



Romans 1:1-7
The Power of Identity in Christ

Summary: Christians living in the capital have a God-given identity in Christ.

The BelAZ 75710 is the largest dump truck in the world. It's 60 feet long, 32 feet wide, and 27 feet high. It's made in Belarus and used primarily in mining operations in Europe. Maximum speed is 40mph empty, but it can hit 25mph when fully loaded and going up a 10% incline - which is pretty impressive because it can carry 450 metric tonnes – that's just shy of one million pounds.



Why do I bring that up? What does this have to do with Romans? Well, imagine the BelAZ, the world's largest dump truck, loaded to maximum capacity, rolling up, tipping its bed and dumping everything out - a million pounds of payload- at your feet.



That's kind of what I imagine happening with God's blessings when you read Romans. This book helps you see how much God has done for you, how much He wants to give to you, how much He wants to help you. This book is a million pounds of blessings poured out on your life.

When you walk out of here this morning, I hope you know, that you are called to be loved, belong, and be saints. That's God's purpose and plan for your life, that is your destiny and direction – and, if you are *in Christ*, that is how He sees you *right now*.

If you're not in Christ, or if you object and say 'Yeah, sure pastor, maybe for other people, maybe some of these good people sitting around me – but not for me,' well, you need to meet the man who wrote the book, a man whose own life had been radically transformed by the truth he's now trying to communicate. And we'll get there.

But first, let's talk about the whole Bible and how Romans fits. See, you need to know that the Bible is a book, but it's not a novel or a textbook. You don't have to read it front to back. That's because it's a collection of sixty-six different books written by forty different authors, over a period of more than sixteen hundred years, on three continents, using three original languages and yet, it all tells one fully integrated story – God's story – who He is, what He's doing, and what it all means for us.

It breaks down into two main chunks – the Old Testament and the New Testament. The New Testament begins with the gospels – four biographies of Jesus that tell us who He was and what He did. Then you have the book of Acts. It's the history of the early church. It tells us what happened after Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection.

After that you have a series of letters written by men like Peter, Paul, and John – apostles commissioned by God to establish and lead His church. Their writings are organized by author, so at the very end of the Bible you have 1st John, 2nd John, and 3rd John – letters written by the apostle to various people. And then you have the book of Revelation, also written by John to a collection of churches. Just before that you have two letters by Peter.

But the bulk of the New Testament is letters written by Paul to various people like Titus and Timothy and to churches in various places like Corinth, Ephesus, and Galatia. At the head of the stack is the one to the church in Rome. That tells you something.

When the early church sat down to determine what would be in the Bible they said this letter from the Apostle Paul to the church in Rome needs to go first. It wasn't written first. It's not the longest or the shortest. It's certainly not in alphabetical order. But Christians have agreed for centuries – this letter deserves a special place. It's a dump truck load full of grace.

That's been the view of Christians throughout the ages. But there's something I want to emphasize for us here and now, something that is, in a sense quite particular to who *we* are and where we live. Remember, Paul wrote this letter nearly two thousand years ago to Christians living in the capital city of their empire.

If Paul was writing today, you could make a strong case that he would be writing *to us*. Friends, we are the modern equivalent to Christians living in ancient Rome. We live in the shadow of the capital. Some of you hold government jobs. In countless ways, our lives are affected by a government whose influence stretches across continents. Friends, we are Rome. In so many ways.

This letter contains timeless truth that applies to everyone, everywhere regardless of their current situation. But we share a special link with the original audience and I'm hopeful God uses that link to provide an extra measure of blessing to us as we study.

So, let's jump in and see what God has to say. We begin with just verse one.

Romans 1:1 Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called *to be* an apostle, separated to the gospel of God

Who is the man God used to write such an important letter? The answer is – a man you never would have expected. A man who didn't deserve it. A man who never asked to do it. But a man whose life was completely transformed by God's life-interrupting and life-transforming grace – a man who was **separated to the gospel of God**.

Paul was a perfect example of what God does through grace. Paul was proof, the stuff he talks about in this book is real.

Paul's name at birth was Saul. He was born into a decently well-off and well-connected Jewish family. Not unlike some of you – he was born into some opportunities. And his family took advantage of them. He received a good education – his parents would have been proud to say where he was studying. And then he pursued leadership opportunities at an early age, networking with the leaders of the nation.

Paul knew important people, and he was on the fast track to becoming important himself. So, it probably wasn't a surprise that when something needed to be done about the rapidly growing followers of Jesus, Paul stepped forward and offered to help contain the religious revolution.

