

New Testament Survey for Beginners: Part 6 – Romans

If we are going to study Paul's letter to the Romans (which is to say, his letter to the Christians in Rome) with any degree of success, it will help to understand and appreciate two things at the outset: (1) This letter is an early systematic theology, and it sets something of a pattern for other such textbooks which would come to be written in later centuries. It does not set out a complete course in systematics, nor was it intended to do so, because it does not cover every head of doctrine. It does, however, address those teachings, and the practical application flowing out of them, which were most critical to this church at that time. Furthermore, the argument of every doctrine set forth is tight, compelling and very persuasive. Unbelievers might not be impressed by reading them, but to all regenerate souls, to all who have been awakened to the truth as it is in Jesus, there can be no denying them. If we understand our fallen human nature at all, we should quickly pick up on how these same things need to be embraced by all Christians and in every generation to the end of time.

(2) This church in Rome would have been small – everyone knowing and having some contact with everybody else in their number – and it was made up of Gentile Christians, primarily, along with a number of Jewish converts. The subjects addressed in this letter relate to these two very different groups of people, how they are to get along together, understand each other, and appreciate that what they have in Christ is better and more binding than what either group would ever come to know without Him. There were weaknesses on both sides. Yet, for all their ethnic and cultural differences, they had been made one new man in Christ, and they should strive to live therefore as fellow citizens of the same kingdom and members together of the household of God.

Now, having laid that groundwork, let us go on to examine the outline and substance of the letter itself. Paul's outlook in ministry and purpose for writing this letter is stated in 1:16,17, the fact that he is not ashamed of the gospel of Christ but is bold to proclaim it, for this is what God uses to save those who believe, the Jew first but also the Gentile. This gospel reveals the righteousness of God in doing so, even as He declares the sinner to be righteous through faith in Christ, and it reveals that those so justified will continue to walk in such faith.

Paul then shows that the whole world is in need of an unblemished righteousness to replace the filthy rags of their own unrighteousness, both Gentiles (1:18-32) and Jews (2:1-3:8), because, as the whole Old Testament so plainly testifies, all have sinned and are guilty before God (3:9-20). But where can such righteousness be found, and how can it be obtained? It is the righteousness, a perfect standing before God, which God Himself graciously provides through the redeeming work of Jesus Christ and is bestowed on all who put their faith in Him (3:21-31).

Oh, but is this different now from how sinners were reckoned righteous under the old covenant? No, not at all. Paul goes on to show how this has always been the way of salvation. Abraham, David and many others, were counted righteous before God, not by circumcision but by believing God's promise of the coming Christ, and, as it was for them, looking to Christ, so it is for us (chapter 4). It does not matter the trials and tribulations that come upon us in this life, the fact remains that Jesus Christ has been offered up on the cross, the Just for the unjust, and we are reconciled to God through faith in Him. This is what gives the Christian peace and joy and hope in the midst of his troubles (5:1-11). And these benefits are not just for some, but for all who trust in Christ (5:12-21).

It will be argued by some that salvation by faith in Christ – that is, by faith in Him apart from works of our own – will be an encouragement to sin. (Indeed, this is the very argument that the Roman Catholic Church would later make at the Council of Trent in its attempt to overturn the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation!) On the contrary, Paul replies that saving faith involves such a union with Christ that one is crucified and resurrected with Him, resulting in the believer dying to sin and being made alive unto God (6:1-14).

Perhaps it might be argued, though, that salvation by faith in Christ apart from the works of the law still makes one free to sin. Again, on the contrary, faith breaks one's bondage to sin and establishes a new alliance, a compelling desire to serve the Lord and bear fruit unto holiness (6:15-7:6). If salvation is by faith in Christ apart from the law, does that not render the law useless, and perhaps even deadly in itself? Here too, on the contrary, the purpose of the law was never to save but to reveal sin and to expose man's inability to keep it (7:7-25).

These arguments are against ‘antinomianism’, that the Christian can and may live in sin, but they are also against ‘legalism’, that one can be saved by keeping the law. The point is that salvation is by faith in Christ *apart* from works, but not by faith *without* works. Faith without works – which is to say, without producing works – is dead (James 2:17), for a saving faith works through love (Galatians 5:6). How is it then that the Christian is so transformed that he is able now to live such a different life and do things that are actually pleasing to the Lord? It is because he, as an adopted son of God, has the Holy Spirit, and needs no longer to be carnally minded but can now, being led of the Spirit, be spiritually minded. The Holy Spirit helps him in all his weaknesses, and, with God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – so working for him, the believer is kept eternally secure (chapter 8).

Everything in this first half of the letter has been very helpful and explains how sinners, whether Jews or Gentiles, may be forgiven, be at peace with God, and embrace the hope of everlasting glory. But now comes the difficult part. The Jewish believers look around them and what they see is that their numbers are greatly diminished compared to the influx of Gentile converts coming into the church. How can that be? Has God’s covenant to Abraham failed? No, it has not failed, for they are not all Israel (the church) who are of Israel (the nation), nor are they all children of God because they are the physical seed of Abraham. God’s covenant is for His elect, and of that number (whether Jew or Gentile) not one will fail to be received into the kingdom of heaven (John 6:37-40).

Chapter 9 of Romans addresses this from the perspective of God’s sovereignty, the fact that He (quoting Exodus 33:19) will have mercy on whomever He will have mercy. Chapter 10 addresses this same matter from the perspective of human responsibility, and supplying the encouraging promise that there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile, that whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (see also Galatians 3:26-29).

Chapter 11 takes us into the changing nature of the church, the Israel of God, where we find the figure of an olive tree in which some branches (Jews) are cut off, and other branches from a wild olive tree (Gentiles) are grafted in. This may well provoke some of the Jews to jealousy and draw them back to the Lord, but, whether that happens or not, the Gentiles are not to boast of the favour that is bestowed upon them because they, too, can be cut off.

The Christian life, though, is more than to celebrate one's deliverance from the forces of evil; it is as well to be lived in grateful consecration to the Lord for all the unsearchable riches of Christ that He has so freely showered upon him. If God so demonstrated His love toward us, believer, in that while we were yet sinners Christ *died* for us, it surely is our reasonable service that we should present our bodies a *living* sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, and this is what the remaining chapters are about.

As living members of the body of Christ, the church, we are to exercise our gifts for the benefit of one another, to do good to all, and to love even our enemies (chapter 12). As citizens of the state, we are to submit to the governing authorities, at least to the God-given extent of their power; and as subjects of God's kingdom, we are to love our neighbour as ourselves as we await the second coming of our Lord (chapter 13).

The church in Rome, as I say, was a mixture of Gentiles and Jews, which meant that they were familiar with some very different social customs from one another and even held different convictions about the proper way of doing certain things. Chapter 14:1-15:13 is a call to patience and understanding in such non-essential matters, to edify rather than to judge one another.

Paul was presently on his way to Jerusalem, but he hoped to visit Rome in due time, and so he explained his purpose in writing this letter to the Christians there as a means of preparing them for that visit (15:14-33). The letter closes (chapter 16) with several words of greeting and with a much-needed word of warning about those who cause division, a sad but potentially immanent threat which hangs as an albatross about the neck of every gospel church in a fallen world. Come, believer, let us stand our ground against the smooth words and flattering speech of those who seek to deceive the hearts of the simple. To God, who alone is wise, be glory through Jesus Christ forever (16:27)!

This summary is far too brief for such an important book as the one before us, but I hope it is enough to whet your appetite to read and study more, as well as for all of us, by the grace of God, to put and seek to keep our own lives in order.

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