

ROMANS—WEEK 1

THE FOUNDATION OF THE GOSPEL



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The cover image is the Conversion of Saul by Michelangelo Buonarroti

Romans is Paul's most thorough treatise on systematic theology. Paul opens it with his usual salutation, referring to himself as a bondservant (doulos) of Christ. Then he launches into a blistering criticism of hedonistic behavior, which he ascribes to idolatry.

Paul doesn't spare believers either, saying that we who condemn others are guilty of the same things.

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Romans, Week 1 — The Foundation of the Gospel
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1 Romans 1:1-7 (NKJV)

Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God which He promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead. Through Him we have received grace and apostleship for obedience to the faith among all nations for His name, among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ;

To all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Try to put yourself in Paul's shoes here. He had persecuted the church right up until Jesus zapped him on the road to Damascus. After that, he was devoted to spreading the gospel. He was consumed with zeal for that task, but beneath that zeal was a deep sense of guilt about what he had done before his conversion.

Many of us feel the same way, and so we're kindred spirits. This makes Paul's letters, especially Romans, widely loved. Romans is preeminent among all the epistles.

Paul's writings are dominated by grace. He knows that his own forgiveness can come only on those terms; yet he knows he's forgiven. Thus, he got it. His guilt is not an obsession; it's simply a fact.

Paul's writings are also dominated by the sense of being owned. He begins this letter by calling himself a *bondservant of Jesus Christ*. The word in Greek is **δο λος** (dou-los) and it literally means slave—one who is owned by another. Many translations shrink from translating this literally because biblical slavery wasn't like American slavery. Yes, slavery wasn't as inhumane back then, but it was still ownership.

And Paul was happy to be owned.

Do you think of yourself as a slave?

When we confess Jesus as Lord, we are swearing fealty to Him. It's silly to think you can join a kingdom without swearing fealty to its king. You can't even join a fraternity without swearing fealty.

And note two key points. First, confessing Jesus as "my personal savior" isn't even a pledge of fealty. The confession references (Matthew 7:21, Romans 10:9, 1 Corinthians 12:3, Philippians 2:11) are all about confessing Him as Lord (**my** Lord.) *Even the demons believe—and tremble.* — James 2:19b (NKJV)

The second point is even more important. None of the references are in the past tense. Confessing Jesus as Lord isn't something you do once and then, "set it and forget it," as Ron Popeil used to say. It's not the pledge of fealty that matters; it's the fealty. That's lifelong. (And don't forget, your fealty could never earn your salvation; it's not that impressive. Salvation is by grace alone.)

Be happy to be owned. The fringe benefits are awesome.

2 Romans 1:8-17 (ESV)

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

Paul has never been to Rome. The Roman church sprang up without Paul's direct involvement. It wasn't planted by him on one of his missionary journeys.

So, this letter is different. When Paul writes to a church he planted, he knows who he's writing to and what they've been taught.

But that's not true here. Paul knows that they're believers, and he's ecstatic about that, but he doesn't know what doctrine they hold to. Sure, there are some things they must believe, but knowing a few facts about the amazing things that happened in Israel is not a complete system of theology.

Without a theology that hangs together well, all kinds of errors can creep in. Paul is well aware that churches have plenty of problems with people whose understanding got way off track. Those heresies even infect churches he planted. Some of his other epistles deal directly with those problems.

So Paul really wants to get to Rome to make sure they have the whole thing straight. *I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you.*

Until then, this letter will just have to do. That's why this epistle is so thorough.

Part of being a doulos of Christ is studying. Getting things wrong matters; so we're called to make a special effort to get things right. Understanding God is impossible, but we should try to understand as much as we can.

The Bible is a finite book about an infinite subject. It's designed to be understood by normal people, but it stretches our capabilities to the limit. Paul's epistle to the Romans will make you think.

But this book will change you.

3 Romans 1:18-23 (ESV)

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

This is about people who not only don't believe in Christ, they don't believe in a creator at all. To Paul, that's ridiculous; *they are without excuse*. Their whole thinking process is undermined. *They became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.*

The Declaration of Independence assumes that the existence of “*nature's God*” is obvious—that it's “*self-evident*” that people are “*endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights.*” So does Paul assume that the evidence of the existence of God is unmissable.

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.

Yet there were many in Paul's day who couldn't see the obvious, and many of them mocked Paul and his faith. Curiously, they worshipped gods made with their own hands.

Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

That's just nuts.

Atheism is alive and well today and so is the mockery of our faith. At least they're not making gods with their hands, right?

No, it's worse. They're making gods of themselves. Our culture has become so ego driven that many people expect to receive worship, rather than give it. This includes, movie stars, sports heroes, and, of course, American Idols™.

Many Americans are full of themselves to an amazing extent. They seem incapable of worshipping anyone else.

Claiming to be wise, they became fools.

Sigh.

4 Romans 1:24-32 (ESV)

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

Wow. Paul really lets 'em have it. What's up with that?

Paul is shocking us with some examples of how bad things can get for unbelievers. But the point isn't how bad things can get; it's how things get that bad.

Paul makes an airtight case that the key to this chamber of horrors is idolatry. This started in yesterday's passage (in verse 23) noting that they *exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things*.

Today's passage starts with "*Therefore*" as Paul begins the description of their decent into chaos. This happens, "*because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.*" Paul notes that it's *for this reason God gave them up*, and he names a few more sins. Finally, before the bulk of his list of horrors, he says, "*And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.*"

But this passage isn't about the specific sins listed; it's about the idolatry behind them.

People don't see the horrors of idolatry because they don't think about what sin is. The individual sins Paul listed may be revolting but they're just surface symptoms, not the root problem. Sin is, at its heart, rebellion against God. It's the opposite of fealty to the Lord.

Idolatry is distilled sin. It's declaring a different god and worshipping that god. It deliberately separates you from the real God, and that's the path to hell.

Little children, keep yourselves from idols. – 1 John 5:21 (ESV)

5 Romans 2:1-11 (NKJV)

Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. But we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against those who practice such things. And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who “will render to each one according to his deeds”: eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness—indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek; but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God.

What? Paul just finished blasting idolatrous unbelievers, but now it seems he’s turning the guns on us. Is he really saying what it sounds like he’s saying?

Absolutely, and this illustrates one of the keys to studying the Bible. When you’re troubled or confused by a passage, the one thing you must not do is blow it off or try to water it down, though your immediate reaction may be to do exactly that.

That’s why so many people try to explain away difficult passages. Few people are interested in doing the hard work it takes to come to grips with tough subjects like this one. Even fewer folks want to live by what these passages teach. That’s what makes them tough in the first place.

And this passage isn’t alone in its message. We’ve all prayed the words, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Do we really want to ask for forgiveness on those terms? Have we ever thought about what that means? Are we paying attention?

We’re not going to get through this in one day; the next lesson will have the same reading.

There are three takeaways to consider. We’re not supposed to judge (whatever that means); we’re guilty of the same things; and judging others “despises” *the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering*.

These all connect.

When Paul says, “*for you who judge practice the same things*,” he doesn’t mean everyone’s sins are the same. Everyone is guilty of sin, but we have different sins. They’re not all equally bad either.

But sin blinds us to the severity of our sins. We tend to judge ourselves charitably and others harshly. We see our sins as minor and the ones we’re less prone to as the bad ones.

Ask God to show you how your minor sins aren’t so minor.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. How did you become a Christian?
2. What book changed you the most?
3. Who gets too much attention in our society?
4. Can a normal hobby become idolatry?
5. Is it ever OK to "judge" another?

Items for prayer: