

Romans: The Revealing of Righteousness (part 1 of 9)

The Vision of Romans

Romans 1:1-7

Mark Vroegop

"Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 1:1-7, ESV)

Today we begin our two-year study of Romans, and I am thrilled to begin this journey together. The book of Romans is a unique and powerful book of the Bible, and I have never preached through it before. And that was no accident.

This book is sacred ground for me, and I hope it will be that for you (if it isn't already). While I have a deep love for the entire Bible, there are some books whose content make me tremble. Romans would be at the top of the list. This book has changed the course of people's lives and the world. For example:

St. Augustine, the most brilliant theologian of the early centuries, came to conviction of sin and salvation after reading some verses from the thirteenth chapter. Martin Luther recovered the doctrine of salvation by faith from his study of Romans 1:17 and went on to lead the Protestant Reformation. While listening to the reading of Luther's preface to the book of Romans, John Wesley felt his heart "strangely warmed" in conversion and became the catalyst of the great evangelical revival of the eighteenth century. John Bunyan was so inspired as he studied the great themes of Romans in the Bedford jail that we wrote the immortal *Pilgrim's Progress*.¹

The reason that this book has been so powerful is due to what is contained in the sixteen chapters. Romans is sacred ground because of truths that it unpacks. Martin Luther said:

"This epistle is really the chief part of the New Testament, and is truly the purest gospel. It is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but also that he should occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul."²

¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Romans: Righteousness from Heaven*. Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991). 15.

² Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998). xxii-1.

John Calvin, in exhorting pastors to make this book clear, emphasized the seriousness of the content of the book: “if we have gained a true understanding of this Epistle, we have an open door to all the most profound treasures of Scripture.”³

I’ve not preached this book before because of my deep respect and awe of what is found here. And while I still do not feel worthy or adequate, I feel like it is time for me and for us to walk through this book together. As we look at each section of this book, I hope that expositional exultation⁴ happens in your soul. I hope that as you see what Paul says (exposition), your heart will be filled with joyful worship (exultation). So let me encourage you to come on Sunday with a prayerful expectation that we are going to see God in this book. I want you to remember that we are not just studying a book of the Bible; we are beholding the glory of God through Romans.

As we begin our study, there are three fundamental questions that I’d like to answer: 1) What is the theme of Romans? 2) What is the background? and 3) How does the book begin?

What is the theme of Romans?

If you were to read through Romans in one sitting (something I highly recommend) you would quickly discover how prominent and frequent the word “righteousness” appears. The word is used forty-one times in thirty-seven verses, and it is the major theme of Romans. Righteousness, by definition, means to be holy, moral, and upright. In Romans the term is used for God and for those who are in a right relationship with God. The Greek term means to be in a right relationship with someone else. When it comes to God, it means that He is the standard of righteousness; He is righteous. For human beings, it means that we are made or declared righteous. Romans is about the righteousness of God and the righteousness that He graciously creates in those who believe in Him. Theme of the book is **righteousness through the gospel**.

The means by which the righteousness of God is revealed and received is the gospel: the message that Jesus Christ came into the world, died, and was resurrected in order to make unrighteous sinners righteous. We see this theme – gospel, God’s righteousness, faith-based righteousness – in Romans 1:16-17. These two verses are the over-arching theme for the entire book:

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’” (Romans 1:16–17, ESV)

We will unpack this verse in detail next week. Today I simply want you to see the connection between the gospel and righteousness. The book of Romans is a “magnificent presentation of the gospel, the good news that God has provided a righteousness based not on what we can do for ourselves but on what God has already done for us in sending his Son as a sacrifice for sin.”⁵

The argument of the book follows a classic line of reasoning that is reflected in many of Paul’s letters: from doctrine to practice. The book of Romans is not a theoretical book or merely a

³ Ibid.

⁴ I’m indebted to John Piper for this term.

⁵ Robert H. Mounce, Romans, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995). 31.

theological book. It shows us the beauty of the theology and the practice of righteousness through the gospel.

