR MOUTH AND IN YOUR HEART"—that is, the **word of faith** which we are preaching,

⁹ that if you confess with your mouth Jesus *as* Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; ¹⁰ for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. ¹¹ For the Scripture says, "WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED."

← Lesson 24 Faith, part 1

← Lesson 25 Faith, part 2

C. Faith makes salvation open to all without distinction.

¹² For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same *Lord* is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; ¹³ for "WHOEVER WILL CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED."

D. Faith requires proclamation.

¹⁴ How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? ¹⁵ How will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, "HOW BEAUTIFUL ARE THE FEET OF THOSE WHO BRING GOOD NEWS OF GOOD THINGS!"

E. Faith is not understanding the good news but receiving the good news.

¹⁶ However, they did not all heed the good news; for Isaiah says, "LORD, WHO HAS BELIEVED OUR REPORT?"

F. Summation: Faith comes from hearing the word of Christ.

¹⁷ So faith *comes* from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.

III. Objection and Response

A. First objection and response

¹⁸ But I say, surely they have never heard, have they? Indeed they have; "THEIR VOICE HAS GONE OUT INTO ALL THE EARTH, AND THEIR WORDS TO THE ENDS OF THE WORLD."

C. Second objection and response

¹⁹ But I say, surely Israel did not know, did they?

First Moses says, "I WILL MAKE YOU JEALOUS BY THAT WHICH IS NOT A NATION, BY A NATION WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING WILL I ANGER YOU." ²⁰ And Isaiah is very bold and says, "I WAS FOUND BY THOSE WHO DID NOT SEEK ME, I BECAME MANIFEST TO THOSE WHO DID NOT ASK FOR ME." ²¹ But as for Israel He says, "ALL THE DAY LONG I HAVE STRETCHED OUT MY HANDS TO A DISOBEDIENT AND OBSTINATE PEOPLE."

NASB

Introduction

Paul delivers a stark reality check for the people who claim to be the people of God by insisting that the people of faith do not have faith. Here in Romans we are talking about Israel, the people of God, who base their pursuit of righteousness on their Old Testament Bible and their traditional understanding of the Bible. Listen to that. The people of God, Israel, who uphold biblical morality in the midst of a pagan culture, who insist on the worship of the only true God Yahweh, who pursue their religion with zeal, these people of God are excluded from the people of God.

Is that true today? And I am not asking about Israel. I am asking about the people who claim to be the people of God, who claim allegiance to the Bible, who hold on to a long tradition, who uphold

biblical morality in a modern pagan world. If it was true that the Jews misunderstood faith in Paul's day, is it possible that Christians misunderstand faith in our day? This passage is a reality check. We need to pause and pay attention to make sure we understand what Paul is saying about Israel, so that we can evaluate ourselves, our churches our movements our denominations by the same measure. It is possible for the people of God to be zealous for their way and yet miss the main thing. How can the people of faith, the people of God, not have faith? We are continuing with that question, which started in Romans 9:30 and goes through the end of chapter 10. We got half way through in our last lesson. We are able now to consider the larger argument. I will set up the whole and then we will focus in on the part we did not get to yet.

At the end of chapter 9, we can paraphrase Paul's question like this, "How can it be that Gentiles who were not even trying were let in and called the people of God, while the Jews who were the most biblically moral and religious people around were shut out?" Paul's answer is quite simple. The Gentiles accepted by faith God's plan of salvation while the Jews, the people in the know, rejected that plan of salvation, holding stubbornly to their own understanding of the Bible. They understood the Bible requiring the pursuit of righteousness that centers on or has its locus in Israel. They would say that it is fine to let in Gentiles as long as they pursue righteousness in the Jewish way. Paul says, "They stumbled over the stumbling stone – Jesus."

Then in the beginning of chapter 10, Paul admits about the Jews that they have an impressive zeal. They are very religious. Sadly, that zeal is not based on knowledge but on their own theological system. They have decided how it ought to be. And simple faith in Jesus is not at the center of that system. We are reminded here as Paul speaks that the Christian faith is a truth-based faith. The Jews do not get to define their own way. God's way exists. The post-modern idea of "my truth" does not hold before God. It is not enough to sincerely run in the wrong direction. If you drink poison instead of medicine, it does not matter how sincerely you believe you are drinking medicine. Sin is a cancer and there is one treatment that works. Jesus. If you reject that treatment and come up with your own treatment based on whatever combination of ritual or morality or theology or spirituality, your cure will be no cure. At best you may succeed in mollifying or hiding some of the symptoms of sin. But your way is not based on knowledge of spiritual reality.

There must be a payment of sin. Jesus. There must be a victory over death. Jesus. There must be reception of the gift of grace. Jesus. There must be submission in trust to your Savior and Lord. Jesus. God's plan of salvation is Jesus. No matter how sincerely or faithfully or successfully or painfully you pursue another way of righteousness, that way will not cure the disease of sin and death. Paul says that they sought their own way, rejecting God's way. So, what is God's way? Verse 4:

"For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes."

That's the hypothesis, that's the central statement that Paul develops through the rest of chapter 10. In our last lesson, we interpreted the word "end" with its double meaning of a goal and of completion. At the end we reach the goal. We are done. Imagine God's plan of salvation as a relay race. Abraham and his descendants ran the first lap and then he handed the baton over to Moses and the nation Israel. And in the Old Covenant Israel ran the second lap, running the whole way towards Christ. When they came to the exchange zone and passed the baton to Jesus and the church, the law came to an end. It completed its purpose to bring us to Christ who is both the goal and the completion of the law. That lap is over. Now we should be running together, Jew and Gentile, as the body of Christ.

I also argued that the best way to read the word "for" in that verse is as a logical connector, like you find in the NIV translation. Verse 4 then means this. Christ is the end of the law, the fulfillment and completion of the Mosaic covenant, so that there might be righteousness for everyone who believes; for those who believed before Jesus and those who believe after Jesus; for those who are Jews and for those who are Gentiles. Jesus makes righteousness possible. It is the righteousness that comes by faith. And it is available to all.

Now in verses 5-21 Paul develops this statement about Jesus that Jesus is the fulfillment and true source of righteousness for all who believe. First, Paul looks back to what the law of Moses says then he brings us forward to the time of Christ. And by way of introduction, in verse 5, Paul points out from the law of Moses that righteousness based on the law is accomplished by actually doing the law. This was his argument back in chapter 2. If you choose the way of law, if you pursue a righteousness of law, you must succeed in doing the law to live. But he argued before that no one succeeds in doing the law. So, is that all Moses has for us, a call to do the law that we cannot fulfill? No. And now we get into the main development of Paul's case for faith. The Law says that you must do. Faith says that you must receive.

The Principle of Faith: You must receive.

Of Paul's six points about faith in this chapter, we addressed two in the last lesson. Now we are really ready to go. The people of faith have missed faith. What does it look like to get faith? Or what does the kind of faith God approves of look like? We have six points. Two from the last lesson. Four for this lesson and then we are going to end the chapter with a couple of objections. You are familiar with these points, so we can keep it moving.

The first point comes in verses 6-7. Faith requires believing in the revelation God has given.

Point 1: Faith requires believing in the revelation God has given (10:6-7).

Paul took this point from Moses in Deuteronomy. Don't go up to heaven to get it or down below. The word is near you, it is in your mouth and in your heart. The first point from Moses that if you pursue righteousness based on law, you must do the law, is not the last word from Moses. Moses also taught the requirement of faith. God kept some things secret. He gave Israel what she needed to know. Faith requires trusting in the revelation that God has given. The Jews had to trust God's grace that they would be forgiven of their sins as they trusted him and performed the symbolic acts of sacrifice. God took away their sin as a result of their faith. They had that word in their mouth and in their heart.

The next point came in verses 8-11. The word of faith given that must now be believed is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Point 2: The word of faith given that must now be believed is the gospel of Jesus Christ (10:8-11).

Paul brought the word of faith up to date in accordance with the new revelation we have from Jesus. The word in Egypt had been cover the door with the blood of the lamb and the angel of wrath will pass over you. "How does that work? How does the blood of the lamb take away our guilt and the wrath we deserve?"

"That is not for you to know, not until the coming of Jesus, not until now! Now the secret things are revealed. Jesus is the true lamb. His blood takes away our sin as he died in our place!"

This is the word that Paul says we must now believe. This is the new word in our mouth and in our heart. And as that baton is passed from Moses to Christ we ought to have a positive aha moment. "Aha, that's what it all means. That's how it works. I see now!" Faith in the salvation plan of God seamlessly transitions from Old to New as Jesus fulfills what was pointed to and what was left lacking in the Old. So, now the believer who confesses with their mouth and believes in their heart that Jesus is Lord is the one who will be saved.

Those two points were in our previous lesson.

1. Faith requires believing in the revelation God has given.
2. The word of faith given that must now be believed is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now we move on to Paul's third point about faith in 10:12-13. Faith makes salvation open to all without distinction. Let's read the verses.

Point 3. Faith makes salvation open to all without distinction (10:12-13).

¹² For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same *Lord* is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; ¹³ for "WHOEVER WILL CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED."

This principle gets us back to the Jewish problem with the Gentiles. “How can they who have not tried be let in.” It brings to mind Jesus’ story about the landowner who hired workers throughout the day and payed them all at the end of the day the same wage. Now that’s not fair. The ones worked from the beginning get the same as these late comers. It also brings to mind Jesus’ story of the king sending servants out to the lanes and ditches to bring into the wedding feast anyone who will come, so long as they dress themselves in the wedding clothes the king provides. It also brings to mind the wicked thieving man who trusted Jesus as the last breaths were forced from his crucified body and was promised by Jesus paradise. Fair or unfair, faith levels out the whole playing field. Everyone at any time can come in, everyone. The gospel is exclusive. It is exclusive in this way, only through Jesus. Jesus is the only way. But the gospel is also inclusive. Education does not matter. Wealth does not matter. Gender does not matter. Ethnicity does not matter. Previous lifestyle does not matter. “Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved!” No ifs, ands or buts. The gospel is offered to all who will come and trust in Jesus. That’s the word of faith.

This leads us to a fourth point. Faith requires proclamation. Let’s read 10:14-15.

Point 4. Faith requires proclamation (10:14-15).

¹⁴ How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? ¹⁵ How will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, “HOW BEAUTIFUL ARE THE FEET OF THOSE WHO BRING GOOD NEWS OF GOOD THINGS!”

The universal welcome of the gospel to every person on earth who will believe compels the mission of the church. If we have a cure for the disease of sin and death, how can we not make it our central mission to proclaim that good news to every man, woman and child who suffers from the disease?

The great commission at the end of Matthew 28:18-20 was not a last minute add on. It was not an, “Oh by the way.” It was the commission to the church. The mission of the church on earth. As Jesus communicated that mission, it came down to one central imperative, “Make disciples of all nations.” The imperative is not to grow your church or your denomination. It is not to spread your traditions and your distinctives. The imperative is to invite people from every ethnic group, without distinction, to come to Jesus, to trust Jesus and to follow Jesus. That’s the beautiful, good news.

For Paul, the logic of missions and evangelism is integral to the message of faith. If Jesus has died for everybody, and made it possible for everybody to enter into the family, shouldn’t we go tell everybody? You see, a lot of people do not call on Jesus for salvation. They do not call on Jesus because they do not believe that Jesus is Lord and Savior. But a lot of people do not believe Jesus is Lord and Savior because they have not heard about Jesus. And a lot of people have not heard about Jesus because no one has explained Jesus to them. And it is possible that no one has explained it to them because no one was sent. The good news compels proclamation.

There is a challenge here. Paul has obviously taken his own message to heart, dedicating his life to proclaiming the gospel. He is going to say later in Romans 15:20, “I aspired to preach the gospel not where Christ was already named.” He wants the people who haven’t heard to hear. He owned the mission of taking the gospel to those who have not heard because how can people believe if they have not heard. And how can they hear if someone is not sent to proclaim?

God has given the mission of proclamation to the church. The implication and challenge here is that if the people of God do not respond then the world will not believe. The proclamation is linked to the hearing which is necessary for faith. Now God can make the rocks cry out. That is true. But that is not his plan. And it certainly is not a justification for neglecting the gospel imperative to proclaim. God has given his people this great and solemn responsibility to make sure that everyone hears. This is our mess and our crisis. God gave humanity the commission to rule over this world. We humans are responsible. God challenges and calls us and invites us to participate in the rescue mission, in the clean up and in the rebuilding.

The body of Christ is responsible to proclaim. This proclamation must come by words. It should be supported by a life style of growth in Christ. Word and behavior need to be an integrated message. We should not have word without behavior but then we can't behavior without word. People need to hear. That is our responsibility. Even with all that said, we also recognize that proclamation is not a guarantee of salvation. That's point 5. Faith is not understanding the good news but receiving the good news.

Point 5. Faith is not understanding the good news but receiving the good news (10:16).

¹⁶ However, they did not all heed the good news; for Isaiah says, "LORD, WHO HAS BELIEVED OUR REPORT?"

They heard but did not heed. They understood but did not receive. They listened but did not obey. Faith requires a personal act of will by which an individual yields to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. In Paul's day the Celts of England might be able to argue, "How could we have believed. We did not hear, and no one was sent." Paul's focus is not on Gentile peoples in this passage. He's not talking about the Celts. His focus is on Israel. The people of faith did not miss faith because they had not heard of Jesus Christ. They missed faith because they did not heed. Hearing is not enough. Hearing must be followed by receiving, by an act of true faith.

As we should expect by now, Paul's choice of Old Testament reference here is not simply a choice of nice phrases that fit into his argument. Paul draws from Isaiah not just to express his argument but also to support and deepen his argument.

He quoted from Isaiah 52:7 in verse 15, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring great tidings of good things." Then in verse 16 he quotes the next chapter of Isaiah, Isaiah 53:1. "Lord who has believed our message?" The immediate expression works in Romans. We do not have to go back to Isaiah, and we get Paul's point. Blessed is the person who announces the gospel of Jesus. But not everyone will believe that message. It makes sense without us turning back to Isaiah.

But then we get even more when we do go back to the original context of Isaiah. The quote about beautiful feet comes from Isaiah 52. That is a chapter of joyful announcement of salvation for Israel from captivity in Babylon. God will bring the people back to Jerusalem. Blessed are the feet of the man who brings that news. We are delivered! We are going home! That's good news. Those are some beautiful feet.

That good news is followed immediately by the famous Isaiah 53 chapter of the suffering servant who will be "pierced through for our transgressions," "crushed for our iniquities," "a lamb led to the slaughter." Physical salvation from Babylon is not enough. God cannot bring back his people without addressing the curse of sin and death. He would only be reforming a wicked people, bringing them home to die in their sin. As Alec Motyer puts it, the great deliverance must be followed by the greater deliverance (*The Prophecy of Isaiah*). That greater deliverance is described as the death of the servant in Isaiah 53. This is what must happen. This is the prophecy about which Paul quotes, "Who has believed our message?"

Israel was ready to receive good news of salvation, whether in earlier days from Babylon or in present days from Rome. They were ready for deliverance from whoever was oppressing them. They were ready to receive a political savior, a miracle worker, a king who provides bread. They were not ready to receive a crucified messiah, pierced and crushed like a lamb to the slaughter. And they were not ready for a savior who opens the door to every person without making them pass through Israel as the gatekeeper. They heard the gospel of faith in Jesus. They were not ready to heed it.

Point six is a summation to this point, focusing on the idea of hearing. Faith comes from hearing the word of Christ. That's verse 17.

Point 6. Summation: Faith comes from hearing the word of Christ (10:17).

¹⁷ So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.

The word of Christ is God's plan of salvation. Faith comes from hearing the word of Christ. Paul simply makes the statement. I think that we could read a lot into this one verse. We could recognize the previous points that hearing happens when people go out and proclaim and that hearing is not enough but must be followed up with faith. We could also recognize things that Paul has not said in this passage. That faith is not a purely human act, but a work of God in the heart. And that the word is living and active, so much so that God uses the proclamation of the word in the power of the Holy Spirit to bring people to true faith. That's why the proclamation of the gospel sometimes brings an immediate response.

Paul does not say those things here. The point here is a simple point aimed at Israel. Faith comes from hearing and hearing by the word of Christ. The people of Israel have been called to trust in God's plan of salvation. That plan has been made known. Nothing else is required. Nothing else is needed. There are no hidden secrets, special handshakes, ritual requirements. There is the proclamation of the gospel, the hearing of the gospel and the believing in the gospel. That hard. That easy.

Paul ends the section, bringing clarity to his argument with a couple of objections. We are used to this in Romans. Paul likes to object to himself and then answer his own objections. The first objection and response is in 10:18. It says this.

III. Objection and Response

First objection and response – Everyone (10:18)

¹⁸ But I say, surely they have never heard, have they? Indeed they have; "THEIR VOICE HAS GONE OUT INTO ALL THE EARTH, AND THEIR WORDS TO THE ENDS OF THE WORLD."

Paul raises the objection that they have not heard. And then he answers the objection by quoting Psalm 19. That Psalm declares that God revealed himself in the creation. It's similar to Paul's claim back in chapter 1, when he said, "His eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made."

But we have got two problems here. First, who is the objection about? Who are we claiming has not heard? And second, Paul has been talking about the specific revelation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, not the general revelation of God as creator. So, what does Psalm 19 prove in this regard?

I am going to take a step back to Paul's larger argument. The big picture argument is that even though the majority of Israelites have been excluded from the New Covenant people of God, God's word has not failed. And here in chapter 10 the reason Israelites are excluded is that they have rejected the way of faith and pursued their own way of righteousness. Paul has said that Israel is responsible in hearing the message of Jesus to receive with faith that message as God's plan of salvation.

The objection here in verse 18 is stated generally, perhaps claiming all peoples have not heard, but our context is more specifically about Israel. How can the Israelites be responsible to believe the message about Jesus if they have not heard that message?

But they have heard. "Their voice has gone out into all the earth and their words to the end of the world." The question here is whether Paul is suggesting that the Psalm somehow argues that Israel has heard about Jesus, was that included in the prophecy of the Psalm, or whether Paul is using the language of the Psalm to make a point of the current state of affairs. I think he is using the language of the Psalm. I do not think the Psalm makes the point for Paul. I think Paul is using the familiar language of the Psalm to make a new point that connects back to his comment about preachers being sent to preach the good news. Metaphorically, the sun is sent every day to shout that God reigns in the heavens above. That is general revelation. Paul is using that language to say that messengers of the gospel have been sent out into the world. The point could be phrased this way, "Just as knowledge of God is announced throughout the world by the physical creation, God has also sent human messengers throughout the world to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ."

If this is the intent, then I have to admit that there is certainly some hyperbole or literary exaggeration. The gospel message has gone out through Paul and others into the known Roman world, but not the whole known Roman world. Paul's own plan is to head further west to the Roman territory of Spain. No one has gone there yet. But for the sake of the argument, the gospel has radiated out from Jerusalem to Gentile peoples who have responded in faith. And perhaps even more to the point, the gospel has gone out to the scattered Jewish people throughout the Roman Empire, and in Persia, and all around the Mediterranean Sea. If our main argument is about Israel, and we are asking whether the Israelites have heard, then the answer is "Yes." The word has gone from Jerusalem outwards. The problem of the Jews, in the homeland and outside the homeland, is not that they have not heard.

This brings us to the second objection in verse 19.

Second objection and response – Israel (10:19-21)

¹⁹ But I say, surely Israel did not know, did they?

Paul's response is essentially this. Knowledge is not the problem. Moses and Isaiah foretold what would happen. God planned to invite the Gentiles in. Israel would be jealous. And the Israelites would stubbornly refuse to accept God's plan. Here is how Paul says it in 19a-21.

First Moses says, "I WILL MAKE YOU JEALOUS BY THAT WHICH IS NOT A NATION, BY A NATION WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING WILL I ANGER YOU." ²⁰ And Isaiah is very bold and says, "I WAS FOUND BY THOSE WHO DID NOT SEEK ME, I BECAME MANIFEST TO THOSE WHO DID NOT ASK FOR ME." ²¹ But as for Israel He says, "ALL DAY LONG I HAVE STRETCHED OUT MY HANDS TO A DISOBEDIENT AND OBSTINATE PEOPLE."

The problem for Israel is not a lack of hearing and not a lack of understanding. The problem is in the heart. The problem is a refusal to accept the way things have turned out. They do not want the Messiah to be a crucified Messiah. They do not want Gentiles invited in without coming through Israel. And they do not want a righteousness that you do not have to work to obtain. The image of stubborn disobedience takes us back to Paul's original thesis in Romans 1:16-17 which includes the statement from Habakkuk, "The righteous will live by faith." Remember way back in lesson 3 Habakkuk rejecting God's plan of salvation at that time for Israel, a plan of cleansing wrath through Babylon with only a remnant being saved. Habakkuk took his stand on the wall, planting both feet firmly, challenging God and God's plan. In the end Habakkuk's heart changed. He saw the coming army as God's justice and eventual deliverance. Finishing his prophecy Habakkuk wrote these words of faith, "I must wait quietly for the day of distress...yet I will exult in the Lord, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength, and he has made my feet like hinds' feet and makes me walk on my high places." That's a heart of faith.

The challenge was voiced anew in the day of Jesus. This is the way of salvation. Will you accept Jesus Christ as the end of the law and the answer to your cry for deliverance? Israel ascended as a people on to the wall, firmly planted their feet in opposition to God's plan and still obstinately waits for God to change his mind.

Conclusion

That ends the chapter, but let's conclude with our own reality check. First our six points:

The principle of faith says that you must receive.

Point 1: Faith requires believing in the revelation God has given.

Point 2: The word of faith given that must now be believed is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Point 3. Faith makes salvation open to all without distinction.

Point 4. Faith requires proclamation.

Point 5. Faith is not understanding the good news but receiving the good news.

Point 6. Summation: Faith comes from hearing the word of Christ.

Here is a simple but important observation. Faith is not something expressed by a group. If we say a group has believed, what we mean is that many individuals have expressed personal faith in Jesus Christ. These individuals were either already part of some group, like the Samaritan village that responded to the woman's testimony and came to Jesus. Or these individuals were separate but because of their common faith joined together as a group, like a local church. The group does not have faith. The group is made up of individuals who must have faith.

I also want to make a correction from my lesson on chapter 9. Chapter 9 speaks about both corporate groups and individuals. Looking back over my notes, I see that I said the vessels of wrath are groups: Israel and Gentiles. There is a sense where that may be true. That was true in Jeremiah's potter analogy is about Israel as a people. But in 9:24 Paul says that we are the vessels of mercy. He is talking about individuals. Each individual who has received by faith the gospel of Jesus, whether Jew or Gentile, is a vessel of mercy.

When we talk about corporate Israel or the corporate body of Christ, we are talking about groups of individuals. We can speak of the groups we belong to, of our denomination or our movement or our local church fellowship. And as we speak of our group or our community, we also recognize that at the most basic level, faith is intensely personal and individual. My reality check starts with me. I must first ask myself, "Have I heard the gospel of Jesus Christ like Paul teaches it here?" And then I must ask myself, "Have I received by faith this gospel, this good news. Have I accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior and my Lord? Has hearing the word become faith in my heart? Is Jesus my one and only hope? My one and true Lord?"

Having asked this question of myself, we now ask it of our group. Have our brothers and sisters in Christ understood this gospel message? Does everyone know that righteousness is by grace? Have we each heard? Have we each been challenged to receive that message personally and individually? And having asked this question of ourselves and our group, we then ask, "Who else needs to hear? With whom can we share the good news? Who can we tell? Who can we send?"

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as important, confusing, interesting or strange in Romans 10:12-21?
2. Paul asks in verse 14, "How will they hear without a preacher?" Does your Bible use the word preacher or another word? The original Greek means one who proclaims and should not be associated with the role of the preacher in a modern church. It was not a technical word describing a position in a church but a practical word describing the action of proclamation.
 - a. Who proclaimed the gospel to you when you first believed? Was it primarily one person or several people? (Did you ever tell them they have beautiful feet?)
 - b. Who should proclaim the gospel? List a variety of situations or environments in which a Christian might proclaim the gospel.
3. How does your local fellowship of believers help people within your church understand the gospel and respond in faith to the gospel? What are one or two positive steps you could take to help strengthen the gospel proclamation in your own local fellowship?
4. How does your local fellowship of believers help people in your community understand and respond in faith to the gospel? What are one or two positive steps you could take to help strengthen the gospel proclamation in your own community?
5. How does your local fellowship of believers help people beyond your community understand and respond in faith to the gospel? What are one or two positive steps you could take to help strengthen gospel proclamation beyond your community?

Lesson 26: God's Plan for Israel Involves a Current Remnant

Romans 11:1-10

Invitation and Objection

¹ I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He?

Short answer

May it never be! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. ² God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew.

Long answer (A Remnant is Preserved.)

Or do you not know what the Scripture says in *the passage about Elijah*, how he pleads with God against Israel?

³ "Lord, THEY HAVE KILLED YOUR PROPHETS, THEY HAVE TORN DOWN YOUR ALTARS, AND I ALONE AM LEFT, AND THEY ARE SEEKING MY LIFE." ⁴ But what is the divine response to him? "I HAVE KEPT for Myself SEVEN THOUSAND MEN WHO HAVE NOT BOWED THE KNEE TO BAAL."

⁵ In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice. ⁶ But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace.

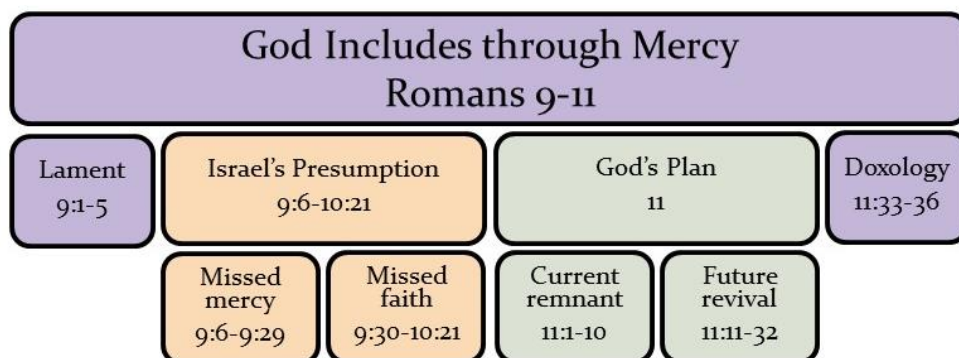
⁷ What then? What Israel is seeking, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened; ⁸ just as it is written, "GOD GAVE THEM A SPIRIT OF STUPOR, EYES TO SEE NOT AND EARS TO HEAR NOT, DOWN TO THIS VERY DAY." ⁹ And David says, "LET THEIR TABLE BECOME A SNARE AND A TRAP, AND A STUMBLING BLOCK AND A RETRIBUTION TO THEM." ¹⁰ "LET THEIR EYES BE DARKENED TO SEE NOT, AND BEND THEIR BACKS FOREVER."

NASB

Introduction

Is God done with Israel? They have stumbled over the stumbling stone of Jesus Christ. Paul began Romans chapter 9 with a lament over the lostness of his countrymen. And we finished with Israel disobedient and obstinate at the end of chapter 10. Is God done? Has he washed his hands and moved on?

No. God is faithful in his promises to Israel. In chapter 9 Paul showed us that Israel has misunderstood mercy. Presuming upon God that they deserved a special, central place as his people, they misunderstood both that God chose them by mercy and that God is free to include others by that same mercy. Then in chapter 10 Paul taught us that Israel also misunderstood faith. They presumed upon God that their pursuit of biblical righteousness earned them a special place. And so, they misunderstood how Gentiles could be accepted by faith in Jesus and that they too could be assured a place only by faith in Jesus. They misunderstood mercy and misunderstood faith.



Is God done? No. Paul now directs us in Romans 11 to this truth: God has a plan for Israel that includes a present remnant and a future revival. We begin with the present remnant.

Paul's approach here will again sound familiar. He has returned to his rhetorical pattern of invitation, objection, short answer and long answer. Let's read the whole passage, Romans 11:1-10.

[Romans 11:1-10]

Invitation and Objection (1a)

We start with the invitation and objection.

In 6:1 the invitation was a complete sentence, "What shall we say then?" Here it is just the phrase "I say then," followed by the objection, "God has not rejected his people, has He?"

We respond, "We don't know. You tell us Paul. Has God rejected his people?"

Short answer (1b-2a)

The short answer is Paul's classic, "May it never be!" And in this case, we get a little more to go with it. Paul points out that he himself is proof that God has not rejected Israel. "For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew."

Notice also this use of the word foreknew. In 8:29 Paul used the word foreknow as applied to an individual who God would call and justify and glorify. Here the context is corporate. God foreknew his people Israel. He is not surprised by the stubborn resistance to his will. God foreknew all the troubles he would have with this people. He knew that some would never believe. But he knew ahead of time something else as well. He knew there would always be a remnant of Israelites, like Paul, walking in grace.

Next, in the long answer, Paul makes three points.

- (1) The idea of a remnant within Israel as an Old Testament reality.
- (2) The present remnant in Israel as a testimony to God's gracious choice.
- (3) The present rejection of grace as a testimony to Israel's hardness of heart.

Long answer (2b-10)

1. The idea of a remnant within Israel is an Old Testament reality. (2b-4)

This is in 11:2b-4. Let's read those verses.

[Read Romans 11:2b-4]

Paul starts this longer as he has before with the phrase "Do you not know..." And then he typically refers to something known, like baptism or slavery or marriage, and from that which is known he supports his answer. Here he chooses the story of Elijah to support his case.

Elijah came on the scene after the northern kingdom of Israel had separated from the southern kingdom. The biblical record does not consider one of the 20 kings in the north as good. The fundamental reason is that at the inception of the northern kingdom the new king established two altars to Yahweh with images of bulls. He erected one on the southern border and the other near the northern border of the kingdom. In doing this he made worship more convenient by giving Israelites two closer places of worship. He made worship more acceptable by providing idols which conformed to Canaanite society. And he made worship more politically expedient by detaching it from Jerusalem.

None of the northern kings did anything about these idolatrous places of worship. As may be expected, the kingdom spiraled downward as the Israelites gave only lip service in a modified worship of Yahweh until Ahab and Jezebel came on the scene, dethroning God altogether and establishing Baal as the national god. God responded by raising up Elijah to oppose Baal. God gave spectacular proof by first bringing fire down from heaven to oppose Baal's prophets and then bringing rain to water the drought, stricken land. To Elijah's surprise, no revival followed this miraculous test of power. The king and queen did not convert, and the people did not rise up. All Elijah got was a message from Jezebel saying, "I am coming for you."

Despondent and maybe afraid, Elijah left Israel walking all the way down through the southern kingdom out into the desert, a fitting metaphor for the spiritual state of Israel; one man alone in the wasteland. But after caring for his needs, God gave Elijah a more accurate perspective. The state of

Israel was bleak. Nevertheless, God had kept for himself a small but significant remnant of 7000 Israelites who had not bowed down to Baal.

God gave Paul this same spiritual insight. As bleak as it looked for Israel. God had kept for himself a faithful remnant. A significant remnant. Remember that 3000 had come to faith at Peter's first evangelistic sermon in Jerusalem. From among these Jews the gospel was going out to the world and the word of Christ was being recorded as the New Testament witness. This was from Jews. There was a significant remnant.

The idea of the remnant clarifies for us a major point of chapter 9. Paul said in 9:6, "But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel." Paul does not then go on to say that Israel is made up of Jew and Gentile. He is not expanding the concept of Israel. He is reducing the concept of Israel. He goes on to say that of Abraham's two sons only Isaac is chosen. And of Isaac's two sons only Jacob is chosen. True Israel is limited according to God's choice. We could then go on and ask, "What about Jacob's 12 sons? Are they not all Israel?" Yes and no. They are ethnically Israel. But Paul's point is that true Israel is made up of those in Israel who truly believe, even if it is only a remnant. That is where Paul concludes in 9:27, "Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, it is the remnant that will be saved." This is what Paul meant when he said, "Not all are Israel who are descended from Israel." The remnant is Israel.

Is God faithful in his promises to Israel? Yes. He is faithful in all of them. The promises made about the land and fruitfulness and the government of Israel may bless the whole, every person. However, the eternal, spiritual promises made specifically to Israel apply to spiritual Israel which is made up of the remnant of ethnic Israelites who have trusted in God. It is Abraham and Sarah. It is Moses and Miriam. It is Naomi and Samuel and Hannah and David. It is Isaiah and Habakkuk and Daniel and Malachi. It is Mary and Joseph, Peter and Paul, Mark and Silas, Priscilla and Aquila. And thousands more believing Israelites, young and old, rich and poor, male and female who make up the remnant of true and faithful Israel.

The spiritual promises continue to be applied to the remnant of ethnic Israel made up of those who have believed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Having established the idea of a remnant from the Old Testament, Paul goes on to say that the present remnant in Israel is a testimony to God's gracious choice.

2. The present remnant in Israel is a testimony to God's gracious choice. (5-6)

How do we explain the remnant? Are they smarter, more spiritual, more righteous? What makes these worthier than the majority of Israelites. Nothing. God chose. That's why, 11:5-6.

⁵ In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice. ⁶ But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace.

Chapter 9 and chapter 10 gave us the two sides of the doorway into God's kingdom, into God's house. If you imagine yourself standing on the threshold with God on one side of the door and you on the other, whose will moves you to step across? Chapter 9 emphasizes God's gracious choice. It is God who shows mercy and God who calls. Chapter 10 then emphasizes the human side, the act of faith. You are responsible to believe and step through.

Here in chapter 11, Paul again emphasizes God's side. It is God who chooses. So, we can ask again whose will is primary in bringing you into the household of God? Yours or God's? Faith or gracious choice? I indicated in an earlier lesson that I understand God's will to be primary. I believe that people see and respond to God's gift of grace because God opens the eyes of the heart to see. Faith is a gift of spiritual sight that comes by God's gracious choice. That's how I understand the relationship of grace and faith, though I recognize you may resolve the question differently.

When I talk about God's side, I talk about his sovereign freedom to make a loving and gracious choice. Justice demands condemnation. The cross provides a way of mercy. God is glorified either way he chooses, whether he chooses just wrath or merciful grace.

When I talk about the human side of the equation, I talk about the responsibility of each person to respond to God in faith. Everyone is responsible. Time and again I read in the Bible a call to faith, which I never see qualified by a discussion of predestination. Our job is to proclaim the gospel and call all men and women to believe in the gospel and receive Jesus as Lord and Savior. The Bible proclaims love and forgiveness to all who would come. We follow the Bible's lead, proclaiming grace and forgiveness to all, and we trust God to do the internal spiritual work that brings about salvation.

Paul does not get into all of that here. He does not tell us how to understand the complementary truths of chapter 9 and 10, of gracious choice and the requirement of faith. I've given you a little bit of my thinking, and I'll you to work it out for yourself.

I have a twofold concern. (1) I am concerned that we do not say less than what Paul says. For example, he has stated quite clearly that the remnant is "according to God's gracious choice." And on the negative side he states, "the rest were hardened." I do not want to come up with a solution that makes those statements nonsensical or undercuts the point that Paul draws from these truths. God chooses by grace, and God hardens others. We cannot and should not try to change that. (2) But I am also concerned that we do not say more than what Paul says. For example, Paul never says that we should not proclaim the gospel to all men because some are not chosen. It is never said. Such a thought is foreign to the way the Bible presents the call to faith, though sadly not foreign to some Christians. It may seem logical based on what Paul says here. And that is a warning for us that we need to recognize when our logic takes us outside the bounds of biblical truth, and we especially need to recognize that when that logic begins to actually contradict biblical truth. How does the remnant come to be? By God's gracious choice.

That statement then leads to a great sentence clarifying for us the nature of grace. Verse 6, "But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace." If we need more confirmation to Paul's definition of grace and works given at the end of chapter 3 and beginning of chapter 4, here we have it. This is one of the nice things about being involved in a longer conversation with Paul. He is applying his gospel argument in chapters 1-4 to the case of Israel here in 9-11. Because of that, we get restatement of the same idea in different ways. This is one of those restatements. Clarifying again our answer to the first question of covenant "How am I made acceptable to be in relationship with God?", we have this truth that grace plus works is not grace at all. The idea that grace gives me the spiritual strength to do the works I need to do to be accepted is an idea of works, not of grace. The idea that 90% is God's grace and 10% is my effort, is not grace at all. For grace to be grace, as a means of obtaining righteousness, it must not require any sinful human work to play a part. The best you can do would always mess it up. We need perfection and that perfection only comes if you are dressed 100% in the righteous robe of Christ. 99% grace and 1% works is less than holy. Grace is on the basis of grace. Works are on the basis of works. Your 1% will not be found acceptable. "But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace."

That's a thought I hope is hammered into our brains by the time we finish studying Paul's teaching to the Romans. What makes you acceptable? 100% grace. Otherwise, it's not grace.

And there are wonderful implications that follow. You do not have to maintain your position with God by your goodness. You stand by grace, not by your 1%. Because you were chosen by grace, you are acceptable. You are safe. You are loved. There is no room for boasting. There is all kinds of room for gratitude. The woman who fell before Jesus, kissing his feet and washing them with her tears and her hair. She knew grace. And she loved much in return. The Pharisee who thought himself good did not value the love received and so returned little love from his own heart. Who loved more, the

younger brother who came back empty and was accepted or the older brother who felt he deserved all the father's stuff?

You are chosen by grace. In spite of your sin, you are loved. Hallelujah!

And still, still, attendant to the glorious truth of God's grace is the disturbing truth that God has not chosen all. In fact, Paul says God has hardened the rest.

This is one of those truths we may be tempted to explain away, but to do so is to diminish the hard reality of human sinfulness and the righteousness of God's justice.

3. The present rejection of grace is a testimony to hardness of heart. (7-10)

Let's read 11:7-10. [Read Romans 11:7-10]

I want to explain away this text. And I do not want to explain away this text. Recognizing my own sinfulness and my own limited knowledge and my own faulty logic, I must assume that spiritual reality is somewhat beyond my comprehension, both of my head and of my heart. There are things I must not be getting. And that's okay. I do know that I am not more compassionate than God. And I am not more just than God. And my love comes nowhere near God's. It is okay to be disturbed emotionally and cognitively by some of the revelation of Scripture. I should expect there would be truths that I cannot wholly see, that I can't wrap my mind and my heart around. And I do not need to resolve it all. I do not have to be emotionally okay with everything I read. I am quite sure that when I meet my Lord in heaven and he has taken off this sinful flesh, I will see these things with very different eyes. I don't see it now. But I know I will see it differently then.

I do not want to explain away the hard passages of Scripture. God hardens some hearts. At the same time, I do not want to make these passages of Scripture more difficult than they actually are. One idea I have already indicated is that God's choice is decisive. That's a hard truth. And I am going to come back to that. There is another idea that does not come out here in Paul but does help add biblical context to his words. So that we do not take this idea farther than Paul intends, I want to focus on this other theme of Scripture to help us understand the hardening of the human heart.

(1) Light hardens the human heart.

The idea which we see elsewhere in Scripture is that light itself hardens the human heart. God does not need to enter into the human heart to make it hard. All he has got to do is shine light on it.

We saw back in 1:18-32 that when God employs a passive wrath, by simply withdrawing from us, the result is darkness in thought and desire. Without God our passions become degrading and our thoughts depraved. We can imagine, left to ourselves, separated from God in the darkness of this world, our hearts and minds become a gooey mush. In the moral and spiritual realm, they are neither hard nor soft but undefined, malleable, confused, blah.

We find hearts like this all over organized religion with no clear vision of who God truly is, no clear vision of the depth of sin or the height of love. So much of traditional religion has lost sight of God, having left the rock, it wallows in the swampy sands of empty ritual, false tolerance, misguided spirituality and secular morality. This religious morass produces hearts of gooey mush. Is there any solid spot in there? I mean any true conviction whether wicked or righteous but at least something that is hard?

How do you make such a heart hard? You shine light on it. Let's consider the hardening of Israel.

In Deuteronomy 29:3-4 there is similar text to the one Paul uses in Romans 11:8. Paul says, "**God gave** them a spirit of stupor and eyes to see not..." whereas Moses says in Deuteronomy 29, "**the Lord has not given** you a heart to know, nor eyes to see." Did you catch there is a slight difference? Moses emphasizes the hardness of the Israelites. They are already hard. And God has not given them a heart to know. Paul emphasizes the hardening done by God. God gave them eyes to see not. We talked about this tension seen in Moses and Paul back in 9:18 regarding Pharaoh. Paul used Pharaoh as an example that God has the right to harden who so ever he desires to harden. Going back to the

story in Exodus we observed the text sometimes says that God hardened Pharaoh's heart and sometimes says that Pharaoh hardened his own heart. We also made the point from the potter analogy that God is not dealing with a good or neutral substance that he then hardens. When talking about the human heart, we are starting with clay that is already sinful. It's already resistant to God.

So, we have these two truths. God hardens hearts which harden themselves against him. And no human heart is neutral. All human hearts are wicked. Truth does good to a good heart. Truth applied to a sinful human heart often has a negative effect. This is what it means to say that light hardens the human heart.

You ever wonder how a dentist can repair your tooth by squeezing liquid enamel onto it. You know I've had enough practice with super glue to think of all kinds of ways that could go wrong. How do you squeeze a liquid into a wet mouth to produce the super hard enamel of a tooth that will not come off? They do it with a photopolymer. It's a substance in gooey form that hardens when you shine a certain kind of light onto it. That's the human heart. Light hardens the human heart. Our spiritual center is a photopolymer that hardens against the light of God's truth.

A person's heart floats in the grey twilight of human society as gooey mush satisfied with not knowing too much about God, too much about right and wrong, or too much about self. A heart may not be content. It may desire more. But the heart does not desire too much truth or too much of a higher authority.

We might think that in dispelling the darkness, light would bring the heart to life. That is not what we see. The light of Christ shining on a human heart has the reverse effect. The heart hardens against the light. When you are in a deep sleep and you are in that warm darkness your first response to a bright light is to shut it off. The light brings pain and discomfort. So, you pull the cover up over you. You need to restore the darkness. That is the spiritual state of people.

John starts his gospel, proclaiming, "There was the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, and the world did not know him. He came to his own, and those who were his own did not receive him (1:9-11)." Later John said, "And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil (3:19)." Later he tells the story of a blind man. Jesus put mud on his eyes and the man saw. But the Pharisees, so upset that Jesus made mud on the Sabbath, could not see the healing of a blind man. The light shone full on their face and they who claimed to have eyes, turned away and tried to snuff it out. Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, 'We see,' your sin remains (John 9:41)." The light reveals the true nature of the human heart. If we reject the revelation that comes by that light, as our stubborn hearts do, then we cannot see, we cannot be forgiven, and our sin remains.

Because of our human fallenness which resists God, the result of more light is not salvation. The result of more light is a hardening of the heart that reveals the true state of our soul. God commission Isaiah with these words, "Render the hearts of this people insensitive, their ears dull, and their eyes dim, lest they see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and return and be healed." The text sounds like God wants Isaiah to confuse the people to prevent them from coming back to God. That's what it sounds like. And yet, as you move through the book of Isaiah, you see the irony of the original commission. Isaiah uncovers the sin of Judah. He contrasts the religious hypocrisy and wicked oppression of the society with the holiness and compassion of God. Isaiah does not confuse the truth with his message. Isaiah shines a light on Judah, calling them back to the word of God. But the light Isaiah shines results in confused anger. It only succeeds in making the just wrath of God appear completely justified. God should judge these people.

At one point Isaiah cries out, "To the law and to the testimony! (8:20), calling them to God's word. But he says of them that they "have no dawn." In the desolation of their own making, Isaiah says, "they are enraged and curse their king and their God as they face upward [towards him]. Then they look to the earth, and behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish; and they are driven away

into darkness (8:20-22).” Isaiah’s voice was a light shining in the dark that did not soften but hardened hearts against the light. As Paul said back in chapter 7, “I would not have come to know sin except through the law” and “through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.” The light of truth reveals stubborn human sinfulness. But the human heart does not want to see itself in the truth of God’s light and so reacts against the light to mock it, dismiss it or extinguish it.

The words of Isaiah I just quoted come from chapter 8. In chapter 9 Isaiah announced a greater light that would come in the word, shining out from Galilee, “A child will be born to us, a son will be given to us (9:6).” But as Jesus later predicted in his own teaching. Those who killed the lesser lights of the prophets would also kill the true light that gives light to the whole world. Because the world of men does not want the light of God.

As Paul speaks of hardening the hearts of Israel, we should keep this biblical theme in mind. God does not harden the hearts of men by hiding the truth from them. Ironically, the light of truth has that effect, unless God intervenes inside the heart, so that the light may be received.

Verses 9-10 are a quote from Psalm 69.

⁹ And David says, “Let their table become a snare and a trap and a stumbling block and retribution to them.” ¹⁰ “Let their eyes be darkened to see not and bend their backs forever.”

That is Psalm 69:22-23. We should go back one verse to better understand the harshness of David’s words. He speaks of men who betrayed him and then mocked him in his pain. Psalms 69:21 says, “They gave me gall for my food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.” It is not just about David. This is a messianic prophecy. In quoting this Paul is certainly aware of the context. The Jews of his day did exactly what John said. “The light came to that which was his own [to Israel] and his own [Israel] rejected him.” They rejected Jesus, crucified him, and gave him vinegar to drink while hanging on the cross. Paul’s words speak justice against those who would crucify the Prince of Peace. “Let their table become a snare and a trap, and a stumbling block.” It is both a statement of just wrath and also a recognition of the blindness of Israel. God has shown his light full in their face. By doing so, by giving them the light of the gospel, God has hardened their hard hearts. And God has not chosen to intervene. Israel is allowed to stumble in the dark, all but a remnant.

God hardens human hearts through the painful, harsh light of truth that unveils our false assumptions about ourselves, our religion and our people. This happened to Israel. And it continues to happen with modern Jews but also with modern people from all kinds of backgrounds. So many are happy to live in the semi-darkness of a world view that refuses to take a stand about Jesus. People can talk about God the Father all day long, but when we hold up Jesus as the true light, and when we claim that there is no other way to the Father but through Jesus, and when we insist that grace must be free without religious ritual or works, when we share this gospel of Jesus, so often, seemingly open hearts close up hard because of the light that has shone upon them.

Conclusion

I have not resolved the problem of God’s choice. If God’s will is primary, then he must choose to open the eyes of some hearts and to not open the eyes of others. That problem remains with Paul’s teaching here. It is not a problem of justice. All deserve wrath. It is a problem of mercy. Why to some and not to others?

So, the passage raises questions that it does not answer. But it also very suggestive on other points. You could take away a number of truths. And here are three things that I’ll suggest you think about as we close.

(1) True Israel lives on in the remnant of Jewish believers who have accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. So, there is no place at all in Christianity for anti-Semitism. It is such a terrible irony of history that the Christian Church has in many times and many places promoted prejudice against Jews. We are one body made up of all languages, nations and tribes, certainly including our Jewish brothers and sisters who have placed their faith in Christ.

