

TRUE POWER: ROMANS 1:13-25

Introductory Activity

Explain: In 2011, Clorox Bleach was facing headwinds in the marketplace. Company officials had noticed a drop in young adults using their product. The product, which had been a staple of cleaning and dealing with the worst of the worst messes, was being ignored by “an entire generation of young adults who have not been taught the virtues of liquid bleach as their parents had been.”¹ In response to this problem, Clorox launched an ad campaign dubbed “Bleachable Moments.” The “offbeat-campaign” presented humorous, hyperbolic moments in everyday life that might benefit from a bit of bleach. One of the commercials featured a young boy running into the bathroom. He is wearing white shorts and struggling with his belt, which he cannot seem to get loose. After a time of struggle, he realizes it’s too late and yells, “Mom, we have a situation.” The commercial ends with Mom firmly placing a bottle of bleach on the table. (See below for a link to the commercial.)² **(Teacher's note: You could send the link to the video to your group via text a few days before Sunday with a comment like, “This Sunday we are going to be talking up the ultimate ‘Bleachable Moment.’ Come learn about what the book of Romans says about Christ’s Power to clean up our mess.”)**

This ad campaign connects to our lesson today on several levels. First, the campaign was aimed at what the New York Times calls “younger consumers who have ‘high barriers to bleach use.’” Second, the campaign emphasizes the power of bleach to deal with the messiest of problems. Today our lesson will focus on the power of the gospel to remove humanity’s sin. Like bleach, the gospel is powerful enough to deal with humanity’s messiest problem: sin. However, like bleach in 2011, the gospel has a generational problem. Many people today have not learned the truth of the gospel and its power from previous generations. As believers, we should be challenged to share the gospel in a way that informs and transforms the lives of those around us.

Summarize and Transition: Today we begin a study in the book of Romans. The letter to the Romans, written by Paul, is probably one of the most theologically rich letters in the NT. The letter is written as an introduction of himself to the church at Rome, a church he had never visited. We are not certain who started the church in Rome. It is speculated that the church was founded by Jews or Jewish converts from Rome who had been present in Jerusalem at Pentecost (Acts 2:10). Scholars speculate that these newly minted followers of Jesus returned to

Notes:

This Lesson was created using:

- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *Explore the Bible Commentary* (ETBC)
- *New American Commentary: Romans*, Mounce (NAC)
- *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans*, Moo (NICNT)
- *Exalting Jesus in Romans*, Merida (Exalting)
- *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Romans*, Bruce (TNTC)
- *Be Right*, Wiersbe (Be)

TEACHER’S NOTE: I am going to try something new this quarter (we will see how it goes). Some have asked if there is a Sunday School curriculum that will help teachers do the work of Sunday School better. So, I am going to try and include tips on how you can use each week’s lesson to enhance the ministry of your small group. Alan Taylor wrote that the purpose of Sunday School is Reach, Teach, and Minister. Recently I heard Scott Sullivan of the Georgia Baptist Convention say that he adds Multiply to that list. So, each week I will try to provide tips on how the content of the lesson can give you the opportunity lead your group to Reach, Teach, Minister, and Multiply.

This is an experiment. Let me know what you think. It will also make the lessons seem longer because the page count will increase. Please don’t let that be a barrier to study. If you are pressed for time you can skip the tips and stick with the content.

¹ Stuart Elliott, Clorox Puts Focus on “Bleachable Moments,” New York Times Blog (September 15, 2011), accessed August 20, 2026.

