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Sermon Summary #2

Christianity is Christ! Romans 1:1-7

If you were to sit down over coffee or lunch with an unbelieving friend or co-worker and they asked the question, “What is Christianity?” how would you answer? I hope you wouldn’t point to a building with a steeple, as if a physical structure defines what Christianity is all about. And I hope you wouldn’t point to any individual, even one as godly as the Apostle Paul or Billy Graham. My hope and prayer is that you would say, “Well, that’s easy. Christianity *is* Jesus Christ!” Here is how John Stott put it:

“The person and work of Christ are the rock upon which the Christian religion is built. If he is not who he said he was, and if he did not do what he said he had come to do, the foundation is undermined and the whole superstructure will collapse. Take Christ from Christianity, and you disembowel it; there is practically nothing left. Christ is the center of Christianity; all else is circumference” (*Basic Christianity*, 21).

There should be no dispute about this in view of what Paul writes in these opening words in Romans 1. The “gospel of God” concerns God’s “Son,” Jesus Christ (v. 3).

The Gospel of God Prophesied

But before we look at what Paul says about Jesus, note closely what he says about the “gospel”. The gospel isn’t something concocted by Paul or Peter or John or any other NT figure, far less by anyone in the 21st century. God had spoken about the gospel of Jesus Christ much earlier, in and through the prophets of the OT. The gospel may well be “good” news, but it is not “new” news. It is as old as the Old Testament scriptures which Paul describes as “holy.” Simply put, these OT prophetic books are not like any others. They are not the product of human ingenuity or intellect. They came about only as God himself spoke through his prophets in the holy scriptures. That is why they are “holy.” They are the very voice and breath of God.

The Gospel of God’s Son

But what is it that makes the gospel something more than news? Why is it “good” news? Indeed, why is it “better” news than anything else you might discover? And could it be that the biblical gospel is in fact the very “best” news imaginable? Clearly yes, and here is why.

The gospel is fundamentally about something that *has* happened. It is an accomplished event, an unalterable fact of history. Nothing can undo the gospel. No power in heaven or earth can overturn or reverse it. But as a settled achievement it also exerts a radical and far-reaching influence into both our present experience and our future hopes. Central to why it is the “best” news imaginable is that the glory of what God has already done in and through Jesus transforms everything now and yet to come.

Last week I defined the gospel. Let’s look at it again.

The “gospel” is the gloriously great good news of what our triune God has graciously done in the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ to satisfy his own wrath against us and to secure the forgiveness of sins and perfect righteousness for all who trust in him by faith alone. Christ fulfilled, on our behalf, the perfectly obedient life under God’s law that we should have lived, but never could. He died, in our place, the death that we deserved to suffer but now never will. And by his rising from the dead he secures for those who believe the promise of a resurrected and glorified life in a new heaven and a new earth in fellowship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit forever.

However, this gospel is not only the means by which people are saved. It is also the truth and power by which people are being sanctified (1 Cor. 15:1-2); it is the truth of the gospel that enables us to genuinely and joyfully do what is pleasing to God and to grow in progressive conformity to the image of Christ. Thus we must never think that the gospel is solely for unbelievers. It is for Christians, at every stage of their lives. There is nothing in the Christian life that is “post” gospel! That is why Paul will say in v. 15 that he is eager to “preach the gospel” to the Christians in Rome.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the gospel is *the gravitational center* of both our individual experience and the shape of local church life. We see this in numerous biblical texts. As Paul says it clearly, the gospel is Christocentric: it is about Jesus, God’s son (Mark 1:1; Rom. 1:9). Both Mark (Mark 1:14) and Paul (Rom. 1:1; 1 Thess. 2:2) describe it as the gospel “of God” insofar as he is its source and the cause of all that it entails. Humans do not create or craft the gospel. We have no business shaping or fashioning the gospel to conform to what we want it to be. Instead, we respond to it by repenting of our sins and believing its message (Mark 1:15) concerning what God has done in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

“But Sam,” you may be tempted to respond, “I think you’re making far too much of the gospel. Can it really be *that* important?” In response I will simply remind you of what Paul wrote in Galatians 1:7, that to “distort the gospel of Christ” (Gal. 1:7) or to preach one that is “different” from or “contrary” to what the apostles made known (Gal. 1:6-7) is to come under a divine curse (Gal. 1:9).

