



God's Powerful Gospel

Lesson 1 | Romans 1:1-17

When people hear the word “gospel” they almost always think of Christianity. This makes sense; the gospel is central to the teaching and story of the Bible. But what exactly *is* the gospel? The word gets used so often and is so frequently mixed with other words – gospel music, gospel churches, gospel truth, and gospel-centered – we run the risk of becoming confused over what exactly the gospel is.

How would you describe the gospel if you had to sum it up in one sentence?

The word “gospel” comes from the Greek *euangelion*. This word is composed of two parts: *eu*, which means “good,” and *angelion* means “report” or “news.” The gospel is the good news. Secular Greeks and Romans would use this word to describe joyous announcements, such as the news that a new emperor had been crowned or a victory had been won in war. In the Bible, the word gospel has a narrower focus. It’s not just any good news, it’s the good news of what God has done for sinful humanity through Jesus Christ. And no book of the Bible does more to explain that good news than the book of Romans.

Many have seen the book of Romans as uniquely important in the Bible. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and all of it is profitable (1 Timothy 3:16), but throughout the history of the church God has used Romans in a special way. To give one example among many, Martin Luther said of Romans “*This Epistle is really the chief part of the New Testament and the very purest Gospel, and it is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul.*” In Romans we find, perhaps more clearly than anywhere else in the New Testament, an explanation and application of the gospel. The entire New Testament teaches and builds on the gospel, but in Romans we have the most systematic, careful presentation of the gospel in our Bibles.

Why do you think it’s so important to have a clear, thorough understanding of what the gospel is?

The Historical Background of Romans

When Paul sat down to begin dictating Romans, he was writing a letter that was a long time coming. Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles and was finally writing to Rome, the most important Gentile city of his time (and perhaps all time). The church in Rome likely started when people saved in other places eventually moved to the capital. Over time enough Christians were living in the city that a church formed.¹ Paul was hoping to visit Rome soon, and so it was time to officially introduce himself to this church.

¹ Romans 16 is filled with the names of people Paul knows in Rome, even though he has never himself been to the city. This suggests that people who had been involved in other ministries had moved to Rome at some point and could possibly explain where the church initially came from.

Paul's Mission

Paul had traveled and planted churches throughout Asia Minor and Greece. One major problem, however, was the continuing tension between Jews and Gentiles. After years of hatred, the idea that these groups were now one in Christ was a little hard to grasp. Part of Paul's solution was to take up a collection for the poor believers in Jerusalem. By this he hoped to show the unity these two groups shared and to encourage the Gentiles to be a blessing to those who originally brought the gospel message. This was a dangerous mission. A lot of Jews in Jerusalem were quite upset with Paul and for him to go to the city might not end well (spoiler alert: it didn't). Yet Paul was so convinced this offering needed to be made that he was willing to risk physical harm for the sake of the unity of the gospel. It was while Paul was headed to Jerusalem that he wrote Romans.²

Why do you think the unity of the church mattered so much to Paul? How can we learn from his example?

Paul's Future Plans

So what would happen when he finished delivering this gift, assuming he got out alive? Paul outlines his thinking on this issue at the end of Romans.

Read Romans 15:20-32

Where does Paul plan to go next?

Why is he hoping to go there?

What part does he hope the Roman believers play in his plans?

Paul, Apostle of the Gospel (1:1-7)

Ancient letters normally began by identifying the author, naming the recipient, and including a few kind words. Paul's letters have this format, but Paul liked to expand on this simple structure. Carefully studying the introductions in Paul's letters often clues us in to what Paul is going to be talking about in his letters. Not surprisingly, in the opening to Romans Paul begins by talking about the gospel. Paul describes himself as a servant of Jesus and an apostle set apart to the gospel of God. Throughout this opening he describes for us that very gospel and the Jesus whom he has come to serve.

Jesus was promised in Scripture (1:2-3)

Paul was a Jew by birth and a Pharisee by training. As a Jewish Pharisee, he firmly held to the writings of the Old Testament as Scripture. At first Paul didn't understand how it was that Jesus could be the Messiah. He didn't see how a crucified Messiah fit with the Old Testament picture of a conquering king. But once Jesus revealed Himself to Paul, Paul went back and realized that Jesus was exactly what the Old Testament was about. Once Paul came to the Bible with faith in Jesus instead of doubt, he not only saw Jesus – he saw Jesus as the main character! All throughout Romans Paul is pointing his readers back to Scripture, trying to help them see what he had originally missed: all of Scripture was preparing the way for Christ and what He is now up to!