² <https://www.ispot.tv/ad/w8pf/clorox-bleach-bleachable-moments-belt-buckle>

their various synagogues in the city of Rome and shared with others that the Christ/Messiah/Anointed One had come. History reveals that there were more than 50,000 Jewish adherents in the city of Rome. We also learn from history that the issue of Jesus as the Christ led to some disagreements among the Jews of the various synagogues in Rome. In his biography of Emperor Claudius, Emperor Hadrian's private secretary reveals that in A.D. 49 Claudius "expelled from Rome Jews who were making constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus (2)." "Chrestus" is "likely a corruption of the Greek *Christos* ("Christ")." (NAC, 24) This expulsion of the Jews is what led to Priscilla and Aquila's move to Corinth where they met Paul (Acts 18:2). All this to say that when Paul wrote the letter to the Romans in the mid A.D. 50's the Roman church was probably a majority Gentile church (the Jews had been allowed to return to the city in A.D. 54) As we said, the letter was one of introduction because Paul was making plans to visit the city. As part of that introduction, Paul writes this gospel-centered letter to explain what he believed to this church he had never met. One thing is clear from the passage we will study today. Paul clearly believed that "The gospel alone has the power to remove the guilt of humanity's sin." Life itself is a "Bleachable Moment." (ETB LG, 15) So, let's look at how he introduces himself and this gospel message.

1. GOSPEL POWER (ROM. 1:13-17)

Read (or have someone read) Romans 1:13-17.

Explain: Verse 13 picks up in the middle of Paul's introductory notes to the letter. He has already introduced himself as an apostle to the Gentiles and communicated his fervent prayer for the church at Rome. He has also expressed his desire to visit them. In the passage we read (vv. 13-17), we can see Paul's example that "believers [should] seek opportunities to share the gospel's power with those who need it." (ETB LG, 19)

Verse 13 relates Paul's long-standing desire to visit the church at Rome. His statement there reveals that we should **Seek Opportunities for Ministry and Take the Ones Given to Us**. In Paul's comments, we see that his desire to visit Rome has been thwarted. Many possible earthly and spiritual reasons might explain his delayed visit. However, most scholars point to a rather mundane reason for his delay: Paul was busy doing ministry in the eastern Mediterranean. Everywhere Paul went, he was looking for opportunities to share the gospel. A reading of the book of Acts will reveal that as he sought opportunities, he kept finding them. One thing is clear: if we seek opportunities to share the gospel, we will find them. Paul had done so, and the opportunities had kept him busy. **We Too Should Seek and Take the Opportunities Presented to Us and Share the Gospel**. With the church firmly established in the East, Paul now looks west (Romans 15:21-23). He wants to travel westward to Rome, and as we will see in chapter 15, use it as a jumping-off point for ministry further west in Spain (v. 24).

"The churches for which he had primary responsibility--those which he himself had founded--made heavy and continual demands on his time and attention..." (TNTC, 71)

Quick discussion: How can you discover opportunities to share the gospel? (David Francis writes about focusing first on FRAN's—Friends, Relatives, Acquaintances, and Neighbors. While Paul traveled far and wide to share the gospel, we can do so among our closest connections.)

Explain: In verse 14, Paul goes to explain who he sees as possible recipients of the gospel. (Guide the group to the text by directing the group to examine verse 14 and call out to whom Paul wants to share the gospel-- Greeks and barbarians; the wise and the foolish) Scholars want to break this apart and determine who Paul means exactly. Greeks would be educated, cultured Romans. Barbarians would be the uneducated, non-Greek-speaking residents of the empire. In the word Greek, barbarian is actually a demeaning word meant to connote the unintelligible jabbering's of non-Greek speakers. Wise and foolish seem to imply that Paul wants to preach to the educated and uneducated alike. Needless to say, verse 14 could be shortened to "I am obligated to everyone." His words here remind us that we should **seek everyone and focus on those before us**. That is what Paul shows in verse 15. (Guide the group to the text and ask them to call out another group that Paul sees as possible recipients of the gospel—the church at Rome.)

Discuss: Ask the group to stop and consider this fact deeply for a moment. What is interesting about the fact that Paul wants to "preach the gospel" to the church? (Clearly, we preach the gospel "in church" on Sunday mornings because we expect guests and unsaved people to be in attendance. However, the letter to the Romans is written to people who already follow Jesus.)

