



WEEK ONE: Romans 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 16

The letter from Paul to the believers in Rome would have been read aloud to them. This means that vv. 17-20 contain the last words of this treatise. They are instructive and take the form of a warning that sits at the heart of the epistle, "I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them." The one thing Paul wants to leave with them is to preserve their unity and guard against those who might divide them. He goes on to describe these sorts of people in similar ways to how he describes false teachers elsewhere in his letters (see 1 Timothy 6:3-10; 2 Timothy 2:14-3:9; Titus 1:10-11; Philippians 3:17-21). This final reminder to keep away from these people surely suggests that there is a clear and present danger that the Roman believers are facing.

Paul follows this up with an encouragement. Their obedience (as it says in v. 26, an obedience that comes from faith) is well-known and Paul expresses his confidence in their ability to navigate the challenges before them. In words that echo Jesus' words to his disciples as he sent them on mission (see Matthew 10:16) Paul encourages them to be wise about what is good and innocent of what is evil, reminding them that the "God of peace" is going to crush Satan underfoot (reminiscent of Genesis 3:15). Maintaining unity is mission critical and a spiritual battle.

The letter closes with a doxology – a prayer of sorts – that describes the end-product of the gospel: the inclusion of the Gentiles. In short, the gospel unites people together. It is not something that we rally around or hold in common, but is itself that which unifies – it is powerful to overcome those things that divide us. Division in the body is the undoing of the gospel itself!

The unity of the Roman church lies at the heart of the letter's purpose. And sheds some light on the long list of greetings in vv. 3-16.

The Romans are commanded to “greet” a list of twenty-six people and five house churches. To greet is more than saying hello, but is making them feel welcome. It has the sense of embracing and/or saluting.

The list demonstrates the unity that the gospel brings as Paul jumbles together Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, men and women. These represent three common fault lines where division was easily fomented. It is important to note that the church contains the seed of its own division because the gospel unites people who need to be united. The church is a group of people who have no business being united; people who don't understand each other, people whose behaviour offended others, people who, in other contexts, hated each other.

It is worth briefly reflecting on Phoebe (vv. 1-2) who is Paul's emissary to Rome. She is a Gentile believer and a deacon of a church in Cenchreae. More significantly, as the one who brought the letter to the Roman believers, she very likely was the one who read it to them and who was authorised and able to answer questions, clarify certain points, and deliver the letter as Paul wished. She is, then, the first person to read and preach the epistle of Romans! This is all the more noteworthy since Paul has Timothy with him in Corinth (v. 21), but is content to send Phoebe. Throughout this series we will, from time to time, make reference to her role in the presentation of the letter.

Apart from demonstrating the unity that the gospel has already brought to the Romans, Paul is doing a couple of other things as well. He is providing a reference list of sorts. The people he wishes for them to greet are people who can vouch for him and his ministry. He is also telling the Romans that these twenty-six people are not those whom they have been on the lookout for. These are not people who are seeking to divide them or put obstacles in their way or who are serving their own appetites, or who use flattery to deceive.

However, those listed are also part of a network of house churches who are experiencing division – especially between Jews and Gentiles. One commentator speculates that at this point in the public reading of the letter, Phoebe may have actually paused after each command to greet another... waiting until someone got up, crossed the room, and welcomed that person. It may have been a lived-out demonstration of restored relationships – after hearing all the doctrine and theology, this is how it was to be lived out!

The gospel is still powerful to unite us and our community of faith contains the seeds of our own division, about which we must be on guard too! The applications for us, as we seek to understand the situation in Rome, include being aware of the seeds of our division (e.g., complementarian v. egalitarian views, support for Gaza or Israel, political conservatives and progressives), and to work on demonstrating the unity that the gospel brings by “greeting” others – welcoming them, embracing them, serving them, etc.

Questions to Ask

Note: It might be worth having a discussion about preaching Romans backwards and/or what stood out to them about starting at the end.

1. Make a list of the fault lines in our community of faith where division might be sown.
2. Discuss the difference between seeing the gospel as a set of beliefs and practices that we have in common and a power that unifies disparate people.
3. “I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil.” Discuss.
4. How can we demonstrate our unity with those who are most different from us in our community of faith?

A Prayer to Pray

Pray for our community of faith. Pray that the Spirit would continue to unify us by the gospel and that we would be a demonstration of that unifying power in our actions towards one another. Commit yourselves to pray for a deepening commitment to each other and the mission of God in our lives together. Pray for our community of faith, that we might commit to “working out our salvation together”.

A Practice to Try

Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, in her book Spiritual Disciplines Handbook (2015), includes the practice of Community. This is the discipline of being part of the family of God. It seeks to undermine our independence and individualism. She suggests a few questions to reflect on, including:

1. What is appealing or unappealing to you about being an independent operator?
2. What kind of connection does Christ want you to have with Christian brothers and sisters?
3. When has the body of Christ nurtured and sustained you?
4. What gifts do you bring to the body of Christ?

She also suggests some practices such as:

1. Choose one of the “one anothers” – “love one another,” “serve one another,” “pray for one another,” “forgive one another,” etc. Practice living one particular “one another” every day for a week. What is this practice like for you?
2. Ask someone to tell you their story. Listen to the story as deeply as you can. Tell the person how much it means to you to hear the story. How does the story give you a deeper understanding of your friend, of God, of yourself?
3. Begin a thank-you list. Thank God for the people in your life who have helped you grow.

Readings to Read This Week

The following passages reflect on unity in the body of Christ.

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

Galatians 3:26-28

Ephesians 2:11-22

Colossians 3:11-17

Revelation 7:9-17

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. We have scheduled a baptism service for March 15. If you have anyone in your Life Group who would like to explore baptism, encourage them to fill out an expression of interest or speak to one of the pastors.

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	23/8	TBD	25/10	TBD
22/2	15:14-33	14/6	9:30-10:21	30/8	TBD	1/11	TBD
1/3	14:1-15:13	21/6	11:1-24	6/9	TBD	8/11	TBD
8/3	12:14-13:7	28/6	11:25-36	13/9	TBD	15/11	TBD
15/3	Baptism			20/9	TBD	22/11	TBD
22/3	12:1-13					29/11	TBD
29/3	13:8-14						
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.