We will examine the book in five sections, each showing us a different angle on this theme of righteousness:

1. **The Revealing of Righteousness (Ch 1-3)** – how God’s righteousness and our unrighteousness is made clear
2. **The Gift of Righteousness (Ch 3-4)** – how righteousness comes from God by faith in Jesus
3. **The Hope of Righteousness (Ch 5-8)** – how righteousness by faith gives us hope
4. **The Mystery of Righteousness (Ch 9-11)** – how God’s sovereign plan for righteousness humbles us
5. **The Lifestyle of Righteousness (Ch 12-16)** – how righteousness works every day

So this book is about God’s righteousness, the gospel, and our righteousness that comes through faith in Jesus. Romans 3:21-26 is a great summary:

“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” (Romans 3:21–26, ESV)

Romans is about righteousness through gospel. That is the theme of this book.

What is the background?

When you study the Bible, it is very important that you attempt to understand the background of a particular book. There are specific reasons why each book was written, and understanding the context helps you to interpret more accurately. It is helpful to know the author, the audience, and the occasion that prompted the book to be written.

The issue of the authorship of Romans is fairly straightforward. The first verse clearly identifies the Apostle Paul as the author, and there are few scholars who call this into question. In 16:22 we learn of a man named Tertius who says that he wrote the letter, but he is likely the secretary or amanuensis who physically wrote what Paul said. For those of you who are new to Christianity or if you do not know a lot about the Bible, the Apostle Paul was the greatest apologist and missionary for the early Church. He was a highly educated Jewish teacher who persecuted the early church until his dramatic encounter with Jesus in Acts 9. After his conversion, Paul led a substantial effort to reach non-Jewish people, he planted a number of churches, he faced incredible persecution, and he embarked on three missionary journeys in modern day Turkey and Greece.

Paul is arguably the most influential person in the course of Christianity after Jesus Christ. And his strength was the way in which he could present a compelling argument for the gospel based upon

his understanding of the Jewish tradition and even contemporary culture. Paul loved the gospel, and his letters present his argument for the Christian faith.

The letter is addressed to “all those who are in Rome” (1:7). It is not addressed to one specific church but seems to be written for distribution in a series of house-churches. We discover later in the letter (1:13) that Paul had never actually visited the city of Rome despite his strong desire and attempts. Unlike other churches to whom Paul wrote, he neither planted the churches in Rome nor visited them. In fact, we are not sure how the church in Rome started. It may have been the result of Jews who were converted at Pentecost and returned to Rome (Acts 2:10) or that some other converts took the message of the gospel there. The church in Rome was not directly connected to Paul, and this will become important as we look at the reason why Paul wrote Romans.

Understanding the reason that Paul wrote Romans requires piecing together a few pieces of information. We know from a Roman historian that in 49 AD the Roman Emperor Claudius expelled a number of Jews who were followers of Jesus. Acts 18:2 makes reference to this in regards to Aquilla and Priscilla, who fled to Corinth because of this order. We can infer from this that Christianity began to be swept through the Jewish synagogues, and it created a conflict that Claudius solved by displacing Jewish Christians. Therefore, the church at Rome was likely comprised of a Gentile majority and a Jewish minority, and they were likely very familiar with the issues that surfaced between Jews and Gentiles when the gospel advanced. Whenever the gospel was received, there were cultural questions about the Law, circumcision, equality of Jews and Gentiles, and how a person becomes a part of God’s community of faith.

If this is right (and I think it is), it would explain why Paul leads off his letter talking about the gospel coming to “the Jew first but also to the Greek” in 1:16. It also explains why he would spend so much time dealing with the Law, the place of Israel, and how to deal with matters of personal freedom related to clean and unclean foods. The church at Rome was probably constantly dealing with significant cultural challenges between different kinds of people.

Paul likely wrote the book of Romans from the city of Corinth and sent it with Phoebe. It was likely written between 54-58 AD, after Paul had completed his third missionary journey and before he had delivered the special offering for the saints in Jerusalem. Paul was about to travel back to Jerusalem to deliver this gift, and he was concerned about what was going to happen to him there (see Acts 20:22-23). But there was a particular area of the world on his heart: Spain.

Paul desperately wanted to go to Spain to preach the gospel and plant churches there. We get a clear sense of his passion for this in Romans 15:22-25.

