

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR THE WEEK OF APRIL 7-13

Message Title: GOSPEL PARTNERS

Message Text: ROMANS 1:1-17

Before Your Small Group Meeting:

- Watch Pastor Brandon's Message
- Read Romans 1:1-17

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Read Romans 1:1. Paul, the author of Romans, lived through his identity found in Jesus Christ. What attributes of his identity did Paul mention in verse one? Have you ever considered your identity? If so, briefly explain how you might live from your identity?
2. Read Romans 1:2-6. On Sunday, Brandon mentioned that having a clear picture of the gospel is vitally important. What elements of the gospel are outlined in verses two through six?
3. Why should having a clear vision of the gospel motivate Christians to share the gospel with others?
4. Read Romans 1:8-15. Why did Paul desire to visit the church in Rome? Why are you motivated to spend time in your small group or with your friends?
5. Read Romans 1:16-17. Brandon explained that these two verses are widely considered the theme for the entire letter of Romans. Paul was not ashamed of the gospel. Have you ever been ashamed of the gospel? If so, why?
6. Brandon talked about "gift" righteousness and "works" righteousness. When do you most often depend on your own righteousness? Why is it good news that our salvation depends on God's righteousness and not our own righteousness?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Commentary on Romans 1:1-17

1:1. The apostle **Paul** began his letter with an expanded introduction. Because his future mission to Spain and beyond involved the church at Rome, and because the believers there had never met Paul, he made extra efforts to validate himself in their sight. He wanted them to know, as he wanted the Galatians to know several years prior (Gal. 1:1, 10-12), that what they were about to read in his letter was not his own invention. His letter to them was part of a divine mission, and what he wrote, he wrote for God.

The common form of a letter introduction in Paul's day was "X to Y, greetings ..." Paul followed this pattern with only slight variation in most of his letters, but here the "to" comes in verse 7. Paul takes six verses to identify himself and establish his credentials and mission. In fact, it can be said that Romans 1:7-16:27 is simply an explication of Romans 1:1-6. In these initial six verses Paul summarizes who he is and what he does: a servant of Christ who calls people from the nations of the world to come to faith in Christ.

"Easy for Paul to say," we think to ourselves. "He was an apostle. He had been knocked flat on the ground after being accosted by Christ on the Damascus Road, being blinded in the process. He was smart; he was goal-oriented; he was committed; he was single without a family; he was ..." and on and on. Our reasonings somehow make us think that apostles are supposed to live simply-defined lives (with the obvious implication being that it is okay if we do not!). Granted, all those things are true of Paul, but it is not those things to which we attribute the simplicity of his self-definition and identity. In fact, when Paul was saved by Christ, he was the same thing that the Romans are now to Paul, and that you and those you teach are now as well: potential partners in the gospel.

Remember, Paul was the enemy of Christ when he was saved, meaning he was only a potential partner in the gospel. He became a partner, a colaborer with Christ, through obedience—the same "obedience that comes from faith" (v. 5) to which he is calling the Romans and all who would read his letter, including us.

Paul was single-minded (Jas. 1:7-8) and uncluttered (Heb. 12:1-2)—characteristics which are to be found in every believer. Therefore, the potential exists for our identity to be the same as Paul's: servants of Christ committed to calling the nations of the earth to faith in Christ. If that is not our true identity now, perhaps we will be closer to it as we study Paul's great epistle to the Romans. The church has, after all, inherited the Great Commission which Christ entrusted to the original disciples (Matt. 28:18-20) and is presently under obligation (see Rom. 1:14) to fulfill it.

For all the theology and logic and reason and profundity that is rightfully attributed to the apostle Paul—and which the church commendably imitates—it must be remembered that it all served one purpose in his life: to fulfill the mission he had been given to take the gospel to the nations of the world. If there is a lesson for the church in Romans, it is that theology serves missions. If it did in the life of the greatest apostle, and the One who sent him on his mission, surely it must in our lives as well.

Three things characterized Paul: he was a **servant**, he was **called to be an apostle**, and he was **set apart for the gospel**. Perhaps the most radical evidence of the transforming power of the grace of God in Paul's life was what happened to his will. The transformation was subtle and therefore easy to miss—so subtle that many in the leadership of the contemporary church may have

missed it. Paul was not changed from an active to a passive person; if anything, he was perhaps more active and goal-oriented after his conversion than before. The difference is that he submitted his activity to one whom he now knew personally and loved. He willingly subjected himself to the plans and purposes of a lord who was his master. He lived only to do the will of God (cf. the same perspective in the life of Christ as highlighted in John's Gospel: 4:34; 5:30; 6:38; 8:26; 9:4; 10:37-38; 12:49-50; 14:31; 15:10; 17:4).