(2) I think we need to put the nation state of Israel into right perspective. While God does have a future plan for Israel as a people, which we will discuss next time, the special bond between Christians and Jews is fundamentally with the Jewish remnant of believers, not the nation state of Israel. When Paul speaks in Ephesians 2:15 of Jews and Gentiles being brought together as one new man, he is speaking of the body of Christ made up of believing Gentiles and believing Jews.

This implies to me that we need to evaluate the nation of Israel critically as we would other secular nations. We should probably highly value in the Middle East Israel's democratic government, rule of law, right of self-defense. At the same time, we should not uncritically rubber stamp all of Israel's policies just because they bear the name Israel. Again, the special bond of spiritual family is with fellow believers in Jesus, not with a nation state but with the true remnant Israel.

(3) We must continue to share the gospel of Jesus with Jewish people. Extreme modern concepts of tolerance might claim that disagreeing with the Jewish faith is anti-Semitic. It is not. And anyway, we do not believe we are disagreeing. Jesus fulfills Torah. There is a remnant of Jews waiting to hear and believe. As the culture of tolerance continues to grow in the West, we cannot relinquish the truth that Jesus Christ is the very word of God, the very image of God. Jesus Christ is God. Whenever we discover non-essential ideas and practices that make the gospel abhorrent or irrelevant, we should work to remove those ideas and practices. But Jesus Christ is the essential. A rejection of the Son is a rejection of the Father. Without Jesus, without the cross, and without grace there is no hope and no salvation for anyone, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, Atheist, Christian. We must not tolerate the darkness. We must not accept the thoughts and systems that bind humanity down in the hardness of their own hearts. We must shine the light of Christ, even though we know that the light hardens and that the gospel is the smell of death to some. We must continue to announce the good news of Jesus Christ because the gospel is also the fragrance of life to those whose hearts and minds are open to the love, forgiveness and acceptance found only in Jesus Christ.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as important, confusing, interesting or strange in Romans 11:1-10?
2. In 11:5-6 Paul connects God's choice of a remnant with the idea of grace and works. Do you like to think of yourself as having been chosen by God or do you prefer the idea that by faith you chose God? Do you have a way that helps you personally explain the relationship between God's choice and your faith?
3. Does the idea that light hardens the human heart make sense to you? What personal example can you think of that agrees with the idea that the light of truth hardens a sinful heart? How have you seen this in your life or the life of someone else?
4. Consider the first idea suggested in the conclusion that the true inheritor of the spiritual promises to Israel is the spiritual remnant that has believed in Jesus Christ. Are you aware of any anti-Jewish sentiment now or in the past in your family or church or society? How ought a Christian view a Jewish person?
5. Consider the second idea suggested in the conclusion that the current nation state of Israel should not be given a special pass because it is Israel. Is Israel discussed in your family, church or social circles? Do you think it is right to consider Israel critically, with positives and negatives, as you would consider any other nation or do you see Israel as holding a specially status by which they should be judged differently? Or both?
6. Considering the third idea suggested in the conclusion, in a culture of tolerance have you heard that it is wrong to impose Christian ideas of truth on non-Christians? What are your thoughts and feelings about that? How do you feel about sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with people who would find the gospel offensive?

Lesson 27: God's Plan for Israel Involves a Future Revival, part 1

Romans 11:11-24

Invitation, Objection and Short answer

¹¹ I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be!

Long answer, part 1 (11b-24)

A. The rejection of Israel now will be followed by the acceptance of Israel later.

But by their transgression salvation *has come* to the Gentiles, to make them jealous. ¹² Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be!

¹³ But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, ¹⁴ if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them.

¹⁵ For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will *their* acceptance be but life from the dead?

B. The Olive Tree illustrates the rightness of Israel's return while also warning Gentile believers.

¹⁶ If the first piece of *dough* is holy, the lump is also; and if the root is holy, the branches are too. ¹⁷ But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, ¹⁸ do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, *remember that* it is not you who supports the root, but the root *supports* you. ¹⁹ You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." ²⁰ Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; ²¹ for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either. ²² Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. ²³ And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. ²⁴ For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural *branches* be grafted into their own olive tree?

Long answer, part 2 (11:25-32) – next lesson

NASB

Introduction

John describes his glimpse into the throne room of God. He writes, "I looked, and behold, a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and the to the lamb (Revelation 7:9-11).'"

When I read this vision in college my response was, "Yes, let's take the gospel to the nations! How will they know if they do not hear and how will they hear if no one is sent!"

I still feel that in my heart. At the same time, I see something new that did not cross my mind before. John sees ethnic groups. There is a multitude bound together through worship of God and belief in Jesus. And the individuals express a wonderful variety of characteristics. On one level they are male and female, introvert and extrovert, thinkers and feelers, artists and engineers. Then there are these groupings of tribes and peoples who have shared physical attributes or customs or history or language, whatever makes up the culture or ethnicity of a people.

It is true that we have a shared identity that goes to the core of who we are as human beings which transcends our individual and cultural differences. At the same time, we maintain in the body of Christ our individuality and our culture. Personality and family and culture may not be that which is most important or most essential to being human or to being Christian, but it is part of who we are.

As Paul communicates what it means for Israel to be the people of God and part of the body of Christ, he is also providing us with a big picture grid to help us think about God's plan in history and

where we fit into that plan, not only as individuals but also as groups, nations and tribes and peoples and tongues.

In this lesson today, Paul's teaching about Israel also challenges us to consider who we are before God.

Invitation, objection and short answer (11:11a)

The second half of Romans 11 starts us off in verse 11 with Paul's typical rhetorical pattern, giving us an invitation and objection. "I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they?" This objection is very similar to the earlier objection in the first verse of chapter 11, "God has not rejected his people has he?" Paul answered that question by pointing to the remnant of Jewish believers in Jesus. God continues to draw Israelites into fellowship with him through Jesus. He has not rejected Israel.

This is a different question. The current objection "They did not stumble so as to fall, did they?" has to do with the place of Israel as a people in God's ongoing plan of salvation for the world. Israel held a very special position in salvation history from the time of Abraham to the crucifixion of Jesus. It is true that Israel is not left out of the New Covenant people of God. There is a significant remnant down to this day. But is that it for Israel? Did Israel's stumbling over Jesus as the Messiah lead to a long fall out of God's plan. As a people Israel has been hardened by the light of the gospel. They are cut off. Is that it for Israel? Or will there be a future exodus out of spiritual exile back into right relationship with God as a whole nation?

We can predict Paul's short answer because it is always the same, "May it never be!" Now we need to consider his longer answer. How does Paul answer the idea that Israel has stumbled so as to fall? How does he refute that?

His answer is rather long, extending from verse 11 all the way through verse 32. We will take two lessons to cover the whole response. The first part occurs in 11-24, that's our passage for this lesson. And we can break this down into two distinct sections. First, we have a summary of the answer in verses 11-15, then we have the olive tree illustration in 16-24. Let's read the whole passage and then address the two parts. So here we go, Romans 11:11-24.

[Read Romans 11:11-24]

Long answer, part 1 (11b-24)

A. The rejection of Israel now will be followed by the acceptance of Israel later (11b-15).

Paul gives us the outline of his answer in 11b-15 which moves back and forth from Israel to Gentiles. We have the same idea restated several times. In 11b we get this, "But by their transgression salvation *has come* to the Gentiles, to make them jealous." So, there is some transgression or sin that works out for the good of non-Jews but results in making Jews jealous. Then in verse 12, "Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be!" Again, we see the sin and failure of Israel results in riches for the world, for Gentiles. And we get the added idea that if their sin turned out to be good for others, how much more positive would their fulfillment be.

Paul shifts slightly in verse 13 and 14 to make a parenthetical statement about his own ministry to the Gentiles. "But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them." Paul's ministry to the Gentiles is magnified or made even better if it can result in also gathering in some of the Jewish remnant. He recognizes that his ministry of inviting Gentiles into the kingdom of God is offensive to most of his countrymen, but he doesn't do it out of spite to Israel. He is not going to change his message to make it more acceptable to Jews, but he is glad if his ministry might stir up some even by way of jealousy to bring them into the body of Christ.

He then comes back in verse 15 to restate again the principle that if what is bad for Israel turns out as good for the Gentiles, how much better if Israel also experiences the good. "For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will *their* acceptance be but life from the dead?"

Let's tackle three words here that will help us clarify Paul's points. The three words are transgression, fulness and jealousy.

(1) *Transgression* First, what is the transgression? The transgression of the Jews, in this case, is the rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. That rejection climaxed in the crucifixion of Jesus and is ongoing in the hardness of Israel towards Jesus. Though the treatment of Jesus was an awful moment in the history of Israel, his crucifixion very clearly resulted in riches for the world.

(2) *Fulness* The second word, fulness, occurs at the end of verse 12. My Bible translates it as fulfillment, but it is important that we recognize it is the same Greek word as in verse 25 which reads, "a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fulness of the Gentiles has come in." In verse 25 Paul speaks of the fulness of the Gentiles and in verse 12 the fulness of Israel. It is not clear what fulness actually indicates. Is it qualitative implying bringing a people to true knowledge or to full maturity, or is it a quantitative thing implying a full number? Paul does not say, and for our purposes we do not need to know. The big picture idea is what matters. After the transgression of the Jews, the crucifixion of Jesus, God launched a mission to the Gentile peoples of the world. God has in his mind what he plans to accomplish through that mission. It will enable the vision of Revelation 7:9 of a multitude from every people and tribe. When that mission has reached its fulness according to the plan of God, then God will bring about the fulness of Israel. We do not expect the fulness of Israel right now. Right now, we are aware of a hardening of Israel. Paul is indicating to us that we should look forward to something more for Israel, an acceptance that leads to life, a fulness or fulfillment. That is coming.

(3) *Jealousy* How about the word jealousy? What makes Paul use that word to describe the Jewish response to the Gentile mission? How does that word help us better understand the nature of the hardening of Israel?

To understand the jealousy, we need to step back and take a broad view of history. God's promise to Abraham was a promise to provide for and protect the nation of Israel that would come from him and also through that nation to bless all nations. Faithful Jews understood their role to bless the nations. They just understood the blessing of Gentiles to result from Gentiles coming to Israel. For example, the vision God gave in Isaiah 2:3 describes many peoples saying, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob that he may teach us concerning his ways and that we may walk in his paths." You see it is many peoples, but they are coming to Jerusalem.

Gentiles entered relationship with God by coming through Israel, by submitting to the religious culture of Israel. Rahab came to God through Israel. Ruth came to God through Israel. Naaman came to God through Israel. Moses taught Israel in Deuteronomy 4:6 that if they obeyed the Law then the peoples around them would notice the goodness and prosperity of Israel and would say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." They would understand God through Israel.

You can hear in that statement the danger of God's promise to provide and protect. The people that walks with God reaps benefits. The people that walks with God experiences blessing and grows in wisdom and understanding. The people that walks with God has something to boast about. And people are never really very good at giving credit where credit is due. Success, even success grounded in God, leads human beings to pride and to boasting

Faithful Jews at the time of Paul may have believed in their role to bless the Gentiles. But it would come by their efforts to live out the Law, and Gentiles would receive it by attaching themselves to Israel. And that happened. When Paul visited synagogues on his missionary journeys there were often God-fearing Jews connected to the synagogues. The blessing comes through Israel.

Pride in this role and pride in the customs of the Law spurred on a jealousy when Paul succeeded with Gentiles by preaching a gospel not requiring attachment to Israel. We see it in the record of Paul's missionary work. Acts 13 tells an early story in Paul's ministry in Antioch Pisidia. When he visited there, the synagogue officials asked Paul to give a word of exhortation which, of course, Paul

did and which, of course, was about Jesus. The text says that the people begged Paul to come back and speak again next Sabbath. They did not have a problem with what he said. They were interested. Next Sabbath nearly the whole city turned up. This had never happened before. They had some God-fearers among them. They had some response from Gentiles but nothing like this. This was amazing. All these Gentiles coming to the synagogue. So, how did the Jews respond? Acts 13:45 says, "They were filled with jealousy, and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul and by Barnabas." Paul quotes Isaiah to them, "I have placed you as a light for the Gentiles that you should bring salvation to the end of the earth (Acts 14:47; Isaiah 42:6; 49:6)." He is saying, "Don't be surprised at this response from the Gentiles." The quote does not do any good. Paul is pushed out, so he turns from the synagogue to the people of the city.

This was a regular pattern for Paul. At times he received a welcome from Jews, but whenever Gentiles accepted the gospel, the majority of Jews became aggressive and jealous, rejecting Paul. You can imagine a mixture of feeling. Paul was not requiring Gentiles to become Jewish. He was making it too easy for them. He was having great success among them, and they resented Paul. And because of their jealousy, because of their rejecting of the gospel, riches went out to the Gentiles. When Paul writes this in Romans, he is not just writing sound theology. He is also giving us his missionary experience.

The stumbling of the Jews freed the gospel to go out unfettered.

It is interesting to imagine what would have happened if Israel had come, as a whole people, to the gospel. Peter saw thousands come to Christ in the early days of the Jerusalem revival, and that was a significant remnant. That revival was shut down by the authorities, forcing the gospel out of Jerusalem and out of Israel. But what if the revival had just continued to grow? What if Israel accepted Jesus as Messiah, and the temple became the center of Christian worship? How would that have affected the mission to the Gentiles?

I can't know for sure, but I do know as an American working cross-culturally that it is impossible not to bring your culture with you. We cannot in the end separate biblical Christianity from our own cultural values and experience. People can receive the gospel message from someone who is foreign, but they themselves must work to help the gospel become their own. And with such a strong Old Testament biblical culture, I can only imagine that success among the Jews would have resulted in missionary preaching very tied to the Old Testament Jewish culture. We continue to see that struggle in the New Testament letters between Gentiles and the Jewish remnant in Jerusalem led by James. But Israel did not come to the gospel as a whole culture. They did not make the temple a center of Christianity and the synagogues throughout the empire did not become lighthouses of hope. In a way, this rejection of the gospel by the Jews resulted in a blessing to the Gentiles. The gospel was forcibly detached from Jewish culture, rejected and pushed out. As a result, the gospel went unfettered by Jewishness. It went out in a form more palatable, more acceptable, more readily received among Gentiles.

In America we have blond-haired, blue-eyed pictures of Jesus. And there is a problem with that which we are going to get to. But there is something good as well. It says that Jesus belongs to me as an Anglo-Saxon. I feel like he belongs to my culture. But I have also seen African pictures of Jesus and South American pictures of Jesus and Indian pictures of Jesus and Asian pictures of Jesus. Jesus belongs to us. That's what this says. His gospel is for my culture, my people, not just for me but definitely for me. The transgression of the Jews brought about riches for the Gentiles because the simple gospel message went out, and it was received, and it was planted among the peoples.

Is that all for Israel? Verse 15 says, "For if their rejection be the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead." We are thinking here of Israel as a whole. A remnant of Israelites have trusted in Jesus, experiencing life from the dead. But mostly the gospel has been rejected and the house of Israel left spiritually destitute. In the olive tree illustration, Paul teaches us that Israel is not necessarily out, and for that matter, we ourselves should be careful not to repeat Israel's mistake.

B. The Olive Tree illustrates the rightness of Israel's return while also warning Gentile believers (16-24).

Let's read the illustration in 11:16-24.

[Read Romans 11:16-24]

Paul gives a picture here to help us imagine the New Covenant people of God. The tree is the body of Christ. The people of God are defined by faith in Jesus. Belief includes peoples into the tree. Israel has been largely excluded. But the exclusion of Israel is not necessary or even natural. The tree sprung up out of Jewish soil, out of the history and the world view of the Old Testament. If anyone can naturally appreciate how Jesus fulfills the Law and promises, it would be an Israelite. The body of Christ is a natural home for Jews.

The illustration has a horticultural problem. You do not graft wild branches into a cultivated olive tree. Wild olives have large pits with little meat or oil. But wild olive trees can have strong, durable root systems. If you do any grafting, you do not graft wild branches onto a cultivated tree. You graft cultivated branches that produce plumb, juicy olives onto a strongly rooted tree.

Some commentators suggest Paul just got this wrong because he is a scholar who grew up in the city. Others say it does not matter anyway because it is just an illustration. I have a serious problem with the suggestion Paul did not know what he was talking about. Coming from a city in North Carolina, I grew up never seeing a real olive tree. I didn't know anything about olives or grafting olives or any of that. But I have been in Croatia for a long time now. And in Split, we purchased our excellent quality olive oil like everybody else in a two-liter plastic coke bottle from our neighbor. During the season after Sunday service, sometimes we had a taste testing of oil from different members' trees to guess which extraction process was used. By tasting you had to figure out how they extracted the oil. Mediterranean people know their olives. How much more so back in Paul's day when 90% of humanity worked in agriculture?

I say that Paul knew exactly what he was saying. The incongruity of the illustration is intended. You do not graft wild branches into a solid tree. That's the point. Compared to the Jews, we Gentiles are wild and unnatural. While Paul was writing this half my ancestors were worshipping gods dancing naked around sacred trees in Germany and the other half were dancing around standing stones in Brittan. We were not natural candidates for this olive tree. We didn't have the history. We didn't have the culture. We didn't have the belief in one God. We didn't belong. It was all foreign. So, now we can come back to the blond haired, blue-eyed pictures of Jesus. The gospel is for everyone and Jesus is for everyone, still, Jesus is of the tribe of David from a Jewish mother. The patriarchs are Jewish, the writers of the Old Testament are Jewish, the writers of the New Testament, apart from Luke, are Jewish. The New Testament books all sit firmly in the theological worldview of the Old Testament Bible. Israel was elected as a nation to serve a special purpose. The body of Christ is the natural home of Israel. We Gentiles are the foreigners, accepted by grace.

Has Israel stumbled so as to fall out of the picture? The olive tree illustration tells us there is no reason that Israel as a people of faith could not return and take their place in the body of Christ. The olive tree illustration also warns the rest of us Gentiles against making the same mistake as Israel.

Paul warns Gentile communities not to make the same mistake as Israel.

What was Israel's mistake? After the Tower of Babel, God moved to a divide and conquer strategy. He would divide the peoples into various nations, tribes and cultures, then he would take one people to shine as a light among the rest as a witness. Through them he would bless the nations. He did not choose the mightiest or the wealthiest or the most righteous. He chose a man and woman advanced in age who could not have children. He called into being a people that was not a people. He allowed that nation to grow up as slaves in Egypt. And when he led them into the promised land, he told them, "it is not because of your strength or your righteousness but because of the choice of the Lord (Deuteronomy 8:17; 9:4 and 10:15)." What makes Israel so special? What is the core of their

identity? I will tell you. It is not their Jewishness. It is the same as yours. (1) They are created in the image of God, male and female. (2) They are fallen. (3) They are accepted 100% by grace. (4) They are being remade into God's image. The worth of a Jew is the same as the worth of an Indian, an African, an Asian, a European, an American. Our core identity is not in the specialness of our history or culture but in our humanity and in God's love for us.

Israel allowed the law and traditions and history and success that came from God to take central place in their core identity. They could not accept a Messiah who wanted center place if that meant pushing out the law and customs that they felt made them Jewish. God does not require that we forget our culture and customs. He does require we move it out of the way, out of the center. Israel took what was good and made it central, so central that they could not get past it to Jesus. They could not let go of the identity that they created for themselves and their own pursuit of righteousness to accept the identity that God declared to be true of them.

Every Christian nation, every denomination, every local church is tempted to do exactly the same thing. To let our traditions and culture and history become central to what defines us. For example, where I live, to be Croatian is to be Roman Catholic, to be Serbian is to be Eastern Orthodox. Your faith defines your identity. And when a whole nation connects with one branch of the Christian faith, the danger becomes very real that the traditions and sacraments and culture will come to define the believer instead of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We Christians are in just as much danger of stumbling over Jesus as the Jews were. It is not only a danger for a so-called Christian nation. It is a danger for every church and denomination that traditions and culture would take center place, such that we believe our children and grandchildren to be safe because they say the right words and know the right history and value the right traditions. They are not safe! If the nation of Israel can be cut off, then any people, any church, any denomination can be cut off. Any Christian group that does not hold the gospel of Jesus Christ as the most central and important and defining reality, is very near to being cut off. This is history. God does not stick with peoples who claim his name but remove their hearts far from him. God continues to build his church. The gates of hell cannot prevail against it. But that church is not an institution or a movement or a denomination. That church is the gathered who have professed faith in Jesus Christ.

This is how I understand Romans 11:18-21, "Do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, 'Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.' Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; for if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you." When the simple gospel message of faith in Jesus Christ and the grace of Jesus Christ is no longer central then we are cut out of the tree, our churches, our denomination, our nation. We are not part of the tree if Jesus is not central.

Does the olive tree illustration teach that a true Christian can lose salvation?

A normal question that arises out of the olive tree illustration is whether Paul teaches here that Christians can lose their salvation. What I have said so far serves as my basis for the answer to that. The olive tree illustration is here for two reasons: first, to demonstrate how Israel as a people is cut off from the body of Christ but as a people could come back in and second, to warn Gentile peoples and communities from making the same error as the people of Israel.

In one sense, this language applies to individuals. "They were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear..." Individuals believe, and individuals choose not to believe. When we talk about inclusion in the body of Christ, we always speak in some sense on an individual level. At the same time, notice here that those Jews who were cut off are those who never believed in the gospel. In some sense we are thinking of the nation of Israel as the people of God, as part of the tree, and then they get cut off because they don't receive Jesus. They were part of the people of God only by name. They were members of Israel. In a parallel sense, the Gentiles cut off may not be individuals who have believed in Jesus, but may be like Israel, part of a Christian Gentile

community that over time has come to rely on its own culture and traditions and pursuit of righteousness. Those who bear the name Christian may not develop true faith in Christ. And so, they too will be cut off as a community like Israel. Maybe there is still a remnant of believers among this Gentile Christian people or denomination or church, whatever the group is. But largely the group is cut away from the body of Christ when the gospel disappears from that group. They only have the name. This makes the most sense to me as an interpretation because it parallels the Gentile experience to the Israel experience. We are talking about larger groups and communities.

The individualistic language that you stand by faith and you also can be cut off makes the warning poignant to any member of any Christian community who feels they are safe because they are part of a Christian people or tradition. You are not safe just because you grew up in a Christian home or a Christian nation or part of a Christian church. Just as the Jews were broken off, so too will you be if your faith is not in the simple gospel of Jesus Christ. Have you believed? Are you standing by grace through faith? That's the question Paul is putting to you. If so, you walk in his kindness. If not, you will experience his severity just as the Jews hardened to the gospel experienced his severity and were cut off.

If you still feel that Paul teaches here that a true believer can lose their salvation, then you need to work that out with the beginning of Romans 5 and the end of the Romans 8. Paul teaches our security in Christ in those passages, and he does it powerfully. So, however we interpret the olive tree passage, it should not be in such a way as to remove the security of the believer. No one can separate us from the love of Christ. And to remove that security is to remove a major plank from Paul's earlier argument about why the gospel so powerfully produces righteous living. And it does so because we are safe in him. He is transforming us, and he has called us, he has justified us, he is going to glorify us. We are safe. So, however you understand the olive tree illustration, it has got to fit in with the argument Paul has already made.

Conclusion

Okay. Let's wrap this up.

Aside from this warning to Christian Gentiles not to fall into the same error as the people of Israel, the olive tree illustration's main point is summed up in 11:24, "For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree?" How natural it would be for Israel to be grafted back into the body of Christ.

Two broad principles come to my mind as we think about this big picture view of history and of peoples. The body of Christ is comprised of a variety of ethnic identities. When we envision his throne room, we see a multitude from every nation, people, tribe and language. We retain our ethnic and cultural identity in the body of Christ. The great commission instructs us to make disciples of all nations, that is all peoples. The fulness of the Gentiles has something to do with a remnant from all peoples coming to faith in Jesus Christ. And the fulness of Israel has something to do with ethnic Israel still playing a role in God's plan.

We also have this principle. Though our ethnicity, language, culture and traditions help make up our special uniqueness, these things do not define the most central truths about us. At the very core of who you are as a human being and as a member of the body of Christ, these are the vital truths about you. (1) You are created in the image of God. (2) You are fallen as a sinner. (3) You are fully accepted as forgiven and righteous in Christ. (4) You are being renewed into the image of Jesus. This is where your worth is derived. This is what makes us brothers and sisters of one family, many peoples, but one family. These are the most central truths to be passed down to our children as we teach them who they are. These are the reasons we hope for men and women of every nation to come to faith in Jesus Christ. And this is why we pray for the renewal of the people of Israel.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as important, confusing, interesting or strange in Romans 11:11-24?

2. Does this passage adjust or refine how you view Israel, as you think about the key words transgression, fulness and jealousy or as you think about the olive tree illustration? What stands out to you about Israel?

3. When Paul wrote this passage, the long tradition of Israel dominated the history of salvation. The Christian church was not quite 30 years old. Now, 2000 years later, entire cultures have been affected by Judeo-Christian values. There are cultures that identify with major branches of the Christian faith, whether Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox or Protestant. Some denominations and local churches boast hundreds of years of tradition and experience. The olive tree has grown over time such that we can imagine Christian peoples, denominations and churches having been grafted into the tree and having already been cut off or are in the process of being cut off from the tree.

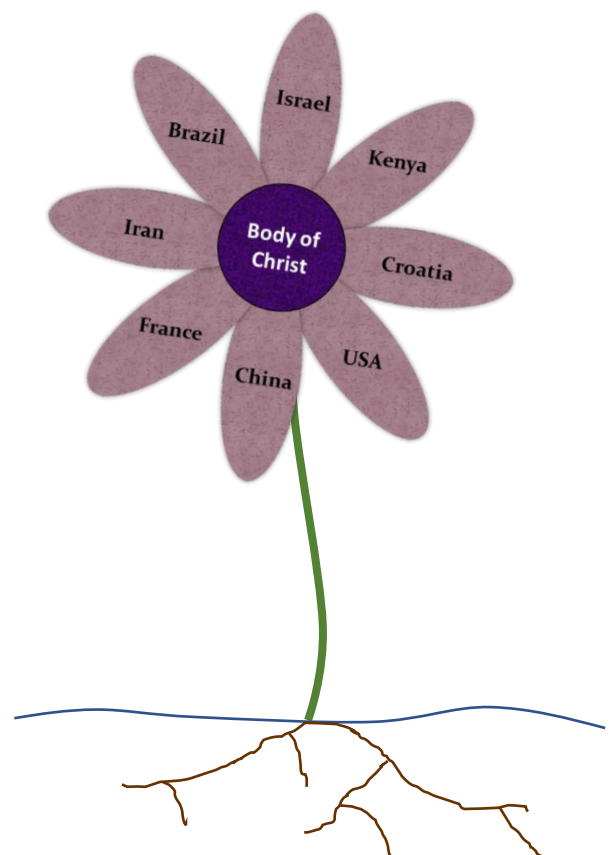
Consider the picture below. Okay. It's our daisy from an earlier lesson and not an olive tree. This illustration pictures better the idea of the remnant from every people. Each petal is a nation, but only part of the petal overlaps with the body of Christ. That part is the remnant.

a. Reimagine the petals with different branches of Christianity or denominations in your society.

What would some of those be? Some may have a very small remnant of true believers, some a larger remnant. How is your own church or denomination doing? Is there a temptation to value history, culture and tradition over the simple message of Christ? Or is there a temptation toward pride in how well you are doing (remember Paul's warning)?

b. How about the issue of jealousy? In what ways might Christians of one church or of one ethnic group express jealousy regarding the work of Christ among another ethnic group or church? Describe some time you felt jealousy toward what God is doing among another community?

a. Reimagine the petals with the more specific people groups or cultures in your immediate society. How is Christianity expressed differently in these different cultures? What are some things you appreciate about how a different ethnic group worships or practice their faith? Describe some of the characteristics you admire in a particular brother or sister in Christ who comes from a different ethnic group than you.



Lesson 28: God's Plan for Israel Involves a Future Revival, part 2

Romans 11:25-32

²⁵ For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery
so that you will not be wise in your own estimation

(1) that a partial hardening has happened to Israel

(2) until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in;

(3) ²⁶ and so all Israel will be saved;

just as it is written, "THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION,

HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB."

²⁷ "THIS IS MY COVENANT WITH THEM,

WHEN I TAKE AWAY THEIR SINS."

²⁸ From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake,
but from the standpoint of God's choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers;

²⁹ for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

³⁰ For just as you once were disobedient to God,

but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience,

³¹ so these also now have been disobedient, that because of the mercy shown to you
they also may now be shown mercy.

³² For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all.

NASB

Introduction

What do you take credit for? And who do you blame? How often do you take credit or feel good because of the achievements of somebody else? I felt great when Croatia came in second in the World Cup, and I just live here. I am not even Croatian. I feel the same with NC State, that means I am up and down a lot. Does that make any sense? That's my association with a people, a tribe a pack. Why would that define me or give me significance or make me feel good? I don't train. I don't have any skills. I just wear the shirt and glory in the victory.

Parents do something similar. Moms and Dads post online achievements of their children and glory in their success. On a much larger scale we do this culturally. On a really large scale, the West boasts advancement in science, rule of law, better gender equality. And so, we in the West feel smarter, more cultured, better than the East. Family, race, tribe, culture, there is something in us that finds value in the group, in our group, something that makes us feel, smarter, nicer, funnier, wiser, stronger, richer, better.

We take pride in the achievements of other people in our group. This trend certainly extends into religion and into Christianity. I love Tim Keller. And I love telling people that I went to the same seminary as Tim Keller. We've never met but that doesn't matter, still makes me feel good about myself. On the negative side, I hate it when a pastor is caught in a scandal. It affects my own sense of worth. And shamefully, I have to admit that if a pastor is going to be immoral, at least let him be from another denomination, so I do not have to feel so bad about myself. What does that say about me? Nothing good. We derive honor and value from our family, from our people, from our group, from the tribe that we choose to belong to.

God has a plan that involves peoples. Way back when Jesus was here that plan included a village of Samaritans coming to faith in him and a multitude of Galilean Jews walking away from him. That plan included the spread of the gospel that moved out from Israel to pagans, spreading East and West but mostly West. That plan took the gospel through Europe to North America. Colonization took the gospel to the coasts of South America, Africa, India, China. Then the gospel began to move inland. As Europe and the United States move in the direction of being post-Christian, the gospel faith continues to grow in places like Brazil and China.

At no stage in the plan has the gospel come to a people because they are worthier than their neighbor. The gospel goes out by the mercy of God.

The ebb and flow of the gospel through the peoples of the world does not affirm or validate any ethnic group as smarter or better or more spiritual or kinder. We have all been hard to the gospel of Jesus Christ. We can all be hard again. All will receive mercy, and all can receive mercy again.

Our text today begins in Romans 11:25, “I do not want you, brethren, to be uniformed of this mystery, so that you will not be wise in your own estimation.” Rejoice in what God has done but do not let it become a source of ethnic pride or superiority. That’s not how you got the gospel.

Christians through the centuries have ignored Paul’s teaching about not becoming wise in their own eyes, about not looking down on the Jews. Christians have a shameful history of persecuting and vilifying Jewish people, of ignoring Paul in Romans chapter 11. The attack this past week by a gunman, killing 11 worshippers in a synagogue in Pittsburgh reveals the demonic extreme. Paul calls us to reject any sense of superiority at all. He argues that the root of true worship, true religion, true civilization is in the Jewish people. And though Israel, as a people, is currently in a hardened state against the gospel, this has not always been, nor will it always be in the future. God did not turn from the Jews because they are particularly bad, nor did he turn to Gentiles because they are particularly good. God’s choice is by mercy and is open to all who will believe. The gospel is not for the better, the smarter, the wiser, the more moral, the religious. The gospel is for the humble. The gospel is for those who get the depth of their own sin and know that all the good comes by the grace of God.

Romans 11:25-32 completes Paul’s response to the wrong idea that Israel has fallen out of God’s plan while also completing the larger argument in chapters 9-11. Let’s read 11:25-32.

[Romans 11:25-32]

I like the way Douglas Moo understands the division of the text. In verses 25-26a Paul presents the mystery that Israel will experience salvation. He will then show us that this mystery is confirmed by Scripture (26b-27); rooted in God’s faithfulness to his promises (28-29); and representative of God’s impartiality to all peoples (30-32) (Moo, NICNT Romans, 712).

I. All Israel will be saved (25-26a)

We are continuing with Paul’s long answer to the rhetorical objection back in verse 11, “Israel did not stumble so as to fall, did they?” I suggested that Paul has in mind Israel falling out of God’s plan of salvation. We know that Israelites are not rejected. There continues to be a significant remnant of Jewish believers in Jesus. But is that it for Israel as God’s people? Is the church now the new Israel with no special role for Israel? Paul does not accept the church as fulfilling all the Old Covenant promises made to Israel. Paul’s indicates the story has not yet been completed in a way that satisfies God’s plans for Israel.

Paul began his long answer arguing that Israel has indeed stumbled over the stumbling block of Jesus. And that has turned out as blessing for the rest of the world. The Jewish rejection of Jesus as Messiah led to his crucifixion, such that whoever believes in him might receive forgiveness. Furthermore, the Jewish refusal to accept Jesus allowed the gospel to go out unencumbered by the strong cultural wrapping of Judaism. Gentile peoples were able to receive Jesus as their own without feeling they must first become Jewish. And so, the transgression of the Jews resulted in riches to the Gentiles.

Paul extended his argument with a “much more.” If their transgression produced riches for the world how much more will their fulfillment be! Paul looks ahead to the fulness of Israel, to spiritual abundance for his countrymen. “And why not?” he says. The body of Christ is like a tree that has Jewish roots. They are the natural branches. The shocker is that Gentiles have found a home here. Jews would naturally fit back in if they were to yield to Jesus as Messiah.

So, now we continue the third part of Paul’s argument that Israel has not fallen out of God’s plan in today’s lesson. Paul begins with his practical purpose. He says, “I do not want you to be uniformed about this mystery, because I do not want you to be wise in your own estimation.” That’s the application point. That’s how we began this lesson. Do not let the blessing and riches that have come to you, and the benefits that you have received in your culture and in your church and in your walk

with God, do not let that become a point of pride or superiority. There is no reason why anyone once hardened might not experience revival, especially the Jews who have held such a special role in the outworking of God's plan of redemption.

What is this mystery Paul does not want us to be in the dark about? Paul explains the mystery with three phrases, and this is in 25 and 26. First, (1) "a partial hardening has happened to Israel." The fact of that hardening is no mystery. Everyone is aware of that. The hardness of the Israelites towards Jesus prompts this whole section starting in chapter 9. How can Jesus be the Messiah if God's people have rejected him? It is surprising. But Paul has explained. God forewarned that Israel would stumble over Jesus. Second, the second phrase, this partial hardening will continue (2) "until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in." God has a plan for the spread of the gospel through the world that will end in the vision of Revelation which depicts representatives from every tribe, people, nation, language worshipping God the Father and Christ the Son. Now, considering the extent of Christianity during the day of Paul, such a vision of the fulness of the Gentiles may have seemed mysterious, though not completely, considering that Paul had already planted churches through Asia Minor and into Greece and was communicating with a primarily Gentile church in Rome, in the heart of the empire. The main thrust of the mystery comes in the third phrase, (3) "and so all Israel will be saved." Paul sees a future revival of Israel. That's the mystery.

We need to unpack this phrase, "all Israel will be saved."

Let's start with the "and so." "And so, all Israel will be saved." What's the logical connection there? I think the connector implies the process that Paul described in verses 11-15 and that he is going to continue to describe in verses 30-32. Jesus came. Israel stumbled. Gentiles experienced the riches of the gospel. When the fulness of the Gentiles is complete, God will soften the hearts of the Israelites. "And so, all Israel will be saved." The "and so" points to the salvation of Israel as a culminating event in God's plan of salvation among people through history.

We will get to the "all" in "all Israel" in a minute. Before that we need to clarify what Israel refers to here. Here are three options that have been suggested.

Option 1: Israel designates the family of the redeemed, including all true believers, Jew and Gentile.

Option 2: Israel designates ethnic Israel both past and future.

Option 3: Israel designates ethnic Israel as a future generation of Jews.

So, let's start with the first option. Israel designates the family of the redeemed, including all true believers, Jew and Gentile.

Option 1: Israel designates the family of the redeemed, including all true believers, Jew and Gentile.

This option suggests that Israel here is a spiritual or metaphoric term representing everyone who has trusted God's revealed plan of salvation, so all believers before Jesus and all believers after Jesus. In this present age Israel would equate with the church or with the body of Christ. And the view provides a solution for what it means to say "all Israel" will be saved. It is saying that everybody who has trusted in the saving plan of God will be saved. The view also explains why some prophecies made to the people Israel seem to have been fulfilled in the church.

Some proponents of this view would look back to the use of Israel in 9:6 where it says, "For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel." They suggest that the phrase "not all Israel who are descended from Israel" indicates that Israel includes more than those who are of the bloodline of Israel. So, it's not just physical Israelites, ethnic Israelites, but it's more. It's not just those descended from Israel. It's more. So, you do not have to be descended from Israel to be of Israel. The children of Abraham are both of the physical and the spiritual seed of Abraham.

There is no logical reason why Paul could not use the term Israel in a metaphoric way like this. The problem is in the context. So, consider three things.

1. First, in the immediate context of verse 25 Paul said that a partial hardening has happened to Israel. If Israel is a spiritual term for all believers, then a partial hardening doesn't really make sense.

The partial hardening makes sense when we think of Israel as an ethnic people which has members hardened, some of whom are hardened against the gospel of Jesus Christ. For Israel in verse 26 to be a label for all believers, we would have to conclude that Paul switched meanings from verse 25 to 26 without giving us any indication.

2. This brings up a second problem. Paul only uses the term Israel in Romans in this major section of chapters 9-11. This use in 11:26 is the eleventh and final occurrence in these three chapters. Except possibly for the first use in 9:6, the other nine uses of the term Israel refer to the people group made up of ethnic Jews. Israel is used in these chapters in contrast to Gentiles who are ethnically not Jewish. We can imagine Paul using Israel metaphorically or spiritually but that has not been his use in this whole section of Romans. It would be a pretty big interpretive stretch to think that Paul used a term consistently nine times or ten times and then, without warning, expects us to understand in this last use in verse 26 a different meaning. So that he would switch all of a sudden from ethnic Israel to spiritual Israel.

3. A third problem has to do with the context of 9:6 where Paul states “not all descended from Israel are Israel.” In chapter 9 Paul is not making the membership of Israel more inclusive to include Gentiles. That is misunderstanding the phrase. He is making the membership of Israel more exclusive to exclude some Jews. I made this point in an earlier lesson. It is not both sons of Abraham who are chosen but one; not both sons of Isaac but one. Paul’s historical argument validates God’s choice to include Gentiles. It also validates God’s choice to exclude Jews, only a remnant will be saved. This is a narrowing down of which Jews make up true Israel until Paul concludes in 9:27, “Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, it is the remnant that will be saved.” So, in a sense, only the remnant is true Israel, according to the argument in chapter 9. It is a narrowing down of who really is Israel. And so, the point for our purposes is to recognize that 9:6 does not indicate a spiritual expansive term of Israel. It doesn’t support a view in verse 26 that Israel is all those who believe.

Paul consistently uses Israel in 9-11 to indicate the ethnic people Israel. So, I think we have to reject the interpretation that suggests that Israel here has a special, spiritual meaning which means all believers. No. We are talking about ethnic Israel. So, option 2 is that Israel designates ethnic Israel past and future.

Option 2: Israel designates ethnic Israel past and future.

This interpretation suggests universal salvation for all Jews, that somehow God’s plan was that all Jews would be saved for all time. And it is not really a serious option. I am only mentioning it because I have actually heard it, and it has been suggested to me. It’s usually by somebody who is not looking at the broader argument at all. They have just read through Romans and the phrase catches their attention. And they fix on this idea that “all Israel will be saved.” The option does not make sense at all with biblical history or with the present context. Paul’s lament to start chapter 9 assumes that the majority of Jews of his day are cut off from the hope of salvation in Christ. So it does not apply to all of ethnic Israel past and future. That brings us to option 3. Israel designates ethnic Israel as a future generation of Jews, some point in the future.

Option 3: Israel designates ethnic Israel as a future generation of Jews.

Verse 25 places the comment into the temporal dimension. In this present time or age, a partial hardening has happened to Israel. They are considered collectively as a vessel of wrath, to use the language of chapter 9, and have been removed from the olive tree of God’s people, to use the metaphor in chapter 11. Not every single Israelite rejects Jesus, a remnant remains, but the majority resist the gospel. As Paul says, Israel is currently experiencing a partial hardening. That hardening is to last until the fullness of Gentiles has come in. Some time in the future God will consider the fullness of the Gentiles to be complete. And when that happens, all Israel will be saved. We are looking towards a future event in the life of the people of Israel.

This is my view. I believe we are talking about a future revival among ethnic Israel. This is what Paul is looking towards when he speaks in verse 12 of the fullness of Israel. Just as we have had the fullness of the Gentiles in verse 25, we are looking ahead for God to complete his plans for the Jews.

Now we need to talk about the word “all.” If we are talking about ethnic Israel what does “all Israel” mean? Must that mean that every single living Israelite when the time comes will place his or her faith in Jesus? Or can the all carry a general sense, like all of Croatia came out to cheer their world cup team when they returned home or like when we say, the whole school turned up or all the neighbors were there? We use the word all in language sometimes to mean every single person but sometimes to mean the majority or an impressive percentage. And I understand that this interpretation is frustrating for some who want more precision and that it is possible that Paul has in mind every single Israelite. I am not saying it is not. Still, I think Paul is using the word “all” in the more general sense. We are looking forward to a revival among the majority of Israelites which will happen after God is satisfied with the spread of the gospel among Gentiles. It does not require every single Israelite to believe, but it will cause the Gentile church to look with wonder and remark, “Wow! All Israel has come to faith in Jesus.”

Paul supports his understanding of this mystery first by the confirmation of Scripture, then by God’s faithfulness to his promises and finally by how it shows God’s impartiality to all peoples. So, first the confirmation of Scripture which comes in verses 26b-27.

II. The mystery is confirmed by Scripture (26b-27).

“THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION, HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB.²⁷ THIS IS MY COVENANT WITH THEM, WHEN I TAKE AWAY THEIR SINS.”

Paul’s quote of Scripture here stays consistent with his practice all the way through 9, 10 and 11. He has quoted Scripture throughout and especially at the end of each section. He has also drawn heavily on Isaiah. At the end of every section he has had a quote from Isaiah.

The Greek text that Paul quotes here matches Isaiah 59:20-21a and Isaiah 27:9. His use is in line with how those verses were translated in the Septuagint (LXX), a Greek interpretation of the Hebrew Bible available in Paul’s day. Paul seems to have made just one change from the Septuagint. Whereas Isaiah says that the deliverer will come to Zion or for the sake of Zion, Paul says the deliverer will come from Zion. So, that’s strange. I do not know why Paul makes this change. Douglas Moo suggests that Paul does it to emphasize that Jesus will be going to come from the heavenly Zion. That may be. I don’t know. I can’t figure that one out.

Paul’s quote has connection points with other passages in Isaiah. One very notable one occurs in chapter 45 where Isaiah begins with promise of physical deliverance for Israel from exile in Babylon through the Persian king and then the chapter shifts from this great deliverance out of exile to an even greater spiritual deliverance that must occur if Israel is to be saved from herself. The chapter is full of the salvation and righteousness language that Paul has been using in Romans. He started his thesis in 1:16-17, “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ because it is the salvation of God for everyone who believes for in it the righteousness of God has been revealed.” So, this conjunction of that language, the salvation of God and the righteousness of God is not new with Paul. It’s normal for Isaiah. And you would really get it, especially if you would go back and read the second half of Isaiah 45. Let’s just read the end of that, the end of 45, verses 22-25.

²³ “I have sworn by Myself,

The word has gone forth from My mouth in righteousness

And will not turn back,

That to Me every knee will bow, every tongue will swear *allegiance*.

²⁴ “They will say of Me, ‘Only in the LORD are righteousness and strength.’

Men will come to Him,

And all who were angry at Him will be put to shame.

²⁵ “In the LORD all the offspring of Israel

Will be justified and will glory.”

Reading Isaiah, I sometimes feel like I am reading Paul. Of course, it is the really other way around. It is Paul whose own language is so influenced by Isaiah. Did you notice the last verse, “In the Lord all the offspring of Israel will be justified?” It is very similar to “all Israel will be saved.”

Paul’s reference to covenant in verse 27 is another point of interest. Paul said in 10:4 that Christ is the end of the law, which is the Mosaic Covenant. Which promise of the covenant does Paul foresee as being fulfilled in the future revival of Israel? Is it the promise of the Abrahamic covenant? I think it is the promise of the new covenant. We Gentiles, we readily embrace the New Covenant prophecies as though they had all been given for us. And they do include us, but that’s not how they are initially presented in the Old Testament. The New Covenant was first promised to Israel, not at all to the Gentile world. Listen to the wording of Jeremiah’s famous passage. This is Jeremiah 31:33-34.

³³ “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. ³⁴ They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the LORD, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

Do you hear that language that is similar also to what we have here in Romans? “I will remember their sin no more.” The promise of a New Covenant is not given to the church, not initially, or to Gentiles but right here it is given to the house of Israel. Paul has shown that God intended to include us Gentiles. But that is the shocker few were expecting. The covenant is for Israel. The promise is to put the law into the hearts of the Jews. When he says, “their sin I will remember no more” he is speaking of Israelites. This is the great problem Paul has been addressing in these chapters. The New Covenant promises were originally given to Israel, yet Israel has been hardened and excluded. How can God be shown faithful to these promises to his people Israel, not just to the promise to Abraham but to the New Covenant promises? And to call the church Israel and say that fulfills the Lord’s obligation seems to me really a sneaky way to defend God’s faithfulness. Promises were made to the house of Israel, the physical descendants of Jacob. I believe those promises will be kept in an abundant and overflowing way because that is how God keeps his promises

At Pentecost God poured out his Spirit on the Jewish apostles initiating a first fruits of putting his law into their hearts, of fulfilling the promises. But I think we have to look to the future for the fulness of the blessings to Israel to complete the promises that God made to them in the New Covenant.

III. The mystery is rooted in God’s faithfulness to his promise (28-29).

Paul supports the mystery that all Israel from the prophets. He also, in our next couple of verses, points back to the promises made to the patriarchs. So, verse 28 and 29, “²⁸ From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of *God’s* choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; ²⁹ for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.” I am reminded of Jesus’ story about the prodigal son. At the end of the parable, the wild, disobedient, but repentant and humbled son is in the house feasting while the older son stands outside, hurt, jealous and refusing to come in. The older son’s actions reveal his heart. Though he stayed home the whole time, his heart drifted just as far from the father as did the heart of the wayward son. And just as the father came out initially to embrace the younger son, he also chose to leave the feast and come out to the older son. The father did not hate the older son any more than he did the younger son.

To use Paul’s word, the older son is beloved of the father, even though he refuses to receive that love. I believe this parable by Jesus is intended to talk about individuals, but we can also imagine Israel as the older brother. We can extend that language out to the group. And Israel is our older brother, who stands outside, angry and jealous with a heart hardened against the Father. Israel is still beloved.

