

10.15.2023

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Gospel Shaped Relationships | Romans 1:8-15

I. Introduction

In the fourth century there was a man from northern Africa whose Christian mother raised him to be a disciple of Jesus, but as he grew he turned his back on Christianity and he gave his life to pursuing truth through other means. He also lived in whatever way he pleased; according to the whims of his desires. Then one day he listened to a Christian sermon and he was deeply affected by the message. He couldn't shake the conviction he felt after the sermon. He wrote:

The tumult of my heart took me out into the garden, where no one could interfere with the burning struggle with myself in which I was engaged... I was twisting and turning in my chains. Suddenly I heard a voice from a nearby house chanting as if it might be a boy or a girl... 'pick up and read, pick up and read.' [I took] the book of the apostle and [I read]. ...it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All shadows of doubt were dispelled.¹

The man who was converted to Christ in that moment was Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo - one of the greatest influences on Christianity in all of history outside of the bible. And the "book of the apostle" that he picked up to read, was the book of Romans.

About a thousand years later, there was a monk who lived in constant torment, gripped by fear that he was not good enough to be saved. Then everything changed when was studying the book of Romans and it clicked for him that God saves by grace through faith. The God who he had seen as his task master and tormentor, became his precious Savior. That monk was Martin Luther, another of the greatest influences on the church throughout Christian history.

We're continuing our series in the book of Romans today - this book that has resonated so profoundly across the ages. And I'm telling you these stories of the pivotal influence of the book of Romans, not to promise you history-making outcomes to our study, but to stir up in us a prayerful desire for God to use this book in our midst like he has in Christian history to make clear the gospel that leads sinners to repentance and joy. To change the trajectory of lives through the study and preaching of God's word.

Context:

Romans was written around 57AD - almost thirty years after Christ lived, died, rose again, and ascended to heaven - by the Apostle Paul. Now, if you know the life of Paul, you know that he was radically transformed from a prosecutor of Christians to a disciple of Jesus when Christ appeared to him on the road to damascus. And after his conversion he eventually became a missionary who would travel from place to place preaching the gospel and starting churches wherever the gospel was received. Many of the books in the New Testament were written by Paul to churches he knew because he had planted them and pastored them. One of the interesting things about the book of

¹ Augustin, Quoted in "Romans For You" by Tim Keller (8-9)

Romans is that it's a letter Paul wrote to a church that he didn't know. Scholars say that at the time of his writing, Paul is probably wintering in the city of Corinth and he has his eye on Spain - a place which would have been on the very edge of the map in that day. So he wants to take the gospel to the ends of the earth, where Christ isn't yet named or known and on his way there, he plans to pass through the church in Rome and meet them on his way to take the gospel to Spain. So he writes them a letter.

Knowing this kind of context is helpful for us as we look at Romans 1:8-15 because, even though most of this book is dense with doctrinal teaching, our passage for today covers not dense theological teaching, but a warm greeting from Paul to the church in Rome. And so the meat of what we're studying here in these eight verses is the *example* of Paul's affections for these Christians in Rome who he has not yet met. And in Paul's heart for a community of Christians he hasn't met, what we're seeing is that Paul's gospel doctrine shapes the way he relates and interacts.

What Paul *believes* impacts what he is *like*.

The connection between what we believe and how we are experienced by other people is so important! Faithfulness to Jesus means more than believing the right theology. Faithfulness to Jesus looks like people who have been so shaped by the doctrine of the gospel that they embody the culture of the gospel in the way we relate to one another. It is possible to preach true theology and then cancel what we preach with the way we live and relate to one another. We are preaching a message with what we are like and how we are experienced. Like one pastor wrote, "If a church is not positively communicating the gospel both by what it says *and by what it is*, then that church risks unsaying by its reality what it is saying by its theory."²

So in Paul's greeting to the church here in Romans 1 Paul is displaying a heart bursting with affections! Affections that have been shaped by the truth of the gospel. Paul's greeting to the church is teaching us that *the Gospel has unignorable implications for how we relate to God, the church, and the world.*

II. What is the Gospel?

Now, I want to spend time unpacking those unignorable *implications* of the gospel, but in order to talk clearly about its implications, we have to have a clear understanding together of what the gospel is. Paul doesn't give a clear explanation of the gospel in our passage today, but thankfully he spends multiple of chapters elsewhere in the book of Romans explaining it. So we could explain the gospel and reference passages all over the New Testament, but today I'm going to help us sample the book of Romans as I define the gospel for us.

