

Christ's Church and the Apostles (30-100 CE)

Letter to the Romans

Readings: *Romans 1:1-3:20*

Reflections:

- Letter to the Romans: Many scholars believe Paul wrote Romans in the late 50's CE, probably while he was in Corinth around 56 to 58 CE. It is likely he was staying with Gaius and had the help of the scribe Tertius (Romans 16:22). This is another fundraising letter and so to ensure the Christ-followers in Rome understand his message, he writes this letter to clearly outline his understanding of the Great News and to appeal to them for funds. Paul takes a standard rabbinic approach to ask and answer a series of questions that present his argument. The questions sound like they are coming from a heckler, sometimes from the Jewish Christians, sometimes from Gentile Christians and then sometimes from the church as a whole. He also focuses on contrasting the Great News with the Law and particularly the relationship between Jews and Gentiles as both were present in the Roman house churches and were obviously struggling with how to do community. In 49 CE Claudius (see The Edict of Claudius) expelled Jews from Rome because of an internal struggle within their own community, some following the Torah and others following Jesus as Messiah. As a result, by the early 50's CE much of the Roman Christian church movement was largely Gentile as many of the Jews had been removed from Rome. It is no surprise that the various house churches, some Gentile and some Jewish were struggling. Paul again takes his normal approach and looks for ways to affirm the weaker within the community as he points out that God's salvation is first for the Jew and then the Gentile. Most scholars consider Paul's most substantial theological treatise although Ephesians is most likely his best summary of what he taught.
- Salutation: Paul uses the term "slave of Christ Jesus" or "bondservant of Christ Jesus" in the tradition of Moses and Elijah who both called themselves "slaves/servants of God." "Christ Jesus" or "Anointed one Jesus" or "King Jesus" was a term emphasizing that he was the long awaited Messiah and King of the Jews. Paul again affirms that he has been called as an apostle or sent one. The focus of this mission and mandate before God is the proclamation of the Good News (or gospel), the royal announcement from the king. This royal proclamation is centered on Jesus as the son of God. Paul affirms his human ancestry through David and his divine nature revealed at the resurrection through the Spirit. Paul references all of his main themes: grace, obedience, faith, belonging as he gives a simple

overview of his message. Everyone in Rome, both Jew and Gentile are deeply loved by God and called to be holy ones (literally “set apart for God” or “saints”). This is true for us today. We are all deeply loved and before God are called to be transformed by his Spirit. We are holy ones and we are becoming holy ones. We are perfect in his sight and we are being perfected by his grace and Spirit working in us.

- Desire to be with Romans: We see here how the reputation of this growing church in the capital of the Roman Empire was spreading throughout the Christian community. We also see how a key part of his role is to pray for those he owns in his heart and how he wants to do all he can to invest in them spiritually and through solid teaching.
- Theme of the Gospel: Paul is bold because the message he carries is the rescue mission of God: Everyone can be completely right before God just by trusting in Jesus. It is that simple. Paul quotes Habakkuk 2:4 a key verse for both Romans and Galatians.
- Judgment of God – Gentiles rejected by God (this title is not accurate as the focus of this section is on humanity as a whole and not that God has rejected them but their rejection of God has brought God’s judgment and wrath on them): Paul begins by saying that the judgment and wrath of God is on humanity for our collective rejection of the truth and active choice to embrace evil in its various forms. God has revealed key elements of his nature and character through the created order and therefore for people truly desiring to know God, aspects of his nature can be discovered just through observing creation. This leaves all of humanity without excuse for failing to truly seek God. Now we need to note that Paul is speaking collectively rather than individually. This is where humanity has basically gone over the generations and the records of humanity have confirmed this from the common practice of human sacrifice, sex slavery, war, and abuse. Rather than seeking to worship the one true God who is Spirit, humanity created gods in their own image and essentially worshipped themselves and that which they can control. This happens today. People would rather love, adore and make the center of their emotional life either themselves or the things they can control. Surrendering to God means putting him at the center of your life and giving up control as being the god of your own life.
- Idolatry led to immorality: Paul makes an obvious connection. Within the Roman world (and ancient world) there was a direct connection between idol worship and sexual orgy. Self worship always goes toward self-indulgence and self-gratification, most commonly sexual immorality. Today we have a thousand different ways people self-indulge, especially sexually.
- Unnatural replaced natural: This is one of the more controversial passages within the New Testament as Paul places homosexuality as an outworking of sexual degradation and self-worship. It is important to note that within the sexual ethic of Israel and within the Christian church, the key to sexual intimacy being honoring to God is a blessed covenant relationship between a man and a woman. Within Israel that covenant could include many wives and concubines but it was still blessed by God because of the committed relationship. In terms

of the early Church, it may still include more than one wife but the key was always a covenant relationship between the man and the woman. Sexual expression outside of a blessed male/female covenant was sin or missing the mark. This meant that all single heterosexuals and homosexuals as well as all covenanted heterosexuals would have to exercise self-control and honor God by restraining from sex. Now with this said, Paul references homosexual relationships because of the common role of this kind sexual activity in the orgies of the sex cults of Roman and the connection to idolatry. Paul goes on to say that those who participate in such sexual orgies receive the due penalty within themselves. This may be a cryptic reference to sexually transmitted diseases although we can't be certain.

