

God's Righteousness: A Non-Trivial Pursuit

An Introduction to Romans

*"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. ¹⁷ **For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."***

Introduction: We had a bittersweet experience last weekend, as Erin graciously cleaned out the closet that contained many treasures, from the leaf in our kitchen table, to old backpacks, to vacuums and other cleaning accoutrements, to board and other games that had been accumulated throughout the years. Some of these were well worn, well used, and falling apart, and others still unopened. But one of the games that did not make the cut to stay was our old *Trivial Pursuit* game that brought hours of fun to dad and minutes of non-bored excitement for everyone else. The extended Bakker family grew up playing this game (before answers could be found in milliseconds on a phone or known before you asked in by AI), with questions ranging from knowledge of history and sports (the men's favorite), literature (my mom knew everything), and science, which basically no one knew or could know. Years of random bits of information about a broad base of subjects came in handy for a game that would take hours to complete, but also force your family to stay in the same room for that amount of time.

In an article that summarized a book he had written, Uche Anzior explored the idea and reason that **apathy** exists among believers, Christians who have been transformed by the gospel of Jesus Christ. If I were to diagnose an area of concern for our young people and families, this issue would be high on the list. It is not a new issue, is not uncommon in our church or area, and has clear reasons as to why it exists and pathways out of it. By apathy, I do not mean fighting for joy in the mundane or walking faithfully through all of the responsibilities we have in life. No, it is more about a lack of **zeal** (Rom. 12:11 – *"Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord"*) that is not just an external passion but an inner commitment and fervency to glorify God in all things, including our priorities. This kind of apathy is a slow burn away from our normal *means of grace*, where prayer withers away, time in God's Word gets squeezed by so many other demands, service becomes marginal, and even gathering with God's people happens when there is **extra time** in the overburdened schedule, which rarely happens. On top of this, sin becomes comfortable, and instead of fighting FOR righteousness, we let sin take cozy up in a corner of our lives since it seems harmless sleeping in the corner. This is to say nothing about thinking about missions, discipleship, and cross-cultural ministry, which is a distant thought or is assuaged by participating in an event or giving to an organization.

But perhaps the most insidious cause of apathy is our drift toward the **trivial**. Again, Uche Anzior said it this way:

*If God is not filling our thoughts and occupying our attention daily, then what is? **The reality is that we are always being formed.** We are being shaped by everything that holds our gaze, whether we realize it or not. The problem for us is that we are regularly beckoned to fix our eyes on objects that really don't*

matter much. We are in a culture where the peripheral and irrelevant are presented as meaningful and worthy of our attention. This is a problem for those wanting to maintain spiritual zeal.¹

He then quoted from a fantastic and forward looking book written by Neil Postman back in 1985 called “*Amusing Ourselves to Death*”², about the contrast between George Orwell (1984) and Aldous Huxley (A *Brave New World*):

*What **Orwell** feared were those who would ban books. What **Huxley** feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be **drowned in a sea of irrelevance**. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a **trivial culture**. (xix)*

“Our world is Orwellian *and* Huxleyan, but Huxley’s concern is relevant here. We have **become a trivial culture** and, unfortunately, **triviality numbs us to the meaningful**. In a world where everything is seemingly significant, **what are we really supposed to care about?**”

It’s this last phrase that is both poignant and pertinent to our study in the **Book of Romans**. Romans is weighty, both in concept and in implication. Paul uses different rhetorical devices to both explain and defend, and he used all the tools in his legal background to ask and answer questions that were both *being asked* and that he *anticipated* being asked. It deals theological issues like God’s choosing of Israel and the condemnation of the world, practical issues like obeying the government, and social issues like what homosexuality is and where it comes from. To say it a different way, **Romans is NOT trivial**, since Paul gives his fullest and most complete thoughts on the **gospel of Jesus Christ** over 8 whole chapters not simply as a theological treatise but rather to call the church to unity and action. This study will be challenging, a little long, and completely relevant to what we face today, but only if you are engaged with your mind and heart and allow the Holy Spirit to bring clarity and conviction.

John Piper, said “*Romans is the most important theological, Christian work ever written.*”

Martin Luther: “*This epistle [i.e., Romans] is really the chief part of the New Testament, and is **truly the purest gospel**. It is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but also that **he should occupy himself with it every day**, as the daily bread of the soul. We can never read it or ponder over it too much; for the more we deal with it, **the more precious it becomes and the better it tastes.***”

J.I. Packer: “*All roads in the Bible lead to Romans, and all views afforded by the Bible are seen most clearly from Romans, and **when the message of Romans gets into a person’s heart there is no telling what may happen.***”

Elders at Grace Simi to our teaching pastor about Romans: “*Don’t mess this up!*”

¹ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/why-dont-i-care>

² I’d highly recommend this book, its full title “*Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*” A 20-year anniversary addition came out in 2005, which I have not read, but sure it is helpful.