The gospel is a message that answers four questions: *Who is in charge of us? What is our problem? What is the solution? And How can I be included in that solution?* These are all questions that Paul answers and expounds on throughout his letter to the Roman church. First, **who is in charge of us?** God is the one who created us and we are accountable to him. The latter half of Romans 1 is going to

² Ortlund, Ray. *How to Build a Gospel Culture in Your Church*

talk about how we human beings were created to worship, serve and honor God as our Creator. Romans 1 is also where Paul begins to answer the second question: **what is our problem?** Our problem is that humanity exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator. This is what *sin* is - ignoring, or rejecting, or rebelling against God in the world he created and not being or doing what he requires in his law. Romans 5 says that since sin came into the world through one man (Adam), death - the consequence of sin - spread to all humanity. Romans 3 says all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Our sin against God is the root of all the brokenness, suffering, strife, and wickedness in the world. And our sin deserves God's justice, for the wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23) and God's judgment and wrath rightly falls on those who sin against him (Rom 2:2). **What is the solution?** Romans 5:8 says, "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Romans 6:23, says "the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." The solution to the problem of sin is salvation through Jesus Christ who died to pay the penalty for sin! And **how can I be included in God's solution?** Romans 5 teaches that we are justified by faith, and that through faith in Christ we receive peace with God and grace from God. Romans 10 says, "...if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

This is the "gospel" that Paul is unpacking throughout the book of Romans. It's the message on which he has based his life. This is the gospel for which he's been set apart, like he says in verse 1 of this chapter, and it's the this gospel that provides that atmosphere in which a passage like Romans 1:8-15 can exist because this good news is the source for all of Paul's affections that are on display here. This is the Gospel that has unignorable implications for how we relate to God, the church, and the world.

III. The Implications of the Gospel

How We Relate to God

If we are gospel people, the first implication is that the way we relate to God will be changed. Our salvation through Christ bears the fruit of grateful, wholehearted service to God.

If you were here last week, you heard Pastor Kyle preach about how Paul introduces himself in the opening verses of Romans. In fact, look at verse 1 while we refresh our memory. We saw that Paul has an identity that is wholly centered around God. He writes that he is a servant of Jesus Christ - he is not his own, but belongs in body and soul to Jesus Christ. He's also called by Christ to be an apostle and he's given a job - he's set apart to proclaim the gospel. Now what we saw last week was that these identifying markers don't just belong to Paul. If you are a Christian, these things are also true about you! You also are called as a servant of Jesus Christ and sent by God to proclaim the gospel. And what we see in our passage today is Paul's attitude about his calling. Let me show you what I mean. Let's look at verse 8 & 9.

⁸ First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. ⁹ For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son...

So in this section of text before we unpack Paul's affection for this church we need to see Paul's joy and wholeheartedness in serving God. He is not begrudging. He's not hesitant. He's not distracted.

He's not divided. He says, "For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit..." That means that he is serving God with his whole heart. His will, his affections, his strength, his desires are all aimed at serving God in the gospel of his Son. Listen, we talk often about our calling as disciples of Jesus. We talk about what obedience and faithfulness looks like in practice. But we can't miss that the gospel is not only meant to shape our actions of obedience, but also our attitude and affections toward God. I mentioned Martin Luther earlier. As a monk he was completely convinced of the reality of God and the necessity of serving God. Nobody needed to convince him that he should obey God. But he writes that he hated and murmured against God because the root of his conviction to serve God was a misunderstanding of the gospel. Once he understood that his salvation comes through the mercy and grace of God to justify us by faith in Christ it wasn't his outward obedience that transformed, it was his inner joy in relating to God as his merciful Savior. What are the shape of your affections toward God? Is there any part of you that has focussed on serving him outwardly, while inwardly harboring bitterness or halfheartedness? Have you brought the gospel to bear on the quality of your affections for God in serving him?