- Sinfulness replaced purity: Paul makes the connection now between rejecting God and the impact it has on the habitual thought life of a person. The "depraved mind" means that a person develops mental habits that make self-indulging and/or anger based actions a pattern of life. This self-centered life Paul argues leads a society and potentially a person into the most active and aggressive forms of evil. Self-centeredness is like an emotional form of cancer that slowly takes over our lives and destroys us. The more we feed it the fast it grows. Paul says that this destructive way of living deserves to be judged by God.
- All are sinners: Regardless of the degree, Paul points out that this is true for all of us. We are all the same and can't judge other people. We are all naturally self-centered and we all need to be rescued from ourselves and our own selfishness. We all need God's kindness that leads us to repentance (a change of heart and mind)! If we choose to remain in stubborn and unrepentant, if we refuse to humble ourselves, we had better take warning! We remain under God's judgment.
- God's judgment impartial: Paul quotes Psalm 62:12 and Proverbs 24:12 to point out that God's evaluation on our lives is personal and specific. God is righteous and evaluates our lives from the place of perfection and grace perfectly mixed together. God doesn't play favorites. If our heart is to seek with all our hearts glory (God's highest), honor (a life that is honorable and acts on the truth you know) and immortality (living for the life beyond and not just for what I can get now), God will rescue us. If we only want to live for ourselves then we better look out!
- Those without the Law: God's judgment for the Jews is based on the Torah, particularly the Ten Commandments. This most fully reveals the righteous requirements of God. The essence of these same laws is written on the hearts of all people and so at the final judgment, all people will be judged according to what they know and what God has placed on their hearts. God knows everything and so any secret thoughts or actions will be revealed before God at the time of judgment. This truth should bring all people to a place of humility before God.
- Law cannot justify (again this title is not accurate to the passage): Here we see Paul outline the self-concept of the Israelites as they saw themselves as in a superior spiritual position

because of possessing the Law. This description is in one way true as Israel was called to be a light to the Gentiles but as Paul points out, they actually did the opposite (See Isaiah 52:5; Ezekiel 36:22) as their consistent evil acts gave God a bad reputation. Here we see again that setting the standard high does nothing for a person unless they have the internalized ability to achieve that standard. Without the Spirit changing a person from the inside out, the Law only revealed how messed up Israel was. It did nothing to ensure that they would live a more honorable life before God. It was the diagnosis, not the cure.

- Circumcision cannot justify: Paul now uses circumcision as an example of this. It isn't the outward sign or signs of a person's spirituality that matters, it is the inward reality. It is the circumcision of the heart (being set apart for God) that matters to God and will receive his blessing, not any outward sign that people may think is important. If we aren't changed on the inside, then the outward signs simply make us more obviously hypocrites.
- Pride in heritage: So is there no point being an Israelite? Does it only make matters worse? Paul clarifies that it is a good thing to be entrusted with God's word and he will clearly argue that Jews are blessed by having been chosen by God to serve as the case study for the rest of humanity. The fact that they lacked faith doesn't mean that they should be rejected as a people. Once we understand the story of God we must all realize that the story of Israel is our story, my story. God reveals my own spiritual condition to me as I gaze into the story and struggle of Israel. They are not the failures, but I am and that is why Jesus and God's grace is so necessary for all of us.
- God's judgment is just: Paul now tackles an interesting human rationalization. If my sin reveals God's glory more fully, isn't it better if I sin more so that God's glory will be more evident? And if this is how it works, why should God judge me by bringing honor by sinning? This is a completely ridiculous rationalization. Evil is judged by God because of its fundamentally destructive nature in the same way a doctor wants to eradicate cancer because it destroys the body. The best is never to have had cancer and to have never needed a cure. So sin has no inherent value. There is nothing inherently redeeming about self-centered destructive behavior. The teaching on God's grace to redeem broken people was being manipulated into a being a license for sin and Paul wants to nail the lie. It would be similar to a person saying that the best testimonies of life change are those that really make a complete disaster of their life and then with God's grace really turn things around. Therefore, I am going to intentionally do everything terrible I can think of for the next ten years so that down the road I will have a great testimony. Talk about not getting it! The greatest testimony of how God's work is the degree to which a person reflects and emulates the love and character of Jesus.
- All are under judgment: Paul now quotes a number of Old Testament passages from memory that illustrate how completely messed up the human race is (see Psalm 14:1-3, 53:1-3; Ecclesiastes 7:20; Psalm 5:9, 140:3; 10:7; Isaiah 59:7-8; Psalm 36:1). Again Israel's story is our story. This section also reminds us of how much of the Hebrew Scriptures Paul had memorized.

- Law for education: Here Paul makes it clear that the Law was not given as a cure but rather as a spiritual diagnostic tool. “Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law, rather through the law we become conscious of our sin.” We must come to terms that we sin and are bent to sin before we can truly and fully receive God’s grace and complete rescue of our lives.