

GOOD NEWS FOR ALL OF US

WEEK FIFTEEN: Romans 3:9-31

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 3:19-31

Our text this week contains one of the theologically rich passages in Romans – 3:21-25a. It contains the first stop on the Romans Road (an evangelical tool that sought to simplify the gospel around five basic points linked to five specific texts in Romans): "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (3:23). And that's only a start. It also contains three "seed" metaphors for salvation that have been particularly fruitful: the legal concept of being justified, the idea of redemption (especially in the context of manumission), and an atoning sacrifice.

In making sense of these kinds of passages (and we'll continue to bump into them throughout the epistle) it is important to allow the context to shape our understanding of them. This is not to deny their importance or wider significance, only to remind us that Paul is not engaged in systematic theology but practical theology – he is applying truth to a specific pastoral situation.

The relational fault line between Jewish believers who felt entitled due to their perceived advantages – especially the law – and Gentile believers who saw the law (as well as other Jewish so-called privileges) as outmoded and irrelevant is squarely in Paul's view.

We see this in 3:9 where Paul concludes his argument by seemingly contradicting himself. In 3:1 he had affirmed that Jews did have an advantage due to the law, but here he concludes that there is no advantage. The apparent discrepancy is resolved when we understand the advantage that Paul is considering.

After doubling down on his assertion that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin's power with a catena (or list) of Old Testament passages that affirm this truth he concludes – "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law." This is the so-called advantage that Paul denies.

This invites us to consider the purpose or function of the law. It is a blueprint for what a righteous life looks like and obeying it would lead to righteous works. What Paul has been arguing (and will continue to in Romans 5-8) is that true righteousness comes from a changed heart and the law was not designed to transform lives in that way.

It's a bit like this: recipes, if followed, lead to nice meals but the recipe is unable to produce the meal by itself. Neither is the recipe able to make one a chef. That takes, shall we say, a transformation of skills, competencies, and intuition. However, anyone can follow a recipe and produce a meal. For Paul, the law is like the recipe; works of the law is like following a recipe; true righteousness is like becoming a chef. What is important to note is that having the recipe is advantageous to making a meal but is not advantageous to becoming a chef. It is also noteworthy that both result in meals! Paul's concern for the Gentiles is that they come to the obedience that comes from faith – true righteousness that stems from a changed life.

All this sits behind 3:21-25a where Paul recapitulates his primary proposition (1:16-17). "But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known... This righteousness is given through [the faithfulness of Jesus] to all who believe." [This alternate reading reminds us that it is not our faith that saves us, but Jesus – in whom we believe!]

This shapes how we understand 3:23. When Paul affirms that all have sinned his point is not how sinful we are, but that we are all sinful. It's a small but subtle difference linked to his purposes in the letter.

This is reinforced in Paul's conclusions. After dropping three rich but largely undeveloped metaphors to describe our salvation he turns to why God did this. And it is not so that sinners can be united with God in heaven! God did this – freely justifying, redeeming, and atoning for sins – to demonstrate his "rightness" in delaying judgment.

As an aside, it is worth remembering that "grace" was not just an unmerited gift, but the very mechanism of social interaction. The three graces of giving, receiving, and repaying the gift were central to Greco-Roman interactions and the Roman congregation would have heard this in the grace of God to them. They were to receive that and seek to repay it – the fact that they never could did not relieve them of the duty to do what they could to try!

Similarly, "boasting", which Paul says is excluded because of our shared sin and salvation, was a social reality. In an honour/shame culture, drawing attention to one's privileges and achievements was expected (humility was not a virtue in the Greco-Roman world). Paul undermines this in the community of faith and affirms (again) that Jews and Gentiles have one God who justifies them both by faith.

But notice where he ends this section – "Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law." There is more to say about the law and Paul does so in chapter 4.

One last thought about application. If we treat the law as the source of righteousness it encourages legalism based on the works we produce. The law then becomes a boundary marker – things that people must do to get "in". If we understand the law as the outcome of a changed life, we begin to look for other indicators (one of which is righteous acts). It is a bit like joining a club versus developing a friendship. To join a club, you have to meet certain criteria; shared competencies, application fees, etc. To develop a friendship – which has equally high expectations – we are looking for different things; character, personality, loyalty, commitment, etc. We are called to a community that is more like developing a friendship than joining a club. to define our own level of inclusion, rather than God's invitation. There's more to say about this...

Questions to Ask

1. Paul says that Jews and Gentiles alike are all "under sin's power." Why is it important for a divided church to begin with this shared reality?
2. The sermon suggests Paul is doing practical theology rather than systematic theology. How might that shape the way we read Romans 3:21-25a in its context?
3. The law is compared to a recipe: helpful for producing something good, but unable by itself to make someone a chef. How does that analogy help you understand the relationship between obedience, righteousness, and transformation?
4. Paul says that righteousness is given through Jesus to all who believe. What difference does it make to focus on Jesus' faithfulness rather than treating our own faith as the thing that saves us?

- Paul says that boasting is excluded because all people share the same need and receive salvation in the same way. What kinds of spiritual comparison or status-seeking can still damage Christian community today?
- The sermon contrasts “joining a club” with “developing a friendship.” What would it look like for our Life Group to embody a community shaped by grace, changed hearts, and friendship rather than boundary markers?

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.

- Psalm 14:1-3; Ecclesiastes 7:20
- Psalm 5:9
- Psalm 140:3
- Isaiah 59:7-8
- Psalm 36:1

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.

- 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.