

Biblical Authority

Romans 1:1-7

©Copyright February 4, 2024 by Rev. Bruce Goettsche

Rick and I discussed what book of the Bible we would study after the Gospel of Mark, we looked at our archive of sermons (starting 23 years ago) and saw we have preached on every New Testament book except for Titus and the book of Revelation. So, one thought was: we should do the book of Revelation. Everyone would love to know what this book is teaching us. However, there are several different interpretations of the Book of Revelation and we have not found one that is compelling to us. Since we are very concerned about preaching the truth, we would have found it necessary to give you all the different views on each passage, which would have only made the book of Revelation more confusing than it already seems to be.

There are many Bible teachers who seem to have a much better handle on Revelation than we do, and they tend to preach on it a great deal. We encourage you to listen to them. Learn what you can from them, but carefully check out what is said by your own reading of the Word of God at all times.

So we decided to take a different route. We want to help prepare you for that day (however and whenever it happens) by taking you to the book of Romans. Of all the books of the Bible, this is the one that explains the gospel systematically. It is, if you will, a very carefully reasoned explanation of what it means to be a follower of Christ. Someone has said the book of Romans is like the constitution of the church. It has been 20 years since we have last been through Romans . . . that means it is time to return.

We live in a world that confronts us with numerous religious beliefs. We encounter them at school, in our social circles, at work, and in our neighborhood. It is easy to deal with different views when we don't know anyone who actually believes them. We can come up with pat answers and feel we have answered the questions effectively. Douglas Moo, a Christian Bible Scholar, tells what happened when his son who went off to college. Mind you, this is the son of a theologian! He was a strong Christian but in a short period of time, his dad was deluged with questions,

How do we as Christians respond to the Buddhist view of God? What am I supposed to think about one of the nicest guys on campus who just happens to be gay? What is wrong with the New Age religion? How can I prove that there is absolute truth?
(NIV Application Commentary, introduction)

Before we can address these very real questions, we need to have a true Christian understanding of God, sin, redemption, judgment, and how people can be made right before God. We also need to ask, "What does life look like when you have been made right before God?" Romans is going to address these questions and help us learn how to think biblically.

Sadly, many people (and Pastors) don't want to read, study, or even preach on Romans because it is "doctrinal." For some reason people think that means it is boring and will turn off their audience. It is much more engaging to preach on how to live good lives (even though Romans tells us no one does good . . . not even one!) For some reason, learning about God, His holiness, His heart, and His plan to rescue sinful man has become boring! We would rather talk about how to be nicer people or how to have a richer life. A lot of "nice" people are going to end up in Hell!

The book of Romans is a book that has had a huge impact on the Christian faith. St. Augustine, Martin Luther, and Charles Wesley were all converted by studying the book of Romans. Luther's conversion was one of the factors that led to the Protestant Reformation.

The first chapter in the book of Romans is an important chapter because the main themes of the book are all included here.

As we read through the letters of the apostles we tend to skip over the first words to get into the "meat" of the letter. One of the things we learned when I developed the discipline of writing out our sermons (even though we preach from a brief outline) every word became more significant. The same is true for writing books. Words have meaning. When what you are writing is about God, that makes every word even more significant. So, these are not just nice-sounding phrases that are fluff from the writers, they are carefully chosen words. Let me read again the opening of the book of Romans.

This letter is from Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, chosen by God to be an apostle and sent out to preach his Good News.

The Author: Paul

Paul, as you may know, used to be known as Saul before his conversion (In Acts 9). Saul was educated under the finest of scholars. He was a member of the Pharisees, and was zealous for the Law of God. In fact, you could say that Paul was fanatical about the law because he sought to arrest and kill Christians because he believed they were being blasphemous (transgressing the Law) because they talked about Jesus being God.

Saul was a Jew, but also a Roman citizen. That made him conversant with the Jews and with the Greek culture around him. Some suggest that Saul had an education that would be the equivalent today of at least a couple of Ph.D's. He was a brilliant man. He was from Tarsus which was a great bastion of Greek culture, surpassed only by Athens and Alexandria. He was unique in his ability to relate to both Jews and Greeks.

The letter to the church in Rome was to a church Paul had not (to this point) visited. We don't know who founded the church. There were likely Jews from Rome who were in Jerusalem at Pentecost and were converted from the preaching of Peter. They took the message back to Rome and the church began. Paul wrote this letter (probably around 57 AD) as a way of

explaining the gospel to this congregation . . . and through them . . . to us. Paul likely wrote the letter from Corinth. Acts 20 notes Paul spent three months in Greece. Several of the names in Romans 16 are connected to people in Corinth. If you want to understand what genuine Christians believe, you need to have a good working knowledge of the book of Romans. Paul's description of himself is instructive.