So, how does the gospel change us? Of what practical, daily importance is it? Many Christians live in an “*if/then*” relationship with God. *If* I do what is right, *then* God will love me. *If* I give more money to missions, *then* God will provide me with a raise at work. *If* I avoid sinful habits, *then* I will be spared suffering and humiliation. It’s a *conditional* relationship that is based on the principle of *merit*.

The gospel calls us to live in a “*because/therefore*” relationship with the Lord. *Because* we have been justified by faith in Christ, *therefore* we have peace with God (Rom. 5:1). *Because* Christ died for us, *therefore* we are forgiven. *Because* Christ has fulfilled the law in our place, *therefore* we are set free from its demands and penalty. This is an *unconditional* relationship that is based on the principle of *grace*.

If we are to understand the gospel rightly, we must keep in mind three foundational truths.

First, the gospel is not what God requires. The gospel is what God provides. There is of course, an intrinsic demand built into the gospel. The good news that is proclaimed calls for a response of faith and repentance. But our faith and repentance are not themselves the gospel. Our personal testimony is not the gospel. We cannot *be* the gospel, but we *bear witness* to it.

Second, the gospel is not an imperative, demanding things you must do. The gospel is an indicative, declaring things God has done. Again, of course we do things *because of* the gospel. But our doing things isn’t itself the gospel.

Third, the gospel is not about human action. The gospel is about divine achievement. Or again, the gospel is about God’s provision, not man’s response. The gospel is not a moralistic Do! The gospel is a merciful Done! There are undoubtedly multiple consequences of the gospel that extend beyond its impact on the individual and his relationship to God. The gospel invariably issues a call for human action. Among the implications or results of the gospel are the cultivation of humility (Phil. 2:1-5), the pursuit of racial reconciliation (Eph. 2:11-22) and biblical justice (Philemon 8-20), a commitment to harmony and peace among men (Rom. 15:5-7; Heb. 12:14), and the demonstration of love one for another (1 John 3:16, 23). But we must never confuse the content of the gospel with its consequences, or its essence with its entailments.

The Gospel of God is all about God’s Son, Jesus Christ

The focus of the contrast between v. 3 and v. 4 is not between his human nature and his divine nature but rather between his *humiliation* and his *exaltation*. In other words, the contrast is not between two different components in Christ’s person but between *two successive stages or phases in Christ’s experience*. The simplest way of putting it is that Paul is describing Jesus during the time of his earthly ministry and Jesus after his resurrection and exaltation.

When I use the word *humiliation* I have in mind his birth as a literal, physical descendant of King David, and the lowly life he lived while on earth. He was weak, subject to slander and persecution and eventual crucifixion. The word *exaltation* points us to his resurrection from the dead, his ascension into heaven, and his enthronement at the right hand of God.

Therefore, “flesh” in v. 3 refers not so much to the body (far less to the sinful nature) but to the present, natural, earthly realm in which we live. The *flesh/spirit* contrast is *historical*; it is a contrast between this present, fallen, earthly, temporal world in which we live, and the future, redeemed, heavenly, eternal world which is yet to come.

Thus the phrase “according to the flesh” refers not so much to Christ's human nature but to the historical realm/environment with which humanity is necessarily associated. The eternal Son of God entered the sphere of the flesh, i.e., this present, fallen, evil age. But as v. 4 goes on to point out, by virtue of his resurrection he has entered the sphere of the *spirit*, the new age, the heavenly realm where he now lives and reigns.

The word translated “declared” is significant. It is the Greek word *horizo*, from which we get the English term “horizon”. Some insist it means that the resurrection *marks out* or *declares* Jesus to be the Son of God. But in its 7 other occurrences in the NT it means *to determine, to appoint, to fix* (Luke 22:22; Acts 2:23; 10:42; 11:29; 17:26,31; Heb. 4:7). In some sense, then, Christ Jesus was *appointed* Son of God by virtue of his resurrection from the dead.

