

Romans: The Proposal

We are beginning a new series today from the New Testament Book of Romans. As the outline stands *right now*, I have 12 messages that will take us into July with a number of weekends off for special days.



We just finished a series (a longer series) working through the Gospel of John. In some ways this series will be similar, in that we will go methodically through a book of the New Testament, doing our best to cover the **big ideas**. But we will not go *chapter by chapter*, but rather more *idea by idea*.

In our last series, our focus was on a **who**. We asked and answered the question: **Who is Jesus?** We found that when it comes to life's biggest questions, it **is** a matter of *who you know*. With our study in the Gospel of John, we focused on understanding the Gospel as a **who**: Jesus.



In Romans, our focus will shift from **who** to **what**. Many scholars think of the Book of Romans as the Bible's *premier theological* text. So our attention will shift from matters of **who** is the Gospel (our understanding and relationship with the *Person* Jesus) to **what** is the Gospel. We will look for answers to questions like:



- How does the Gospel work?
- What is our part in it?
- How does the Gospel impact our eternity?
- What does the Gospel mean for our lives now?
- How does God see us in light of the Gospel?
- How should we see ourselves in light of the Gospel?

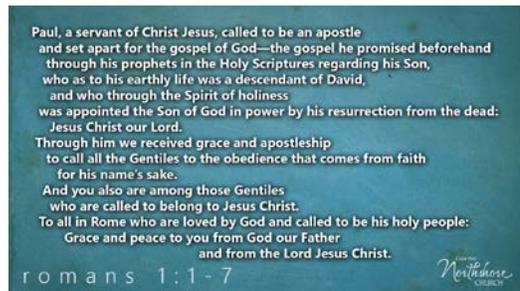
Pretty good questions, don't you think? Maybe you are wondering, "Do we really need a series of 12 sermons just to tell us what the **Gospel** is?" And the answer is no... we need 1,200 sermons or maybe 12 million. We need a heady, confrontational, no nonsense, theological approach to the Gospel, as it is delivered in Romans, because even though the Gospel may be easy to **say**, we often find it harder to **do**... we so easily mess it up. And, our lives change, so we need to be constantly thinking about how the Gospel impacts our circumstances and challenges (and even victories). So, together, we are at least going to take these *dozen or so* opportunities to let God's Word in Romans help us to get this *more right*, to get it **deeper** into our hearts, and heads, and lives.

Romans opens with these words:

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God¹

We just finished up the Gospel according to John, an eye witness account from the Apostle John who also wrote the Book of Revelation, as well as the three epistles that bear his name. John is an important writer in the New Testament.

Romans was written by Paul, the most prolific writer in the New Testament. I'm not sure that it serves us well to say that Paul is the *most important* writer in the New Testament (which is the most important ingredient in a cake?)... but the work accomplished by the Holy Spirit through Paul in writing so much of the New Testament cannot be *over appreciated*.



¹ The New International Version. (2011). (Ro 1:1). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Paul introduces himself as an **apostle**, but first he underscores his position as a **servant** of Christ Jesus. It might remind us a bit about Paul's story. It is recorded in Acts 9. Paul was not an apostle like John and the others. He was not a *friend* of Jesus, among those 12 disciples. Quite to the contrary, Paul was an enemy of Jesus. He was a fervent Jew who viewed the followers of Jesus as a threat, so Paul was devoted to put an end to the Christians and their Gospel using whatever means necessary, even if that meant execution. On that Damascus road, on the way to severely persecute Christians, Paul met Jesus. Not in the gentle way that so many meet Jesus, with a song and an altar and a prayer... Paul was knocked to the ground and stricken blind. But through it Paul's life was turned around... and for that Paul was forever grateful. He could take no credit for his position as a believer, let alone as a leader... so Paul thought of himself as a servant... literally a *bondservant*, one who was exclusively bound to his master, bound to do whatever his master commanded.

And, regardless of Paul's former life, he was called to be an **apostle**. An apostle was one who received a *face-to-face* commission by a King, and then went out to accomplish that work with that King's full authority. Paul's encounter with Jesus, and the call of God, qualified Paul to serve as an apostle.

an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—² the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures ³ regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life ⁸ was a descendant of David,²

Paul was schooled by the best, a Pharisee who knew the Scriptures, yet was blind regarding the promises of the Old Testament fulfilled by Jesus. It seemed that Paul's spiritual eyes were not opened until after God blinded Paul's physical eyes. But now both his physical and spiritual eyes were healed, and Paul could see how Jesus fulfilled the promise of Scripture.

