

## Introduction to Paul’s Letter to the Romans and the Purpose of This Sermon Series

- Paul’s letter to the church in Rome has been considered the “flagship” of Christian theology throughout Church history, and has even been considered the key to understanding the whole Bible.<sup>1</sup>
- Here is the phrase I am using to meditate on, pray in, and preach through this letter with you: **“Paul wrote his letter to the Romans to unify the local church for global mission through the right understanding and application of the Gospel.”** Consider memorizing this with me. Write it in your Bibles on the first page of Romans.
  - **“Global mission.”** This is what we’re called to as God’s people (Matthew 28:18-20; Luke 24:46-49; Acts 1:8). It frames the beginning and ending of Romans (1:5,8; 16:26). Paul’s desire to preach to the Romans face-to-face seems to be part of a plan to launch from there to a Spanish mission (15:23,24).
  - **“Unify.”** Paul’s desire was for a unified Church. In the first generation of the new covenant in Christ, Jews and non-Jews were put together into one body, one people of God. Having been separated for the entirety of the old covenant age, there were considerable birth pains in this new

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<sup>1</sup> “...when anyone gains a knowledge of this Epistle, he has an entrance opened to him to all the most hidden treasures of Scripture” (John Calvin, *The Epistle to the Romans: The Argument*, 1539). “This Epistle is really the chief part of the New Testament and the very purest Gospel, and is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul...it is, in itself, a bright light, almost enough to illuminate all the Scripture” (Martin Luther, *Preface to Romans*, 1552). More recently, and more poetically, John Piper (b. 1946) called it “this Everest.”

- creation. The answer is the Gospel, and Paul was not willing to allow any disunity to exist in the Roman congregation. Neither should we in our congregation.
- **“The local church.”** The letter to the Romans (and most of the New Testament) was originally written to a local, definite congregation of believers.<sup>2</sup> By the power of the Spirit Who wrote it, the same letter continues to be an instrument of sanctification (being made holy) to countless other local churches – like ours.
- **“The right understanding and application of the Gospel.”** The letter to the Romans is about the Gospel from beginning (1:1) to end (16:25).<sup>3</sup> It explains it in detail, and applies it thoroughly. This is where Paul seeks to build the unity of the Roman church that it might be a suitable help to him in a Spanish mission. It is where we should seek our unity for a mission from southwest New Mexico to the furthest reaches of the world.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The book of Acts describes the founding of individual congregations throughout the Roman Empire. Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy (Ephesus), Titus (Crete), Philemon (Colossae), Hebrews (see 13:18-25), Revelation (churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea) are all definitely written to specific congregations. The New Testament is a local church Book which knows Christianity as expressed through the local church. Beware of those who advocate a “Christianity” freed from the mooring of the local church!

<sup>3</sup> In fact, the noun “Gospel” (εὐαγγέλιον) occurs more in Romans than any other N.T. book (10 times). The verb translated “preach the Gospel” (εὐαγγελίζω) occurs in 1:15; 10:15; 15:20.

<sup>4</sup> READ 2 Timothy 3:16,17. What precedes “*every good work*”? A desire and attempt to “*every good work*” apart from scriptural grounding is doomed to failure. Paul writes a doctrinal masterpiece to establish a firm foundation for global mission (his desire to move on

- We don't just gather to study the Bible to learn facts. God the Holy Spirit authored this Book, and uses our time gathered together in it to work in us and through us. With that in mind, pray with me that what the Spirit did through Paul's letter to a local church 2,000 years ago He will again do through the same letter in our congregation.

1:1 “*Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God...*”

## The Man Reborn

“Paul...”

- The first word of Romans is a miracle, an example of God's greatest miracle: eternal life to the spiritually dead. Salvation. We first meet Paul as “Saul” in Acts 7:58, where he stands witness at the stoning of Stephen, the first martyr of the new covenant Church. He consented to Stephen's execution (8:1). Paul calls himself “foremost of all” sinners in the world (1 Timothy 1:15). Why?
  - He was “*ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison*” (Acts 8:3).
  - He was “*breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord*” (Acts 9:1).