God’s enduring love for Israel was established in the promises he made to the patriarchs. God used everlasting covenantal language with Abraham when he said, “Sarah your wife shall bear you a son,

and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him (Genesis 17:19).” Paul recognizes the tension. There is a tension. It is true that the Jews of his day opposed the gospel of Jesus Christ and opposed followers of Christ, and especially made it hard on other Jews who decided to follow Jesus. And in that sense, they were enemies to the gospel.

And yet, God still has his eye on the older brother. He made promises. The endurance of the Jews as a race in the promise land is one of the great wonders of history. It shows that God’s eye is on Israel. Driven from the promise land because of famine, Abraham’s descendants moved to Egypt where they were enslaved for four hundred years. Who could believe Israel would become a nation and return to the land of Abraham’s sojourn? And yet, they did. Centuries later in 586 BC Babylon exiled Judah, tearing down the walls of Jerusalem and demolishing the temple. And yet, 70 years later the Jews were back in Jerusalem, the walls rebuilt, and a new temple was built. Once again in 70 AD, Jerusalem was destroyed and the temple burnt to the ground by the Romans. And the Jewish people spent centuries wandering, centuries of flourishing but also of persecution, a persecution that culminated in the Holocaust, one of the world’s most atrocious evils. Six million Jewish men, women and children were killed. Who could believe that Israel would ever make it back, after such a long time and so much hatred and death? And yet, Israel is back again in the land of Abraham’s sojourn. In a spiritual sense, they may be enemies to the gospel of Jesus Christ, but who can doubt that Israel as a people exists by the mighty hand of God. They are beloved. And they still have a part to play in God’s plan.

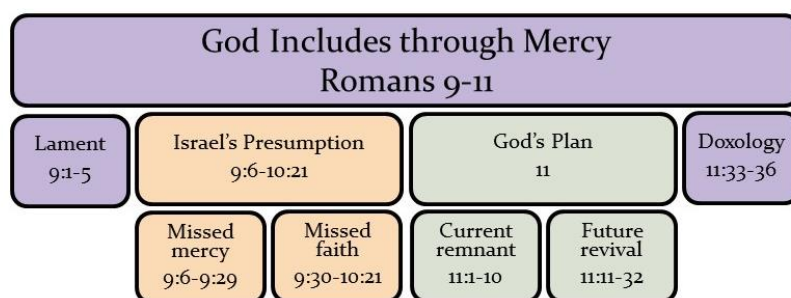
IV. The mystery is representative of God’s impartiality to all peoples (30-32).

In the final verses of his argument, Paul describes the mystery of Israel’s salvation as representative of God’s impartiality to all peoples. Verses 30-32, ³⁰ “For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹ so these also now have been disobedient, that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy. ³² For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all.”

Verse 30 speaks in broad, general terms about us Gentiles, repeating that the benefit came to us because Israel refused Jesus, “For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience...” The next clause ending verse 30 parallels the clause beginning 31. The closing clause in 30 has this idea, “We have been shown mercy because of their disobedience.” And then the beginning clause of 31 could be understood to say pretty much the same thing but in reverse order. “They have been disobedient for the sake of mercy to us.”

Then we have the final clause of 31, “they also may now be shown mercy.” How is it that the mercy being shown to the Gentiles enables showing mercy to Israel, “that they also may now be shown mercy”? We are considering here salvation history from a very high perspective. It’s like we are way up high, and we are looking through time. God’s mercy to Israel lasted from Abraham to Jesus. That was 2000 years. Then came their disobedience and the gospel spread out to the Gentiles, which lasted another 2000 years, so far. To say that, “they also may now be shown mercy” is to voice the next stage in God’s plan. So, Gentiles were shut out in disobedience as Israel was chosen by mercy. Then Israel was shut out in disobedience as Gentiles were included through mercy. And now, anytime now, once the fulness of the Gentiles is complete, God will again include Israel through mercy.

In justice God has shut out all peoples in their time for their rebellion and wickedness. And God shows mercy to all peoples, inviting them all in through faith in Jesus Christ. “There is no partiality with God (2:11).” God has shut up all in disobedience, so that he may show mercy to all. There is a great mystery. And the great mystery that’s coming, it’s not that the gospel has spread out to Gentiles. That’s shocking, but we are aware of that. The great mystery that is yet to be, is that in a future time all Israel will be saved. God is looking ahead. He has saved a remnant now. He is looking ahead to revival. And you need to know this. And you need to not be wise in your estimation. The blessings you have are by the grace of God, by the mercy of God, not because you are wiser, smarter, better, stronger, richer, whatever. Anybody can be hardened, and anybody can receive mercy.



Paul's Doxology (11:33-36)

Paul is going to finish out chapter 11 with a doxology. Doxology means a statement of praise. We are getting a statement of praise. Paul began chapter 9 with a lament. And he continues to lament the state of Israel. The doxology does not mean he has gotten over that. But as he stands atop the mountain and surveys the mercy and justice of God through all time to all peoples, he is overcome with awe. The language of his doxology comes, unsurprisingly, from Isaiah 40. Isaiah ended chapter 39 foretelling the coming exile at the hands of the Babylonians. So, Isaiah was looking ahead to pain for Israel. Chapter 40 begins with God exhorting Isaiah to, "Comfort, O comfort my people. Speak kindly to Jerusalem and call out to her, that her warfare has ended, that her iniquity has been removed (40:1-2a)." Israel is then told, "Get yourself up on a high mountain and lift up your voice mightily." From the high point of the mountain, proclaim the wonder of God. Go tell it on a mountain.

Paul, from his mountain top view, surveying all of salvation history, draws on further language in Isaiah as he glories in the magnificence of God. So, he shouts it out in verses 33-36,

³³ Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! ³⁴ For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, OR WHO BECAME HIS COUNSELOR? ³⁵ Or WHO HAS FIRST GIVEN TO HIM THAT IT MIGHT BE PAID BACK TO HIM AGAIN? ³⁶ For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him *be* the glory forever. Amen.

Consider the wonder of God through the ages, as he runs out to the prodigal and as he calls the proud to become humble. Consider his justice, his love, his grace and his mercy. Consider too that he left this world in our hands, with all the evil that would follow and all the redemption that would be required. He sees the nations. He sees the smallest child. He knows our hearts, yet he brings us home. He makes promises to stubborn and rebellious people and then makes a way to keep those promises. At the mid-point of history stands a cross, an old, rugged cross. At times we pervert that cross into a symbol of ethnic pride. But for God that cross remains. It remains a statement of incredible love, unending justice and persistent mercy. Let's read Paul's doxology again and glory in the grace and wisdom and love of God. [Repeat Romans 11:33-36.]

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as important, confusing, interesting or strange in Romans 11:25-32?
2. What ongoing questions do you have about the phrase, "All Israel will be saved?" Does the option of a future revival of ethnic Israel appeal to you or does that not seem quite right to you?
3. How do you understand Paul's idea of the fulness of the Gentiles? Paul does not give us specifics on what this means? What are some possibilities that come to mind?
4. Paul's big picture of salvation history suggests a current hardening of Israel, an expanding spread of the gospel through the world until the "fulness of the Gentiles is reached", and a future work of God described as "the fullness of Israel (11:12)" or "all Israel being saved." What are some thoughts you have when you try to fit your own country or community or church into the big picture? In what way is it helpful to think about the big picture without getting into the specific details?
5. Paul ends with a statement of praise. What are some truths that come to mind that lead you to praise God when you think of the big picture of his work of redemption through human history?
6. Using Romans 11:33-36 as a model, spend some time in praise.

Lesson 29: The Worshipper's Response to Grace: Life as a Living Sacrifice

Romans 12:1-2

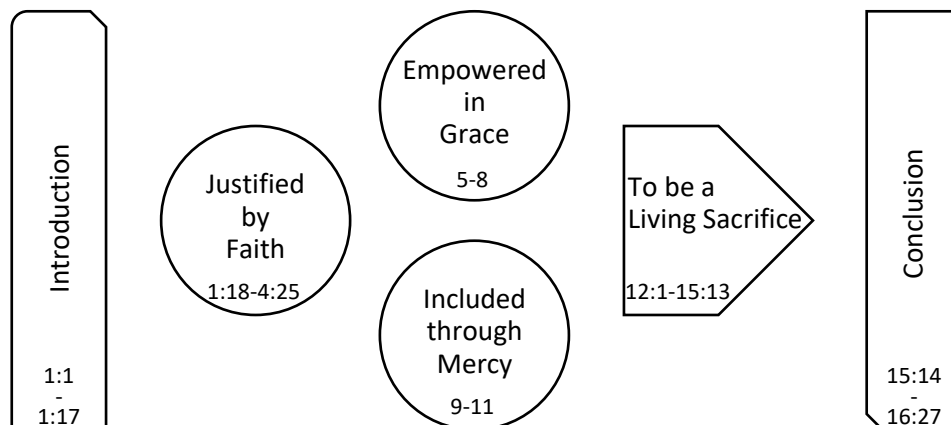
¹ Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God,

(1) to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God,
which is your spiritual service of worship.

(2) ² And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed
by the renewing of your mind,
so that you may prove what the will of God is,
that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

NASB

Introduction



We have finished Paul's argument for the gospel. We have looked deeply at these three proclamations: (1) God has justified us by faith; (2) empowered us in grace; and (3) included us through mercy. This is why Paul shouts boldly, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ! The gospel of Jesus Christ is the power of God to save everyone who believes, because in the gospel God has revealed his righteousness!" The gospel answers the first question of covenant, "How can I, a sinful man, be allowed into relationship with God?" The gospel proclaims, "By grace! 100% by grace, received through faith!" We also began in chapters 5-8 to answer the second question of covenant, "Now that I am safely brought into relationship with God, how then should I live?" We say to Paul, "We hear you saying that the rules of the covenant of law have been set aside for the new covenant of grace. What are the rules of this new covenant Paul? What do we do? How do we live?"

"What does our gathered worship look like? What does our interaction with people in society look like? How do we relate to government? What are our obligations to each other? How do we party? What do we do when we disagree about these things? We no longer live by Mosaic Law, how then do we live?"

Paul is finally ready to address that question with concrete specifics. He had to work hard to help us understand the gospel of grace. We don't do grace like we did law. Whatever living for Jesus looks like, it must be done in line with grace. It is a new wineskin. We can't just take the old and repeat that pattern in the new. Sunday is not simply the new Saturday. We have received a new invitation to live out grace as adult children of the king and it is going to look different.

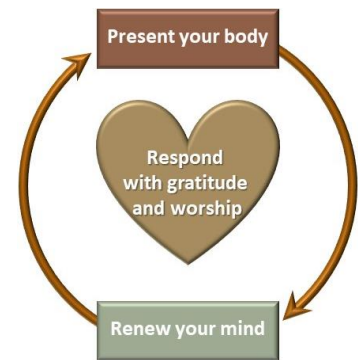
We are about to get into some very good material on the practical stipulations of the new covenant. 12:3-15:13 is full of practical instruction. God is still Father, Lord and King. He still commands us, and we still obey. But before we get to those specifics, Paul starts with a model for Christian living. How then should we live? Here you go. Apply this model to everything. This will be a great start for you. Romans 12:1-2. This is your model. Respond from the heart. Present your body. And renew your mind. Respond. Present. Renew. Let's read the text.

The Model of Romans 12:1-2

[Read Romans 12:1-2]

The model breaks down into three parts. Respond, Present, Renew. Imagine a circle with the word present at the top, on the top arc of the circle. And imagine the word renew at the bottom arc of the circle. Then draw some arrows on the circle going around clockwise, so you have a continuing cycle from present to renew back to present back to renew. And then in the center of the circle is a heart with the word respond. Present and renew both flow out of a response of the heart.

This is the model: respond from your heart, present your body, renew your mind. Let's consider each element of the model separately, starting with the heart response in the first part of verse 1.



Respond from your heart (12:1a).

The mercies of God

"Therefore I urge you brethren, by the mercies of God..."

We have a therefore, so we have to ask what is the therefore there for? The therefore indicates a logical connection to something Paul said previously. The placement of this therefore right after the end of the whole argument, forces us to wonder how far back we should consider. Is it therefore in light of Paul's doxology in the previous 3 verses where he rejoices in the glory of God? Or is it therefore in light of Paul's teaching on who are the people of God in chapters 9-11? Or is it therefore in light of Paul's whole three-part presentation of the gospel starting in 1:18 and going all the way through the end of chapter 11?

As it turns out, we do not have to decide. The text works fine if we just say all three. I think it is the whole big argument. Paul could call us to action in light of God's wisdom and knowledge and power and sovereignty praised in the doxology in 11:33-36. Maybe it makes more sense to recognize the call of action coming from chapters 9-11. In light of God's merciful inclusion of all peoples by faith into his kingdom, in light of this great grace shown to Gentile and Jew alike, we should present ourselves to God as an act of worship. But as chapters 9-11 is grounded in the larger gospel presentation, it makes sense to expand even further out. In light of the power of God for salvation revealed in Jesus Christ and this gospel of grace, we should present ourselves fully and completely in service to God (1:18-11:36).

Paul exhorts us to respond. Therefore brethren, in light of these things, "I urge you." It is not a typical religious action. It is not live this way or you will be excluded. It is a call of response to grace. Paul envisions a clear move from our beliefs to our action, so he exhorts us to action. Live in line with what you believe. And he sums up what we believe in the very brief phrase, "by the mercies of God." "Therefore, I urge you brethren, by the mercies of God." We look at the glory of the doxology. There is a right response of obedience in awe of who God is. Paul is calling us not only to the glory of God but to the mercies or compassion of God. He is calling us to consider what God has done for us in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In English, it appears that this phrase connects directly back to chapters 9-11. As faith was a key word for chapters 1-4 and grace a key word for 5-8, you may remember that mercy was a key word for 9-11. The link is not so clear though in the Greek. The Greek word for mercies in 12:1 is different than the Greek word translated mercy used through chapters 9-11. They are two different words. The word used for mercies in 12:1 is similar, almost synonymous to the earlier word used for mercy, but it is not the same word. In verse 9:15 the word for mercies is translated as compassion and it is used alongside the standard word for mercy. So verse 9:15 reads, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." That word compassion is our word in 12:1, "I urge you brethren in view of God's compassion."

Those two words, the one being translated for compassion and the one for mercy are the first two words used in the Greek translation of a crucial Old Testament text where God reveals his name, his character, to Moses. Our English usually uses the word gracious for mercy, but I will leave in mercy to stay consistent with the Greek in Romans 9-12. Here is God's name revealed to Moses, "The Lord, the Lord God, **compassionate** and **merciful**, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness and truth (Exodus 34:6)." David employs the same two words in his Psalm 51 confession, as he lays himself into the arms of God. "Be **merciful** to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the greatness of Your **compassion** blot out my transgressions (Psalm 51:1)." This is the glory of God. He is just. He is also compassionate and merciful.

Paul draws out this truth revealed in the gospel as that which should motivate from the heart a response to obedience. We are unrighteous and without hope. But God has made a way for us. God offers us grace. When we really get that, when we really see that we have fallen into a pit like David, when we really see that we are hopelessly, hopelessly unable to live consistently for God like Israel, when we see that God himself chose to die for us, when we see that he has made a way for us to be safe, to be secure, protected by the love of Christ, when we see that he has made a way for us to live, to experience abundance, when we see with the eyes of saving faith, what then ought our response be?

"Here I am God. I am yours. I have nothing else to give." The Christian life is a life of humble gratitude. The Christian life is a life of worshipful response. That is the motive of grace. We see God, and we see his grace, and we give ourselves. It is not to get something, the motive of legalism. It is a response to what has been given, the motive of grace. "Therefore, I urge you brethren in view of God's mercy" his great compassion.

Notice how this is different from legalism. We are not trying to pay God back. We are not trying to earn forgiveness or make ourselves righteous. That is the normal human impulse. That is the root of all religion. We want to clear our debt. We want to prove ourselves. We want to establish our place. We want to ensure God's blessing to us based on the work we have done to earn that place.

I have noticed that when my wife makes someone a plate of cookies in Croatia, that plate never comes back empty. In fact, it usually comes back with more on it. It's a pretty good deal. But it is not easy to help a neighbor without that neighbor feeling the need to return the favor, to clear the debt. It's not necessarily bad to want to keep clean accounts with your neighbor. But you do not get the gospel until you get the fact that it is impossible to keep a clean account with God. To try and pay back the death of Jesus Christ on the cross is to belittle the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. How can we imagine that any paltry service we might render God would do anything to remove even the least tiny amount of debt we owe? I owe millions God, and I am trying to pay it back with pennies. That makes no sense. That's an insult.

That's why Jesus told the story about the two servants who were forgiven their debt. In the context a woman had come into the home of a pharisee. And she knelt before Jesus and she wept and she washed his feet with her tears and her hair. She knew that she must get to Jesus. Something about Jesus drew her, reassured her, made her willing to go into a place where she was sure to be judged by men, but she was also equally sure she would be received by Jesus. And she was right. He did receive her. And he said, to the pharisee, "one owed 500 denarii and the other 50. Both were forgiven, which loved more?" The Pharisee got the answer right even though he did not get Jesus. The one forgiven more loves more. The woman loved most because she saw how large, how insurmountable was her debt. The Pharisee did not love because he did not consider himself to be in debt (Luke 7:36-50). He considered his account clean through his religious ritual and moral living.

The right response to grace is gratitude. It is not at all the same thing as paying back or clearing your debt or earning your righteousness. It might look similar in the outward action. We would do some of the same things. But it is completely different heart motive. The gospel calls us to a response of gratitude. It's what happened to Zacchaeus when Jesus entered his house. He did not try to pay Jesus off. He responded spontaneously to the grace and forgiveness he had received. If you do not want to

be legalistic, then understand the depth of your sin and recognize the greatness of his mercy, then live out of humble gratitude for his love and grace to you. "I urge you brethren in view of God's mercies..."

Your spiritual service of worship

Notice also that Paul describes this heart response is a response of worship. We catch this in the rest of verse 1. This is going to overlap with the next element of our model. We will get to the word present in a minute. Notice for now the word service at the end of verse 1. "Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship."

There are two words in that last phrase that present slight difficulty in translation. The first word can mean logical or reasonable or spiritual. It is the adjective describing service. The second word means service and is usually used in the context of serving God or the gods in ritual worship. In the Old Testament the Greek Septuagint uses the word for service when God tells Moses to bring Israel out to Mount Sinai where they will serve him or worship him (Exodus 3:12). It is also the word Moses used when telling Pharaoh to let the people go into the desert to serve the Lord (Exodus 7:16). And it is the word Moses used to tell Israel not to "turn away and serve other gods and worship them (Deuteronomy 11:16)."

So, we see the word used alongside with worship in the context of a spiritual ceremony, where the priest or worshiper is said to be serving God. And though the word is used in a specific ceremonial context of worship, Moses can use the word more broadly. He exhorted Israel, saying, "Now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require from you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul (Deuteronomy 10:12)." Serve here does not imply service in ceremonial worship but service in the conduct of life. This is your worship, your service.

English translations typically add the word worship to bring out the meaning of this particular word. It's not just any kind of service. It's a "service of worship," and that is a good translation. Considering the adjective Paul used, we translate the phrase either as "reasonable service of worship" or "spiritual service of worship." Both words could work in the context. If reasonable is the right word, it would mean that your reasonable service of worship in light of all that God has done for you is to give your whole self to him. If spiritual is the right word then it is probably emphasizing that this service of worship is not merely something you do in the temple or in a ceremony, but it is the broader idea of service Moses used in Deuteronomy 10, not just ceremonial worship, but life worship. It is to fear the Lord and walk in his ways and love him, serving him with all your heart and all your soul.

What we have here is Paul urging us to offer our whole selves as an act of worship. The heart response to grace is both gratitude and worship. You are not acting legalistically when your heart motive is a response of humble gratitude to the compassion and greatness of God.

Worship is integral to the second question of covenant, "How then shall I live?" You live by offering yourself as a sacrifice of worship. In the immediate context, Paul himself is given over to worship in the doxology of 11:33-36. Reflecting back on the truth of the gospel, he breaks out in praise to the glory of God. Then he tells us to offer ourselves as an act of spiritual worship. You know that is not a mistake. Paul worships and then he said, "Now worship with your lives."

There is also a connection in the whole, larger argument. If we go all the way back to the beginning to the very first point of Paul's argument in 1:18-32 we see that the problem humanity begins with is a turning away from true worship to false worship. Let's remember Paul's words in 1:21-25.

²¹ For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. ²² Professing to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form

of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.²⁴ Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them.²⁵ For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and **worshiped and served** the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

As a race, we turned from true worship of God. Turning our backs to his glory, we began to worship the shadow of his glory, the things he has made. We turned to the creation. We turned to other human beings to find identity, to find purpose, to find control, to find happiness. What we could ultimately, what we must ultimately, find in God we sought in the things God had made. We continue to seek these things in what God has made. We look to relationships and careers and entertainment and money and groups of people to find our identity, our purpose, control and happiness. What is most fundamentally fulfilled by God, we look for elsewhere. As Jeremiah put it,

For My people have committed two evils:
They have forsaken Me,
The fountain of living waters,
To hew for themselves cisterns,
Broken cisterns
That can hold no water (2:13).

We turned from the source of living water and made ourselves cisterns, broken cisterns that will never fill, never satisfy, never last.

Paul now tells us, “Turn around. Face your God. Glory in him. Do you want to know how to answer the second question of covenant? The answer is worship. The answer is love with all your heart and your mind and your soul. The answer is serve him with everything you have. Love your Father, serve your king, worship your God with a heart of overflowing gratitude.” The life of grace is a life of humble gratitude and worship.

The model for the Christian life in Romans 12:1-2 is a model of worship, a model of response. So, for our model we draw the circle, and we have a heart in the middle. If the Christian life is only one of mind and body, if it's only present and renew, we lose the soul. We do the Christian life by keeping our hearts fresh in humble gratitude and wonder of the one we worship. The life of grace is a heart response.

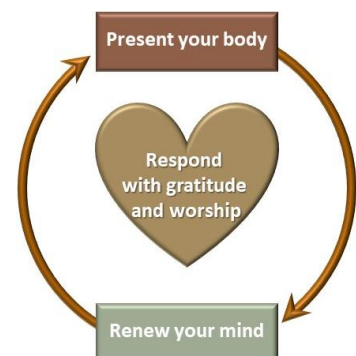
So we've got the heart in the middle and at the top of our circle is present. At the bottom is renew. Let's talk now about present.

Present your body (12:1b).

This is Paul's first command. “Present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.” We are getting ready to move into a highly concentrated number of commands, starting in 12:3. Paul has put off the commands of the new covenant until solidly establishing us in our understanding of grace.

He did have a couple of commands in chapters 1-11, just two actually, and if you remember, they were back in chapter 6, consider and present. “Consider yourself dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus (6:11)” and “present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God (6:13).” Those two commands, consider and present or think and do, are the same commands we have here in 12:1-2, present and renew.

Paul puts the present into the metaphor of temple worship. He says, “present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God.” In Paul's text three adjectives follow the word sacrifice. First, it is a living sacrifice. That's a striking contradiction. Sacrifices are usually sacrificed. They are dead, not living. God is not asking us to die for him but to live for him. Going with Jesus' command to take up your cross, we can understand that living for God does require a kind of death to self. But it is a death to the old self or the self that would be independent of God. It's a death to the flesh. Living for



God is also a living out the new life we have in him. The main point here is that God is looking for ongoing worship as we give ourselves as a living sacrifice.

The second adjective is holy. We are to be a holy sacrifice. Holy means both pure and also set apart. God has cleansed us from the guilt of our sins. He has made us pure. We are called to embrace the reality of our holiness. We recognized in chapter 6 that faith in Christ opens our eyes to the reality of sin. Non-Christians hear grace as permission to sin. Christians hear grace as freedom from sin. Sin corrupts, damages, destroys, sucks away life. God has taken away the penalty of sin and declared us holy in Christ. We can still experience the effects of sin in the world, in our lives, in our families. To live for God is to pursue his glory and to pursue the life he offers. It makes no sense to serve God in hidden sin. We bring our sin to God, we confess it, we experience his forgiveness, and we live for him as a holy sacrifice. The second meaning of holy is set apart. We live for him by embracing the idea of holy. We see ourselves as made clean and set apart for his service.

The third adjective is pleasing. If we have offered our whole self as a living sacrifice. And we seek to be pure and clean in our offering, set apart for God, then we are a sacrifice well-pleasing to him. This is the response that God yearns for from his own heart as Father. The first two adjectives, living sacrifice and holy sacrifice, ensure the third, a well-pleasing sacrifice. Paul reminds us of our goal. If God is my Father and I love him with humble gratitude, the humble gratitude of a thankful and adoring child, then my goal is to please him. I do not want to please him in the legalistic sense of pleasing in order to manipulate or pleasing in order to get what I want. The loving child wants to be pleasing in order please. I want his heart to be happy with me, his fallible, yet growing child. I want my heavenly Father to smile at me. I want him to be well-pleased.

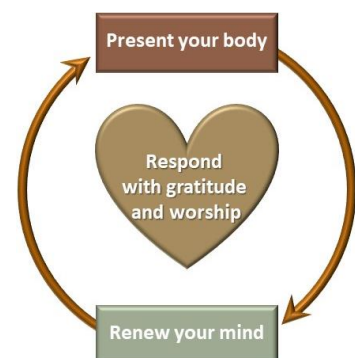
We have already recognized that Paul's sacrificial language puts the presentation of ourselves into the context of worship. This is the broad life worship, not the narrow context of a worship service. It is still right to use worship as a word applying to a church service or to believers gathered for singing and prayer. That's worship. And that worship is included in this broader worship. Part of my presenting is making worship at church a priority for me and my family. That is part of how I present my body as a living sacrifice. At the same time, my worship is more than church service. This is worship, the giving of your whole self to God. Every moment in life is meant to be a moment of worship. My work is worship when I do it in Christ to the glory of God. My play is worship when I do it in Christ to the glory of God. My art is worship when I do it in Christ to the glory of God. My rest is worship when I do it in Christ to the glory of God.

Paul envisions this worship as the offering of self into real concrete life experiences. Paul did not choose even to say offer yourself. He chose to say offer your body. The language is similar to chapter 6 where he said offer the members of your body. Body prevents us from over-spiritualizing our response of worship. Body brings our worship into the concrete world of taste and touch and smell. We worship in real life with our hands and our feet and our eyes and our mouth and our ears.

And know things might get complicated. They are going to get complicated. Its hard to know what to do with the stuff and the time and the talents God has given us. That is why we have to move on to verse 2. Our model of worship is a circle that has the heart at the center with the word respond; a box at the top of the circle with the word present; and one more box at the bottom with the word renew. Let's read Romans 12:2 and consider the command to renew our minds.

Renew your mind (12:2).

"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect (12:2)."



Paul indicates two opposing or competing processes. If one is not going on the other is. Either we are being conformed to the world or we are being transformed. The two different words here are probably synonymous. Paul used the word conform positively back in 8:29 when he said that God's intention for us is "to be conformed to the image of his Son." That's the process of renewal. We are either experiencing transformation into the image of Jesus Christ, or we are being conformed into the pattern of this world.

If we walk out into the middle of the stream of life and just lift up our feet, letting the current take us where it will, we will not end up living a life very glorifying to God. The current of society, the current of our ingrained thought patterns, the current of the old flesh tugs at our heart and our mind taking us places we do not want to go.

The simple truth is that we do not naturally think the thoughts of God. We have nature and nurture problems. By nature we are sinful fallen creatures. This is back to chapter 1 again. The original turning from God has resulted in degrading passions and a depraved mind. I cannot just go with my heart. That might turn out great, but it might turn out awful. I am part of the problem. In addition, I have a nurture problems. My family and my culture have conformed my mind to a particular view of the world. My experiences have reinforced patterns in my mind and in my heart that are not true or life-giving.

We cannot stay neutral. We are either being conformed or being transformed. Life is full of experiences, constant experiences that we process mentally and emotionally, rationally and subconsciously. Our personality, our sin nature, our social context, all work to create patterns in our brains and in our souls that affect how we understand ourselves, how we relate to members of the opposite sex, what motivates or demotivates, how we engage in conflict, how we understand religion, how we believe God views us, how we relate to authority, and so, and so on. So, much of our deeper values, helpful and unhelpful, were developed in us while we were very, very young. Keeping in mind that we start, not as neutral beings, but as sinful beings and keeping in mind that so many of our deep values and relationship patterns are molded at a very young age, it makes sense that Paul assumes we need transformation, we need renewal. We know that we are broken and wounded and off-track. We want to see things like God sees things. We want deeper change. We do not just want understanding, we want transformation at a heart level, at the core of our being. Our model of living in grace requires a heart change. Our model also requires a hands change of presenting ourselves in concrete life obedience. Now we have to address the mind change. Transformation is not accomplished only by changing the way we think. On the other hand, transformation does not happen without changing the way we think. We need both to think and to do, so we need renewal of the mind.

We see here in 12:2 that renewal of the mind involves both resistance to the pattern of this world and recognition of how God sees things. Renewal involves recognizing sinful, fleshly, wrong and unhelpful patterns or values. We need to identify the thought patterns and relationship patterns of society that do not match up with a biblical worldview. We also then need to do some hard thought about what are the wise, spiritual, helpful patterns and values that we should believe and live out.

So, we need to consider both the thought patterns already ingrained in us and the sources that are continually reinforcing or developing our thought patterns.

That means I need to think about the negative influences on me. What past influences have already conformed me to non-biblical patterns? And what current sources continue to press me into a mold not in line with truth. What am I getting negatively in my education, in my entertainment, in my political party, in my social media, in my Christian movement, in my news outlet, or in my family? What sources do I need to cut off? What sources do I need to filter more carefully? Where do I need to show greater discernment?

And then on the positive side, how am I seeking renewal of my mind? What are my sources of truth? Who is helping me think biblically and compassionately and truthfully. Paul gave the Philippians a list.

He said, "Brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things (Philippians 4:8)." What sources help me dwell on these things?

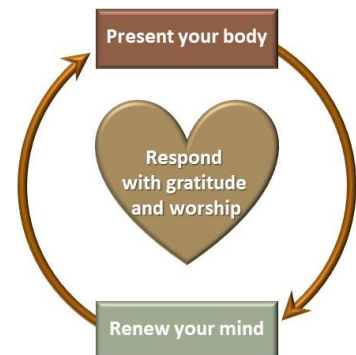
Renewal of the mind does not just happen. Bible study, alone and in group, is a necessary requirement to thinking like God. Without growing in God's word, you cannot grow in thinking like God. I have noticed that a lot of people give up on Bible study when they stop getting regular, positive feeling from the practice. It is as though the discipline of Bible study had only the goal of making one feel happy. If we only go to the Bible for the aha moments and shots of joy, then when those cease to happen often enough, then we stop going to the Book. Jen Wilkin's challenges believers to stop thinking of Bible study as a debit account that you go to regularly to make withdrawals. You know, I am just going to the Bible, and I am trying to get something out. This special moment of insight or this feeling of joy or whatever feeling I am looking for. Instead we should be looking at going to the Bible as a savings account where you put in deposits. Your study of Scripture changes how you view the world. And that moment, that day, you might not see an immediate impact. You are making deposits in your mind, renewing the way you think. Sometimes there will be aha moments. Sometimes there will be joyful heart moments. But all the time you are doing that you are making small deposits that build up over time. You are participating in your mind, so that you can see life the way God sees it.

So, what are your other sources? Who helps form your mind around God's truth? What Bible teachers or Christian commentators assist in your mind renewal, in understanding the world from a biblical perspective? Which Christian friends help you think about your job or your relationships? Has a Christian counselor helped? Would a Christian counselor help you think about the deeper patterns inside? What Christian music or movies or books challenge you to think Christianly?

We have our model of respond, present, renew. And now let's talk about the arrows on the circle.

The model is a process.

We have arrows moving around the circle to remind us the model is a process with the goal of worshiping and transformation. Both are going on at the same time. Our worship changes us. We saw that negatively in chapter 1. Turning away from God results in degrading passions and a depraved mind. The opposite is true as we worship God. We become more like the one we worship. Becoming like him has the double effect of both making us more fit to bring glory to him and more fit to experience life as he created it to be. So, glory to God and abundance of experience go hand in hand.



The goal of having our minds renewed is not simply that we see things right. Mental renewal leads to God honoring, life experiencing application. We renew our minds to present our bodies well.

Remember verse 2, "do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, **so that** you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect."

We want to be renewed in our minds so that we know what the will of God is. We are asking, "How then should I live?" Well, present yourself with what you know, but also renew your mind so you can grow in your understanding of the will of God. And as you grow in the understanding of the will of God. Do it!

Present and renew is a continual process. We have to act. We cannot just wait around until we understand everything. With whatever opportunities that come our way, we pause and ask, "What is the wise thing to do?" And then with the best of our ability we do it. We present ourselves in our speech and conduct.

We carry with us then the life experience that comes out of presenting ourselves when we go back in to study Scripture. Presenting ourselves raises questions to which we then seek biblical answers. Why did she respond that way? Why did I feel that way? How do I understand the pain in this or the sin in this? How do I evaluate the success or the fruitfulness of this? How do I see God? How do I see me in this? How do I see the other person? What help do I need to see things from God's perspective?

This is a lifelong process. As soon as you get it figured out, life changes. You graduate high school. You graduate college. You move. Your job changes. You get married. You have kids. Your small group falls apart. Your kids leave. Your parents grow old. Your boss changes. You experience success. You experience failure. The river of life is constantly taking us through new experiences. We never get it all in balance and all figured out. We are constantly in the need of renewal. We are regularly facing situations we have never addressed before. So, the process of renew, present, present, renew just keeps on going.

And as we move through the stages of life, the process continues, and the challenge continues. And we are either being conformed to the pattern of this world, or we are being transformed into the image of Jesus.

The Role of the Holy Spirit in the Model.

I have one last thought to leave with you. I want to point out something missing from the model. And this surprised me at first. I have had to think it through. Paul has not mentioned here at all the role of the Holy Spirit in knowing the will of God. He talks about being able to prove what God's will is. He calls God's will good and acceptable and perfect. So, we are growing in understanding what is really the good? What is really acceptable, pleasing to God? What is perfect or complete in his sight? How do I really live for him? What is the wise way to go about life, the loving way, the moral way, the pure way?

There is a challenge in knowing how God would have us act in the multitude of contexts and environments and relationships that we will experience in our lives. We seek to know his will because we are convinced it is good, it is acceptable and perfect. And wouldn't it be nice if I would just say, "Lead me Holy Spirit" and the Holy Spirit would lead me every time into the good, the acceptable, the perfect will of God. But that is not the emphasis here. The emphasis here is that we engage in the renewing of our mind so that we might be able to identify what God's will is. There is an assumption that we need to mature, that we do not start with wisdom, that we have to grow into it. There is a process over time that enables us to better and better recognize what the will of God is.

There is a tension here we have to deal with. For people who want to make the process completely intellectual, I will simply point back to 7:6 where Paul said, "We serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter." And then I would quote 8:14, "All who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God." Paul may not refer to the Spirit here in 12:1-2, he assumes the work of the Spirit as part of the newness of grace. We are indwelt by and led by the Spirit of God. This is the model we have already received so far in Romans.

At the same time, to someone who makes significant life decisions based on a sense of the Spirit, without putting time into God's word or engaging in counsel with mature Christians or being willing to admit that maybe what they feel is not coming from the Spirit, to them I would point out that Paul does not focus on the Holy Spirit in these verses. He does focus on the renewal of our mind. We have been and are being conformed into patterns of this world, since our birth. We need transformation which doesn't just come from responding to the Spirit, kind of moment by moment, but from some hard, mental work of renewing the mind.

We do know the Spirit works in us subjectively (5:5; 8:15). We know the Spirit leads us (8:14). But we know too that we might be wrong in our interpretation of the Spirit in us. This is part of being human, part of our frailty, part of our dependence. We have to live in some ambiguity. We don't

always know how to unpack the move or the leading of the Spirit and our own emotions and thoughts. We are not always clear where our emotions are coming from. We know we do not always interpret ourselves right or God right or others right. We know that. We know that we need to grow in emotional and relational and mental maturity. It should not surprise us to say, "I can't always figure out if it's the leading of the Spirit or if it's a pattern ingrained in me."

This knowledge about our own frailty and dependence should lead us to humility in interpreting the leading of the Holy Spirit and should also lead us to invest in the renewal of our mind over time. There is a reason the Bible regularly equates grey hair and wisdom. Wisdom is developed over a long period of time as we walk with God and seek to know his Word.

Paul acknowledges elsewhere a connection between the leading of the Holy Spirit and the process of growth in wisdom. In Ephesians 5:18 he commanded his audience to be filled with the Spirit. This is right and this is good. In the verses leading up to that command, Paul also said, "Be careful how you walk, not as unwise men, but as wise, making the most of your time because the days are evil. So then do not be foolish but understand what the will of the Lord is." Being filled with the Holy Spirit does not replace renewing our mind to know God's will. Renewing our mind does not replace being filled with the Holy Spirit. Both realities are important elements of our walk with God and our growth in Christ.

If you would like to remind yourself of this, you could add to the heart, "Respond to God in the power of the Holy Spirit." You could add that in.

This is our model of the Christian life. How should I then live? Respond, present, renew.

Now we need to apply that model to a real, life context. That's what we will be doing in our next five lessons. Paul gives us a series of concrete application scenarios in 12:3-15:13. In each section, we will apply the model. We will consider in each case how God is calling us to renew our thinking and how God is calling us to present our bodies and what this looks like as a humble response of worship.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as important, confusing, interesting or strange in Romans 12:1-2?
2. Can you practice responding to God in gratitude or worship when you do not feel the emotions of gratitude or wonder? How do you understand the role of faith or the will in a response of grace?
3. What has been a good source for you in the process of renewing your mind over time as you walk with God? Who has helped you understand the Bible? Who has helped you think Christianly?
4. Describe an example of how you have experienced the process of Present and Renew leading to transformation.
 - a. Consider an area of life in which you tried to live out God's will, a relationship, a ministry activity, an experience at work or in your family, etc...
 - b. How did you try to present yourself as a sacrifice to God? What did you do?
 - c. What confused you or went wrong or turned out surprisingly in regard to your own behavior and emotion or in regard to someone else?
 - d. After reflecting biblically or Christianly on the experience how was your mind renewed in your understanding of yourself or God or the other person?
 - e. How did you then present yourself differently after experiencing renewal of the mind?
5. How do you understand the Holy Spirit's role in this model of Christians living: Respond, Present, Renew?

Lesson 30: Living as a Member of the Body

Romans 12:3-8

³ For through the grace given to me
I say to everyone among you
not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think;
but to think so as to have sound judgment,
as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.

⁴ For just as
we have many members in one body
and
all the members do not have the same function,

⁵ so
we, who are many, are one body in Christ,
and
individually members one of another.

⁶ Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, *each of us is to exercise them accordingly:*
if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith;

⁷ if service, in his serving;

or he who teaches, in his teaching;

⁸ or he who exhorts, in his exhortation;

he who gives, with liberality;

he who leads, with diligence;

he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

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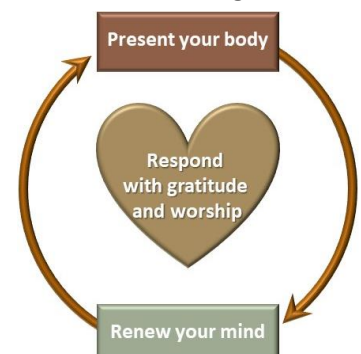
Introduction

Having established us more firmly in the gospel of grace in chapters 1-11, Paul has now turned to the application of grace. How then shall we live? In our last lesson we recognized the first two verses of chapter 12 as a model for Christian living: Respond, Present, Renew. Now from 12:3-15:13 Paul gives us several scenarios in which to apply the model. Where do you think Paul will start? What is his first scenario? The body of Christ.

Paul doesn't argue for it. Paul assumes it. You live out the gospel of grace in the community of grace. You are born again into a body of believers. Paul assumes that when you ask, "How then shall I live?" you are not asking, "Should I live as part of a local community of believers?" Of course, you should. Paul assumes your question is not "Should I live in Christian community?" but "How should I live in Christian community?"

We have agreed with Paul that God is supremely merciful, that we want to present ourselves to God, and that in presenting ourselves to God, we need to know what his good and acceptable and perfect will are. We agree that we do not know his will naturally. We need to be renewed in our mind to understand his will. So, even though we know his will is to participate in a local Christian community. We also recognize the need for continual renewal in how we perceive the local body of believers. We do not just want to present ourselves to service in community, we want to grow in understanding how to present ourselves in a way that honors God.

Remember the three parts of the model. "Therefore brethren by the mercies of God..." that is a response from our heart to the love of God displayed to us in the grace of Jesus. We live as a response of gratitude and worship. That is the heart at the center of our circle. Next, "present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice." At the top of our circle we have the word "present." We do not wait to be perfect. We ask, "What is the wise thing to do?" And we do it to the best of our ability. Recognizing our limited wisdom, we have at the bottom of the circle the word renew. "Do not be conformed



to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." To know God's will we need to be in this continual process of present and renew, present and renew.

Coming into our first scenario about the body of Christ, Paul does not describe again the heart motive of grace. From this point on, we are assuming the heart motive. Though when you put the model into practice, in a concrete situation, it's helpful to remind yourself why you are doing what you are doing. Get into the practice of taking a moment in prayer to offer yourself to God out of a grateful heart as an act of worship.

When you think about the body of Christ and some act of service or involvement, envision yourself holding yourself up to God as an offering. Before you go to worship on Sunday, before you enter a meeting, before you lead Sunday school or participate in an outreach or arrive at homegroup or shake somebody's hand at the door or look at the prayer list or clean up after service, before you do anything, take a moment to mentally present yourself to God. You can see yourself giving yourself into his hands. Here I am God. Because you are so awesome and because you have been so very gracious to me, here I am. I present myself to you as I interact with my brothers and sisters in Christ. This is a service of worship.

And that changes our stance toward the body of Christ. Our approach to the body of Christ becomes most fundamentally a response of grateful worship. It is not most fundamentally about what I will receive, but what I bring. But it's not what I bring to other people. I bring myself as an offering not to people but to God. And even though I do not always receive what I want from community, I offer myself to God. Even though I might be hurt in community, I offer myself to God. Even though people might let me down, I am offering myself to God.

I also recognize that I do not really know what I am doing. I need to grow in my understanding of the body of Christ. It's so complicated. I need to know me. I need to know other people. I need to know various aspects of service and activity. And I just don't know it. I need to be renewed as I go. Paul is going to help us with that. His focus in 12:3-8 is renewal of the mind, so that we can continue to present ourselves in a way that is more and more in line with his heart and his will.

How do we understand our participation in the body of Christ? The text is in three parts. First, you need to renew you mind in how you view yourselves as an individual. Then you need to renew your mind in how you view yourself as a member of the body. Finally, you need to renew your mind in how you view your contribution to the body, so yourself as an individual, yourself as a member of the body and your contribution to the body.

Let's read the text. This is Romans 12:3-8.

Read Romans 12:3-8].

I. Renew

A. Renew how you think about yourself (12:3)

Before thinking about the body of Christ, Paul challenges us to think about how we view ourselves. This is verse 3.

"For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith."

The pastor may be tempted to think highly of himself because he gets to preach at everybody else on Sunday and because he receives praises, smiles and handshakes. At the same time there are just as many people tempted to criticize the pastor's sermons and feel superior to him because he is a little odd or he is not the best speaker or he makes certain mistakes or because he does not live up in some other way.

The pastor is always the easiest example to pick on. He's one guy, and he is up front a lot. The reality is that we are constantly comparing ourselves to other people in the body of Christ. We are making

mental notes and judgements that sometimes make us feel better about ourselves and sometimes make us feel worse.

Who are you comparing yourself to in your local body of believers? To other single men? To other mothers? To other people doing the same ministry as you? To people doing a different ministry than you? To someone's personality or beauty or success or spirituality or talent? There are people in your church that you look up to and want to emulate, and there are people that you look down on and want to criticize.

Max Lucado wrote a wonderful little book called *You Are Special* describing a people who went around all day sticking either yellow stars of approval or grey dots of disapproval on one another. The main character Punchinello excelled at collecting grey dots.



Paul's focus seems to be towards those people who have gathered a lot of yellow stars. He warns against thinking of yourself too highly. Bring your estimation of yourself in line with sound or sober judgement. Think of yourself rightly.

We can experience the same temptation in the other direction to think of ourselves too lowly. It is not hard to create Facebook or Instagram profiles of other people in our minds. The people with yellow stars, they have a great family of high achieving children and they post photos that show themselves simultaneously serving the poor, succeeding at work, playing with their kids, enjoying exotic vacations. I don't know where they get all the time. We imagine there are these yellow star people. Of course, it's not a clear picture. Social media condenses life into a highlight reel. And it's only what people choose to put up there. It's "face" book. It's where we show our best face. And looking at other people's highlight reels, it's easy to feel like Punchinello. It's easy to feel covered in grey dots.

Maybe we swing between the two, sometimes successfully comparing ourselves and earning stars, at other times failing in comparison, receiving dots. We receive them from other people, but we also receive them from our own internal voice. We are putting stars and dots on ourselves.

Paul's exhortation to sound judgement says, resist thinking about yourself too highly. That's pride. And resist thinking of yourself too lowly. That's not humility. Humility is not thinking badly about yourself. Humility is thinking of yourself accurately, sometimes badly, sometimes with praise, according to God's estimation.



One day Punchinello meets a strange girl named Lucia with no stars and no dots. She is really unusual. They just don't stick to her. And she does not mind. Lucia has met her Creator. She does not define herself by her internal voice. She does not define herself by the voices in society. She defines herself by His voice.

His voice does not say what we want to hear. His voice speaks the truth. It is that truth, the good and the bad that has the power to set us free, if we are willing to hear it. When I think about myself with sound judgement, I think that I am sinful. I am fallible. I am limited. And I am inexperienced. I am also created in God's image. I am gifted. I am skilled. And I have some pretty cool experiences. God does not define me in comparison with other people. God does not even define me in

comparison with Jesus. When I am perfected, I will still not be Jesus. I am being conformed into his image, but not into his being. He is man and God. I am just man. And God has a vision of me as he created me to be. That is the standard he holds me up to. The standard I am being held up to is his vision of a perfect Michael, not any Michael but "Michael Brent" Michael, the standard of his own

vision for me. I am a man in process. I am not yet there, but God has gifted. I still struggle with this body of flesh, with selfishness and pride and lust. That's where I am right now. I have to think of myself with sound judgment. But I am someone going somewhere. To be honest, I struggle to think of myself with sound judgment. We all do. And we all do in different ways, according to our personality and according to our inner voice.

