

Sermon for Sunday, September 13, 2009
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THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL
Romans 1

Romans is the longest and most complete expression of the mind of the Apostle Paul and so of the mind of the Lord. But it is a letter, a letter meant to start a relationship with a church he didn't know. How might he do that? Long ago, people used letters of introduction. If a man traveled to Rome on business, he asked a friend from Rome to write a letter on his behalf, vouching for him with his friends (2 Corinthians 3:2): "This is my friend Jason he is a merchant, trustworthy..."

Romans is Paul's letter of introduction to the church of Rome. Perhaps he didn't need a letter. He was a well-known apostle and he knew people in the church from past travels. He greets many of them in Romans 16. Still he wanted to introduce himself and his mission: He planned to come to Rome to visit that church on his way to lands where the gospel was unknown:

"I have been longing for many years to see you. I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while."

But the apostle had to go to Jerusalem first. He was arrested there; so that when he came to Rome he was in chains. Still we have his letter. It presented his message, the essentials of the gospel, Christian doctrine and the Christian life.

Romans 1 describes Paul's calling and his plan. But it's more. Paul is God's apostle, his servant, sent on a mission, therefore he speaks to everyone who is God's servant, willing to be sent on God's mission.

1. The apostle's calling (1:1)

Paul presents himself three ways : He identifies his master, his office and his purpose. First, his master: Paul is a slave of Christ.

Paul is a servant or slave of Christ.

We wonder: who would wish to call himself a servant or slave? But the point of the comparison was obvious long ago. A slave is devoted to his master, fully at his disposal. Further, the slave of a great man gains the great man's honor. Paul is totally devoted to the Lord, serving as his apostle.

The Lord called Paul as his apostle.

The word apostle can simply mean a messenger, but Paul gives it the full meaning. He stands with the twelve. Jesus appointed them as his trailblazing and foundational witnesses, the cornerstones of the church. Paul was gifted, but that is beside the point. God gave Paul his very authority. An apostle is "sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father" (Galatians 1:1).

Paul was set apart for the gospel.

One day, the church of Antioch was at prayer, when the Spirit "set apart" Paul and Barnabas to be the first team to take the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 13:2). That gospel is the message of the work of Christ and the call to faith in him. Paul begins to explain that gospel next.

2. The apostolic gospel. (1:2-4)

Paul's master gave one task: to preach the gospel. He shares it in outline form right away with the Romans and with us. First, he says God promised his gospel long ago, that it rests on Jesus' person and work.

Promised beforehand

The gospel was newly accomplished in Paul's day, but it wasn't a new idea. The prophets had promised it in advance. So it's no surprise, no new idea.

Genesis already said that faith – not good works – is the core of a sound relationship with the true God: "Abram believed the Lord, and [the Lord] credited it to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6).

Moses predicted: "The Lord will raise up a prophet like me..." The Lord said, "I will put my words in his mouth." (Deuteronomy 18:15, 18). A prophet like Moses is important because Moses was a uniquely great prophet. He acted, leading Israel out of slavery and bondage. He also spoke for God. He promised grace and gave laws.

The Lord also foretold the coming of a king like David, but better, a king who would never fail or die. "I will establish his kingdom. He will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever" (2 Samuel 7:12-13).

Founded on the Son's identity

In a way, therefore, the gospel was already familiar when Jesus arrived. Paul summarizes it almost poetically:

Jesus came from the seed of David - according to the flesh.

But he's appointed the powerful Son of God - according to the Spirit.

Every word is important. First, Jesus came. "Came" reminds us that Jesus existed outside this world and chose to enter it. He came as a Son of David - from the line of kings from which God promised to send a deliverer. All this is "according to the flesh;" but there is more that happens by the Spirit.

By the Spirit, by the resurrection, Jesus was "declared," literally "designated" or "appointed," as "Son of God with power."