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to Spain with the help of the Roman congregation). We must be a people who start from the Book, or our unity will be shallow, producing only a temporary fruit before disintegrating from lack of focus and discipline. The Spirit works through the Word He has inspired to accomplish His purpose in the world: “*...work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God Who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure...prove yourselves to be...children of God in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life*” (Philippians 2:12-16).

- He “*persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons*” (Acts 22:4).
- He “*used to imprison and beat those who believed in*” Christ (Acts 22:19).
- “*...not only did [he] lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death [he] cast [his] vote against them*” (Acts 26:10).
- He “*punished them often in all the synagogues,*” trying “*to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, [he] kept pursuing them even to foreign cities*” (Acts 26:11).
- He would “*persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it*” (Galatians 1:13).
- He “*was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor*” (1 Timothy 1:13).
- Until you really understand the story of Saul/Paul, you will not understand “*the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ*” (Romans 5:15). READ of his conversion in Acts 9:1-31. Can you understand a grace that makes the Church's greatest enemy its greatest teacher? Do you really believe the God Who saves solely by the grace He gives in His Son? It is the only thing that can save you, and it can save anyone. Anyone.
- Saul of Tarsus was not harder to save than you. He wasn't more lost than you were before Christ. Apart from Christ, we are all “*ungodly*” (5:6), “*sinners*” (5:8), and even God's “*enemies*” (5:10). The ugly “*all*” of “*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (3:23) means “*all*.” The grocery list of Old Testament verses in 3:10-18 applies to all apart from Christ. Look at Saul the murderer, blasphemer, persecutor, torturer. He is the same as anyone lost in their sins apart from Christ. It is equally “*impossible*” for Saul and anyone else apart from Christ to save themselves (Matthew 19:25,26// Mark 10:26,27//Luke 18:26,27). Only the power of the

Gospel can make Saul the murderer into the first word -  
“*Paul*” - of the greatest letter ever written.

- Luke first tells us that his name is Paul in 13:9. Paul’s name is the first word of the letter to the Romans. His name means “little,” or “small.” This name meaning pictures Paul’s self-identity: “*I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am*” (1 Corinthians 15:9,10).<sup>5</sup>

## The Man Purchased

“...*a bond-servant of Christ Jesus...*”

- The Old Testament law of the “*bond-servant*” can be found in Exodus 21:1-6; Deuteronomy 15:12-17.
- Paul will define what it means for you and me to be “*a bond-servant of Christ Jesus*” in Romans 6:16-20. It involves being owned. It involves obedience to a master. This is the life of not just Paul, but every believer. If you confess to being a Christian, can you say this of your life?
- This title echoes the Old Testament title “servant of the LORD.”
  - This title is given to Abraham (Genesis 26:24), Moses (Deuteronomy 34:5; Joshua 1:1,13,15; 8:31,33; 11:12; 12:6; 13:8; 14:7; 18:7; 22:2,4; 2 Kings 18:12; 2 Chronicles 1:3; 24:6), Joshua (Joshua 24:29; Judges 2:8), David (Psalm 18:1; 36:1; 89:3,20), and the Prophets (2 Kings 17:23). Paul’s taking of this title upon himself puts him in great company.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The first two words in the original Greek text of Romans (Παυλος δουλος, “Paul, bond-servant”) rhyme, emphasizing the writer’s low state.

<sup>6</sup> And since Paul will apply this title to all believers, we also take our place with the Old Testament saints who are called “the servant of the LORD.”

- The adapting of the Old Testament title “*servant of the LORD*” to the New Testament title “*bond-servant of Christ Jesus*” also makes a statement about Jesus. He is the LORD of the Old Testament.