Paul was present at the death of the first Christian martyr. You can read all about in the book of Acts. The crowd of zealots laid their robes at his feet as they threw rocks at a Christian named Stephen until he died. Later Paul would search out and arrest Christians in Jerusalem and eventually received authorization from the Chief Priest to travel to Damascus and do the same thing there.

But, on the way – you have to know this and appreciate this – *while Paul was on the way from Jerusalem to Damascus*, he has a sudden, unforeseen, unsought or predicted encounter with Jesus who at this point has been put to death on the cross, buried in the grave and then risen from the dead.

Jesus interrupts Paul's trip and confronts him with the question: "[Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?](#)" Their interaction leads to Paul's subsequent conversion to Christianity and baptism. He is then called into ministry and spends the rest of his life advocating zealously for the Christian faith before eventually being put to death himself for his beliefs.

Now there are at least two things you need to know and appreciate about that experience on the Damascus Road.

Jesus identifies with our suffering.

First, Jesus asks Saul [why are you persecuting Me?](#) But he wasn't. We have no record of Saul ever interacting directly with Jesus before the cross. That wasn't the point though – Jesus so closely identified with the suffering of His people that He said it was like suffering Himself. That's why Jesus asks, [Saul, Saul why are you persecuting Me?](#) Ask the parent or spouse of anyone suffering from a severe illness or injury and they'll you, they're suffering too. Friends, Jesus experiences the suffering of His Church, but even more intimately. When you suffer for Him, He suffers with you.

Jesus comes to us when we're messing up.

Second, you have to know Saul was in the middle of messing up when Jesus set Him straight. *Friends you have to know that* – especially if you're just kind of here this morning but you're not really sure if all of this is for you. You're not sure what God really thinks of

you. You know, you're kind of a good person, but you've done some stupid things, or you've made some mistakes, you've got some regrets.

If that's you – God knows. He knows exactly who you are and what you've done. *And He's still coming to you.* This is the overwhelming, mind-blowing, truth of the gospel: Saul wasn't looking for Jesus when Jesus came looking for him. Paul learned, in his own life, what he'll write later in **Romans 5:8** that *while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

You have to know, *you absolutely have to know* – God doesn't expect you to get yourself cleaned up, fixed up, or to get your act together before you come to Him. *He comes to you* in the middle of your mess, your hard-heartedness, and your rebellion. Friends, God seeks you out.

Paul experienced this and it upended his life. It completely changed everything. He suddenly saw himself as, look at verse one, a **bondservant** of Jesus.

You don't understand what that means. I don't fully understand what that means. Because we don't live in a culture so defined by status and roles. Maybe if you were born in India to the lower end of the caste system you could understand.

Paul lived in a world in which status was everything and he had it all. He was born into a good family. He received a great education and had all the right connections and opportunities. He was born in the right place to receive Roman citizenship. The man literally had everything going for him. And suddenly he was turning his back on all of that and saying I'm nothing. I'm a **bondservant** to Jesus.

Saul was the kind of man who would have had servants. Certainly, his family had them when he was growing up. He was used to being with important people in important places with servants always in the background making things happen. And now Paul says, that's who I am. That's what I'm like. Only I'm not a servant for some Roman senator or some Jewish aristocrat or merchant, I'm a **bondservant** of Jesus.

We hear that today and it just sounds kind of nice and poetic to us. We're missing something. We're missing the depth and richness, the power of what this man is really saying. *It's not poetic to him. It's real.*

For a Roman citizen to *choose* to be a servant was unthinkable – people spent great sums of money trying to buy their freedom and citizenship and yet, go read through Paul's writings and you find that his favorite title for Jesus is Lord - *kurios*, in Greek. It's not poetic. A *kurios* was someone with undisputed possession of a person or thing, an absolute owner or master. Paul experienced a radical and real psychological transformation – the center and anchor of his identity and self-image completely shifted and transformed. He said this is who I am: a **bondservant of Jesus.**

Paul made nothing of himself. But then, notice, Jesus gave him a task – he was also [called to be an apostle](#).

Jesus had both disciples and apostles. Sometimes you hear of the twelve disciples, sometimes it's the twelve apostles. What's the difference?

Well, a disciple is a student, someone who is learning, someone who wants to be like the other person. An apostle is someone sent out on behalf of another to bring a message or carry authority. Today, an ambassador would be the closest example.