A Bit of Background:

Whether you've studied and taught Romans or have never read through the whole thing yet, it's important to remember that any book in the Bible that we set out to study is best understood in **context and background**. The more we understand the particulars of any book – author, date, background, purpose, themes, outline. etc. – the more that the parts within make sense. The Bible was written by men inspired/directed by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:20-21) to a real group of people who existed in time and space. When we understand what that group of people were dealing with, the text becomes clear, which allows us to move from **what the text says to how the text applies**. REMEMBER, we NEVER ask what any text of Scripture “*means to me*”. We first do the work to understand what the text MEANS, and THEN we can move to how that APPLIES to me/us.

We know some information about this epistle with a high level of certainty. The Apostle Paul was the author (1:1), and it is nearly universally unchallenged (NOTE: there are ALWAYS liberal ‘scholars’ who question everything about the Bible’s veracity, so they are nominally interesting to us). You’ll remember that Paul went from trying to destroy the church and Christianity in his zeal for the Law to becoming the greatest missionary and defender of the gospel that the world has ever known. **Acts 9** recounts his conversion through Jesus’ direct intervention, with a clearly stated, given mission:

Acts 9: 15-16 “*But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the **Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel**. ¹⁶ For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”*

This set a course for the rest of his life, which spanned about 3 decades of active ministry. This included **three distinct** missionary journeys’. The **first**, around **47-48 A.D.**, started in Antioch (Acts 13:1-3) with Barnabas and reached the area of Cyprus and Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), and was the first of its kind, where a church would fund, support, and send their best to reach other nations and plant churches. The **second** (Acts 16:1-5), which happened after a splitting of ways with Barnabas and John Mark within a year of the first, was accompanied by **Silas and Timothy**, and was more expansive, reaching into Europe, including churches we know well like those at **Corinth, Thessalonica, and Philippi**. The **third journey**, which took place shortly after the second ended, was distinctive in that it was the longest (between 53-58 AD), and re-visited many of the same churches planted on the second trip. Here he spent a lengthy time in Ephesus and time in Corinth. It was most likely in the three months he spent in Corinth that he wrote the letter to Rome (Acts 20:1-3 - between **55-58 A.D.**), including his desire to come to Rome and be with the church there. This trip ended because he had an important contribution from the churches in Macedonia and Achaia to the struggling Christians in Jerusalem (see Romans 15:25-26).

When Paul wrote this letter to the churches at Rome, he had never visited. When he arrived in Jerusalem with the gift (Acts 21:17), it did not take long for his enemies --- Jews from Asia --- to stir up the crowd and have him arrested (Acts 21:27-28). After waiting in prison in Caesarea for 2 years (Acts 24:27), he finally **appealed to Caesar** to have his case adjudicated in Rome, and Festus agreed to send him (Acts 25:1-12). After a shipwreck and three months spent on the island of Malta (Acts 28:11), he finally arrived in Rome under house arrest (Acts 28:30-31), where he wrote **Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon**, which we refer to as the *Prison Epistles*. From there we piece together that he was released, possibly made it to Spain, was re-arrested, wrote 2 Timothy, and was martyred in Rome between 64-65 A.D.

What was the purpose or reason Paul wrote this letter?

Understanding the reason behind a letter gives us clarity as to what we are supposed to understand from it. Let me propose **three main reasons** (these were largely shaped through the help of Thomas Shriener, David G. Peterson, and Colin Kruse and their respective commentaries, as well as many others) that Paul wrote Romans.

1. To Unify the Churches of Rome Through the Gospel of Jesus Christ

It is not difficult, as you read Romans, to see that Paul's main focus and emphasis is on the gospel of Jesus Christ and the righteousness of God. In fact, the **theme verses for the whole letter are:**

1:16-17 *"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. ¹⁷For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'"*

Righteousness revealed is the pervasive thread that runs through the whole of the letter. The gospel itself is glorious in the fact that we can explain it in a few sentences but explore it over a lifetime and never reach its depths. Paul said he was not ashamed because in verse 14 he said he proclaimed the gospel to both Greeks and barbarians, both to wise and foolish. In 1 Corinthians 1, he reminded us that for Jews, the gospel was a stumbling block, and for non-Jews, the gospel is mere foolishness. This meant some thought Paul was a weirdo and deserving to be mocked (Acts 17:32), while others saw him as a threat to get rid of because the gospel called people to the rightful King Jesus (Acts 17:6-7).

The gospel is undoubtedly the **"power of God for salvation"**, meaning an emphasis throughout Romans will be in our own human ability to save ourselves. Humility is required for salvation, because we have to empty ourselves of all our striving and trust in Christ's finished work completely, but it also is the means of growth and maturation. We all have a natural bent to trust ourselves for everything, and God will not accept any competitors to His rule in our lives. The **"good news"** of Romans is that EVERYONE WHO BELIEVES can be saved! God is NOT partial. He saves on the basis of His righteousness, the finished work of Jesus Christ, and the gift of **faith** given to those who believe. This concept will color and shape the entire book.