## The Man Commissioned

### The Office

“...*called as an apostle...*”

- There is no verb in this phrase in the original Greek (“*called*” is an adjective); our English translations provide the verb, considering it implied. A more literal rendering might be, “a called apostle.”
- The title “*apostle*” is the equivalent to our title “missionary.”<sup>7</sup> For that first generation, however, it was also a title specially designating those men used of God to write the New Testament.<sup>8</sup>
- Paul later identifies himself as “*an apostle to the Gentiles*” (11:13).

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<sup>7</sup> The word “*apostle*” (αποστολος) is the noun of the verb αποστελλω, which means “to send.” While we usually focus on the original Twelve apostles, others in the Church had this title (16:7; 2 Corinthians 8:23; Philippians 2:25).

<sup>8</sup> Peter gives the qualification for this unique position in Acts 1:21,22. Paul later cites the appearance of the ascended Jesus to him as a qualification for apostleship (1 Corinthians 15:8,9); Paul (and Barnabas) is first called an apostle in Acts 14:4. The early Church was continually dedicated to the “*apostles’ doctrine*” (Acts 2:42). The apostles are the “*foundation*” of the Church (Ephesians 2:20; Revelation 21:14). All of the New Testament is considered “apostolic.” It is either written by an apostle, an apostle’s associate, or is identical with the teaching of the apostles. Those who try to isolate Jesus or Jesus’ teaching from the rest of the N.T. fail to realize we would not have any knowledge of Jesus or His teaching apart from the apostolic New Testament!

## The Purpose

“...set apart for the gospel of God...”

- “Set apart” is the only verb in this verse. It is, of course, passive. Paul did not set himself apart (any more than he gave himself the title “called apostle” or purchased himself, making himself “a bond-servant of Christ Jesus”).
- Even though Paul will use the phrase “my Gospel” (Romans 2:16; 16:25; 2 Timothy 2:8), there is no doubt as to the divine origin of the Gospel. No man invented it or has authority to change it.<sup>9</sup> It is all-consuming and completely defining of Paul’s life. It is not to be reworked or subjugated to anyone’s personal, political, or philosophical agenda.

## God’s Commissioning of the O.T. Prophets

- Paul uses similar language (“...called...set apart...”) in his letter to the Galatians (sometimes called a shorter version of his letter to the Romans): “*God, Who had set me apart even from my mother’s womb and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles*” (Galatians 1:15,16).<sup>10</sup>
- This language is echoed from the commissioning of the O.T. prophets:
  - “*The Lord called me from the womb; from the body of my mother He named me. He has*

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<sup>9</sup> Paul made it clear that even he had no authority to change the Gospel (Galatians 1:8).

<sup>10</sup> See also Acts 13:1-4, where the Holy Spirit (through the “prophets and teachers” of the church in Antioch) sets apart Paul and Barnabas for His mission. They will return to this same to church to give a report on the mission (14:26-28). Even the apostle Paul, one of the greatest theologians and church planters in Church history, is sent by the Holy Spirit through the agency of a local church, and reports back to that local church.

*made my mouth like a sharp sword...and now says the Lord, Who formed me from the womb to be His servant...He says, ‘It is too small a thing that you should be My servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make you a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth’*” (Isaiah 49:1,2,5,6).

- “*Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations’*” (Jeremiah 1:4,5).

## The Gospel and the “Roman Road”

- Paul will soon describe the Gospel for which he was “set apart” as “*the power of God for salvation.*” This is the Gospel he wanted to preach both to Christians (1:15) and “*not where Christ was already named*” (15:20).
- Proclaiming the Gospel using the “Roman Road” approach is well-known to many believers. Using verses in Romans, we share the need for salvation because of sin (3:23; 6:23), the gift of salvation found in Jesus Christ alone (5:8), what we must do to be saved in Christ (10:9), and the assurance of salvation in Christ (10:13). Paul was set apart for the Gospel. Are you? Have you walked down the “Roman Road” and know the salvation that comes by faith in Jesus Christ alone?

**Paul wrote his letter to the Romans  
to unify the local church for global mission  
through the right understanding and application  
of the Gospel.**

**We pray that the Holy Spirit uses it to do the same in us.**