

Romans, Part 1 4-3-22

Gospel Servant

The beginning of a journey is usually rather exciting – and especially so if the journey is a long and significant one. That is how I feel today as we begin our journey through, our swimming in the river that is Paul's letter to the Romans. I have preached a few sermons from Romans in my lifetime. I have included it in my teaching routinely, but I have never endeavored to teach through the epistle as I intend now to do. As we begin, I am mindful of the historic importance of this letter. It is a portion of Scripture that has been used by God in singular ways throughout the history of the church. The names of Augustine, Luther and Wesley are certainly prominent in the Christian hall of fame. All three of them trace their conversion back to Romans. Augustine was the only son of a woman by the name of Monica. She had given her only son to God. She had prayed that he would know and serve Christ but instead he had become an educated liberal. He had a live-in girlfriend and was heavily into new age religion. He had thoroughly rejected his mother's faith, but she continued to pray for her son who could have been a poster boy for total depravity. And as she prayed things only got worse. Her son was sent to a new assignment in the city of Milan, Italy, known as a Mecca for the debased. So, there he went, far away, entrapped in a lifestyle of self-indulgence and false religion. What are the odds of a man like that becoming a right-wing Bible thumping Christian like his mother? There was no hope for him. No hope. But God. This great God one day led a curious college professor into a church in Milan Italy just to hear the oratory of the famous preacher named Ambrose. Just to hear how the man could move a crowd and there he heard more than a speech. There he heard a word that sounded strangely like home. Soon after he was moved to pick up a Bible, which happened to fall open to Romans 13:13, a verse which exposed the wickedness of his life for it said **13** *Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy.* Then he came to the punch line, in verse **14** *But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.* Put on the Lord Jesus Christ. This man, whose name we call St. Augustine, the famous bishop of Hippo said of that moment. "No further would I read, nor did I need; for instantly, as the sentence ended - by a light, as it were, of security infused into my heart - all the gloom of doubt vanished away." That was 386 AD.

Fast forward now 1,350 years later. A man named John Wesley who also had an extraordinary mother – Susannah, who disciplined seventeen children in the ways of the Lord. John had recently been a missionary to the Americas, but when he returned to England he discovered on his treacherous voyage that whatever faith he had, it had given him no confidence in the face of death. But on the evening of May 24, 1738 Wesley went very unwillingly to a little religious meeting in Aldersgate Street in London where he found a man reading, not preaching, but reading Martin Luther's preface to his commentary on Romans. On this night, in that little chapel, Wesley says that "at about a quarter to nine I felt my heart strangely warmed" He was never the same. I have a biography of Wesley accurately entitled "The Burning Heart." He was a man aflame with love for God and it was Luther's preface to his Romans commentary that set his heart to burning. Or, rather, Jesus, speaking through Paul and Luther to his servant.

200 years and more before Wesley then there was Martin Luther, the famed reformer from Germany. His encounter with Romans was clearly life and world changing. Luther was a devoted monk who was seeking to serve God but finding no joy in the process, instead only a great burden of guilt. He was a man without peace, but God had appointed Luther a mentor by the name of Staupitz who encouraged the young monk to devote himself to the study of Scripture which is where Staupitz had discovered the keys to pardon and peace. Luther did. And it was the book of Romans that grabbed his attention. In a few weeks we will study verses 16 and 17 of this first chapter. These two verses were the keys that unlocked Luther's heart and the Reformation that followed. Luther said: *Romans is the chief part of the New Testament and the perfect gospel.*

Unlike most of Paul's epistles, it was not written to address a particular problem or problems in the church. Paul had never been to Rome at this point. So, his letter is more generic in nature. It provides Paul an opportunity to simply set forth in writing a summation of what he saw as most important for Jesus-people to understand. It is as relevant today as it was in the first century. It is as relevant in western Pennsylvania as it was in first century Rome. May God once again speak with transforming clarity and power from this letter of His servant.

1:1-7 *Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God,* ²*which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures,* ³*concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh,* ⁴*who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord,* ⁵*through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the*

obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for His name's sake, ⁶among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ; ⁷to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. The substance of the book of Romans begins in verse 16 of this chapter. This is the brief introduction to the epistle, which introduces us again to the author, the apostle Paul. *1 Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God.* The author of our epistle sets the table neatly for this first message in which we consider the disposition, authority and mission of our author. Most of our time will be spent on the disposition of the author, so let's start with a quick consideration of the other two ideas.

