

GOOD NEWS FOR ALL OF US

WEEK THIRTEEN: Romans 2:1-16

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 2:1-16

In the previous section (1:18-32) Paul laid out the first great "leveller" in the Roman community of faith: they had all – whether Jewish or Gentile – been under the power of sin. Their unity was based, in part, on their common salvation from a common enemy.

In this section, the apostle continues to level the playing field between the Jewish and Gentile believers. To do so, he utilises a rhetorical technique known as impersonation in which a speaker (and the letters were written in order to be read aloud – since so few people could read – and would have been "performed" with the rhetorical techniques on full display) engaged with an imaginary dialogue partner. The sign that Paul is doing this is the use of the first person singular "you" beginning in 2:1. He is not attacking a specific person in the community, but is creating a character with whom he can dialogue (the official term is an "interlocutor"). The purpose of doing this was to provide an indirect way to uncover attitudes and beliefs in the listeners who "overheard" the dialogue between Paul and the interlocutor.

The question for us, then, is who is the "you" that Paul is dialoguing with? It seems clear that he has a Jewish Christian in mind. In 2:17-20 this becomes explicit. At first glance, the issue that Paul appears to be addressing is a matter of hypocrisy. We see this in 2:1 where the interlocutor is accused of doing the same things he judges in others (with an eye to 1:18-32). However, there appears to be something else going on. There are two

First, note that Paul's primary concern in 2:1-3 is judgment; God's judgment and human judgment.

Second, 2:4 reflects wider Jewish thinking about God's judgment on the Gentiles. This requires a small digression...

The Apocrypha is a series of texts written in the period between the Old and New Testaments. Its usefulness lies in its account of Jewish history in the intertestamental period and the way it reveals Jewish attitudes and beliefs. In the Wisdom of Solomon 12:8-10a, the author lists some of the wickedness of the Canaanites and then says this,

“But even these [the wicked] you spared, since they were but mortals, and sent wasps as forerunners of your army to destroy them little by little, though you were not unable to give the ungodly into the hands of the righteous in battle or to destroy them at one blow by dread wild animals or your stern word. But judging them little by little you gave them an opportunity to repent.”

He goes on to discuss God’s justice in judgment (as Paul will in the next section!) before turning to the judgment of Israel. This is the important part for us. Wisdom 12:20-22 says,

“For if you punished with such great care and indulgence the enemies of your children and those deserving of death, granting them time and opportunity to give up their wickedness, with what strictness you have judged. Your children, to those ancestors you gave oaths and covenants full of good promises! So while chastening us you scourge our enemies ten thousand times more, so that when we judge we may meditate upon your goodness, and when we are judged we may expect mercy.”

Here endeth the digression...

Did you hear it? Jews believed that they would face a lighter judgment from God than the Gentiles. Paul is not addressing a hypocritical Jew, but an entitled one. Someone who believes that they deserve the unearned privileges they have received (and for a list of the Jewish privileges, see 9:4-5).

Once we see this the rest of the section makes more sense. 2:5-11 lays out the central premise – God shows no favouritism in judgment. And what is the basis of the judgment? Their deeds.

Again, it is important to keep the context in mind. Paul is not answering the question, “How are we saved?”. If he were, he would certainly talk about faith in Jesus. The question (paraphrasing Michael Bird) is, “How can you say that Jews and Gentiles are in the same boat?” And Paul is certainly not against works. He opens and closes Romans with reference to the obedience that comes faith as the result he wishes for the Gentiles (1:5; 16:26).

In fact, Paul subtly flips the table on the Jewish believers in 2:12 where he reminds them that they will be judged on the basis of the law – the revealed will of God – while the Gentiles would be judged apart from the law. While the Gentiles might plead ignorance, the Jews cannot.

2:14-15 prepares us for what Paul will go on to say in the next section by drawing attention to the very fact that some Gentiles (whom we must identify as Christians because they have the law of God written on their hearts – in reference to the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34) – the very Gentiles the Jewish believers are judging!

This is the conversation Paul is having with the interlocutor – the conversation that the Roman Christians are listening to. It raises questions about privilege, entitlement, and double standards. But ultimately it raises critical questions about our unity.

It seems noteworthy that Paul’s most influential letter wasn’t addressing heresy, but unity. It was such an important issue that he pulled out all the theological stops to confront it. It begs the question, “Are we doing absolutely everything we can to deepen, develop, and demonstrate our unity as a community of faith?” If we’re wondering what that means, we can return to the end of the epistle and read Paul’s conclusions for ourselves!

We have, all of us, been saved from a common enemy by faith in a common Saviour to a common call. This is the basis of our unity; not our agreement on everything!

Questions to Ask

1. Paul uses an imaginary dialogue partner to help listeners recognise attitudes in themselves. Why do you think indirect challenge can sometimes be more effective than direct confrontation?
2. In Romans 2:1-16, Paul confronts judgmentalism and entitlement. Where might we be tempted to assume we stand in a better position before God than others?
3. The sermon suggests that privilege can become entitlement when it is misunderstood. What spiritual privileges have we received, and how can we hold them with humility rather than superiority?

4. Paul insists that God shows no favouritism in judgment. How does this challenge the way we view people who are different from us, especially within the church?
5. The overview says Romans is deeply concerned with unity, not merely doctrine. What does this teach us about the importance of unity in our life together as followers of Jesus?
6. The sermon concludes that we have been saved from a common enemy by faith in a common Saviour to a common call. What is one practical first step our group could take this week to deepen, develop, or demonstrate our unity?

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 the power of sin; that which we have been saved from. (Notice how often sexual immorality is included in the vice lists.)

1. Psalm 133
2. John 17:20-26
3. Ephesians 4:1-6
4. Philippians 2:1-4
5. Colossians 3:12-14

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. 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. 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.