Not: Jesus became or was appointed Son of God at his resurrection. That is a heresy known as adoptionism: Jesus was the best and most faithful man whom God recognized and chose to become his Son after he proved himself with his total obedience, even to the point of his death on the cross. No, Jesus is the Son since before the beginning.

Focused on the Son's work

Still: At his resurrection Jesus is designated the Son with power. That is, until the resurrection Jesus didn't seem so important. He came from a small town and a poor family. He had no wealth, no connections, no education. Yes, he performed miracles and taught like no one ever taught. But the world didn't consider him powerful. Influential, yes, truly powerful, no.

But the resurrection changed that. After the resurrection, Jesus is manifest, publicly declared and known as Son, Messiah, and Lord. Again, he always had this rank. But now we must know him as the powerful, life-giving Son of God. He reigns and gives life to all who believe in him (1:16). His resurrection from the dead declares that Jesus is Lord of all.¹

Subordinate to the Son's reign - application

None of us is an apostle or a pioneer evangelist, but we are servants – even slaves of Christ. The word "slave" sounds extremely negative to us, with its connotations of injustice, racism and violence. And

¹ Doug Moo, *Romans*, page 50

slavery is a terrible thing. But slavery was universal in Paul's day, so everyone understood his analogy: I belong to someone. His service is my life.

We can see something similar today. Certain people give their lives to the service of a great or influential person: a great politician, business leader or scientist, even an entertainer. A political aid or business assistant serves the great man or woman all day, every day they work. Eventually, they burn out or move on because the great person has flaws and the assistant begins to disagree with the program here and there. They can move on because they are not slaves.

But Paul isn't moving on. He is the Lord's slave. He says: "My life is not my own. I'm attached to Jesus and his cause. Jesus called me and appointed me. I'm his and obey him as surely as if I were his slave." Now Paul wasn't perfect, so he didn't perfectly serve Jesus, but he did try.

The problem with so many of us is that we try to serve two or three masters. We try to honor God on Sunday, serve the career Monday to Friday and reserve Saturday for ourselves. This mindset regards faith as a hobby, like gardening. One can certainly have a job and a hobby or two. But when commitments compete, it's a disaster. We can go to two parties in one night. But you can't be in Chicago and London the same night. It won't work.

Some of us view God as an employer, not a master. Surely a man can work for two employers, schedule permitting. But no one can belong to two masters. No slave can be the property of two owners, "for single ownership and full-time service are of the essence of slavery."² By definition, a master can demand service at any time. Therefore, we cannot serve two or more gods: God, money, leisure.³

When we fail to accept this, life becomes tangled with competing goals and dueling aspirations. When we have high level commitments that clash with each other, we're torn. We say, "I need balance in my life", but that's wrong. When we say "I need balance" we often mean "I want to serve two or three masters."

We don't need balance in these cases, we need godly radicalism. Paul found peace in a life of enormous burdens and he found direction amidst competing demands because he served one master – Jesus – and one cause – the gospel. We will find peace and direction the same way – by serving one master.

3. The apostle's task (1:5-6)

Through Christ, Paul received grace and apostleship. We know the story: Saul the Pharisee who became Paul the apostle. He didn't decide for Christ. Jesus chose him. Saul/Paul had been the foe of Christ. Saul was persecuting Jesus, not pursuing him. But Jesus pursued Saul and made him a disciple. When Jesus encountered him, he was "still breathing threats" against the church (Acts 9:1). He searched out and dragged off men and women and put them in prison. Paul blasphemed and tried to force Christians to blaspheme – to curse Christ (Acts 8:3, 26:11a, 1 Timothy 1:13).

Saul was angry. He threatened; he intimidated. He wanted to kill! And he was organized. He says, "In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them" (26:11b) – traveling hundreds of miles to find and extradite citizens of another province for bad theology.⁴

² Tasker, *Matthew*, page 76

³ Jacques, Ellul, *Money + Power*, page 94-7.

