

Romans 1, Pt. 1

Romans presents us with **the good news of God's righteousness**. Right from the first verse of the book, we see that the "gospel" is of God. Now that could mean that the gospel is from God. But it could also mean that the gospel is about God. In all likelihood, it means both. It is good news that God is righteous. The God of the Bible is good. He does good things. He has integrity. He has right relationships within himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He has created a good world and has integrity in his relationships with this creation and his human subjects. Could you imagine how terrible the world would be if God were anything other than righteous? If he did not have integrity? One of the greatest problems in our contemporary political life is that we feel the pressing need to show not only that our political opponents are wrong but that they are in fact nefarious scoundrels mired in corruption. One side desperately tries to smear the other. The net result is the vague sense that all of our political leaders could be hopelessly compromised. But wouldn't it be an absolute relief if we could have a clear revelation that someone in authority was absolutely clean? That they had untarnished integrity? How much better is it to know this about God. Indeed, it is good news of urgent necessity to know that God is righteous.

It is also good news that **God is in the business of establishing righteousness** in this world. He created Adam and Eve to be the king and queen of a good world in which they had a righteous relationship between one another that was then to be replicated between their descendants and in the society which grew up after them. Of course, we know that Adam and Eve departed from their original righteousness. The generations that followed were not righteous generations. Cain killed Abel. Noah's generation practiced a deep-seated and pervasive ungodliness. The descendants of Noah tried to build a mighty tower in defiance of God's rule. But God is still in the business of establishing righteousness. The Bible teaches us that God establishes this righteousness through two principle ways - **the way of mercy** and **the way of judgment**. Both ways are part of God's good purposes to establish righteousness in this world. As we journey through this book for the

next several months, we will learn much about how **God manifests his righteousness through both judgment and mercy.**

The first verse of the book tells us that the letter is written by Paul. Paul was a Jewish man born in the city of Tarsus in Asia Minor. He was both a strict Pharisee and a citizen of the Roman empire. From his youngest days, he had been brought up to know the teachings of the Hebrew Bible and the words of the rabbis. He knew the commandments of God. He sincerely attempted to follow these commandments, though, as we will see in due course, he simultaneously disobeyed God and didn't quite know what to do with the reality of his disobedience. In adulthood, he became a fierce persecutor of the church. But Jesus intervened in his life in a powerful way and called him to be an apostle to the Gentiles. In his life as a Pharisee, Paul had believed in the righteousness of God. Paul's hope was that God would judge all of the enemies of Israel and vindicate his faithful people. What Paul had to learn was how much he deserved the judgment of God and what God had done in Jesus to give mercy to him and people of every tribe, tongue, and nation.

We learn **three things about Paul** within the first verse of this letter. Each of these things is also to be true in some way for each one of us.

Paul was a servant of Christ. Paul had once lived his life apart from Christ. He saw himself as a free Israelite, an agent of God's vindication against the foolishness of the Christians. For Paul in this early phase of his life, the world was full of people in delusion and bondage. But he was clean and free. After becoming a Christian, he would eventually come to understand that his freedom was an illusion, that he was in bondage to the power of sin and Satan. Paul only gained freedom after coming to know Jesus. But the freedom that he gained in Christ was paradoxically a new kind of bondage. He was now bound to Jesus as the sovereign Lord. All true Christians come to understand this paradox - that **the only real freedom that anyone can know is the freedom that comes from belonging body and soul to Jesus.** We are all called to be servants of Christ. Maybe even the stronger translation is necessary at this point - we are all called to be slaves of Christ. Jesus is not just Savior and Friend but Master and Lord. Christ has a right to tell us how to live. And the surprising reality that we encounter is that Christ's authority is a healing and restoring authority. His commandments are for our good.

Paul was called to be an apostle. Paul was called by God out of his work as a persecutor to become an apostle of God. In the technical sense, an apostle was one who had been with Jesus and had been appointed by Jesus to be a representative and leader in the early church. Though Paul was probably the same age as Jesus, he seems to have had no contact with him during his ministry. Nonetheless, on the road to Damascus and in the days that followed, Jesus met Paul and commissioned him to become a messenger to the Gentiles. According to Romans 1:5, Paul “received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of [Christ’s] name among all the nations.” Paul’s entire reason for writing to the Romans was so that he could establish a relationship with the Roman church in order that they could help him get to Spain (15:24). Paul had a burning passion to exercise his apostleship and preach the name of Jesus across the face of the known world. In a general sense, **all Christians have an apostolic urge** since an apostle in the general sense is simply one who is sent to be an ambassador. Christ sends his people into all sorts of circumstances and places to be his representative. Where has Christ sent you? And where could he be sending you in the future?

Paul was set apart for the gospel of God. To be set apart in this sense is being distinctively marked out as an individual or group. Paul was marked out as a person who would bear the good news of God’s righteousness revealed in Jesus. All Christians have been set apart and marked as distinct. Ordinarily, we use the word sanctification to refer to the gradual process of becoming more like Jesus. But it is also true to say that Christians have already been definitively sanctified, definitely marked out as God’s holy people. We belong to the Lord and our lives are to be distinct lives. That doesn’t mean that we are to be snobbish, self-righteous, and superior. But it does mean that a Christian must pursue different qualities and attributes than those prevailing in culture. We are **supposed to be different**, to stand out and stand up for Christ.

The clear theme in each of these things is that **Paul belongs to Jesus**. And if you believe in Jesus, then so do you. You are not your own. You were bought with a price (1 Cor. 6:19-20). It cost the precious blood of the Son of God to buy you back from the powers of sin and Satan. Once you were in bondage.

Now you are free. Once you were set to experience God's judgment. Now you have received God's mercy. Romans explains the good news of God's righteousness. And part of that good news is that **he has worked and still works to bring people like you and me into a right relationship with himself**, transforming them and liberating them from all of the powers of unrighteousness.

But we must be absolutely clear at this point. Someone who hears my words right now has never experienced the power of Jesus. But the opportunity stands before you today. There is nothing that you can do in your own power to commend yourself to God. One day you will stand before a holy God. He might ask, "Why should I let you into my heaven?" What would you say to God if that happened right now? Listen, there is an answer. And that answer is found in Jesus. You don't have to wait to the end. You can have assurance of heaven right now. You can have that assurance by turning from disobedience - indeed by renouncing your works - and by trusting in Jesus. That he is the Son of God. That he died. That he rose from the dead. That he reigns from heaven even right now. Believe in Jesus. Believe in the good news of a righteous God who gives mercy to the undeserving. You too can belong to Jesus in this life and on into eternity.