

BIBLE STUDIES ON ROMANS 1-5

Eagerness to Preach the Gospel

John Stott

Paul and the Gospel (Romans 1:1-5)

Paul's letter to the Romans is a type of Christian manifesto—a manifesto of freedom through Christ. Once we grasp the Good News which it contains, we are eager to share it with the world, and no one is able to silence us.

The book of Romans contains fundamental teachings about:

- Human beings—sinful, guilty, and without excuse
- God—revealing his wrath against evil and his mercy in the gospel
- Jesus—who died for our sins and rose again to prove it
- Salvation—justification by faith alone, life in the Spirit, and the glory yet to be revealed
- History—God's unfolding purpose for Jews and Gentiles
- Believers—their responsibilities to God, to the state, to other believers, and to the world

The truths God reveals in this book are enough to stretch our minds, liberate our consciences, set our hearts on fire, and open our mouths in praise and testimony. May God speak to us through his Word and give us grace to listen and respond!

Paul and the Gospel (vv. 1-5)

At this time, Paul has not yet visited Rome. The people he addressed his letter to were not known to him personally, nor was he known to them. He introduces himself as a servant (or slave) of Jesus Christ, which is a title of great humility, and as one called to be an apostle, which is a title of great authority.

On the Damascus road, Saul of Tarsus was not only converted, but he also was commissioned as an apostle, indeed, as an apostle to the Gentiles. He did not appoint himself to this task. He was called to it—called to be an apostle. He was set apart for the gospel of God, which he describes to the Romans in six aspects, which are as true for us as they were for him.

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1. *Its origin is God (v. 1)*. The Christian Good News is the gospel of God. Paul and the other apostles did not invent it, it was revealed and entrusted to them by God. This is the first and most basic conviction which underlies evangelism. Specifically, what we have to share with others is not human speculation, not just one more religion to be added to the rest, not actually a religion at all but the gospel of God—God’s Good News for a lost world. Without this conviction there can be no evangelism, no world mission.
2. *Its attestation is Scripture (v. 2)*. The gospel of God is a message which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures. Although God revealed it to the apostles, it was no novelty, because he had already promised it through his prophets. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, . . . was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:4). The gospel has a double attestation: by the prophets in the Old Testament and the apostles in the New. Both bear witness to Jesus Christ, which is what Paul discusses next.
3. *Its substance is Jesus Christ (vv. 3–4)*. Paul states he was set apart for the gospel of God . . . regarding his Son. The gospel of God concerns the Son of God. The Good News is about Jesus, who, Paul says, “as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead” (vv. 3–4). We could spend hours meditating on the profound implications of these two verses. There are references, direct and indirect, to the birth, death, resurrection, and reign of Jesus Christ. It is a statement of both his humiliation and his exaltation. These verses make the claim that he is both fully human and fully divine; his human descent is traced to David and his divine Sonship demonstrated by the Resurrection. Further claim is made that this historical person is our Lord, who owns and rules our lives.
4. *Its scope is the nations (v. 5)*. Paul’s grace and apostleship (the undeserved privilege of being an apostle) is “to call people from among all the Gentiles.” Although Paul was a Jew—previously, a narrow-minded Pharisee—he had been gloriously liberated from his racial prejudice. He retained a patriotic love for his own people, and longed passionately for their salvation, but now he loved the Gentiles too and longed for their salvation as well. If we are to be committed to the Christian world-mission, we need to be delivered from all pride of race, nation, cast, tribe, and class, and to acknowledge that God’s gospel is for everybody without exception.
5. *Its purpose is the obedience that comes from faith (v. 5)*. The obedience of faith is Paul’s definition of the response which the gospel demands. Its importance is emphasized by its mention at both the beginning and the end of Romans. In Romans, Paul outlines more clearly than anywhere else that justification is by grace alone—through faith alone. Yet, the response to the gospel is not just “faith” but the “obedience that comes from faith.” Paul is not contradicting himself with that statement. The obedience the gospel requires is not the obedience of *law* but the obedience of *faith*. The proper response to the gospel is indeed faith alone, but a true and living faith in Jesus includes an element of submission and inevitably leads into a life of obedience.
6. *Its goal is the honor of Christ’s name (v. 5)*. As Christians, we desire to call the nations to the obedience of faith “for his name’s sake” (v. 5). God has

exalted Jesus and given him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow (Philippians 2:9–11). If God desires every knee to bow to Jesus, so should we. We should be jealous for the honor of Christ’s name, troubled when it remains unknown, hurt when it is ignored, indignant when it is blasphemed, and all the time anxious that it should be given the honor and glory due it. Henry Martyn once said, “I could not endure existence if Jesus were not glorified.” This is the highest of all missionary motives. It is not obedience to the Great Commission, nor love for sinners who are perishing, but zeal for the glory of Jesus Christ. Some evangelism is a thinly disguised form of imperialism—ambition for the honor of our own race, nation, church, or organization. Only one form of imperialism is Christian, and that is concerned for the empire, or kingdom, of Jesus Christ. “For his name’s sake” expresses the supreme missionary goal, before which all unworthy motives wither away and die.

