

Today we embark on a 14 week series of sermons
on the Epistle to the Romans.

Aside from the Gospel accounts, the Epistle to the Romans has probably
fashioned Christian understanding more
than any other book of the New Testament.

For example, the first words that Augustine of Hippo read,
according to his Confessions, after hearing a child next door say,
"Pick it up, read it," were from Romans (i.e., 13:13).

As a result of this incident, Augustine was immediately
converted to the Christian faith
and went on to become the most influential theologian
of the first millennium.

The first New Testament lectures that Martin Luther gave,
after becoming a doctor of theology
at the University of Wittenberg,
were on the Epistle to the Romans (1515-16).

The outcome of Luther's struggle to understand this epistle
was the Protestant Reformation,
which had a dramatic impact not only on the Christian church
but also on all of Western civilization.

And the first major writing in the prolific career
of the Swiss theologian Karl Barth
was a commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Romans (1918).

This commentary represented a break with the prevailing schools
of theological thought and inaugurated a new era of
theological investigation in the 20th century.

The Epistle to the Romans has also contributed significantly
to the history of Christian doctrine.

Almost every influential Christian thinker has dealt with Romans.
Origen, Thomas Aquinas, and Philip Melancthon
[Mal-length-thon], a contemporary of Martin Luther
wrote noteworthy commentaries on Romans.

Numerous theological notions have been derived solely
or in part from Romans.

Augustine acquired his idea of original sin from Romans 5,

Luther gained his understanding of justification by faith alone
 from Romans 3-4,
 John Calvin obtained his doctrine of double predestination
 from Romans 9-11,
 John Wesley got his distinctive teaching on sanctification
 from Romans 6 and 8,
 and Karl Barth learned of the importance of the righteousness
 of God from Romans 1 and 2.

The theme of Romans comes from 1:16-17.

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for
 salvation to everyone who has faith, to the [Judeans] first and also
 for the [Hellenists]. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed
 through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous
 will live by faith.”

The quotation is from Habakkuk 2:4. It is better translated,

“The one who is justified by faith will live.”

Note that I used Judeans and Hellenists.

In Paul’s time Israelites were in two groups.

Those who still lived in Judea and culturally lived under the
 “law and the prophets,”

and those who had adopted the wider cultural or Hellenism.

There also was a third group which Paul will cite the “barbarians.”

These were people who didn’t recognize
 the God of the Israelites.

Righteousness is a difficult word for us modern westerners to grasp.

It’s refers to the concept of God’s nature in the Old Testament.

God is both righteous and just.

Righteous in our thinking means “doing what is right.”

But it also has a component is its definition of doing
 what is merciful or compassionate
 to one who has committed a moral offense.

Righteousness also has component in the Honor/Shame
 society of the times.

To do right, is to honor God; to do wrong is to shame God.

Salvation meant rescue from a threatening situation.

Particularly rescue from God's wrath
and maintaining God's honor.

This rescue was done in the raising of Jesus from the dead.

God did right in God's approval and acceptance of Jesus.

And now this approval and acceptance extends

to those who have faith or trust in God who raised Jesus.

In the first chapter, Paul talks about God's wrath
against the barbarian world.

Basically, he says that barbarians should have understood
from nature who God is.

"Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse, for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him..."

God's wrath could be translated God's anger for people
who rejected God.

In chapter 2, Paul talks of the Laws of God
for both barbarians and Judeans.

Both are under judgment; both have not practiced
what the Law requires,
even those who are circumcised.

But there is a way for God's grace.

Eugene Peterson is his paraphrase, *The Message*, captures Paul's intent:

"When outsiders who have never heard of God's law follow it more or less by instinct, they confirm its truth by their obedience. They show that God's law is not something alien, imposed on us from without, but woven into the very fabric of our creation. There is something deep within them that echoes God's yes and no, right and wrong. Their response to God's yes and no will become public knowledge on the day God makes his final decision about every man and woman. The Message from God that I proclaim through Jesus Christ takes into account all these differences."

In Chapter 3 Paul expands on the significance of Jesus Christ.

...apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...

In Chapter 4 Paul reaches back to Abraham as an example of faith.

We heard a bit of the story of Abraham and Sarah earlier.

Again from Peterson:

“...the story we're given is a God-story, not an Abraham-story.

What we read in Scripture is, "Abraham entered into what God was doing for him, and that was the turning point. He trusted God to set him right instead of trying to be right on his own.

“When everything was hopeless, Abraham believed anyway, deciding to live not on the basis of what he saw he couldn't do but on what God said he would do. And so he was made father of a multitude of peoples. God himself said to him, "You're going to have a big family, Abraham!

“Abraham didn't focus on his own impotence and say, "It's hopeless..." He didn't tiptoe around God's promise asking cautiously skeptical questions. He plunged into the promise and came up strong, ready for God, sure that God would make good on what he had said... But it's not just Abraham; it's also us! The same thing gets said about us when we embrace and believe the One who brought Jesus to life when the conditions were equally hopeless. The sacrificed Jesus made us fit for God, set us right with God.”

This brings us to today's Roman reading, and it started with the word, “Therefore.”

This is Paul's conclusion of all that he has said thus far.

This was the section of Romans that so influenced Martin Luther and through him changed our understanding of the Christian faith.

“Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained

access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

I can testify to a modern experience of this.

I was visiting a man a few months ago
 who had been diagnosed with a terminal disease.
 Less than 5% of the people who contracted the disease
 lived beyond six months.

Yet he did experience what Paul says.

Suffering lead to endurance which lead to character
 which lead to hope
 and I witnessed his growth in faith and his experience
 of God's love even as his body began to fail.

His favorite song was:

“Put your hand in the hand of the man who stilled the water
 Put your hand in the hand of the man who calmed the sea
 Take a look at yourself and you can look at others differently
 By putting your hand in the hand of the man from Galilee.”

Paul says it is our faith, our trust in God, that makes all the difference.

If we trust in God's grace and love we become reconciled to God.
 God's love is poured into us through the Holy Spirit.

Martin Luther threw himself into study... by preparing a series
 of lectures on the Psalms and Romans.

And there, in the Word, he found the answer.

He says: “I greatly longed to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, “The justice of God”... Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that “the just shall live by faith.” Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and

to have gone through open doors into paradise.”
That was the missing piece, the reason sinful humans
could love God—the doctrine of justification by faith alone.
This rediscovery led to a wildfire of revival across Europe called
“The Reformation.” It changed the world forever.

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