If you find in yourself a holding back, a divided heart, a begrudging heart in serving God, then I would just lay before you: brother, sister the remedy is not going to be buckle down and do more, but fix your eyes on what's been done for you. While we were weak, Christ poured himself out for our sake. Not so that he could add one more servant to his staff. He's God, he doesn't need you to do the work for him, but he loves you. And in Christ he's welcomed you into his family. And by the blood of Jesus, though you are undeserving, you *get* to work in the family business. Don't buy into the lie that the Christian life is an existence characterized by white-knuckled, duty-focussed obedience. There is more joy to be found in relating to your Savior.

A passage that I've prayed often is Psalm 51:12, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation." If serving God is drudgery for you, maybe begin with a prayer like that?

So the gospel has implications for how we relate to God, and it also has implications for how we relate to the church.

How We Relate to The Church

Here's what's crazy to me: Paul is bursting with affection for these Christians in Rome. He thanks God for their faith in verse 8. He mentions them without ceasing in his prayers, asking God to allow him to come to them. He longs to see them. And that's not a casual expression. He has a deep yearning to see them. He desires to strengthen them spiritually, to encourage them and to be encouraged by them. All this gush of warm affection for a people he has never met.

Paul is modeling for us how the gospel shapes the posture with which we relate to other christians. Here's the beauty of the gospel: If I am a follower of Jesus that means that in Christ God has paid for my sin and made me his friend instead of his enemy, adopted me into his family, made me a citizen of his kingdom, called me to serve as an ambassador of his kingdom to make disciple for his glory. And if you are a Christian, all those things are true about you too. Which means that we belong to each other at a relational the level because we're both friends of God in Christ. We belong to each other at a familial level as brothers and sisters in God's family through Jesus. We belong to each other at a

national/political level as fellow citizens in the Holy Nation, the kingdom that cannot be shaken. We belong to each other at a missional level, because we have both been given the same goal - to make disciples of all nations.

Friends if you belong to Jesus everything about you has been reoriented around him, which means the most important aspects of your identity have been consumed by Christ. And that means that as a disciple of Jesus, you have thicker ties to the Christian that lives on the other side of the world, who has a completely different culture from you, different preferences, different ideas of what is fun, different needs, a different family situation. They don't care about who is president, they don't care about your sports team, they can't relate to your work, they don't share your hobbies... but you have a more significant relational affinity with them than you do with your unbelieving neighbor who shares all the same cultural accoutrements as you because you both belong to Jesus and to his kingdom.

Now that doesn't mean loving one another in the church is easy! It just means loving one another is worth the hard work because Jesus died for us to love one another! Let's remember that when we are tempted to gossip about our brothers and sisters. Let's remember this when we are frustrated by one another. Let's remember when the current of our culture drags us toward division. Like, can anybody picture a scenario where unity in the gospel might be difficult as 2024 approaches? Might we need to be reminded that we are bound together in love by the blood of Jesus? Somebody once counseled me that my friends will come and go, but family is forever. Well in the gospel, we are family to the 10th power! Let's remember that the blood of Jesus is thicker than the water of the world. When the relationships of Christians are damaged by our political affiliations... when our work takes us away from commitment to the community of faith... when our busy schedules and extracurricular activities weaken our connection to God's people, we are choosing the quickly fading friendship of the world instead of the forever family of the kingdom of God.

We are trained by the waters we swim in to emphasize culturally-approved markers of identity. I'm talking about identities as mundane as your role as a parent or your success in your job, to identities as controversial as sexual expression, gender, or political affiliation. And I just want to set the expectation for you that our prayer is that if you hold onto those identities as primary, you will feel uncomfortable here, because as the people of God, through gospel all those identity markers are important-but-secondary to your identity in Christ. And in the diversity of God's church, we want to deconstruct the training of the world that would have us withhold our exuberant affections from one another. The gospel changes the way we relate to the church... And the gospel shapes the way we relate to the world as well.

How We Relate to The World

Let's look at verse 13 -15 again: ¹³ I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. ¹⁴ I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. ¹⁵ So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

So here's where Paul is coming from: he will say in a few different places in New Testament that he is the Apostle to the Gentiles - the people of the world who are not Jewish. He writes it later in the book of Romans, we see it in Acts 9, in Galatians 1. It's clear the Paul will preach the gospel to anybody, but has a particular, God-given burden for the gentiles. That's why he says he's "under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians." Paul is saying he has a mission from God to the sophisticated non-jewish greek-speakers inside the Roman Empire, and to the unsophisticated non-jewish, non-greek speakers outside the empire, to preach the gospel and "reap a harvest" among the gentiles.