Servant here is the familiar *doulos*, the word in the vernacular for "slave." Its background is in the Old Testament provision for a servant voluntarily choosing to remain with a master after a required period of servitude was completed (Exod. 21:5-6; Deut. 15:12-17; see Ps. 40:6-8 and the NIV's rendering of "pierced" in v. 6 as a possible reference to King David's self-positioning of himself as God's bondservant). The owner pierced the ear of his voluntary servant with an awl; such a mark identified him forever as belonging to the master.

The words of a hypothetical servant to his master in Deuteronomy 15:16—"I do not want to leave you because I love you and your family and am well off with you" (author's translation)—have stunning ramifications for the one today who would call himself a servant of God. Paul surely understood the implications, but do we? Can every believer, but especially those who teach and lead as did Paul (Jas. 3:1), say with integrity that we do not want to leave? That we love God and the family of God? That we are better off with him—regardless of the trials and problems that attend us—than we would be anywhere else in the world? For how many is Christian "service" a vocation rather than a voluntary profession of loyal love?

Note also how Paul used a term (**servant**) that would have shocked the Gentiles in the church at Rome while appealing to his Jewish brethren. Rome was filled with slaves; some have estimated that the majority of the population was in forced servitude of one sort or the other. To be a slave in the Gentile mind was to be at the bottom of the social order. Servanthood was something to escape; freedom was a goal to attain. How arresting it must have been to the Gentile believers to learn that Paul had "given up" his freedom and willingly submitted himself to **Christ Jesus**, the Jewish Messiah.

Paul delivers a book-in-a-word on freedom when he calls himself a *doulos* of Christ. As Francis Schaeffer beautifully puts it, "Paul had [a slave's] iron band around his neck, not because it had to be there but because he held it there by the fingers of his own will" (Schaeffer, *Finished Work of Christ*, p. 14).

To the Jewish believers, however, being a servant of God called to mind a roll call of those used by God in the Jewish nation. Abraham (Gen. 26:24), Moses (Num. 12:7-8), David (2 Sam. 7:5, 8), Isaiah (Isa. 20:3), and the prophets (Amos 3:7) were all called the servants of the Lord in the Old Testament. His Jewish readers would have noted immediately the formulary "servant of the Lord" being replaced by "servant of Jesus Christ" in Paul's salutation. The seamless transition from *Yahweh* in the Old Testament to Jesus Christ in the New Testament would not have been lost on the careful Jewish reader.

But Paul's use of the Old Testament label "servant" was not for class purposes. Paul had no interest in being a member of anyone's Hall of Fame. But Hall of Faith? That was a different story, and one he was willing to tell. As he would tell the Ephesians, writing from a jail cell after finally making it to Rome, he became a servant in response to God's grace (Eph. 3:7). But even that grace, and

the faith to receive it, was God's gift (Eph. 2:8-9). If anyone deserves credit it is God, for "inviting" him to become a servant.

In addition to being a **servant**, Paul is **called to be an apostle**. Paul got to be an apostle the same way the Twelve did: Jesus called him. Remember the purity and simplicity of Jesus' calling of the disciples? "Come, follow me," he said to Peter and Andrew, who followed him at once (Matt. 4:18-20). Then he called James and John, who likewise followed (Matt. 4:21-22). Then, a few years later, he called Paul (Acts 9:1-19; 22:6-16; 26:12-18). An apostle is a "sent one" without necessary reference to the identity of the sender.

Before his conversion, Paul was sent by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem to capture and incarcerate believers in Damascus (Acts 22:5). As such, he was a "sent one," an apostle. After his conversion, he was sent by Christ to do the same thing that Christ was sent to do: release the captives and set the prisoners free (Luke 4:18-29; Gal. 1:1). By whom one is sent determines the kind of ministry one will have.

Who has sent you? Hopefully, the words of Jesus to the first twelve that he sent out have been your commission as well: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21). Two thousand years removed from the personal sending ministry of Jesus, it can become hard to sort out "who is sending whom" in today's ecclesiastical world. But two questions bear asking in this regard (and are especially tied to the issue of servanthood previously mentioned by Paul).

First, as best you are able to prayerfully and humbly determine, are you where you are in ministry as a teacher as a result of the "sending" ministry of Jesus Christ? This is not asking if you are an apostle, a "sent one." That office was apparently reserved for those who had seen and could testify to the reality of the risen Christ (Acts 1:22; Eph. 4:11). Rather, it is the principle of going and doing according to the will of Christ.