A Slave of Christ Jesus. Paul calls himself a slave of Christ. When we hear the word slave we think of people being forced into serving others in a demeaning way. However, this idea of a slave can also apply to one who voluntarily entered into the service of another. In the book of Exodus, we read of one who was a slave (to pay off a debt) and when the debt was paid said, 'I love my master, my wife, and my children. I don't want to go free.'⁶ If he does this, his master must present him before God. Then his master must take him to the door or doorpost and publicly pierce his ear with an awl. After that, the slave will serve his master for life. (Exodus 21:5-6)

Paul saw himself as one who had chosen to be a servant of Jesus Christ for life. He went where the Lord led him, and served as the Lord instructed him. He did this joyfully and willingly. This is the way all of us should be. We should be so overwhelmed and grateful for what God has done for us in Christ, that we want to serve the Lord with the remainder of our lives.

Chosen by God to be an Apostle. In the book of Acts, when it came time to replace Judas (though there is no record God told them to do this. The job description for an apostle was: we must choose a replacement for Judas from among the men who were with us the entire time we were traveling with the Lord Jesus—²² from the time he was baptized by John until the day he was taken from us. Whoever is chosen will join us as a witness of Jesus' resurrection." (Acts 1:21-22)

An apostle is different from a disciple (those who learn from the teacher). All apostles are disciples but not all disciples are apostles. An apostle was given a special authority to represent the Lord. They were God's spokesmen. Based on Acts 1:21-22, it appears Paul could not be an apostle. He may have never heard Jesus preach. He may have never witnessed a miracle. But Paul argued that he WAS a legitimate apostle because he met the risen Lord on the Damascus road. The Lord specially commissioned him to go and preach to the Gentiles. The other apostles came to agree with Paul. In Peter's letter, he acknowledged that Paul's letters were like the rest of the scriptures.

our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him,¹⁶ as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. (2 Peter 3:15-16)

Sent Out to Preach the Good News. Paul was given a special commission from the Lord, He was to preach the good news to Jews and Gentiles alike. It was the latter that created problems. Paul proclaimed we are all saved the same way . . . Jew and Gentile alike. Many of the early believers didn't like the message of God through Paul. Sadly, there are many people who still

don't like his message. Talk of sin, judgment, and the substitutionary nature of the death of Christ is seen as barbaric.

There are people who tell you that they are "red letter Christians." They only listen to the words of Jesus. They dismiss the rest of the New Testament saying, "these are just the opinions of men." If they actually did listen to Jesus, they would know that He commissioned Paul to reach out to the Gentiles (that's us!) on that Damascus road. The letters of Paul, Peter, John, James and Jude are just as authoritative as the gospels. They write, as though Christ speaking through them. Christian leaders talked in the early centuries as to which books were worthy of being "in the Bible." Paul's letters were never debated (In fact, only a few led to any discussion). These books that were all written by the apostles; recognizing that these apostles had a special authority from God much like Isaiah, Ezekiel, Moses or David. In the Old Testament.

Jesus said to Peter,

Now I say to you that you are Peter (which means 'rock'), and upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it. ¹⁹ And I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Whatever you forbid on earth will be forbidden in heaven, and whatever you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven." (Matthew 16:18-19)

I believe Jesus was not speaking only to Peter. Peter had just declared that Jesus was the Messiah. I believe *that* is the rock Jesus was speaking of. He was telling His twelve disciples (later called the apostles) that He was giving them a unique authority. They were to speak with His authority. This kind of apostle no longer exists. We are told the church is built on the *foundation* of the prophets and apostles. The Bible is now our sole authority. You don't keep building a foundation. You put down the foundation once and then you build on it.

Some religious groups have apostles (like the Mormons) who continue to give new doctrines for the church. The Pope serves in this same capacity for Catholic believers and there are some Pentecostal groups who have "apostles." We believe the Bible is God's Word to men and we are to anchor our lives and teaching to the authority of the Word of God alone! Be very careful of those who claim to give us "new" scriptures.

Right at the beginning of the letter I believe Paul wants us to know that this letter is not his opinion or viewpoint on things. This letter is the Word of God!

What is the Good News?