“This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while. At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints...” When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you” (Romans 15:22–25, 28 ESV)

It seems this Paul's hope was that Rome would be to Spain what Antioch had been for modern day Turkey and Greece – a base for reaching unreached people.

So what is the background of Romans? A series of house churches comprised of Gentiles and Jews, who have no personal connection to Paul are strategically located in the mission to reach unreached people. So what does Paul do to bring unity and a sense of mission to this church? He preaches the gospel to them! He gives them the most systematic summary of the gospel that we have in the entire Bible so that they will know how to live in harmony and as a platform for outreach.

As we study Romans we cannot forget this! The doctrine contained within this book and its focus on righteousness is not merely a theological or intellectual exercise. A right understanding of the gospel will affect relationships and our sense of mission. This just makes sense, doesn't it? Church at its best is when people from different walks of life and different struggles are united in love under banner of Jesus Christ. Church is at its best when people are so captured by the gospel that they are compelled to give to reach unreached people and they are compelled to open their mouth in declaration of that gospel. The Church is at its worst when people who claim to follow Jesus cannot get along and when it forgets about people who have yet to receive Christ.

This is the revolution of Romans! To address the problem of their differences and to give them a heart for the spread of the gospel, Paul preaches the gospel to them. Paul loves the gospel, and he loves the glory of God in the gospel. And his vision in Romans is that that the believers in Rome would understand the power of righteousness through the gospel in their lives and in their sense of mission. That is why he says, " . . . it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes . . ." (Rom 1:16).

With that lens, look at how Paul closes the book in 16:25-27:

"Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen." (Romans 16:25–27, ESV)

The vision of Romans is to see individuals, house-churches, cities, and the entire world transformed under the banner of the righteousness that comes from God through the gospel. In other words, what is in this letter can change the world! And it has.

I wonder if that is how you see the gospel? For many years – even as a pastor – I used to think of it as merely the beginning of salvation, the truths that created my salvation. I viewed the gospel as elementary. But I've come to agree with what C.J. Mahaney says in *The Cross-Centered Life*:

“The gospel isn’t one class among many that you’ll attend during your life as a Christian – the gospel is the whole building that all the classes take place in! Rightly approached, all the topics you’ll study and focus on as a believer will be offered to you within the walls of the glorious gospel.”⁶

For our family devotions for the next month or so, we are going to use Milton Vincent’s book about the gospel. We are reading each short section about the gospel, including the verses that are footnoted, and are trying to get a renewed focus on the gospel as we move into 2014.

The gospel – righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – is the power of God.

How does the book begin?

The final question is simply looking at how the book of Romans actually begins. We have already touched on a number of important themes, but I think it is valuable to see the way that Paul starts this book and to specifically see how the gospel defined his identity, message, and mission.

Identity

The first verse of Romans includes Paul’s name and three titles by which he identified himself:

- **Servant of Christ Jesus** - Paul considered himself a slave (Greek: *doulos*). By listing this first, he is making an important statement that his authority and identity are derivatives of his relationship with Jesus. The gospel gave him a servant identity.
- **Called to be an apostle** – Paul was miraculously and sovereignly called by God (see Acts 9), and this Greek word (*kletos*) will appear in other places in Romans for God’s calling to salvation and ministry.⁷ God had invaded his life by the gospel.
- **Set apart for the gospel** – God had a very specific purpose for Paul. In Galatians 1:15 he says that he was separated from birth. The idea is simply that God had a plan for Paul’s life, and he needed the Romans to know this because they had no prior relationship with him. His life was given to the spread of the gospel.

The introduction of Romans is important because it shows us how much the gospel informed Paul’s sense of identity. He was a man with stellar education and a long pedigree (see Philippians 3:3-6) and he was also a man with an embarrassing past (1 Cor.15:9). Yet he introduces himself to the Romans with neither his past nor his pedigree. Paul’s identity came from the gospel.

This is righteousness through the gospel does! It humbles the exalted and exalts the humble. It shows us who we really are, and it also shows us who we *can be* in Jesus. The gospel exposes us and humbles us, but it also cleanses us and changes us. When you really understand that, the gospel, becomes the center of everything in life – including who you understand yourself to truly be. The gospel doesn’t just change what you do or what you hope for; it changes who you are!