Second, is anything standing in the way of your going where you feel you are sent? Your own will perhaps; a human institution; a lack of resources; an ecclesiastical permission structure? And what about those whom you are teaching? How would they answer the same two questions? Tasks which flow from authority structures result in someone going somewhere and doing something. The church is an authority structure, we have a task to do, and therefore can assume that we are going to be sent by our Master to accomplish his mission. It is healthy to pause and take stock of where we are and what we are doing, and make sure that we are where we have been sent by Christ.

Finally, Paul's third designation is as one who was **set apart for the gospel of God**. While we will explore issues concerning the gospel more in "Deeper Discoveries," it is important here to note that Paul only views himself as set apart for one thing: the gospel. Part of this stems from his commission to preach the gospel as the apostle to the Gentiles—a formal commissioning which he alone received from the Lord. But part of it also stems from the centrality of the gospel in Paul's life and thinking, a focus that the entire church of Jesus Christ is to embrace and maintain (Matt. 28:18-20).

Did Paul have a soul mate in the person of the weeping prophet Jeremiah? God told Jeremiah that he had been set apart in his mother's womb to be a prophet to the nations (Jer. 1:5). Paul likewise knew that God had set him apart from birth so that he might preach Christ among the Gentiles (Gal. 1:15). In ways that parallel the ministry of Jeremiah, Paul showed a no-holds-barred approach to fulfilling that for which he was set apart.

Other clues exist to the depth of the apostle's spiritual understanding of his "set apartness." The Greek word for "set apart," *aphorizo*, has the same root (p-r-s) as the Hebrew word on which "Pharisee" is based. While the meaning of "Pharisee" is murky, the practice of Pharisees was crystal clear. They had set themselves apart, dedicated to the practice of the Law of Moses. Paul had been "in regard to the law, a Pharisee" (Phil. 3:5), yet now he finds himself set apart as a "gospelizer," a spreader of the good news about Jesus Christ.

Because Paul mentions the gospel ten different times in this letter, we will encounter many facets of it in our study. Unfortunately, the contemporary church has so compartmentalized the gospel that it has lost touch with its full-orbed meaning. Many churches preach an evangelistic message every Sunday to an audience that is 98 percent Christian, boring the believers and turning them off to "the gospel." Other churches never mention the gospel in their meetings since the gospel is (allegedly) for the unsaved, not for believers. As a result, believers know little of the gospel's ongoing relevance for their lives.

Yet Paul says in Romans 1:15 that he is "eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome," referring to the believers. We will discover from Paul the gospel's relevance for the church. F. F. Bruce provides a clue when he defines the gospel as "the joyful proclamation of the death and resurrection of [God's] Son, and of the consequent amnesty and liberation which men and women may enjoy through faith in him" (Bruce, p. 68). It is the first half of Bruce's definition with which we are most familiar since it echoes Paul's own words in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5. In the second half resound the words of Jesus himself in Luke 4:18-19, a quote from Isaiah 61:1-2. Indeed, the good news has its roots in the Old Testament, its fruit in the New. Paul had a broad and biblical (meaning Old Testament, for him) view of the gospel, and it was this gospel for which he had been set apart.

1:2-4. Which gospel is Paul going to expand on to the Romans? He tells them clearly to make sure that they are receiving not another gospel or a new gospel or a different gospel, but the *gospel* gospel, the one **promised beforehand through [God's] prophets in the Holy Scriptures.** The gospel is serious business for Paul. It is the heart of the message about the kingdom of God and its impact, and he wanted to make sure that the Romans had confidence in what they were about to hear. Paul was preparing to tell them more about the gospel than they had ever heard, and he wanted their full attention (plus, he did not want to be cursed; see Gal. 1:8-9).

Paul's gospel is the gospel regarding God's **Son**, born of a physical mother, making him fully human; conceived by the **Spirit of holiness**, making him fully divine and sinless; and raised by a father who was a **descendant of David**, qualifying him as well as part of the royal lineage in Israel. It is the gospel of **Jesus Christ our Lord**. Paul said, the Lord who by the power of God conquered death and the grave. What good news would there be in a gospel that is based on "bad news"—the news that the promised Messiah was killed, and his kingdom apparently with it? It is therefore the resurrection of Christ that puts the "good" in the good news. Be assured, Paul said—the gospel you are going to hear from me is the gospel that "I received" (1 Cor. 15:3).