There are six fundamental truths about the gospel. Its origin is God the Father, and its substance Jesus Christ, his Son. Its attestation is the Scripture and its scope all the nations. Our immediate purpose in preaching it is to bring people to the obedience of faith, but our ultimate goal is the glory of the name of Jesus.

Or, to sum up these six truths by six prepositions: the Good News is the gospel of God, about Christ, according to Scripture, for the nations, unto the obedience of faith, for the sake of Christ’s name.

Paul and the Romans (vv. 6–13)

Having described himself and his gospel, Paul now describes his readers—the Christians in Rome. According to Paul, they are “loved by God,” “called to belong to Jesus Christ,” and “called to be saints” (vv. 6–7).

Similarly, if we are Christians, we are also called and loved. Not because we decided for Christ, but because God first loved us and called us to himself. In consequence, we belong to him and Paul wishes for us a continuing enjoyment of “the grace and peace” which we have already begun to receive.

After this introduction, Paul tells the Romans of his feelings towards them:

1. *He thanks God for them (v. 8)* “because your faith is being reported all over the world.” Paul was not responsible for bringing the gospel to them, yet this did not hinder him from giving thanks that Rome was evangelized.
2. *He prays for them (vv. 9–10)*. He does not know them personally; yet he prays for them “constantly” (v. 9), and “at all times” (v. 10). He prays especially that “now at last by God’s will the way may be opened” for him to come to them (v. 10). His prayer was answered, although neither at the time nor in the manner that he had envisaged. Paul reached Rome about three years later, not as a free man but as a prisoner, having appealed to the emperor. God sometimes has unexpected ways of answering our prayers.
3. *He longs to see them (vv. 11–12)*, and tells them why. His motivation is partly to impart some spiritual gift, perhaps his teaching or exhortation, but also to receive something from them. He knows about the mutual encouragement of Christian fellowship. Although he’s an apostle, he is not too proud to acknowledge his need for encouragement. Modern missionaries who go to another country or culture in the same spirit of humility and

receptivity, anxious to receive as well as to give, to learn as well as to teach, to be encouraged as well as to encourage, are likely to be fulfilled and content.

4. *He had often planned to visit them (v. 13)*, not only to give or to receive, but to “reap some harvest” among them (RSV), as among other Gentiles, that is, to win some of them for Christ. It was appropriate that the apostle to the Gentiles should do some evangelistic reaping in the very heart of the Gentile world.

Paul and Evangelism (vv. 14–16)

Paul makes three strong personal statements about his anxiety to preach the gospel:

- I am under obligation (v. 14)
- I am eager (v. 15)
- I am not ashamed (v. 16)

These affirmations are striking because they are in direct contrast to the mood of many people in the contemporary church. Today people regard evangelism as an option and even a charity, but to Paul it was an obligation. The modern mood is one of reluctance, but Paul’s was one of eagerness and enthusiasm. Many today are ashamed of the gospel, but Paul declared that he was not.

Paul had as many reasons to feel as reluctant or embarrassed as we have. Rome was the capital of the world—the symbol of imperial pride and power. People spoke of Rome with awe. Everybody hoped to visit Rome once in their lifetime, in order to look, to stare, and to wonder. Paul wanted to visit Rome, not as a tourist but as an evangelist. He believed he had something to say, which Rome needed to hear. According to tradition, Paul was an unattractive man with bad eyesight and no great oratorical gifts. What could he hope to accomplish against the proud might of imperial Rome? Would he not be wiser to stay away? Or if he must visit Rome, would it not be prudent for him to keep silent? Paul did not think so. On the contrary, he was under obligation, eager and not ashamed to preach the gospel. What, then, were the origins of his evangelistic eagerness?

1. *The gospel is a debt to the world (v. 14)*. The expression, “I am under obligation” (NIV) is correctly translated in the King James Version as “I am debtor” or in debt.

There are two possible ways to get into debt. The first is to borrow money from someone, and the second is to be given money for someone by a third party. For example, if I borrowed \$1000 from you, I would be in your debt until I had repaid it. Equally, if a friend of yours had given me \$1000 to bring to you, I would be in your debt until I gave it to you. In the first case, I got myself into debt by borrowing, but in the second case, your friend put me in your debt by entrusting me with \$1000 for you. It is in this second sense that Paul was in debt to the Romans. He had not borrowed anything from them, which he needed to repay. But Jesus Christ had entrusted him with the gospel for them. Several times in his letters Paul uses the expression, “I have been put in trust with the gospel.” It was Jesus who had made him a debtor. And as the apostle to the Gentiles, he was specially in debt “to Greeks and non-Greeks, to the educated and the uneducated” (v. 14).

Similarly, we are in debt to the world. If the gospel has come to us, we

cannot keep it to ourselves. Nobody can claim a monopoly of the gospel. The Good News is for sharing. We have a universal obligation to make it known. Such was Paul’s first incentive. He was eager to preach the gospel because he was in debt. It is universally regarded as a dishonorable thing to leave a debt unpaid. We should be as eager to discharge our debt as Paul was to discharge his.

2. *The gospel is God’s power for salvation (v. 16)*. “I am not ashamed of the gospel,” Paul wrote, “because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (v. 16).

