

Understanding Romans 1-8

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Last week, I tried one of my many pulpit experiments. I read the entirety of Romans 1-8 from a reading-friendly translation just to see how it would go. Though I don't regret the experiment, the answer seems to be "Not well". One of the most interesting points made about it was made by my wife. Because I'd spent so much time rehearsing it, I understood the text really well, which led me to emphasize every verse in my reading. Sadly, emphasizing everything means emphasizing nothing. My style of reading dwelt so much on the nuances that I actually ended up obscuring Paul's main argument.

This morning, I'm going to try to right that wrong, not by reading for 45 minutes in a different style, but by skipping 95 percent of the text and only addressing the most significant verses. By doing this, we'll be able to grasp what Paul is saying. Let's devote ourselves, then to understanding Romans 1-8.

The Sin Problem

The first main section of Romans contains Paul's description of mankind's problem with sin. It begins by revealing **GOD'S WRATH AGAINST SINNERS**. Let's read from Romans 1:18-19. In order to understand this snippet, I think we have to start at the end and work backwards. There, Paul makes a crucial claim: that even in the physical creation, we have enough information to know God and know His will. The first point is obvious. When we're driving down an unfamiliar road and see a house standing on the corner, we don't say to ourselves, "I wonder what strange coincidence of natural forces created that house!" Instead, we know that somebody built it. How much more, then, do we look around at the beauty and intricacy of the creation and in it, recognize our Creator? Every blade of grass in the lawn is a proof of God's existence.

If God exists and is our Creator, it follows that we are responsible for obeying Him. We are here for a reason, and that reason is to glorify Him. Every human being on the planet ought to recognize that, and those who don't are blocking out the truth. When we choose not to glorify Him, when we choose to sin, we rebel against the divine will and set ourselves up as targets for His wrath. This too should not be surprising. My children aren't even in kindergarten yet, but they know that disobedience has consequences and indeed are able to predict the consequences. Why would we expect God to deal with us any differently?

Next, Paul forces us to acknowledge **OUR OWN CONDEMNATION**. This is highlighted in Romans 2:1-2. Paul has just spent the last half of Romans 1 talking about all the bad, bad things those Gentiles do: idolatry, homosexuality, and the practice of every other sort of sin. It's not hard to imagine the first-century Christians in Rome nodding in agreement at that point. Even today, we've all heard Christians loudly condemn the very sins that they themselves have never struggled with.

Paul, though, is using his laundry list of other people's sins to bait us out. Once we agree that, yes, those sinners are terrible, and God has every right to punish them, Paul forces us to acknowledge that we have sinned too, so that God has every right to punish us. As Jesus might say, our condemnation is measured out according to the ferocity with which we condemn others. The point here is not that we should soft-pedal the sin around us. Sin truly is evil. There is nothing good about sin, and God will be entirely justified when He sentences the unrepentant sinner to eternity in hell.

Instead, the point is that we must be careful not to soft-pedal our own sin. Just like everybody else, we have a tendency to want to make excuses for our own sin, to explain it away as not really all that bad. Not so. On our own merits, none of us are any better than the most wicked sinner we can imagine, because we too once committed our lives to rebellion against God. We deserve the same judgment that they do.

After this, Paul examines **THE PROBLEM WITH JUDAISM**. It's stated succinctly in Romans 2:25. 2000 years ago, the Jews thought they were God's chosen people. After all, God had revealed His law to them in a way He had done for no one else. They studied that law. They knew it probably better than most Christians know their Bibles. Paul points out, though, that being God's chosen people doesn't count for anything. Knowing the Law of Moses inside and out doesn't count for anything. Being part of God's covenant because your parents had you circumcised as a baby doesn't count for anything.

Instead, the only thing that matters is keeping God's law. Some random Gentile who wasn't part of God's people, didn't study the Law every week, and wasn't circumcised, but fulfilled the requirements of the

Law, would be blameless. On the other hand, a Jew who was circumcised the eighth day, was part of God's people, and had the Law practically memorized but didn't keep it was under sin just like everybody else.