1:5-6. Verse 5 is perhaps the most pregnant proposition in the entire letter, for it contains the seeds of Paul's entire spiritual life and ministry as a believer and apostle. **For his name's sake** reveals Paul's ultimate motivation in preaching the gospel. His further references to the name of God in Romans betray the depth of his concern that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ be vindicated: the name of God was blasphemed among the Gentiles (Rom. 2:24, quoting Isa. 52:5; Ezek. 36:22). God wanted his saving name proclaimed throughout the earth (Rom. 9:17, quoting

Exod. 9:16) because “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom. 10:13, quoting Joel 2:32). The ultimate role of the name of God in the earth is to be the object of reverence and praise (Rom. 15:9, quoting 2 Sam. 22:50; Ps. 18:49).

Why, therefore, did Paul receive **grace and apostleship** from God? **For his name’s sake ... to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith.** It is instructive, and perhaps convicting, to see how Paul turns to the Old Testament to explicate the gospel message. The average Christian today does admirably when he or she refers to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the benefits of which are appropriated by faith. But the understanding of God’s salvific intent for the world in the Old Testament is beyond the pale of most believers.

Remember: when Paul, and the Old Testament writers, refer to “the Gentiles” or “the nations,” they are referring to the whole world. As Jews, they were looking beyond themselves to everyone else. The Gentiles are “the world” which John 3:16 says, “God so loved” (including the Jews, of course). It is obvious at the very start of this letter that Paul has “the world” in his sights, and he wants the Roman believers to catch his vision.

Deftly, he weaves them into the universal scope of the gospel by saying that they are among the Gentiles **who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.** Paul is building his case for going beyond Rome to Spain and the “ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Follow the reasoning: “I, Paul, am a voluntary bondservant of Christ, called by Christ **to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith.** You Romans are an example of what I must do elsewhere, for **you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.** I belong to Christ as a slave, as do you. If we partner together in the extension of the gospel, I can be supported as I go on to Spain and you can continue to spread the gospel in Rome. A harvest is prepared among the nations and in Rome” (1:13).

Thus Paul concludes the most lengthy introduction of himself and his ministry to be found in any of his letters. If there is a sobering admonition from the life and testimony of the apostle to the Gentiles, it is this: “What is our purpose in life, and from whence comes that purpose?” Perhaps we have thought our purpose is to be the best pastor, or the most life-changing teacher, or the most careful scholar, or the most able administrator we could be. All of those are worthy means to that which is the only worthy goal: the proclaiming of the gospel among the nations for his name’s sake.

Much of the church today, especially the church in the West, does not see the vast portions of the world which do not praise the name of the Savior. Paul saw those near him (Rom. 10:1) and those who were far from him (Rom. 15:28). He will shortly explain to the Roman believers how spiritual blindness can come upon those who do not respond obediently to the grace and faith they have received. May all who teach the Word of God, and especially the Book of Romans, have eyes to see as Jesus saw (Matt. 9:36) and to respond as Paul responded.

B. Paul: Committed to the Romans (1:7-15)

SUPPORTING IDEA: *Truth has its ultimate application in the lives of people.*

Paul’s transitional reference to the Roman believers in verse 6 is the first stone in what is a bridge between himself and his explanation of the universal application of the gospel: “Here is

who I, Paul, am (1:1-6) an apostle sent to the nations; here is who you Roman believers are, Jews and Gentiles who have embraced the gospel concerning Christ (1:7-15); and beyond us both lies the rest of the world for whom Christ died, a world desperately in need of the gospel (1:18-3:31). Rome can be a gateway for me, a launching pad, as I push further west with the gospel—if we unite our hearts and abilities in partnership in the gospel” (15:24).

1:7. In another profound link between himself, his vision, his mission, and the church in Rome, Paul now refers to the believers in Rome by the most sacred title possible: **saints**. He had already told them in 1:1 that he was “set apart for the gospel,” and even this language could tempt the average believer to view Paul in a different class—more spiritual, more committed, more disciplined in spiritual matters. Some so-called “super-apostles” had already begun to throw their weight around in the church in Corinth (not likely any of the original Twelve), and Paul no doubt battled the tendency of some to elevate him beyond where he saw himself—as nothing apart from the grace of God (2 Cor. 11:5; 12:11).

In calling the believers in Rome **saints**, Paul is saying that they also are set apart as holy, as spiritual, as called by God to the highest levels of privilege, and thereby responsibility, imaginable. Twenty-nine times in eight of his epistles Paul referred to believers as saints. If there ever was a critical concept that would link Paul’s “set-apartness” with the Corinthians’ “set-apartness,” this was it.

