

The Gospel of God

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's scripture reading is from the Apostle Paul's Epistle to the Romans, chapter 1, verses 1 through 7, as printed in your liturgy.

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God, the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and through the spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his namesake. And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people, grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

[1 : 42] This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Good morning, Christ Church. We are going to try to do something that we've never done in the 17 years that we've existed as a church, and that is to preach through the Epistle to the Romans, this great letter to these Christians and this church in the heart of the empire, the capital of the Roman Empire.

Now, this might be a terrible mistake. We might get a few weeks into the sermon series and realize this is a really, really bad idea. Why might we do that?

It's kind of like living down at sea level, you know, and sitting on your couch most of the time and thinking to yourself, you know what would be great is to go climb Mount Everest.

You know, Romans is Mount Everest. There's no higher summit you could try to climb than the Epistle to the Romans, and I'm pretty sure, at least speaking for myself, that I don't think I'm in shape to do this.

I don't know that my lungs have the capacity to get up into this high, high altitude, this rare air. I'm pretty sure my legs don't have the strength to climb up to the heights of Revelation and up to these great peaks of wisdom and insight that are in this letter, but even though I'm not equipped, I'm going to try anyway.

[3 : 08] And I wonder if you are willing and ready to come on this journey with me from down here at sea level up to the very tippy top of Mount Everest.

Well, ready or not, that's what we're going to do. And this letter, the Romans, it's a letter written by a pastor. This pastor is deeply concerned to help these Christians in Rome, to help them grow and be built up and established in their faith in Jesus Christ.

And if you just look at the table of contents in your Bible, you'll notice that of all the letters that are in the New Testament, this is the first letter. It's the first of the various letters included in the New Testament canon.

It comes right after the Acts of the Apostles. And that's kind of a question for us. Like, why is Romans found in the first position? It's not because it was the first letter to be written.

But why did, you know, the people who put the Bible together put it in the first position of importance from the very beginning? And the reason for that is that this is, it's just widely recognized that this, in this epistle, we come face to face with the foundational truths of God's revelation.

[4 : 23] You know, that after the Acts of the Apostles, this great story about the birth and the founding and the spreading and the formation of the church. What could be more natural than that

all of those churches, and really churches everywhere, would be reminded of the basic foundational truths upon which Christians everywhere at all times must stand?

So if you're here and you're exploring Christianity, we're so glad you're here. And I just want to say there's no better place to bring your questions and to seek answers about these foundational truths than this epistle to the Romans.

Just by way of introduction, this letter has played a more important role in history than any other book in the New Testament, maybe any other book in the Bible.

God has just used this letter in an exceptional manner. For example, there was a guy in North Africa named Augustine, and he was converted when he read this letter.

We can't even imagine Christianity from the fourth century onward without St. Augustine. Another guy was a German guy. He was a monk named Brother Martin. Brother Martin Luther read this letter, and he was converted.

[5 : 34] And the impact on the reformation of Christianity in the world has been incredible. A British guy named John Bunyan. He read this letter, and he was converted, and he went and wrote a book called *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

Maybe you've heard of that book. A student at a great university called Oxford University, a guy named John Wesley, read this letter.

He was converted by this letter. We can't even imagine Christianity in the United States apart from the influence of John Wesley. And there's just countless stories like that of men and women who've encountered the truth of God in this letter.

And it's profoundly changed, not only their lives, but the whole world. And the question is kind of who's next? Who's sitting here that's going to be profoundly changed by this letter to the Romans? I hope many of us will be changed. This great preacher in the early church, his name was John Chrysostom in Constantinople in Turkey. He loved this letter.

[6 : 36] He read it two times a week. Can you imagine? Two times every week. Martin Luther, similarly, he writes this in his preface to his comments on this letter.

He says, this epistle is really the chief part of the New Testament, meaning it's the greatest book in the New Testament, and it's the very purest gospel. It's worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word by heart, but should occupy himself with it every day as the daily bread of the soul.