The apostle’s almost fierce negative is surprising. The suggestion that Paul could have felt ashamed of the gospel sounds ludicrous, but it is not. I once heard Professor James Stewart of Edinburgh preach on this text. In the course of his sermon he said, “There is no sense in declaring that you are not ashamed of something unless you have been tempted to feel ashamed.” And without doubt Paul had been tempted. He knew that the message of the Cross was a stumbling block to the proud. We sometimes experience the same temptation.

How did Paul overcome this temptation to feel ashamed? Only by remembering that the gospel, which some despise for its weakness, is God’s power to save sinners. We know this because we have experienced it ourselves. The gospel has saved us, brought us into a new and right relationship with God, so that he is our Father and we are his children. How then could we be ashamed of a gospel which has transformed us?

Paul and Righteousness (v. 17)

The logic of verses 16 and 17 is clear: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone . . . For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed.” The power of God is in the gospel because the righteousness of God is revealed in it. This expression is crucial for our understanding of Romans.

What did Paul mean by “the righteousness of God”? Is it a divine attribute? Our God is a righteous God. Is it a divine activity? God coming to rescue and vindicate us. Or is it a gift? God bestowing a righteous status on sinners.

All three positions are held by different commentators. The most satisfactory solution seems to be to combine them. In the letter to the Romans, “the righteousness of God” is God’s righteous way of putting people right with himself by bestowing on them a righteousness which is not their own but his. “The righteousness of God” is God’s way of justifying sinners, by which he both demonstrates his righteousness and gives righteousness to us. It is God’s righteous way of declaring the unrighteous righteous. It is God’s act of putting us right with himself, without thereby putting himself in the wrong.

He does it through Christ, the righteous one who died for the unrighteous, and he does it by faith, that is, when we put our trust in him or cry out to him for mercy. Indeed, what God does, he does “from faith to faith,” (v. 17, KJV), or “by faith from first to last” (NIV). For God affirmed it centuries before through Habakkuk, “But the righteous will live by his faith” (2:4).

God’s enlightenment of Martin Luther to grasp this truth sparked the Reformation. When he was preparing his lectures on the letter to the Romans in 1514, he wrote:

I greatly longed to understand Paul's epistle to the Romans, and nothing stood in the way but that one expression "the righteousness of God," because I took it to mean that righteousness whereby God is righteous and deals righteously in punishing the unrighteous. . . . Night and day I pondered until . . . I grasped the truth that the righteousness of God is that righteousness whereby, through grace and sheer mercy, he justifies us by faith. Thereupon, I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before "the righteousness of God" had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gateway to heaven.

Paul's eagerness to preach the gospel arose from his recognition that the gospel was (a) an unpaid debt, and (b) the saving power of God. The first gave him a sense of obligation because he had been put in trust with the gospel, and the second, a sense of conviction because the gospel had saved him and it could save others.

Today, the gospel is still both a debt to discharge and a power to experience. Only when we have grasped these truths shall we be able to say with Paul "I am not ashamed of the gospel. I am under obligation. I am eager to share the gospel with the world."

BIBLE STUDIES ON ROMANS 1-5

The World's Guilt

John Stott

Nothing keeps people away from Christ more than their inability to see their need of him, or their unwillingness to admit it. As Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17). This does not mean that some people are righteous and do not need salvation, but that some people *think* they are. In that condition of self-righteousness, they will never come to Christ. Just as we go to the doctor only when we admit that we are ill and cannot heal ourselves, we go to Christ only when we admit that we are guilty sinners and cannot save ourselves.

This is the principle which lies behind the long passage before us. Paul's purpose is to "lay the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin" (3:9) and that "there is no difference" between us (3:22). Paul does more than bring an accusation; he marshals the evidence against us, proves our guilt, and secures a conviction. All men and women, without exception, from both the Jewish and the Gentile worlds are sinful, guilty, and without excuse before God. Therefore, they are under his wrath. Already they stand condemned. It is a theme of great solemnity and an indispensable foundation for world evangelization.

Paul demonstrates the universality of sin and guilt by dividing the human race into several sections, and then arraigns them one by one. In each case his procedure is identical. He reminds each group of their knowledge of God and of goodness. He then confronts them with the uncomfortable fact that they have not lived up to their knowledge. Instead, they have suppressed it, and even contradicted it, by continuing to live in unrighteousness. And, therefore, they are guilty, inexcusably guilty, before God. No one can plead innocence, because no one can plead ignorance. This is the thrust of Paul's argument throughout.

He addresses four sections of people. He describes the depraved Gentile world in its idolatry, immorality, and anti-social behavior. He addresses critical moralists (both Gentiles and Jews), who profess high ethical standards and apply them to everybody except themselves. He turns to self-righteous Jews who boast of their knowledge of God's Law, but do not obey it. And then, he encompasses the whole human race and concludes that we are all guilty before God.

To each group his message is substantially the same:

You know the righteous character and requirements of God. Yet you have persisted in your unrighteousness, so you are guilty. You have no excuse. You have no hope either—apart from the grace of God who justifies those who believe in Jesus.