Saints is actually the adjective for “holy” (*hagios*). Saints are therefore “holy ones.” The two-stage process of holiness is often reversed, resulting in putting the proverbial cart before the horse.

The first stage of holiness is positional; it is something believers are declared to be because of their position in Christ (Eph. 1:4). Because of our positional holiness, we are able to become holy in practice, progressively more so as we mature in Christ (1 Thess. 4:7). In this verse, Paul is focusing on the believer’s positional holiness. An understanding of the Old Testament root concept will help. *Qodesh* was the Hebrew word signifying “holy,” but like many words in the vocabulary of Israel it was adapted from the Semitic culture. It basically meant something that was set apart for a particular use. Cultic temple prostitutes were referred to by this root word because they were set apart for religious purposes (Gen. 38:21).

Our revulsion in thinking of a prostitute as “holy” is an example of our thinking of the second stage of holiness before understanding the first. Knives, tables, lamps—all the articles of the tabernacle and temple worship in Israel were called “holy” because they were set apart for sacred use. Think of it: one minute a knife is ordinary, the next it is holy, all on the basis of being declared holy (set apart for special use) by the priest.

Perhaps the most striking example of the ordinary becoming holy is when God said dirt was holy. When Moses approached the burning bush on Mount Horeb, God told him to remove his sandals “for the place where you are standing is holy ground” (Exod. 3:5). The dirt “here” was holy; the dirt “over there” was not. Why? Because the dirt “here” was set aside as the meeting place between God and man. When the meeting was over, the dirt was no longer holy.

So when Paul calls the Roman believers **saints**, what is he saying? He wants them to know that, regardless of how they view themselves, how unimportant they may think themselves to be in the grand scheme of things, they are as “holy” as Paul himself is. Paul is a saint, and they are saints. Paul has been set apart to accomplish God’s goal of spreading the gospel to the nations, and so have the Romans. It has nothing to do with spiritual giftedness, the office one does or does not

hold, one's education or appearance, one's wealth or poverty, or one's outward manifestations of spirituality. Rather, "holiness"—total dedication to the service of God and his purposes—is a positional reality for every believer, like it or not!

1:8-10. Paul reveals that he has heard that the "sainthood" of the believers in Rome is not positional only. They have acted upon their "set-apartness" to become faithful witnesses for Christ. All over the known Christian world the church in Rome is being talked about because of their faith. Who would be surprised at there being a church in Jerusalem, the spiritual capital of the Mediterranean world? No one—it would be expected. But in Rome, the capital of the pagan world, there is a thriving community of Christian believers? This was something to talk about, and people were spreading the word.

You can understand Paul's genuine pleasure and thanksgiving as expressed in verse 8. Because he has his heart set on taking the gospel into pagan lands where no one has been before, he is eager to come and meet and fellowship with these believers who know how to thrive spiritually in the heart of the Roman Empire! His prayers have been frequent that God would open the way for him to visit the church in Rome.

What do people in your sphere of influence hear about your church, your Bible study group, your mission organization—or about you? Much is said about Christians and their ministries today. Word spreads rapidly about increased attendance, about innovative programs, about multimedia presentations, about new facilities, about conferences and seminars. But how often does one hear about a church that is known for its faith, as were the Christians in Rome? Even if one takes the less objective rendering of *pistis* (faith) in verse 8, and suggests that it refers simply to the Christian beliefs of those in the Roman church, it is still a commendation of note.

How many times does the secular world look at a church or organization and say, "That group really seems to have a genuinely spiritual life; they seem like what real Christians ought to be." It is no wonder that Paul wanted to get to Rome as quickly as he could to meet these believers whose **faith [was] being reported all over the world**. And no wonder he continued to pray for them diligently. Perhaps he prayed, "Lord, keep their faith and their fire alive. May they be the catalyst for a powerful outreach into the nations of the world!" Are you praying that for your church, your organization, your study group, your family—for yourself?

1:11-13. The other reasons Paul wanted to visit the church in Rome was for mutual edification and, as always, for reaping a harvest of souls. Paul's sense of propriety (his spiritual maturity and discernment) are quickly apparent as he revealed his longing to visit the Roman church. Remember—this was not a church that Paul planted. Somehow (we do not know how) the church began and prospered without the apostle Paul ever having been there or having communicated with it outside of verbal messages perhaps being sent by travelers.