This would appear to create a theological problem, for how can the eternally pre-existent Son be *appointed* Son of God? But note well. Paul does not say Jesus was appointed Son of God, but Son of God *with power*. Paul is describing an event in history whereby Jesus was instated or installed in a position of sovereignty and invested with power (cf. Acts 13:33; Phil. 2:9-11). At the resurrection and exaltation Jesus began a new *phase* of divine sonship. While on earth Jesus was certainly the Son of God. But he was not the *Son-of-God-with-power*.

So, Paul is not saying Jesus became the Son of God at the time of the resurrection. Being appointed Son does not mean that the man Jesus underwent some sort of transformation and in doing so became the Son of God. Paul is saying that the Son of God who was man and suffered during the time of his humiliation and lived a lowly existence while on earth has, by virtue of his resurrection from the dead, entered into an exalted position as Son of God with power. He was always the Son of God. But not with power. The transition from v. 3 to v. 4 is not a change from a merely human person to a divine one. It is a transition from the Son of God in weakness, suffering, frailty, submission, and humiliation to the Son of God in power and strength and authority and exaltation.

May I suggest a similar situation in our state. Prior to 2018, Kevin Stitt was a private citizen of the state of Oklahoma. He was a businessman. His authority was limited and he lived his life much in the same way all of us do. But on election day he was elevated to the position of Governor of the state. He was installed publicly as the person with the highest level of authority in Oklahoma. Nothing changed in terms of his personal identity. The Kevin Stitt who was a businessman is the same Kevin Stitt who is now Governor. His essence hasn't changed. His nature as a man hasn't changed. But his status and function have changed when he was appointed to be Governor of our state.

I hope that is a helpful analogy. Jesus Christ was always the Son of God when he walked this earth and ministered and suffered rejection and slander from the people. The Jesus Christ who was raised from the dead and ascended to the right hand of God the Father is the same person as the one who walked this earth. But with his resurrection and glorification, his status and function and authority have changed. He is not simply the Son of God but now he is the *Son-of-God-with-power!*

Perhaps the best way to explain what Paul meant when he said that Jesus was declared or appointed to be the Son of God with power is by listening to Jesus himself. Hear his words in what we call the Great Commission: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matt. 28:18). Paul said it yet again in 1 Corinthians 15:25-26 - “For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For God has put all things in subjection under his feet” (1 Cor. 15:25-27a).

Simply put, Jesus Christ is the Messianic King who reigns and rules over the whole of creation. He is even now progressively subduing his enemies and one day he will return in glory and what we believe by faith we will then see with our eyes, as all will be subjected to him. This is what Paul had in mind in Philippians 2:9-11,

“Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:9-11).

It’s important for us to see that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead that marked the transition from his earthly weakness to his exalted heavenly power was the work of the Holy Spirit. This is in keeping with the fact that everything Jesus did in his earthly ministry, from preaching to healing to setting free the demonically oppressed, was accomplished in and through the power of the Holy Spirit who filled and indwelt him.

Paul’s use of *Lord* with reference to Jesus is eternally significant. *Lord* translates the Hebrew *YHWH* more than 6,000x in the LXX (the Greek translation of the OT Hebrew Scriptures). To speak of Jesus as *Lord* is to identify him with YHWH, God of Israel! It also points to his absolute sovereign right of rule over us: over our minds, wills, emotions, lives, time, money, talents, and everything. This shouldn’t come as a surprise to those who heard Paul describe himself in v. 1 as a “slave of Christ Jesus.”

Jesus Christ, the Source of Grace and the Goal of the Gospel

Although it is true that Paul was uniquely called to be an apostle (v. 1), all of us are recipients of divine grace through Jesus Christ (v. 5). Grace is one of those biblical words that gets used often enough but is not always understood. Mention “grace” during the Winter Olympic games and someone will point to the fluid movements of an ice skater. Others think of it as something you say before you eat a meal. Most Christians define it as undeserved favor. I’m sure you’ve heard all sorts of definitions, but I like this one best of all:

God’s grace is his inclination, disposition, and action to freely give the most glorious and greatest possible blessing to the least deserving creatures at the greatest imaginable cost.

The cost is the death of his Son on the cross. That is why Paul can say here in v. 5 that it is “through” Christ Jesus that we have received grace and through Christ Jesus that Paul was called to be an apostle.

Think about the implications of this in light of what Paul has already said back in v. 1. There he happily described himself, and all of us too, as a “slave of Christ Jesus.” To anyone who may object to that designation, to anyone who may be offended by it, Paul is telling us that it was a gift of God’s grace. We are slaves of Jesus Christ by divine grace.