Explain: To help us understand Paul's desire to "preach the gospel" to those already saved, we have to go back up to verses 11-12.

Read Romans 1:11-12 (See Notes Box.)

Explain: Paul's trip to Rome was to be mutually beneficial and spiritually strengthening (vv. 11-12) for both himself and the church. For Paul, the gospel is more than the saving message of Jesus. It is the entirety of the Jesus message: justification (getting saved), yes, but also sanctification (how to live like your saved). We too should take the opportunity to share the gospel with those who have not yet received it. We should also take the opportunity to share in the discipleship journey of others. When we walk the discipleship path with others, in small groups or more intimate discipleship groups, everyone is mutually strengthened.

Lastly, Paul explains why he preaches the gospel of Jesus and not some other gospel or some self-help philosophy. First, he says that he is not ashamed of the gospel. That is an ironic way of saying that he glories in the gospel: **The Gospel is Commendable**. Second, he says the gospel is powerful. It is literally the power of God to save.

Discuss: Paul says the gospel is the power of God manifest. The ETB Personal Study Guide asks the question (I changed it a little that it is a better question), "How [can] remembering that the gospel is 'the power of God

Notes:

In the Greek, "Barbarian is an onomatopoeic word (a word that sounds like what it means), a mocking way 'uncouth' foreign languages would sound to the Greek ear." (NICNT, 61-62)

Romans 1:11-12

¹¹For I want very much to see you, so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you, ¹²that is, to be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.

"As P. Bowers has pointed out 'the gospel' in Paul includes 'not simply an initial preaching mission but the full sequence of activities resulting in settled churches.'" (NICNT, 63)

V. 16a--"This is an instance of the figure of speech called litotes: Paul means that he glories in the gospel and counts it a high honor to proclaim it." (TNTC, 74)
litotes: (n) an ironic understanding in which an affirmation is expressed by the negative contrary (ex You won't be sorry, meaning you'll be glad)

TEACHERS NOTE: HOW AND WHY DID I CHANGE THE QUESTION? BECAUSE WHEN THE ETB PSG ASK "HOW DOES..." IT IMPLIES THAT THE STUDENT AGREES AND THAT HIS OR HER CONFIDENCE HAS BEEN CHANGED. I DO NOT ASSUME THAT. SO I ASK "HOW CAN..."

for salvation’ change your confidence in sharing it?” (ETB PSG, 13)—We can be reminded that when we share the gospel for salvation, we *are not the ones working*. It is God who works unto salvation, and it is His power manifested in the powerful gospel message that saves. We simply share the message. Moreover, like bleach, it has the power to clean away every stain. **The Gospel is Powerful.** But Paul makes it clear that it is powerful for the salvation of the one who believes, and the one who believes in faith will live.

Lastly, Paul says the **Gospel is Revelatory**. It reveals the righteousness of God. Now, this is a hotly debated statement among scholars. Douglas Moo spends about 32 pages of his commentary on issues related to this topic. Let me boil it down. The gospel reveals that God is righteous in that He wants to save and can save. The gospel also reveals God’s righteousness in the lives of those who are saved.

Summarize Transition: These few verses reveal that **Believers Should Seek and Take Opportunities to Share the Gospel and participate in Discipleship**. Moreover, **Believers Should Seek Everyone and Focus on the Ones Before us**. Lastly, **Believers Should Seek to Promote the Gospel** because it is commendable, powerful, and revelatory.

Let’s continue and examine the tools we have to share the gospel and the harsh reality of why we need to share the gospel.