I am a competitive middle child. I have been conformed by my birth order and by my personality. I have this voice in my mind that tells me every day, "You are not good enough. You should do better. You do not live up. You should regret that. You should feel bad about that." I know it is not the voice of my mom or my dad. They have always encouraged me. I know it is not the voice of my brothers who are better than I deserve. It is my own inner voice. I do not relate fully with Punchinello. I have received a high number of gold stars. I get my fair share of praise. Where I do relate to Punchinello is in my inner voice. I move in the direction of false humility. I like the stars. To be honest, I like them, but I often disagree with them. I think other people are wrong when they praise me. I feel like I don't deserve the stars. And I over-correct with self-criticism. I want to call my melancholy reasonable and sound judgement. Sometimes it is. Often, I fail to acknowledge amazing truths about who God has made me to be. He is the one who has said that I am created in his image. He is the one who has redeemed me. He is the one who has gifted me with his Holy Spirit and given me skills and talents and opportunities. Sound judgment for me means acknowledging and accepting all the great things God has put into my life and made into me and also accepting that I am in process. And I am not perfect. And I am not intended to be perfect. I never will have all the gifts. I'll never have the perfect personality. And that's okay. And somehow to be sound in my judgment, I have to accept that.

That's how it is working in me. That's a bit of my inner challenge, my inner voice. As I said, because we each have different personalities and different experiences, you have your own unique challenges in how you think about yourself with sound judgment, at what times that you are tempted to think more highly than you ought and what times you are tempted to think more lowly than you ought.

Paul includes another phrase in verse 3 that we should consider, think of yourself "as God has allotted to each a **measure** of faith." I used to think that meant we each have a different amount of faith. One person has a thimble full, another person has a cup full, another person has two liters full, and in a sense that helps me see myself soberly. There is some truth in that somewhere, I know. It is okay that I am not Billy Graham or Hudson Taylor or William Wilberforce. I act out of the measure of faith God has given me. There is something like that in Ephesians 4:7 where Paul says, "To each one of us grace was given according to the **measure** of Christ's gift." And then Paul talks about how we have one hope, but we each have different gifts. And we should live out of those gifts. That's what Paul is going to talk about in verse 6-8. So, that interpretation could work here.

But I think Paul is saying something different. He wrote in Ephesians 4:13 that our goal should be to grow "to the **measure** of the stature which belongs to the fulness of Christ." In this sense Jesus Christ is the measure, not as a portion measured out, but as the measure or the standard to which we aspire. I think that is what Paul is saying. This measure is not in the sense of a portion, but in the sense of the standard. If he had used the word grace, I would lean towards measure as a portion. He has proportioned us each grace in the sense of giftedness, which is apportioned differently. But Paul's use of the word faith here, that it's the measure of faith, leans me towards a measure in the sense of standard. Your standard for understanding yourself with sound judgment is not comparison with other people. Your standard is the faith you have received. You should look at yourself through the lens of the gospel. You accept that you are sinful, and you accept that God values you so much he died for you. You accept that you are saved, but not yet complete. You are in process. This is the standard of your faith. It is the measure by which you judge yourself. It is by these gospel truths that you are able to see who you really are.

I love how the stars and dots do not stick to Lucia. She gets grace. She is accepted by her Creator. His love is enough. He defines her. The result is a kind of self-forgetfulness. She is not worried about

judgement. She is not comparing herself to other people. She would be a great friend. Tim Keller describes this result of grace as emotional humility and emotional wealth. Grace shows us who we are in a way that creates “emotional humility” in that we come to understand that we really are no different from anyone else. We have sinned in our own ways, and we have this potential to sin just as wickedly as anyone else. We also recognize that all other people are valued as God’s creation just as we are. Grace creates this kind of humility. The gospel of grace also leads to “emotional wealth.” When I see myself as I am, what does it matter if someone else gives me a star or a dot, slights me or rebukes me. I am loved by my Father. My honor comes from him. He is filling me up. I can take it from others. I can take some mess. I can let it go. My role in this body of believers is not to find my value in comparison and not to be the one who defines other people by my judgements. My role is to accept myself according to the measure of the gospel of Jesus Christ and to offer myself to God to help his body to grow and to thrive.

Next, Paul moves us from thinking about ourselves to thinking about ourselves as part of a community. Let’s read that in verses 4-5.

B. Renew how you think about yourself in relationship to the body of Christ (12:4-5).

“For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.”

Verse 4 gives us Paul’s standard analogy for Christian community. It’s the analogy of a body with many members. He wrote the same thing in 1 Corinthians 12, and the same thing in Ephesians 4. The analogy allows Paul to maintain two realities that are in tension with one another. And as Christians we want to maintain these tensions. We want to recognize the truthfulness of both things. First, Christians maintain their unique individuality when they come to Christ. We are not meant to look and think and feel like every other Christian. We are meant to be unique and different. On the other hand, we do become part of a corporate community, and we have obligation one to another. We are part of a body. Both of these things are true.

How we think about this reality depends in a large degree on the leaning of our cultural values. American values lean towards the individual. Croatian values lean more towards the community. So, Americans are more comfortable with people going off and doing their own thing. Whereas Croats value more that everyone decide and act together.

A Nigerian man attended our church here in Croatia for a couple of years. And though there is some distance from American to Croatian values regarding community, there is much more distance from Croatian to Nigerian values regarding community. I asked Emmanuel, for example, how long a church service in Nigeria would last. The answer was four or five hours. It would include a meal. Basically, you spend the whole day together. Sunday is a community day. So, for him Croatian church was very individualistic. And I do not think he was ever really able to feel comfortable with our short, everybody come in and everybody leave Sunday service. It just didn’t feel right.

So, the person coming from an individualistic society may struggle to understand the reality and importance of Christian fellowship and unity. They just don’t feel it as strongly, naturally. Whereas the person coming from a communal society may struggle to understand how to promote individual uniqueness and initiative. It’s not their natural bent.

Not only is our view of the body conformed to certain patterns based on our society. It is also conformed based on our experience of church. If you grew up in a local church community, then you have this pattern that you grew up with. So, for example, in a very large church there might be a lot going on, and there are all kinds of ways to contribute, and there is all kinds of stuff to receive. So, we come to church as a place where we do our thing. We give what we give, and we get what we get. But we could really miss meaningful relationship and connection. In a small church, we might be expected to be present three times a week and we might know everybody’s name, and we know where everybody lives. But maybe there are only a select few have roles to fulfill. And there is not a

lot of place for us to engage and use our giftedness. Everybody is so similar, we can't see how our individuality fits.

Paul's teaching here is minimalistic. He is giving us a starting point, but we really have to think this out ourselves, according to who we are and according to what our church situation is. He leaves a lot for us to figure out. He does not describe here the optimal size of the body or the activities of the body or the style of worship of the body or the structure or the authority of the body. He is giving us a basic starting point. And this is the basic starting point: Do you see yourself as an individual who has uniqueness and value? Can you accept that God sees how you fit, even if you don't see how you fit? God sees you. God sees your uniqueness. God sees how you contribute.

And can you accept that the Christian life is intended to be lived in community. You do not belong to yourself. You belong to God. And God has placed you into community. Just as you were not created to experience life apart from relationship with your Creator, you were not created to experience life apart from a community of believers.

And this is deep in who God is. In some mysterious way, God is one, and yet, God is many. The Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are an eternal community. So, we image God as individuals in how he has created us, but we also image God in community and in the love of community. How do we show the love of God as an individual? Well, we don't. You have to have at least two. And he is three. So, in community we are able to image God in a way that cannot be done as an individual. This is God's plan. God's plan for us is to be individuals who are part of a community. It is not a uniform community. But it's a unified community.

So, if you withhold yourself from the body of believers then the body is lacking an eye, or a finger, or a foot, or an ear. When you withhold you, you are withholding something valuable that God has designed to help make the body complete. And do not try to over think it. Your value may be in a place you have never realized. You might be the perfect person to bring comfort or challenge or connectedness to some other person you are not even aware of. Without you, they might never fit. If you are struggling, and you are needy, and you just can't imagine what you have to offer at this point in your life, people in the body need to love. And God might need you in the body not for what you give, but that you provide opportunity for other people to grow in love as they give to you.

Again, I do not want to over think it. You do not have to see your value. It is helpful. It is motivating. It is desirable. We want to know how we fit and why we matter. But whether you know or not this is a point of faith, a point of renewing your mind. Are you willing to accept the truth that you are part of a larger community? If you are in Christ, you are a member with others who are in Christ. That is a spiritual reality, even if your community may seriously struggle to live out that reality. The difficulty of living out who God has made us does not change the spiritual reality. That is true just as much for us as a body as it is for us as individuals. My difficulty in living out the Christian life, doesn't change the fact that I am born again. And our difficulty in living in Christian community doesn't change the fact that we are a spiritual body. So, are you willing to accept by faith that you are a member of a spiritual body? And are you willing to accept by faith that God says you matter to that community?

"For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another."

Paul wants us to be growing in how we think about ourselves. And he wants us to be growing in how we think about the body. And he wants us to be growing in how we think about our contribution to the body. He gives us a list of how the Spirit of God equips us differently.

Let's read the list again. This is verses 6-8.

C. Renew how you think about the use of your gifts (12:6-8).

"Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, *each of us is to exercise them accordingly*:

if prophecy,	according to the proportion of his faith;
⁷ if service,	in his serving;
or he who teaches,	in his teaching;
⁸ or he who exhorts,	in his exhortation;
he who gives,	with liberality;
he who leads,	with diligence;
he who shows mercy,	with cheerfulness."

Paul also gives lists of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians and Ephesians in the passages about the body of Christ. None of the lists are the same. The list to the Ephesians is for leaders who need to use their gifts to equip everyone else for service. The list to the Corinthians includes miraculous gifts like healing and speaking in tongues, which had become problematic in the Corinthian church, and Paul needed to say something about that. The Romans list is fairly unique. Only the gifts of prophecy and teaching are mentioned in Corinthians or Ephesians. The rest of the gifts listed here are unique to this list. And even though a comparison of these three lists is quite interesting, especially if we add the one from Peter. That's a topic for another study. For now, let's just stick with what we have here in Romans.

I am assuming the giftedness in Romans is not natural talent but a gifting of the Holy Spirit. That is the clear statement in 1 Corinthians. John Stott argued in his book *Baptism and Fullness* that in recognizing God's sovereignty, we should not be surprised to see that some of our natural talents and learned skills fit nicely along with our spiritual giftedness. God envisions us as whole people. He is at work preparing us for the body of Christ long before we believe. It is no problem to develop in us skills and talents that will come to life spiritually only after our new birth. On the other hand, our skills and vocation may not line up with our giftedness. A teacher may or may not have the gift of teaching. A business executive may or may not have the spiritual gift of leading. We have to consider ourselves with sound judgment. Let's consider the list and then consider how we identify our own giftedness.

Paul starts the list with prophecy. Prophecy can include telling the future, but that is not what biblical prophecy is all about. In the Old Covenant, prophets either brought covenant as a mediator like Moses or they called the people of God back to the covenant, like Elijah, Isaiah and Micah. So, it is this calling people back to God's word which is the essence of biblical prophecy, to call people to the word of God in light of current circumstances, with a view towards future blessings or future consequences, depending on the response of the people to the word. Prophecy differs from teaching in that biblical prophecy is an act of revelation. The prophet receives the word of God and communicates the word of God to the people of God. Which is one reason prophecy is treated very seriously in Scripture, because the prophet is claiming to have a revelation from God. The seriousness of prophecy as a gift is seen in its placement at the beginning of the gift lists. Here Paul lists prophecy first. In 1 Corinthians and Ephesians he lists prophecy second, but only after apostleship.

Paul adds that the prophet should exercise the gift of prophecy "in proportion of his faith." And with the "measure of faith" reference above, "proportion of faith" could have to do with the amount of one's faith or with the standard of faith. Since we are talking about prophecy, I lean towards standard of faith. The words of the prophet should be in accordance with the gospel of Jesus Christ that the prophet has come to believe in by faith. It's that personal vision, the opening of the eyes to see the gospel that creates the standard by which the prophet should measure his prophecy. Is it in line with the revelation of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

The gift of service comes next. And it's a root word meaning to wait on tables. It takes us back to the seven men chosen by the apostles in Acts 6 to organize contributions for widows. This fits with the

idea of a deacon who helps with the material care and organization of the Christian community. The phrase "if service in his serving" indicates that if this is his gifting then he should use his gifts accordingly. If you have the gift of service, then serve. The same phrase is used for teaching. If you are gifted at teaching, then teach. The gift of exhortation could mean comfort or encourage, or it could mean urge others to live out the truth. I am not sure we have to make a decision or choose between one or the other. Since the gift comes right after teaching, I think about it in terms of communicated truth, whether that truth is communicated to spur someone on to action or whether it's communicated to give comfort in grace. Either one fit with the idea of exhortation, helping others to see the truth.

The one who gives could be one who serves the church in a ministry of distributing material resources, he could be in charge of a food pantry, or he could be gifted to give from his own resources. Again, I do not think we have to limit the gift too narrowly. We can recognize that it might manifest differently in one person than in the other person. Paul says the one who gives should do so with simplicity. It also might mean to be generous. Simplicity is the clearer meaning. Again, both work. Our giving should be done with simplicity, and it should be done liberally. The next gift means literally to preside over. It suggests the idea of leadership in the church. And it should be conducted with diligence. The final gift of showing mercy might have in mind the care of the poor, or the sick or the elderly. And Paul says to exercise this gift with cheerfulness.

Paul's gift list gives us a snapshot into the activity of the local church. You can imagine this. That Paul is writing to the Romans and this is what he expects. He expects that there are people there who are practicing the gifts of prophecy, who are involved in service, who are teaching, who are giving exhortation, who are giving out of their resources, who are leading and who are showing mercy. He has not limited his comments to leaders. He is directing his comments to all the members of the body. So, we could take this for ourselves. We are being called to participate in these various kinds of community activity in the teaching of the church, in the service, in the exhortation, in giving, in acts of mercy.

We need to grow in our self-knowledge so that we can present ourselves for service according to our giftedness. This fits with Paul's early challenge to consider ourselves with sound judgement. Don't go after the gifts that bring prestige in your circles. Don't try to be somebody you are not. On the other hand don't deny the giftedness you have. Consider your strengths and your abilities and seek to be developed along those lines.

Of course, this raises the question, "How am I gifted?" How do I know, how do I discover how God has gifted me? Here are three practical recommendations.

First, engage in ministry. Find ways to serve in your local Christian community, in your church. Renewing of the mind generally follows presenting the body. You cannot fully know who you are without giving yourself to the work of the church first. And do it generally. Try to be involved in different ways of serving. Be humble. Do not seek position. Respond to needs. Serve in different ways. Learn how to share your faith. Learn how to lead a small group. Teach children. Serve in a ministry of care or worship. Help wherever you can. And you learn about yourself by the doing. That's first.

Second, as you present yourself in service over time, trust God to use you in the lives of other people. You are praying. And you are trusting God. You are offering yourself as you serve. And in service or organizing or giving or teaching, if you see others coming closer to God because of your service, then that is a sign of your spiritual giftedness at work in what you are doing. So, ask for feedback. Seek development. Ask others that you trust how do they see you fitting in, or how do they see you giving yourself to the body.

Third, Paul always connects the analogy of the body with the gifts of the Spirit and then with instruction about love. We see that pattern in 1 Corinthians. 1 Corinthians 12 is the body and the gifts. 1 Corinthians 13 is one of the greatest passages on love in the Bible. In Ephesians 4 we get the

body and then we get the gifts and then we get a passage on love in the body. And here in Romans it is the same thing. Paul introduces the body metaphor in 12:4-5. He describes the various gifts in 6-8. And then he exhorts us to love and that's going to start in verse 9. Here is something I heard a long time ago from pastor Tom Nelson, and I think he is correct. It stuck with me. The Spirit of God intends to build the body of Christ up in love. He moves in us to show love to other people in line with our giftedness. As you are walking with God, the needs you see and the way you are moved to love will manifest how the Holy Spirit is at work in you. He is moving in you to care for and build up and contribute to the body of Christ in a way that is in line with who he has made you to be and how he has gifted you. So, your gifts come out as love and compassion.

II. Present

So, what does this look like in the way that we present ourselves in the body? Imagine as one example that you know a couple in your church going through a rough time in marriage. How do you show love? Someone with the gift of giving might tell the husband, "Hey, you know what. I know you have been going through a rough time. There is this great marriage conference coming up. I want you to know that I have already signed you up, and I paid for it. I want you to be blessed. The hotel is covered. The conference is covered. If it helps you guys, don't pay me back, pay it forward, you help somebody else. If it doesn't, just don't worry about it. I just want you to have a chance to see if it could help you out."

Another person with the gift of mercy might say to the wife, "Let's go to coffee." She would listen. And she would relate. And she might cry. She would communicate, "You are known, you are loved."

The exhorter might kick somebody in the butt. "You just got to shape up man. Do you know what you have in your wife? Do you know what God has, I know you know what God has called you to do. I love you bro, and you need to man up. Let's pray."

The teacher might take the couple into the word or give a great book or sermon series. They want to teach and help them see God's vision for marriage.

The servant might offer to watch the kids for the weekend, so they can get time together.

We meet needs, we love, according to how the Spirit of God is stirring in us.

How is God calling you to present yourself in the body of Christ? What are the needs? How can you contribute? Not everybody has the same availability at every stage of life. If you have little kids at home, you have to be careful how much time you spend away from them at church. But what can you do? You have to think of your situation with sober judgment. How can you offer yourself as a member of the body? What is God calling you to do?

One last thought. We do not always get to work in areas of our giftedness. Sometimes God calls us to serve in an area of need. "This is just the need. We need somebody to do this whether you are gifted or not." You may have a burden that you believe strongly needs to be addressed by your local church. You may believe 100% that God put that burden on your heart, that the church is failing if it doesn't reach out in this way, if it doesn't meet this need. God may have put that burden on your heart for you to do something about it, not your pastor to do something about it. This is a problem I see over and over in local church. There is a need. A layperson, stirred up by the Holy Spirit, recognizes the need. And the layperson expects the pastor or the elders to meet the need. A pastor is limited. He does not have all the gifts, and he doesn't have all the time. And elders are limited. They do not have all the gifts either, and they don't have all the time. And our church body is limited. There are certain things we can contribute, but we have limited resources and limited time.

If the Spirit of God has put the burden on your heart, you might be the solution to meeting that need. It is the right, it is the responsibility of elders in a church to respond respectfully to every need. But then they have to answer according to what God is teaching them or saying to them as leaders.

And their response might be, “We are going to do something about that. You are so right. We need to address that.” Or the response might be, “You are exactly right. That’s a huge need. And we think you are the person to do something about it.” Or they might say, “You’re right. That’s a need. It’s not where our church is right now. And you could be the person to do something about it. But we don’t believe yet. It’s not the right time for you to take that on. It’s not the right time for our church. We’d love you to contribute in what we are doing right now as a community. We’d love to see you grow in Christ. And just see where God takes this burden, takes this vision that he has put on your heart.”

When Paul says, if you are gifted, use your gift. He does so with the understanding that we are part of a body. And being part of a body creates challenges. We start by learning to regard ourselves with sound judgment and by accepting that God sees us as members of a body. We seek over time to contribute to the body in accordance with our spiritual gifts. And that is going to require growth in love, because as soon as we start contributing as members of the body, there is going to be mess. One of my favorite proverbs is, “Where there are no oxen, the stables are clean.” If we didn’t have any people, everything would remain orderly, everything would be clean. But as soon as you start adding people, as soon as we accept sinful people into our church, as soon as they let me in, we’ve got sin. And we are going to have conflict. And we are going to need to grow in love. Without love the parts of the body grate on one another. Without love the world can’t see that we are true disciples of Christ. Love is essential. And that is Paul’s topic in our next lesson.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as important, confusing, interesting or strange in Romans 12:3-8?
2. Thinking of yourself with sound judgment, what would you say are three of your weaknesses in participating as a member of the body? Also, thinking with sound judgment what are three of your strengths? (Which list is harder for you to come up with?)
3. Does your culture value more individuality or community? How does this play out in how people view the local church? Or what people expect from the local church?
4. What does it mean to consider yourself a member of the body? What do you give up personally or what are some of the challenges in putting the needs of the community above your own desires and needs?
5. What is something you could do personally to help promote a sense of community in your local church or in a smaller group within your local church?
6. Do you feel like you know what your spiritual gifts are? Have you seen God working in the lives of other people as a result of your contribution? What do others see in you? How are you moved to love other people? Do you have a drive to teach? Do you comfort? Do you serve behind the scenes? Do you often feel moved to give?

Lesson 31: Living the Ethic of Love

Romans 12:9-21

⁹ **Let love be without hypocrisy.**

Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good.

I. Exhortations to sincere love in the Christian community

¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; ¹¹ not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; ¹² rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, ¹³ contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality.

II. Exhortations to sincere love in general

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.

¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.

¹⁶ Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation.

III. Exhortations to sincere love outside the Christian community

¹⁷ Never pay back evil for evil to anyone.

Respect what is right in the sight of all men. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.

¹⁹ Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY," says the Lord.

²⁰ "BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD."

²¹ **Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.**

NASB

Introduction

Back in the early sixties when my mom was in college, the movie West Side Story won 10 academy awards, including best picture and best musical. It's the classic love story of boy meets girl from two rival gangs. In her final song Maria sings this about Tony.

I have a love and it's all that I need,
Right or wrong, and he needs me too.
I love him, we're one; [...]
When love comes so strong,
There is no right or wrong,
Your love is your life!

The lyrics mix love and ethics. "When love comes so strong there is no right or wrong."

Paul does the same thing in Romans 12:9-21. He combines the terminology of love with the terminology of ethics, right or wrong, good or evil. Though Paul's message is quite the opposite of Maria's message. In West Side Story, Maria claims that love removes ethics, removes categories of right and wrong. In Romans, Paul argues that genuine love is understood in terms of good and evil.

The two messages start with different definitions of love. For Maria, love is the romantic feeling of attraction. Maria's love is the love of Romeo and Juliet. It is a love that can break boundaries but can also end in senseless death. This is the love of modern music. It is a love that can soar high and just as quickly turn to hate. It is the love of Hollywood. It is the love of the sexual revolution. "When love comes so strong, there is no right or wrong, your love is your life!"

The Bible is not against romantic love. God gave us the Song of Solomon. God gave us the command of Proverbs 5:18-19.

Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth. As a loving hind and a graceful doe, let her breasts satisfy you at all times; be exhilarated always with her love.

The Bible affirms romantic love and sexual expression of love in the context of marriage between a man and a woman. The Bible is not against romantic love. The Bible does, however, urge us to a deeper, lasting, more challenging love.

When I was in college, I remember Josh McDowell telling us that love is an action. Love is a decision of the will. He was helping us renew our minds, helping us counter the pattern of this world. Love is not something that carries a husband and father uncontrollably into adultery. That's not God's love. It's a form of modern love. "When love comes so strong there is no right or wrong." No! Love is the decision of a man to value the good of his wife, to value the needs of his children even above his own selfish passions. Love is the choice and the action to care about the needs of others, even if those needs are contrary to your own.

Later, I heard from John Piper a different message. His message was different because his audience was different. He was not countering the wrong pattern of the world, he was countering a wrong pattern in the church. He challenged us to remember the emotional element of love. He was targeting a cold, heartless Christianity that emphasized an ethic of emotionless duty, that implied the more you dislike something the more spiritual it is that thing. Christianity is doing what you don't like to do. Piper said, "No!" We have been created to love the Lord our God with all our mind, "Yes!", and all our strength, "Yes!", and all our heart, "Yes, yes!" God is working in us a deeper desire of love. Romantic love is not the only feeling of love. There is a love that truly cares and delights in the well-being of another human being. The most natural expression of this love is the love a mother can have for her child, a true delighting in the good for someone else.

When we put McDowell's message together with Piper's message, we get a more integrated picture of love. Biblical love comes from a new heart and is performed as a decision of the will that leads to concrete acts of love. It is heart, will and strength. It is true that our heart is not always in it. But that is a struggle of the flesh. As we grow in Christ, we grow in the enjoyment of loving unconditionally. That is the direction we are headed in, loving with all our heart and our mind and our strength, God and neighbor. If our heart is not there yet, we can still put our faith in the Holy Spirit to empower us to choose to do the loving thing, as McDowell urges. And we can ask him to keep working in our heart to catch up, as Piper urges.

Jesus gave us the ethic of love. After washing his disciples' feet, Jesus says, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another (John 13:34)." He gave them a symbol of concrete service, foot washing, and then he gave them the command to put their love into action for each other. And the command is important enough to repeat. Two chapters later, Jesus says again, "This is my commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends (John 15:12-13)." It is a message of sacrificial love. Give up your own interests for one another. Lay down your life. Not necessarily dying but laying down the moments of your life to take time to serve someone else. In that context of John 15, Jesus taught that this kind of love only comes by drawing your life and your power from him, as a branch draws nourishment from the vine.

I mentioned in our last lesson that Paul always includes a section on love when he teaches about the body of Christ and the gifts of the Spirit. We do not want to make the mistake of the Corinthians, being high in gifts and low on love. We also do not want to fall into a wrong pattern on thinking about love. Paul is giving us here another scenario to which we need to apply the pattern of Romans 12:1-2. As we respond to the grace of Jesus and present ourselves to God in Christian community, we need our minds renewed to better understand his call to love.

Let's read the text, Romans 12:9-21.

[Read Romans 12:9-21]

Notice how Paul frames this passage. The first sentence is not a complete sentence in Paul's Greek. It is simply the three words, "The Love Unhypocritical." Paul then goes on to give exhortations in line with sincere or genuine love. If you want to pursue real Jesus kind of love, love without hypocrisy or without a mask, then you should be doing these kinds of things from a genuine heart.

Paul then does something interesting, after giving us the title, "The Love Unhypocritical," he moves from the language of love to the language of right and wrong, good and bad. He writes, "Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good." Paul comes back to this language in the last verse, too. "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Paul puts our basic morality as Christians, our basic ethic or rule for behavior, in this relational context. Do you want to know if you are a good Christian? Ask yourself, "Do I love people? And do I show that love in concrete ways?" When you ask God, "How then shall I live?", He is saying, "Love." Our basic ethic is love. Growth in Christ is revealed in acts of love. Paul is defining good and evil here according to how we treat other people.

Now in regard to the structure of the text, I see a three-part division to the text. Following Douglas Moo, I have adopted David Black's structure of the Greek text (D. A. Black, "The Pauline Love Command: Structure, Style and Ethics in Romans 12:9-21," *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 1). In part I, verses 9-13, Black describes a 2-3-2-3-2 chiastic structure. It's recognizable by the Greek style. I will arrange my comments according to that pattern. Part II consists of three general exhortations. And part III ends with another chiasm, though one based on content rather than style. Each part has a slightly different group in mind that we are supposed to love. We could say that:

Part I is comprised of exhortations to sincere love in the Christian community, that's verses 9-13;
Part II is comprised of exhortations to sincere love in general, that's verses 14-16;
And part III is comprised of exhortations to sincere love outside the Christian community, that's verses 17-21. So, let's start with part I.

I. Exhortations to sincere love in the Christian community (12:9-13)

A. 2 exhortations

Our first two exhortations here in verse 9, "abhor what is evil and cling to what is good" serve both as the beginning bookend of the whole passage, 9-21, and the first frame of this part I, 9-13.

I have said that good and evil are defined by love, to love is to do the good, to not love is to do evil. We can also say it the other way around. Love will cling to what is good. Love will abhor what is evil. This is where we disagree with Maria from West Side Story. Love does not blind a person to good and evil. Genuine love shrinks away from the pure selfishness of evil. And genuine love desires what is good for the one loved.

B. 3 exhortations

After these two exhortations, we have a set of three exhortations, beginning in verse 10. The first two are "one another" statements that indicates for us that we are talking about the body of Christ, one another in the body of Christ. The first exhortation is "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love." The Greek word used here for love means love of brothers or love of sisters. As members of the body of Christ, we are to be devoted to one another as an extended family. You do not always have to click with your extended family. You don't always have to like your extended family. You just have to love them. Family is family. And we have a special responsibility to the brothers and sisters in our local Christian community similar to the special responsibility we have for family. In fact, Paul urges us to be "devoted" to one another. He is calling for serious action, serious consideration to be given to our brothers and sisters in Christ.

The second exhortation is also a "one another" statement. "Give preference to one another in honor." Remember Paul's admonition for us not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought. This goes a step further. Not only should I not seek my own honor, but I should show honor to my

brothers and sisters in Christ. Instead of seeking opportunities of self-recognition, I should make effort to see that others get recognized.

The style of Paul's Greek suggests that the first exhortation in verse 11 should complete this group of three. "Do not lag behind in diligence." The ESV translates this as "Do not be lazy in zeal." In context, Paul is urging us to show acts of brotherly love to each other. And as we do that, we are not seeking honor for ourselves. We are looking for ways to show honor and recognition to others. In both of these things we should not be lazy or lag behind. Acts of brotherly love take effort even when those acts come out of our spiritual giftedness. We have some motivation in us. We still have to put forth some effort. And Paul has said, if you are gifted in teaching, teach, if you are gifted in service, serve. If we are moved to love through mercy or leadership or giving, these are ways that we can show love for the body. The Spirit is working in us, but we are going to have to take some effort to actually apply our gifts. And even in the use of our gifts is not a means of accruing honor for ourselves. It's a way of devotion, the using of gifts and talents for the good of others. And in this we are not to lag behind. We are not to be lazy. Our zeal should move us toward acts of love.

The exhortation here is not "Keep busy." The opposite of being lazy is not attending every possible church event or filling up every minute of down time or being involved in every ministry. There is a better way. Diligence can happen by seeking out a place you can consistently give in. We should be thinking in this way. "Is there a weekly role I can play in our small group? Are there certain people I can regularly seek out to encourage? Is there a ministry of mercy I can volunteer with once or twice a week? I need to meet my responsibilities at work. I need to meet my responsibilities of love for my family. In addition to that, where is a place I can give in the body that may require some sacrifice but is not detrimental to my health or to my sanity or to my family. And that would be effective, it would be useful. I can give in a way that truly helps. That's not lagging behind in zeal when you find a place that you can fit in, and you can give regular service to.

C. 2 exhortations

Now, our two central exhortations come in the rest of verse 11. First, be "fervent in Spirit." And this literally means, be set on fire in the Spirit! Living the Christian life is not meant to be a boring affair for Paul. That's not how Paul sees it at all. Duty is not a bad word. Consistent duty without emotion is not a picture of the Christian life. Not one that we see in the Bible. If our heart does not overflow with love to Jesus, something is wrong with our heart. If we do not kneel in awe as we contemplate the majesty of God, something is wrong with our heart. If we do not yearn for the fame of God's name to be spread through the nations, something is wrong with our heart.

To be honest, we get that. Let's just say it. Something is wrong with our heart. We struggle to connect emotionally with the reality of our faith. Paul seems to be saying here, "Do not be satisfied with that. Ask the Lord to light a fire in your heart or to fan up the flames." Maybe that fire is going strong like it does in the romance phase of a human relationship. Maybe that fire is a consistent glow that burns in the heart like it does in a healthy, intimate ongoing, human relationship. We cannot live off the highs of romance all the time. I don't think that's what we should imagine for this fire burning in our heart. We need that slow burning fire that does not always shine bright but when poked reveals an intense heat and a strong glow. However you envision it, Paul exhorts us to be fervent, to be on fire for Jesus.

He follows that up with the next exhorting, "serve the Lord," Which seems like a pretty bland or general command after just exhorting us to be on fire. Maybe that is the intent. Maybe he is directing our zeal. Worship might help us to be on fire or preaching might stir up our heart, but don't let the flame die out there. Direct that intensity towards acts of service for God. We need to be stirred up to serve. Worship that moves us emotionally is not intended to leave us there. We might fall into the danger of thinking our main spiritual service of worship is an emotional experience. There is an intensity in the heart meant to moves us to action in a way that is acceptable and

pleasing to God. If zeal for God does not lead to loving service, worship can become a selfish end in itself. Love for God is not meant to be kept inside, but to rise up and spill over and be a blessing.

B' 3 exhortations

The set of three exhortations in verse 12 connect with the working of the Holy Spirit in our heart. Just as the fire of the Spirit moves us to acts of loving service, the Spirit provides the internal power we need to rejoice in our hope, to persevere in tribulation, to be devoted to prayer.

We see that work of the Spirit connected to hope and tribulation and prayer back at the beginning of chapter 5 and the end of chapter 8 where Paul affirmed work of the Spirit in each believer, pouring out God's love into our hearts and witnessing with our spirit that we are sons and daughters of the king. That's what lights our heart on fire, when we see God and when we love God, when we know that we are his. Specifically, in 8:18-27, you can see Paul moving us from the theme tribulation to hope to prayer, just as he mentions here. Rejoice in hope, persevere in tribulation, be devoted to prayer. He is challenging the Romans to keep it up.

A' 2 exhortations

Moving to our last two exhortation in verse 13 Paul gets very, very practical. What does sincere love look like in the body of Christ? What does it look like to be devoted to one another in brotherly love? Here are two things. "Contribute to the needs of the saints and practice hospitality." I imagine you have people in your mind who are good at doing this. I can immediately think of models of generosity. Christians who give their time and effort to make sure those in need are cared for. And three or four couples, also, come to mind when I think of hospitality. They are Christians who invite people into their homes, seemingly effortlessly. I don't know how much effort goes in, but when you are there, you don't notice. They invite you in and make you feel welcome, known, included. What a blessing these people are to the Christian community. I am not one of them. I can't do this to the same degree they do it or with the same level of spiritual blessing. It is not my spiritual gift. But I try to learn from them so that I can offer hospitality in a pleasing way when God calls me to do it. We all are given opportunities to show hospitality.

II. Exhortations to sincere love in general (12:14-16)

Next, we move on to part II. And this is verses 14-16. And here we are moving from exhortations of love in the body to general exhortations of sincere love, love in the body or outside the body. The first is classic Jesus. "Bless those who persecute you; bless and curse not." Hopefully, this is coming from outside the body, if you are being persecuted. And it can be in big ways or small ways. How naturally do words of blessing come out of your mouth the moment you are cut off in traffic or treated rudely by the person behind the counter or put down by your boss or a professor? When someone looks down on you because of what you believe in or because of your moral stance, is your first response to utter words of blessing from the heart? Of course, it isn't! We have a heart problem. Our response is not to bless the offender but to curse the offender, even if we just mutter it under our breath. It's not nice thoughts. Jesus commands another way. Sincere love to someone who annoys you or worse, who seeks your harm, requires seeking their good. Sincere love seeks their good, their blessing, even when your sinful heart desires for them to be cursed. By faith, speak a sincere blessing. And if you cannot control your voice, don't do it. Speaking a Christian blessing in a rude, negative, judgmental way, doesn't count. "I just want you to be blessed." That doesn't get it. If you can't control your voice, then keep your mouth closed and speak a blessing in your heart. By faith, in prayer to God, pray for the person who has hurt you or the person who has persecuted you, or the person who has put you down. And you don't pray for vengeance, as much as you want vengeance. You pray for their good. You offer blessing, not curse.

Next, we have "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep." My wife is my model for this exhortation. When Brenda hears good news for someone else, they won a free cruise, or they were selected for a special honor, she jumps up and down with joy for them. It's natural. I, on

the other hand, immediately think, "Why can't that ever happen for me? Why can't I win the free cruise?" Brenda models rejoicing with those who rejoice. She also models for me the other side of this exhortation. She sincerely "weeps with those who weep." This is empathy, an important component of genuine love. It is a stepping outside our own circumstances and emotional state to empathize with the reality of someone else's circumstances and emotional state.

Verse 16 more clearly brings us back into the Christian community, with the "one another" pattern, urging us to a consistent equality in our love. The previous exhortation urged us to share a common heart. Not that we always feel the same thing but that we recognize what others are going through and show love by entering into their emotional circumstances. Here Paul shifts to the mind. "Be of the same mind." It could mean that we should share in a common understanding of the gospel. But that's not the context. Paul seems to be saying that we give each person equal regard in our thinking. We accept each one in the body as created uniquely in the image of God, equally valued by God. To really do this, we have to go further. We have to recognize and reject our own prejudices. Because we are prejudiced. Whether it is based on race or poverty or education or social ability or gender or work success, we create value judgments in our minds. "Don't do that," says Paul. Be of the same mind one of another.

Recognize what truly matters: he or she is created in the image of God, loved by Jesus, born again, growing in character. Second, recognize the value of variety, there are different types of intelligence, people are good at all manner of different types of things, there are different personality types, there are different giftings, there are different life experiences. There is so much variety that we should seek to enjoy and value the giftedness and the talents and the perspectives of other people in the body. We should also recognize that some have done much more for God with the little they have been given in life than the little done by those who have been given much. I do not say that to create a new kind of comparison, but we need to lean towards considering others with sober judgment. Remove your prejudices. Share the mindset that we are equally valued by God. Which of God's precious children is too lowly to associate with?

III. Exhortations to sincere love outside the Christian community (12:17-21)

Now we are ready to move into part III, verses 17-21. Here Paul exhorts us to sincere love fous outside the Christian community.

Let's remind ourselves of the whole text. These are verses 17-21.

- A ¹⁷ Never pay back evil for evil to anyone.
- B Respect what is right in the sight of all men. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.
- C ¹⁹ Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath *of God*, for it is written, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY," says the Lord.
- B' ²⁰ "BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD."
- A' ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

A Never pay back evil for evil.

The beginning and ending of this part III use the good and evil language. So, we start in verse 17 with "Never pay back evil for evil to anyone." We end in verse 21 with "Do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good." In context, evil refers to hurtful actions done to you by another human being. First Paul tells us what not to do. "Do not pay back evil." To whom should we not pay back evil? You should not pay back evil "to anyone." That is a hard command to swallow and certainly does not line up with the stories we love to tell and the stories we like to watch. We love the stories where the man or the woman or the child gets back at the evil person who has belittled them or harmed them. We rejoice inside when they come back with a clever comment, a quick punch, a

smart plan. We love justice, especially when the weak overcome the strong. There is something good in that, but there can be something wrong, too. Our minds are conformed to the pattern of this world. If we truly want to do the good, pleasing, acceptable will of God, then we need our minds renewed on this point. He is calling us to a higher pattern.

B Seek peace with all.

What is our general approach to people in society outside the body of Christ? We start with the second half of verse 17, "Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men." The Christian stance towards secular society is not one of absolute good versus absolute evil. We are called to acknowledge the natural morality that is present in our society. There are things that all people, or at least a large group of people, recognize as good. Not everybody is trying to do it. But they recognize it. We can find common ground in caring for the poor, helping out our neighbors, living with financial integrity, being honest, being considerate. There is a general recognition of right and wrong in society that allows us to connect with other people.

In addition to recognizing common good and common evil, we make an effort to be at peace with all men, so long as it depends on us. If our neighbor complains that our Christmas lights are shining in his bedroom window all night, we buy a timer to make them go off. If our dog is barking through the night, we do something about our dog. If our neighbor's tree falls in our yard, we cut it up and give him the firewood. Granted, if it falls on our car, living together in peace is going to be more difficult. But as a starting principle, if it is in our reasonable power to put in some effort to live at peace with the people around us, God says, "Do that. Do not intentionally make yourself smellier than you have to be."

C' Never take your own revenge.

What if someone wrongs you? That moves us to the central point of the chiasm in verse 19. "Never take your own revenge." That is pretty absolute. The Christian is not permitted to take revenge, period. We can discuss that, but the end answer is going to be, "No. You are not allowed to take revenge." This is a point of faith. We are told, "leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay,' says the Lord."

Revenge here applies to personally getting back at the one who has wronged you. If the tree falls on your car, and you want your neighbor to pay for it, that is fair. If he refuses, you can take him to court. God has provided means in society by which we can seek justice. That's coming up in chapter 13. We will talk more about that. People need to be held responsible for their actions. A rape victim may choose to forgive her attacker as an act of supernatural faith in Jesus, that does not mean she should argue against him going to jail. He can go to jail forgiven. Punishment is not wrong. Punishment is often in line with Scripture. But you don't take it into your own hands.

To take the lesser example, if the neighbor refuses to pay for the damage to your car caused by his tree and is somehow able to wiggle out of responsibility through our deficient, human justice system, you are not allowed to steal his car or to set it on fire. You don't even get to pour manure into his backseat. Now, that is a normal desire, I think. It's my normal desire. Mostly, it is a sinful desire, though there may be some righteous anger mixed in there somewhere. I am not sure. You are not being told here that you cannot seek recourse according to the system provided by your society. You are being told that if that system fails, you cannot, as a Christian, seek your own form of justice. By faith, you recognize the fallibility of human justice and recognize the reality of God's justice. No one escapes the courtroom of God's justice. We have this over the atheist. While we all share a desire for justice, all normal people do, we do not depend on the fallible justice of this world. We believe that justice will ultimately and eternally be satisfied by our good, impartial, all-seeing, holy God.

B' Heap burning coals on his head

Paul moves on to an odd statement in verse 20. "But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." We already heard

the echoes of Jesus' sermon on the mount in Paul's command to bless and not curse those who persecute you. This exhortation reminds us of Jesus' command to turn the other cheek or go the extra mile. It is a direct command to love your enemy. Give him food. Give him drink. But what about the conclusion, "in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head?"

Paul is quoting Proverbs 25:21-22. Neither Proverbs or Paul give us much to go on by way of context. The metaphor of heaping burning coals on your enemy's head is lost on us. We do not have clear examples from Greek or Hebrew to draw from. Some have suggested that pouring coals on our enemy's head indicates that if our good acts do not turn them, then their punishment will be all the more severe. That is not completely unbiblical, but it does not fit well here with Jesus teaching in the sermon on the mount, already alluded to, nor does it fit with what Paul has said so far. We are encouraged to leave room for God's wrath. We are not encouraged to do good in order to increase wrath. The theme here is love without hypocrisy. This verse should fit with that theme. How does this show sincere love?

A suggestion I have heard preached is that coals on the head alludes to the practice of carrying a jar on the head with coals for lighting a fire. In that sense the coals are a positive, like food and drink. There are two problems with this suggestion. One, we do not have any ancient examples of a positive metaphor about carrying coals on the head. Two, it is not clear what the point would be. It seems the same as saying, "Be nice to your enemy for in so doing you will be doing something nice for your enemy." And that's not really helpful.

A third suggestion, and a better one, is that heaping burning coals on the head of your enemy is a metaphor for causing shame. Now, if causing shame is intended as an act of revenge, you're trying to get back at your enemy by making him feel bad, then the metaphor would not fit the context so well either. That would be like trying to increase his wrath. It is doing something good in order to cause bad to your enemy. But if causing shame is intended to bring your enemy to a recognition of his own wicked behavior, so to bring him to repentance and a right relationship with God and other people, then the metaphor fits the context. We do not bless our enemy with any guarantee of bringing him to repentance, but it is a possibility. This suggestion has the problem that it has got little support in ancient writings. But the positive that it fits pretty well the context.

In the chiasmic structure this verse parallels the command, "Respect what is right in the sight of all men." And, if possible, to "be at peace with all men." And parallel structures often take a point and push it further. The further thought here is that we not only respect what is right for all, but we act in that way even to our enemies, which is unexpected. And just as the previous desire with all men was that we might have peace, so also, doing good to our enemy can have the desired effect of bringing peace. We can only do what we can do. We cannot achieve peace if the other party refuses to admit wrongdoing and refuses reconciliation. But we can choose to bless our enemy. We can treat him as a human being who has needs. We can help with those basic needs. And in so doing, if we somehow move him to shame and that leads to repentance, then we brought about peace.

A' Overcome evil with good.

Paul started this section by telling us what we are not to do. We are not to "pay back evil for evil to anyone." He ends in verse 21 by telling us what we are to do. "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." We are to overcome evil with good. The means do not justify the ends. We are to seek the good. And we are to seek to accomplish the good through good. If we seek to accomplish good through evil, then we lose. We are at that point overcome ourselves by evil. And this is a natural pattern in the world. It is quite normal for the victim of evil to become the perpetrator of evil. When hurt, we lash out, we strike back. We even do to others exactly what was done to us. Not only does our wicked response increase the damage to ourselves, compounding the consequences of sin done to us with sin done by us, but it also perpetuates a cycle of retribution. If we return evil with evil, it will be returned back on us again. And then we return it again. And then it comes back again. In personal relationship, for peace to be accomplished, someone must choose to

break the cycle, to be the peacemaker. Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God (Matthew 5:9)."

Conclusion

The first frame in the chiasm of part I served double duty, creating also the beginning bookend of the whole passage. That was "Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good." So also, here in verse 21 we have the final frame of part III and the ending bookend to the whole passage. "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

We overcome evil with good by pursuing the kind of radical, genuine love that Jesus taught and Jesus modeled. Paul envisions the body of Christ building itself up in love. Jesus envisions a watching world, and he tells us, "by this all men will know that you are my disciples if you have love one for another (John 13:35)."

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as important, confusing, interesting or strange in Romans 12:9-21?
2. What is one example in this text of a teaching that challenges you in your thinking to put off being conformed to this world and to be renewed in your mind?
3. We have around 20 or so exhortations here. If these put you under the pile, remember to thank God that you are accepted by grace. You are not accepted because of your ability to fully live out this list. Also, thank God that he has begun a work in you to transform you, so that you will begin to live life according to this vision of what is good.

Consider the two following exhortations.

- a. Think of a time you cursed someone else for their behavior toward you. Words of judgment and ill will came from your heart and out of your mouth (even if under your breath). What words could you use to bless – both words that you could just say in your own mind and words you could say out loud?
 - b. In Part III *C' Never take your own revenge*, Michael said, "You cannot, as a Christian, seek your own form of justice." This statement depends on context. In what sense would you agree with this statement and in what sense would you disagree with this statement? What "form of justice" can a Christian not seek? What "form of justice" should a Christian seek? Support your ideas from this text or from other biblical passages.
4. Choose two more exhortations that especially stand out to you. For each exhortation go through the following thought process. (1) Take a few minutes to think about how you could apply each exhortation in your own social circle, whether in the body of Christ or outside the body of Christ – what could this look like concretely for you. (2) Then consider some of the challenges to living this out. What obstacles would you need to overcome to see this become a practiced reality in your life? (3) Finally, reflect on the blessing of living this out – what could be the fruit in your life or in your family or in your church or society? Start small. What are some of the simple, relational fruits that could result?

Lesson 32: Living under Secular Government

Romans 13:1-7

¹ Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.	(Exhortation) (1 st reason)
² Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.	(Consequence)
³ For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; ⁴ for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.	(2 nd reason)
⁵ Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake.	(Exhortation repeated)
⁶ For because of this you also pay taxes, for <i>rulers</i> are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. ⁷ Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax <i>is due</i> ; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.	(Concrete example of practice)

NASB

Introduction

Douglas Moo writes, "It is only a slight exaggeration to say that the history of the interpretation of Romans 13:1-7 is the history of attempts to avoid what seems to be its plain meaning (Moo, *NICNT Romans*. 806)." That's not surprising with a text that begins, "Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities," and ends with, "because of this you pay taxes."