² *The New International Version*. (2011). (Ro 1:1–3). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁴and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in powerⁱ by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. ⁵Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name's sake. ⁶And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

⁷To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. ³

Paul was the Apostle to the Gentiles.

I don't always *get* how God does HR; if I were in God's Human Resources department back then, I might have determined a different job for Paul based on his résumé. Paul recites some of his résumé in Philippians 3:

⁵circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. ⁴

Having *seen the light* and being converted himself in such a dramatic way, I might have thought that Paul would be best suited to be an Apostle to the Jews. But God had a different plan.

Maybe you have noticed that God still operates His HR department in similar ways. Here **I** am, a 50-year-old MBA with a couple of decades of successful experience in Higher Education Administration, *happy as I could be* serving as pastor to this congregation in Kenmore. Maybe you don't always feel like your résumé matches the work God has put in your path, or maybe you're noticing that sort of thing in someone else. Consider the example of Paul, and trust God.

It turns out that Paul's rich background in Jewish tradition and scholarship was put to good use as he worked to integrate Gentile and Jewish Christians.

³ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Ro 1:3–7). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁴ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Php 3:5–6). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

This letter was to the church in Rome, the capitol of the Empire.

Paul had plans to visit Rome on his way to Spain. He had spent years planting churches in Asia Minor (churches with their names on other books of the NT), and now wanted to take the Gospel to the unreached people in Spain. But on the way he planned to stop in Rome to visit the church there. We don't know for sure who brought the Gospel to Rome, but we know that it resulted in a strong, influential church.

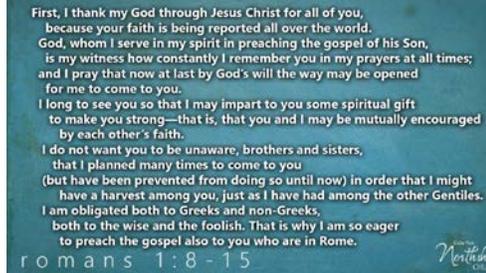
Paul said:

⁸ First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. ⁹ God, whom I serve in my spirit in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you ¹⁰ in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you.

Before Paul could be there *in person*, he was there in **prayer**. I am grateful for those who labor in prayer on behalf of ministry. Northshore is a praying church, and we have some who are especially gifted to pray for ministry. They have a good example in Paul, “constantly remembering” them in prayer, thanking God for them, and praying for more abundant ministry.

¹¹ I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—¹² that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. ¹³ I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, ^c that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles.

¹⁴ I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. ¹⁵ That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome. ⁵



First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. God, whom I serve in my spirit in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you. I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles. I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome.

romans 1:8-15

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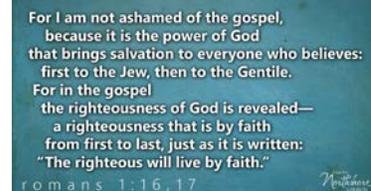
⁵ The New International Version. (2011). (Ro 1:8–15). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

While writing Romans, Paul was on his way back to Jerusalem; he was delivering an offering from the Gentile churches to the persecuted, *mother-church* in Jerusalem. Paul's plan was to go to Jerusalem and then head to Spain, stopping in Rome along the way. Paul did get to Rome, but it wasn't how he had planned. While in Jerusalem, the church's persecutors had him arrested. Paul invoked his right as a Roman citizen to appeal to the Emperor's jurisdiction... so Paul arrived in Rome as a prisoner in chains. Nevertheless, Paul enjoyed a powerful ministry even while in custody.

God doesn't always accomplish his work in conformity to our plans... and sometimes it is terribly difficult. Nevertheless, His work and will are accomplished. It may not be a straight-line path, but His Kingdom expands.

Those first 15 verses of Romans provide some background and introduction, and now we come to the **thesis** of Romans. Here Paul lays out the **key idea** of Romans, the heart of the Gospel that he is eager to preach in Rome and beyond.

