WEEK FOURTEEN: Romans 2:17-3:8

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 2:17-3:8

Paul continues to level the playing field between the Jewish believers and Gentile believers in Rome and he continues to use the rhetorical technique of impersonation to do so.

Beginning in v. 17 Paul undermines Jewish entitlement from their possession of the law. There are three things to notice about this first section (vv. 17-24). First, while Paul is speaking to an individual, this is a function of impersonation rather than an address to a particular individual in the church. Remember, impersonation was an indirect communication style; inviting the congregation to listen in and identify unhelpful attitudes, beliefs, or actions. Second, while it appears that Paul is primarily concerned with hypocrisy, the repetition of "the law" points to something deeper. Third, the language of being a guide, a light, an instructor, and teacher point to the deeper issue. These are not descriptions of an individual but form the PD for the people of Israel. This is what Israel was meant to do.

In Exodus 19:4-6, the Lord outline the function he desires for his people. They were to be his treasured possession (symbols of his authority and kingdom in the world; think crown jewels), a kingdom of priests (those who mediated between the people and God; teaching, instructing, guiding, restoring, etc.), and a holy nation (set apart for purpose; part of this separation was ethical and moral). This is the purpose of God's people and it is what they (Israel) failed to do.

Paul's allusion to Ezekiel 36:20, 22 is instructive. In that passage, the profaning of God's name is linked to the failure of the people to be faithful to God's purpose. God's judgment on them in the exile was seen as calling God's faithfulness to his promises and purposes into question. God says that his restoration of them is not for their sake but for his sake! This background is critical.

As an aside, the value of the indirect communication impersonation is seen in the build-up. Paul accuses his imaginary dialogue partner of stealing – something his congregation must surely be able to deny in their own lives; thus distancing themselves from this Jew who feels entitled because of the law – committing adultery, and robbing temples – each of these would be denied by the listeners. The last one – a much more general "breaking of the law" catches the listeners out! They may not have stolen, committed adultery, or robbed temples, but they have not perfectly obeyed the law. Maybe they were a bit like Paul's dialogue partner!

Paul moves on to circumcision – another identity marker for Jews that contributed to their entitlement (those who were uncircumcised were looked down upon – see Judges 14:3; 15:18; 1 Samuel 14:6; 17:26; Isaiah 52:1). Paul undermines this sense of entitlement by pointing out that it is keeping the law that matters. "A person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart." (2:29).

Beginning in 3:1-8, however, Paul has to get himself out of the corner he's painted himself into. And the corner? Is there really no difference at all between Jews and Gentiles?! And if not, what are we to say about God's promises to Israel? Will he be unfaithful?

Paul really leans into the impersonation technique and scholars identify a bit of Q&A between the imaginary dialogue partner and Paul. The questions are, I believe, asked honestly, rather than trying to pick a fight with Paul. It might look a bit like this:

Jewish interlocutor: What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision?

Paul: Much in every way! First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God.

Jewish interlocutor: What is some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness [to his promises to Israel]?

Paul: Not at all! Let God be true, and every human being a liar. As it is written, "So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge." [In other words, God is always faithful and will be proven so all the more in light of our unfaithfulness.]

Jewish interlocutor: But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bring his wrath upon us? (I am using a human argument.) [In other words, if our unfaithfulness makes God look all the more righteous – for his glory you might say (see Ezekiel 36:22 again) – why are we judged?]

Paul: Certainly not! If that were so [If God is unjust towards us…], how could God judge the world? Someone might argue, "If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner? Why not say – as some slanderously claim that we say – "Let us do evil that good may result"? [This is, of course, a ridiculous thing!] Their condemnation is just!

The central question of God's faithfulness to his people is found in Ezekiel 36. God's faithfulness to his people is secondary to his faithfulness to his purposes – the purposes that he invited Israel to participate in at Mount Sinai (see Exodus 19:4-6 again)!

This primary purpose – to restore and renew all things – is the sphere of God's faithfulness. His faithfulness to his people (as Paul will unpack in chapters 9-11) sits within that larger aim. This forms a very different basis for unity!

If our unity is based on God's faithfulness to Israel then of course the law, circumcision, dietary regulations, etc., becomes critical. If, however, our unity is based on God's plans to restore and renew all things in Christ Jesus – first to the Jew, then to the Gentile – then those things are placed in their proper place. A horizontal unity – based on human comparisons has fault lines built into it! A vertical unity – based on response to God's invitation leaves that all aside.

Too often we allow comparison with others to define our own level of inclusion, rather than God's invitation. There's more to say about this…

Questions to Ask

1. Paul challenges entitlement based on possessing the law and circumcision. What are some things Christians today might be tempted to treat as signs of superiority or security before God?
2. Israel was called to be a treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. How does that calling help us understand the purpose of God's people today?

3. Paul points beyond outward identity markers to "circumcision of the heart." What might it look like for our faith to be shaped more deeply by inward transformation than outward labels or practices?
4. The sermon connects God's faithfulness to his larger purpose to restore and renew all things. How does this widen or challenge the way we think about God's faithfulness to us?
5. The overview contrasts horizontal unity based on comparison with vertical unity based on God's invitation. Where do you see comparison creating fault lines in Christian community?
6. If our inclusion rests on God's invitation rather than our comparison with others, what is one practical way our group can reflect that kind of unity 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 are alluded to in Paul's argument in this section.

1. Isaiah 42:1-9 (esp. 5-6)
2. Isaiah 52:1-10
3. Ezekiel 36:16-32
4. Psalm 51
5. Deuteronomy 30:1-10

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. 1. This September we will be focusing on the work of Hopefield and, as part of that focus, seeking to raise funds to support a DV counsellor on the Hopefield team. Our target is $40,000. This is a smaller financial target than May Mission Month, but is equally important. Please encourage your group to prayerfully consider if this is work that they might want to support. All donations to Hopefield are tax-deductible.

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.