Apply this Content in Leading Your Small Group

The main point of this section is “believers seek opportunities to share the gospel’s power with those who need it.” (ETB LG, 19) As a group, you can live out the **Reach** aspect of your ministry by spending time talking about a prospect list. Ideally, you would keep an actual list in your Sunday School binder or on the wall. If your group is not good at keeping an actual list. You, as a leader, can simply ask, “Who do yall know that needs to hear and respond to the gospel or needs to begin attending a small group?” Then you can keep a list on your own and periodically ask the group member who named someone if they have had a chance to share with the person or invite them to church/small group. You can also inform those involved in Wednesday night visitation of the names provided.

2. DIVINE REVELATION (ROM. 1:18-20)

Read (or have someone read) Romans 1:18-20

Paul tells us in the previous passage that God’s righteousness is revealed in the gospel and in the results of the gospel as evidenced in the life of the one who has saving faith. In this passage, he begins by telling us that God’s *wrath* is revealed. In the next passage, we will explore the means by which God’s wrath is revealed. Before we get to that, though, we have to take a moment to discuss the reality of God’s wrath.

Discuss: How do you feel when the Bible or someone else speaks of God’s wrath?

The heresy taught by the second-century theologian Marcion (pron: mar-sea-on) included the idea that the OT taught the story of an angry and wrathful God, and the NT tells the story of a (different) more supreme God of love. Moderns can fall into the same trap. People today want to disentangle the love of Christ from the wrath of God. To do so is to do a disservice to God and Jesus both. “There is an essential relationship between God’s righteousness and his wrath. If God responded to wickedness with no more than a benign tolerance, his righteousness could be called into question.” (NAC, 76) God’s righteousness does not allow Him to wink at sin. Moreover, to deny God’s wrath would be a negation of Christ’s atoning death.

The OT expression of God’s wrath, whether directed at the nations (Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians) or His people (Israel), is intended to bring about repentance and return. We might not consider the eschatological (end times) Day of the Lord (as expressed in the prophets and the book of Revelation) as a time of repentance, though. Zephaniah 1:15 describes the day of the Lord as, “That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of destruction and desolation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and total darkness.” Moreover, when we consider the end of all things in relation to God’s wrath, we envision a lake of fire and tribulation. However, even in the OT, the eschatological Day of the Lord “includes the restoration of the

earth, when the whole earth will be filled with the knowledge (Is 11:9; Hb 2:14) and glory (Nm 14:21; Ps 72:19) of the Lord and wickedness will be no more (Is 65:25).³ The wrath of God is not an OT thing and the NT is not solely a treatise on the God's love. The NT message, the message of the gospel, *requires* the reality of God's wrath directed toward sin and evil. Paul says it is revealed against "all godlessness and unrighteousness." Again, scholars want to parse these words, and you could do so. "Godlessness" could be related to "spiritual/religious" sin, that is, sin against God like unbelief. "Unrighteousness" could be considered sin against man. Some have compared this to the four-six division of the Ten Commandments. The first four being vertically/heavenly oriented and the final six horizontally/human oriented. (See NAC, 77) However, the simplest way of understanding these nouns is as a simple parallelism: God's wrath is revealed against the sinful.

Paul goes on to explain *why* God's wrath is revealed against the ungodly. He says it is because they "suppress the truth." To suppress is different than ignorance. Suppression of the truth refers to the way a person relates to the truth personally. "It is a deliberate ignorance." (TNTC, 78) It's like a person who knows they are sick but refuses to acknowledge it. It's like saying, "If I ignore it, it will go away." Well, Paul says the truth will not simply "go away" if I suppress knowledge of it. In verse 20, he says they have no excuse. They have no excuse because of creation itself. Here Paul is talking about what we call general revelation. He says creation itself declares the "eternal power and divine nature" of God.

Discuss: How are God's invisible attributes displayed through creation? How should that influence the way we live each day? (ETB LG, 21)

In next week's lesson, we will see that general revelation includes the human conscience as well. History, too, reveals the "invisible attributes" of God. So general revelation consists of creation, the human conscience, and history. Humanity is without excuse because these things reveal enough about God to make us culpable. "Natural revelation leads not to salvation but to the demonstration that God's condemnation is just: people are 'without excuse.'" (NICNT, 106) General revelation reveals enough about God that humans recognize sinfulness and are without excuse because they did not respond by searching for God and His solution to humanity's sin problem. Instead, they deified creation and ultimately themselves. That is what we will see in the next passage.