It can never be read or pondered too much, and the more it is dealt with, the more precious it becomes, and the better it tastes. So Paul is giving us this great little introduction to this letter today, and he signifies the great themes that he's going to unpack through this whole epistle.

And it's kind of like a symphony, you know, you sound all the notes that you want to play through the whole composition right up at the front, and that's what Paul does. And what I want to say about this introduction today is that we urgently need God's apostles and God's gospel.

That here in the Bay Area, here at Christ Church, we urgently need God's apostles and God's gospel. And I want to just talk about our urgent need first for God's apostles.

[8 : 01] Verse 1 says, Paul, servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God. Now, who in the world is Paul? Well, if you're exploring Christianity or if you're a new Christian, I want to commend to you this reading plan in the Bible.

We're working through the Acts of the Apostles and the letters in the New Testament. You can pick up a copy in the back on your way out. No better way to learn about Paul. Well, if you need a refresher, I encourage you to read a biography of Paul.

This is from John Pollock, the apostle, a life of Paul. This is from N.T. Wright, called Paul, a biography. Wonderful, wonderful synopses of the person and the life of the apostle Paul.

But how does Paul identify himself? What's the first thing he says about himself? You know, in our late modern Western culture is a culture of expressive individualism.

And we're searching for all these identity markers to say who we uniquely are in this me culture. This is my truth about myself, right?

[9 : 11] And these identity markers we look at are our class, our race, our nationality, our vocation and our politics. What's my gender and what's my sexuality and my abilities and my age and education, my hobbies, my personality type.

It's kind of an exhausting list, honestly, to think about who am I and how do I tell you my truth about myself. But what's the first thing that Paul says? He just keeps it super simple.

And he says, hey, I'm Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ. Or literally, I'm a slave of Jesus Christ. And that's what a Christian is. This identity transcends all other identity markers. A Christian is somebody who's willingly surrendered themselves to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

They do not merely look at Jesus and say, he's my savior who forgives me of my sin. That's true and we must be able to say that. But more than that, a Christian says, Jesus is my lord.

[10:16] He's my master. He's my king. He's sovereignly governing my life. And if you do not identify yourself as a slave of Jesus Christ, you need to ask yourself, am I a Christian?

If you've not committed yourself to the lordship of Jesus Christ, you're probably not yet converted. And I want to say that we're so glad that you're here.

We welcome you. We want to engage with your questions. We want to explore with you your current identity and your current worldview in relation to this radically alternative paradigm that Paul's giving us.

He says, Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus. And I don't have time to recount the life of the apostle Paul and tell his whole story. But suffice it to say, in a nutshell, Paul was adamantly opposed to Jesus Christ.

You can't think of somebody who was more against Jesus than Paul. He was zealously persecuting Jesus and Jesus' people. He was sending them off to prison and to death.

[11:24] And then one day, one day Paul had this dramatic encounter with the resurrected Christ. And this encounter just profoundly changed the way Paul thought about himself and his identity.

Before, he was critiquing Jesus and Jesus' word, Jesus' message. And then all of a sudden, after that day, he was surrendering to Jesus. Before, he was an enemy of Jesus.

And now he says, I'm a slave of Jesus. And friends, if God can change Paul, and if God can change his identity, then there's no one that God cannot change.

Amen? None of us, none of the people in our lives, God can do anything with anybody whenever he wants. Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus.

But he describes himself in two ways, really. He says, I'm a servant of Christ Jesus, and I'm called to be an apostle. And he repeats this in verse 5.

[12:27] He says, I've received from Jesus both, on the one hand, grace, and on the other hand, apostleship. And it's this gift of grace, on the one hand, that's made me a Christian.

And it's this gift of apostleship, on the other hand, that's given me the knowledge to preach and to teach and write large portions of the New Testament. Because I'm an apostle. An apostle is a special, unique, particular calling.