Paul says he is called as an apostle. This is the office, this is the credential that establishes his authority in the church. Scripture says that the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. These apostles were those called out by Jesus himself to lead the church in its infancy, to lay the foundation for the church by their missionary activity and especially by their teaching. Notice the passive tense of the word *called*. Paul did not volunteer for this job. He never sent in a resume. He was apprehended by Jesus. Set apart by God for this work. Paul says in Galatians 1 that God set him apart from his mother's womb. How awesome is that! So, it is in his role as apostle that Paul writes to the Roman church. The other letters of Paul to churches went to those Paul personally founded – but not this one. Nevertheless, his apostleship gives him credibility, gives him clout when he communicates to this distant body of believers. We believe Paul wrote this letter from Corinth, to a Roman church that was a blend of Jewish and Gentile believers, but mostly Gentile. And you may recall that for Paul, this was his distinct calling among the apostles, to focus on the growing Gentile church. Ephesians 3:8 is sort of my life verse. There Paul wrote – *8 To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ.*

That leads us to our next idea from verse one, which is the man's mission. You could also call it Paul's message because his mission and his message were essentially one and the same. His message was the gospel and his was a gospel mission. What is the gospel? It is the good news of the unfathomable riches of Christ. It is the story of His perfect life, His atoning death, His validating resurrection, His triumphant ascension and His present reign in heaven as a gracious king. Paul says he was set apart for the gospel of God. God's gospel. It is a joy isn't it, to promote something, to share something you really believe in? Some of you get to do that in your job. Paul did too. He preached with confidence, with gladness, and with perseverance in the face of much hostility because he truly had

this in his pocket – it is God’s gospel. God’s gospel. Paul was sold out to it. In Acts 20:24 *I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.* The gospel of --- you could put many things in that blank and when we come to verse 16 we will. The reality is that the Gospel, the Euangelion, is the theme of Romans. It is mentioned by name six times in the first chapter. With that in mind then, we will move on to our next point for today in confidence that we will have many wonderful Sundays together unpacking that the gospel of God is for us.

But, as noted our major focus today is on Paul’s self-reference as a bond-servant of Jesus. This is common language for Paul. He says something similar in most of his letters. Titus 1:1 *Paul, a bond-servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ.* Philippians 1:1 *Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus.* In verse two Paul references the Old Testament prophets and says that his mission and message is connected historically with theirs. Interestingly, his title of bond-servant does the same. This was the way the Old Testament prophets spoke of themselves. The prophets of old were referred to as the Lord’s servants. Daniel said in Daniel 9:6 *we have not listened to Your servants the prophets.* God says through Jeremiah 7:25 *Since the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt until this day, I have sent you all My servants the prophets.* Moses, the greatest prophet of the Old Testament era, was routinely identified as *Moses, the servant of the Lord.* Joshua then took to himself that exalted title. When God spoke to Samuel, how did the young man respond? *Speak Lord, for your servant heareth.* David’s self-designation also – *the servant of the Lord.* All of the prophets – if you had seen their business card, it would have led with “servant of the Lord.” So now – as a New Testament agent of revelation, Paul is picking up on that same title and leading with it as he introduces himself to the Roman church.

Now, does a self-designation as that tell us anything? How do you identify yourself? Who are you? What is the core of your identity? Nowadays there is much pressure to define yourself by your sex, by your sexual orientation, or by your race. Is that what should matter most to us? Are there other things? Are you primarily a doctor or a Christian? A home-school mom or a follower of Jesus? A Republican or a child of God? What about your designation of others? Suppose someone asked you, “Who is Brooke Hopkins?” What would you say? Is he a great musician? Gayla’s man? Olivia’s dad? Or is he a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ? I believe that is a very revealing question about what you think is important. You see, we designate people by that which we deem more important about them

whether that be a position or accomplishment or a relationship. What you pick depends on your values. And I do find it most interesting that Paul did not designate himself by his job, or his family status or his accomplishments. He did not say, *I am Paul of Tarsus, pastor of the 2,000-member church at Ephesus*. He said, *I am a bondservant of Jesus Christ*, because nothing more important can be said about any man. Paul identifies himself by his relationship with his Lord because that was what best explained who Paul was. Paul says, *I am a servant*, and in itself that is not so significant. If someone tells you that they worked as personal aid for Dan Hendley, you would not be impressed, but what if they said they work as personal aid for Elon Musk? Hmm. Or the president? Nothing special about being a servant, but if you serve someone notable or powerful, that servanthood can become your glory. Look at whom Paul served. He isn't servant to a president or a king, but to the king of kings and to the Lord of Lords. And he gloried not in whom he had under him, but in whom he had over him. This is to be our glory my friend. It doesn't matter what great things you have accomplished, or what great titles you have won, there is no title greater than this one: *a bond-servant of Christ Jesus*.