Paul was to preach the Good News. We will talk about this much more in weeks to come as the Book of Romans lays it out for us. But for now, let's look at Paul's introductory statement.

² God promised this Good News long ago through his prophets in the holy Scriptures. ³ The Good News is about his Son. In his earthly life he was born into King David's family line, ⁴ and he was shown to be the Son of God when he was raised from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit. He is Jesus Christ our Lord.

Paul states the Good News

- Is the fulfillment God's prophetic plan.
- It puts its focus on Jesus, who is a rightful descendant of David but, more importantly, is the Son of God, as shown by the Resurrection.

Jesus did not *become* the Son of God at the Resurrection. He was always and forever the Son of God, but this was publicly announced as the resurrection shouted it to the world.

The good news is not about God cheering for us as we *try harder*. The good news is that God, who has seen our rebellion and knows our rebellious hearts, chose to, instead of wiping us out (as we deserved), make a way for us to be forgiven by sending His Son to die as a payment for the sin of those who will turn to and follow Him. We talked about this some last week. Sin is not so much the deeds we do, it is the attitude of rebellion against the rule of God. The late Tim Keller wrote,

The essence of sin is taking God's place.

You didn't create yourself. You don't keep yourself alive. And yet you insist on being your own master, your own king, your own lord. That's taking God's place. You're sitting on the throne. That's the essence of sin. It leads to breaking of rules, but it also leads to keeping of rules all so you can be in charge. You take God's place when you say, "I alone have the right to decide what is right or wrong for me," you are a self-actualized person.

According to Abraham Maslow that's the top of the pyramid of needs. You become a self-actualized person, and the Bible says it is the height of something. It's also the apex of sin. "I am my own master. I'm in charge of myself." I didn't create myself. I don't sustain myself. Therefore, I don't have those kinds of rights over myself, but I take them anyway. Sin is taking God's place.¹

God's response to our sin is not to turn away from us . . . it was to send the Son of God to bear the wrath that we earned by our sin.

Who are the Recipients of the Good News?

⁵ Through Christ, God has given us the privilege and authority as apostles to tell Gentiles everywhere what God has done for them, so that they will believe and obey him, bringing glory to his name.

⁶ And you are included among those Gentiles who have been called to belong to Jesus Christ. ⁷ I am writing to all of you in Rome who are loved by God and are called to be his own holy people.

May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.

Paul's assignment was primarily to the Gentiles (non-Jews) but the gospel was for the Jews also. Usually, Paul started preaching in a Jewish synagogue but was inevitably rejected. The gospel is

¹ Timothy J. Keller, *The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive* (New York City: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2013).

good news. . . not just for religious people, it is for anyone who will “believe and obey him, bringing glory to His name.” Many reject this message because they feel they must somehow earn salvation. Paul will argue that this will never happen apart from God’s grace in Christ.

We live in a world that believes good people go to Heaven. The book of Romans will show us that there are no good people. God has called us to honor Him in all we do. Even many of the so-called good things we do are done for selfish reasons! (To be seen, to score “points,” or even to ease our guilt. You and I can only be obedient if God changes our hearts and works in us by His Spirit. And here is the thing – if we have truly turned to Christ for forgiveness and new life we will begin to live a progressively more obedient life. The person who says they are “saved” with no evidence of change in their life is likely not saved at all.

God’s purpose in salvation is that we will believe, obey, and bring glory to His name. Believing and understanding is just the first step. We must act on what we believe is true (otherwise, we don’t actually believe it). We are to follow the commands of Scripture and do so not to advance ourselves but out of gratitude and a desire to honor and praise the One who came to save us.

Conclusions

You will be stretched and informed by the book of Romans. I encourage you to read through the book carefully several times this year. If you can grasp and embrace the book of Romans and affirm the truth that it announces, you will have a strong foundation for your Christian faith.

When talking to new believers, we always encourage them to read the gospels and the book of Acts first . . . get familiar with Jesus, what He taught, and how the disciples responded to that teaching. But after you have read those books, the book of Romans should be next.

Not everything in the book of Romans will be easy to understand or accept. However, if you listen to the book of Romans as God’s Word (rather than the words of men) you will grow in your understanding of what it means to “believe” in Christ. The book of Romans will give us a foundation on which to anchor our lives. It will also help us to understand the gospel so we can share it with others.

We need the meat of the book of Romans. If we embrace what it teaches, even though we may not know all the signs of His coming . . . we will be ready when He does return.