

“The Purest Gospel”

Sermons on Romans # 38

Texts: Romans 1:16-17; Habakkuk 2:1-5

Martin Luther once described Paul’s letter to the church in Rome as “the purest gospel.” We have spent 37 Sundays going through this amazing epistle, and I thought that it would be appropriate to devote one final sermon to summarizing some of the things Paul has set forth in this letter.

One of the problems with a week by week study of a lengthy book such as Romans is that we can easily miss the big picture since it takes so many weeks to cover the entire book. Paul’s intent was that this letter be read in the various house churches we speak of as the “church in Rome.” Since this letter was originally intended to be read aloud in these various congregations, I can’t help but think Paul would chuckle a bit were he to learn that a congregation such as ours would spend so much time going through a letter which he intended to be read aloud in one sitting. And yet this letter is so profound and so densely-packed with important doctrinal matters, I think a good case can be made that we went through this letter far too quickly. So, a quick summary of several of the major themes of Romans should be a profitable undertaking and a fitting way to end our series.

Our fathers in the faith clearly understood the importance of the Book of Romans and we would be foolish to ignore their wise counsel. Luther thought understanding Romans so important to a healthy Christian life that he thought it should be memorized by every Christian. He also stated that Romans cannot be studied enough or too thoroughly. John Calvin thought that the Book of Romans was the key to understanding the whole of Scripture, since in this epistle Paul quotes more verses from the Old Testament than any other book of the New Testament. If we understand the Book Romans, says Calvin, we will be able to see the big picture of the redemptive drama so that we can make sense of details and understand the more obscure passages of the Bible. A number of writers have made the point that Romans has an uncanny power to bring life to Christ’s church whenever the church is in need of Reformation and renewal. But then the church always seems to be in need of Reformation and renewal.

Then there is the fact that many of the issues facing the church in Rome are issues which have resurfaced in our own day. Just like the ancient Romans, Americans do not embrace the biblical conception of human sin and God’s grace. For Paul, true religion is based upon understanding God’s revelation of himself in the person of Jesus Christ, the central figure in our deliverance from sin, who is revealed on every page in the unfolding drama of the redemption. This why Paul cites so many Old Testament passages even though the messianic age has now dawned and the Old Testament promise of a redeemer is fulfilled. Much like ancient Roman pagans, modern Americans think they can find salvation by looking within. Paul’s letter to the church in Rome reminds us that this is not the case. If we look within for salvation we will only find sin and depravity.

Since Romans is a letter designed to explain more fully a number of things the Christians in Rome already knew to be true, this is why this letter continues to speak to us today. There are many professing Christians who do not fully grasp the horrible effects that sin has had upon the human race and they need to. Such people assign far too much ability to fallen human nature and accordingly think that evangelism is a matter of giving people the right information so that they can act upon it. It is in Romans that Paul makes the case that sinful men and women must be sovereignly called by God through the gospel because the human will is enslaved to sin so that sinners cannot respond to God unless enabled by God to do so.

And then we all know people who struggle with the fact that God justifies the wicked through faith in Jesus Christ. Not only does such an assertion sound completely foreign to modern Americans who think our inherent goodness will somehow gain for us entrance into heaven, this means that our own good works contribute nothing to our salvation. This marks-off historical evangelical and Reformed Christianity as a religion unlike all others. For all other religions are either systems of ethics, or the quest for spirituality, or based in religious ceremonies which celebrate the goodness of humanity or offer up a vain attempt to appease an angry God. Many of our contemporaries simply cannot grasp the glorious news that what God demands of us under the law (perfect obedience), he freely offers to us in the gospel. The free gift of a perfect righteousness makes little sense to people who think that they are just fine as they are. Such people see no need for grace, nor for a savior.

There is also the tragic fact that even in our own Reformed tradition—which prides itself on biblical fidelity and adherence to our Reformed confessions (which often simply summarize Paul)—there are men who will not affirm that we are justified by faith alone, but contend that we are justified by a vague something or other called “obedient faith,” or “covenantal faithfulness.” Romans speaks to this error today with every bit as much power as it did to Paul’s original audience, who likewise struggled with the question, “if God does all the saving, what part do I play in my salvation?” Paul heard the same questions we hear today. “If I am justified by the merits of Christ received through faith, why must I still do good works?” Paul, too, heard the nonsensical accusation, “*shall we go on sinning that grace may abound* (Romans 6:1)?” He answers it just as we would expect him to do—“*By no means, we died to sin.*”

Given the depths of human sinfulness, my guess is that we could start over in Romans 1:1, and spend 37 more weeks covering the same ground, only to find that in the meantime a whole new series of errors will have arisen within the church to which the Book of Romans will speak directly. Thus, Luther and Calvin are absolutely right. We cannot know this book too well, nor study it too much. So even though we will be moving on to other things later in the summer, don’t neglect your own reading and studying of this great book. Read it, meditate upon it, study it. It will be time well spent.