The unifying basis of the gospel is also in the fact that we are all under the **wrath of God** (Rom. 1:18). In fact, Paul spends the **first three chapters** of the book explaining that everyone --- all of mankind, the moral man, and even the ethnic Jew --- is under God's condemnation with no distinction. In 3:21-5:21, he argues that Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews) are justified by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ, and that is apart from **works of the Law**. This naturally would have led to some objections from his listeners, so in chapters 6-8 he deals with specific objections about moral standard and the nature and role of the Law itself, and how it plays out in our sanctification. In 9-11 we see God's righteousness in His saving purposes and with the nation of Israel, in that He will not fail to act in faithfulness in His covenant with her. In 12:1-15:13, he gives ethical implications in everyday life as to how the righteousness of God plays out with each other, and how we can have unity in the midst of differences.

Now at first blush it may be a bit difficult to see the thread of unity, but let me try to flush it out a bit. We know that the churches of Rome were made up of both Jews and Gentiles, as Paul's greetings in 16:3-16 were composed of both Jewish and non-Jewish names. We are not sure who **founded or started the churches at Rome**, but it was most likely associates or converts of Paul who had migrated to Rome,

an obvious cosmopolitan and urban city of commerce. This would explain why Paul knew so many of the people there without ever visiting, and his reluctance to preach there and build on another's foundation and invade another's territory (15:20). It also seems clear that the church had a more **dominant number of Gentiles over Jews, and that caused some potential problems or opportunities for disunity** (16:17-20).

In **Acts 18:2** there is a note that Emperor Claudius commanded that all Jews leave Rome. This took place in **A.D. 49**, and though it may not have meant EVERY Jew left (although Pricilla and Aquila definitely were part of it), it would have meant that for a pivotal 6 years (Jews came back around 54 A.D), the churches were mainly lead by Gentiles. You could imagine that if ANY group leaves a church and then comes back, it could create tension. If Eric and those who went with him to Rancho came back here, they would find a completely different church, from leaders to ways we do things, and unity would have to re-established. Most of the practical sections of Romans seem to speak to this issue that had been working out the last few years and that Paul heard about from his associates.

Unity is no small thing or minor issue. *"One of Paul's primary aims was to unify the church in Rome through his gospel so that Jews and Gentiles together would worship God in harmony, understanding that their unified worship fulfilled what the OT Scriptures taught."*³ Unity is key to our ability to worship, should be **eagerly maintained** because of the work of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:3), and comes out of a full understanding of the gospel. Doctrine unites, where false doctrine divides. Unity is not merely a nice feature of a church; it is an essential quality. So Paul spills much ink to make sure that Jews and Gentiles knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the gospel makes no distinction in revealing the righteousness of God in salvation. When we are dis-unified, we are operating in a different gospel reality.

2. To Ultimately Bring the Gospel to Spain

Romans is not typically seen as a book on missions, but it absolutely was on Paul's heart as he wrote this letter. Paul had reached Asia and Eastern Europe with the gospel --- from Jerusalem to Illyricum (see map) --- and now he had an ambition to reach into **Spain** (15:24, 28), a place that had not yet been reached.

15:24 *"I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while."*

The churches at Rome were established and doing well (15:14), but he saw Rome as a strategic launching pad for his work to the west. This is another reason why the churches in Rome needed to understand the gospel, its implications, and be unified. A church in dis-unity is a poor commendation to the gospel AND will have no power or desire to reach beyond itself in the sacrifice needed to reach the nations beyond it. It also sheds light on Paul's **heart**, that he had reached a significant portion of the known world and help start churches that planted churches --- every pastors and missionaries dream. But even after threats, suffering, pain, beatings, and imprisonment, he knew that his mission on this earth was not done. Paul is a great model to our **apathetic generation** who often do not have clarity as to why we exist, what we are trying to accomplish, and what success even looks like. Paul's view of retirement was rest from ministry when death finally showed up (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

³ Thomas Schreiner, "Romans: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the NT", pp. 24-25.

3. To Uniquely Bring Glory to God

What drove the letter to Rome was exactly what drove Paul in life. Nothing trivial since it all mattered. He was compelled to glorify God with everything he did, said, and thought. At the end of his section regarding Israel and God's fulfillment of His covenant to her, he was compelled to write a doxology, even though he was not done:

Romans 11:33-26 *"Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!*

³⁴ *"For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?"*

³⁵ *"Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?"*

³⁶ *For from him and through him and to him are all things. **To him be glory forever.** Amen.*

His goal was clear: to have others taste and see that God was good and that they could enjoy the Righteousness of God:

Romans 15:8-9 *"For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, ⁹ and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy*

Romans 15:18-20 *"For I will not venture to speak of anything **except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed,** ¹⁹ by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God—so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ; ²⁰ and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel,"*

For Paul, there existed nothing trivial, and thus the zeal he had for the gospel never faded. He believed that the path of joy in life and death was salvation in Jesus Christ in the gospel which revealed the righteousness of God. My hope and prayer through the study of this letter is that we will deepen our love, affection, and zeal for the gospel of Jesus Christ because we want to deepen our love for our God. And in deepening our love for Him, it will refresh and rekindle our love for each other, and desire to see the nations glorify God for His mercy!