WEEK ELEVEN: Romans 1:1-17

Romans Good News for All of Us: A Brief Introduction

Paul's epistle to the Romans is the most influential of his letters and has had an enormous impact on Christian theology and doctrine. Part of the reason is that it is the most systematic of Paul's letters; outlining as clearly as in any of his writings his understanding of the good news about Jesus. One consequence has been that Romans has been treated like a systematic theology rather than as an occasional document; one written to address a specific pastoral occasion. Romans, like all of Paul's letters, has a concrete situation that he is wanting to address. Scholars agree that there is evidence of division in the Roman church. The upshot of this is that the doctrine which dominates the first two-thirds of the letter is less an overview of Paul's thought and more of a foundation for the exhortations in the final chapters. In order to better understand the doctrine, we will benefit from better understanding the pastoral issues that Paul is hoping to address. To that end, we will be working through Romans backwards; seeking clarity about the concerns Paul has and then exploring the doctrinal foundations.

I have included an outline of the series and a brief bibliography at the end of this document.

Sermon Outline:

A Brief Overview of This Week's Sermon

Key Text(s): Romans 1:1-17

After carefully considering the closing chapters of Romans and gaining a clearer vision of the pastoral concern Paul is seeking to address, we now turn to the beginning of the letter! It is, however, of central importance that we keep the pastoral aims in mind in order to not become "distracted" by the doctrine. Or, rather, distracted by an individual perspective. Paul has the fractious community of the Roman church solidly in mind as he opens his epistle.

In vv. 1-7, for example, Paul speaks deliberately to the Gentile believers (v. 6) and describes his ministry as one of bringing them (Gentiles) to the obedience that comes from faith (see 15:14-16; 16:26). The very fact that this is one of the first and last things he says points to its importance!

At the same time, Paul grounds their faith (the Gentile believers) in the story of Israel – the prophets, the Scriptures, and David all get mentioned. This is a little curious because Paul will focus on Abraham and the Law given through Moses in the rest of the letter. Furthermore, he alludes to Hosea 2:23 in which the Lord promises that he will reverse the situation of his people and restore them. He will quote this passage in chapter 9:25 (and it is used by Peter to describe the Gentiles' inclusion in the church – 1 Peter 2:9-10).

Perhaps most significantly, Paul places their shared faith in the context of social obligations. In antiquity, everyone belonged to someone else. In some cases, this was quite literal – slaves for instance. In many others, it was through the conventions of patronage. Social life was highly connected and the oil that kept the gears running smoothly was grace. Where we read "grace" as an unmerited gift, the ancients would have heard so much more. The three graces – that of giving, that of receiving, and that of repaying – describe the interplay between people. Paul identifies himself

and his (Gentile) readers as belonging to Jesus ("Paul, a doulos [slave] of Christ Jesus." v. 1 and verse 6) and twice refers to the grace they have received – a grace that, in context, brought with it mutual obligations.

This theme continues in the thanksgiving section (vv. 8-15). Paul informs the Romans that their "faith" (a key term in Romans) is being reported all over the world. We assume that their disunity may also have been reported (as would their response to Paul's letter). Their unity is not just important for them, but has implications for the church as a whole!

Paul's desire to visit them (finally) is in order "to impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong" (v. 11). This very subtly points ahead to the primary division that Paul will address in chapter 14 – the weak and the strong! But, beyond that, Paul clarifies what he means when he speaks of mutual encouragement in their "faith". This mutual strengthening is a central theme of what Paul hopes God will do in the Roman church.

He follows up this goal with two others: to have a harvest among them as he has had among Gentiles elsewhere and to preach the gospel in Rome. In both instances this might be taken evangelistically, but the context demands that we see this as ongoing discipleship. The Roman Christians need to hear the gospel again and apply it more steadily in their community. In verse 14 Paul describes two groups of people: Greeks and non-Greeks and the wise and foolish. He uses similar language in 1 Corinthians (another divided church!).

In vv. 16-17 we come to Paul's thesis statement. He begins with a negative statement that has a positive meaning. He is not ashamed of the gospel. There is, as far as Paul is concerned, nothing to be ashamed of in the gospel. And what is the gospel that Paul is not ashamed of? To be honest, it's a curious description, not least of all because it doesn't explicitly mention Jesus! In line with Paul's pastoral concern he focuses on unity. The gospel, he says, is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes (which, of course, has to do with Jesus…), first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. Paul is not ashamed of a gospel that unites Jews and Gentiles together as those who have been saved. Remember that the community is one where there was social "shame" of each other – judgment, contempt, etc.