Summarize and Transition: God's wrath is revealed because of sinfulness and the suppression of a "common sense" (NAC, 78) response to creation. The ETB Leader Guide says, "We can point others toward God through what He has revealed in His creation." (ETB LG, 21) That is not *incorrect*. However, that statement is only partially true. According to Paul, we can point people *to their need for God* because creation reveals His greatness ("power") and "divine nature" (righteousness) as well as our inability to mirror His righteousness. Paul is just beginning His argument leading to the gospel, as revealed through what we call special revelation.

³ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, "Wrath of God," in Baker *Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 2167. J. Cardinell, 2026

But he has to start here, with the bad news, before he can get to the good news of the gospel. He is attempting to show that all humanity needs a Savior because all humanity is sinful and without excuse.

Apply this Content in Leading Your Small Group

In this section and the next we are reminded about the reality of God's displeasure over sin and sinfulness. This can remind us of one way to live out the **Reach** and **Minister** function of our group. While we should seek opportunities to share with those who need the gospel, we should also spend time praying for them. As a group you should take time periodically to pray for the lost by name. You can also develop a prayer list that you send to your group via text or email.

You might also establish a specific time each day that your group members will stop and pray. That is a way of presenting a challenge and a bit of accountability to your group. For example, a few years ago the SBC ask people to stop at 10:02 am or pm to pray for workers of the harvest (Luke 10:2). You might do something similar.

3. WORTHLESS THINKING (ROM. 1:21-25)

Read (or have someone read) Romans 1:21-25.

Explain: Paul is eager to preach the gospel in Rome because of man's refusal to acknowledge God and thereby rejection of Him. In this passage, he begins to reveal the consequences of this rejection. The ETB Leader Guide states, "Rejecting God ultimately leads to devastating consequences." (ETB LG, 23) The consequences begin in the heart, reveal themselves in actions, and ultimately reveal the wrath of God.

Discuss: What are some of the consequences of rejecting the Lord?

Explain: The first and most devastating consequence of rejecting the Lord is an eternity without Him, but note that Paul does not mention eternal punishment here. He stays in the temporal space for the time being. The first effect of rejecting God is evidenced in the heart and mind. Paul begins by saying, "For though they knew God." That should give us pause because we might not see how these pagans "knew God." What he means is: though they had general revelation about God, they suppressed any knowledge of Him. In other words, Paul is not letting humanity off the hook. They are "without excuse." So, we might paraphrase Paul and say, "though they had knowledge of God through creation and suppressed it..." By suppressing knowledge of God, they had knowledge without capital-T-Truth. Knowledge without Truth leads to, first, disregard and disinterest. They disregarded the reality of God's goodness and refused to show gratitude. Moreover, knowledge without Truth results in diseased thinking. Paul says their "thinking became worthless." Thinking refers to reasoning. Reasoning is the weighing of information and options to reach a conclusion. Worthless reasoning "leads to corrupt conclusions." (ETBC, 17) Not only was their thinking worthless, but their hearts were also darkened. The ETB Commentary states, "A senseless heart not only fails to provide guidance but actively leads a person astray (Prov. 4:23). Such a person would not be walking in the light but stumbling about in the dark." (ETBC, 17) And Douglas Moo adds, "a darkness that only the light of the gospel can penetrate." (NICNT, 107) But instead of turning to the God of the gospel, as the wise person would, they became foolish and created for themselves gods from creation. "Having held down God's truth and refusing to acknowledge God's glory, man was left without a god, and man is so constituted that he must worship something." (Be, 23) Therefore, he created gods to worship. Foolishness is evident here. Man, the highest of God's creation, debased itself by elevating lower creatures not only above themselves but above the creator as well.