As we conclude our series, there are a number of important things found in Romans which are absolutely essential for us to grasp. And while these matters unfold in a definite order in Paul’s letter, I will summarize just a few of them in a topical fashion.

Logically, we should begin where Paul begins, with the bad news of human sin. While modern Americans have a very optimistic view of human nature (to the point of denying original sin and human inability), Paul’s view of human nature is much more realistic. In fact, Paul’s view of human nature is down right stark by modern standards. To begin with, Paul attributes the human predicament to the fall of Adam. According to Paul, Adam was placed under a covenant of works in Eden as the preventative head of the entire human race, so that when he rebelled against God, he plunged the entire human race into sin and death. As Paul puts it in Romans 5:12-19, through the disobedience of the one man (Adam), the many (all of his descendants) were made (or reckoned) sinners (5:19). And having been reckoned as sinners, the curse (death) comes upon the entire human race (5:12). Not only are we born with a sinful nature (i.e., “the flesh”) we are also guilty for Adam’s act of rebellion (5:12, 18-19; cf. Psalm 51:5). As the old Puritan divines spoke of it, “in Adam’s fall, sinned we all.”

This is hardly a matter of speculation by theologians who have nothing better to do. How many of those we love have died this past year? Death is the result of human sin, specifically Adam’s sin. And death remains our greatest enemy. But the only way for death to be defeated is for someone to die for our sins (so as to remove the curse) and to be raised to life for our justification so that human nature itself may be

redeemed (cf. Romans 4:25). The only possible solution to the predicament of human sin requires far more than a few good works, or the performance of a religious ceremony or two, or a quest for the “god within.” To redeem Adam and his children from the consequences of our sin and his, God must provide a sacrifice for sin so that his justice is fully satisfied. He must provide unrighteous sinners with a righteousness which meets his holy standards.

Paul describes this solution wonderfully in Romans 3:21-26: *“But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.”* Thus God provides such a sacrifice, and he does it in such a way as to demonstrate his love without sacrificing his justice.

But Paul does not end his discussion with our guilt in Adam. Perhaps more than any other biblical writer, in the Book of Romans Paul speaks directly to the effects of sin upon all of us as we experience them in daily life. We may think that we are basically good and that all we need is a little grace and to try a little harder, but Paul tells us the truth. Citing from the Psalms and prophet Isaiah, Paul catalogues the effects of sin upon each of us in Romans 3:9-20: *“There is no one righteous, not even one. There is no one who does good, and no one who seeks God, no not one. All have turned aside.”* Furthermore, in Romans 1:18-32, Paul describes the inevitable tendency of fallen human nature to suppress the truth about God in unrighteousness, truth which is revealed both in nature and in the conscience. We exchange to the truth of God for a lie. This explains why people are at once so incurably religious while at the same time indifferent to the gospel. Calvin was right—our sinful minds are idol factories. We invent a “god” we can manage and then worship him so that he rewards us with a conscience numbed to the truth of our own sin.

In this same series of verses from Romans 1, Paul describes the ever-downward spiral of sinful human nature into even greater and greater levels of depravity. Those who have turned away from God, says Paul, *“have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.”* Paul pulls no punches. Even “little sins” render us guilty before God. When Paul is finished it is clear that no one is left standing. *“There is no one righteous, not even one.”*

Thus the divine indictment of fallen men and women extends even to religious people—in this case, the Jews of Paul’s own day, who were particularly meticulous when it came to external conformity to God’s commandments. Beginning Romans 2:1, Paul reminds his compatriots, *“You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.”* In fact, Jew and Gentile will all be judged by the same standard—*“God will give to every person according to what we have done”* (Romans 2:6). To those who do good, God will give eternal life. God will send those who do evil into eternal punishment. Now, who among us will measure our supposed goodness against God’s commandments, then stand up and say to God, *“I have done good. Give me eternal life.”* Anyone who dares to do such a

thing will be sadly disappointed in the end. After all, God says that all men and women are liars, and given our own sinfulness, we are often self-deceived and certainly not above lying about ourselves. The problem is that while we may believe the lies we tell about our goodness, God knows the truth about us, and Paul expresses that truth plainly. *“There is no one who does good, not even one.”*

And yet, nothing could mis-characterize Paul’s letter to the Romans any more than to give people the impression that the fall of Adam and human sin is the end of the story. Because God is merciful—mercy being one of the major themes of Romans 9-11 where Paul discusses the relationship between Jew and Gentile—God mercifully sent a Savior to redeem us from our sins: someone who would do the good God demands, and who would indeed earn eternal life, not for himself (since he was in no need of a Savior), but for those whom he represents. This is why Paul speaks of Jesus Christ as the second Adam.

While the first Adam brought ruin and misery upon the human race, the second Adam came to undo the consequences of Adam’s act of rebellion for all those who trust in Jesus rather than in themselves. Notice the contrast between the havoc wrought by Adam and the redemption brought by Jesus Christ. In Romans 5:14-19, Paul writes, *“But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God’s grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! Again, the gift of God is not like the result of the one man’s sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God’s abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.”*

But how is it that Jesus Christ makes people righteous through his one act of obedience? Paul addresses this matter throughout the opening five chapters of Romans. Paul’s thesis statement in Romans 1:16-17, which summarizes the main point of the entire epistle, indicates that Paul’s gospel is centered in the ongoing revelation of the righteousness of God. *“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’”* Thus when the gospel is preached, God’s righteousness is revealed. So is God’s wrath against sin (cf. Romans 1:18). But what is this righteousness which comes from God and revealed in the gospel? It is, as Paul will state in Romans 5:18-19, nothing less than the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ, the second Adam, though whose obedience the many are made righteous, if only they renounce their own righteousness and accept the righteousness of Christ through faith, as it is freely offered in the gospel.

And what is the gospel? According to Paul, the gospel is the declaration of what God has done for sinners in the person of Jesus Christ. In Romans 5:6-9, Paul describes this as follows: *“You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!”* It is the death of Jesus (and only the death of Jesus) which turns aside God’s anger toward sinners, which demonstrates God’s love for the lost and which

reconciles an angry God toward guilty sinners. The cross lies at the very heart of the Christian faith. And this is why on the one hand Paul can affirm the gravity of human sin, while on the other, speak so often of hope and of the glorious inheritance which awaits all those who are Christ's. Sinners have hope because of Christ's suffering and dying, because Christ's suffering and dying is for us, and in our place. As Christ was raised for our justification, so too all those who believe in Jesus Christ will be raised with him at the end of the age. Based on what God has done in the past, we can be certain about the future.

It is through the proclamation of the message about the saving work of Jesus Christ that sinners come to faith in him. In Romans 10:14-17, Paul makes this point plain: *"How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news . . . Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.'" Since faith arises in connection to the gospel, Paul, in effect, has given marching orders to the church in all ages. The church is to be about the business of preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, for it is the message of Christ crucified that God's saving power is manifest and the saving righteousness of Jesus Christ is revealed.*

But since the message of the cross is foolishness to the Greek and a stumbling block to the Jews, and just plain offensive to most modern Americans, we will always be tempted to tone down the content of our preaching so as to make it less offensive and more palatable. But the degree to which we tone down the gospel or remove the offense of the cross, is also the degree to which we empty the cross of its power. If we take the Book of Romans seriously, we see both the danger and the folly of removing the offense of the cross. For the cross of Jesus Christ is our only hope of heaven, and a church which does not preach the cross—offensive as that might be—is a church which does not preach the gospel.

Since Jesus Christ is the second Adam who provides the necessary sacrifice for sin (which reconciles, redeems and turns aside the wrath of God) as well as a perfect righteousness (which fulfills the terms of the original covenant of works as well as God commandments), the only way such benefits can become ours through the means of faith. If we are sinners and can't wash away our own sin, if we are in need of a perfect obedience to stand before God in the judgment and not be consumed, and God provides this in the person of Jesus Christ, then the only way we can receive the benefits of Christ is through faith in Jesus. This is Paul's point in a number of places throughout Romans. In Romans 3:28, Paul writes, *"for we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law."* It is hard to distort this into saying that we are justified by faith and by something else. In Romans 10:3-4, Paul puts it this way. *"Since they [the Jews] did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes."* The only way we receive the righteousness of Jesus Christ is through faith. Such righteousness is not something we can earn or accrue through human effort.

In Romans 4:1-8, Paul illustrates this point by pointing out that two of the giants of the Old Testament believed this very thing. *"What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. What does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness. David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: 'Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him.'" Thus, to trust in*

Jesus Christ (to believe his promise to save), is to not have our sins counted against us—because Christ’s death removes our guilt from us. It is also to be reckoned, or credited as righteous, even while we are still “wicked.” Thus it is vital to grasp the fact that God does not ask us to clean ourselves up so that we can be justified. Rather God justifies us through faith alone and then begins to conform us to the image of Christ, which is the theme of Romans 6-8, and a point to which we will turn momentarily.