It would have been tempting for a lesser leader to convey the "I'll take it from here" attitude—to seek to barge into a prosperous situation and assume that everyone would immediately promote him to the top of the pyramid. Paul was wiser. Not only does he want to impart **some spiritual gift** to them (v. 11), he wants to be encouraged by them as well (v. 12). Verse 12 is no quick correction of a *faux pas* in verse 11. Nor does verse 11 convey a desire to come into their midst and, on call, display the "things that mark an apostle—signs, wonders and miracles" (2 Cor. 12:12). Paul knows that only the Godhead dispenses spiritual gifts (*charismata*; Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 12:11; Eph. 4:11), so

neither is he coming to impart spiritual gifts to believers. He is coming simply to be used in whatever way God might choose to use him to help strengthen the church in Rome—that you may be established by **some spiritual gift** (v. 11), not “that I may establish you.”

And, he is coming to be strengthened himself. John Stott captures the heart of the apostle that is so evident in these verses:

[Paul] knows about the reciprocal blessings of Christian fellowship and, although he is an apostle, he is not too proud to acknowledge his need of it. Happy is the modern missionary who goes to another country and culture in the same spirit of receptivity, anxious to receive as well as give, to learn as well as teach, to be encouraged as well as to encourage! And happy is the congregation who has a pastor of the same humble mind! (Stott, p. 57)

Finally, Paul was patient and content with the will of God. Do not forget that Paul was a “servant of Jesus Christ” (1:1). He said without embarrassment or hesitation that he had planned often to go to Rome but had **been prevented**. By what? Evangelism **among the other Gentiles**? Satanic opposition (1 Thess. 2:18)? The daily pressure of his “concern for all the churches” (2 Cor. 11:28)? A quick perusal of 2 Corinthians 6:3-10 and 11:23-33 shows that Paul had more than enough to occupy his time. But he also had more than enough faith in his Master’s plan for his life and agenda than to become discontent over his desires not being met.

It is impossible for Paul’s heart to stay beneath the surface. Like a spiritual artesian well, his desire to preach the gospel to the Gentiles bubbles to the surface of its own accord. He longs to come to Rome in order to reap a spiritual harvest there **just as I have had among the other Gentiles**. In this seemingly casual reflection, Paul tells us who he is. Likewise, in our seemingly casual comments and reflections to others we reveal our heart of hearts as well. What we talk about, what we do in our free time, what we read, what we watch on television, where we venture on the Internet—the small “comments” about ourselves that we make day after day—reveal who we are. Paul was a man in the grip of the gospel. Wherever he went, whoever he was with, whatever his agenda, his priority remained the same—tell the world about Jesus.

1:14-15. Almost as a footnote—perhaps wondering if the believers in Rome would be puzzled by his passion—he explains **why [he is] so eager to preach the gospel also to [those] who are at Rome** (v. 15). It is because he is in debt to Jesus Christ for a price he can never repay. It is a profoundly humbling realization to note that the world’s greatest theologian and apologist, an amazingly gifted man, never got over the fact that God loved him so much that the Son of God died to pay the price for his sins. The words of the bond-servant noted earlier from Deuteronomy 15:12-17 come back to mind here, as if Paul is saying to Christ, “I am well off with you; I do not want to leave.”

When one realizes that Jesus Christ has paid an infinite debt that secures one’s life and welfare for eternity, it is to the shame of the church that there are not millions of apostle Pauls roaming the earth looking for one more person to tell about the gospel of the grace of God. What does it say about our understanding of the gift of God that so many feel no indebtedness, no obligation, to Christ at all? Paul’s attitude was, “If I am the only one who senses this indebtedness, that changes nothing. I am still indebted. And as long as there is one person left on earth to whom the invitation to eternal life has not been issued, then I am not a free man. I will remain a bondservant of Christ until the last lost sheep has been brought into the fold.”

Greeks (the educated, the intellectuals, the sophisticated) and **non-Greeks** (the uneducated, the lower class, the barbarians), **wise** and **foolish**—there were no beginning and ending points on the scale of who Paul felt obligated to reach. His use of a figure of speech (a merism, citing the extremes in opposite directions to indicate a totality; see Ps. 139:8-9) shows the breadth of his vision for the gospel. Paul's perspective should become "the characteristic of a Christian's life once this level of spiritual honor and duty becomes real. Quit praying about yourself and spend your life for the sake of others as the bondservant of Jesus. That is the true meaning of being broken bread and poured-out wine in real life" (Chambers, *My Utmost*, July 15).