⁶ As cited in Milton Vincent, *A Gospel Primer for Christians – Learning to See the Glories of God’s Love*, (Bemidji, MN: Focus Publishing, 2008), 11.

⁷ See Romans 8:28,30; 9:7, 12, 24, 25, 26 as well as 1 Cor. 1:9, 24,26 and Gal 1:16,15.

Message

Paul's last description of himself includes the first use of the word "gospel" in Romans. The term means "good news," and it is the message that God offers righteousness believing in Jesus Christ. In verses 3-4, Paul expands on what he means by the gospel.

First, he links the gospel message to the fulfillment of promises in the Old Testament. Think back on what we talked about in the background material. Why would Paul do that? He did it to demonstrate the connection between the message of the gospel and Jewish Scriptures. He is trying to help Gentiles and Jews understand the beauty and history of the gospel. The hope that Jesus brought was a fulfillment of the promise and the plan of God.

Second, in verses 3-4, Paul talks specifically about the centrality of Jesus to the gospel message. We have talked a lot about the gospel today, but when you boil down the gospel, it is ultimately about Jesus. Therefore, Paul says that Jesus was 1) a descendent of David in the flesh, and 2) declared to be the Son of God. Paul is establishing both the humanity and the deity of Jesus because both are vital to the gospel message.

Finally, you need to notice how Paul describes the declaration of the Son of God in verse 4. Notice the following phrases:

- **"in power"** – This will be a theme throughout the book of Romans. The gospel is powerful, and the resurrection was the most definitive statement that death is conquered by Jesus.
- **"by the Spirit of holiness"** – The Holy Spirit is the agent by which Christ was raised from the dead, and the Spirit is describe as "holy" probably to make a redemptive point about what comes next.
- **"by the resurrection from the dead"** – Since sin and death are linked, then the defeat of death would mark the defeat of sin as well. This is what Jesus did, and this is why the resurrection was so meaningful. The resurrection declared Jesus to be right and that sins could truly be forgiven in him.

As we will see later in the book of Romans, Paul will make the case that for those who place their faith in Jesus, his death and resurrection becomes your own. Followers of Jesus are considered to be "in Christ." He death and his life become our death and our life. This is how God counts sinners to be righteous. What's more, God fills believers with the same powerful Holy Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead. This is the message that Paul declared.

Mission

The final thing that we see in this introduction is Paul's sense of mission. Remember that is one of the major reasons why he is writing to the believers in Rome, and we see this theme in verses 5-6.

After using the important term "our Lord" for Jesus and identifying that the grace and apostleship are both gifts from him, Paul explains his the purpose of the his mission. His aim is to "bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name" (v 5). Throughout Romans, Paul will frequently talk about faith apart from works. But here he makes it very clear that the gospel results in obedience. His mission is to preach the gospel and to call people to believe and to experience its power.

Spain is on his heart, and we get an introductory glimpse of that in verse five when Paul says “among all the nations.” Paul loves the gospel, and he knows what it can do, so he is compelled to think and pray and work to reach people who have yet to hear it or receive it. His passion for the gospel created a longing for more people to be welcomed into God’s kingdom.

And in verse six he reminds them that they are part of that “called” assembly of people who belong to Jesus Christ. The people in Rome had heard the gospel, but Paul wanted to remind them about its power in their lives and in parts of the world that had not yet heard.

When you understand the gospel, it changes how you view yourself, your neighborhood, your city, your country, and the world. As a church we need to see ourselves, our city, and the unreached parts of the world through this lens. We need to long for the gospel to come to the Cloud Mountain region in Asia, for it to come to the urban core of our city, for it to come to areas like Fishers and Eagle Creek, for it to come in our neighborhoods, for it to come in our families, and for it to begin by coming into our lives.

So the letter written to Rome is really a letter written to us. We need Paul’s vision for Romans as much as the church in Rome did. We need to hear his words to the Roman Christians as words to us:

“To all those at College Park Church who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

We need this book because we need to be reminded and motivated about the power of the gift of righteousness that comes to us through the gospel.

© College Park Church

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop. © College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. www.yourchurch.com