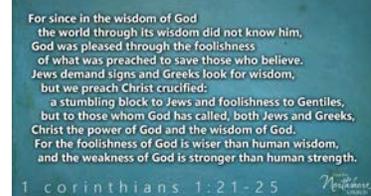
¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. ¹⁷ For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”^{n 6}



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“The righteous will live by faith.”
romans 1:16,17

It is curious that Paul would say that he is not **ashamed**. I think part of that came from his understanding of how the Gospel was received. In 1 Corinthians 1:23, Paul put it this way:

For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ²² Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. ⁷



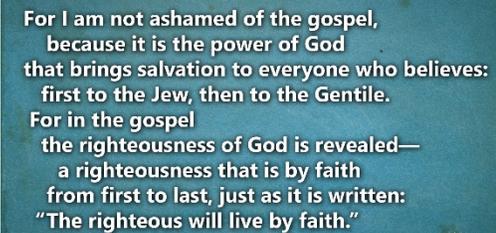
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1 corinthians 1:21-25

⁶ The New International Version. (2011). (Ro 1:16–17). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁷ The New International Version. (2011). (1 Co 1:21–25). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles. Regardless of how it might have been received, Paul was not ashamed.

I also think Paul understood *sin*, especially in light of the Gospel. Sin *ultimately* results in death, but *along the way* it results in shame. Paul not only stood unashamed to external forces, he stood unashamed to internal forces... the self-condemnation and self-loathing that results from sin and our failed and failing attempts to live righteously.



For I am not ashamed of the gospel,
because it is the power of God
that brings salvation to everyone who believes:
first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.
For in the gospel
the righteousness of God is revealed—
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romans 1:16,17

Northshore
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No, in spite of our weakness, maybe even especially through our weakness, the Gospel is demonstrated as “the power of God that brings salvation everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.”

From our perspective, I think it is best to understand this matter of “first to the Jew, then to the Gentile” as a matter of chronology rather than priority. God certainly choose Israel as His people, through which to demonstrate His love and power. Jesus was a Jew, and His earthly ministry was almost entirely among Jews. But that *chronological priority* to the Jews was fulfilled by Jesus, and now **all people** are the recipients of the love and power of God.

¹⁷ For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.” ^{n 8}

That is the ***outlandish proposal*** of the Gospel. This is what we’ll unpack in the pages and months ahead.

It was an outlandish proposal then, and it remains an outlandish proposal today. It is outlandish because this is how religion works:

1. We find ourselves to be insufficient. Not holy enough, not peaceful enough, not devout enough, not rich enough, not enlightened enough, not spiritual enough... just insufficient in any number of ways.

⁸ The New International Version. (2011). (Ro 1:17). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

2. We find rules and rituals. We put our efforts into knowing more, and doing more; we adopt new behaviors and forsake other behaviors. We set out to impress God and others with our careful obedience to rules and our perfect execution of rituals.
3. We hope we make it. We trust the rules and rituals and hope they will be sufficient. We measure ourselves against the harsh standards of the rules, but really hope that God *grades on a curve...* because we know that we aren't really measuring up to the standards, *but at least* we're better than some.

The insufficiencies might be differently identified, and the rules and rituals wildly different... but this is pretty much how the world's religions work. In fact, this is how a lot of Christian religions appear to work. They might be called *Christian...* but they are not the **Gospel**.

The Gospel turns religion *upside down*. Rather than a matter of our efforts to somehow impress a God who is mad at us, the Gospel declares that righteousness is from God, a gift of grace from a God who loves us to everyone who believes. It is not a righteousness that is by rules or rituals or any other effort, but rather a "righteousness that is by faith from first to last."

And when it comes to behavior, the living of our lives, that **living** is by faith too. "The righteous will live by faith."

This is what we'll unpack in the coming weeks as we walk through Romans together.

But what about right now?

Do we believe God's outlandish proposal?



Friend, have you ever believed? You can do this. Trust God. Believe Jesus and the salvation He offers. There is no religious hurdle. Believe today.

All of us... have we truly believed? I know a lot of us are devout... but we might be merely religious if we think that being here and doing the things we do is some sort of ticket to heaven, some sort of ritual to please God.

And for us who have believed, let's be honest... we forget from time to time. The forces within are so strong, driving us to be more **religious** than **faith-filled**. This is especially true when we are dealing with sin... especially our own sin. Where is there shame in our own hearts today? Can we be reminded that the same forgiveness for sin that we found when we first believed is real and alive today? Our behavior matters (we'll get into that as we get into Romans)... but our behavior didn't have the power to **qualify** us for the Gospel, and it doesn't have the power to **disqualify** us from the Gospel either.

There is forgiveness for sin, and power for living for all of us in the Gospel today. Let that sink in... and let us move ahead knowing this great Gospel of God.