C. Paul: Convinced of the Power of the Gospel (1:16-17)

SUPPORTING IDEA: *Truth produces conviction and courage in those who believe it.*

Paul now comes to the climax of his introductory greeting to the church at Rome, and in it states what is for him the theme of the letter and his life. We have said in this commentary that the theme of Romans is the power of the gospel. By that, we mean that it is the controlling idea in Paul's approach to the grand scheme of salvation. Without the gospel, and without the power that the gospel *is* (not the power that the gospel *has*), there can be no salvation, no deliverance, no life. Everything that God wants for us is to be found in the gospel, and Paul is going to spend the rest of his letter explaining every facet of it.

So far, the apostle has said this: "(1) I am called by God to spread the gospel; (2) I am thankful for and encouraged by what the gospel has produced in the lives of you in Rome; and (3) I want to come and join you—for your benefit and mine—as we continue to proclaim the gospel in Rome and as I prepare to push ahead into the nations beyond you." Then, he gives them the reason for his unquenchable confidence and energy in his calling—a confidence he wants to spread among the Romans as well: "(4) Am I ashamed to come to the most powerful city in the world and proclaim our gospel? No, because the power of God will cast in stark relief the "power" of man; the gospel will reveal the righteousness of God amidst the unrighteousness of man. And everyone now lost in Rome and the world that embraces the gospel will be saved—as we have been! That is why I am not ashamed of the gospel!"

1:16-17. John Stott recounts a comment made by Scottish theologian James Stewart concerning this passage: "There's no sense in declaring that you're not ashamed of something unless you've been tempted to feel ashamed of it" (Stott, p. 60). We think of Paul as invincible, yet he was human. Jesus anticipated that his followers might one day be ashamed to identify with him (Mark 8:38), and Peter soon confirmed that prediction by denying him three times in one night (Matt. 26:75). Even Paul himself confessed to arriving in Corinth in "weakness and fear, and with much trembling" (1 Cor. 2:3) so plainspoken did he see himself as compared to the eloquent and sophisticated Greeks. And yet Paul, in truth, was never ashamed of his Savior. He spoke before royalty, rabbis, rulers, and rabble—to him, it made no difference. As he is about to demonstrate to the Romans in subsequent chapters, all are in need of the gospel.

Paul's confidence turns on three occurrences of *gar* ("for" or "because") in these two verses. The first is untranslated in the NIV, but should be, as it provides the transition from his earlier statement of eagerness: "I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome [**for**] I am not

ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God ... for in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed (vv. 15-17; emphasis added).

Paul is giving the Roman believers a paradigm for life that the contemporary church desperately needs to understand: *nothing will display the righteousness of God (and thereby his person and glory) to a needy world like the message of the gospel*. Not surprisingly, it is a paradigm that Paul drew from the Old Testament and applied to the believers in Rome. We can draw on both instances and apply it to our benefit today.

So much has been written by commentators and theologians on these verses that “it is not easy to summarize, let alone to systematize, the debate” (Stott, p. 61). What is the meaning of the **righteousness from God**—attribute, action, or advantage? And what does it mean that righteousness is **by faith from first to last**? And does *ho de dikaios ek pisteos zesetai* mean **the righteous will live by faith** or “the one who is righteous by faith will live”? Good questions all, and best answered with a look at the context from which Paul draws his final phrase (**the righteous will live by faith**), and the context to which he is applying and addressing it (the believing community of Christians in Rome).

In verse 17, Paul quotes something God said to the prophet Habakkuk (Hab. 2:4; also quoted in Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38-39). God’s statement was one of comfort to Habakkuk, who was at his wits’ end with God. First, wickedness was rampant in Israel and God seemed oblivious to it, moving Habakkuk to rail against God in a series of complaints (Hab. 1:2-4). Second, when God said he was going to use a nation more wicked than Israel (the Babylonians) to punish Israel, this produced cries and complaints of injustice from the prophet (Hab. 1:12-2:1). It might be said that Habakkuk was embarrassed, ashamed of God’s inaction and his choices.

Paraphrased, God’s answer to Habakkuk was this: “I am about to reveal something to you, Habakkuk, that I want you to record so that a herald may go and proclaim it (Hab. 2:2). It is a revelation of my righteousness, and will put to rest your fears of inaction and injustice. In the meantime—until my righteousness is revealed—you who are righteous are to trust me, to live by faith. There is nothing you can do to ‘fix’ the situation. You will have to live by faith, not by sight, until what I have written is accomplished” (Hab. 2:4).