I remember teaching this text back in the year 2000. I do not have that good of a memory. But there is a reason I remember teaching it. We were moving from Zagreb to Split and into a new apartment that was completely unfurnished. No oven, no refrigerator, no kitchen cabinets. We made a trip to Ikea (or for your Americans, Ikea) in Austria to buy the cabinets and other household items. I remember that agonizing decision at the Croatian border coming back of whether or not to volunteer information about what we were importing. I was not going to lie, but if I just kept my mouth shut, the guard might just wave me through. On the other hand, I knew it was my responsibility to declare my purchases. And I had Romans 13 blaring in my head. So, I rolled down my window and handed over my receipt.

Our lives are touched in hundreds of ways by the governmental authorities set up over us. From the local city council, the school board to state or county authorities to national authorities, in Europe, even supra-national authorities, the European Union. Our lives are affected by the decisions of these authorities whether by speed limits to trash collection or recycling or school zoning to the possibility of a military draft or federal taxes, our lives are affected.

And it's really hard to get out of the simple reading of the text, though we would love to. We don't want to get out of it just for the minor inconveniences or the minor expenses. There are serious issues that arise out of this passage. What do we do with an unjust government? What do we do with racist authorities or anti-Christian authorities? Or corrupt authorities? Or totalitarian authorities? Is Paul giving rulers divine right to treat their citizens however they please, and we are not to do anything about it? We are just to be sheep to the slaughter. Is Paul taking away the possibility of pushing back and calling, demanding change?

This is a short passage and it has a broad range of application from major issues of human government to the smaller issues of everyday life in human society. Paul recognizes the need for us to give serious thought to this issue. That's why he is offering it as one of his scenarios. If we are to present ourselves to God as a good and pleasing sacrifice, then we need to consider how our thinking about government has been formed by our own society and by our own sinful flesh. How am I thinking wrongly? To present myself in society in a godly way, I need to be in the ongoing process of having my thinking renewed, so that I might be transformed more into the image of Jesus, so that I can live in society with Jesus as my model. What does that look like? What basic principles ought I keep in mind?

As we interpret this passage, we will try to follow two principles. First, we will try not to make Paul's text say more than it actually does say. This is a very small passage on a very big theme. And it simply doesn't address so many of our questions. So, we want to recognize what is addressed here and what is not. Our second principle is in tension with the first. While trying not to read into this passage, we also want to consider the worldview framework that Paul teaches out of. What is Paul's view of how the New Covenant community relates to human government? The purpose of this second principle is to place the passage into the context of Paul's teaching. I will make some comments about the larger gospel context after we consider the more straightforward meaning of the passage.

So, in Romans 12 through 15, the scenarios of application are not given in a flowing argument or exposition from one topic to the next. Still, the different scenarios do seem to have a logical order. For example, it makes sense that the exhortations to sincere love follow the challenge to participate in the body of Christ. Paul did not take time to explain that connection, but the connection makes logical sense. If we are going to be a unified body and each one of us is going to be contributing from differences and different motivations, we are going to need genuine love to make it work. When I say the logical link is not tight, what I means is that Paul does not give us a flowing argument on the body and on love like he does in Ephesians 4, because his focus here is on application, not explanation. So, he gets right into the action. He is saying present yourselves as members of the body and present yourselves in love.

Now, the move to human government in the third scenario links back to the previous passage. In the exhortations to love, Paul made this statement. "Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay,' says the Lord." Being told to leave vengeance in the hands of God, we might ask, "Is there no justice on earth?" And our current passage addresses that issue. Though again, this is not a long exposition. This is application. We are getting a short exhortation; not a sermon on Christians in government. And it fits with our model of respond, present and renew. So, responding out of a grateful heart, we need to present ourselves as citizens of a secular society, and in so doing, we need to renew our thinking about that. Paul does not overdo the thinking part here because his intent is to move us to action. He gives us enough to get our thinking going, leaving us with the challenge to come up with a more developed Christian response to government based on our understanding of the gospel and the broad teaching of Scripture.

This is how we will address this lesson. I will go through the text to clarify the clear exhortation. Then I will raise a few additional questions that arise out of the text but are not answered by the text.

Let's read Romans 13:1-7.

The Text

Unlike the previous passage, which had 20 exhortations, this passage contains one primary exhortation. It is fairly straight forward. "Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities." Paul repeats the exhortation in verse 5. "Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake." In between these two statements of the primary exhortation, Paul gives us two reasons for obeying the exhortation and one statement about the consequence of disobeying. Then Paul finishes the passage with a concrete practical application of the exhortation. Let's walk through the passage.

The Exhortation To Submit to Governing Authorities (12:1a)

Again, our primary exhortation is the first part of verse 1. "Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities." Paul makes the exhortation inclusive. He does not say that some people should be in subjection. You know, the better drivers don't need to be in subjection, just the bad drivers. No. He says, "every person." It may be important to notice that he does not use the word obey in reference to government. He uses the word submit. We will come back to that later.

The First Reason to Submit to Governing Authorities (12:1b)

Paul follows up his exhortation with a reason. We should submit to the governing authorities because "there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God." This creates a problem for us. Paul is saying that human governments outside of theocratic Israel have been established by God. In our previous text, Paul told us to interact with people in society. He said, "respecting what is right in the sight of all men (12:17)." I commented then that the Christian stance toward secular society is not a stance of absolute good versus absolute evil. We are told to recognize a moral impulse towards good that exists in human societies. And we are to build bridges on the common ground of generally recognized morality.

Here Paul indicates another reason we should not view human society in absolute categories. Paul is not naïve. He does not have in mind that Roman government is particularly good or somehow anointed by God. Paul understands the evil in human society. But he also recognizes that God reigns over human institutions. No government exists, and no ruler holds his or her position without God permitting it to be so.

The Consequence of Not Submitting to Governing Authorities (12:2)

In verse 2, Paul describes the spiritual consequences of not submitting to government authority. "Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves." This is Paul's view of spiritual reality. To resist governmental authority is to resist God. The condemnation here is not the condemnation of the government. It is the condemnation of God. God views resistance to governmental authorities as unrighteous, as not good, as wicked. Refusing to submit to governmental authorities is an act against the social order established by God.

The Second Reason to Submit to Governing Authorities (12:3-4)

In verses 3-4, Paul comes back to another reason for submitting to governing authorities. "For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil."

Paul's statement begs the question, "What about unjust and evil rulers? What about prejudiced authorities?" We will have to come back to that question. It was surely a question on Paul's mind as one who had been beaten and imprisoned. And it would have been on the minds of the Romans who experienced in recent years the unjust expulsion of Jewish Christians leaders, like Priscilla and Aquila, who were kicked out of Rome. They were aware of the misuse of authority.

So, we are to take Paul's teaching as wisdom based on spiritual reality. There are general principles, when followed, that lead to a fruitful life. And this is a basic principle of wisdom literature in the Old Testament. Proverbs direct us to wise decision making based on a clear view of reality. Living wisely over time most often results in positive outcomes. Proverbs are not formulas that guarantee a specific outcome. That's the entire point of the book of Job, the man who lived a righteous and wise life and did not experience the fruit and the blessings promised by Proverbs. It is not a formula or guarantee but a recognition of spiritual reality and a choice to live accordingly.

Paul's first statement of reality was that authorities are dependent upon God for their position. Paul's second statement of reality is that governing authorities are pragmatic enough to leave alone, even honor, citizens who live according to law and basic moral goodness. Here is the rest of the text.

"Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does

not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.”

In spite of the prejudice he was subjected to as a Jew and as a Christian, Paul believed in the principle that doing good is generally recognized as good by authorities and doing evil attracts the negative attention of the authorities. We should interpret good and evil here, particularly in terms of law and order in society. Being hard-working, respectful of all men, a peacemaker in relationships, taking care of your parents and your children, treating cautiously and respectfully soldiers carrying swords, these are types of behaviors generally recognized as good in society and approved of by governing authorities. Theft, smuggling, public fighting, abandoning your family, desecration of temples, debasing authorities, these are some of the more obvious evil behaviors that would bring down the wrath of authorities. Human governments want order and stability. Often that is a good thing all around.

Paul describes the governmental authority as an avenger of wrath on the one who practices evil. This does not mean that governmental authorities are therefore good. In chapter 1, we considered the case of Habakkuk who struggled to believe that God's plan of salvation included Babylon as the avenger of wrath against wicked Judah. God said, “Believe it.” And he was clear that the use of Babylon to bring about punishment was not based on the goodness of Babylon. They were not righteous heroes. They refused to accept their role as coming from God. They continued in their pride and idol worship. They abused their power. And they were punished later for it.

Paul is teaching us that God uses sinful people to bring about a certain degree of order in society. There is a basic pragmatic response by authorities to approve of good and to punish evil. Evil in the mind of authorities does not line up perfectly with how God defines evil. Authorities will include in their definition of evil that which threatens their power, or their prestige, or their position. It may include a moral basis, or it may simply be the pragmatism of a politician or ruler. They have their own definition of evil. Still, it will overlap in many ways with God's definition, both because the image of God still leaves a moral imprint in people and because true morality is pragmatic for society. God uses human agents to maintain a certain amount of order in society.

Now, we also saw back in chapter 1 that God's wrath is currently being revealed against human beings in a passive form. God gives us over to a darkened heart and mind. The resulting consequences are a form of God's wrath. He leaves us to the harm of our own rebellion. If there were no ordering principle, we could imagine terrible chaos. We might wonder why human society is not better. I usually wondered why human society is not much worse. Why don't we tear one another apart? That's a complex question for each society, but it comes down to at least two principles we are seeing here from Paul. God has given humanity over to sinful passions and a darkened mind, but God has not given us over fully. God allows a moral principle to still work in the hearts of people. His image still has effect. And God has provided some degree of order in society, according to his wise plan. If God pulled away completely, we would be much, much worse off both as individuals and as societies.

God has placed a restraining principle in us and a restraining principle in our society. He calls us to something much better. Just as individuals can choose to live according to God's revelation of truth, to live as God sees reality, so too, societies can be ordered in such a way to reflect truth. We can see the positive effect on societies as they move towards a godly perspective. As with people, this is always messy. Sin and Satan are always at work, opposing the truth of God. In some cases, God allows greater reign of sin and Satan in a society. Those societies give us a picture of what all society would be like if God did not allow his image to still work in us, and God did not ordain better authorities. So, just as the gospel shakes us to think soberly, “You know what? I could be just as bad as the worst among us.” The gospel also challenges us to think soberly that our society could devolve from its current state to the level of the worst societies that we have read about in history class. If it

were left to us without the grace of God and the hand of God to curb our sin, we could be much, much worse.

In this text, Paul also adds to our picture of the execution of God's just wrath against human evil. We know there will be a final day of wrath where justice is fully satisfied. And we know from chapter 1 that God submits us to a passive wrath by giving us over to our own sin. In this passage on government, Paul adds another agent of God's wrath. God uses governing authorities to bring about the active wrath of justice in our present lives. It precedes the eternal justice that will come on the day of judgment. And as deficient as humans are in carrying out God's justice, God still works through people to bring about a form of justice.

Paul's phrase "for it does not bear the sword for nothing" could be used as support for capital punishment. I do not think, however, that argument stands up under scrutiny. The Old Testament law provides more direct support for capital punishment. That's where you should go if you want to argue capital punishment. We can hardly say that capital punishment is necessarily evil, since God clearly taught that it was the righteous punishment for human society in certain situations, particularly in the situation of Israel. We could argue that the New Covenant brings about a change. Or we could argue that the Mosaic punishments do not apply well to secular government. But those arguments are beyond our current passage. I don't want to talk about capital punishment right now. The reason I do not believe this text is a direct support of capital punishment is that the sword was seen less as an instrument of execution and more as an instrument of enforcement. So, if we say that police officers do not carry guns for nothing, we are not supporting punishment by shooting. We are pointing out the right and need for policemen to enforce the law, hopefully without ever having to use their guns. So, the reference to sword here is more likely a reference to the power to enforce law and to enact justice and less likely a specific reference to the kind of punishment that would happen, to execution.

The Exhortation To Submit to Governing Authorities Repeated (12:5)

In verse 5, Paul summarizes the exhortation. "Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake." We, as Christians, argue for the voluntary submission to governing authorities for these two reasons. One, God uses governing authorities to punish evil behavior in society. This is the reason for fear. God curbs the damage of sin in society by ordaining government. Two, since God has ordained government, submitting to governing authorities is submitting to God. This is more rightly the gospel motivation. We recognize by faith that the governing authorities are servants of God. Paul uses here the word *diakonos* or servant, which he usually uses for Christians serving God and from which we get the word deacon. So, though they may not know or acknowledge that they are his servants, Paul sees governing authorities as providing a function ordained by God and having significance in God's plan.

Concrete Example of Practice

Paul ends this passage with an example of concrete practice. Paul's first words can be taken two slightly different ways. "For because of this you also pay taxes..." could indicate an ought statement. Since, it is right to submit to governing authorities, both out of fear and out of conscience, you ought to pay your taxes. The second option is to take Paul's words as an affirmation of what the Romans are already doing. They are already following their conscience in this matter. Paul is essentially saying, "This is the reason you are paying your taxes." This second option aligns better with Paul's Greek here (Moo, *NICNT Romans*. 804).

I do not know if Paul felt that paying taxes was a particular issue for the Romans or not. I think he is assuming that they are paying their taxes, because they do recognize that they ought to be paying taxes. We don't need to see this as a special case the Romans struggled with. I think it is an issue for everybody. Who wants to pay taxes? When we talk about submitting to the governing authorities, Paul's giving us an example that hits us all. It's a great general application.

I just went yesterday to my local tax office in Zagreb to submit my American income tax forms. I have to pay taxes here and in the US. Which does not work out too terribly, since I get to write of the Croatian taxes on my American tax form and the American taxes on my Croatia tax form. But I still do not like to pay taxes. I don't like giving over the money, and I don't like the time it takes and the trouble. And the system is not set up well for foreigners. When I first tried to pay the lady receiving my papers looked at me like I was an idiot. She asked, "Are you sure you want to do this." I said, "Yes." She hesitated with her hand over her computer keyboard, communicating to me that once I was in the system there was no going back. And I said, "Yes, put me in." And she did and that was it. I said, "Yes." for both reasons Paul mentions here. I was afraid how much money I would owe the Croatian government if they came after me. And my conscience before God was pushing me to obey this text. I believed it was what he wanted me to do.

This is what we do as Christians. "For because of this you also pay taxes, for *rulers* are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax *is due*; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor." We do this as an expression of faith in God, showing to him that we believe he has ordained government authorities for his purposes. We recognize his hand over secular government. We submit to him when we submit to them.

Thoughts for Further Discussion

That's the passage. And though this passage gives us a straightforward exhortation that we can put into practice right away, it also leaves quite a number of questions unanswered. Some questions are too big for our present discussion. I am not even going to bring them up. I was thinking, "What forms of government best model a biblical world view? That's a great question, but I am not even going to try to answer that one here. Though I will slip in that I am a fan of governments that recognize human sinfulness and so create a separation of powers. That's the idea of putting biblical principles into practice. But we can't get into all that, "What's the right kind? Or what's the best? Or what's the most Christian form of government?" Great question.

Here are three other questions I'd just like to begin to answer, just raise.

1. What about unjust, prejudice or oppressive governmental authorities? Do Christians simply obey?
2. Shouldn't Christians work to transform society?
3. What is the relationship between the church and secular society?

What about unjust, prejudicial or oppressive governmental authorities? Do Christians simply obey?

Paul does argue for submission to governmental authorities, and Paul is aware that those authorities do evil things. He experienced himself officially sanctioned beatings and jail time. He knows that he exhorts submission to regimes that may provide good for society, but also do evil. He still says submit. He is not saying, "Submit to good government authorities." Because we will never find them. He is just saying submit. It's like when you submit to your father. You are just supposed to submit. Must we then understand Paul as saying obey in all things and take whatever the government dishes out.

Well, not necessarily. It is interesting that Paul chose the word submit rather than obey. Submission shows acceptance of an ordered hierarchy of authority in society. Submission does not require the belief that the one being submitted to is always in the right or is acting out of godly motives. We can choose to submit to a higher authority even when we disagree with that authority or when we question the motives of that authority.

Submission as Christians, however, always assumes an even higher authority to whom we owe first loyalty. We recognize only one God and one divine King. That was a huge problem for early Christians in the Roman Empire required to worship Caesar. They could not. And the government viewed that harshly as a forerunner to rebellion. We submit to God first and only to human authority second. Now, we are going to argue this makes us good citizens, because our God in heaven has instructed us

to submit to earthly authority, so we are prepared to contribute to society as though we were serving God.

But this means we do not obey in all things. We ought not submit to governing authorities when we are ordered to act in a way that is evil or contrary to a clear moral command of God. Peter and John provide an early Christian example of civil disobedience. When the Jewish governing council commanded Peter and John, "Speak no more to any man in this name," Peter and John responded, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard (Acts 4:19)."

Martin Luther King, Jr. devoted intense thought to a biblical theology of civil disobedience. He wrestled with how to submit to governing authorities while also standing up for justice. In his 1963 *Letter From a Birmingham Jail*, Dr. King wrote, "I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for the law." Dr. King was prepared to take the consequence of his civil disobedience in a manner very similar to Peter and John.

Dr. King also held deeply that the means do not justify the ends. He called Christians to civil disobedience against racial injustices that were directly contrary to the biblical teaching of equality. Leading others from his understanding of the gospel, he reasoned, "We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies (King, *"Loving Your Enemies."* 1957)." That's the gospel. In his argument for submission to a higher authority, it combines the genuine love passage of Romans 12:9-21 that we looked at in the last lesson with respect for human authority from Romans 13:1-7.

This are only some introductory thoughts on the issue of unjust government. There is a lot more to think about. It's not easy to answer. These are hard questions. But let me go ahead and introduce the next one.

Shouldn't Christians work to transformation of society?

Dr. King gives us an affirmative answer to this question. "Yes. Christians should work to transform society?" And I think we all agree. Christians value order in society and also work towards the positive transformation of society. Christians ought to work for all kinds of change in society: for religious freedom, for protection of unborn children, for racial equality, for equal treatment for men and women, for help for the poor, for protection of the vulnerable, for end of corruption in government, and on and on.

And while we are promoting positive change in society, we must not forget to keep the main thing the main thing. The primary mission of the church is not the transformation of secular societies. We can consider Paul and Peter and James. What did they go to prison for? What did they write about in their New Testament writings? What did they speak about, according the record in Acts? It is imperative that the church keep the main thing as the main thing and let other things flow out of that. Paul has spent here seven verses speaking about government. Before that he spent eleven chapters writing about the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel is the good news and the gospel is all about Jesus. In this life and the next, salvation is not in government, and it's not in human society. Salvation is in Jesus. Jesus is the greatest need of every man, woman and child. Love demands that we keep the message of Jesus central to our preaching and to our mission. Paul started this letter proclaiming how happy he was to come to Rome to preach the gospel. "I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes, [...] for in it the righteousness of God is revealed." In the conclusion of this letter, he says that he has preached the gospel from Jerusalem to Illyricum and he can't wait to go on to Spain. Paul's mission is not primarily the transformation of human society but the proclamation of the gospel and the establishment of gospel communities within society.

Paul has not indicated in this letter that he sees the proclamation of the gospel as leading to the transformation of society. You don't see that here. Paul emphasizes the transformation of the people of God within society. And it does not mean that Paul does not hope for positive impact on society. It is not an either or. Either we care for the poor, or we preach the gospel. Either we protect the unborn, or we preach the gospel. Either we protest racial inequality, or we preach the gospel. It is a both/and with the important recognition that the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ is primary. It's foundational. Everything else is built on that, it comes out of that. We are responsible to society to keep the main thing the main thing. And that's clearly demonstrated in this letter by Paul. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ and the growth in love of gospel community. From this gospel community, we then seek to have an impact on the larger society, both in the further proclamation of Jesus Christ and in the promotion of what is righteous and true and good and just in the sight of God.

Now this leads right into our third and final question.

What is the relationship between the church and secular society?

I am going to come at this question from the broadest of strokes.

God is Lord over all human society. The covenants of Adam and Noah still stand. Those were covenants with all men and women. There is a common grace kingdom to which every human being belongs. God does not prevent these societies from perpetrating evil. He has given human beings over to themselves. But then God also does not leave human society completely to itself, to chaos and evil and anarchy. First, God gives rain and sun on all. He maintains a suitable, beautiful environment in which good and evil people live side by side, both receiving blessing. Second, God has not fully removed his image from human beings. There is still a moral impulse in people that curbs some evil and brings about some good. Third, God provides order in the form of human society with ruling authorities. These are human authorities. They are a mix of good and evil. God is providing for the common grace society.

God's authority over the common grace kingdoms is seen in the prophets of Israel, who mostly direct their commands to Israel and to Judah, but who also frequently direct their judgments to surrounding nations. Because God is god of all, curse and blessing are pronounced for superpowers like Egypt, Assyria and Babylon and regional powers like Philistia, Moab and Edom. God is still the God of the superpowers that dominate the global scene today, and he is God of the regional powers that surround whatever nation you live in. He is God over the common grace kingdoms. If he wants Nebuchadnezzar to reign, Nebuchadnezzar will reign. And if he wants Nebuchadnezzar to go mad like a wild animal, Nebuchadnezzar will go mad like a wild animal. God directs the hearts of kings. God is in control.

After the Tower of Babel incident, God decided to go with a divide and conquer strategy. He would call into being a new nation, a special grace kingdom. He made covenant, first with Abraham, then with Moses. This special grace kingdom was to be a light to the common grace kingdoms. With the coming of the Messiah and the end of the old covenant and start of the new, the special grace kingdom changed forms. It is no longer the geo-political nation Israel, but the spiritual community of all believers in Jesus Christ, the church. We are a kingdom within a kingdom, the church within a nation.

Everyone who contributes to the well-being of the common grace kingdom serves God, whether they do so with awareness or not. This is true because the common grace kingdom exists for the special grace kingdom, that is to say, secular society exists for the church. Secular society provides roads and sewers and electricity and food production and transportation and health care and civil administration, and law and justice, and all the infrastructure and services necessary for human society to exist. That blessing of common grace society exists for the furtherance and growth of the church. Consider the blessings provided by Rome, order and roads and a common language over a vast territory, all of which served the mission of the church in the proclamation of the gospel in its early initial spread.

So, every Christian, if you work in what we might call a secular job, you are not a full-time Christian worker or missionary, you are working for God, building up the common grace kingdom, building society, building the infrastructure that allows us to live, and even gives a context for the special grace kingdom, for the church. So, Paul can say that governing authorities are also ministers of God. This is not a wholesale validation of their actions. It is a recognition of the importance of the common grace kingdom for human beings and for the church.

We can also say that the special grace kingdom exists for the common grace kingdom, that is the church exists for secular society. I mean that is this way, God has instructed us not to separate ourselves out of society. We are to be a light to the world, a city on a hill. We exist to proclaim the glory of God and to call everyone back to true worship and to relationship with him.

Whether your primary vocation is for the building of the common grace kingdom or for the special grace kingdom, all of us who believe contribute also to the primary mission. We contribute to the mission of the special grace kingdom by living out the gospel wherever we are. And we contribute by offering ourselves as members of the body, giving our time and gifts and resources to God for the growth and mission of the church, of the gospel community.

So again, I am just touching on how the church relates to secular society. And you may have a different way of formulating or viewing this within the biblical story. I am just trying to get your thinking started. Let's wrap it up. You can think on these things later.

The command to submit to governing authorities and pay taxes is not hard at all to understand. What's hard is thinking rightly about the command in the face of some challenging issues. It is yet another area where we need to continue to present ourselves for service in the manner that we believe honors God and to continue to renew our minds so that we ourselves are transformed and better able to discern how to live for God in whatever society he has placed us.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as important, confusing, interesting or strange in Romans 13:1-7?
2. How does this text relate to free speech? Does submitting to governing authorities mean that you have to agree with authorities? Does submitting to governing authorities require a certain amount of respect in communication about authorities? Is it right to verbally degrade current ruling authorities even when you disagree with their policies?
3. How does this text relate to civil disobedience? Is it ever right for Christians to disobey law established by governing authorities? If so, when? And if so, in what manner?
4. If governing authorities serve God in bringing order to society, do the other jobs contributing to the welfare of society also serve God? How do you understand your own role as a Christian in your current vocation? In what sense are you a servant of God?

Lesson 33: Living in Common Grace Society

Romans 13:8-14

⁸ Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another;
for **he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled *the* law.**

(1) ⁹ For this, "YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY,
YOU SHALL NOT MURDER,
YOU SHALL NOT STEAL,
YOU SHALL NOT COVET,"
and if there is any other commandment,
it is summed up in this saying,
"YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."

(2) ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of *the* law.

¹¹ Do this, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep;
for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed.

¹² The night is almost gone, and the day is near.

Therefore

(1) let us lay aside the deeds of darkness
(2) and put on the armor of light.

¹³ Let us behave properly as in the day, (do)
not in carousing and drunkenness, (do not)
not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, (do not)
not in strife and jealousy. (do not)

¹⁴ But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, (do)
and make no provision for the flesh in regard to *its* lusts. (do not)

NASB

Introduction

The community of believers is a community within a much larger community. We are the special grace kingdom existing as a light in the midst of the common grace kingdom. Christians have swung to both sides of the pendulum, on one far side walling themselves off from society and on the other conforming to the values and behaviors of their society.

Remembering back to Romans 12:1-2, Paul challenges us to present ourselves to God as an act of worship out of a heart of thankfulness and wonder towards his great mercies. We respond from the heart. We present our bodies. And we renew our minds. How do we renew our minds so as to present ourselves as members of a common human society in a way that is pleasing and acceptable to God?

Paul recommends two perspectives for us to adopt as we venture out. Renew your mind in this way. Live with this perspective.

1. Live as though you owe a debt of love to everyone you encounter.
2. Live as though you are waking up to the clear light of day.

Let's read the text, Romans 13:8-14. How are we as Christians to live in human society?

[Read Romans 13:8-14]

Paul's first principle here for living in society is to live as though you owe a debt of love to everyone you meet. This principle is covered in our first three verses.

1. Live as though you owe a debt of love to everyone you meet. (13:8-10)

Paul connects this scenario back to the previous one with the language of debt. He ended his exhortation on submitting to governing authorities with the practical command to pay taxes as that which we owe to the governing structures of our society. The context of owing nothing to anyone comes from having just said, "Do not owe the government anything, but pay up."

But Paul is not staying on the financial topic. He is using the language to set us up for a shocker. Owe nothing to anyone is a great bit of wisdom, and we can work towards that. Clear your debts. Pay your bills. Owe nothing. But then Paul goes and adds, "except to love one another." He sets us up with a debt that never gets repaid. The only debt you have is to love each other. Just that. That's it. That simple.

He does not explain why we have this debt. We can imagine that we owe this debt because of what God has done for us. God has loved us. So, we now owe love to everyone God loves, which is everyone. Remember Jesus' parable about the servant forgiven much by his master who then went out and threw men under him in prison for not paying the small debts they owed him. The master didn't take too kindly to that. As we have been forgiven, so we forgive. As we have been loved, so we love. It is the ultimate idea of paying it forward. The overflowing love of God to us never ceases and is never repaid. If we pay that forward, then our debt to others as a debt to God always stands. We always have something to pay ahead.

This is not to say that we pay off our debt to God by loving others. Rather, we show our gratitude to God and worship of God by imitating him. That's the idea that you pick up on in Ephesians 5:1-2, "Be imitators of God as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma."

We can also think about a debt of love as an obligation of our new nature. That lines up with 8:12-13 that we are under obligation to live according to the Spirit because we have been made alive in the Spirit. This is who we are now. We are sons and daughters of God. We have been made new creatures in Christ. We are being conformed into his image. Therefore, we have a moral obligation, not imposed on us but which arises out of our new nature, to live with integrity, to live out who we are becoming.

The focus on love is interesting when we remember that Paul already addressed sincere love in Romans 12:9-21. So, we could ask, "Why come back to love, now?" So, let's review the logical connections in our first three scenarios of this application section of Romans. Our first scenario was about the body of Christ, that was in 12:3-8. Then Paul gave us the sincere love passage which mostly focused on believers loving one another in the new gospel community. Having raised there a question of justice, Paul moved to the third scenario in 13:1-7 to address government. And there we had to think about the church as a community within a community. We are the special kingdom of God. We are made up of believers in Jesus Christ, who live in the common grace community, which is the community of all men, separated from God, but not left absolutely cut off.

Now in our fourth scenario Paul is moving from relating to the authorities in society to people in general in society. And he brings us back to love. Though in this love passage he takes us to the Ten Commandments. And by bringing the Ten Commandments into the conversation, Paul creates links with at least three different legal contexts.

First, there is a connection to the context of law in society. Paul has just said that if we do good in society, we do not have to live in fear of the governing authorities. The Ten Commandments were the center piece of Jewish legal code. What does it mean to do good in human society? Well, obey the Ten Commandments. That is a great model to go by.

Second, there is a connection to the context of Mosaic law. Now, Paul has argued already that Christ is the end of the law. Romans 1-11 showed us how that kind of language raises huge questions. If Christ is the end of law, does that mean we are without law as individuals? And it is not only a question about personal morality. We can see here it is also a question about social order. Paul addressed that question of lawlessness in chapters 5-8, arguing that grace ends the law, but is the beginning of an even greater practical righteousness being lived out by those made alive in Jesus Christ. Bringing up the Ten Commandments here provides Paul another opportunity to show how the end of the Mosaic Covenant does not equate to an abandonment of moral obligation for New

Covenant believers. We have an obligation to love our neighbor which will fulfill the moral obligations to members of society that were required by Mosaic law.

Third, there is a connection to the context of Jesus' teaching on the Ten Commandments. We noted that Paul's language on love in chapter 12 made a couple of allusions back to Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. In a section of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:21-48, Jesus gave an expanded teaching on the Ten Commandments. According to Jesus, "do not murder" covers more than not killing someone. We will come back to Jesus' development of the Commandments in a moment. Paul's words here also bring out Jesus' famous teaching that the whole of the Law and the Prophets depend on the two commandments to love God and to love your neighbor, that's in Matthew 22:37-39. Though Paul's reference to law connects us to three different contexts, Romans law, Mosaic law and Jesus' teaching on law, this connection to the teaching of Jesus is the primary one for us in our interpretation of Paul here.

This perspective on viewing ourselves with a debt of love to the members of society around us is described in the first three verses of our passage. It starts with an exhortation and a claim in verse 8 which is followed up with two supporting statements, one in verse 9 and the other in verse 10. Let's consider these three verses and then come back to Jesus' teaching about the Ten Commandments.

The Exhortation and Claim (13:8)

In verse 8, Paul exhorts us to consider ourselves as having a debt of love to others. And he then adds this claim to that exhortation, "he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law." The next two verses support that claim that loving your neighbor fulfills the law. Let's read the first supporting statement in verse 9.

Supporting statement 1 (13:9)

⁹ For this, "YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY,
YOU SHALL NOT MURDER,
YOU SHALL NOT STEAL,
YOU SHALL NOT COVET,"
and if there is any other commandment,
it is summed up in this saying,
"YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."

Now, if verse 8 stood alone we might think Paul's statement that loving our neighbor fulfills the law was a reference back to obeying the law of human society laid down by governing authorities. Instead, we see that Paul has the Mosaic Law in mind, which was a morally, higher version of civil law than you would have found in the Roman society. Paul's claim is that loving our neighbor fulfills the high version of Mosaic civil code. The command to love your neighbor was not new to Jesus. It was a quote from Moses. It comes from Leviticus 19:18. Leviticus 19 is an important chapter in Mosaic Law in that it establishes the basis for law. Moses begins and repeats through the chapter this injunction from God, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." "Why should you obey these laws? Because they reflect my holiness as God. I am holy. You be holy." What does it look like to be holy? Well, Leviticus 19 gives us a practical list and in that list he includes commands like love your neighbor and love the foreigner in your midst. Jesus had the foundational principle of being holy as God is holy in mind during his Sermon on the Mount. And he said it this way there, "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." The character of God is our model and our motivation for law.

The Ten Commandments starts with laws referring to our relationship with God and then moves to laws referring to our relationship with people. The law to honor our father and mother could be seen as a link between the two. Paul refers here only to the Ten Commandments dealing with other people. And that makes sense when we recognize that he is helping us understand how to live in

relationship to people in human society. And in helping us to do that he is quoting those commands specifically from the Ten Commandments that address that, that address living in society.

It is not clear why Paul choose to start with adultery instead of murder. He changes the order. And I am not sure exactly why he dropped out, "Do not bear false testimony." That commandment is about justice, and it's about not subverting the courts as a false witness. So, perhaps it does not fit as well with his theme of focusing on others in society. But after skipping that ninth commandment, "Do not bear false witness," he does include the tenth commandment. And that tenth commandment stands out as the one commandment that is not enforceable. It's a commandment of the heart. So, while we might find evidence that someone has committed adultery, or murder, or theft, it is quite difficult to prove whether someone is coveting or not, unless that coveting actually leads to an act of adultery, or murder or theft, because the coveting begins in our heart. That's important when Jesus starts to develop these commandments. He is going to start with the heart. And it is interesting to note that that is a principle in the Ten Commandments itself. The Ten Commandments includes at least one command that is a heart command.

At the end of the verse Paul adds a catch all comment, "and if there is any other commandment it is summed up in this saying, you shall love your neighbor as yourself." By saying, "if there is any other commandment," we see that Paul chose laws that apply specifically to his current context, but we also see with he uses a catch all comment, so that we do not need to overly think about what he left out, because he is saying that all of the law. These four commandments sum up the whole social and moral requirements of the law. Which in turn are going to be summed up in the one command to love your neighbor.

Paul is not reapplying here the Mosaic law to believers in Jesus. He is saying that if you live out the law of love given to us by Jesus, then you will indeed fulfill the law of Moses. The Mosaic code still has this value for us, in that it helps us consider, to understand from God's point of view, what does it truly mean to love our neighbor in society.

Supporting statement 2 (13:10)

In verse 10, Paul makes a second supporting statement. "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law." Here he simply points out that if we follow a principle of love then we will not wrong our neighbor. We will not wrong him through adultery or through murder or through theft. We will not even wrong him through coveting his stuff. The requirement of civil law is met by doing no harm, by not wronging.

In fact, if we truly do love our neighbor then we will go far beyond the expectations of civil law. The laws of society focus on preventing harm, not on requiring good. We see this in the Ten Commandments. The bar is pretty low. Do not commit adultery. Do not murder. Do not steal. Those are extreme examples of bad behavior. They are enforceable laws meant to curb the harm of sin in society.

The law of love that Paul advocates is a positive command. To love is not merely to resist harming somebody but to work for the good of somebody. This debt of love, this insistent that we should love our neighbor goes far beyond what's required by social law. The Old Testament code had to provide enforceable civil laws for a nation. But it also pointed to this higher moral law. There is more, than might first appear, to the commandments do not murder, do not commit adultery, and do not steal. Let's consider that. Let's consider how Jesus taught these commands.

The Moral Continuum of the Ten Commandments

Can we really imagine that God would be happy with our behavior if all we succeeded in doing was to not commit murder? Is that the bar? I did not commit murder today. God must be really happy with me! I resisted the urge. Everybody is still alive. God must just think I am wonderful.

Now, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches us that the act of taking someone's life is only the most negative extreme of murder. He says to call someone a fool is also to break the law of murder.

There is a negative continuum that moves from thoughts to words to actions. That changes our perspective. Have I murdered someone today? Have I hated in my mind, with my words, with my actions another person today? To murder is to disdain someone's life so much that you would be willing to remove their life for your own desire or gain. That disdain begins in the mind. When we begin to devalue or disdain or disrespect the life of another human being in our mind, then we are beginning down the continuum of murder.

The next step on the continuum is the move from hateful thoughts to hateful words. To communicate disdain, to put down, to devalue, to dismiss, to show distaste or hate for another human being with our words is to murder. It is to take life. "You're nothing. That was stupid. You're an idiot. You know what, you are a moron. I don't care what you do. You just like your father. You never get it right. I hate you. I wish you were dead." Those are words of murder. Those words that suck life. They take life. And they are on this continuum. Words can move in intensity and in hatefulness down the continuum and at some point, just as thoughts move to words, words move to actions. To spit on, to scratch, to pull hair, to kick, to hit, all with the intent of harming, devaluing another person, that is murder. Until you finally get to the most negative extreme which is actually taking another person's life. To sum up, disdain for the life of another human being expressed in thoughts, words or actions is the sin of murder.

Recognizing murder to cover a range of negative thoughts and behaviors, much more than killing a person, we might still ask, "Is this what God is after? Is God pleased with me if I succeed in not murdering in my mind, in my words, in my actions?" I think it is a good thought. You are resisting sin. It is a start. But it is not the goal.

It is not enough to just recognize the negative side of the continuum. God calls us not only to abstain from death but to pursue life. So, we turn our back on these things. We turn our back on murder and death, and we turn to face to Jesus Christ, to the positive side of the continuum. So, now we need to ask, "What is the positive opposite of murder? What's the extreme opposite on the positive side? What's the opposite of murder?" We might say, "Love." That would be natural, and it would be close. But when I am of the positive opposite extreme, I am thinking of something more concrete, more specific. I like John 15:13 as the positive opposite to murder, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends." The opposite of disdaining someone's life so much that you would remove it is to esteem someone's life so much that you would give up yours to preserve theirs.

It is rare that a human being is called to act on this positive extreme of laying down their physical life for someone else. But on the continuum of love we have opportunity all the time to set aside our life, to set aside our desires, our needs for the sake of someone else. To take our time and our energy to give life to another human being. Love calls us to the thoughts, the words, the actions that affirm and build up life. This is the opposite of murder. It is creating life, affirming life, building life.

So, avoiding the negative side of the continuum may enable us to keep the laws of society but we do not pay off the debt of love with that. Love is not simply not harming. Love is actually moving forward in helping. Love is a positive action. Words like these, "You did that so well. I appreciate the work you put in. I am so glad God put you in this family. Can I give you a helping hand? That's a great idea. I really appreciate your honesty, or I appreciate your kindness, or I admire your courage." There are a thousand examples of sincere, wholesome words that instead of taking life give life. That's what you have to ask yourself. "What kind of words are regularly coming out of my mouth. Am I a person who takes life with my words? Or am I a person who gives life with my words?"

And beyond our words are our actions, actions that help out, actions that communicate concern, respect, value, love. All of this is in the command, "Do not murder." Do not disdain the life of your neighbor, but love your neighbor by showing you value her life.

Now, how about the command, "Do not commit adultery?" Does it work the same way? Well, what do you think? Would you guess that my wife is happy and satisfied with me if the height of my moral behavior is to not commit adultery. "Hi honey. I didn't commit adultery again today. Aren't you so

pleased with me?" No. That's an awfully low bar. It is the civil code. And it's a law that is enforceable. It's to place value and integrity on the family. But the negative side of this command starts long before a married person actually has sex with somebody else.

Jesus taught that if a man looks on a woman with lust in his heart, then he has committed adultery. I do not think Jesus meant that initial attraction or lust that just springs to mind that you have no control over. I think he meant that first moment when we start to turn that initial attraction or lust over in our mind. As soon as we take it and do something with it. As soon as we take a mental step forward, that's crossing the line, that's adultery. When we then create a narrative in our minds of carrying out any kind of romantic relationship or sexual action in our minds, we are going further and further into adultery. And those thoughts then come out as words and words move to action.

And again, God does not call us simply to resist the negative side of the continuum. He doesn't just want us to avoid death. He wants us to live life. So, we turn our backs on the thoughts, words and acts of adultery, and we face toward Jesus. What would you say is the positive opposite of adultery? I like Ephesians 5:25 for this one, "Love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave himself up for her." My wife does not want me to just not commit adultery, she wants me to give my life for her. She wants me to love her and desire intimacy with her. She wants relationship and with me. She wants me to show my love through actions that communicate that I value her, and that I think she is wonderful. This is life in Jesus. When my thoughts, words and actions show love to my wife.

And also, we could add when my thoughts, words and actions treat other women who are not my wife with respect as my sisters in Christ. Loving my neighbor in this means that when sexual thoughts come into my mind connected to women I may meet in society, I reject those thoughts, and I replace those thoughts with thoughts of value and esteem. I say to myself in my mind that she is a creation of God. She is in the image of God. And she deserves the respect and esteem that everyone made in God's image deserves as one loved and gifted by him. To love my neighbor is to consider how to show respect, how to show value.

So now, how about, "Do not steal?" I will leave you to consider how this continuum works. How does stealing begin as thoughts in the mind on the negative side? And what is the positive opposite of stealing? How does it work in the mind positively? And what are the positive actions that are the opposite?

In regard to "Do not covet" that command could fit well on the continuum of all the others. To covet is a desire in my mind that can pull me down the wrong side of the continuum for do not murder, or for do not commit adultery, or for do not steal. All of these can follow a desire to have that which is not rightly mine. Desiring what's not mine can lead towards murder or towards theft or towards adultery. Covetousness expresses dissatisfaction with what God has given and with the circumstances he has allowed me to be in. The positive opposite is to turn my face towards Jesus and to find satisfaction in him.

Before moving on there is one last question for verses 8-10. "Who should we love? Who is our neighbor?" Well, we know that already don't we? We all know the story Jesus told of the despised Samaritan who was the real neighbor to the injured Jew. The man beside you is your neighbor. The woman you pass on the way is your neighbor. Everyone in your society is your neighbor. And if they desire your harm, you might want to say, "They are no neighbor. They are my enemy." And that may be true. That's a fair point. But then I think Jesus also had something to say about our enemies.

In order to renew our minds to think rightly about living as new creatures in society, Paul first says, "Live as though you owe a debt of love to everybody you meet." Now, in verses 11-14 he gives us a second thought for engaging society. He says, "Live as though you are waking up to the clear light of day."

2. Live as though you are waking up to the clear light of day.

Paul writes in verses 11-12, "Do this, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed. The night is almost gone, and

the day is near." So, it is not yet daytime, but it's not quite night either. It is the early hours of the morning. The night is almost gone. The day is near. It is time to wake up. Paul's picture is the picture of the coming day, and it communicates both urgency and clarity.

Urgency of the Day

The urgency lies in the arrival of something new and momentous. We already noticed Paul's ability to use the word salvation in either the past tense as in 8:24, "For in hope we have been saved" or in future tense as in 5:9, "we shall be saved from the wrath of God through him." So, when Paul speaks here of the nearness of salvation, he does not mean we are not yet saved. And it does not mean that Paul is inconsistent. It is a recognition of the already but not yet reality of our salvation. We are already declared righteous and thus, secure in forgiveness, in our salvation. But we are not yet complete and whole. Paul said earlier, "we await the redemption of our bodies." And the creation also awaits its renewal along with the glory of the children of God. Jesus is coming again. He is going to create a new heaven and a new earth. We will live with him in a glorified existence. The full salvation of all things is yet to come, and Paul says it is nearer than when we first believed. The full light of day is about to rise up.

It is not exactly clear what Paul means by our salvation is nearer. The letter to the Romans comes about 25 years after the resurrection of Jesus. That means the earliest Christian communities have had a generation to grow up in church and now even have some grandbabies of the first believers in church. Even if some of the first disciples expected Jesus to return quite soon, by the time of writing Romans there has been some time for those expectations to be somewhat tempered.

Jesus also teaches a sense of urgent preparation for his coming in certain parables, such as the one about the thief who may come in the night or the servant whose master has gone on a trip or the ten virgins waiting the coming of the bridegroom to come. All of those are in Matthew 24:42-25:13. So, even though he would not return for more than 2000 years, God still communicated this way. He wants us alert in every generation. He wants us to live with a sense of urgency at the coming of Christ. Live as though he will come tomorrow. You never know when you will see Jesus face to face. It might be tomorrow. It will certainly be no longer than the length of your life. Every day we are closer to the day we stand before our Savior, whether at his coming to us or our going to him. We can see the gleam of dawn peaking over the horizon, lighting up the landscape. The night is nearly over.

Clarity of the Day

The coming dawn gives a sense of urgency. The coming dawn also brings clarity. We have begun to see with the eyes of faith. It is that moment of the morning where everything has been dark, but all the sudden you realize that you can make out all the shapes. We have begun to see reality. We see sin as death. We turn our backs on the night of adultery, of murder, of hatred and theft. And we turn to face the light of Jesus Christ. And we begin to see what true life really is. The coming day is bringing clarity.

Paul then gives us a therefore verse in verse 12. "The night is almost gone, and the day is near. Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light." There are two actions involved in getting dressed. The first is to take off your night clothes. The second is to dress as a soldier of Christ. "Lay aside the deeds of darkness. Put on the armor of light." Then in verses 13 and 14 Paul starts both with what we are to do, with the positive, with the putting on of the armor of light. And they both make statements about what we are not to do, about laying aside the deeds of darkness.

The do statements are general and unspecified. In verse 13, "behave properly as in the day" and in verse 14, "put on the Lord Jesus Christ." These are general exhortations to positive behavior which are similar to Paul's "owe no one anything but the debt of love" and "love your neighbor as yourself." These are quite general. They are not really specific. But to get an idea of what it might look like concretely all we have to do is go back to the sincere love section of 12:9-21 where we had about 20 positive exhortations. There was plenty there for us to do.

In our present verses, Paul gets a little more concrete with what we are not to do. We are not to live in the sins of human society. "Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy." The first two pairs of prohibitions could fit under the typical meaning of the word "to party." So, no partying. Carousing is associated with excessive feasting and goes along naturally with drunkenness. The Greek word translated in my Bible as sexual promiscuity is just the word for sex, but the context indicates inappropriate sex, which in Paul's mind would have been any sex outside of marriage between a husband and wife. Sensuality was a more general word for all kinds of inappropriate behavior. Strife and jealousy fit in with this kind of party scene. Drinking, sex and sensuality quite frequently lead to strife, and to argument, and to jealousy. Those two words also fit with the dark side of human society in general.

Verse 14 just then adds, "make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts." And this is a great challenge for us in our already but not yet state as we enter into society. With our body not yet transformed, we still covet what is not ours, and we still desire what is not life. And these are the types of things that society urges on us. "You will find life in this. It's fun. Nobody's going to get hurt." But if we have lived long enough, we know that is foolishness. Somebody always gets hurt. And we have been hurt. These types of behaviors tear down who we are and who we are meant to be. They hurt us. But more than that, they always hurt other people. Sex outside of marriage leaves a trail of pain and dysfunction. Drunkenness, drug use does the same thing. Jealousies and arguments and bitterness tear away at our heart and at our soul. That living a life of sensuality hurts no one is simply a false narrative.