Why does it matter what perspective we come to Scripture with?

² Although we can't know for sure, it seems likely that Romans was written from Corinth during Paul's 3 month stay in Greece recorded in Acts 20:2-3).

How might you help someone who says they just don't see how the Bible could be true?

As Paul begins describing this good news promised long ago, he addresses Jesus as the son of David. By doing so he is tapping into a story, a story of a king promised an enduring legacy (2 Samuel 7). But it's also a story of great disappointment because that promise seemed to be forgotten when the nation split; when the southern kingdom was carried away; and when it was brought back under the thumb of Persia, then Greece, and then Rome. But the hopeful still waited for the son of David to come, and now Paul realized that the Old Testament and the history of the world had been pointing to Jesus as that figure.

How can the hope of Paul and the Jews be an encouragement to us who wait for the second coming of Christ?

Jesus was validated by the resurrection (1:4)

Jesus claimed to be the Son of God. That's a startling claim, but a claim that anyone *could* make. The real question is not what you claim, but what you can prove. Through His resurrection from the dead, Jesus powerfully proved that He is who He said He is and thereby earned the right to be known as the Son of God. Sadly, during the nineteenth and twentieth century, some theologians argued you could keep some of the wonderful teachings of Jesus, but it didn't matter if he was actually raised from the dead. The New Testament, on the other hand, repeatedly points to the resurrection of the dead as the clinching proof that Jesus truly was who He said He was (1 Corinthians 15; Ephesians 1:19-20; Galatians 1:1; 1 Peter 1:3, 21; Revelation 1:18).

Why does it matter that Jesus was who He says He was? What would change if Jesus was never raised from the dead?

Jesus empowers faith-filled obedience (1:5-6)

We rightly emphasize that salvation is by faith apart from works, meaning that we don't have to do good things in order to be saved (Ephesians 2:8-9). But faith that is truly faith will lead to obedience. The purpose of Jesus's coming to deal with sin was not so that we could go on sinning! Rather, He gave His grace and He gave apostles for the purpose of bringing about a greater holiness in our lives. Christ goal was the obedience of faith, not just of the Jews, but of all nations! This small, unusual phrase "the obedience of faith" comes again at the end of Romans (16:26). Romans has a lot to say about faith and salvation, but it flows directly from what God has done for us (Romans 1-11) to how we should now obey Him (Romans 12-15).

What are the dangers of overemphasizing faith to the point where we ignore obedience?

What are the dangers of overemphasizing obedience in our salvation?

How can we avoid either extreme?

Rome, Paul's Intended Destination (1:8-15)

Paul had never been to Rome and apparently had never written to the whole church. Yet Paul still prayed for and loved this church and wanted them to know his frequent desire to visit them.

Why do you think Paul would care so much for the Roman church even though he never visited it?

Paul strongly desired to see the Romans so that he could be a spiritual blessing to them. He desired 1) to share a spiritual gift³ that would strengthen them 2) to be mutually encouraged by their faith and 3) that he might have spiritual fruit from ministering with them. As the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul had wanted to go to Rome but had previously been hindered. Paul wanted to go to Rome so that he could preach the gospel there as well.

Why would Paul want to preach the gospel to people who had already been saved?

What benefit is there in people who already have faith in Christ hearing the good news again?

The Gospel, God's Power to Save (1:16-17)

After this lengthy introduction, Paul starts the letter itself with two powerfully packed sentences which give the theme for the rest of Romans. These verses give the message of the letter and introduce the key themes that Paul will explain as he goes.

What major themes do you see in these opening verses that you think will be important for Paul as he continues writing?

The Theme of Salvation

The good news through Jesus is that God saves, and God can save powerfully. The power of God is seen in creation: from rolling hills to mighty thunderstorms to a universe so large we can't begin to comprehend it. God's power is seen in His providence: the way that He maintains the universe after the initial creation. But God's power is especially seen in salvation: His bringing sinful men into a right relationship to Him.