Now, fast forward to A.D. 57. Paul is writing to a community of Christian believers living in the most powerful city in the world. Just three years prior to his letter, the reign of the Roman Emperor Claudius (ruled A.D. 41-54) had ended. Claudius had banished all Jews from Rome around A.D. 49-50 because of the continuing disruptions “instigated by Chrestus” (a misspelling of “Christ,” scholars agree; recorded by the historian Suetonius in *Claudius*, 25). Obviously, the disruptions were not led by Christ in person, but were perhaps instigated by debates over his person. Claudius ended the disruptions by driving all Jews (including those who had come to believe in Christ; see Acts 2:10) out of Rome. Paul met Aquila and Priscilla for the first time in Corinth, where they settled as expatriates from Rome (Acts 18:1-2). Supposedly, when Claudius’s reign ended, Jews were allowed to return to Rome. But the banishment no doubt had an unsettling, disruptive, and persecutorial effect on the young body of believers in Rome.

Unfortunately, this was just a foretaste of what Rome would give to the church in years ahead. Paul himself would suffer a martyr’s death at the hands of Nero along with multitudes of believers during Nero’s reign. Could the believers in Rome have wondered where God was in the midst of their suffering under Claudius? Could they have been embarrassed, even ashamed, as Habakkuk

had been, that God was seemingly doing nothing to rescue them? Could they have felt powerless to act, wanting to do something but not knowing what to do?

Paul had read Habakkuk, and he knew that the Roman believers needed a revelation from God—some good news in the midst of their confusion. And so he writes verses 16 and 17 to them: the **gospel** is God's good news and Paul is the herald who is **not ashamed** of the circumstances or of God. Why? Because God's **righteousness** is **revealed** in the gospel! The pagan power of Rome (like the pagan nation of Babylon in Habakkuk's day) is no match for the **power of God** which is the gospel, Paul says. Do not think that God's power is absent—it is here in the gospel! And God's righteousness will be revealed against all manner of sin everywhere. In the meantime, the righteous must live by faith. Rather than thinking you are powerless to change Rome, the gospel gives you the power of God to change lives.

Now fast forward to the end of the second millennium A.D. In a day when Western civilization is said to be in its "post-Christian" phase, believers can feel powerless to effect the cultural trends and tides that bring constant pressure to bear. What the church needs today is what Habakkuk needed in 600 B.C. and oppressed believers needed in A.D. 50—a herald with a revelation of good news from God! The gospel is that revelation, and Paul's letter to the Romans is the tablet upon which it is written. But where are the heralds? They are meant to be every believer who knows that **the righteous will live by faith** regardless of the circumstances.

As Paul will soon explain, every person whom you pass on the street today is in need of the good news of the gospel. Whether an unbeliever oppressed by sin who is trying to create his or her own salvation, or a believer oppressed by the world who feels powerless living amidst unrighteousness. For both, the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel, and for now, those who would be righteous will find life by faith.

The bottom line to history is that God will judge all human affairs: the Babylonians, Habakkuk, the Romans, Paul, the church, you, me—all will be judged. His righteousness will balance human actions. The message of the gospel—the message of Romans—is that we do not have to wait for the end of history to discover the effects of God's righteous judgment. His righteousness (his judgment) is revealed in the gospel. Paul will show convincingly in Romans that all have sinned and stand under the condemnation of God, and that the gospel reveals that fact now. Therefore, since man can know today of his sin and impending judgment, he can accept today God's righteousness in place of his own unrighteousness and be saved (therefore, the **righteousness from God** is an attribute, an action, and an advantage).

In addition, the gospel vindicates God's name today (see Rom. 1:5). As God heralded his righteousness to Habakkuk (Hab. 2:2) but did not execute it upon the Babylonians until years after Habakkuk's death, so the gospel heralds the righteousness of God today. **For his name's sake** (1:5), Paul says, he was given grace to proclaim the gospel among the Gentiles. Let the Romans laugh at "Chrestus," the common carpenter from Galilee. We will not be ashamed because the gospel of Christ reveals the true righteousness of God which transforms the "righteousness" of the Romans from laughter to lament. God's name may be mocked, but it is also vindicated—through the gospel.

Finally, Paul is proclaiming in Romans 1:16-17 a fresh insight into the truth of Isaiah 55:11: "So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." This gospel does not *contain* the power of God. It *is* the power of God to everyone who believes it and lives in it (*ek pisteos eis pistin*; **by faith from**

first to last), first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. Starting with Israel, the gospel is flowing to the nations, and Paul is inviting the Romans to partner with him in that proclamation of power.¹

¹ Boa, K., & Kruidenier, W. (2000). [Romans](#) (Vol. 6, pp. 19–33). Broadman & Holman Publishers.