Jesus had many disciples during His earthly ministry, including the Twelve – they all learned from Him and about Him. But He also sent the Twelve out to accomplish His purposes and spread His message – they were His apostles.

Paul received similar authority and commission from Jesus. As a result, he has this really healthy self-assessment, this beautiful model for us to consider and follow. On the one hand, he says 'I'm nothing. I'm no one. I'm a [servant](#). No one says 'I want to be that when I grow up.'

But, on the other hand, he knows he's not just a servant, he's a servant *of Jesus*. And Jesus gives Paul purpose, meaning, and identity. Serving Jesus is a valuable way to spend his life. Paul knows that His master and lord has made him an [apostle, separated to the gospel of God](#). Notice how he explains it in verse [5 Through Him we have received grace and apostleship](#).

Paul knows - God Himself has given me this new identity, this reason to live, this purpose and meaning and direction for my life. It's not based on all the things I've done or accomplished for myself. It's not based on where I went to school, or where I worked, or what projects I worked on. It's not based on how much I earned or even on my performance. It was all from God who generously chose me and blessed me *and He did it when I was in the middle of tracking down His people*. Paul knows, with absolute and utter certainty – this is who I am, this is what God has made me – a lowly servant AND an esteemed ambassador, but both are based in what God has done for him.

So, what about you? How do you see yourself today? Where do you put the center of your identity? What are you trying to accomplish or achieve and who are you doing it for? Or what do you look back on and tell yourself you're OK, or you're pretty cool, because you..._____? You what? How do you fill in the blank?

Maybe it goes the other direction – you tell yourself you're not happy, you're not content, you haven't made it, and maybe you never will because you don't _____ or you haven't _____? What are you judging yourself by? Is *your* identity anchored in Jesus?

Because if you, you might hear an obnoxious beeping sound, warning you that the dump truck is backing up, ready to pour out blessings at your feet.

So far, we've been talking about Paul, but Paul says the reason all of this happened to him was so that he could share the good news with others. Read with me and notice what God has done and what it means for you.

Romans 1:1 Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called *to be* an apostle, separated to the gospel of God which He promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared *to be* the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead. Through Him we have received grace and apostleship for obedience to the faith among all nations for His name, among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ;

That's Paul's introduction of himself, and now look at this, this is for you:

7 To all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called *to be* saints:

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

I know you only have two hands, but I want to give you three things to hold on to when you walk out of here this week – you are called to belong, called to be loved, and called to be saints. This is God's will for you. This is His gift to you. This is His promise. It's not earned, it's not achieved, it's received.

I am called to belong.

First, you are called to belong. The big theme in the background here is that God is orchestrating all this. Remember He barged into Paul's life and spun him around out of nowhere. And He did it because He had a plan. A plan for the salvation of our souls that goes back to the beginning of time. God knew we were going to fall. He knew we were going to fail. And He knew we would never be able to pick ourselves back up, to fix what we had broken. But He had a plan to do it for us.

Notice verse two – God had been promising this through **the prophets** for centuries and now it had come to pass. Jesus came and lived the life we could not live then died the death we deserve to die in order to give us the blessings we could never earn. And once His death, burial, and resurrection made all of that possible, God commissioned people to go out and spread the news - to say, 'this has happened, this has been done and now you can receive the benefits. You can belong.'

Listen, you have to know, you have to understand, because this affects everything – the gospel is not primarily an appeal for you to do anything. The gospel does not call you to live a good life, to be moral or ethical and not get into too much trouble. The gospel is an announcement of what God has already done and how you can benefit from it. It's the good news that you can belong.

If you struggle to find your people, if you struggle with feeling lonely, or if you struggle to find acceptance you need to know that God is actively seeking you, stalking you, targeting you, desiring for you to belong. He wants to adopt you.

So let me take a minute to address the beautiful people, the strong people, and the high performing people in the room. You may have found temporary acceptance and approval because of how you look, or what you know, or what you can do. You may be winning at life right now, but you also know it's precarious. You can't sit back and coast, because you could lose it if you don't keep up. And there are always challenges and new trends and new things to stay on top of, new skills to master. It can be exhausting to keep up.

What if you didn't have to? What if you could just belong without trying? What if you could be accepted without being inspected? You can, *if you're accepted by Jesus*. And He's calling you to belong. He's targeting you. Seeking you. My friends, you can belong, if you belong to Jesus.

And more than that, you can be loved.

I am called beloved.