In what ways has God demonstrated His power through salvation?

And it's a good thing God can save powerfully, because we desperately need salvation. As one theologian put it: "If God had perceived that our greatest need was economic, He would have sent an economist. If he had perceived that our greatest need was entertainment, he would have sent us a comedian or an artist. If God had perceived that our greatest need was political stability, he would have sent us a politician. If he had perceived that our greatest need was health, he would have sent us a doctor. But he perceived that our greatest need involved our sin, our alienation from him, our profound rebellion, our death, and he sent us a Savior."⁴

Why is salvation our greatest need?

If salvation is really our greatest need, why do so many people ignore their need of it?

The Theme of Unity

This is a gospel that comes both to the Jew and the Greek. This is essentially Paul's way of saying, "Everyone gets the gospel!" While we might take this for granted, it was a radical idea at the time of Paul. In Ephesians Paul describes the salvation of the Gentiles as a mystery, something that was hidden in the Old Testament, but which has now been revealed (Ephesians 3:6). No longer do people need to become Jewish and follow the Mosaic law to be children of God. All nations and all people stand equal at the foot of the cross.

³ The spiritual gift here is probably different from the "gifts of the Spirit" that Paul discussed in 1 Corinthians 12-14. Those were gifts given by the Holy Spirit, not by Paul. This spiritual gift is likely a reference to his ministry to the Romans in sharing the gospel or providing whatever help and encouragement they needed.

⁴ D. A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers*, page 109.

How can the unity of the Jews and the Gentiles help with ethnic and racial divisions today?

The Theme of God's Righteousness

The concept of righteousness is a big deal in Romans. In fact, the Greek root *dike* shows up as an adjective, a noun, and a verb over 75 times in Romans. As an adjective, it can be translated as "just" or "righteous." As a noun, it can be translated as "justice" or "righteousness." As a verb, it is translated as "justify." This word shows up in Romans more than any other book, and almost twice as much as the next book (Luke). The picture here is of a court room, where justice must prevail. In Romans we meet a just judge (God) who is seeking to declare as just (save) a sinful person deserving judgment (you, me, and everyone else, both Jew and Gentile).

How is it that a righteous/just God could declare a sinful person to be just?

Paul says that in the gospel "the righteousness of God is revealed." For centuries the church has debated whether this means 1) through the gospel God reveals that He is righteous (an attribute of God) or 2) through the gospel God reveals how people can be declared righteous (an action of God). Since the phrase is so general, it's possible that both are in mind. God demonstrates His righteousness, but He does so by declaring sinful men to be righteous on the basis of Jesus Christ. In many ways, this is the whole point of Romans! How is it that a just God could justly declare sinners to be righteous? That God was able to do this excited Paul and caused him to be unashamed and to marvel at the power and wisdom of God.

Why does the gospel sometimes fail to inspire the same wonder and worship in us?

The Theme of Faith

Finally, Paul says that the God reveals His righteousness "from faith to faith." Many different meanings for this simple phrase have been suggested, but it probably means something like "from beginning to end, righteousness comes by faith." Paul then cites Habakkuk 2:4 to show that our lives need to be characterized by faith. God's righteousness is not something we earn or deserve. It's a gift that comes to us through faith.

Why do salvation and righteousness depend on faith?

What does it look like to live by faith?

Romans is foundational – it works through the basics of what we believe. Romans is deep – Paul works out in great detail those foundations of our faith. Romans is practical – what we believe is connected to what we think and how we live. Let me encourage you to consider making this study more than a once a week occurrence. Read through Romans throughout the week. Go back over the previous week's lesson and ask God to help you understand more fully and clearly what he has done for you. Pray and ask God that over the next few weeks you will better understand this precious book which so clearly explains the gospel. And, as Luther said, may this book become "the daily bread of [our] soul."

Preview: In our next three lessons we will see our need for the gospel:

- God's wrath against the sinful pagans (1:18-32)
- God's wrath against the sinful religious (2:1-29)
- God's wrath against all (3:1-20)

The second half shows why it is that God is so angry with those who do not know Him. If you study the passage on your own ask yourself questions like: ***Why is God angry at the heathen [pagans]? How does the path of descent away from God begin? How might some of Paul's descriptions of the unsaved ring true even in my life?***