The Greek word is *doulos*. The New American Standard translates it as *bond-servant* and it does so because the meaning falls somewhere in between our words *servant* and *slave*. The *doulos* was not a slave of the chains and whips variety which we often associate with the institution. But neither was he a servant who worked under a simple labor-management agreement. He could not go on strike because a *doulos* was not free to quit. He was bound to his master who had bought him. And so, the translation *bond-servant*. He was, in truth, the possession of his master. So, when Paul says he is a *doulos* of Christ Jesus, he was not only telling who received his service, but who, in fact, owned him. Did you know that if you are a Christian, you are owned by Jesus Christ? Is that a part of your self-image? I Corinthians 7:23a *You were bought with a price. You belong to Christ. And oh my, does that truth ever have some powerful implications! The most important is that if Christ is your master than nothing or no one else is. Think of what the Bible says, You cannot serve God and money, for no man can serve two masters.* I Corinthians 7:23 goes on to say 23b *You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men.* Look at Galatians 1:10 *For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ.* The same truth. If you are like Paul, a card-carrying servant of Jesus Christ, you are placing all else in subordination to that one supreme allegiance. And oh, I'm talking slavery from my mouth, but in my heart, I am thinking freedom, freedom, freedom! When Christ is your Master you are free

from bondage to everything else. When Christ is your master you are free from men and you are free from their opinions and that is glorious. Martin Buxbaum said, *Freedom is being able to do what you please without considering anyone except your wife, the police, your boss, your insurance company, your doctor, your neighbor and all federal and state authorities.* No, no. Freedom is having one boss who is demanding but oh so gracious! From Jr. High-school on, most of us are tossed about by the opinions of others. Some of us despise ourselves because we don't rate in the area of physical attractiveness. Some of us feel useless because we aren't quite the bread-winner we hoped to be. Some of you spouses walk around with a weight on your soul because your husband or wife is dissatisfied with you. But if that is the way we think we are still tied by mental cords to the opinions of men, to the values set forth by this corrupt world, and God calls you to break free and serve Christ alone. We get so worried over things our real Master doesn't care about because we still want to please men. Good news. In our bondage to Christ we are freed from men. We have one Master and to Him we answer.

Another wonderful implication of being a bond-servant is that it frees us from self-seeking. We can get off that awful treadmill of always having to make sure we get treated right, and having to fight for our rights, because if you are really a *doulos*, really a slave of Jesus, what rights do you really have? So many of us live our lives in a state of perpetual offendedness. We get our feathers ruffled by the slightest indication that we are regarded with anything less than the highest honor. Bondservants don't struggle with that. Bond-servants are interested in the treatment the Master gets, but not about themselves. Their status frees them from that concern. In his book, *Rebuilding Your Broken World*, Gordon MacDonald writes this: *You know if you are a servant by how you react when you are treated like one.* Wow! Listen to that again. *You know if you are a servant by how you react when you are treated like one.* A real servant-spirit is not easily offended because it is free from self.

By our attachments to Jesus we are freed from men and from self and one other thing I want to mention. See if you can identify it from this text. Romans 6:17-18 *But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed,* ¹⁸*and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.* 6:22 *But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life.* 8:2 *For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.* Did you get it? Do

you see what else we are freed from? As you become Christ's servant you become free from the dominion of sin over your will. You don't have to sin anymore. There is a whole sermon in that thought, but what I want to point you to is the idea that our servanthood is related to our freedom, as paradoxical as that may sound. But the plain fact is that there is no such thing as this idea of freedom from everything and everybody. Romans 6:16 *Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?* It's an either/or. You either serve sin or serve Christ. Bob Dylan, in his Christian period, back in the early 80s, sang a song called *You Gotta Serve Somebody*. He sang, *It may be the devil, or it may be the Lord, but you gotta serve somebody*. Paul said, *I am a bond-servant of Jesus Christ*. What about you? Whose slave are you? Your mom? Your husband? Your boss? Your culture? Your lusts? The true Christian is a servant to his master. And remember that no matter what you come to think about your Christianity, in the final analysis, it is not primarily a lifestyle or a set of rules or a set of beliefs, but a relationship with one who is our Savior, our Creator, our Redeemer, our Shepherd and our Master. Paul tells us in the one word *doulos* that he is a man with a Master. And just because he is a man with a master, he is also a man with a mission and it was the Master's mission and that mission was to preach a message which was the Master's message and he carried out the Master's mission by preaching the Master's message and thus he became a man with a master, a mission and a message – a bond-servant and apostle of Christ Jesus.

And now we have finished verse one. Only 431 to go. Let's pray with many thanks.