This means that we are simultaneously “justified” and yet still remain sinners. Christ’s merit is not a wage to be earned, it is a gift to be received through faith. This is what the Jews of Paul’s day could not grasp, what the Roman Catholic church from the time of the Reformation cannot grasp, and what so many in our own day still find troubling or offensive. God justifies the wicked through faith in Jesus Christ. Yet again, Martin Luther grasped the significance of this so well—the doctrine of justification is the article by which the church stands or falls. When the church is not clear about the doctrine of justification by faith alone, the church is not clear about the gospel.

Paul would also be amused, I think, by the attempt of so many of our contemporaries to contend that justification and sanctification are two distinct stages of the Christian life, such as the popular error that people can accept Jesus as Savior and then later on yield to Christ’s Lordship, or that people are indwelt with the Spirit when they are saved, but not baptized in the Spirit until later on. Paul was familiar with those who taught that justified sinners need not obey the commandments of God—these are the so-called libertine antinomians. He condemns their error in no uncertain terms. But to argue that sanctification was a second-level stage of Christian experience of complete victory over all indwelling sin would be foreign to Paul. Indeed, one of the most comforting sections of Romans is chapter 7:14-25. Here, Paul makes the point that the normal Christian life entails an intense struggle with sin which does not end until we die, or Christ returns, whichever comes first. We simultaneously delight in the law of God and yet grieve that we still behave as slaves to sin, even though we have been set free. What wretched people we are, even when we are presently justified!

This is why it is so important to notice that Paul’s first imperative when he begins to speak of this relationship between justification and sanctification is that Christians are to reckon themselves dead to sin but alive unto God (Romans 6:11). Recall that repeatedly in Romans 6-8, Paul makes the point that now that Christians are in Christ and no-longer dominated by what they were in Adam, having been transferred from the realm or dominion of Adam to the dominion of Christ. Throughout Romans 8, Paul speaks of this as life in the Spirit. We have died to sin, in the sense that we have been set free from sin’s guilt and its power. Christians are no longer condemned by the law (since Christ has fulfilled its righteous requirements). Nor are we bound to death, for we will rise with Christ. Paul’s main central category here is union with Christ, which means that every Christian has already died to sin and has already been raised to newness of life because they have been united by faith through the power of the Holy Spirit to our crucified and risen and ascended savior.

And yet, this act of dying to sin and self and rising to newness of life is also to be a daily event. We must put to death the deeds of the flesh and rise to newness of life. We begin to do this by reckoning ourselves dead to sin but alive to God. The same act of faith which justifies also begins the process of sanctification. Having buried and raised with Christ through faith and baptism, we are now to live like the free men and women that we are. We are free from the hold of sin and death and condemnation of the law. As freed slaves we must learn to live like the free person we now are. No longer are we to be conformed to the pattern of this age, and we are to be renewed in our thinking about these matters so that we no longer behave as pagans. We now love our brothers and sisters in Christ, we use our spiritual gifts to serve others, we pay our debts, we submit to governing authorities, we abstain from fornication and

sexual immorality and we regard others more highly than ourselves. We help those in need and do not repay evil for evil. For having been justified by faith, we will begin to live lives that reflect our right standing before God. For Paul, these two things cannot be separated. Thus in Romans 12:14, Paul exhorts all justified sinners: *“clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.”*

Finally, Paul goes on to make the point that once God begins his work in our lives, he sees it through to the glorious end. In Romans 8:28-30, Paul links what God has done in eternity past with what he does in the present, and what he will do in the future. Thus we read of the so-called “golden chain of salvation.” *“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.”* Notice that God begins, sustains and ends the whole process of salvation. While the sovereignty of God offends so many of our contemporaries, Paul sees this as a great source of comfort. Because God is sovereign, the Christian can be assured that all things work together for good. For Paul, God’s sovereignty is not a threat to human freedom, it is the basis for our hope as Christians. God is control of all things. He is working all things toward their appointed ends. Things are in very good hands.

And while we cannot say enough about this great book, we are out of time and thus we have come to end in our series on Romans. Luther was right—this is a book which contains the purest gospel! We cannot know this book too well, nor study it enough. Its truths encourage and correct, they transform us and reinvigorate us. It speaks with as much power today as when Paul first dictated it to Tertius to be read in the church in Rome. May God continue to use this book in each of our lives and in the life of this church. It is the purest gospel!