⁴ Marshall, *Acts*, page 168

Saul was confident. No hint of self-doubt. "As for legalistic righteousness" he says, "I was faultless" (Philippians 3:6). Perhaps he was aware of internal flaws, but he was a self-righteous man until Jesus appeared to him and told him that the people he persecuted were in fact God's people. Ouch!

By grace, the Lord did not punish Paul. Rather he chose and commissioned him as his apostle to the Gentiles. This is familiar, but think: Until the day Jesus encountered him, Paul dedicated his life to punishing people who followed Jesus.

But Paul became Jesus' ambassador. Until then, Paul had dedicated his life to learning, keeping and teaching rules that set Israel apart from Gentiles. Now God calls Paul to tear down those barriers, to bring Jew and Gentile into one family. Paul received the gospel but more: he took it to Gentiles. This is his call and place in God's redemptive plan. He became the apostle to the Gentiles. Christians everyone know this story; why does Paul refer to it? To introduce himself, but more.

He says, "You also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ." You too are "loved by God and called to be saints." His story isn't unique. God also set apart the disciples in Rome. They are loved and called by God as surely as he was. So Paul moves from call to blessing: They have grace and peace just as he did (1:6-7).

4. The apostle's blessing: Grace and Peace

Paul mentions several blessings, but since he notes them briefly it's easy to miss them. Let's slow down and notice. First, we're called to belong to Jesus Christ (1:6). We're called to be saints (1:7). Second, Paul offers grace and peace to all whom God calls. Third, Paul says he was appointed apostle "to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith". These three: Calling, grace and peace, obedience from faith.

Let's begin with our calling. Most of us would love to have a clear, important call, with the certainty and direction Paul had. Is that possible? Maybe not. Unemployment is high. Many of us need to take any job we can get. At work we have to put up with things. Long hours, little freedom. We don't work where our greatest gifts, skills and passions lie. We wonder if we missed God's call.

But everyone who believes and follows Jesus has heard the Lord's primary call. He called us to himself. He called us to be saints – set apart for him. Don't decide you missed God's call if work or home life disappoint you and don't feel right. A lot of things can go wrong yet your life is still right if you hear his call to follow him.

Grace and peace come from this. Our status as God's children gives us peace. Consider our work. We all take good pleasure and find peace when we are good at something and can practice it without impediment. A researcher enjoys his work when he has the time, resources, and support for his work and no one interrupts. A pianist enjoys playing when she has an excellent instrument, good music, and a quiet room. A bricklayer has peace when his "mud" has the right texture, the laborers bring materials at the right pace and the temperature is moderate.

Now take the perfect conditions away. The researcher's equipment breaks; the lab technicians quarrel. The keys on the piano stick and it's out of tune. Temperatures plummet and sleet begins to fall on our bricklayer. Not all disappointments are equal. Some are very intense: A lost career, a lost relationship, a lost cause.

What then? We can become angry or frustrated. We cared deeply, we worked hard, we had a plan. But real faith lays hold of the peace God offers. Even in bitter disappointment, Jesus is Lord, we are his people, we can find peace.

So "Grace and peace to you" is no formality. If we know Jesus is Lord, we should know that even when our plans are spoiled, his are not.

The apostle's blessings link up with our responsibility. See the phrase: the obedience of faith. The phrase "obedience of faith" appears in the first and last paragraphs of Romans 1:5, 16:26. So it's important. The phrase "obedience of faith" describes the source of our obedience – it comes from our faith. This reminds us that there are other sources for obedience.

We may obey out of compulsion. A boss tells us to do something, so we do it. Compulsion is connected to fear. We fear a rebuke or discipline if we don't obey. We also obey because someone is watching. We might obey because we hope for a reward. We may obey to project an image of ourselves. We may obey to prove something to others – we can do it. We may obey to prove something to ourselves. An addict may stay clean to prove something.

