

SJSM Know-The-Word

The Book of Romans, April 2011

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Part 1. Rom 1:1 – 17 The Gospel and Theme of Romans

1.1 The Gospel of God

In v1 – v5, Paul sets out his view of what this Gospel is that he is so eager to preach to the Romans and the world at large. Paul is emphatic that this gospel is from God (v1) and is regarding His Son, Jesus Christ (v3).

This lays the foundation of Romans and perhaps all of Paul's theology. It is not a gospel which Paul or any other apostle "developed" or "derived" as a result of their association with or understanding of God or Jesus. Christian gospel is a revelation from God, and hence is "of God", not of man. This is distinctive from many other religions which have an enlightened founder who "discovered" some truth through meditation or other means of "understanding".

The centrality of the gospel of God is His Son, Jesus Christ. This is of importance and significance for several reasons. First, the whole Scripture, as Paul argues in his letters, point to one messiah who is Jesus. Indeed, Luke records that Jesus himself, after the resurrection, explained this to the 2 travellers on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:27 – "and beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself."). Any other gospel that does not have Jesus as the central subject is not the true gospel.

Second, the Jews who rejected Jesus as their Messiah, are here being confronted with this assertion at the beginning of Romans. Paul, as a fellow Jew, and a Pharisee who persecuted the Christians no less, makes it clear who this gospel proclaims.

Third, Paul declares that this gospel is not a new revelation from God. It has been promised by God through His prophets throughout the whole OT. He confronts the Jews again to re-examine what they know in their Scriptures (something Paul will return to in Chap 3).

1.2 Jesus of the Gospel

As the central figure of the entire gospel, Jesus' nature, his status and work are declared in v2 – v5.

He is by nature and status, the Son of God (v3, His Son) even as in God's plan He took on different roles in the salvation plan. As a man, he was from the seed of David (the title "Son of David" being used and understood by Jews as referring to the promised Messiah); and his human nature and humble obedience fulfilled the Scriptures and God's promise to Abraham. As the true Son of God, He comes into power following His resurrection and the giving of the Holy Spirit to His followers.

Paul, seized by the knowledge of Jesus as the promised Son of God, considers it a undeserved honour to be His apostle. Earlier in v1, Paul calls himself both a servant - a lowly position vis-a-vis Jesus who is Lord (v4), and also an apostle - an authoritative position appointed by God for the rest of believers, reflecting this understanding of Jesus' position and Paul's own role in His work.

Paul also declares that this gospel and his work is for all Gentiles and brings in the concept of faith as the source of obedience – thus introducing the two key themes of Roman, ie the scope of salvation and basis of salvation.

1.3 The Theme of Romans (v16 – 17)

In v16 -17, Paul announces the main content of his letter.

“I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes; first for the Jews then for the Gentiles. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last...”

Having explained the gospel he is referring to, Paul introduces the key topics which he covers in the rest of his letter:-

- i) The power of God for salvation
- ii) It is for everyone (not just Jews who have the Scriptures, but Jews will still have a prominent role)
- iii) A righteousness from God (the righteous ways of God in offering salvation to all)
- iv) This basis of getting right with God (righteousness) is faith (not the law or works)

From Rom 1:18 – 8:39, Paul argues his case and explains the new life that God gives to those who by faith believes in Christ and gain salvation. Paul’s main argument goes something like this:

- i) If we look at the state of the world, we see that human all alike are sinful. Not only Gentiles who do not have the Scriptures but even Jews who have it.
- ii) This is so because all have not acknowledged God and obey him. Gentiles have no excuse because the whole earth (which God created) testifies to God’s existence and goodness. Jews have even less excuse since they were given the Scriptures. But the law only told them of God’s requirement but not the power to obey. Sin is universal. All in all, humanity has deserted God; and on its own is condemned and destined for destruction under the wrath of God.
- iii) But humanity is not doomed because of the grace of God. In fact, God’s law already points to Christ and the offer of salvation. God provided for the punishment of sin through the death of Jesus; He became the sacrifice offered to God and upon which God granted justification to those who believed in Jesus. This is not something new, the Scriptures tell of getting right with God through faith in Christ, not through the law. Abraham, the father of Jews, was dealt with according to his faith. God did not ignore the sin of men, but overlooked it on account of the work of Jesus. It is justice and grace operating at the same time.
- iv) God’s salvation did not end here. With the redemption of believers, God offers a new life in preparation for the eventual reunion with Him. One that is mirrored in the resurrection of Jesus. Unlike the law, this faith in Jesus ushers in the Spirit that gives us the power to overcome the sinful nature and live a new life unto God as His people.

Part 2. The Heart of the Gospel : Justification by Faith

2.1 Depraved Gentile Society (Rom 1:18 – 32)

Paul begins his argument by showing how God has through His grace not only provided for mankind but also revealed in His created order His presence. Psalm 19 tells us “the heaven declares the glory of God” and “the earth is full of His glory”. And Paul explained in Acts 14

how God did not leave himself without testimony but showed His kindness in His provisions of rain, crops, food and joy. This knowledge of God, however, is a general one and not one which brings salvation. The latter required the knowledge of Christ which is to be revealed specifically.

Yet, gentiles have ignored these self-revelations in nature and wilfully suppressed them. As a result, God's wrath is being revealed against them.

God's wrath is not to be understood as being the same as human anger. Often when we get angry, it originates from injured pride or defeated wilfulness; and we would have frequently contributed to the incident to begin with. But as Creator God, He does not in any way contribute to human's deliberate turning away from the truth He has revealed, nor is God in any sense losing His temper or flying off the handle. Rather, God's wrath is a holy and righteous displeasure and revulsion against sin, and the sinfulness of man. (Eph 5:6, Col 3:6)

Paul's says this wrath is being revealed from heaven. So while Scriptures often point to the coming wrath in the last days (eg 1 Th 1:10), here Paul points to an on-going revelation of God's wrath. This takes the form not of God bringing on some natural disaster, but in Him giving man over to their sinful desires and hence reaping the inevitably outcome. This is mentioned 3 times in v24, v26 and v28. God gave them over to their own (i) sinful desires (ii) shameful lusts and (iii) a depraved mind.

Paul showed that by suppressing the knowledge of God which were given to them in nature and wilfully turning to their own desires, man utterly corrupts both his mind and body. The darkening of their minds and a failure to understand their relationship with God leads to a perversion of all natural relationships between man and woman as purposed by God in creation. Finally, it leads to a complete breakdown in morality (v29-31) of the human community and society.

In v32, Paul says that not only do these people know about God, in fact they know His disapproval and punishment of those who practices such immorality. Indeed, most people, including non-believers, will acknowledge that these immoral acts Paul listed are unacceptable – something CS Lewis refers to as natural law – a fragment of God's law which by His grace has remained in our conscience. Yet not only do people condone such immorality, they in fact encourages others to do so.

We only have to reflect on the state of morality in our current generation to appreciate what Paul had in mind.

2.2 Moralisers (Rom 2:1 – 16)

After his indictment of the shameless immorality of the world, Paul turns next to the self-conscious moralism of the day.

Following from v32, Paul now says that not only are those who encourage others in immorality guilty, but those who judge or condemn others for doing so are also not excused because they are hypocrites (Rom 2:1 – "do the same things"). Those in Rom 1 ignored God's revelation, practiced immorality and encouraged others to do so [at least they are consistent in that sense]. This group has the same knowledge of God and identifies with it, but instead of acknowledging God they judge others who do the wrongs things. Paul states that both groups are under the same wrath.

This judgement from God is inescapable (v3), righteous (v4-5) and impartial (v6, v12-15). In v4-5, Paul is not disputing that salvation is by faith; rather he is stating that judgement is based on the work each have done. While faith is an inward reality towards God, and only God can judge; its manifestation outwardly is in the form of good works of love. This is taught elsewhere in Scripture (ie James 2:18, Gal 5:6). God's judgement is also impartial as He judges those who have the law (Jews) and those who do not (Gentiles) based on what they do (ie obedience) and not what they merely hear or possess. In v14, Paul points to the inner reality of the law such that even Gentiles who do not have the law are capable of obeying it because God in His creation of man has placed within them the ability to know Him and His laws. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught that the commandments were really commandments of the heart or inner morals rather than mere external laws for physical compliance. In fact, later in Rom 2:27, Paul says those who are not physically circumcised but obey the law may even condemn the circumcised who break the law!

Condemning others without first examining ourselves is a dangerous path towards hardening ourselves. Even though we are not encouraging others in immorality and seemingly reproaching them; we often do so less for others' good than for our own self-satisfaction. We risk being self-delusion about our own true sinful state before God. In John Stott's words "we keep our sin and self respect at the same time".

So commentators are of the view that the group that Paul addresses here is the Jews. But more likely it refers to all who practice such moralism and hypocrisy. But this section also acts as a bridge or transition to the next part of Paul's specific argument about the Jews; and he alludes to it by stating that both the positive and negative consequence flowing from the decision on whether to seek God, applies "first to the Jews, then for the Gentiles".