It means that I'm a sent one. I'm one whom Jesus has sent out as a messenger. And this term, this technical term, the apostle, it applies only to this band of the apostles that Jesus selected, that he trained, that he authorized, and that he sent out to be his ambassadors.

His delegates, his representatives in the world. So that they would go out and speak for the Lord Jesus himself. They would speak on Jesus' behalf as if it were Jesus himself speaking to other people.

And the reason I'm spending a little time on this is because we cannot follow Jesus Christ without following his apostle Paul.

[13:38] I'm going to say that again. We cannot follow Jesus Christ without following his apostle Paul. And the reason I say that is because you'll hear many Christians today say, I love Jesus, but I'm not so sure about this Paul guy.

Maybe you've thought that to yourself. You know, I go and I read Paul and I pretty quickly encounter things that I don't like. Things that offend me.

Things that irritate me. Things that make me want to say, you know, that's just Paul, but this is Jesus. Paul's down here. Jesus is up here. And I want to say that's a very low view of Paul.

And it's shared by a lot of people. This is Thomas Jefferson. He wrote this letter in 1820. He said, Paul was the first corrupter of the doctrines of Jesus.

Frederick Nietzsche in 1881, he said, Paul was the disangelist. Not the evangelist. He was the disangelist, the bringer of ill tidings. Fast forward to our time in 1991.

[14:41] This guy, Stephen Mitchell, he's translated a lot of ancient texts. He wrote a book called The Gospel According to Jesus. He said, Paul of Tarsus was the most misleading of the earliest Christian writers.

He didn't understand Jesus at all. He wasn't even interested in Jesus, just in his own idea of the Christ. These things, I have pages and pages of lists of these kind of quotes. That's just the air we breathe. It's the water we drink. It's the default mode of our cultural moment. And that's a very low view of Paul.

It's a view that's shaped by the European Enlightenment, not so much the New Testament itself. And I want to ask ourselves, what would it mean to have a higher view of the Apostle Paul? And I think a higher view means to recognize that God carefully developed this man, Paul, in three unique ways. Number one, he was Jewish.

[15 : 39] And he sat at the feet of this guy named Gamaliel, who was the greatest teacher of the Pharisees, which meant that Paul himself excelled in the scriptures. And he became an expert in the Jewish scriptures.

Secondly, Paul was not only Jewish, he was Greek. He was born and raised in Tarsus, which was one of the three centers of Greek culture. You had Athens, Greece, Alexandria, Egypt, and Tarsus in Turkey.

And this means that Paul can not only quote the scriptures, but he can quote to us the Greek poets and the Greek philosophers. And then thirdly, Paul's a Roman citizen. He has grown up in this Roman legal culture.

He's developed that legal mind, that power of logic and argument and reasoning. Paul is like this tricultural polymath. He's like some of you guys.

He's this tricultural polymath, this Jew who's also Greek, who's also Roman. And I love what N.T. Wright says. He's a great scholar of the Apostle Paul. He says, Paul is one of the most seminal minds of the first or any century.

[16 : 51] Despite the longstanding tendency to sneer at Paul and to press him for answers to questions he didn't ask, I persist in regarding him as the intellectual equal of Plato, Aristotle, or Seneca.

Now, if you're here exploring Christianity, I want to encourage you to read Paul, if you've never read him, like you would read Plato or Aristotle or Seneca. And if you're here and you're a Christian today, I'd like for you to encourage you to read Paul as the special chosen mouthpiece of Jesus Christ himself, the resurrected Christ.

Because Jesus says in John 16, on the night before he's to go to his crucifixion, he's with his apostles and he says to them, he says, I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear.

But when he, the spirit of truth, comes, he's going to guide you into all the truth. He's saying the Holy Spirit's going to guide my apostles into the deeper truth that they need to preach and teach and write the New Testament scriptures.