Conclusion

We are called to live life in society; to be in society but not of it; to be salt and to be light. As you go to work or to school or the gym or the cinema or the club or the beach, wherever you go that there are other people, keep these two principles in mind. Live as though you owe everyone around you a debt of love. And live knowing that you are waking up in Jesus to the clear light of day. So, you are putting off the things of night, and you are putting on the things of day.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as important, confusing, interesting or strange in Romans 13:8-14?
2. What is a possible positive opposite for, "Do not steal"? What are thoughts, words and actions that lie along the negative side of the continuum of "Do not steal"? What are thoughts, words and actions that lie on the positive side of that same continuum?
3. Imagine that you are upset or frustrated by another person. Think of a recent past experience, maybe while standing in a ticket line or trying to return an item to a store or interacting with a teacher or confronting a neighbor. Try to remember your emotions. Now imagine that person as someone to whom you owe a debt of love. How does that change your emotions towards that person? How might that have changed your behavior?
4. How does owing a debt of love to other people affect your perspective towards the poor or oppressed or struggling in society? Does it change your perspective towards someone in need to consider yourself in debt to them?
5. How does thinking about the eminence of Christ's return and the coming of his kingdom affect how you live day by day? What do you think it would look like to live with a sense of urgency?
6. Why do you think Paul chooses the examples he chooses in verse 13 as representative behaviors not proper to the daytime?
7. What does it mean to you, to put on Christ?

Lesson 34: Living With True Acceptance in Disagreement About Issues of Conscience

Romans 14:1-12

¹ Now accept the one who is weak in faith, *but* not for *the purpose of* passing judgment on his opinions.

^{1a} ² One person has faith that he may eat all things,

^{2a} but he who is weak eats vegetables *only*.

^{1b} ³ The one who eats is not to regard with **contempt** the one who does not eat,

^{2b} and the one who does not eat is not to **judge** the one who eats,
for God has accepted him.

⁴ Who are you to judge the servant of another?

To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

^{1c} ⁵ One person regards one day above another,

^{2c} another regards every day *alike*.

Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind.

^{2d} ⁶ He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord,
and he who eats, does so for the Lord,
for he gives thanks to God;

^{1d} and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat,
and gives thanks to God.

⁷ For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself;

⁸ for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord;
therefore whether we live or die,
we are the Lord's.

⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

^{2e} ¹⁰ But you, why do you **judge** your brother?

Or you again, why do you regard your brother with **contempt**?

For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.

¹¹ For it is written, "AS I LIVE, SAYS THE LORD, EVERY KNEE SHALL BOW TO ME,
AND EVERY TONGUE SHALL GIVE PRAISE TO GOD."

¹² So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God

NASB

Introduction

In Romans chapter 14 we come to the longest and final scenario of Paul's application section. It covers 36 verses from 14:1-15:13. So, we will take three lessons to cover the whole section.

Paul's big idea exhortation is to accept one another. We get that command at the beginning in 14:1 and towards the end in 15:7. The command to accept is given to the strong and the weak. There is a disagreement going on here. And before we get into the text, I'll go ahead and tell you what I think the problem is all about.

How specific is this issue to the Romans?

Some interpreters argue that we should not think that Paul was aware of any issue going on in the Roman church. They see Paul's argument of the gospel in 1-11 and the other application issues in 12-13 as applying to any church in general. What we have here, then, is another issue that might apply generally to churches Paul experienced in his missionary work. They would put accepting one another in the same category as exhortation to live as members of a body and to submit to governing authorities. I do not think that is correct. I believe that Paul has shifted here to a specific issue affecting the Romans. As we will see, the issue fits a church that started with strong Jewish leadership but then transitioned to Gentile leadership. And also, Paul had plenty of friends in Rome like his co-workers Priscilla and Aquilla who may have given him a heads up about a particular challenge they faced in their house-churches.

Other interpreters go in the complete opposite direction, seeing this passage as the primary reason Paul wrote the letter in the first place. They notice Paul mentioning Jew and Gentiles directly in

about six passages and they notice the emphasis given to Gentile inclusion in chapters 9-11. And they argue that the whole gospel presentation in all of those chapters was written as a basis for addressing the practical problem of acceptance raised here in chapter 14. Now, the positive about this view is the correct recognition of Jew and Gentile inclusion as a consistent motif through Romans. And the correct recognition that it is related to the issue in chapter 14. The problem with the view is that it makes too much out of this issue. Consider the much more problematic issues addressed in churches like Galatia and 1 Corinthians. It is hard to believe that Paul spent 13 chapters here in Romans just to set up a base for addressing this problem in chapter 14. We also need to take care not to oversimplify Romans, just because we recognize this motif that is going on. In our second lesson of this series, we recognized that Paul's got multiple purposes for writing. He was writing Romans to introduce himself to that church, he was writing with a missional purpose, with an apologetic purpose, with a pastoral purpose. And as we think about it, each of these purposes is served theologically as Paul develops the theme of Jew and Gentile inclusion in the gospel. So, it is way oversimplifying to suggest that the only reason Paul wrote about all of this was so that he could address this problem that was going on. They are related, but it is more complicated than that.

This issue is not the main motive for Romans. That is going too far. But it is right to recognize that that a struggle to accept one another over issues relating to Jewish and Gentile experience of the gospel was causing real problems in Rome. And they are not problems that ended in the first century. The challenge to accept fellow Christians over similar issues continues in our communities.

So, we need to clarify exactly what was going on.

Clarifying the issue (as observance of Mosaic ceremonial laws)

In the passage, Paul is going to give us three examples of disagreements that the strong and the weak have with one another. First, he mentions disagreement over what a person should eat. Then he mentions the observance of certain days. And then he adds on drinking wine. Scholars have come up with a variety of possibilities of what issues these examples reflect. Are these ascetic Romans who forbid lavish eating and drinking? Are they the Stoics? Are they days that are connected to Pagan customs? Is Paul worried about people attending pagan celebrations of eating and drinking? What is going on?

Well, the text points strongly and clearly, I think, to the practice of certain Roman Christians, maybe mostly Jewish, who believe that Old Covenant ceremonial laws still apply to how a believer should ought to live out the Christian life. That understanding fits best with the motif that has run through the whole letter, regarding the inclusion of Jew and Gentile in the gospel of Jesus Christ and with recognizing that Paul is teaching that there is an end to the Mosaic covenant.

The issues reflect core issues to Jewish observance of the Mosaic Law which proscribes what foods may be eaten and what days are to be kept as holy Sabbaths. And Paul's strong language in 14:14 of clean versus unclean picks up the Jewish way of understanding these food and drink rules. Food and drink could be unclean either as a direct prohibition of the Mosaic code, no eating shrimp and no drinking blood. Those things are always unclean. Or food and drink could be unclean through an incorrect process of preparation. Clean kosher food requires attention to both content, what is the food actually made of, and how is it prepared.

There is no prohibition on wine in the Old Testament, but there may have been concern among Jews not to drink wine prepared by unclean hands with unclean implements or there may have been partially poured out in libation to the gods. If a Jew did not know the source of the meat or the wine, even if it was not a forbidden food or drink, the Jew might not eat or drink. Daniel made that very decision when he was taken to Babylon. Rather than risking eating something unclean, he ate only vegetables, and he just drank water. And in Daniel's case, as one clearly still under the Mosaic covenant, that was an upright and good decision. The question facing the Christians of Rome was whether any of these requirements still applied to them. Should they abstain like Daniel did?

Clarifying the issue further (as a 2nd question rather than 1st question issue)

Now, we need to define the issue even more specifically. If we have the promotion of Mosaic law from Jewish Christians or Gentile Christians, then we have to ask, "What were they saying about the importance of keeping those laws? Is it an issue of salvation or is it an issue of living out salvation? Is it a first question issue or is it a second question issue?" For comparison, we should consider Paul's words about such issues to the Galatians. When Peter stopped eating with Gentiles in Galatia, Paul confronted him publicly. Paul used very strong language in that letter over seemingly similar issues. The difference is that in Galatia Paul was dealing with a first question problem, and in Romans he is dealing with a second question problem. That is to say that in Galatians certain Jews had come preaching a legalistic emphasis on keeping the law which was perverting the gospel of grace. So, Paul says there, "Even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed," or "let him be damned." Paul does not mince words when someone threatens the answer to the first question of covenant, "What makes someone acceptable in the eyes of God?" The answer is 100% grace received by faith. Any attempt to mix in some law or some moral requirement will be met by Paul with extremely strong language.

Yet, here in Romans we see very calm and understanding language. And it is not a change made by an older Paul over against the words of a more intense younger Paul. The change is not in Paul. The issue is different. And to find middle ground between Galatians and Romans, we could also go to 1 Corinthians 9-10 and Colossians 2. The language addressing similar issues in those two letters is stronger than Romans and not as strong as Galatians. And this leads me to believe that we are solidly into a second question issue with the Romans. They are not asking about first question, "What makes me acceptable?" They are asking about, "Being accepted, how ought I live? How do I please God with my life as a response to grace?" The issue here in Romans is not a legalistic push for salvation by law but a belief that keeping these laws honors God. It is the belief that it is morally and spiritually right to do these things in our attempt to present ourselves to God as an acceptable offering and sacrifice. Paul validates this attempt to live for God, but he also urges further renewing of the mind to come to an even better understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Clarifying the issue even further (as an issue of conscience, not an opinion issue or sin issue)

We can still get even a little more precise about the issues under consideration in these scenarios. We have said they are issues of conscience that have to do with keeping Jewish ceremonial laws. And we have said that they are not a first question issue but a second question issue. We are not saying I need to live out the law to gain salvation. But I want to obey these ceremonial laws as a way of giving honor to God, observing God's word. So, to get a little more precise we need to think about what is not going on here.

There is conflict among the strong and the weak, but it is more than a disagreement of opinion. I mentioned, for example, in our passage about spiritual gifts that conflict sometimes arises out of our positive motivations and passions for service. As the Holy Spirit is working in us, then we see things that need to be done. These are disagreements about the use of our resources and the strategic direction of our community. Should we spend more time and money on discipleship or more on caring for those in need? Do we need to hire a new music minister or a youth pastor? Are we contributing enough to international missions or should we think more about local evangelism? There is often not an obvious right or wrong decision connected to these disagreements. We have limited resources, limited people, limited time, limited money, that we have to figure out how are we going to use them.

On the other hand, we are also not talking about immorality in this passage. Paul is not recommending here that we accept the lifestyle of the sexually immoral or defend someone who acts hatefully or dismiss drunkenness. Those are all issues addressed in our previous section about how we ought to live in society, and that all those things belong to behaviors of the night but that we have awoken to the day. And we are not to live like that. That is not what we are talking about here. The weak are not the sinful in this scenario. And we are not begin told here how to handle

immorality in our communities. That is a different case. So, the way that Paul applies acceptance here would not apply in the same way if we were talking about immorality or sin.

What we are talking about here are issues of conscience, particularly in relation to ceremonial observance. Some brothers and sisters in the community believed that God wants Christians to keep the Mosaic food laws and to observe certain Mosaic holy days. They felt that it would be a sin to not do this. And others disagreed. They believed that the establishment of a new covenant in Jesus Christ has freed Christians from the ceremonial observances of the Mosaic code.

Now, we in our day, we experience these kinds of disagreements when we move from one denomination to another or from one generation to another or from one culture to another. Should we dress up to go to church? How important is that? Should we keep Sunday as the Sabbath? Should we raise our hands in worship? Is it permissible to clap? Should children be kept silent during worship? Should we attend evening service on Sunday? How important is it to go to prayer on Wednesday? How important is it to have a quiet time every single morning?

I've encountered a lot of these issues as a Southern American Protestant serving God in Croatia. Think about this. In Split we attended a brethren church that encourages head covering and uses real wine drunk out of one common communion cup during the Lord's supper. We met in a community center that had a photo of the current Pope on the wall. And one evening we invited our Cru students to join church members at the community center in watching a World Cup soccer game. So, a new student brought to our brethren church, which has a photo of the Pope on the wall, a keg of beer to share with everybody. And as I am just taking this all in, one of our church elders walks into the room. What is his first response? What's your response just hearing that story? Is there anything in there that strikes you as interesting or as odd or as out of place?

I remember forgetting to tell the members of a visiting American church team who came to our church that we drank wine, not grape juice, for the Lord's supper. And one of the women on the team had committed to never drinking alcohol. She had never put alcohol in her mouth. And she just assumed it was grape juice. How do you think she felt when she drank?

We have certain rules that we live by. They may come from our interpretation of the Bible or from our culture or from our church up-bringing or from a reaction against our church up-bringing. But whatever the rules are, we do not agree on all the same rules.

So, how do we respond to that kind of disagreement within the Christian community? Disagreement that is not clearly sin, but is also not simply disagreement over strategy or resources? These are issues that some have a strong conviction about and others do not.

Paul is going to help us think about how to approach such issues. The main thing is to accept one another. But it is not that simple, so we need to look closely at what he says and consider how to apply Paul's principles to our communities. We will consider now 14:1-12, and then we will pick up the rest in a later lesson. So, let's read the text, Romans 14:1-12.

[Romans 14:1-12]

The pattern to these twelve verses is called a ring pattern. In the beginning, Paul addresses the problem with an exhortation, that's verses 1-3. Paul then comes back to restate the problem again at the end in verses 10-12. It's in verses 4-9 that he develops the problem. And that's where we are going to pick up our two principles to live by.

Let's consider the initial exhortation and statement of the problem. So, this will be 14:1-3.

I. The Exhortation to Accept amidst disagreement of spiritual practice (14:1-3)

It starts off, "Now accept the one who is weak in faith, *but not for the purpose of* passing judgment on his opinions." Paul addresses his exhortation to those who consider themselves strong. He tells them, "Accept the weak." So, we cannot get around the fact that Paul considers certain Christians weak in faith. Paul's making a distinction. As we go through the text, we will see that Paul does not mean that they are weak in their faith in Jesus Christ. He is using faith here in a broader sense. Their

faith is what they believe. It is the gospel. They are weak in some aspect of their understanding of the implications of the gospel. They have not figured out how to apply the gospel correctly to certain aspects of life.

And Paul expects the strong to accept the weak. The Greek word literally means to welcome. So, to accept is to receive, to welcome. The strong are not supposed to do this for the purpose of passing judgment on the opinions of the weak. They are not to treat the weak as weak or as second-class citizens. They are not to invite them in and then look down on them. The acceptance is a wholehearted welcome into fellowship. And it should come from the heart.

The next two verses give us more insight into the problem. Paul says,

- 1^a 2 One person has faith that he may eat all things,
- 2^a but he who is weak eats vegetables *only*.
- 1^b 3 The one who eats is not to regard with **contempt** the one who does not eat,
- 2^b and the one who does not eat is not to **judge** the one who eats,
- for God has accepted him.

So, our first specific example is about kosher food laws. The weak person avoids any possible contamination by eating only vegetables. Paul does not actually call the other side strong here. He does in 15:1. But here he only uses the word weak. I am just assuming the other side is the strong. Perhaps for now Paul does not want to overly build up the maturity of the strong or the pride of the strong. A person can be strong in understanding the freedom of the gospel and yet show great immaturity in how they apply that freedom, even to the harm of others.

In fact, I think this is quite a natural response to growing up in an overly conservative or overly legalistic Christian community. And when young believers figure out that in the gospel a lot of the rules that have been applied to them shouldn't really apply, they can throw those off so freely that they don't even think about how their actions harm other people. They are just expressing their freedom in the gospel. And that is not a bad thing. That is a first step. If they truly were being bound by rules that are not rules of Jesus, then understanding that their acceptance is by grace and not by keeping all of these expectations by other people, then that's a move forward. But it's not maturity. That kind of strong understanding of the implication of the gospel is not maturity until they realize how their behavior also may affect others. And then they are willing to allow their liberty in some cases to be subsumed by their love for other brothers and sisters. So, Paul does not call them strong here. Maybe he does not want to over do it. But he does call the weak, "Weak."

The verbs used for each side of the argument fit well, contempt from the strong and judgment from the weak. You can imagine a younger generation of Christians, having grown up in a conservative church, feeling the freedom to smoke a cigar at a guys' night or to have just one beer or to play basketball on Sunday. They know their Bible. They know the gospel. They know they are not acting immoral. And when the other side starts talking about the sin of alcohol or smoking or the need to keep the Sabbath, they ask, "Isn't the Sabbath on Saturday? And isn't the prohibition against getting drunk, not against just alcohol as a drink?" And so, they look down with contempt on those who uphold these prohibitions as though they are stuck in the by-gone era of no dancing and no card playing and no playing pool, no going with girls that do.

And those Christians look back at them with judgment. If they drink one beer, certainly they will drink more. And if they smoke one cigar, they are just tempting God. And keeping the Sabbath is one of the ten commandments. So, they judge the lack of spirituality in this new generation of liberated Christians.

Paul's exhortation is not "Argue until you win the other side over." That's not what he says. Paul says, "Accept one another." Paul understands this reality that there are always going to be Christians at different places in the process of transformation. Unity does not come from unified thought. And unity does not come from pretending that all opinions are equally valid. Paul does actually call one position weak and the other position strong. He gives away which position he believes to line up with

true gospel faith. But winning the argument over these issues does not guarantee a win for the community. Paul's exhortation to acceptance is not acceptance on the outside, but acceptance on the inside. Internally, we trust Jesus to work in our hearts to take away the pride of contempt and the pride of judgment. And we trust Jesus to replace that pride with the humility of love and the humility of acceptance. This is a win for the community when both the weak and the strong show enough maturity to accept from the heart those they disagree with over issues of conscience.

In the next section, verses 4-9, Paul gives us two principles or two perspectives that help us with this exhortation of accepting one another. He gives us the principle of the master and the principle of faith.

II. Two Principles of Acceptance (14:4-9)

The principle of the master runs through the whole section. Let's read it. I believe the text speaks for itself. I think you are going to get this easily.

[Read Romans 14:4-9]

⁴ Who are you to judge the servant of another?

To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

^{1c} ⁵ One person regards one day above another,

^{2c} another regards every day *alike*.

Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind.

^{2d} ⁶ He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord,
and he who eats, does so for the Lord,
for he gives thanks to God;

^{1d} and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat,
and gives thanks to God.

⁷ For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself;

⁸ for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord;
therefore whether we live or die,
we are the Lord's.

⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

The principle of the master

Jesus Christ died and rose again to take his rightful place as Lord. He is the Messiah. He is the king of heaven. He is the head of the body. The church is his. We owe to him our life and our allegiance. Each Christian is a servant of Christ Jesus the king. Each Christian is responsible to live for Jesus. Each Christian will give an account to Jesus. This is the principle of the master. This is our perspective as we consider each of our brothers and sisters in Christ, that each one of us has a responsibility to live for Jesus as lord.

It is a freeing principle. My brother has six children. It's not unusual to hear the youngest say to another sibling, "You're not the boss of me." And that is the truth. Even though she still has something to learn about delegated authority, she does only have one mom and one dad. And each of us only has one ultimate boss in regard to issues of conscience.

You do have a role in the lives of other Christians. But you are not their master. We discuss and argue and consider together, knowing that iron sharpens iron. But when all has been said, you are not their master. You may be an elder or a pastor or a leader. You may have some delegated authority. And you may have to set the direction and policies of the community and discipline immorality and sin. But when that is all set, you are not their master over issues of conscience. And there is freedom here. You do not have to be their master. It's not your responsibility. You are free from the responsibility of having to get others to conform to your sense of propriety. We have to let each other be in process when it comes to issues of conscience. We have to recognize the principle of the master. We also need to acknowledge the principle of faith.

The principle of faith

This comes out in verse 5, "One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind." Remember that the issues here are not moral issues. These are not clear sin issues. Jesus is the end of the law. Christians are released from the food laws of the Mosaic code but some struggled with letting go of that code. As modern Christians, we have lived so long eating shrimp and crab and bacon and barbecue that we can hardly relate. But try to imagine that you grew up in a culture that defined religious identity over a period of 1500 years through these food laws, and through keeping the sabbath and through circumcision. The big three. It's like baptism, first communion and confirmation. There are rituals that defined for Jews, not only their religious faith, but who they were as a people. Their religious and national and ethnic identity, all rolled up into one, was expressed and felt through these ceremonies and practices. And they had the additional weight of Scripture. They are not just customs. These were proscriptions of Mosaic Law.

And now the Messiah has come. And God has given Peter a vision of a sheet descending out of heaven three times, and he says, "Eat." And then God sends Peter to the home of a Gentile to enter in and enjoy fellowship. Peter still when he gets to Galatia is going to really struggle with these things, and he is going to get confronted by Paul, the apostle Paul, the former Pharisee, who has begun to preach freedom from the covenant of Moses and a new obligation to practice the new covenant of Christ. But as a Jew who grew up with this, or as a Gentile who came under Jewish influence and Jewish leadership and began following God before you understood the gospel of Jesus Christ. It just feels so wrong. You just can't make yourself believe that it is okay for Christians, especially Jewish Christians, to give up on these practices that have been so important and are so engrained in your sense of values. You know you are saved by grace through faith, you just can't eat. You just can't give up your Sabbath practices. You just can't give up feeling that it is wrong to give them up. You understand the arguments. But it still feels wrong.

Paul gets this. And so, he writes, "Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind." That's the second principle, the principle of faith. If you believe that it is sin to eat pork and you go ahead and eat pork, then for you that is a sin. Because you have done what you believed was wrong to do. And you stand before Jesus as your master. You must act faithfully before him. In this way, Paul can say, "he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God." It is not that the action itself is relative, that it is both a sin, and it's not a sin. Paul would argue it is not a sin to eat pork. You can eat pork. That is why he calls that group strong. But he does argue that if you think it is a sin, then for you it would be a sin. In that sense it is relative to your understanding of what God is calling you to do. And conversely, if you obey your conscience whether to eat or not, then it is morally commendable, because you're eating or you're not eating out of your relationship for God and out of your heart your giving thanks to God. So, what you are doing, whether required or not, you are doing out of a true heart for God. It is not just a religious ceremony for you. It is a sincere attempt to live out the second question of covenant, "How then can I live to please my God?"

And if that is what we are all really striving for, then there is no place for contempt, and there is no reason to despise, and there is no cause for judgment, not when we act out of faith and we entrust each one to his master who is Jesus Christ

III. Summary of the Exhortation not to Judge or Show Contempt (14:10-12)

We close this passage by restating the issue in verses 10-12. And notice how Paul repeats his use of the language of judgment and contempt which opposes true acceptance. And notice his repeated call to remember that we each stand before God and must give an account. We will give an account not only on how strong or weak we were in regard to issues of conscience, but more importantly, we will give account of how sincerely we sought to accept our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ over these types of issues.

Let's close this lesson just with the reading these last three verses. Let's just read them.

¹⁰ But you, why do you **judge** your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with **contempt**? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. ¹¹ For it is written, "AS I LIVE, SAYS THE LORD, EVERY KNEE SHALL BOW TO ME, AND EVERY TONGUE SHALL GIVE PRAISE TO GOD." ¹² So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as important, confusing, interesting or strange in Romans 14:1-12?
2. Come up with two or three examples of real, modern issues of conscience present in your Christian community or that you have experienced elsewhere.
3. Considering these examples, do you feel the verbs judge or condemn apply to how you have experienced the disagreement? Did you feel the urge to judge or condemn someone else? Do you feel like you were judged or condemned?
4. Also considering the examples that you have thought of, do any of your examples fall into the category of a sin issue that is prohibited by biblical teaching? In other words, are you really talking about an issue of conscience or a moral issue? How do you know the difference?
5. Take one or two of the issues you have come up with and ask yourself, "How would the principle of the master have helped me to accept others in this situation?" And also, "How would the principle of faith have helped me to accept my brothers or sisters in Christ?"
6. What are some of the ongoing problems or challenges with resolving disagreement over issues of conscience that do not seem to be addressed by these two principles?

Lesson 35: Living Without Causing Others to Stumble Over Issues of Conscience

Romans 14:13-23

Beginning exhortation

- A** ¹³ Therefore let us not judge one another anymore,
but rather determine this—**not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way.**
- B** ¹⁴ I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that **nothing is unclean in itself;**
but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.
- C** ¹⁵ For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love.
Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died.
- ¹⁶ Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil;

Support for the exhortation

- ¹⁷ for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but **righteousness and peace and joy** in the Holy Spirit.
- ¹⁸ For he who in this *way* serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.
- ¹⁹ So then we pursue the things which make for **peace and the building up of one another.**

Ending exhortation

- C'** ²⁰ **Do not tear down** the work of God for the sake of food.
- B'** **All things indeed are clean,** but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense.
- A'** ²¹ It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or *to do anything by which your brother stumbles.*
- ²² The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God.
Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.
- ²³ But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because *his eating is* not from faith;
and whatever is not from faith is sin.

NASB

Introduction

Accept one another. You would think this would be an easy command for Christians. That is, you would think it would be easy unless you have committed to being a part of a Christian community for any length of time. Acceptance is not easy. The principle of modern acceptance or tolerance tries to come up with an easy solution. That solution is to declare everybody's beliefs equally valid and all behavior equally good, as long as that behavior does not directly harm another person. But that easy solution is really hard to pull off. No one really accepts that all beliefs are valid. And behaviors said to not harm anyone often inflict deep wounds.

In any case, that modern idea of accepting all beliefs and behaviors is not an approach open to biblically minded Christians. We believe in the importance of an accurate worldview, and we believe that good behavior brings forth fruit and life, while bad behavior brings forth pain and death. Beliefs, thoughts, words and actions matter very much. Blanket acceptance of everything is not good for anyone.

In Romans 14:1-15:12, Paul brings up a specific type of disagreement that affects every Christian community at some point. The disagreements here have to do with issues of conscience in regard to certain religious or spiritual practices. Paul is telling the Romans, they need to figure out how to accept one another even as they continue to disagree with one another.

There are times when a brother or sister in Christ feels very strongly about certain behaviors and practices, so strongly that they feel it is sinful to do this or that or to not do this or that. It is a sin to drink wine. Or it is disrespectful to use drums in church. Or it is breaking the ten commandments to do certain activities on Sunday. Or all dancing is bad. Or there is one Christian way to raise your children. Everybody should homeschool because of the state of our public schools. Or nobody should homeschool because we need to participate in the community. The list is long that Christians feel

passionate about: vaccinations, interracial marriage, birth control, proper language, modest dress, acceptable movies, modern worship...

Paul says, "Accept." But Paul also realizes how difficult it can be to figure out what true acceptance looks like. It cannot be the modern version of everything goes. But it should also not be based on forcing everyone to the same thoughts and the same behavior.

So, how do we practice gospel-based acceptance when we are disagreeing about issues of conscience? What are the principles for acceptance in these cases?

Paul got us started in Romans 14:1-12 with two principles. The principle of the master and the principle of faith. The principle of the master is a reminder that each person stands before his master in regard to these issues. And we are not that master. God is the master. We each stand before God and are accountable to him. So, we can allow people to be in process. We do not have to fix everyone or draw everyone into line with our own sense of values. They stand before their own master.

Along with the principle of the master, Paul introduced the principle of faith which requires us each to take seriously the state of our own conscience. If we really believe that an act is sin, then for us to willfully participate in that act would be sin.

As we continue on with Romans 14:13-23, Paul will further develop the principle of faith and add a third principle, the principle of the stumbling block. Let's get into the text.

We have a similar pattern in 13-23 as we did in 1-12. If you remember 1-12 is a ring pattern. And a ring pattern you begin with one idea and you end with the same idea and you develop it in the middle. So, here we have the exhortation to not be a stumbling block at the beginning. That's in verses 13-16. Paul comes back to the exhortation in the end in verses 20-23. And in the middle, verses 17-19, Paul provides support for the exhortation. We will take each of these in turn, exhortation, support, exhortation and then consider a couple of challenges that come up when we try to apply Paul's principles in Christian community.

Let's read Romans 14:13-23.

[Read Romans 14:13-23]

Do not cause your brother to stumble. (14:13-16)

Point A

Paul starts in verse 12, "Let us not judge one another anymore." This is the language from verses 3 and 10. This is how you know that you are not accepting one another. If you are judging the morality or spirituality of your brother in Christ because of his convictions over issues of conscience, then you are not accepting.

What principles do we employ to help us not to judge? Well, we recognize that it is not our job. God is okay with these kinds of differences. Each person is in process as they try to live for God as their king. Each of us needs some freedom in our walk with God. This is always an issue inside the Christian family when you are trying to raise your kids in Christian community. Different families disagree on how to handle various issues. Some families in church are going to have one standard for the kinds of shorts or bathing suits that are appropriate for little girls. Other families are going to have a different perspective. Some families are going to go to see Harry Potter together. Others are going to forbid it. And those who forbid it might go to a different set of movies off limits to the first family. Some families are going to drink wine or beer at a meal, others are not. We learned early on that we needed to say to our kids, "Girls, these are the Brent rules. There is not one right or wrong way to approach some of these things. That family is not bad for having a different approach. We have to do what we think best for our family before God. So, in our family we follow the Brent rules. God is our master. God is their master. We are both trying to follow God."

That's how the principle of the master frees us up to not judge our brothers and sisters. We could call this a passive principle. It just requires you letting others be. Here in verse 13 Paul is giving us an active principle. It requires you to exert some effort by changing your own behavior in order to help a brother out. This is the principle of the stumbling block. Paul says that we are not to create an obstacle that would get in our brother's way. The way here is his walk with God. Like you, your brother and sister are trying to honor God with their lives. They are doing their best to walk the path he has marked out for them. And as they move along the way, they are going to have enough challenges to deal with. Don't you be the cause of putting up additional stumbling block or obstacle in their way.

We could think back to 9:32 where Paul talks about Jewish people stumbling over the idea that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus himself is the stumbling block. That's not a stumbling block we can do anything about. It's not one we would want to change. The brother or sister in this passage has overcome Jewish resistance to Jesus as Messiah and has come to accept that they are under the new covenant of grace. They are just struggling with how to live out the gospel in light of a deep value for the practices of Mosaic Covenant. They already have some major obstacles to overcome. Do not put up additional obstacles that do not even need to be there.

Let's look at how Paul develops this idea. He gives us a second point in verse 14.

Point B

He says, "I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean." Paul reaffirms here that we are talking about an issue of conscience, not a sin issue. Under Mosaic covenant it would have been wrong for a believer to ignore the food laws. But one of the new things about the new covenant is that the ceremonial laws no longer apply. Those laws belong the older covenant. So, Paul can say here, in reference to food, "nothing is unclean in itself." Some prohibitions are symbolic for teaching purposes or for extra protection. The thing in itself is not sinful. It is not immoral to eat a mouse or a scorpion or a lobster. It might be unhealthy. It might be unwise. It is not immoral. If God specifically says, "Do not do it." Then it is not immoral because of the thing itself, but because of the command.

This is a standard principle with raising children. If I say, "Do not cross the street without holding my hand." And my daughter looks at me with that look, like, "I hear you." And then she runs across the street by herself hands free. Not only has she done something unwise, but she has done something sinful. The sin is not crossing the street without holding someone's hand. When she gets a bit older, she will be free to cross the street on her own with no hand holding. Hand holding across streets is not a moral requirement. Obeying a clear command from your father is a moral requirement. The sin, in that case, is the sin of disobedience. And I want her to understand this distinction when she gets older, so that she will not go through life feeling guilty and bad every time she crosses the street without holding somebody's hand. When she gets older she is free from that command. And I do not want her going around judging people who cross the street without holding people's hands. The thing in itself is not a sin. And it is the same with the food laws. The eating is not in itself a sin. It was only a sin as long as God's command to not eat applied. Now that God has removed that command in the New Covenant, we are all free to eat non-kosher food, though some who grew up under the command may still have trouble getting over guilty feelings associated with eating formerly forbidden foods.

So, Paul's comment that "nothing is unclean" reaffirms that this is not a moral issue we are talking about but an issue of conscience. Paul is also reaffirming here the principle of faith. Though a thing in itself may not be sinful or immoral, if you believe it is and do it anyway then that is sin. With all immoral acts there are two sins. There is the thing in itself, the murder or theft or adultery or whatever leads up to that, and there is the rebellion committed in doing the sin. We disobey God, sin 1. And we do the sinful thing, sin 2. In this case of eating formerly forbidden foods, the thing itself turns out to be not immoral. It is not a sin. Despite what the believer thinks, his act is not sinful.

There is potentially, however, still a sin. If you think your behavior goes against the will of God, and you do it anyway, then you are committing the sin of rebellion or disobedience. This is how Paul can say that a thing might be unclean in itself, "But to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean."

Paul adds another point in verse 15.

Point C

"For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love." If we hurt a brother or sister over an issue of conscience, then we are not acting in a loving way to that brother or sister. Paul uses strong language. He says, "Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died." How is our freedom in regard to a certain issue destructive? A friend once told me that in high school he saw a case of beer in his youth leader's room. After seeing that it caused him to withdraw from discipleship and threw him off his path with Christ for some time. Later he found out that what he saw were bottles of root beer. It was just soda. It's not alcoholic. So, in this case, I have to admit that there are sometimes things just out of our control. That we create obstacles with good intentions and without knowing what other people are thinking. The youth leader was not being unloving by hoarding root beer. Still, the example reminds us that people are in process and these issues of conscience have potential to create serious internal struggle.

I think Paul has more in mind the idea of us urging one another to a freedom that we do not yet feel comfortable with. If you are at a church or movement event and there is dancing going on, how hard should you work to get people out on the dance floor? Generally, it is probably okay. There are probably not dancing because they are introverted. They just need some encouragement. And you can get them out there. But if someone let's you know that they really do not feel comfortable dancing, you should probably let it go. You do not want to talk someone into doing something that they feel is sinful for them to do.

I had another friend for whom this was a real issue. He had qualified to go to the Olympics for the exhibition sport of competitive dance. He hurt his back and he was not allowed to go. Then he came to Christ. And after coming to Christ, he made the decision not to go to a dance club and not to dance at all. For him, the environment of dance brought up a range of sinful memories and desires associated with the culture of dance. To pressure him to dance would be putting a temptation, a stumbling block in his path.

Even more similar to Paul's context, if someone grew up in church where they were taught that dancing is sin or drinking is sin and you pressure them strongly to join in, you might be pressuring them to join in doing something that they still believe is sin. If you don't know there is not much you can do about it. But if you are aware that this is something they struggle with, then back off for the moment. You can have a gospel conversation later to explore the issue, but in the moment is not the time to pressure someone to behave in a way they may not be comfortable with. You might disagree with their rationale, but you can respect as good their desire to honor God in their behavior.

Love is a higher goal than personal freedom of behavior. Sometimes we express love by curbing our freedoms so as not to cause others to stumble. So, in the American South Christian leaders may make the decision never to have alcohol in their home, because they do not want create confusion or a stumbling block for other Christians who might come in their home and see the alcohol and have wrong ideas or have their own temptations.

Sometimes the right action of love involves, not suppressing freedom, but expressing freedom. In Croatian Protestant culture a number of churches make a distinction between drinking a beer or a glass of wine and getting drunk on beer or wine. The first is okay, to drink a glass; the second is not, to get drunk. I mentioned in our last lesson a non-Christian student who brought a small keg of beer to a joint viewing of a world cup soccer match with our college movement and our church members. An elder from the church walked into the room. What do you think he did? Well, he walked over to the keg and poured himself a cup of beer, that's what he did. Not only was there no drunkenness

that night, there was also no unnecessary communication of judgement. That action by the elder did not result in us bringing beer to church events. It did not change the way we behaved. It did allow for the acceptance of a college student who did not exactly understand what kind of social event he was coming to but had acted with good faith, with generous and hospitable motives.

In verse 16, Paul exhorts us to “not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil.” That requires considering the needs, the motives, the understandings, how the other person feels and being able to express or curb your own freedom out of love for them. So, you may feel strongly about your view about a particular issue of conscience. Paul challenges us here to think more deeply. There is a more important good to be concerned about.

We see what he means in verses 17-19, the center of the passage.

Relinquish liberty for the good thing. (14:17-19)

“For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved’ by men. So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.” Paul has not used a lot of kingdom language, but the concept of the kingdom is basic to his biblical worldview. Paul did point out in 1:3 that Jesus is the expected son of David, the Jewish king, the Messiah. Then in chapter 5 Paul compared Jesus to Adam, declaring that through Adam sin reigned in death and through Jesus grace reigns in life. There are two different realms or kingdoms, one of Adam, sin and death and the other of Jesus, obedience and life. Jesus will one day establish his right reign on a new earth. So, we pray, “Thy kingdom come.” For now, he reigns from heaven, so we pray, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” The reality of the kingdom of God on earth shows up as men and women live according to God’s will. They have submitted willingly to his reign. The kingdom is expressed by transformed people who live out of a new heart in the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul describes this transformational new covenant living here as “righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” And using the language of 12:1, he says, “the one who serves Christ in this way is acceptable to God.” We want to present ourselves to God in a way that is pleasing and acceptable, a real offering of worship. So, the gospel of Jesus has freed us from a whole range of ceremonial or religious practices that people attach to true spirituality. But the expression of that freedom is not the goal of true spirituality. Love is the goal. Freedom is not the main thing. Living out the will of God in love is the main thing.

Paul comments that not only is this kind of spirituality pleasing to God, he says it is also approved by men. I do not think that he means that it is approved by all men all the time, but that authentically loving one another in growing maturity is our witness to the world of the reality of Jesus Christ in our lives. People will not be impressed by our ritual habits of religion. They will notice a community that practices genuine love and acceptance. Jesus was quite serious when he said, “by this all men will know that you are my disciples, that you love one another.”

The kingdom of God is the good thing that we do not want people to speak badly of. We recognize that people are in process. And rather than flaunting our freedom which may lead to dissension or spiritual disillusionment, instead “we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.” We do not want this good to be destroyed simply because we held on to our right to live according to our freedom in the gospel.

Moving to the last section of the passage in verses 20-23, Paul repeats the exhortation to not cause your brother to stumble. In fact, he repeats each of the three primary points from verses 13-16, and he does so in reverse order, creating a chiasmic pattern.

Do not cause your brother to stumble. (14:20-23)

Point C’

In verse 15, he said, “**Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died.**” Here in verse 20, he says the same thing, “**Do not tear down** the work of God for the sake of food.” The point of the

kingdom is to build one another up in spiritual maturity in Christ, not tear one another down over disagreements about issues of conscience.

Point B'

In verse 14, Paul made clear that he is indeed talking about an issue of conscience and not a moral issue by stating, **"nothing is unclean in itself."** He repeats that point in the second half of verse 20, **"All things indeed are clean,** but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense."

Point A'

Finally, just as Paul warned us against putting up **"an obstacle or stumbling block"** in verse 13, he repeats the same in verse 21, "It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or *to do anything by which your brother stumbles.*"

That's the stumbling block principle. We do not want to entice another believer to go against his or her conscience. Nor do we want to make our freedom such an issue that it turns another person away from the more important reality of their spiritual relationship with Jesus Christ.

Paul ends the passage with a clear statement of the principle of faith, "The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin."

You stand before God as your master. Whenever you encounter a choice or decision or opportunity, and you ask, "What is the wise thing for me to do in this situation? How do I honor God in this?" You are accountable to your own conscience. To know whether or not I can do something with faith, I think about whether or not I can feel good about asking Jesus to join with me in whatever I am doing. If I am comfortable eating this or drinking this or doing this or watching this with Jesus, that shows me that I believe it is not sin. Whether I am right or wrong, at least, according to my conscience, if I can freely ask Jesus to join me and I am okay with that, then I do not believe it is a sin. If I am uncomfortable doing it with Jesus, if I don't think I could watch this or eat this or drink that with Jesus, that shows me what I think about the watching or the eating or the drinking. I think there is something wrong with it. So, I can't do it by faith. For me to do that would be sin, because I don't think Jesus really wants me to do it.

Paul has given us the exhortation to accept one another when we disagree about issues of conscience. And he has given us three principles, great principles to apply; the principle of the master, which frees us up to let people stand before God, the principle of faith which challenges us to consider our own conscience and to act accordingly, and the principle of the stumbling block which exhorts us not to become part of the problem but to look at something deeper, to be willing to limit our own freedom out of love for somebody else.

And as we seek to apply these principles we are going to encounter some further challenges. And I am going to mention just three of those. These are important in thinking this out and applying this. And the first is, "When does an issue of conscience become an issue of sin?"

Challenges to consider in Christian community

1. When does an issue of conscience become an issue of sin?

We know that chapter 14 is not intended by Paul to encourage the acceptance of sin in the Christian community. Paul began way back in chapter 1 of Romans describing fallen human nature. He gave us several examples of sin there if you want to go back and review. And he says this displays a darkened heart and corrupt mind. This is a turning away from God. It is becoming less than human. Then in chapter 6 Paul called us to stop offering the members of our body to unrighteousness and instead to offer ourselves to God. And as recent as the previous chapter we have Paul calling us to turn our backs on murder or theft or adultery or drunkenness and to turn ourselves towards the life of love.

This passage cannot be encouraging the acceptance of sin in gospel community. That would run contrary to the presentation of the gospel of grace Paul has been giving us. Believers do not see grace as permission to sin, but freedom from sin. We pursue life and growth in Christ, together.

So here in chapter 14, we have issues that are not sinful, such as whether or not to eat non-kosher food. A problem that arises is the grey area between clear issues of conscience and clear issues of sin. We have questions about sabbath keeping and drinking and modesty and entertainment. How do we recognize when we have moved from something that is just an issue of conscience into something that really is a sin issue? How do we recognize, for example, when we should leave the watching of certain movies up to each person to determine before God, and when we should communicate a moral stance in regard to certain kinds of material?

This is one of the challenges of applying this passage. I can imagine Paul saying that we are free to watch movies. I think he would have loved the Jesus Film. I cannot imagine at all, however, the apostle Paul watching an uncut episode of the Game of Thrones. At some point we moved from an issue of conscience to pornography. And pornography is not okay for Christians. And we need to speak out against it.

The answer is not to develop a system of laws that will keep us safe. So, we'll just ban all movies and not have to worry about it. That's a legalistic answer. In dealing with issues of conscience, we need to allow individuals and families to make their own decisions. We acknowledge that they must follow the principle of faith and God is their master. On the other hand, when we move from issues of conscience through the grey area to sin, we also need to call sin, "Sin." The ongoing challenge for us in Christian community has to do with handling this grey area between, that area that is in between a clear issue of conscience and clear issue of sin.

Here is a second challenge. At what point do we say the weak are exerting too much influence on the community?

2. At what point do we say the weak are exerting too much influence on the community?

This is Paul's language. The weak in faith are those who do not yet understand the freedom they have from certain practices. The stumbling block principle can be taken too far. Paul calls the strong in faith to hold off acting on their liberty in the gospel, so as not to cause others to stumble. We could imagine practicing this principle by choosing not to order wine or beer when out with other Christians because someone may see drinking alcohol as a sin. You reason, "Why hurt our opportunity to have good Christian fellowship, if it only means I need to order water? It's really no big deal?"

This is a valid application of the stumbling block principle. If, however, a group in the church insists that all wine is evil and that Jesus never really drank wine, and it is never acceptable for any Christian to drink wine, and furthermore this should be the teaching of our church, then that individual or group is beginning to exert an undue influence on the whole community. We set aside our liberty out of love, but we do not change the biblical teaching of liberty in order to be at peace with those who have not yet come to a certain understanding of biblical truth.

Paul did use the terms strong and weak, which shows us that he had a view regarding whose understanding of the gospel was correct. Furthermore, Paul taught what he understood to be the correct position that we are indeed free from Mosaic ceremony. Those who felt they must still follow those laws did so out of an incomplete understanding of the gospel. And though Paul might choose himself to eat kosher food when in fellowship with these Christians, he was not going to let their failure to grasp the implications of the gospel change his own teaching of the gospel. Paul wants them to live in faith according to the current state of their conscience, but he also wants them to grow into maturity. He wants them to be transformed and come to a more full, a stronger understanding of their freedom in Christ.

Healthy gospel community should resist the imposition of a weak view of the gospel onto the whole. This is especially the responsibility of the community's leadership. That brings us to the third challenge. We need spiritually mature leadership.

3. We need spiritually mature leadership.

Both of these challenges highlight that need. We need spiritually mature leaders who are continuing to grow in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Based on the tone of chapter 14, I believe Rome had that kind of leadership. I believe Paul had confidence in Priscilla and Aquila and the others he names in chapter 16. He had personally discipled Priscilla and Aquila in gospel ministry. They worked with him. They sat under his teaching. Now they are back in Rome. I doubt Paul would have written this chapter in this way if he did not trust the leaders in Rome to apply these principles in community.

I will admit this is not something I can prove. It is simply something I am assuming. It seems to me that Paul trusts the Roman leadership to understand the freedom of the gospel, while also trusting them to understand when to set aside that freedom for the sake of love and building others up.

We need leaders who can recognize when we have passed from an issue of conscience to a sin issue, and who know how to communicate about the grey area in between. And we need leaders who are willing to subjugate their own liberty for the sake of others, and yet, do not subjugate the glorious message of the gospel out of pressure from those who are still struggling to understand the gospel.

We need these kinds of leaders. So, pray for your leaders. They are also in process, and they are also in need for your acceptance.

One of the best ways you can support your leaders in the building up of your community is to put into practice yourself these three principles of acceptance, that you entrust each one of your brothers and sisters in Christ to his own master without judgement, that you try hard not to create a stumbling block for anyone else, that you are willing to hold back your liberty out of love, and that you resolve to do nothing, except that which you can do by faith in Jesus Christ.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as important, confusing, interesting or strange in Romans 14:13-23?
2. How would you describe in your own words each of the three principles of acceptance?

The principle of the master

The principle of faith

The principle of the stumbling block

3. What is one issue of conscience that is relevant to your Christian community (worship styles, keeping the Sabbath, movies or television, drinking, etc...)? Consider your past experience or current circumstances to select an issue that could be or is real in your community?
4. After deciding on one issue, come up with an example or two for how you have seen each of the three principles being applied or how you could imagine each principle being applied.
5. Come up with a second issue of conscience to consider.
6. Again, thinking about this second issue, how might each of the principles of acceptance be applied.
7. How do the three challenges at the end of the lesson apply to each of the cases you considered for questions 3-4 and 5-6? Review the three challenges and consider each case again.

Lesson 36: Living In Acceptance of One Another

Romans 15:1-13

- ¹ Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not *just* please ourselves.
² Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.
- ³ For even Christ did not please Himself;
but as it is written, "THE REPROACHES OF THOSE WHO REPROACHED YOU FELL ON ME."
⁴ For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction,
so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have **hope**.
- ⁵ Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement
grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus,
⁶ so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- ⁷ Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God.
⁸ For I say that Christ has become a servant
(1) to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises *given* to the fathers,
(2) ⁹ and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy;
as it is written, "THEREFORE I WILL GIVE PRAISE TO YOU AMONG THE GENTILES, AND I WILL SING TO YOUR NAME."
¹⁰ Again he says, "REJOICE, O GENTILES, WITH HIS PEOPLE."
¹¹ And again, "PRAISE THE LORD ALL YOU GENTILES, AND LET ALL THE PEOPLES PRAISE HIM."
¹² Again Isaiah says, "THERE SHALL COME THE ROOT OF JESSE, AND HE WHO ARISES TO RULE OVER THE GENTILES,
IN HIM SHALL THE GENTILES **HOPE**."
- ¹³ Now may the God of **hope** fill you with all joy and peace in believing,
so that you will abound in **hope** by the power of the Holy Spirit.