2.3 Jews have no excuse (Rom 2:17 – 3:8)

Reading up to the end of Rom 1, Jews would not have an issue with what Paul has said. Their view of the Gentile world, which does not know God nor possess His law, is consistent with what Paul has stated. In fact, Jews would probably feel justified in feeling a sense of superiority and dis-association with such a Gentile world. But in Rom 2:1-16, they would begin to realise the implications of what Paul is saying. The moralism of both the Gentiles (who condemn others for the same things they do) and the Jews (who condemn those without the law) are really no different before God.

In this section, Paul is engaged in a "dialogue" with objecting Jews. We can imagine them asking Paul – surely our status as God's chosen people, the Law given to us as a God's revelation, and circumcision (sign of God's covenant) must distinguish us from Gentiles and God's wrath ?

In v17-24, Paul answers the question on the law. He uses 3 "if" (v17, 18, 19) to challenge and expose their hypocrisy. If they placed so much emphasis on their relationship with God and the law, and consider themselves well taught under the law and know God's will to be able to teach, lead and guide others; the Jews have no excuse why they themselves do not teach nor practice obedience to the law (not just relying on mere possession or knowledge of it). Paul challenges the Jews in 5 "do you"? (v21, 22, 23); a reminder of v13 on hearing versus obedience.

In v25-v28; Paul deals with the role of circumcision. He stresses the right relationship between circumcision and obedience at the start (v25). Paul makes it clear that physical circumcision is no substitute to obedience to the law. And that the uncircumcised could in

fact observe the law and condemn them. Paul distinguishes the real spiritual significance of circumcision – a commitment to obey God’s covenant, from its mere physical symbolism before man. Like the law, circumcision by itself cannot excuse Jews from God’s wrath. Indeed, both the law and circumcision demand that Jews obey the law. (Gal 5:3 “obliged to obey the whole law”).

Paul’s explanation of what is a true Jew seems shocking to them but is in fact another indictment of those who held on to their physical circumcision as the guarantee of protection against God’s wrath no matter what they do. This is because in the OT, Deut 10:16 [“Circumcise your hearts therefore, and do not be stiff necked any longer.”] and Deut 30:6 [“The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your hearts and with all your soul, and live.”] the idea of circumcision of the heart has been made clear to the Jews; and as those who profess (or brag about) to know the law, they had forgotten the true meaning of circumcision.

In Rom 3:1-8 Paul answers the question – if a true Jew is one inwardly circumcised and could include Gentiles who obey the law, then what is the point of being a Jew, and what about God’s work in choosing Jews as His people? He points out that Jews are still privileged in having the promise that God made to their forefathers and the entrusted with the law. And since God does not break His promise (even though He has extended His grace to Gentiles), Jews remain in His plan. We will leave this to the later lesson on the role of the Jews in Chapter 9.

2.4 Universality of Sin (Rom 3:9 – 20)

Having made his case against the Gentile world, moralisers and the Jews, Paul concludes that all humanity is under the universal bondage of sin; and hence God’s judgement. He cites the OT in Psalms (14:1-3, 53:1-3), Ecclesiastes (7:20) in support of his point and reminds the reader that throughout the OT, God has warned of this through His prophets.

The section contains some of the most important teaching about the nature of sin.

- i) Ungodliness is the essence of Sin
The charge here, together with all the wickedness cited by Paul in chp2, is that “no one understands or seeks God” and “there is no fear of God before them”. God’s purpose for His people is to know Him, honour Him and to love Him, but all humanity (Gentiles, moralisers, Jews) have failed to do this, and even suppressed what they are given to know in order to satisfy their own desires.
- ii) Sin is pervasive
From the earlier list of wickedness (Rom 1:30-31) and the list here, all parts of the body are considered and participate in the sin – physical, emotions, spiritual. This is the concept of total depravity of human nature.
- iii) Sin is universal
Paul had chosen OT verses that emphasised the universality of this sinful human nature. Repeatedly, the stress is that “no one” (4x) and “not even one” (2x); and “all” have gone astray (2x).

The importance of understanding the nature and universality of sin cannot be over-emphasised. It affects how we perceive God, the salvation He offers and how we will live our Christian lives. If we see it as only “sins” (ie acts of wickedness), we would have missed

the point that it is Sin (a human condition and nature) which is the source of such wickedness. If we see our sin as results of being ignorant or weak (these are no doubt valid reasons but by no means the core reasons) then we will see the path to God as education or self-discipline, and miss the importance of repentance for our sins, and thankfulness for God's offer of salvation.