And that means for us is that if we want to find the truth, we don't go straight to the Holy Spirit. No, we go to these apostles and what they've written in their letters, in their gospels, and we ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to us the truth that Jesus has given to and through these apostles.

[18 : 16] In fact, we are not being led by the Holy Spirit into truth unless it's apostolic truth. Unless it's the truth that the resurrected Christ spoke through his apostles, including the apostle Paul.

So I want to encourage you, I want to invite you and challenge you to build your life on these two great things that we hear about in verses 1 and verse 5. And that is, first of all, this experience of grace that would cause you to identify yourself above and beyond everything else as a slave of this one whom you call your Lord, your master, your king.

And secondly, I want to encourage you to build your life on what Paul calls the apostolic truth. That is, this authoritative revelation. There's no other sure foundation given through Jesus Christ for his church.

You with me so far? We urgently need God's apostles. But here in the Bay Area, here at Christ Church, we also urgently need God's gospel. We need God's gospel.

And Paul announces this major theme of his letter here in the first sentence. He says, Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for what?

[19 : 34] Set apart for the gospel of God. And that's obviously an important word. He uses it six times, the gospel, in this opening kind of introduction to the letter.

And perhaps it's become an over-familiar term for many of us. And so I want to think for a minute about what it means. The gospel is like this multifaceted diamond. Right?

It's just radiant. It's beautiful. It's brilliant. It's a great treasure. And it's got these six facets to it. And Paul says, first of all, the first facet is that the origin of the gospel is God.

It's the gospel of God. It's not just about God, but it's from God. And it has God as its source. And this implies that it's not from a human source.

It's not been invented by any of these apostles. No, it's a divine message, not a human message. And this whole letter is going to be an exposition of this divine revelation, this gospel of God.

[20 : 35] Paul says, secondly, the ground of the gospel is scripture. It's the gospel of God that was promised beforehand through the prophets in the holy scriptures.

This good news of God, he says, is not new news. It's, in fact, very, very old news. And I want you to think back, he says, to all these great promises of God, these promises that were spoken through the prophets, these promises that are recorded in scripture.

Go back to that mother promise in Genesis 3.15, the Garden of Eden, right? Where God says, a great one is going to come among you.

And he's going to trample down evil. He's going to be, he's going to fight with evil. And he's going to be grievously wounded. He's going to suffer terribly, but he is going to triumph over evil.

Fast forward to Genesis 12, where God says to Abraham, he says, Abraham, through you and through your offspring, particularly one of your offspring, I'm going to bless all the nations of the earth.

[21 : 40] You look at the psalm, Psalm 22. It's about this anointed king. And he's crying out to God in utter agony. He says, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

And you read to the end of that psalm, and somehow it ends in victory. You go to Isaiah 53, this promise about this suffering servant who's going to come, and somehow God's going to place on him all the sins of every single one of us.

And somehow through his wounds, we are all going to be healed. Daniel 7, this great promise of the Son of Man who's going to come, and he's going to enter into the presence of Almighty God, into the presence of the Ancient of Days, and he's going to bring all of us with him, and he's going to have a kingdom that will never end.

The whole Old Testament is just preparing us and telling us these great promises about this coming prophet, this coming priest, this coming king. And, you know, when Paul is going around, he's preaching, he's teaching in all these major urban centers in the Mediterranean basin.

He goes to Corinth for 18 months. He goes to Ephesus for 36 months. He's preaching from morning till night. He's sweating. You know, he's weeping. What is he telling these people?

[22 : 59] What's the content of his message? This letter is a condensed outline. It's a skeleton of all the great headings that Paul would unpack.

And when you read this letter, it's just full of allusions and quotations to these promises of God in the Old Testament. And Paul would tell us, I really want to encourage all of you to read the Old Testament at least one time a year to familiarize yourself and just soak in these promises of God. He says, first of all, the origin of the gospel is God. Secondly, the ground of the gospel is Scripture. And thirdly, the center and substance of the gospel is Jesus Christ. It's the gospel of God regarding his son, he says.