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Introduction

One of the great challenges in the early years of gospel expansion came from the richness of Old Testament Judaism. God intended under the Old Covenant for his people to be set apart from the nations of the world by their morality and their religious customs. God's covenant led to a strongly defined religious culture. With the advent of Jesus Christ, God initiated a new way; a gospel stripped down to a powerful, minimalistic set of customs that would enter into any culture as good news for that people. The essential beliefs of the gospel and the life-giving experience of new birth in Jesus Christ are a seed that can be planted in any ground, among any people, with the power to grow into a community of believers that can transform that society. The seed of the gospel of Jesus Christ has taken root among the urban elite of New York City and the tribal headhunters of Nagaland (Check out the youtube video from National Geographic: [Why These Headhunters Converted to Christianity](#).), among Muslim Iranians and atheist Chinese, in Tanzania and Honduras, in Mississippi and California, in Scandinavia and the Balkans, from Israel to Egypt to Hawaii to India.

And though Christians cannot help but to spread their own culture with the gospel of Jesus Christ, so that sometimes a new Christian community feels foreign to that culture, still in every one of these places just mentioned there also exist Christian communities that have taken on the distinct flavor of the culture in which the gospel seed was planted.

With the New Covenant coming from such a strong culture derived from Old Testament biblical commands, Paul as a missionary to the Gentiles faced the challenge of disassociating Old Covenant elements that were not meant to be carried on with the new wineskin of the New Covenant. The gospel needed to be freed from Jewish culture in a way that still must happen when Korean missionaries bring the gospel to Europe or South American missionaries go to Africa. In cross-cultural mission there is always this danger that the source culture will significantly distort the gospel when it is introduced into a new receiving culture. How will those who receive the message distinguish between what is essential to the gospel and what is an expression of the missionary's own Christian culture? This is the challenging danger that faced the first generation of Jewish Christians tasked with taking the gospel from Israel out into the world. They must attempt to take off the Jewish packaging without belittling the Word of God.

When God called Paul as a missionary to the Gentiles, he not only gave Paul an evangelistic ministry, he also gave Paul a theological ministry. More than any other single person, the apostle Paul was tasked with defining the new wineskin of the new covenant in this context of transition from Jewish religion to a universal message of good news for all of humanity. What God did not want was for Paul, the former Pharisee to lock himself away in Tarsus for three years writing out a universal systematic theology. God wanted theology in action, or we could say theology in context. We need to see how this is done. How do you maintain gospel integrity while disassociating the gospel from the very strong Jewish religious culture?

With the Letter to the Romans we see Paul stepping into this challenge, drawing on his commitment to God's Word and his experience as the Apostle to the Gentiles. Paul is communicating the gospel of Jesus Christ to a mixed community of Jews and Gentiles. And in doing so, he has balanced the theological tension of continuity and discontinuity between the Old and the New. We also see him balancing the practical tension of how two different cultures within one community are struggling to understand the implications of the gospel.

When we come to the practical section of the letter to the Romans in 12:1-15:13, each section comes out of Paul's practical understanding of how the gospel of Jesus Christ takes root and grows into a new community. Chapters 12 through 13 apply to all churches everywhere. These are universal issues. And though we can easily apply chapter 14 to the broader issue of accepting each other when we disagree about issues of conscience, we also see that Paul is addressing a specific issue that was particularly important to his time. These disagreements are specifically about the transition from Old Covenant Jewish ceremony to New Covenant gospel practice. We can even assume from the particular tone of the issue that he is specifically speaking into the context of the church in Rome. And that explains why he uses much harsher language writing to the Galatians on the same issue; same issue but different specific local context.

So, Paul's instruction regarding this last application issue is giving us insight both into Christian practice but also into our understanding of the gospel. Paul is very serious about freeing the gospel from Old Covenant ceremony. And he does not show us any attempt to rebuild that ceremony with New Covenant parallels. Paul is pointing us past these disagreements over these issues of ceremony to a spiritual reality that he considers to be more important for gospel community. The theology of the gospel is being worked out in the practical application of the gospel.

In our last two lessons we considered three practical principles of acceptance that come out of Paul's exhortation here: the principle of the master, the principle of faith and the principle of the stumbling block. In this lesson, Paul directs us back to the gospel as the foundation of our unity and acceptance of one another. He is reminding us again that the content of our belief matters. Let's read the text and then we will walk through it step by step, Romans 15:1-13.

[Read Romans 15:1-13]

Paul makes five points. His first point is that the strong have an obligation to the weak.

1. The strong have an obligation to the weak (15:1-2).

This is in verse 1-2. "Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not *just* please ourselves. Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification." This is Paul's first use of the word strong to characterize one of the groups in Rome. We just assumed it as the opposite of weak in chapter 14. But this is the first place he actually says it. Here he explicitly refers to those with a clear understanding of gospel freedom from Jewish ceremony as the strong. For us, we could expand the principle out of the Jew/Gentile context by considering the strong as those who are able to distinguish the essential truths of the gospel from the non-essential truths of the gospel. The strong understand that salvation is 100% by grace through faith in Jesus Christ; they understand that living out biblical morality flows from the truth of the gospel; and they understand freedom from cultural norms that are not essential to gospel truth or gospel morality. We should imagine that Paul is thinking about some of the leaders he mentions in chapter 16, like Pricilla and

Aquila, Mary, Urbanus, Persis and others who labored with him in the gospel. These believers are among the strong in this context.

In my own ministry with college students, I have noticed an interesting phenomena among some who trust in Christ. Sometimes there is this interesting mix of behavior that includes a new commitment morality, maybe waiting for marriage to have sex, not cheating on tests, or telling others about Jesus, which goes along with a freedom to drink, and smoke cigars and engage in other activities not normally considered appropriate in the Christian culture. In a gospel environment of grace, the young believer commits to morality while also exerting freedom. And along with this can come an intensity, unfortunately, not accompanied with love. The young believer is excited about truth and his or her own personal experience with God and may communicate the truth of the message without considering how the other person might hear what is being communicated.

One student friend I discipled came out of a legalistic Roman Catholic background. He saw God as a cosmic policeman. His main goal was to keep his head down and not be noticed. He learned at confession to tell just enough of the truth to make it sound like a confession without admitting anything too serious. When he first understood the gospel, he came alive to God, but began to feel dead to the empty teaching in his particular local church. He stopped going to the church he had grown up in but did not start attending another church. One Sunday his mother confronted him when he said he was not going to go to church any more. She asked, "Well, what do you believe then?" And he responded, "I don't know. I just know that I am not Roman Catholic."

That did not go over so well. When he told me, I thought, "Wow, you really could have handled that better." Then I thought back to my own conversations with my parents after I had come alive in my faith in Jesus. I was very critical of the local Moravian church where I grew up. When I talked about never hearing the gospel at church, it never occurred to me to consider how that would sound to my parents who raised me there. I did not think about the kind ladies who watched over me in Sunday School. I was on fire with the gospel, but I was immature. I was personally rejoicing in the gospel, expressing my freedom, but with other people I was often really intense and indignant. I witnessed to the truth but without love.

And I am not sure there is any real way to fix that. It's a natural progression of coming alive to the truth of the gospel. We start as babies. We hear this truth and it is wonderful, but our character isn't fully formed. And God uses that young intensity. But he does not want us to get stuck there. He wants us to hold on to the truth of the gospel while also growing in love. So, if you want to claim that you are among the strong, then show it by combining gospel understanding with gospel character and behavior. As Paul says, if you are strong, then you "ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength." I have seen myself fail at this more than once in parenting, well, often in parenting. My children act immature which angers me, so how do I respond? Well, sometimes I respond like a child, a big, angry child who happens to be in charge. They at least have an excuse for acting like a child. What's my excuse? The mature are obligated to act mature.

And if the strong in the gospel are to continue to live in line with the gospel, they must put away the natural tendency towards pride and judgment over those who disagree with them, who do not yet have the same understanding. The freedom of the gospel is not intended for selfish use. The freedom of the gospel is intended to give us space to grow in love. Those who are strong, if indeed they are strong, will go past their own exultation in freedom to learn empathy and understanding and desire for the blessing of other people. They will learn to understand that their message is not an end in itself but an invitation for other people to share in the glory of God. And what good is an invitation if it is offered in an obnoxious, distasteful way. The goal is not to win a debate. The goal is to win over hearts for Jesus and to build the weak up, so that they might become strong in faith. As Paul says in verse 2, "Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification."

Paul's next point gives the precedent for what it looks like to be strong. He tells us to look to Jesus.

2. Jesus modeled this attitude (15:3-4).

Paul quotes from Psalm 69:9 when he writes in verse 3, "For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, 'THE REPROACHES OF THOSE WHO REPROACHED YOU FELL ON ME.'" Jesus is the supreme example of one who was willing to take abuse for the benefit of those who abused him. He was unmoved by false accusation or by the questioning of his motives. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus scorned the attempts of Roman and Jew to shame him through the cross. Jesus knew who he was, he knew who he was listening to. He was unmoved by those who opposed him out of their own lack of understanding. Do you know who you are? Do you know who you are listening to? Are you unmoved by those who oppose you out of their own lack of understanding?

Paul makes an interesting observation about the Bible in verse 4. He comments, "For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." Paul understands what was written about Jesus in Psalm 69:9 as useful not only in teaching us what Jesus was like but also to help us understand what we ought to be like.

Jesus modeled how conviction of truth leads to perseverance and encouragement in living out that truth. We persevere when we are convinced in what we believe. And we receive encouragement or comfort when we are convinced of what we believe. Without conviction that we act on real truth our commitment to that truth gives out and our consolation from that truth fails. We need to know that we are not just making these things up. We need a stronger foundation for our convictions if we are going to be able to live out those convictions in difficult circumstances.

Paul says we gain that conviction through Scripture. Jesus knows who he is because he is God. He is the source of the Word. We know who Jesus is not by discovering that truth in ourselves but by recognizing that truth in the Bible. The Bible teaches us what Jesus was like, so that we can model our behavior after him. In this case, the model of Jesus in the Scripture is showing us that if we are strong in the faith, we will be willing to take recrimination without retaliation from those who are less strong in the faith. Even if we are treated unfairly, we do not retaliate against our brothers and sisters in Christ because our goal is their edification, not winning the argument, not justifying ourselves. Our goal is not to prove ourselves right but to work for the growth of the whole community.

Lots of people commend the love of Jesus and say, "We should all love like Jesus." But without knowing what that love really looks like it is hard to persevere through the kinds of challenges that Jesus persevered through. Scripture provides for us truth upon which we can build conviction. I see what Jesus was like in the Word of God. Against all justice, Jesus did not exert the rights that were truly his. He did not require the honor that was due to him. Jesus chose to take abuse for the sake of those who abused him. It's counter intuitive. It's not the way you would think to act. But it is the way of Jesus acted.

Paul just quotes half of Psalm 69:9 here. The other half of the verse is quoted in John 2:17, "The zeal of your house will consume me." Thinking about the two verses brings up a very interesting tension. Paul uses half the verse to show how Jesus took abuse meekly. John uses the other half of the verse to show how Jesus became angry with those misusing the temple court. Jesus took abuse at times without exerting his power. That does not mean Jesus could not be intense or angry or righteous in his judgement. It does mean that Jesus was not ruled by pride or anger. He could not be pushed into action contrary to his purpose. The strong learn from Jesus when to exert authority and when to be meek. And they learn about Jesus from Scripture which provides the conviction necessary for perseverance and comfort in the midst of difficult service.

Here we also have to notice that Paul never suggested to the Romans that they expel the weaker group from the community. Christian unity does not come by claiming differences do not matter and it does not come about by getting rid of those who differ. Christian unity comes through a willingness to engage in the difficult tensions of holding onto the truth of the gospel while also allowing for space for disagreement or even weakness or mistakes during the process of growth.

Paul emphasizes the importance of gospel truth to unity in verses 5-6. This is the third point. Unity is grounded in our faith in Jesus. So, let's read verses 5-6 again.

3. Unity is grounded in our faith in Jesus (15:5-6).

"Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Paul uses two phrases that communicate the same idea. In my version the two phrases are "be of the same mind" and "with one accord." We are to be of the same mind according to Jesus Christ. I believe this has to do with our belief about Jesus Christ, our belief about his nature, our belief about his gospel. Having that same mind, we are able to glorify God with one common voice. We are saying the same things about God. One of those same things is that we recognize God as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our unity or oneness starts with common beliefs about Jesus which lead to a common voice in our praise of God.

Modern attempts at Christian unity often focus on common action. I think common action is good. But following Paul here, I think true Christian unity starts with common belief. There must be an essential set of truths about God and about the gospel of Jesus Christ from which we start.

We have one fairly famous Brent in the family, he is my grandfather's uncle, the Episcopal Bishop Charles Brent. My oldest brother is named after Charles Brent. We have a picture of him with General Patton when he served as Chaplain General of the American forces in World War I. Two ecumenical conferences begun in the early 20th century later came together to form the World Council of Churches which first met in 1948. The Conference on Life and Work focused on common social action as the basis for Christian unity. Bishop Brent was no stranger to social action. He gained international recognition for helping to end the legal opium trade between the United States and Europe and Asian nations. Bishop Brent did not, however, endorse the argument by the Conference on Life and Work that unity comes through social action. He championed the work of the Conference on Faith and Order, arguing "that cooperation among churches was possible only on the basis of agreement on essentials of faith (Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 444)." The Conference on Faith and Order lost out to the Conference on Life and Work. As a result, the World Council of Churches has no clear message for the world. They have given up on Romans 1-11, while trying to hold on to Romans 12-15. But even there they pretty much whittle it all down to "accept everybody for every reason no matter what they believe."

Bishop Brent's insight that unity must be grounded in an agreement on essential beliefs follows Paul's teaching to the Romans. In his exhortation to acceptance, Paul does not urge both sides to validate one another's ideas. He urges both sides to respect one another. But he recognizes one side as having a stronger understanding of gospel truth. His desire is that both sides would accept one another even as both sides move towards an agreed understanding of the gospel, towards one mind about Christ.

The ultimate goal of coming together in one mind is "so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul is urging unity of belief and unity of worship. Christians do not and cannot share this unity with Muslims, Jews, Atheists or even liberal Christians who deny the true reality of Jesus' humanity and divinity. We simply do not worship the same God. As Jesus himself said, "He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him (John 5:23)." The God we worship as Christians is three-in-one, Father, Son and Spirit. A god who is not seen as three-in-one is not God. Jesus Christ is the full representation of the nature of God (John 1:1; Colossians 1:3; Hebrews 1:3). To reject Jesus, who is the very image of God, is to reject God the Father. As Jesus said when Philip asked to see the Father, "Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the father (John 14:9)." To accept God while rejecting Jesus is to reject God.

Christian unity is grounded on our agreement regarding Jesus Christ and his gospel. Paul's fourth point is closely connected to that. Our unity comes from our common testimony about Jesus. When we establish a common testimony about Jesus, then we can accept one another. When we agree about Jesus and his gospel, we find that acceptance is grounded in the work of Jesus. This is Paul's fourth point. This is in 15:7-12.

4. Acceptance is grounded in the work of Jesus (15:7-12).

Our faith in Jesus makes a claim about acceptance. Not acceptance between people, but an acceptance between man and God. Jesus Christ makes acceptance 100% possible through his gift of grace. Having been accepted by God we can accept one another. What is our basis of rejection if God has accepted? Paul is particularly targeting Jew and Gentile here. He is saying that Jesus Christ became a servant on behalf of both Jew and Gentile. So, how does the Gentile justify his rejection of the Jewish brother in Christ, and how does the Jew justify his rejection of the Gentile? If Christ died to accept both then how do you justify using non-essential disagreements as basis for rejecting one another.

Let's read how Paul puts the argument in verses 7-12.

⁷ Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. ⁸ For I say that Christ has become a servant (1) to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises *given* to the fathers, (2) and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy; as it is written, "THEREFORE I WILL GIVE PRAISE TO YOU AMONG THE GENTILES, AND I WILL SING TO YOUR NAME." Again he says, "REJOICE, O GENTILES, WITH HIS PEOPLE." And again, "PRAISE THE LORD ALL YOU GENTILES, AND LET ALL THE PEOPLES PRAISE HIM." Again Isaiah says, "THERE SHALL COME THE ROOT OF JESSE, AND HE WHO ARISES TO RULE OVER THE GENTILES, IN HIM SHALL THE GENTILES HOPE."

Paul's gospel message about Jesus Christ is the foundation for the practice he expects from the Roman believers. Jews might argue exclusion of Gentiles based on Old Covenant precedent. They were taught to exclude those who were ceremonially unclean. The gospel has removed those ceremonial barriers between Jew and Gentile. Gentiles might argue exclusion of Jews based on an incorrect understanding of the implications of the Gospel. But while the gospel may not require keeping the food laws, the gospel also does not condemn those who do keep the food laws, as long as they do not see it as the basis for salvation. The gospel creates space for disagreement these issues of conscience. And the gospel creates space for different cultural applications of the gospel or different cultural ways of answering the question, "How do we live in a way that is pleasing to God."

Now there is a definite leaning towards Gentiles in these verses. I think that may be for two reasons. First, the Roman church is primarily Gentile now. But second, and I think more importantly, Paul wants to emphasize that God had always intended for the gospel to go to the Gentiles. Isaiah proclaimed it ahead of time. God loves all peoples. And through the prophets Israel should have been prepared for something really new to happen when the Messiah came. The newness of the gospel resulted in a removal of the Jewish religious custom with no necessary Christian replacement. For the sake of correct understanding of the gospel, Paul has emphasized throughout that the Law has ended, something new has come. Paul's application of the gospel to the Greek and Roman Gentile world helps us all to recognize what is truly essential to the gospel message as distinct from what is its cultural packaging, whether that packaging was the original Jewish packaging or whether we are talking about later Western Christian packaging.

As hard as it was for Jewish Christians to let go of food laws, it became just as hard for later Western Christians to let go of Latin services or closer to our day it becomes hard for some Christians to let go of organ music. That is not to say that service in Latin is bad, or organ music is bad, not necessarily. We are not supposed to aim for some kind of culture neutral primitive church experience. For those whose heart language was Latin, that was the right choice. And for those who spiritually connect with organ music, that is a fine choice. But it is packaging. It is not essential to the gospel. What is essential to the gospel is our faith in Jesus Christ and the recognition that he opens his arm to every people group.

Paul's final point comes to us as a benediction and will serve as our conclusion for this lesson. He prays that we would experience the fruits of belief. Those fruits are joy, peace and hope.

5. The fruits of belief are joy, peace and hope (15:13)

This is verse 13, "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." There is a basic spiritual pattern here in Paul's letter. We yearn to experience joy, peace and hope. Just imagine for a second if these three words

described your normal internal state. This is you as you normally go through your day: joy, peace, hope. Would you require anything else. Joy is true satisfaction that brings a genuine smile to your face which does not fade quickly. Peace is a soul settled on a deep, firm, fearless foundation. And hope is a portal opening up a clear line of sight to a beautiful and just and loving future. Joy, peace, hope, these are the fruits of belief.

And yet, the fruits of the belief do not come separated from the acts of belief. We experience the fruits of belief by offering ourselves up as a living sacrifice to God and by pursuing a renewed mind. The fruits of belief come through the hard work of perseverance through life with God.

But those acts do not automatically produce the fruit. It is possible to engage in the acts of belief without the heart of belief. Without true faith in Jesus and a heart made alive in him, religious action is more likely to produce bitterness than joy, more likely to produce stress than peace, and more likely to produce disillusionment than hope. Saving faith is not only a decision of the will but is also true sight. We need to see God. It is a work of the Holy Spirit in the soul of man. And we start with a heart that has come alive to God. The Christian life is a response of wonder and gratitude from the heart. And in response we offer ourselves up to the acts of faith, in obedience to God as a living sacrifice, and we pursue the renewing of our minds through study of the word. We walk with God. We depend on God. From the heart of belief and these acts of belief come the fruits of belief.

There is one more element required: time. Walking with God is not easy. We do not experience joy and peace all the time. Paul would not have spent so much space talking about accepting one another for the sake of God if it were not a real challenge in Christian community. If we are going to walk with God in gospel community, we can expect to get hurt, to be misunderstood, to have disagreements. To successfully offer the loving gift of acceptance in a meaningful way will require perseverance and encouragement from God. We cannot keep going apart from the truth of Scripture and the work of the Holy Spirit.

The feelings are not always there. But as we persevere and as we trust in God for his encouragement, his Spirit will produce these fruits in our lives in due season. Walking with Jesus we will experience joy and peace and hope. And as Paul said in 5:5, "hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us."

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as important, confusing, interesting or strange in Romans 15:1-13?
2. In this context, what do you imagine it looks like for the strong to bear with the weak? What would the strong have to bear in the case of the Roman church? (For a parallel use of the Greek word translated here as "please" look at 1 Corinthians 10:33 where the word is used in a similar context.)
3. Think back to one of the issues of conscience you considered over the last two lessons, what might it look like to "please" yourself in regard to that issue? What might it look like to "please" someone else?
4. What are the strengths of expressing unity through common social action? Do you agree or disagree that Christian unity in a local community of believers must start with common agreement regarding the nature of Jesus and the essentials of the gospel? What are some reasons for your position?
5. What factors prevent Christians from different races or different nationalities from worshipping together in local communities of believers? Could this passage be applied to bring together believers from different races or nationalities into a common Christian community? What truths here would apply?
6. Notice the repetition of the word "hope" in 15:4, 12 and 13. Notice also the repetition of the word in 5:1-5 and 8:24-25. Those two passages are at the beginning and end of the larger section about how the gospel empowers believers through grace. Those two bookend sections teach us that we have security in our relationship with God because of the love he has expressed through Jesus Christ. How does Paul's use of the word "hope" speak to you personally here at the end of our application section?

Lesson 37: Paul's Concluding Thoughts About His Mission

Romans 15:14-33

Paul's Mission as the Apostle to the Gentiles

¹⁴ And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able also to admonish one another. ¹⁵ But I have written very boldly to you on some points so as to remind you again, because of the grace that was given me from God, ¹⁶ to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the gospel of God, so that *my* offering of the Gentiles may become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

Paul's Past Mission: Jerusalem to Illyricum

¹⁷ Therefore in Christ Jesus I have found reason for boasting in things pertaining to God. ¹⁸ For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed, ¹⁹ in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit; so that from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ. ²⁰ And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was *already* named, so that I would not build on another man's foundation; ²¹ but as it is written, "THEY WHO HAD NO NEWS OF HIM SHALL SEE, AND THEY WHO HAVE NOT HEARD SHALL UNDERSTAND."

Paul's Present and Future Mission: Jerusalem to Spain via Rome

²² For this reason I have often been prevented from coming to you; ²³ but now, with no further place for me in these regions, and since I have had for many years a longing to come to you ²⁴ whenever I go to Spain—for I hope to see you in passing, and to be helped on my way there by you, when I have first enjoyed your company for a while—²⁵ but now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints. ²⁶ For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. ²⁷ Yes, they were pleased *to do so*, and they are indebted to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things. ²⁸ Therefore, when I have finished this, and have put my seal on this fruit of theirs, I will go on by way of you to Spain. ²⁹ I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.

Paul's Prayer Request

³⁰ Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me, ³¹ that I may be rescued from those who are disobedient in Judea, and *that* my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints; ³² so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God and find *refreshing* rest in your company. ³³ Now the God of peace be with you all. Amen.

NASB

Introduction

Hearing Romans for the First Time

The Roman word *domus* means home. The Slavic word *dom* comes from the Roman word as does the English word *domicile*. You call it *domus* because you are a free Roman living in the capital city. Believers have been assembling every night this week in different homes. This is your third night in a row. Arriving at one of the wealthier homes in the Christian community, you pass through the vestibule, greeted with a kiss, and squeeze your way into the atrium.

You notice again there is no statue of a household god standing in this atrium, and you smile to yourself. We Christians are a strange lot. Though this atrium measures some 50 square meters, about 540 square feet, the seating is shoulder to shoulder. You do not mind. You enjoy the closeness of your brothers and sisters in Christ. The ceiling is high with an opening to the sky. The air is good. As more arrive, the group spills from the atrium into the warm m night air of the courtyard, scented by lemon trees. There must be sixty or seventy brothers and sisters assembled together tonight.

The sister Phoebe arrived three days ago. She brought with her a letter from the Apostle Paul. You were there the first night the letter was read. We first read, as we always do, from the Bible. From the Law or the Prophets or the Writings. Your Bible consists only of the Old Testament Scripture. You have no gospels or letters, not yet. There is very little Christian writing. Priscilla and Aquila brought

back with them copies of a couple letters written by Paul. And now you have another. One written directly for you in Rome. Epaphroditus stands up to read. You will never forget the first time you heard the letter to the Romans. What an incredible presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ!

Paul's introduction drew you in. Even though he was a persecutor of Christians, a pharisee of Pharisees, he talked about his special calling to the Gentiles. You had heard the story from his friends. He wrote in his introduction that he had heard the report of your faith in Rome, and he expected to be blessed by your church when he comes. He longs to visit your great city, but the work of the Lord has prevented him from coming. You love his confidence in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. When Epaphroditus read that line, "I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes," you got goose bumps. As you did also the second night. And will again tonight.

After declaring that the righteous man will live by faith, Paul went on to defend the gospel with such care and depth and insight. He brought together so much you had been hearing from the preachers and teachers among you. He answered so many questions, raising so many more.

He proclaimed freedom from the Old Covenant law. Christ is the end of the law he says. Still he rooted everything in the Law and the Prophets. He taught about Abraham and quoted David and Moses, from the Psalms, Genesis and Deuteronomy, from Habakkuk and other prophets, especially Isaiah, a lot of Isaiah. He preached the freshness of gospel while keeping it rooted in the deep, rich soil of God's Word. Some of your teachers lean towards formulating the gospel as though it is a new Christian law parallel in form to the old. Others lean in an opposite direction, almost degrading the old in order to promote the new. Listening to Paul that first time, your emotions went both ways. He is stuck to the old. No, he is preaching something entirely new. But as you hear again and again, you realize how beautifully he proclaims the newness of the gospel of Jesus Christ, still rooted firmly in the Word of the Law and the Prophets.

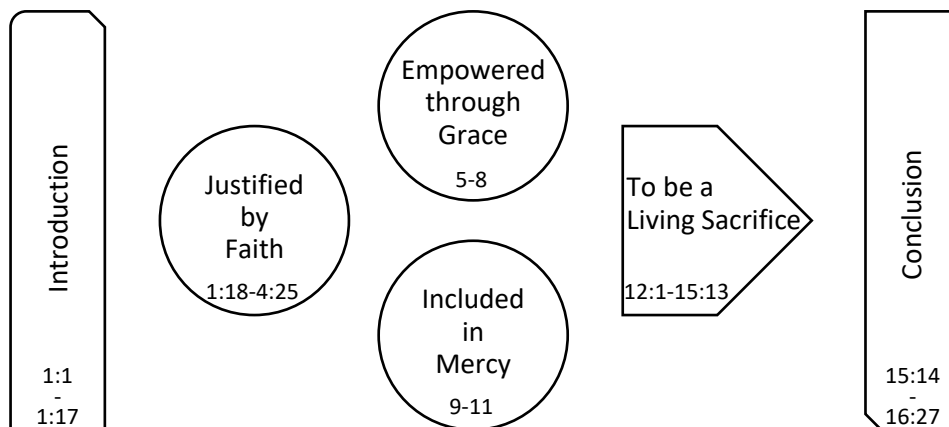
You hear Paul declare how you are justified by faith, then also empowered in grace, and finally included through mercy. You, a Roman Gentile, justified, empowered and included through the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Jewish Messiah, humanity's Messiah. "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!"

You remember how Paul then shifted from proclamation to exhortation. And he described it as worship, offering ourselves as living sacrifices. Living for God is an act of worship. We are to be a new community. And you realize how much good already exists among you, and how much more growth you long to see. And then there is the rebuke. A gracious rebuke, though still a rebuke, that you all take care not to ruin your work to build the kingdom of God over the non-essential issues of food laws and holy days.

You come again to the conclusion as Paul turns from exhortation to speak about his mission to the Gentiles and his travel plans and to greet everybody he knows in Rome. You decide to come again the next night. You admit that your mind wandered during the reading, taking a thought and running with it for several minutes before you came back again to listen. You are just beginning to catch elements of Paul's structure. To see how he brings together different parts. You especially enjoyed the chiasmic parts of the letter. That was artfully done. But you know there is so much more to the teaching of Paul. In a lifetime of serving God and learning about Jesus, you sense that you can come back to this well again and again.

Introduction to the Conclusion

We have arrived at the conclusion to Paul's letter to the Romans, this amazing letter. What would it have been like to hear it read in context, to receive a letter crafted so well, addressing essential questions of gospel belief and gospel practice, a letter excelling from the perspective of human achievement and even more importantly inspired by the Holy Spirit?



The letter divides into four basic parts: the introduction, the argument, the application, and the conclusion. The argument was a three-part presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul first took us to court to show how the gospel saves humanity from the curse of sin. We are justified by faith. That was chapters 1-4. Then Paul addressed two challenges to the good news of justification by faith. First, what about sin? Does a gospel of grace promote sin? By no means! The gospel of grace motivates and empowers the believer for righteousness. That was chapters 5-8, empowered in grace. Second, what about Israel? Does the end of the law mean the end of God's faithfulness to Israel? By no means! The gospel of Jesus Christ includes through mercy, both Jew and Gentile. That was chapters 9-11. Concluding his argument section, where he establishes us in the truth of the gospel, Paul then moved on to chapters 12-15 to exhort us to live out the gospel as a new kind of community.

We just finished this practical application section with a personal charge to the Romans to accept one another in spite of disagreement over issues of conscience. And at the very end of that exhortation to acceptance, Paul came back again to the prophetic vision of Gentiles being incorporated into the people of God. The Messiah will rule over the Gentiles who will give God glory through their heartfelt obedience. Verse 15:12, "Isaiah says, 'There shall come the root of Jesse [that's the Messiah], he who arises to rule over the Gentiles, in him shall the Gentiles hope.'"

The newness of the new covenant establishes Jesus as King over all peoples, issuing an invitation for all peoples. Ending the application section with a focus on Gentiles living to the glory of God does two things. First, it ends the application section with an emphasis on life as worship. Gentiles believing in God bring him glory as they live lives of worship. Ending on Gentiles living to the glory of God also provides a transitional bridge to Paul's conclusion, where he returns to his special calling as apostle to the Gentiles.

We are going to cover the conclusion in three lessons. In chapter 16 we will consider Paul's long list of greetings and his final words to the Romans. In this lesson we will cover Paul's report about his mission in chapter 15:14-33. In this section, Paul shifts to the more personal communication that we saw in the introduction of the letter, verses 1:1-17. He used there the three classical Greek categories of persuasion, logos, ethos and pathos. Logos is the message that Jesus is the Christ and salvation comes through him. Logos was presented in the first few verses of the letter, the entire argument section, and will be covered again in the last verses of the letter. Logos is the content of the message.

People can be persuaded by the facts of the message. But persuasion drops dramatically if the audience does not accept the credibility of the messenger or if their heart is not engaged. Ethos establishes credibility, and pathos draws in the heart. As in the introduction, Paul employs all three elements of persuasion in the conclusion of the letter. We especially see ethos and pathos in chapter 15. As we read through the text for this lesson, in addition to hearing Paul express details about his past and future mission plans, listen also for ethos and pathos, that is, listen for ideas that establish Paul's credibility and for the phrases that communicate to the heart of the Romans. How does Paul draw the Romans towards accepting his message? Let's read the whole passage, Romans 15:14-33.

[Read Romans 15:14-33]

Ethos and Pathos in Paul's Conclusion

Paul communicates ethos or credibility by asserting a special calling from God as a minister to the Gentiles. His mention of signs and miracles performed in the power of the Holy Spirit also attest to his credibility, especially since his coworkers in Rome can support the claim. Paul creates pathos by affirming the Romans in their faith and by talking about how he longs to see them and how he expects to be blessed by them.

Paul uses here in the conclusion, the same means for creating ethos and pathos as he did in the introduction. Consider these five parallels. (1) Concerning his affirmation of the Romans, he said in the introduction, “your faith is being proclaimed through the whole world.” And he says in 15:14, “you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge.” (2) Concerning his calling to the Gentiles, he says in the introduction that he wants to obtain some fruit among them, “even as among the rest of the Gentiles.” And he says in 15:16 that he was given grace, “to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles.” (3) Concerning confidence in the gospel, he proclaims in the introduction, “I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for salvation.” And he says in 15:17, “in Christ Jesus I have found reason for boasting.” (4) Concerning his desire to visit the Romans, he says in the introduction, “I long to see you.” And in 15:23 he says, “I have had for many years a longing to come to you.” (5) And concerning his expectation of benefit from the Romans, he gave this expectation in the introduction, “that I may be encouraged together with you while among you each of us by the other’s faith.” And he states this expectation in 15:24, “I hope to see you in passing, and to be helped on my way there by you when I have first enjoyed your company for a while.”

Introduction 1:8-17

- 1 ^aFirst, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because **your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world.** ^bFor 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, ^calways in my prayers making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you. ^dFor
- 4 **I long to see you** so that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established; ^ethat is, that I may be encouraged together with you
- 5 **while among you, each of us by the other's faith,** both yours and mine. ^fI 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
- 2 **I may obtain some fruit among you also, even as among the rest of the Gentiles.** ^gI am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. ^hSo, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in
- 3 **Rome. ⁱFor 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. ^jFor in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “But the righteous shall live by faith.”

Conclusion 15:14-29

- 1 ^kAnd concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that **you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge** and able also to admonish one another. ^lBut I have written very boldly to you on some points so as to remind you again, because of the grace that was given me from God, ^mto be
- 2 **a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles,** ministering as a priest the gospel of God, so that my offering of the Gentiles may become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. ⁿTherefore **in Christ Jesus I have found reason for**
- 3 **boasting** in things pertaining to God. ^oFor I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed, ^pin the power of signs and wonders,
- 4 **in the power of the Spirit:** so that from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ. ^qAnd thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was *already* named, so that I would not build on another man's foundation; ^rbut as it is written, “They who had no news of Him shall see, and they who have not heard shall understand.” ^sFor this reason I have often been prevented from coming to you; ^tbut now, with no further place for me in these regions, and since
- 4 **I have had for many years a longing to come to you**
- 5 **whenever I go to Spain—for I hope to see you in passing, and to be helped on my way there by you, when I have first enjoyed your company for a while—** ^ubut now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints. ^vFor Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. ^wYes, they were pleased to do so, and they are indebted to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things. ^xTherefore, when I have finished this, and have put my seal on this fruit of theirs, I will go on by way of you to Spain. ^yI know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.

Why does Paul make this effort to relate to the Romans and to establish his credibility? I believe that he does it because he believes in his message, and he wants the Romans to benefit from the message and even join him in the mission of spreading that message. We considered in the introduction the multiple purposes of the letter to the Romans. There is a pastoral purpose to the letter. Paul wants to strengthen the Romans in the truth of the gospel so that they will be saved and transformed to the glory of God. The fruitfulness of the message in the lives of the Roman believers requires accepting Paul as a true messenger of Jesus Christ. Along with the pastoral purpose, the letter has an apologetic purpose. Paul is establishing truth about the gospel of Jesus Christ by addressing criticism or challenges to his message. He is not presenting his message as a useful option. He is presenting his message as a definitive statement. For the Romans to stand strong in the defense of the gospel, they need to accept Paul as a credible defender of the gospel. Along with the pastoral and apologetic purposes of the letter, Paul has a missional purpose. This message should be proclaimed. “How beautiful are the feet

of those who bring good news (10:15).” Paul invites the Romans to join him in the proclamation of the gospel, not only through their own witness in Rome, but by assisting him on to Spain. For the sake of the people in Spain who have not yet heard the name of Jesus, Paul wants the believers in Rome to accept him as a credible missionary with whom to partner in the work of the gospel. So, this is why Paul establishes his credibility when writing the Romans; to motivate the Romans to receive his message of the gospel for the sake of his pastoral, apologetic and missional purpose.

For this same reason Paul seeks to create pathos in the heart of the Romans. Feeling a connection with Paul as a partner in the gospel will also help them accept his message of the gospel. He can count on a relational connection with churches he has planted and visited. But apart from believers he has met during his work in the Eastern part of the Empire who now reside in Rome, Paul does not have personal relationship with the members of this community. So, he makes this effort to connect relationally through his writing to help open hearts to his gospel message.

This work of Paul to create credibility and heart connection occurs as he describes for the Romans the past work and future plans of his mission to the Gentiles. Paul gives us a lot of insight into his understanding of his calling. So, let’s look at that, the past and future plans of Paul as the minister to the Gentiles.

Paul’s Mission, Past Present and Future (15:14-29)

He starts his mission summary with a general statement of his special calling to Gentiles in 15:14-16.

Paul’s Mission as the Apostle to the Gentiles (15:14-16)

Just as the last verses of the application section 15:9-12 create one half of a transitional bridge over to the conclusion, the first verses of the conclusion create the second half of the transitional bridge from the application. Paul’s initial comments in the conclusion point back to his final exhortation. He typically allows himself freedom to rebuke members of churches that he has founded. Here he tempers his rebuke to the strong and weak in Rome by telling them that he knows they are mature enough to admonish one another. He also says that he is reminding them of truths that they already know, which is much of what we need from sermons when we hear. We need reminders of how to live out the gospel. I need to hear a good sermon on communication in marriage at least once a year to remind me of the truth I know I need to be applying. Imagine the transformation if we would apply just half of what we know. So, Paul tells them, “This is part of my ministry. I am reminding you of truth you have already heard, so that you will continue in your effort to live it out.

These first few verses of the conclusion are also where Paul reminds the Romans of his calling to the Gentiles. It is as though he imagines someone asking, “Who does he think he is writing to us about accepting each other? Who’s Paul?” Paul pre-emptes the question. I am writing to you, not as one of your own, not as a founder of your community or even as a member of your community, but as one given a special ministry to all Gentiles. I would be remiss to leave you out. God called me to Gentiles. You are Gentiles. So, I need to write to you, though I know you can admonish each other, and I am just reminding you of what you know. Let’s read how this comes together in those verses, verse 14-16.

¹⁴ And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able also to admonish one another. ¹⁵ But I have written very boldly to you on some points so as to remind you again, because of the grace that was given me from God, ¹⁶ to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the gospel of God, so that *my* offering of the Gentiles may become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

Paul envisions his own service to God by expanding on the imagery of 12:1. There he associated the offering up of one’s own life as an acceptable sacrifice to God. Here he sees himself offering up others as acceptable sacrifices to God. So, gospel ministry is a dual offering. We offer up ourselves as we live for God, and we offer up all those that God may have given us the opportunity to bless with the gospel. And our desire for them is that they be sanctified by the Holy Spirit, that is, set apart for use and cleansed and made holy in that purpose.

After recommunicating his special calling to the Gentiles, Paul gives us a brief summary of his past work, that's in verses 17-21.

Past Mission – Jerusalem to Illyricum (15:17-21)

Paul starts this summary giving credit to Jesus. He does recognize his own participation in serving God. God invited Paul to a special ministry, and Paul said, "Yes!" to that offer. At the same time, Paul does not see his ministry as something he can boast about as coming from himself. He does boast, but he boasts in Christ Jesus. Let's that read in verses 17-19.

¹⁷ Therefore in Christ Jesus I have found reason for boasting in things pertaining to God. ¹⁸ For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed, ¹⁹ in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit; so that from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ.

For Paul, boasting reveals something essential about who we believe we are as human beings. Right after the critical passage declaring justification by faith in 3:21-26, Paul immediately asks, "Where then is boasting?" All non-graced based religion, religion that is not based on grace, provides the believer with grounds for boasting. Whether the goal of that religion is to live according to an external law or the goal of that religion is to be true to your own internal spiritual self, either way, if you are not made acceptable 100% by grace, then your acceptance depends in some part on your efforts to live out the law or to be true to you, whichever one, you have to do it. And therefore, you have something to boast about. That is not true if you see yourself depending 100% on the gift of God for your acceptability. You depend on him 100% not only as your creator but 100% as your savior. You do not save yourself. Where then is boasting?

In 5:1-11, Paul repeated a similar Greek word three times. We translated the word there as "exult" which carries the meaning of boasting and rejoicing together. Our joyful boasting in that context came from our hope we have in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Here, the boast has to do with fruitfulness of Paul's ministry. But he does not boast on his own account, on what he has done, rather in what Jesus has done through him. He is able to affirm the fruitfulness of his service, without taking prideful credit. He is thinking soberly, not belittling his own contribution, but being sure to recognize his complete dependence on Christ for supernatural results. I imagine Paul keeping a running conversation with God in his head, praying before everything, "Let this not be by my power but by Christ who lives in me for it is no longer I who live, but I live by faith in the Son of God;" and praying after everything, "To Christ be the glory for including me in the work he has done! Praise be to Christ!" So, Paul is able to rejoice in his own effort in the ministry as one who has run the race faithfully while giving all the credit to Jesus Christ.

Paul's boast in Jesus includes the scope of his ministry from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum. Paul could have said that he had preached the gospel from Damascus all the way around to Illyricum, where he first came to Christ or from Antioch all the way around to Illyricum where he was sent out on his first missionary journey. But he could also start with Jerusalem where he had a short, but significant, ministry after his conversion. He also continued to report back to Jerusalem as the mission to the Gentiles continued to expand. Starting with Jerusalem Paul accurately understands himself as involved with the expansion of the gospel from the center of Israel out to the Gentiles. He really could not have chosen a more theologically important starting point than Jerusalem, from Jerusalem out.

The end point of Illyricum is curious. Illyricum was the region north of Macedonia bordered on the East by the Adriatic Sea, starting in modern day Albania and reaching up through Croatia. This is the only mention of Illyricum in the Bible. The choice makes sense geographically since from Jerusalem to Illyricum covers the entire Eastern, Greek speaking portion of the Roman Empire. The curious question is, "When did Paul ever go to Illyricum?"

There is a period of time during Paul's third missionary journey, recorded in Acts 20:1-4, when Paul travelled through the districts of Macedonia to Greece and back again. And it took several months.

The Roman road called Via Egnatia stretched from the Adriatic coast city of modern-day Durres in Albania. So, that's if you come to the back of the boat of Italy and then just take a boat across to the Adriatic Sea. Now you are in Albania. You are in Durres. And that road stretched all the way through Albania across modern-day Macedonia into Turkey, all the way to Istanbul. And it passed through Thessalonica and Philippi. So, Paul must have used this road on his second and third missionary journeys. And following that road from Philippi up to the coast would have taken Paul through Macedonian districts as described in Acts 20:2, bringing him to the border between Macedonia and Illyricum. His statement that he preached the gospel around to Illyricum could mean that he preached up to the border of that region. You know, if he covered all of Macedonia, he would have preached up to Illyricum. Or it could mean that he actually entered into the region. Like he went up the road to Durres and just went a little further north, and he would have done some ministry in Illyricum. We do not know. We do know that Paul covered the major regions in the Greek speaking portion of the Roman empire.

His comment that he fully preached the gospel in this area does not need to mean that everybody in Asia Minor, Greece and Macedonia heard the name of Jesus. Rather it means that Paul completed his pioneering ministry of planting churches in major cities and towns through the area that served as lighthouses or rescue stations for the further spread of the gospel. Paul's mission plan seems to have been strategic culturally by planting gospel communities among different Gentile peoples, strategic geographically by planting gospel communities in the various regions of the Eastern Roman Empire, and strategic socially by targeting urban centers where there was a lot of movement, and the rest of the region might be reached.

Additionally, Paul understood himself as called to pioneering ministry. He cared about the ongoing growth of the church communities he started. He made it a practice to visit churches he had planted on each of his succeeding missionary journeys. He wrote letters to these churches. He sent fellow workers like Timothy and Silas to these churches to help establish solid leadership of elders. At the same time, he also continued to press into new regions, having as a basic principle the goal of taking the gospel to people who had not heard about Jesus. He did not stop and establish himself in one place. That's not Paul. This is verses 20-21.

²⁰ And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was *already* named, so that I would not build on another man's foundation; ²¹ but as it is written, "THEY WHO HAD NO NEWS OF HIM SHALL SEE, AND THEY WHO HAVE NOT HEARD SHALL UNDERSTAND."

Paul's ministry shows the tension between using time and resources to build up the community of Christ and using time and resources to spread the community out. He has longed to get to Rome and beyond. But he is not only an evangelist. He can't just preach the gospel and keep going. His goal is not simply conversion of individuals. He consistently invested time in the establishment of gospel movements, of communities of believers committed to growing in Christ and proclaiming the good news of Christ. Sometimes Paul stayed in a location for days. On a few occasions he stayed more than a year. So, on the one hand, he did not just set up evangelistic meetings and then move on. On the other hand, he stayed only for short periods of time in a given location, counted by days, maybe months, rarely years. He prepared faithful men and women to take over the ministry of the church, and then he moved on. If he could, he might even move on before raising up leaders, but he would then leave fellow workers or send fellow workers to help with that task.

From his past ministry we have a valuable window into Paul's mission strategy. In the second half of our passage, 15:22-29, Paul gives the Romans insight into his present plans and his future plans.

Present and Future Mission – Jerusalem to Spain via Rome (15:22-29)

Looking to the future, Paul connects his desire to visit the believers in Rome with his long-term plan to go to Spain. Spain had been dominated by Rome for over 200 years. It was a rich producer of olive oil and wine. The Roman Road via Augusta stretched across the Iberian Peninsula, from the east in France all the way over to the coast of what is modern-day Portugal for 1500 kilometers or 930 miles,

connecting significant Roman towns in much the same way that the via Egnatia stretched across the territory of Macedonia. Spain was a settled territory ripe for the harvest of the gospel. The mission to Spain would be Paul's first missionary journey in a primarily Latin speaking region of the Western Empire. Most importantly Spain contained millions of souls who had not heard the name of Jesus.

By communicating his mission strategy of proclaiming Christ where Christ had not been heard and by communicating his plan to only visit Rome on the way to Spain, Paul let's the Romans know that he has no plans to set up shop in Rome. Rome is not a promotion for Paul. It's not advancement for Paul. Rome is strategic as a mission center, both for the mission the Romans will do, and for the mission Paul aims to do. Paul wants the Roman believers established firmly in the gospel, not only for their own benefit, but also to equip them for the role they can play in spreading the kingdom of Christ. And he let's them know that he looks forward to their partnership.

Before Paul can go to Spain, however, he must go in the exact opposite direction to Jerusalem. That is sometimes the way it is with God. Paul had a calling of giftedness. He was passionate about that calling. It was the call of pioneering mission, to establish communities of believers where Christ had not been known. Paul also had a calling of need. This may not have been his passion. It may not have utilized his primary gifts. But it needed to be done. Sometimes the need comes before the passion. We cannot always do what we most want to do with those we would most want to do it. Sometimes that happens. Sometimes God has other plans. We follow God's call.

Paul had special influence, and he had special responsibility as the apostle to the Gentiles. He was concerned for unity between Jew and Gentile believers. He was also concerned with maintaining the integrity of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The tension between Jew and Gentile provided a context for defining the gospel as something new rooted in the that which was old. One of the ways that Paul sought unity and fought to maintain faithful gospel proclamation, was by raising financial support from Gentiles to give to poor Jewish believers in Jerusalem. He describes this plan in 15:25-27.