But God’s grace is more than a disposition or inclination in the heart of God toward hell-deserving sinners. It is also power. It is the strength of God the Holy Spirit working in and through us. In Romans 15:21 Paul speaks of grace “reigning” or ruling in such a way that people are led to faith and eternal life in Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 15:10 he again writes: “I worked harder” than anyone else, “though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.”

Let’s read v. 5 again and insert ourselves into the text. That’s perfectly legitimate. So listen closely. It is “through” Jesus Christ and all that he has done for you that you have “received grace” and _____. It may not be apostleship, but every gift and calling in a Christian’s life is the fruit of grace. You fill in the blank. Some of you may say that it is through Jesus that you have received grace and the gift of teaching, or the gift of mercy, or the desire to serve others, or the talent to lead worship, or the calling to show hospitality. Others may say that through Jesus you have “received grace and singleness” or “motherhood” or whatever. There isn’t anything to which God has called us that we can faithfully fulfill apart from the power of his grace.

But to what end? Why has he made Paul and you and me objects of his gracious love and the power that comes with it? Paul says it was “to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ” (vv. 5b-6). There it is again: we “belong” to Christ; we are his slaves. But that wonderful privilege has a purpose: to be the instrument through which the nations, and that includes the Romans and you me as well, experience “the obedience of faith” (v. 5b).

The phrase “obedience of faith” may mean one of two things, depending on how one interprets the prepositional phrase, “of faith.” Let me give you another example. If I were to say, “The love of God is the reason why we exist,” how would you interpret “the love of God”? Do I mean our love for God? Am I saying that the reason we exist is to

love God? Or do I mean God's love for us? Am I saying that the reason we exist is because God chose to love us? So, is God the object and focus of our love, or does love originate within God?

In the case of the phrase, "obedience of faith," the options are slightly different. Does Paul mean that obedience or a godly life issues out of faith? Is he talking about that obedience to God's will that comes from or is produced by faith? Or does he mean that obedience *is* faith? Belief in the gospel can be described as an act of obedience, as indicated by the parallel phrases in Romans 10:16 ("But not all *obeyed the gospel*. For Isaiah said, 'Lord, who has *believed* our report?"). I prefer option two. That faith in the gospel to which Paul calls us is the kind that obeys. Thus, if your so-called "faith" does not obey, is it "saving" faith?

But even more important is the fact that the salvation of the nations was not itself the ultimate purpose of Paul's mission, and neither should it be of ours. We long to see the nations of the earth come to saving faith in Jesus. But why? To what ultimate end? Paul says it clearly. It is "**for the sake of his name**" (v. 5b). First, foremost, and fundamental to Paul's endeavors was honor and praise for the glory of Christ's name. John Stott said it perfectly:

"The highest of missionary motives is neither obedience to the Great Commission (important as that is), nor love for sinners who are alienated and perishing (strong as that incentive is, especially when we contemplate the wrath of God, verse 18), but rather zeal—burning and passionate zeal—for the glory of Jesus Christ" (53).

As a "slave" of Jesus Christ, I assume you wouldn't want it any other way. As one whom he has purchased by his blood, as one who belongs to him, as one who exists for him, your desire must be that in all that happens, even the salvation of the lost, his "name" should be honored and glorified.

This applies universally. Paul says in v. 6 that we are recipients of God's grace so that all of us, including those in Rome and those in Oklahoma City and those in Madagascar and those in Russia might live to his glory and for the sake of the fame of his name.

The Recipients of Romans

Paul sends this epistle to all the Christians in Rome. He doesn't send it to "The Society of Ivory Tower Theologians" or to those with an IQ of 150 and higher. The point is that **Romans is not too difficult for the average believer**. It is for *you and me*. There will be times during our study of Romans when you will probably leave here scratching your head and wondering what in the world could the Apostle Paul (and Sam) have meant by that? But don't ever resign yourself to confusion or ignorance. The people in Rome were nowhere nearly as educated as you are. Some of them were probably illiterate. Few of them held positions of authority and influence in Rome. Most were simple people who labored long and hard every day just to make ends meet. And this remarkably profound theological treatise was intended for them and for you and me!