Look at verse 7, who is this letter written to? [All who are in Rome, beloved of God](#). If you're like most people you want to be loved. Now you can come up with all kinds of self-talk, all kinds of stories you tell yourself about how you're an introvert, or you're an island, or you don't need people. Tell yourself whatever you want, there's no psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually healthy human being who doesn't want to be loved.

Jesus offers you that love. And if you start there, with His love, then you're right: it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks. But you know what? You'll find that the more you look, sound, and act like Jesus the more other people will love you too.

We are made for relationships – with God and with others. Most men aren't good enough on their own – so God made women to complete us. And most couples are going to have kids. And all Christians belong in a congregation with other Christians - you are made for relationships and relationships, when they're healthy, are full of love.

This is God's plan for you. This is who He wants you to be. This is what He wants you to experience. This is what He's been conceiving and planning and executing throughout human history. This whole load of blessings dumped out for you. And there's more.

You're called to belong, to be loved, and to be saints.

I am called to be a saint.

We mess this up because we often think saints are like super Christians – people you name churches or hospitals or football teams after. But they're not. According to the Bible there are only two categories of people – saints and aints. If you have confessed your sin, turned away from living your life your way and asked God for forgiveness, direction and strength, you're a saint. If you haven't, you ain't. There's no third or fourth or fifth category.

And here's what's mind boggling – the word saint shares the same Greek root as the word holy. That's how God sees you because He sees you in Christ.

Now I know that's not what you think when you look in the mirror or reflect on your life, you think, 'this is not what a saint looks like or acts like.' You're right. *If* all you see or think about is yourself – *but that's not how God sees you*. He sees you as you could be, as you are in Christ.

My friends, do you understand what this means? It means God looks at you with sympathetic eyes. God sees all your good, all your potential, all that can and could be. When God looks at you, He sees a saint, if you are in Christ.

And that is why Paul is able to end with this (vs 7): [Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ](#).

We're often upset, worried, frenetic, and frantic – not sure what's happening or if things will work out. We lack peace. But God wants us to have it. He's loaded it into the truck and wants to deliver it.

So, can you hear the thundering roar and the see the swirling cloud of dust as the load is dumped out for you?

You've messed up in life. You don't always measure up. You've been hurt and you've hurt others. Things don't always work out well. You're angry at times. You're proud, arrogant, and hard to get along with. You're depressed and lonely. You're anxious. You're addicted. You're a dork.

But you're called to belong. You're called to be loved. You're called to be a saint.

God is pouring out [grace](#) and [peace](#) to you. He wants to be your [Father](#). Jesus wants to be your Savior. The Holy Spirit wants to be your strength. This is the life God wants you to have. A life of blessing and belonging in the midst of struggle and trials and things we cannot control.

Will you receive it? Will you tell God to back it up and pour it out, right here? He may do it whether you ask or not, like He did with Saul. But if you want to receive these blessings, you can ask for them, right here, right now.

God wants to make the delivery. And if you know them, you can say Thank You and praise God for them.



Why don't you take a minute to do that now and then come forward and receive the elements of communion this morning – but first

Let's pray.



Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

Romans 1:1-7 The Power of Identity in Christ

Summary: Christians living in the capital have a God-given identity in Christ.

- Outside of salvation, what are some of the biggest blessings or gifts that have been 'dumped' into your life?
- Have you read the entire Bible? What's your favorite book? Where would you tell someone to start reading the Bible, why?
- What does it mean that "we are Rome?" How can the Bible be both true for all people, at all times, in all places, and particularly true for us here and now?
 - o Are there parts of the Bible that feel more relevant to you than others? Have those parts changed over time? Why?
- Did God interrupt your life, seemingly out of no where, or did you consciously seek Him? What might be some benefits of each experience?
- Why is it good to know that Jesus identifies with His people, asking why Saul was persecuting *Him*?
- Why is it good to know that Jesus called Saul when he was in the middle of furious resistance to Christ?
- Paul saw himself as a servant of Jesus. He also knew he was called by Jesus to be an apostle. Read 1 Timothy 1:12-17. What other identity to Paul apply to himself? How do you think this self-understanding affected his approach to the high calling of being an apostle?
 - o Where do you see a tension in your life between your shortcomings and sin and your calling to serve God and others?
 - o How can you hold both things as true at the same time – you fall short, but you're also called to serve and be a blessing?
- Which do you need to be reminded of most, that you are called to belong, be loved, or be a saint?
- Read Ephesians 1:6 – what message does this reinforce from Romans 1:7?