He continues, "For in the gospel [the power of God to save Jews and Gentiles] the righteousness of God is revealed." The unification of Jews and Gentiles into one new family is a revelation of God's righteousness (or justice)! Their unity tells us something about who God is and what God does.

And this righteousness is by faith (a term he uses six times in these opening verses, plus one use of the verb) from first to last or, more literally from faith to faith. The meaning of this ambiguous phrase is clarified by reference to Habakkuk 2:4. The book of Habakkuk is a prophetic dialogue between the prophet and the Lord about his justice and the use of Gentiles in his plan. In a description of their arrogance we find the section Paul quotes, "the righteous will live by faith" or "the righteous one will live faithfully". Some scholars believe that this can be read as a reference to the Messiah (thus hinting at Jesus). If this is the case the faith from first to last may refer to Jesus' faithfulness to ours. This, of course, fits nicely with Paul's pastoral concern for the church!

We will have to wait for Paul to unpack his thesis the following chapters to test these assumptions so to speak. However, there is a clear implication that we must carry with us as we do. As far as Paul is concerned, we do not only belong to Jesus. To belong to Jesus means that we belong to one another.

Knowing, as we do, the end of the letter, we have some ideas about what belonging to each other means. It means greeting one another, showing hospitality, leaving no debt unpaid except that of love, mutual encouragement in faith, and a gracious attitude towards each other (gracious in the Greco-Roman ideal of giving, receiving and repaying). This kind of orthopraxy – right living – comes from orthodoxy – right thinking. And while it is important to get our thinking right, our living is equally critical!

Questions to Ask

1. Paul opens Romans with the pastoral situation of a divided church in mind. How does knowing that context change the way we read Romans 1:1–17?
2. In what ways does Paul ground Gentile believers' faith in the story of Israel, and why might that matter for a mixed Jew-Gentile church?
3. The sermon highlights grace as involving giving, receiving, and responding. How might this richer understanding of grace shape the way we relate to one another in Christian community?

4. Paul says he wants the Roman believers to be "mutually encouraged" by one another's faith. What might mutual encouragement look like in our Life Group or church community?
5. Romans 1:16–17 presents the gospel as God's power to save "everyone who believes," first Jew and then Gentile. How does the gospel challenge judgment, contempt, or shame between believers?
6. The overview concludes that belonging to Jesus means belonging to one another. What is one practical way we could live this out more faithfully this week?

A Prayer to Pray

Continue to pray for the unity of our community of faith. In particular, pray that we might demonstrate our unity more, and more significantly.

A Practice to Try

Choose one of the first steps you identified in Q. 6 above and implement it this week.

Readings to Read This Week

The following passages reflect on our mutual relationships as followers of Jesus. The first couple are from Romans – a reminder of Paul's concern!

1. Romans 12:3-8, 9-16
2. Romans 14:19-15:7
3. Ephesians 4:25-5:2
4. Colossians 3:12-17
5. 2 Peter 1:3-11

A Mission Commitment to Reflect on

One of our values is to be Others-Focused. The unity of the body of Christ is a mission-critical matter. Putting others first, serving them, and seeking to demonstrate our love for one another are all things we can do to strengthen our unity.

A GBC Initiative to Promote/Celebrate

Each week we will provide you with a key aspect of our community news that we would encourage you to remind your Life Group about.

1. As we heard at the mid-year meeting, we are currently behind in our Ministry Budget. For those who may be in line for a tax return, encourage them to consider helping us catch up.

Good News For All of Us – Sermon Series outline

Please note that this is subject to change, but as it stands right now…

Term 1 (Romans 12-16)		Term 2 (Romans 9-11)		Term 3 (Romans 1-4)		Term 4 (Romans 5-8)	
15/2	Romans 16	7/6	9:1-29	16/8	1:1-17	25/10	TBD
22/2	15:14-33	14/6	9:30-10:21	23/8	1:18-32	1/11	TBD
1/3	14:1-15:13	21/6	11:1-24	30/8	2:1-16	8/11	TBD
8/3	12:14-13:7	28/6	11:25-36	6/9	2:17-3:8	15/11	TBD
15/3	12:1-13			13/9	3:9-31	22/11	TBD

22/3	13:8-14			20/9	4:1-25	29/11	TBD
29/3	Easter						
5/4	Easter						

A Brief Bibliography

The following commentaries have been utilised in the preparation and delivery of this series.

Bird, Michael, 2016, *Romans*, Story of God Bible Commentary, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Gorman, Michael J., 2022, *Romans: A theological and pastoral commentary*, Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan.

McKnight, Scot, 2019, *Reading Romans Backwards: A Gospel of Peace in the Midst of Empire*, Baylor University Press, Waco, Texas.

Witherington, Ben III, 2004, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan.