



ROMANS

ROMANS 1:1-17

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“I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God...”

ROMANS 1:16



A DYNAMITE INTRODUCTION

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTRODUCTIONS

Life is a series of introductions. New parents get the thrill of introducing their baby to the whole world of sights, sounds, and experiences. A teacher introduces herself to a room of wide-eyed children on the first day of school. A young man introduces his nervous fiancée to his parents. Advertisers introduce new automobiles and electronic gadgets to a waiting public. A pastor introduces himself to the congregation he is about to serve.

That last scenario is actually what today’s study is all about. “Pastor” Paul is introducing himself and his message to a congregation he hopes to meet in person soon. The epistle to the Romans is one mighty, meaty letter of introduction. As we’ll soon see, it’s a “dynamite” introduction! His letter to them is still reverberating with the explosive power of that dynamite in hearts and minds almost 2,000 years later. That letter is still introducing people to the wondrous Gospel of Jesus Christ.

PAUL INTRODUCES HIMSELF

ROMANS 1:1-7

First, Paul introduces himself. Stop to consider how you’d introduce yourself to a prospective employer or a first date. Would you be bold? Careful? Transparent? What words would you choose to lay out who you are and what you’re all about?



Now look at the words Paul chose. The first is “servant.” In Greek, it’s even more striking. The word is *doulos*, which can also mean “slave.” Rome, in Paul’s day, had a population approaching one million people. Demographers estimate that 30% of those were slaves. It is almost certain that a significant number of the people in the congregation at Rome were slaves. They would understand that Paul was saying he no longer belonged to himself. Paul, as “slave,” was totally given over to the service of his new master Jesus.

There may be another reason for this term. William Barclay points out that in the Old Testament, “slave” (or “servant”) is a regular word to describe God’s appointed leaders and spokesmen. Moses (Joshua 1:2) and Joshua (Joshua 24:29) were both servants of God. The prophets were designated as God’s servants (see Amos 3:7 and Jer. 7:25). Paul sees himself as part of that company of “servants” who speak on God’s behalf.

A second term Paul employed is the word “called.” Three times in seven verses he uses it, first about his own call to be an “apostle” (v. 1), then twice about his readers. We understand Paul’s “calling” in the same way we say pastors receive a “call” to a particular congregation. We who are laypeople do not so frequently use it of ourselves, but we should! The Holy Spirit has “called me by the gospel” (*Small Catechism*). The Greek word for “church” (*ekklesia*) literally means “the called-out.” We are called out of one thing, “darkness,” and into another, “light” (1 Peter 2:9).

What are the Roman readers called into? Sainthood! Here, in verse 7, Paul tells his readers that they are called to be “saints,” a word that some of us are hesitant to embrace. We may have in our heads the sort of definition provided by a confirmation student: “a saint is a really good dead person.” Dead? Certainly not in 1 Timothy 5:10, where the saints need to have their feet washed! Here in Romans and elsewhere, the word “saints” could

also be translated “holy ones.” That holiness, Paul will make clear later, is not an accomplishment of religious super-heroes, but the gift Jesus came to impart (Eph. 5:25–26) — the washing of a whole life and not just the feet.

Paul expresses his goal for his readers another way, saying he wants to “bring about the obedience of faith” (v. 5). Which of these two words would YOU stress? Our tendency as Lutherans is to focus on faith and place it prior to obedience, separating words that are really two sides of the same coin. The result is that we neglect the “obeying” that is there when faith is there (as light and heat are there when the sun shines). Dietrich Bonhoeffer explained it thus: “Only the obedient believe, and only the believing obey” (*The Cost of Discipleship*). Luther somewhere remarked, “We are not saved by faith and works, but by a faith that works.” Paul calls it “the obedience of faith.”

ESTABLISHING A RELATIONSHIP

ROMANS 1:8–15

Having introduced himself, Paul boldly lays out his mission goals and goes immediately to work toward them. He knows he won’t accomplish anything without establishing a friendly relationship with the congregation. The relational bridge he builds to them is paved with personal pronouns. Though he has not yet met them, he employs 16 first person singular pronouns (“I,” “my,” “mine”) and 12 second person plural pronouns (“you” and “your”). All of them are Paul’s way of saying, “let’s have a relationship.”

For his part, Paul is already in relationship with them. Already that relationship is valued. Accordingly, he does here what he does in every letter, except Galatians. He launches into a thanksgiving which is both intensely personal and transparently emotional. “I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you” (v. 8). Already they are in his prayers (v. 10). Already Paul is emotionally invested. “I long to see you” (v. 11).

This section is a model for pastors in the conduct of their ministry. What congregation wouldn't love to welcome a pastor who displayed such a thankful spirit? What congregation wouldn't be encouraged by a pastor who lifted them in prayer, even before he met them? In his book *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer reminds pastors that they are never to be the congregation's "accusers" but always "intercessors." What congregation wouldn't be motivated to do its part by a pastor who was humble enough to acknowledge that ministry is a two-way street: "that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith" (v. 12)? Paul ends the section sounding like a man fresh out of seminary, "I am eager to preach the gospel to you" (v. 15). If I were a member of that congregation, I'd be thinking he couldn't get here soon enough!

Paul's personal interest in them is no act. He already knows a good deal about them, likely from friends like Aquila and Priscilla who had lived in Rome for a time. Paul knew they were a largely Gentile congregation. In verse 13, he says he wants to reap his harvest "among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles." He knows that some are not Gentiles and not everything is rosy. There is pointed discussion in Chapters 14–15 of conflicts over foods and holy days that likely grew out of the differences between Jewish and Gentile believers, an issue seemingly everywhere in the infant church.

He already has thought about and strategized his mission. The basic shape of it will be to reap some "harvest" (literally "fruit") among them. In the Bible, the mission task of the church is often framed in agricultural terms. Jesus speaks of a plentiful "harvest" in need of workers (Matt. 9:37). There is a harvest of new believers Paul surely hopes to reap. He may be using the word "fruit" also in its customary sense of the "good works" (Matt. 7:16). Those good works would necessarily include a more harmonious

relationship within the congregation itself as it seeks to resolve the aforementioned differences.

THE DYNAMITE

ROMANS 1:16–17

Paul has introduced himself and begun to establish a relationship with them. Now comes the "dynamite" introduction of the message he wants to preach. "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God..." (v. 16). "Power" translates the Greek word *dynamis*, from which we get that explosive word "dynamite." It is a word the church desperately needs to hear in a time when churches are grabbing at whatever tools or approaches will empower a renewal in their life and mission. People ponder, "What can we use?" Traditional liturgy or contemporary music or maybe a blend of the two? A pastor conversant with church growth strategies? Lay leaders attending workshops on leadership, or reading just the right books on reaching Generation X or Millennials?

"Whoa!" Paul seems to say to them and us. It is not the eloquence of the preacher that does it. It's the dynamite message of the Savior! It is not the proper use of church growth principles that changes lives. It's the dynamite proclamation of His forgiving love. It's not the rhythms of the praise team, the soaring architecture, or the fine-tuned piety of the congregation. It's the Gospel!

Paul is, as they say, packing some serious heat with this Gospel he brings. This is already the fourth time he uses the word in this opening chapter. In verse 1, it was the "gospel of God." In verse 9, it is "the gospel of his Son." In verse 15, it is simply "the gospel." Now he begins to unpack it for them.

We already know that Gospel means "Good News." Most of us have memorized John 3:16 as the one-verse summary of that news. Here in verse 17, Paul explains it with a meaning-full

word. In the Gospel, he says, “the righteousness of God is revealed.” The heart of the word “righteous” is the smaller word “right.” Being put into a right relationship with God is what his Gospel message is about. The root meaning might well be rendered “just,” a term from the courtroom where justice is done. The verbal form of “righteousness” is the word “justify.” A righteous person is one who has been justified.

In his early years in the Roman Catholic Church, Luther was taught that justification was a cleansing process by which God gradually made people more righteous (not unlike the washing of a very dirty shirt). By the time of their death, most people were still not fully purged of sin’s stains, a fact that necessitated a “purgatory” where the completion of that cleansing made them fit for heaven. But here in Romans, Luther discovered that the verb “justify” denoted a declarative act rather than a process. Not over long years, but all in a moment, God’s declaration “not guilty!” makes sinners righteous, puts them back into a right relationship with Him.

That declaration of God, and not a string of human accomplishments, is what makes the difference. That verdict is not to be achieved, but rather received! That brings us to the crucial role of faith. Four times in these two verses, Paul uses the word “believes” or “faith.” That faith is not itself a work at all, but the trusting reception of God’s amnesty declaration. Faith relinquishes all reward on the basis of one’s work, as if salvation were a wage, in order to grasp the verdict of righteousness God supplies.

Paul says this salvation is given “to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” This combination recurs in 2:9, 10; 3:9; 10:12 and elsewhere as “Jew and Gentile.” By mentioning them together, he reminds readers that there is one God over all people, regardless of race. But in saying “Jew first,” he points out the role God gave His chosen

people to be the vehicle for blessing the rest of the world. “Salvation,” Jesus Himself said, “is from the Jews” (John 4:22). The Savior who rescues all comes from Jewish fathers according to the flesh. Paul’s own mission strategy was to go first to the synagogues in the towns he visited. But there would be no difference in the way Jews and Greeks finally received that salvation.

All of that brings us at last to the theme of the entire letter of Romans: “the righteous shall live by faith.” It is the first of more than fifty quotations from the Old Testament Paul will use in Romans. Such quotes, in addition to their specific application, are Paul’s way of saying, “I’m not making any of this up! It has been there all along. It is God’s idea.” This first citation is of Habakkuk 2:4. The promise “shall live,” echoes how Jesus describes His mission in John 10:10: “I came that they may have life.” The quote from Habakkuk is deceptively complex. The verse’s original meaning could properly be rendered “the just shall live by his faithfulness.” Not simply the faith of the just person is in view, but also the faithfulness of God! What distinguishes the righteous from the wicked, according to Habakkuk, is that the righteous cling to the faithfulness of God in fearful times.

Paul will spend the rest of this great letter detailing the relationship of such words — righteousness, faith, and life. One professor told this writer, “the first part of Romans expands upon ‘he who through faith is righteous,’ and the second part expands on ‘shall live.’”

Is your mind spinning? Be patient. Settle in for the long haul and let Paul do his careful work of spading the soil and planting the seed. Gardens don’t grow overnight. Neither does our understanding of the richly-nuanced message in Romans. There’s much more to come. The adventure is only just begun.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ROMANS 1:18-32

Father, as I open this great letter once more, help me read with a receptive mind and heart. Hold up the mirror and show me the truth about this hurting world...and about me. In Jesus' name. Amen.

For Review:

1. What key words did Paul use to introduce himself in Chapter 1?

2. What words did he use to unpack the message he hoped to bring?

3. Review your memory verse from Chapter 1. The “challenge” will continue in Chapter 2.

Romans 1:18-20

4. This section details God’s wrath. How does pop culture picture the “wrath of God” showing up in the world?

5. People like to say they don’t need church; they can worship God “in nature.” What CAN we learn about God from nature?

What CAN’T be learned about God from nature?

Romans 1:21-32

6. This is Paul’s chronicle of the fall into sin (Genesis 3) and its impact. “Claiming to be wise” (v. 22) describes whom?

7. What is the great sin mentioned repeatedly in the Old Testament? (Isaiah 44:9-20, for example, is an extended, impassioned diatribe against it.) _____

8. List several stories in the Old Testament that make reference to some of the images Paul has described. (Places to start include Ex. 32:1-4 and Dan. 3:1-7)

9. Paul had some direct experience of this. Look up Acts 14:8-13. What “idolatry” was attempted there?

10. Idolatry has not disappeared in the 21st century. What “idols” do people today worship?

What are you personally tempted to make into an idol?

11. Any religion is better than no religion. True or False? Why do you think people say this?

12. One word Paul uses for what happened in the fall is “exchanged.” What is exchanged for what in:

Verse 23 _____ for _____

Verse 25 _____ for _____

Verse 26 _____ for _____

13. What verb describes God’s response in verses 24–28? How many times is it used, and in which verses?

14. Some argue that the word “exchanged” applies only to consciously chosen homosexual acts, not to one’s innate orientation. How do you react?

15. Make a list of the words that Paul uses to describe what “life without God” is like, starting in verse 29. How many words or phrases are included?

16. What is God’s verdict on “those who practice such things” (v. 32)? _____

17. They “not only do them but give approval to those who practice them” (v. 32). Give an example of how you see this happening today.

18. How did you feel as you read this section of Romans 1?

Were you thinking primarily about others or about yourself?