But why should we be given the truths of this letter? Who are we that we should be in this position of privilege and blessing? Paul answers that in v. 7. You who have become slaves of Christ Jesus by faith in him are "loved by God and called to be saints" (v. 7). Let's slow down and consider both of these.

Those who are Loved by God

You may not think that anyone else cares anything at all for you. I don't believe that's true, but you may be convinced that it is. Satan is trying to convince you that it is true. He wants you to feel excluded, unloved, uncared for, and unnoticed by others. You aren't. But hearing me reassure you probably won't change things. What will change things is your capacity to believe and receive *God's* love for you.

Think about that for a moment. We talk about it all the time. We sing about it on Sunday mornings. But God wants you to feel his affection for you. He wants you to be set free from self-contempt and shame and the pain it brings as you reflect on the glorious truth that the God of the universe, the Creator and Providential Lord over all, loves you and delights in you and quite literally sings over you (Zeph. 3:17)!

Does God love everyone in Rome, even those who don't believe in Jesus? In one sense, yes, but in another sense, no. God's love for all mankind is seen in his provision of sunlight and rain and food and his sustaining power that keeps them from falling into non-existence and countless other blessings that people enjoy.

But he has a special, covenant love for the Bride of Christ, the church, wherever it may be found, be it in first-century Rome or twenty-first century Oklahoma City. Does it not shock you to hear Paul say that the God of all creation has a special love for this small band of believers who live in a city of 400,000? Paul is saying, "Among all the men, women, and children of every age who live in Rome, I'm writing this letter to those who are loved by God." In some sense they are loved by God in a way that others are not.

If I say to all the believers at Bridgeway, "I love you," you know what I mean. I actually love you in a way that is different from the way I love non-Christians in OKC. You are my spiritual family. We are in a covenant relationship with one another. And if I say to Ann, my wife of 48 years, "I love you. You are my beloved," you don't have to be told that my love for her is special and unique. You would never assume that I love Ann because I love all women, and the only reason why I love her is because I love them.

So it is with God's love for his people, the Church. There is a special affection and delight he takes in us that he does not feel for those who hate him and reject the gospel. Paul is not saying, God calls you "beloved" because he loves everybody the same, and, since you are part of everybody, you are also beloved." Here in v. 7 he is speaking to those who are "called to belong to Jesus Christ" (v. 6). In other words, this is not the general or universal love that God has for everyone in his creation. This is the love he has for his covenant people, those he has called to be saints, set apart for himself.

Called to be Saints

There will be plenty of occasions in our study of Romans to explore what Paul means when he speaks of our being "called" to Jesus Christ. But today I want you to think about what it means that you are called to be "saints."

There is no such thing in Scripture as a special class or category of exceptionally holy or "saintly" or godly people who should be called "saints" to the exclusion of all other believers. We are all saints. The word doesn't mean we are saintly or without sin or that we have performed miraculous deeds that set us apart from other ordinary believers. To be a "saint" is to be set apart unto God.

Furthermore, there is not a single instance in the NT where a particular individual is called a saint. Every time the word appears it is in the plural: "saints." We often hear references to "Saint Paul" or "Saint Timothy" or "Saint Peter." And believe it or not, I am "Saint Sam"! But such labels or titles are misleading. The point of the plural "saints" is to highlight that we are a community, a group of believers set apart for God. Back in v. 1 Paul described himself as "set apart for the gospel." Well, all of us are "set apart" unto God as his personal possession. That is what is meant when he calls us saints.

Conclusion The Impartation of Grace and Peace

I don't like it when teachers or preachers or even average Christians skip over statements such as we find in the second half of v. 7. Don't ever read things like this as if it is nothing more than a literary device or a throw-away conclusion to his opening statement. When Paul declares, "grace" to you and "peace" to you, he is praying for an impartation of grace and peace into the experience of God's people.

There is a very real sense in which this sort of statement is actually a prayer. Paul is, in effect, asking God to impart into the experience of the Roman Christians a fresh expression of his power and peace. It is as if Paul says,

"May God be pleased to empower you by his Spirit and awaken and energize you to the reality of his kindness toward you and his presence in you. May God be pleased to calm your troubled hearts and bring spiritual tranquility to the turmoil in which you find yourself."