²⁵ but now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints. ²⁶ For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. ²⁷ Yes, they were pleased *to do so*, and they are indebted to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things.

As the apostle to the Gentiles, he took on himself the responsibility of delivering the financial gift and giving a report of the continue spread of the gospel among Gentiles. We can see into the future how this works out because Luke writes about Paul's arrival in Jerusalem in Acts 21:18-20a:

¹⁸ And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. ¹⁹ After he had greeted them, he *began* to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. ²⁰ And when they heard it they *began* glorifying God;

Luke goes on to describe one of the worries of the Jerusalem leaders in Acts 21:20b-21. And this worry gives us insight into the tension that we have seen Paul addressing in this letter to the Romans between Jew and Gentile believers. This is Acts 21:20b-21.

And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law; ²¹ and they have been told about you, [Paul] that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs."

And we see that Paul is preaching that we are free from those things. But we have also seen how carefully he has talked about it. And even here to the Romans, he does not tell them to forsake the customs. So, the need for Paul to go to Jerusalem was not primarily to deliver the financial support. He could have sent someone else to do that. The need was for the sake of the gospel and for the sake of unity between Jew and Gentile. Paul understood God calling him to stand up for the gospel in Jerusalem, as one who understands both what it means to be a Jewish believer and as one who also understood the freedom that was to be given to Gentile believers. And Paul had to go meet this need

before he could follow his passion to proclaim the gospel in Spain. In this case Paul put the call of need first. This was a special moment in the history of the church. The apostle to the Gentiles was needed in Jerusalem.

Paul's Prayer Request (15:30-33)

Paul concludes this description of his mission, past, present and future with a request for prayer. Let's read the prayer request, it's interesting, in 15:30-33.

³⁰ Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me, ³¹ that I may be rescued from those who are disobedient in Judea, and *that* my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints; ³² so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God and find *refreshing* rest in your company. ³³ Now the God of peace be with you all. Amen.

I wonder whether Paul would consider this one of the prayers that God answered. I think he probably would have, but certainly not in the way he was hoping for. He asked that his "service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints." That prayer came true. He was received by James and the elders who praised God for the work done among the Gentiles.

He also asked to be rescued from those who are disobedient in Judea. This prayer was answered as well. When a mob seized him and took him out of the temple, preparing to kill him, a Roman centurion intervened and arrested him. He was imprisoned, but alive. So, we have to admit the prayer was answered. He was "rescued from those who are disobedient in Judea" even if the answer meant he was going to be put in jail.

Paul adds on to the prayer the request "that I may come to you in joy by the will of God." Again, this did not happen the way Paul planned. After two years of imprisonment in Caesarea, Paul finally appealed to Caesar. He was sent as a prisoner to Rome, survived a shipwreck, and on arrival was put under house arrest where he was able to receive guests. Not the way, I would have wanted God to get me to Rome. But he got Paul there. And we must admit looking back that Paul had some pretty incredible adventures on the way.

And that's how prayer works, isn't it? If your mind is focused on the work of God, and your heart is motivated by love for your king, then you can really trust him to answer your prayers however seems best to him, and you know in the end it will also be revealed that however is best for God is also best for you.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as important, confusing, interesting or strange in Romans 15:14-33?
2. Where do you notice Paul persuading through ethos, or the establishment of his credibility?
3. Where do you notice Paul persuading through pathos, or connection to the feelings of the Romans?
4. Would this passage motivate you to support Paul as a missionary to Spain? Why or why not?
5. What principles of mission work does Paul's strategy suggest to you? Or what questions does it raise for you or your church?
6. Does it make sense to you to think of Paul's desire to go to Spain as a calling that matches his passion and the plan to go to Jerusalem as a calling that lines up with need? Is that a helpful distinction? Have you experienced in your own life that tension between a call of gifting and a call of need? (This could be in any area of service, not just mission service.)
7. Can you think of a personal prayer example where you asked God for something, and he answered you, though in a very different way than what you had originally envisioned?

Lesson 38: Paul's Personal Greetings to the Believers in Rome

Romans 16:1-24

- ¹ I commend to you our sister Phoebe,
 who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea;
 ² that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints,
 and that you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you;
 for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well.
- ³ Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus,
 ⁴ who for my life risked their own necks,
 to whom not only do I give thanks,
 but also all the churches of the Gentiles;
- ⁵ also *greet* the church that is in their house.
 Greet Epaphroditus, my beloved,
 who is the first convert to Christ from Asia.
- ⁶ Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you.
- ⁷ Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners,
 who are outstanding among the apostles,
 who also were in Christ before me.
- ⁸ Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord.
- ⁹ Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ,
 and Stachys my beloved.
- ¹⁰ Greet Apelles, the approved in Christ.
 Greet those who are of the *household* of Aristobulus.
- ¹¹ Greet Herodion, my kinsman.
 Greet those of the *household* of Narcissus, who are in the Lord.
- ¹² Greet Tryphaena and Tryphosa, workers in the Lord.
 Greet Persis the beloved,
 who has worked hard in the Lord.
- ¹³ Greet Rufus, a choice man in the Lord,
 also his mother and mine.
- ¹⁴ Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the brethren with them.
- ¹⁵ Greet Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them.
- ¹⁶ Greet one another with a holy kiss.
 All the churches of Christ greet you.
- ¹⁷ Now I urge you, brethren,
 keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned,
 and turn away from them.
 ¹⁸ For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites;
 and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting.
- ¹⁹ For the report of your obedience has reached to all;
 therefore I am rejoicing over you,
 but I want you to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil.
- ²⁰ The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.
The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.
- ²¹ Timothy my fellow worker greets you, and *so do* Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my kinsmen.
- ²² I, Tertius, who write this letter, greet you in the Lord.
- ²³ Gaius, host to me and to the whole church, greets you.
Erastus, the city treasurer greets you, and Quartus, the brother.
- ²⁴ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

NASB

Introduction

Paul's concluding greetings in Romans 16 give us an interesting glimpse into the life of the early church. There are four parts to the section. We start with words of commendation for Phoebe, then Paul greets everybody he knows in Rome, then we get a final short exhortation, and we end up with greetings from Paul's associates. We will move through each part one by one, starting with the commendation of Phoebe in the first two verses of chapter 16. Let's read that.

[Romans 16:1-2]

1. Letter of Commendation for Phoebe

Phoebe is our most likely candidate as the person who delivered the letter from Paul to the Romans. And even though that is not stated specifically here, it would explain why she had travelled to Rome and why Paul mentions her in the letter. Also, she is coming from Cenchrea which was a port town 8 miles from Corinth where Paul likely wrote the letter to the Romans.

We do not have information in the Bible about the planting of the church in Cenchrea which reminds us that Paul's goal in establishing churches in major cities like Corinth was for the church there to serve as a base for the surrounding countryside. For example, when he wrote 2 Corinthians, Paul addressed it to, "the church of God which is at Corinth with all the saints who are throughout Achaia (1:1)." In Paul's day, Achaia was the Roman province that included the whole Peloponnesian peninsula with the central cities of Corinth and Athens. Paul's letter to Corinth was meant for the whole region. Corinth was a base for gospel ministry and apparently saw success in planting a church in the nearby town of Cenchrea.

Acts 18:18 records Paul leaving Corinth at the end of his second missionary journey. The text says he put out to sea for Syria. And since Corinth did not have a port, we would assume that he set out from Cenchrea, which the next sentence affirms. Luke writes, "In Cenchrea he had his hair cut, for he was keeping a vow." Luke also tells us that Priscilla and Aquila were with Paul on this journey. These are those tantalizing details in the narrative that make you want for more. What was the church like in Cenchrea? How well did Paul know the believers there? Did Phoebe host him and Priscilla and Aquila before they left? Where did Paul go for a haircut? We do not have much, but we can imagine when Paul commends Phoebe to the Romans, she may already had at least two friends there in Priscilla and Aquila.

Paul calls Phoebe a diakonos. Some Bibles translate this as servant and some Bibles as deacon. In the normal use of the Greek, the word means servant and should apply to all members of a church. We are all servants of Christ. The trouble with a word like diakonos is that even though it had a typical use, it began at some point to carry the more technical meaning of deacon. Paul started to use the word technically in his later letters to the Philippians (1:1) and to Timothy (1 Timothy 3:8) to refer to a certain ministry role in the church. He uses it in the same context with elder, showing us that it was not the same as elder or overseer. It's a different role. In his words here in Romans, Paul connects the word to the church. Phoebe was not just a diakonos in general. She was a diakonos "of the church which is at Cenchrea." That suggests to me that she served a recognized ministry role in that church. So, the word deacon as a title could apply.

Paul says that she has been "a helper of many and of myself as well." That is another interesting word to use. The Greek noun *prostatis*, translated here as helper, is only used this once in the Bible. Paul does use the verb, which can mean to give aid to someone or can mean to preside over someone. Some scholars think this means that Phoebe performed a leadership role of presiding over the church in Cenchrea. That seems unlikely, since Paul says that Phoebe performed this function for him as well. And we do not see anyone in the churches Paul planted as presiding over Paul. Douglas Moo recommends understanding the word according to its Greek use as a benefactor or patron. He writes, "A patron was one who came to the aid of others, especially foreigners, by providing housing and financial aid and by representing their interests...Phoebe, then, was probably a woman of high

social standing and some wealth, who put her status, resources, and time at the services of traveling Christians, like Paul, who needed help and support.”

So, Paul seems to be asking the Roman Christians to provide for Phoebe in the same way that she has provided for others. She has partnered with Paul in the ministry of the gospel, and Paul wants to make sure she is taken care of.

2. Greetings to the Romans

After commending Phoebe, Paul moves on to greet about 26 individuals and 5 groups. Some interpreters have pointed out the oddity of Paul knowing so many people in a church he has never visited before. Some then question whether this greeting is original to Paul or added by someone else later. It is so different from his other letters. Why does he not likewise greet a long list of people in the churches he established, for example, when he writes the Thessalonians or the Galatians?

That seems to me to be asking the question without thinking it through. We all know the trouble of communicating to groups of people, whether your inviting people to your birthday party or your wedding or you’re thanking them in an acceptance speech. As soon as you include Bob and Mary, then you better not leave out Janice, Tom or Harry. But if you include them what about Roy or Harriet? It is tough to find a clear boundary. The more people you mention by name, the more likely you are to leave someone out and hurt or offend them. The safest approach in writing to a church he had planted is to mention only those absolutely necessary and just greet everyone as a group. That’s what Paul does.

Here, I believe Paul is mentioning every single Christian he knows in Rome. It is a significant number, but manageable. It also serves a triple purpose. A lot of the people Paul mentions are active in ministry. So, this probably serves to build Paul’s ethos, or credibility. He is not just dropping names. These are people that he has real relationship with. And if others in Rome respect these brothers and sisters as Paul does, then it will help them see Paul positively and strengthen the bridge between them and his gospel message. Because Paul feels such personal love and warmth for his partners in the gospel, his communication here also builds pathos. If I were there and heard Paul speaking this kindly about people I love and respect that would continue to strengthen the bridge between me and his message. Paul is aware how important the relational context can be for the positive communication of the gospel.

I said Paul accomplishes three purposes. Not only does he employ ethos and pathos to enable the reception of his message, but at the same time, he builds up his fellow workers. He gives them honor. He acknowledges his own indebtedness to them. He points out their hard work and commitment to the gospel. Imagine Paul writing to your church and including your name here in the list of greetings. I imagine that he does not want you to boast in anything except what Christ has accomplished through you. But this does not prevent him from recognizing your faith and love in action. Imagine how these brothers and sisters in Christ might have felt as we read through the greeting. This is Romans 16:3-16.

[Read Romans 16:3-16.]

A Glimpse of Social Diversity in the Early Church

I love the encouragement Paul gives here. Can you imagine these words to you? You’re my beloved in the Lord. You are my fellow prisoner. You are a choice man in the Lord. I see what you have been doing. I see your hard work. It just makes you want to keep it up. It makes you want to keep going for Jesus.

Another exciting thing about this passage is the glimpse we get into the makeup of the early church. Paul mentions two house churches. If Priscilla and Aquila are doing the same tent making work they were doing with Paul, then their house church was not meeting in a wealthy home. They likely had an apartment above their shop, a common practice in Rome. Jews were not allowed to assemble in large numbers and at this time Christians were generally considered a sect of Judaism. A wealthy

home may have allowed a large assembly of around 60, but I assume a gathering in an apartment above a shop would have been considerably smaller.

Paul's reference in verse 14, "and the brethren with them," and in verse 15, "and all the saints who are with them," are also probably references to house churches. Those of Aristobulus in verse 10 and of Narcisus in verse 11, refer to members of the households of these men. A household could include family and slaves. It is not clear whether there were house churches in these two households.

A study of names is not exact. A name normal for Roman citizens might also be given to a slave. Or what appears to be a Roman name might be the Latin version of a Hebrew name. Still, the variety in this list of names suggest such a mixture of male and female; Roman, Greek and Jew; slave, free and citizen. The church was not only for the low in society and not only for the educated. The early church broke through gender, economic and social barriers. You can imagine hurrying along narrow streets among white stone buildings four or five stories high with red clay tile roofs. The stone streets are worn smooth from centuries of wear. And you come to Aquila's shop and turn in at the narrow door, heading up a flight of stone steps to be welcomed in by Priscila. There are people there who you could never imagine interacting with socially, not before you came to Christ, but now you grasp hands warmly and greet each other with a kiss.

A Glimpse into the Role of Women in the Early Church

I'd like to speak a little about the prominence of women in this section. I do not want to address right now the theological issue of gender roles in church and in family. My practice through this series is to address the theological issues raised by Paul in Romans, and he does not speak about gender roles here. I still want to make a few comments because there is information here that informs the gender roles discussion.

To simplify the discussion, I will refer to three different positions regarding gender roles: complementarian, egalitarian and authoritarian. These words have different meanings for different people. Some people who call themselves complementarian really act like authoritarians. I say that because I think my position is complementarian, but on the one hand, I do not always agree with others who call themselves complementarian, and on the other hand, I do not always like the way egalitarians describe complementarians. That is okay. I am sure some egalitarians do not like the way they are pictured by complementarians. That is the nature of disagreement. Now, I know I am on dangerous ground even bringing up this subject because there is a lot of pain and frustration and injustice wrapped around gender issues. There is a lot of valid emotion and a lot of confusion. I am going to try anyway, just to say a bit.

I define a complementarian as one who recognizes equality and partnership among men and women in the family and church, while also recognizing that God has reserved certain leadership roles for men, not based on skill, or competence or value, but based on gender. An egalitarian recognizes the first, that there is an equality and partnership among men and women in the family and church but does not recognize a limitation of roles based on gender. An authoritarian does not recognize equality and partnership, but sees the man set above the woman. The woman is not beside the man, but below the man. That is the one I would outright reject.

To study this issue biblically, we would need to start by setting aside for a moment all the failure of the church. At some point we would have to address prejudice against women in the church. At some point, we would also need to address the positive and negative movements in society. But to develop a biblical worldview, we would start by trying to put those issues aside and make an attempt to renew our minds according to the teaching of Scripture.

We start from Scripture. To do that, we would need to look at places where the Bible gives us specific teaching about gender roles in the New Covenant. That means we would need to study closely 1 Corinthians 11-14, Ephesians 5, and 1 Timothy 2. And since all three of these passages refer to the creation, we would also need to go back and study Genesis 1-3. This would be a significant study

because we would want to look not only at the individual passages but also at the books as a whole in order to understand the context of the specific passages. We would also want to look at the role of women through Scripture. And I think we would especially want to look at how Jesus interacts with women and how Paul interacts with women.

Romans 16 just gives us a bit of this last task, showing us something about how Paul interacts with women. It is not going to help us develop a biblical theology of gender roles. It doesn't help us decide between complementarian and egalitarian, but it does give us some interesting information that would need to be included in a thorough study. Here are four things, as a complementarian, that I find very interesting in Romans 16.

First, I find it interesting that Paul refers to Phoebe as a deaconess of the church of Cenchrea. And I have already said that I think deacon is the right translation here, not servant. I think Paul is most likely referring to a ministry role that Phoebe holds in that church which fits with the word deacon.

Second, I find it interesting that Priscilla's name is mentioned before Aquila's name. Whatever the reason, we come up with for that, in Paul's day writing the wife's name first would have been very unusual and would have given some kind of preference to Priscilla. Paul did not feel the need to defend Aquila's honor or position by mentioning him first. Paul does mention Aquila first on some other occasions in Scripture, but it is interesting to consider why. And here he did not feel the need to do so here. Here we have Priscilla, or Prisca as he is using her short name, mentioned first.

Third, I find it interesting that the name sometimes translated in 16:7 as the feminine Junia and sometimes as the masculine Junias has much more support as a woman's name than as a man's name. While there is a possibility that it is a form of a masculine name, commentators before the 13th century all assume that it is a feminine name (Moo, 922). And while we have no evidence of its use as a Latin male name, it was used commonly as a female name. The pair of Andronicus and Junia seem most likely to be husband and wife. And the most likely translation for the rest of the verse is that this married pair were counted among the apostles. That's why this is interesting. Junia is counted with Andronicus among the apostles. The text is not suggesting that Andronicus and Junia were apostles in the most technical sense. That applied specifically to twelve men, with Paul as the lone exception in his special role as apostle to the Gentiles. In Acts 2, when the apostles replaced Judas, we see that the intention was to maintain the symbolic number 12 and that there were really strict limitations on who could even fulfill that role. But the word apostle was not a special Greek word. It had a common meaning. It just meant messenger. It is kind of like we have already talked about the word for servant which generally meant servant, or it could mean deacon. So the word for apostle, apostolos, is just the word for messenger. The word takes on special meaning in the New Testament in two contexts. The apostles of Jesus are the most limiting context. There are just 12 of them. The word also began to be used in the sense of missionary, those who went out as messengers of the gospel. This would be a natural way to take the word in the case of Andronicus and Junia. They were among those sent out as messengers of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Fourth, mentioning even one woman by name as a valued partner would have been a radical exception among first-century writers. You don't acknowledge women. Of the 26 valued co-workers mentioned here by Paul somewhere between 9 and 11 of them are women.

Taking these four observations into consideration, we can then ask, "What do these facts suggest about Paul's relationship to women in the work of the gospel?" The facts do not really help us with the egalitarian versus complementarian question of whether or not the role of elder or pastor is one assigned only to men or whether it can be assigned to men and women. That does not come up clearly here. What does seem clear to me is that Paul trusted women. Paul valued women. Paul respected the contribution of women. Paul envisioned a movement where women took up important roles in the building of the church and the furtherance of the gospel.

Paul concludes this section with a call to greet one another with a holy kiss. I thought that was odd until I moved to Croatia. We do not normally greet each other that way in our church, but we do on

special occasions of congratulation or if you visit somebody's home on a holiday. I remember the first time a big, partially shaven guy kissed me on each cheek at Christmas. It made me feel like I finally belonged in Croatia. You just have to be sure to lean to the right to make sure the kiss lands on the cheek. That's the only important thing to know.

Paul concludes this section with a general greeting from all the churches. All the churches greet you guys. And then he moves on to his exhortation.

3. A Final Exhortation

This final warning is in 17-20. Let's read that.

[Read Romans 16:17-20]

It was typical for Paul to include a final exhortation in his letters. And this one is a warning. The warning continues to paint for us the picture of the early church. Though the church in Rome seemed healthy and well-led, Paul recognized the need for alertness against those who would introduce teaching contrary to the gospel message. Though this young movement has managed to grow despite the earlier crisis of Jewish leaders being expelled from Rome and though this young movement has experienced leadership trusted by Paul, they are still vulnerable to false teaching from men or women who rise up among them.

By reminding the Romans that he is aware of their obedience, Paul communicates that his warning is not based on any report of misbehavior. He is communicating based on his experience as a church planter and leader. In this time of new growth, he wants them on guard to the reality that some men or women will put themselves forward with a false view of the gospel. This is one more reason for Paul to write it down, so that they would have a written message to come back to. And so, it serves a clear warning to us. There will always be men and women assuming the name of Christ and calling others away from the teaching we have received. We stand firm on the authoritative word of Scripture, that teaching we have received.

To be wise in what is good speaks to our practice. That we would wisely present ourselves as instruments of righteousness. To be innocent in what is evil does not mean to be naïve in our knowledge, but innocent in our practice. It was not wrong for Adam and Eve to learn about evil, and so judge Satan. That was their job. They are supposed to rule as king and queen over the creation. It was wrong for them to seek to learn about evil through disobedience. We do not learn about evil by trying it out. We seek to remain innocent in the practice of evil. And we learn from the word of God.

So, though Jesus has conquered the powers of sin and death, we are still engaged in a struggle with evil. God has not yet crushed Satan's head under his foot. We are still in the already/not yet transition of our salvation. Jesus has already won. But we wait for the final act when he will crush the head of Satan. This is a reference back to Genesis 3:15. The snake continues to strike out at the seed of Eve, the believing remnant, trying to destroy the gospel community. We need to be wise about the real danger that exists. Still, we know who wins. The God of peace will win. And that is a strange combination of words, "peace" and "crushing the head." Being the God of peace does not mean being a pacifist. For peace to reign, Satan must be engaged, defeated, and crushed. The God of peace will bring about this final victory when the time is right, when he has completed his rescue mission of calling men and women into his kingdom.

Paul's final blessing builds on all that he has been teaching us, "The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you." These are not just nice spiritual words. By God's grace we have been saved from the evil one. By God's grace our gospel community can continue to grow and thrive. And by God's grace the evil one will be eternally vanquished. And then peace will reign.

The greetings section concludes with some shout out from Paul's associates. Let's read that in verses 21-24.

4. Greetings from Paul's associates

[Read Romans 16:21-24]

Of course, we know Timothy, the most consistent of Paul's younger co-workers. There is a Lucius in Antioch, Acts 13:1, but we have no reason to believe that Lucius is the same as this Lucius. Jason may be the Jason from Thessalonica, Acts 17:5-9. And Sosipater may be the Sopater from Berea in Acts 20:4. Paul is regularly involving others in his mission. Since Thessalonica and Berea are in Macedonia, these men could have joined Paul to take the financial gift from those Gentile churches to Jerusalem. Maybe that is why they are there.

Tertius served as Paul's secretary for writing down Romans. It's interesting to see Paul giving him the opportunity to say, "Hello!" himself. He writes it with his own hand. Gaius may have been the Gaius from 1 Corinthians 1:14, since Paul likely wrote Romans from Corinth. It sounds like he hosted Paul at his home and hosted a house church there as well. Paul describes Erastus as a financial officer. Archaeology uncovered an inscription of an official named Erastus in Corinth. Perhaps this is the same man. And Quartus, we don't know anything about Quartus. Though that is true of most Christian history isn't it. The faithful saints have lived and served and loved and struggled without us ever knowing the details. We are just getting this little glimpse here into the life of the church. We will have a lot of questions to ask and a lot of stories to share in heaven.

Verse 24 ends the greeting section with "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all." We already had this up in verse 21. It seems probably that verse 24 is not original with Paul. But whether we should take both verses as original or whether we should verse 21 over 24 or 24 over 21, it hardly seems to matter. They say the same thing.

Paul liked to start his introductory greetings with a blessing of grace and peace, like, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." That's Romans 1:7. And he liked to end similarly with a blessing of grace in the Lord Jesus, so from grace to grace.

That's a good way for us to end this glimpse into the life of the early church. We come to faith through the grace of God. We are gathered into community through the grace of God. And we continue on by the grace of God.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as important, confusing, interesting or strange in the greetings in the first part of this passage Romans 16:1-16 and the end 21-24?
2. What are three questions raised for you about the early church that you would like to ask? What sparks your curiosity?
3. What lesson do you draw from the diversity represented here or from the way Paul speaks to the brothers and sisters he knows in Rome?
4. What stands out to you as important, confusing, interesting or strange in the warning section of Romans 16:17-20?
5. What source of false teaching might threaten your community?
6. Paul suggests three or four ideas in this passage to help guard against false teaching? What should you be doing as a community?
7. Do Paul's final words in verse 20 encourage you? If so, how so?

Lesson 39: Paul's Final Words to the Romans

Romans 16:25-27

²⁵ Now

to Him

who is able to establish you

according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ,
according to the revelation of the mystery

which has been kept secret for long ages past,

²⁶ but now is manifested,

and has been made known

by the Scriptures of the prophets,

according to the commandment of the eternal God,

to all the nations,

leading to obedience of faith;

²⁷ to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen.

NASB

Introduction

I love how Paul refers to the gospel as my gospel here at the end of the letter. It's like my team, my family, my city, my wife – my gospel. I am not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is my gospel. It is the truth about my Lord. It's ownership. It's identity. It's my gospel. Anyway, we will get back to that.

Here is how Paul began the letter to the Romans. This is his thesis.

“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 to faith; as it is written, ‘BUT THE RIGHTEOUS *man* SHALL LIVE BY FAITH’ (Romans 1:16-17).”

So, how did Paul do in supporting the claims of his thesis in Romans?

He claimed that the gospel is the power of God for salvation. What power? The power of the cross which removes the penalty of sin; the power of the indwelling Spirit which enables us to overcome the sin principle in our flesh; the power to keep us secure in the protection of his grace, knowing that he will take us to glory. Who can separate us from the power of his love in Jesus Christ? The gospel is the power of God for salvation. I think Paul did a great job of laying out for us the power of God for salvation in the gospel.

Paul also claimed that this power of salvation is available “to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” He argued that Gentile and Jew both will be judged according to their works and both will come up short, “by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in his sight.” The problem of sin is universal, having been introduced to humanity through the disobedience of Adam. Therefore, God's solution for sin is universal, coming through the obedience of the second Adam, Jesus Christ. This gift of grace is totally inclusive to all who receive it by faith in Jesus. We got a glimpse of that inclusivity in the closing greetings to members of the church of Rome. Their names included men and women, Hebrew, Greek, Roman, slave, free and wealthy. The gospel is for everyone who believes.

Paul further claimed that the gospel has power and universality because in it God's righteousness is revealed. We saw Paul show us two sides to that claim. First, the gospel reveals that God himself is righteous. God cannot ignore the penalty of sin. By the cross he paid for sin, so that he might remain righteous when he forgives sin. Critics would say it is well and good to forgive sin, but this gospel makes God out to be unrighteous because it then allows people to go on living in sin. But we see that grace brings a new vision, a new motivation and a new power. Grace is not permission to sin. Grace is freedom from sin. God is righteous not only in forgiveness but also in producing a new people being restored into the image of Jesus Christ. Critics also fault God for being unfaithful in his promises to

Israel. But in this too, God is proved righteous. God has kept his promises, though his people have turned away from him. The doors have been open wide to Gentiles, but God has not rejected the Jew. God maintains a remnant of believing Israelites, and he has a plan for the future of Israel. The gospel reveals the righteousness of God in his faithfulness to all his promises.

The righteousness of God is about God. It is also about man. This is the other side of righteousness that Paul develops. Man receives the righteousness of God through the righteousness of Jesus. We are justified, declared righteous, by faith. It is not our own righteousness but the righteousness of God. And we are not only declared righteous. Grace gives us new vision, new motivation, new power to actually begin to live righteously. There is a righteousness that is our own that comes from participating with God in our sanctification. It is not perfect. It does not justify us. It is the first fruits of God's work in us. He is transforming us into the image of Jesus Christ. That work will be complete only in heaven. So, we have the righteousness of God as a declared status. And we are also beginning to live out the righteousness of God in community with one another.

This is Paul's declaration, and this is the argument he has made. The gospel is the power of God for salvation. That gospel is universally available to all who believe. And the gospel reveals the righteousness of God.

Paul has invited the Romans to believe in this gospel, to live out this gospel and to join him in the mission of the gospel. Paul expects the Romans to join him in spreading the gospel and building the gospel community. When we read the little phrases he uses to describe the people he greets in chapter 16, we hear this idea of participation together in the work of the gospel. They are in the harvest field together. It seems to me that he expects everyone to be a witness to the gospel in his or her own sphere of influence. Consider these phrases in his greetings to the men and women in the church.

Paul says of Phoebe she has been a helper of many. He says of Prisca and Aquila that they have risked their own necks for me. Mary has worked hard for you. Andronicus and Junia are outstanding among the apostles. Urbanus is a fellow worker. Tryphaena and Tryphosa are workers in the Lord. Persis has worked hard in the Lord. There is this working together to build something. There is a commitment to the kingdom of Christ which is focused on contributing to the local community of believers. To not be ashamed of the gospel means that we gladly proclaim that gospel to other people in society as the power of God for salvation. To not be ashamed of the gospel means that the gospel of Jesus is our primary focus, our primary mission of the church. We proclaim the gospel, and we invite people to believe in the gospel, and we build up one another in the knowledge of the gospel. This is what Paul has been doing for us in the letter to the Romans. He has been proclaiming to us the gospel, he has been inviting us to believe in and live by the gospel, he has been building us up, giving this foundation of deeper knowledge about the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And now we have come to the end. And since Paul ends very similar to how he began, we are going to a moment to look at his rhetorical structure because that is going to help us to better understand the benediction that we have in the last three verses. So, after we consider this big picture structure, we are going to look closely at that benediction to close up our study of Romans.

The Rhetorical Structure of Romans

The oldest manuscript copies of the letter to the Romans contain the full 16 chapters that we have in our modern Bibles. There are some manuscripts, old, but not the oldest, that move the final benediction from the end of chapter 16 and put it in between chapter 14 and 15. So, they still have everything. There is just that one little change. Then there are some later Latin manuscripts that drop off chapter 15 and 16 altogether. Since the oldest manuscripts contain the full text in our current order, we should assume that some later manuscripts made some adjustment for some reason that we don't any longer know about. For example, it is possible that a copy of Romans was shared with churches outside of Rome without the last two chapters because somebody thought, "Well, that speaks primarily to the Romans." And they cut out those two chapters. Or perhaps Origen is right. He

blames the heretic Marcion for leaving out the last two chapters because Marcion was anti-Jewish, and Paul talks positively about going to Jerusalem and bringing together Jew and Gentile. (For various options see Moo, 5-9.)

Anyway, we have the testimony of the oldest manuscript copies. They agree with us that we have all 16 chapters. It also makes sense to recognize our current 16 chapters as original because it creates a well-balanced structure. Paul has, in fact, created a chiasmic balance to the letter with his use of Greek rhetorical style. Remember our previous references to Greek rhetoric. We have *logos* as the message or the topic, *pathos* which creates heart connection, and *ethos* which establishes credibility.

So, the greetings at the beginning and the end of the letter are the first frame of our chiasm. That is 1:1-7 at the beginning and chapter 16 at the end. In both places Paul talks about the people, who the letter is to and who it is from. And in both places he refers to the *logos* of the letter or the big picture topic which is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The second frame is prayer. And that is a standard element of a Greek letter introduction. So, we have Paul's statement in 1:8-10 that he has been praying for the Romans. That was right after the introductory greeting. Then, before the concluding greeting, we have Paul asking the Romans to pray for him when he goes to Jerusalem. That is in 15:30-33. So, we have greeting on either end with *logos*. Then we have prayer as the inner frame.

The third frame of the chiasm has Paul using *pathos* and *ethos* to create a gospel-centered connection with the Romans. And we discussed this two lessons ago when we went over the beginning of our conclusion in 15:14-29. That is where we see this *pathos* and *ethos* in the conclusion. And we identified close parallels between that section and the *pathos* and *ethos* employed by Paul at the end of the introduction in 1:11-17.

So, we have People and *Logos* in the outside frame, then prayer in the second internal frame, then *pathos* and *ethos* in the third internal frame, and then the development of *logos* in the middle or body of the letter. That's the biggest portion of the letter from 1:18-15:13.

1:1-17 Introduction	1. 1:1-7 Greeting (People and <i>Logos</i>)
	2. 1:8-10 Prayer
	3. 1:11-17 Gospel connection (<i>Pathos</i> and <i>Ethos</i>)
1:18-11:36 Body of the letter	X. 1:18-15:13 Development of the thesis (<i>Logos</i>)
	3' 15:14-29 Gospel connection (<i>Pathos</i> and <i>Ethos</i>)
	2' 15:30-33 Prayer
15:14-16:27 Conclusion	1' 16:1-27 Greeting (People and <i>Logos</i>)

The big picture topic is the gospel. And the body of the letter develops that topic. It is a big theme. There is a lot you could say about the gospel. And Paul is not going to write a fifth gospel. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John have that covered. So, Paul is not going to focus on the "who" of Jesus or the narrative of the cross. Paul focuses on the "how" of the gospel. How is this gospel God's power for salvation? How does that work? And how does this gospel reveal God's righteousness? And how do we live out this gospel. Those are the questions that Paul has addressed through Romans.

So, now we are ready to look at Paul's last three verses. It is loaded. In this one sentence, he is going to refer to his purpose, his topic, his antecedent, his scope and his goal. It's all one sentence.

So, let's read the text. This is Romans 16:25-27. And then we will address each of these big picture elements.

[Read Romans 16:25-27]

Paul's Benediction (16:25-27)

So, these three verses are one of those long sentences Paul likes to write. And as with all of Paul's long sentences the best thing to do is to first identify the subject and verb. The sentence is a benediction, and so, it has kind of a strange form. The main subject and verb do not come until the last few words, and at least in the English, the order is odd. We could shorten the whole benediction just down to this, "Now to God be the glory. Amen" To see the subject and verb clearly we have to turn that sentence around, so that what we have is, "Glory be to God!" So, "Glory" is the subject, "be" is the verb and "to God" is a prepositional phrase. That's our main sentence.

That was probably more complicated than it needs to be. The main thing to recognize is that Paul starts the benediction in verse 25, "Now to him..." and then he is going to say everything he wants to say, and he is going to end in verse 27, "...to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen." So, we can separate out that beginning phrase in verse 25, "Now to him..." and the ending portion in verse 27 that starts with "to the only wise God...". That's our benediction. In the middle, Paul is going to wrap-up or restate five big picture elements that he stated way back in the introduction. These are the purpose, topic, antecedent, scope and goal.

First, we get the purpose.

1. Purpose: 16:25 and 1:11

The phrase "to establish you" or as your translation may have it, "to strengthen you," appears only two places in Romans, 1:11 and here in 16:25. Paul said in the introduction that this is why he longed to come to Rome, "that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, and that you may be established." I have said in other place that the letter to the Romans has multiply purposes, an apologetic purpose, a missional purpose and a pastoral purpose. I also said that I think the pastoral purpose is primary.

And there are three reasons that I believe the pastoral purpose is primary.

This phrase is the first reason I believe Paul is writing primarily as a pastor. That in the introduction and in the end, he wants to know that he has been writing in order to strengthen or establish the listeners in the gospel of Jesus Christ. That has been the main agenda all along. It is the main agenda of the letter, so it has also been the main agenda of our series, that we would be established more firmly in our understanding of the gospel. The second reason I believe Paul's purpose is primarily pastoral is the amount of time that Paul spends developing the gospel in the body of the letter, through both doctrine and application. That focus suggests to me that he is not primarily introducing himself to the Romans, he could have done that in a much shorter letter, or primarily inviting them to join in the mission. He could have done that in a much shorter letter. He is going for life change. He does not want to wait until he visits Rome to establish the Romans in the gospel. He has begun with this letter. The third reason I believe his purpose is primarily pastoral comes from the answers he gives to the questions he raises. Paul uses an apologetic style by employing a sceptic to raise objections throughout the letter. And one reason to have such a long letter would be to give an apologetic or a defense of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And while Paul does succeed in defending God and the righteousness of God in his thorough explanation of the gospel, his answers are not written

Introduction 1:1-7, 11

- ¹Paul, a bond-servant of Christ
2 Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God,
³which He promised beforehand
3 through His prophets in the holy Scriptures. ³concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh, ⁴who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord, ⁵through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the
5 obedience of faith
4 among all the Gentiles for His name's sake, ⁶among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ; ⁷to 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.
¹¹For I long to see you so that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that
1 you may be established;

Conclusion 16:25-27

- ²⁵Now to Him who is able
1 to establish you according to
2 my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, ²⁶but now is manifested, and
3 by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God,
4 has been made known to all the nations, leading to
5 obedience of faith. ²⁷to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen.

to convince a non-believing sceptic. He assumes that his audience is on his side. His answers are a call the listener to believe and respond to the truth of the gospel. And that is more the work of a pastor than an apologist. Paul's message provides a defense of the gospel, and it calls the Romans to the mission of the gospel, but it does it by establishing the Romans in the truth and practice of the gospel. If he can do the pastoral purpose, and he can get these believers solidly grounded in the gospel, that's going to be their best defense, and that's going wake their hearts up or connect them to the mission. So, Paul's primary purpose is pastoral, to establish the Romans in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul's next phrase states Paul's big picture topic, that is, the gospel of Jesus.

2. Topic: 16:25 and 1:1

This is how Paul plans to establish the Romans. He writes that God will, "establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery." These are all the same thing: the gospel, the preaching of Jesus Christ, the mystery. Paul first introduces this topic in the very first verse of the letter when he says that he has been set apart for the gospel of God. And then he goes on in 1:3 to explain that gospel, as concerning Jesus, both the son of David and the son of God.

Here in the conclusion Paul uses three words in quick succession that have been important throughout Romans in connection with the gospel. They are reveal, manifest, and make known. And we can add to those three two additional, similar words used by Paul, one can be translated to make evident and the other to demonstrate, so that we have these five words: to reveal, to manifest, to make known, to make evident, and to demonstrate. And they are all words used to describe God's work to reveal his truth to man. Remember in chapter 1 Paul wrote that in the gospel "the righteousness of God is revealed." He also wrote, "the wrath of God is being revealed" and what can be known about God is evident because God "made it evident." Then in chapter 3 Paul wrote that "the righteousness of God has been manifested," and God "demonstrates his righteousness at the present time." Then in chapter 9 he wrote that "God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And *He did so to make known* the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy." And then now in our present text in chapter 16, we have God has revealed the mystery which "now is manifested and has been made known."

Paul calls the gospel my gospel. I said I would come back to that. He owns it. He embraces it. He has no shame in it. He boasts about it. At the same time, Paul makes abundantly clear that when he says, "my gospel," he does not at all mean that he came up with it. The gospel is not Paul's theology. The gospel message does not originate with Paul. The gospel message originated in the trinity, in the mind of God the Father, the Son, the Spirit, before the creation of the world. This gospel is God's idea, God's plan, and God's execution of that plan. This gospel is God's truth for humanity, revealed, manifested, made known, not by Paul, by God. God used Paul as an instrument through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, along with other apostles and prophets to reveal to us the mind of God, the truth of God.

And the revelation of this gospel didn't begin with Jesus Christ, when he came and with his followers who taught us about it but began long before. There is an antecedent. And that brings us to our third big picture idea.

3. Antecedent: 16:26 and 1:2

Paul writes in 16:26 that the mystery "has been made known by the Scriptures of the prophets." And we might take this to refer to the apostles and prophets who have given us the New Testament Scriptures which explain the mystery of the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is a possible interpretation. But I think Paul is connecting us back to the earlier point he made more than once. The mystery may not have been fully revealed before Jesus came, but it was previously witnessed to by the Law and

the Prophets. Paul wrote back in 1:2 that the gospel of God was “promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures.” And then in 3:21 he wrote that God’s righteousness has been “witnessed by the Law and the Prophets.”

Not only does Paul show that the gospel comes from God, he also shows that it is not a completely new idea foreign to the Old Testament Scriptures. There is radical newness in the gospel. It is the new wine skin that cannot be structured and lived out in the same way as the old wine skin. But even with all of its newness, the gospel is deeply rooted in the doctrine of the Torah and the doctrine of the Prophets. Perhaps because the gospel of grace includes such radical newness, Paul recognizes the importance of making it very clear to us how strongly the gospel is connected to Old Testament teaching.

Paul does not just make the claim that the gospel is witnessed by the Old Testament. He shows us. So, there are places where Paul alludes to ideas in the Old Testament, such as the idolatry mentioned in 1:22-23 or circumcision of the heart mentioned in 2:29. It is hard to count up all the potential allusions or connections that Paul makes with the Old Testament narrative, with Old Testament world view. That is Paul’s world view, so it is connecting to the Old Testament all the time. But in Romans Paul does not just leave us only with allusions to the Old Testament. He goes directly to the source. He cites roughly 60 passages from the Old Testament. Isaiah and the Psalms are his favorites, so they get multiple citations, but he also quotes in Romans from Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, 1 Kings, Proverbs, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Nahum, Habakkuk and Malachi. We cannot miss that Paul believes that the New is deeply rooted in the Old.

It is possible to make one of two mistakes with the New Covenant. We could see it as an updated version of the Old. And we could seek to create a new Christian law with a religious structure parallel to the Old. But when we do that, we miss the discontinuity. The Old Covenant was weakened as a system by the sinfulness of human beings. Part of the whole point of the experiment with Israel was that it did not work. It could not bring about righteousness that is pleasing to God. In Jesus God instituted something new. Rather than a law outside of us working to form our behavior, the Spirit is working in us to transform our hearts.

Now, the other mistake would be to jettison the Old Covenant now that we have the New. Paul certainly does not give up the Old Testament. His 60 citations in Romans make it very clear that he values highly the Old Testament as useful to Christians for teaching about doctrine and about practice. Our challenge is to make sure we receive that teaching in a way that fits with the new realities of the New Covenant.

Jesus Christ does not abolish the Law and the Prophets, he fulfills them. Avoiding these two errors is not easy, the error of seeing only continuity between the Old and New Covenants or the opposite error of seeing only discontinuity between the Old and New Covenants. It is not easy to avoid those errors or to see how best to fit the Old and the New. Studying Romans is been a great place to start. We get a lot of help from Paul in this, and how we are supposed to understand the Old Covenant law, and what is different between the Old Covenant and now what we have in the New Covenant of grace. We also need to seek to know the Old Testament like Paul did. For that reason, I will go ahead and tell you the next series that I am going to teach after I wrap up with Romans today is going to be an overview of the first five books of the Bible called Grace in the Law. I believe that better understanding of the Old Covenant helps us to better understand what we have in the New Covenant.

Okay, so, we have considered the big picture purpose, topic and antecedent. Paul also states his scope.

4. Scope: 16:26 and 1:6

In 16:26, Paul says that the gospel “has been made known to all the nations.” It is not clear to me what Paul means by saying this in the past tense that the gospel “has been made know to all the nations.” What is clear is that Paul is not done preaching the gospel to the nations. He does not

believe the task is complete. His big desire is to go to Spain. He's got more to do. Another thing that is also clear is that Paul's scope is all nations, not some nations, not select nations, but all of the nations. This fits with 1:6 where he writes that he has received grace to bring about "the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles."

And early on in the letter, that reference to all Gentiles might lead us to think that Paul does not see the gospel as God's plan of salvation for the Jew or that Paul does not see the Jews as within his particular scope. But once we get to the thesis in 1:16 we see really quickly that Paul understands the gospel of Jesus as first for the Jews and then also for Gentiles. Paul has a special calling to Gentiles, but he sees the scope of gospel proclamation to all nations.

That phrase "obedience of faith" brings us to our fifth and last big picture element.

5. Goal: 16:26 and 1:5

This is Paul's goal. It is closely related to his purpose. And like the phrase "to establish you," the phrase "obedience of faith" appears only twice in Romans, just here in the conclusion and then it was in the beginning in the introduction. And limiting the use of these phrases "to establish you" and "obedience of faith" to the beginning and end, highlights them for us. These are significant phrases for Paul's big picture.

I taught a long time ago in one of the introductory lessons that obedience of faith can mean two things. Faith could be the act of obedience. That would mean that Paul's goal is to bring about the reception of the gospel among the Gentiles. Their obedience would be the act of faith, kneeling before Jesus as the king, receiving him as Lord and savior. The phrase can also mean the obedience that flows out of true faith. I prefer not to make a choice between the two. And the issue of human righteousness is similar. Chapter 1-4 teaches us that we receive righteousness by faith. We cannot do the righteousness required by the first question of covenant to become acceptable in the eyes of God. We must receive the status of righteousness by grace through faith. All we can do is believe.

But then, chapters 5-8 emphasize that, having received a status of righteousness by grace through faith, we are united with Jesus Christ. And because of that, his Spirit indwells us, and we are now able to begin doing the righteous acts that are pleasing in the eyes of God. And we do not do them to answer the first question of covenant, "What makes me acceptable?", rather, to answer the second question, "How then shall I live?"

So, if we interpret obedience of faith as our act of faith when confronted with the gospel, then the phrase goes with chapters 1-4 and the first question of covenant. If we understand obedience of faith to mean the obedience that comes from faith, then the idea fits chapters 5-8 and the second question of covenant. So, I like both ideas. And I do not see a need to really choose between the two.

Sum up

Let's sum up what we have here in these three verses and so also sum up our study of Romans. Paul's purpose is to establish us. And the topic or means by which he will do that is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul has owned this gospel in his mind and in his heart. He can say, "It is my gospel." But Paul is not the source. This is not Paul's theology. God thought of this good news before the foundation of the world, he brought it about by becoming man, dying and rising again, and he has communicated it to us in the writings of the Apostles. This gospel is rooted in the soil of Old Testament narrative and teaching. The scope of the message is all nations, every people, every tribe, every language. And the goal of this message is to bring about among all peoples the obedience of faith and the transformation of faith that leads to further obedience.

It has been my pleasure interpreting Romans with you over these 39 lessons. I know that I have personally been established more deeply in the gospel of Jesus Christ by going through Romans again. And I hope that that is your experience as well, that you are established deeply in him, that you see the grace of God and the love of Jesus and that you are motivated by the Spirit working in you to live for him, that you feel completely secure in relationship with God because you know it is

not what you do that makes you acceptable to God. It is who you are as his creation and who you are in Jesus Christ. You are completely righteous, completely loved. God's desire is for you to be able to live life as a true man and a true woman, a true son, a true daughter of the king, to live life as life was meant to be lived in union with Jesus Christ and in obedience to our glorious Father in heaven. I pray that is true of you. It is working in you. That you can say with Paul, this is my gospel. And I am not ashamed.

I hope you will join me as we begin to interpret the Pentateuch. Or give an overview to equip you to be able to interpret the Pentateuch, and especially with a focus on seeing grace in the law. That is where we are going next with Observe the Word. Now, I would like to end in the same way that Paul ended.

So, let's end with his benediction.

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, *leading* to obedience of faith; to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as important, confusing, interesting or strange in Romans 16:25-27?
2. How has your study of Romans "established you in the gospel"? What are two or three truths that have "stuck" with you, helping to formulate your thinking about the gospel?
3. How has your study of Romans lead to your own "obedience of faith"? How has your life changed or what are actions you feel lead to take based on Paul's exhortations to present yourself as a living sacrifice? Have you committed to any specific behavior, to start doing something or stop doing something as a result of your study?
4. When you say with Paul, "I am not ashamed of the gospel!" and when you think of the gospel like Paul as "my gospel" what one or two truths connected to the gospel would you most like to share with someone else? What truth that excites you or encourages you or comforts you or strengthens you would you like to pass on?