And Paul's already told us about this blessed person, Jesus, at the center of his life. He's the Lord and I'm his servant. He's the master and I'm his slave. Paul's telling us that I've been captivated. I've become a captive. I'm captured by the love of Jesus Christ. I can't even think about myself apart from Jesus Christ. My whole life revolves around this person.

[24 : 07] And now he's telling us why he's so captivated. Verse 3, he says, It's the gospel regarding his son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the spirit of holiness was appointed the son of God in power by the resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Paul's saying that Jesus has two natures. He's fully divine and he's fully human. And Jesus had two stages in his ministry. He was humiliated and then he was exalted.

And Paul's telling us, he's saying that the eternal son of God came down. He descended. He emptied himself. He lowered himself.

He humbled himself. And he became obedient to a life under the law, to being a human being like all of us. He was born in the royal line of King David.

He came to fulfill all these promises that God made about his Messiah. But as we know, he came by stealth. He came incognito. He was born into this very ordinary, poor family.

[25 : 17] And he ended his life in a very lowly and humiliated and weak way on his cross. And yet Paul says that he was resurrected from the dead.

And he doesn't say that he became the son of God because of the resurrection. But because he was raised by the Holy Spirit, he was declared to be and he was demonstrated to be the son of God.

Obviously, for all the world to see this one, this only one of us, who's gone through death and come out the other side alive, he says he's been declared the son of God in power.

Because he has the power not only to be alive, but to give us life. And Paul says that he now, he's been exalted. He reigns on God's throne as the world's true Lord.

Caesar is not Lord. Jesus is the Lord. This God-man who was humiliated in weakness and exalted in power, why did he do it?

[26 : 21] He did it to take our place. You think about what is sin? Sin is us taking the place of God. Sin is us saying, I want to be my own Lord and my own master.

I want to sit on the throne. I want to be in charge. I want to determine what's right and what's wrong for me. And if sin is us taking the place of God, what is salvation? Salvation is God taking the place of us.

That though we try to usurp his throne, Paul's telling us that the son of God, he came down to live this God-glorifying, righteous life that we owe to God.

He came down to die the death of a sinner in our place. He came down so that he might be raised up in power to live and to reign, and so that he might raise us up in power to live and to reign with him.

And Paul says, that's why I'm a captive. I'm a slave. I've been taken captive by this amazing love, this gospel regarding God's son. And he'll go on to say that I'm not ashamed of the gospel.

[27 : 29] That's his great thesis statement in this letter. I'm not ashamed of this gospel. It's an ironic understatement when you state a negative to affirm a positive. When he says, I'm not ashamed of the gospel, he's saying, I'm very proud of this gospel.

My only boast is in this gospel. This gospel thrills me and it moves me in the depths of my being. I can hardly contain myself. Why, Paul says, because it's the gospel of God and of his son.

It's not about what we must do to get God to love us. No, the gospel is about what God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, has done to show us his love.

The gospel is not spelled D-O, go and do something to get God to love you. The gospel is spelled D-O-N-E, what God has done for you in your place.

And that's why Paul writes this whole letter, just proudly boasting in the heart of the empire that the good news of God's son is better than any other good news that's on offer out there.

[28 : 44] And that's my prayer, is that we too would become not ashamed. That we too would become, in fact, very proud of this gospel of God's son.

The origin of the gospel is God, the ground of the gospel is Scripture, the center and substance of the gospel is Jesus. Paul says, the range and the scope of the gospel is all the nations.

I've received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles, he says, all the ethnos, all the ethnics. If this is the gospel of God, then it must include every creature that's made in the image of God in the whole wide world.

Paul says, this isn't just a message for Jews only, it's universal good news for Africans, for Asians, for Latinos, for Europeans, for Middle Easterners.

If you just look around this room, you'll see it's a good news that includes all these different people groups in the world. And Paul would say it not only includes all the ethnic groups, it includes, it's a good news for all the religious groups.