We do not have a specific calling from God as apostles to the Gentiles, but friends, we do have a commission from Jesus to "go and make disciples of all nations." (Mt 28:19). Too many of us treat Jesus' command as an intimidating opportunity you can opt into in the Christian life. But the scriptures do not give us an opportunity, they give us a command from Jesus! And, like Paul, you are under obligation to the world. In the same way that if I handed you \$100 and asked you to pass it along to someone else, you would then be indebted to that person until you gave them the money, Christ has handed you the message of the gospel and you are indebted to the world. And like Paul, the good news of a God who came toward us while we were far off and called us out of darkness into light, and washed us, and justified us, and sanctified us - that gospel - has to shape our heart to look out at a lost world and recognize our former selves there and be moved with compassion and eager expectation that the Lord will continue to save just as he saved you!

The Gospel has implications for *how we relate* to God, the church, and the world.

IV. The Implications of False Gospels

Ok. So as we move toward closure here, I want to take just a moment to zoom out. The whole organizing idea this morning has been that Paul's warm greeting, the example of Paul's affections toward God, the church, and the world can only exist in the atmosphere of the gospel. Like, this way of relating can only be the fruit of the seeds of the gospel in us.

So before we're done, I want to think briefly about the kind of culture we see in ourselves and in our church. Because if there are aspects of what we are like, how we are experienced that don't harmonize with the kind of characteristics we see here from Paul, then an obvious conclusion would be that we are being formed not by The Gospel of Jesus Christ, but by a false gospel. Because the gospel has unignorable implications for how we relate, and false gospels also have implications for how we relate.

So let's think about some of the false gospels that we are prone to believe in our context so that we can diagnose our own hearts.

- **Gospel of Comfort & Control**

- **God** - If you do relate to God, only do so insofar as it provides comfort and demands little to no sacrifice.
- **Church** - Look for a community that promotes your comfort and helps you avoid inconvenience and meets your felt needs.

- **The World** - Invite others into this community only insofar as it doesn't require your own discomfort or vulnerability.
- **Gospel of Tribalism**
 - **God** - Your relationship with God must not lead you to transgress the party line of your tribe.
 - **Church** - Only care for those who support the same beliefs and causes as you
 - **World** - Whatever identity marker you take on (including "Christian") is functionally subordinate to that of your tribe. So make sure that in addition to following Jesus, they also begin aligning themselves with all the things people in your tribe align with.
- **Gospel of Expressive Individualism** *(Where the autonomy of the individual takes precedence over everything else. Where the individual is elevated to the highest authority and has become the arbiter of one's own truth, mediated through one's own means of personal expression. You be you. Be true to yourself. Live your truth.)*
 - **God** - If you do relate to God, he can only be your divine enabler and affirmer.
 - **Church** - Community exists to validate and celebrate your self-determined identity and felt needs.
 - **The World** - Invite others into spiritual community as an enhancement to your autonomy.

V. Conclusion

Friends, one of the ways to evaluate your system of beliefs is to be honest about what kind of person your beliefs are forming you into.

If you're a secular person, you need to think through the traits and characteristics that are coming out of your life as you relate to others. And you also need to ask whether or not those positive virtues that you value are actually coming from your secular beliefs, or if they are borrowed from a western culture that doesn't even realize how downstream from Christianity it actually is.

If you're a Christian, you almost need to do the opposite. you need to think through the traits and characteristics that are coming out of your life as you relate to others and ask yourself whether your virtues and vices are the fruit of the gospel in your life or the fruit of a false gospel.

In another of Paul's letters he writes to a church and tells them, "Imitate me as I imitate Christ" (1 Cor 11:1). And that's what we're getting an invitation to do as we look at the example of Paul's gospel-shaped affections here in Romans 1. Paul is imitating Christ here. And we are called to do the same. Jesus invites you into a transformation in the gospel that will right your relationship with God, surround you in loving community, and orient you with compassion and good will toward the world.

Let's pray.