We discussed the worship of false gods in our study of the book of Judges. We saw that Israel chased after the gods of foreign nations. In response to their actions, God then turned them over to those pagan nations. Those they sought to be like became their oppressors. Paul points out a similar act by God in verse 24.

Reread Romans 1:24 (See Notes Box.)

When man chases after the wisdom of this world and the ways of this world, then, like the Israelites, God simply turns him over to that which he desires. This brings us back to the topic of God's wrath. I said earlier

Romans 1:24
Therefore God delivered them over in the desires of their hearts to sexual impurity, so that their bodies were degraded among themselves

"Paul's use of the verb 'hand over' to describe this retribution has its roots in the OT, where it is regularly used in the stereotyped formula according to which God 'hands over' Israel's enemies so that they may be defeated in battle. And, in an ironic role reversal, the same formula is used where God hands his own people over to another nation as punishment for their sins." (NICNT, 110)

that we would discuss the means by which God's wrath is revealed. Here we see that means. Yes, God's wrath will be meted out at the end of all things. But note that back in verse 14 Paul's said God's wrath "is" being revealed. Robert Mounce, referencing a note from the NIV Study Bible, writes, "God allowed sin to run its course as an act of judgment." And he expounds, "God's wrath mentioned in Romans 1 is not an active outpouring of divine displeasure but the removal of restraint that allows sinners to reap the just fruits of their rebellion... Moral degradation is a consequence of God's wrath, not the reason for it." (NAC, 80, 81)

The meting out of God's wrath is an "already and not yet" event. It will, but not yet be experienced at the end of all things, but it is already evident in our world today. The moral degradation of the Roman world and our world as well is a manifestation of God's wrath. He has simply turned humanity over to that which humanity chases. C.S. Lewis put it well. The lost, he says, "enjoy forever the horrible freedom they have demanded and are therefore self-enslaved." (quoted in TNTC, 80)

Summarize and Transition: This "self-enslavement" process is the result of rejecting God. Knowledge without Truth leads to degraded and degrading worship of idols and diseased thinking. As a result, the wrath of God manifests in the degradation of society. However, it also leads to a degradation of the individual. The consequences of our personal sin have personal and interpersonal consequences. Sin will destroy the life of those who chase after ungodliness. It might sound harsh, but worthless thinking resulting from rejection of God will result in a worth-less life. Every individual is valuable, but chasing after sin leads to self-devaluation and limits the worth we can bring to this world.

CONCLUDE

We began our time together discussing the "Bleachable Moments" ad campaign. Some stains can only be removed by a powerful cleaner. In this lesson, Paul has presented us with a "Bleachable Moment." The stain of sin needs a powerful cleansing agent. This first chapter of Romans presents the bad news that must be understood before he can get to the good news of the gospel. Don't worry, Paul will get there, but we do not know what the week has in store for us. So, let me tell you some good news. Jesus can clean up our sin problem. He can restore our minds and hearts. He can give our lives worth.

As believers, we display our worthiness by living as Paul. In verses 14 and 15, he said he was "obligated" to everyone and "eager" to preach the gospel.

Challenge 1: If you do not feel an obligation and eagerness to share the gospel, pray and ask the Lord to cultivate those feelings in you.

Paul also said that he wanted to preach to the church at Rome. This revealed that the gospel message is more than a message about salvation. It is a message about living like we are saved. Therefore, we should seek to grow in our faith by cultivating the life of a disciple.

Challenge 2: General revelation can only reveal our need for God. The special revelation given in Scripture reveals our Savior, Jesus, and how to live like Him. If you are currently not reading the Bible and praying, make a decision to do so. You might start by simply reading your Explore the Bible Personal Study in preparation for next week's lesson. Or you might start by reading one of the gospels slowly and deliberately in an effort to learn how to live like Jesus.