[29 : 52] The gospel is good news for Hindus. And it's good news for Buddhists and Muslims and atheists and agnostics and none of the above. Paul is saying God is on a mission to call not just some people in one region of the world, but to call all people to himself through the gospel of his son.

And to be a Christian means that you too want to extend God's call to all the people in your neighborhoods and all the people in your networks.

And some of us get nervous about that. Some of us get nervous about evangelism and missions. And we say, well wait, isn't Christianity a Western religion? And isn't Christianity against diversity? And isn't Christianity just about colonizing other cultures? And that's a big hairy conversation. Love to talk about that over coffee. But the data says that in the 21st century, there's the same number of Christians in Europe as there are in North America, as there are in South America, as there are in Africa right now.

And the data tells us that by the year 2030, in seven years, the church in China is going to outgrow the church in America. By the year 2060, 40% of Christians will live in sub-Saharan Africa.

[31 : 13] And black Christians will be the largest racial group of the global church. And the data tells us that even right now, in the United States, black women are by far the most Christian demographic.

And that globally, the people who are most likely to be Christians are women of color. And the reason I say this is that if you're a Christian, this multicultural joy, this interracial love, that's your inheritance in Jesus Christ.

Amen? You belong to the most inclusive life system that's ever been introduced on planet Earth. It's not just for some people. It's for all the people. And Paul says the purpose of this gospel, he goes on, he says the purpose of the gospel is the obedience that comes from faith.

I've been called to, I've been given grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith. This is how it worked with Abraham, our great father in the faith.

Hebrews 11 says that by faith, Abraham obeyed. The only proper response to the gospel is faith and faith alone. But a true and a living faith in Jesus Christ includes within itself a submission to Jesus as your Lord, who's leading you into a lifetime of obedience.

[32 : 36] We enter into new life in Jesus Christ on the basis of faith and faith alone. But the test of whether or not your faith is real is, do I obey Jesus?

We are saved by faith alone, but saving faith is never alone. Paul says it's the obedience that comes from faith. And then the last thing Paul wants us to know, this last facet of this gospel diamond, he says is that the goal in the end of this gospel is the honor of the name of Jesus Christ. I've been given grace and apostleship through Jesus to call all the Gentiles his obedience that comes from faith. Why? For the sake of his name.

For his name's sake. Friends, if you've been transformed by the love of God the Father, and if you've heard that love being expressed to you in the gospel of his Son, and if that love has been applied to you by the power of the Holy Spirit, then the result is that your one goal in life, the chief end of your existence, utterly changes from what it was before.

You begin to live your life however you were living it before, you begin to live your life for his name's sake. And that means that I'm no longer living for the glory of my name.

[33 : 58] Who am I? I'm just a slave of Christ Jesus. No, I'm living for the glory of his name because who's going to be the center of attention at the very end of time?

It's not me. It's not you. It's going to be one person. And he says, we're called to live for the glory of his name and his name alone.

So if you're exploring Christianity, and you're here and you're asking yourself the question, what does it mean to be a Christian? To be a Christian means that you cherish the six facets of this gospel diamond.

This gospel that has its origin in God the Father. Its ground in the Old Testament scriptures. Its center and substance in Jesus. Its range and scope in all the nations.

Its purpose and the obedience that comes from faith. And its goal and end in the glory of the name of Jesus Christ. And if you're a Christian, and you're asking yourself, what kind of people is God calling us to be and to become?

[35 : 03] He's calling us to become good news people. He's calling us to be a people who celebrate and who study and who share this gospel of God, according to scripture, about Jesus Christ for the nations, unto the obedience of faith, for the sake of the name.

We can never, never let go of these great precious truths that have been given to us. We urgently need, not only God's apostle, we need God's gospel.

This is the gospel of God himself. May he teach us, and may he conform us to this gospel. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen. Amen.