In the last two years, I've seen that much of my service aimed to prove something. Next Sunday night I'll tell more of my story, but as the title of the talk says, I grew up in a violent home. There was serious, dangerous physical violence. The verbal violence was more constant and formative. No exaggeration: My father told my older brother and me that we were useless, worthless, helpless, feckless and always would be 5,000 to 15,000 times. He lectured us on this for five to forty minutes, most days, for several years. I was afraid to reply out loud. But in my mind, I fiercely disputed with him. I offered counter-evidence. And I vowed, "I will prove you wrong. I will prove you wrong."

It was how I survived and at the level of survival it worked. After I left home, I met several Christians who lived beautiful lives so I was able to embrace the faith I had heard as a child. Much of my obedience was born of love for God and neighbor. But sometimes I wasn't motivated by love. I worked hard at certain things, some professional things, because I wanted to prove the man wrong.

Some of you know exactly what I mean. But almost all of us obey for reasons that are divorced from the gospel. We do what is right because someone expects it, because we're afraid to do otherwise. Or because we hope it helps our reputation, or because we have an image to protect, or because of some noble cause.

I don't say this to lay a burden on you, but to tell you the Lord's best desire for you. He wants our obedience to be free and willing and peaceful. He wants us to be trusting him instead of trying to prove something, trusting him instead of wanting your way. Our obedience should be as free as if your best mentor or teacher or coach said, "I have something I want you to try."

5. The apostle's desire

Paul has aims for his readers – faith, peace, obedience – but he also has his own goals. He is a pioneer: He wants to preach Christ where his name has never been heard. He has gone everywhere he can in the eastern empire; now he wants to go west. Therefore "I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be sped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a little" (Romans 15:24). He will come to the great city - Rome. Word of the strong faith of that church "is being reported all over the world." Long has he prayed for them (1:8-10).

While there, he wants to give or impart a spiritual gift (1:11-13). That gift will be his message, the gospel, which is found in Romans. He hopes to "have a harvest" in Rome as "among the other Gentiles" He hopes they support his mission to preach the gospel in Spain. (1:12-13). But first, he is "eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome" (1:15).

We have learned to be suspicious or cynical about people who say, "I'm excited to do something for you." A recent film, "Great Buck Howard" is based on the life of magician and mentalist, the Amazing Kreskin. Wherever he goes – even Akron - he stretches out his arms and shouts, "I love this town! I love

you people." We snicker. But he seems sincere. He has skills; he takes risks. Every night his evening's fee goes to audience members who hide it wherever they please. In over 10,000 performances, he missed it nine times. How does he do it? How does he make an outdoor crowd shiver in the hottest day in July? He seems sincere.

Paul was sincere and passionate about the gospel and for good reason. When Paul writes, the Roman church is well-established and more Gentile than Jewish (cf "the rest of the Gentiles" in 1:13). The core of his excitement is the gospel which is "the power of God for the salvation of all people", Jew or Gentile.

Paul's gospel explains how Jew and Gentile can "stand on the same level of advantage before God" – pure enough for God and at peace with him. His answer: "all men stand on the same level of disadvantage. They have rebelled against God and stand before him." They have been in the employ of the Adversary and the wages are death (Romans 6:23). But Jew and Gentile are both put right through the reconciling work of Christ. He died for our sins and was raised for our justification (Romans 4:24).

Thus the summary of the gospel is "The righteous will live by faith." Not by works, but by faith in Jesus who forgives sins and gives life and promises to make all things new. This is a message that stirs passion for Paul and should stir faith and obedience in us (1:15-17).

So we begin with the great book of Romans. Paul tells us who he is – an apostle – and what he plans – a journey to the pagan west. Will the Romans help him? He will help them – and all Christians – first.

He presents his gospel. How long God's people awaited the coming of the great prophet and great king – in one person! The Son of God, come in the flesh and was declared Lord at his resurrection. He calls for perfect allegiance and he offers perfect blessings: a sense of call in life, grace and peace, a noble reason to pursue obedience. As we embrace these we live: the just will live by faith.