As Jesus said "It is not the healthy that needs a doctor but the sick...I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Mat 9:12-13). Indeed, if we do not recognise or accept our "sickness" and how serious it is, will we truly and earnestly seek the doctor? And if all of humanity (no one, not even one) can be found to be right with God before Him, where then can the path to reconciliation with God come from but outside of humanity ie supernatural, divine !

2.5 Righteousness revealed (Rom 3:21 - 4:25)

Having made his case against humanity, finding all to have fallen short of the glory of God with no excuse, and that no righteousness is possible through the law, Paul declares the gospel of justification by faith through grace. "But now" – what is beyond humanity, God now provides. From v21 -25, Paul covers the key essence of the gospel of justification by faith through grace.

This righteousness from God is His just means of making the unrighteous acceptable before Him. Paul continues his earlier argument here and state that this is universally needed because no one can be excused – "there is no difference, all have sinned and fallen short" (v22)

Justification is a legal concept to mean "being made in the right." It is distinct from "being pardon". Pardon is to waive the just punishment for an act. Justification, on the other hand, in fact declares that the basis for the punishment has been removed, that there is no ground to hold the accused guilty. Justification declares someone acceptable, not merely setting aside his punishment. One can be pardoned but still be banished and unaccepted; but justification goes beyond that.

i) The origin of justification

Paul says all are "justified freely by his grace" (v24). This is the beginning and source of our salvation – the grace of God, His undeserved favour for men who come to Him believing in Jesus Christ. V25-26 shows how God in achieving both His characteristic of kindness (forbearing punishment) and justice, provided Christ as "a sacrifice of atonement". This is the core of our faith and gospel.

ii) The basis of justification

Throughout the OT, God exhorts His people to judge justly – to justify the righteous and condemn the guilty. God repeatedly showed his displeasure with the miscarriage of justice – Isa 5:23 "woe to those who acquit the guilty". For God to justify the wicked (4:5) without compromising His own just nature nor condone the unrighteousness of the wicked, He sent Jesus to the cross. God is not only just and loving; He is so at the same time. On the cross, God demonstrated this. He justified the wicked (4:5) because Christ died for the wicked (5:6)

iii) The means of justification

Paul stresses 3 times the necessity of faith. V22 – the righteousness of God come through faith in Christ; V25 we are justified through faith in His blood; and v26 God justifies those who have faith in Christ.

In the Hebrew language, the main form of the word “faith” is the verb rather than the noun, suggesting that they saw it more as something one performs rather than possess.

There are 2 aspects of faith – one meaning “to be established or steadfast”; the other “to confide in or lean upon.” The first entails a belief and trust in some objective truths or statement; as in “believing that”. The second is more personal form of trust and reliance; someone to which one is committing to; as in “believing in”. Hebrew 11 defines faith as “the substance of things hope for” where we can consider such substance to be the objective fact of God and His work in Jesus which we believe in, and also a personal commitment and trust in who God is and His goodness. Also faith is the “conviction of things not yet seen” pointing to the strength of such belief as beyond the mere visible and now.

It is important to note and remember that our faith is not that which saves us. The source and origin of salvation remain God and His grace; and the means, Jesus’ atonement. It is a mistake to think that salvation is some form of cooperation between God and men, where He provides the grace and Jesus, and we the faith. Salvation is God’s work and His alone. Our faith is an active choice to believe in Him and what He has done even when the final reconciliation is yet to come. This trust and commitment in Him places us in a position to receive the grace that He first offered to us freely. Rom 5:2 “we have gained access by faith into this grace”.

A proper understanding of the origin, basis and means of salvation (the righteousness of God) leads to the answer to Paul’s question on boasting. Since no one has excuse for his sins or can be justified under the law; and God’s righteousness through Christ and our faith (believe and trust) in Him is the only way to gain righteousness before God, then all forms of boasting are vain. As the God of the universe justifies only through true faith in Jesus, He has no bias towards those who have been given the covenantal symbol of circumcision. Paul uses the example of Abraham and David to show that both were saved by faith rather than works.

In v31, Paul answers those who raise objection that if God simply declares sinner righteous based on their faith, then there is no need for obedience to the law. This argument Paul rebuts more completely in later parts of Roman, but here he concludes that in fact faith upholds the law. How is this so? Indeed if faith in Jesus is a firm belief and commitment to who He is (Son of God) and what He did, then surely the precepts of God (ie whether as specific OT laws given to Jews or the general words and teachings of God in Scripture) which reflects His character will be upheld by those who belief in Him.

----- END of Part 1 -----

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