One of the challenges we face in interpreting the first half of Romans is the temptation to equate ourselves with first-century Jews and apply everything that Paul says about Jews and the Law of Moses to us and the Law of Christ. For instance, people have been known to argue that because Paul compares baptism and circumcision in Colossians 2, the two are the same thing in all respects. As a result, they argue, when Paul says that circumcision does not save, he's really also saying that baptism doesn't save either. That's a bad argument. Baptism and circumcision aren't exactly the same thing in every respect, and regardless, just a few chapters later in Romans 6, Paul is quite clear on the necessity of baptism for salvation.

Having said that, though, there are some lessons we can learn from Paul's statement here. I think there are all too many Christians who take pride in their churchiness in the same way that Jews in the first century took pride in their Jewishness. Christians like this look down their noses at everybody else, and they look to their special identity as God's people and their knowledge of His will as proof of their own righteousness. Don't get me wrong, friends. It's essential that we belong to God's church, but we are not saved by a church. We are saved by a Savior, and we must place our trust in Him, not in ourselves.

Paul's conclusion from all of this is that **ALL ARE UNDER SIN**. He's pretty blunt about this in Romans 3:9. This was a shocking statement in the time of the early church, and it's a shocking statement today. As I've observed before, "sin" is a dirty word in our society. Generally speaking, Americans think of themselves as good people, and they reject the notion that on their own, they are sinners. They refuse to admit that they deserve to have God's wrath poured out on them.

This is true even of those who profess to be Christians. In many churches across this country, "wrath" is another dirty word. This leads to some truly strange logical contortions. Believers like this will celebrate the love of Jesus on the cross, but they're really vague about why He had to go to the cross in the first place. They aren't willing to call anybody out as a sinner, and they certainly aren't willing to repeat the Scriptural warning that sinners will lose their souls. Unintentionally, they construct an I'm-OK-you're-OK spiritual world in which the sacrifice of Christ is meaningless. He died for people who didn't need saving.

Conversely, if we believe that the death of Christ is meaningful, that it is the most significant act ever to take place on this planet, we necessarily also emphasize the dangers of sin and God's wrath. Jesus didn't die for no reason. Instead, He died for a very good reason, that every last one of us was a rebel, every last one of us was going to hell, and nothing less than the blood of God's Son could rescue us.

Salvation Through Christ

Now that Paul has established that every one of us is doomed on our own, he presents us with a much more pleasant alternative: salvation through Christ. The first subpoint of his argument is that we can be **JUSTIFIED BY FAITH**. This idea is encapsulated in Romans 3:21-22. There are few topics in Scripture that are more hotly contested than this one, and it is often true that our read on it is more the results of those arguments than it is of what the text actually says. To be quite honest, even as I was preparing this sermon last week, there was a part of me that wanted to add, "But you still have to be baptized!" That's certainly true, but baptism or not has nothing to do with Paul's argument here.

Instead, we have to understand the idea of justification by faith, and indeed its opposite, justification by works, in the context of the two and a half chapters we've already looked at. Basically, there are two theoretically possible roads that can lead to heaven, two doors, if you will. Door Number One is perfect law-keeping. If you live your life sinlessly, you can pound on the gates of heaven and demand admittance. The problem with Door Number One is that nobody actually does that. Paul has already said we're all under sin.

Door Number Two, then, is looking for someone else to make us right with God when we have failed to make ourselves right. We trust in Jesus to save us when we cannot save ourselves. That's justification by faith. The alternative to justification by faith is not doing something. It is doing everything. As long as we depend on Jesus to do something for us, we are relying on salvation by faith rather than works.

Next, Paul reveals that this system of justification is not new. Instead, it is very old, even in his own time. He illustrates this by pointing to **THE EXAMPLE OF ABRAHAM**. Look at Romans 4:16. If we want to know what the faith of Abraham is, we have to go back and look at the story of Abraham.

Abraham is certainly one of the good guys of Scripture. He was a man of faith, and that faith shaped the way he lived his life. If we were to flip over to Hebrews 11 this morning, we would see that by faith, Abraham did all kinds of things. However, even though Abraham was a good man, he wasn't a perfect one. He lied. He tried to finesse God's plan by sleeping with his wife's handmaid Hagar. Even though God spoke to him directly, he did not live his life entirely according to God's will. He was not justified by works.

Instead, Genesis 15 tells us that he was righteous in God's sight because he trusted in God's promises. Paul points out that this is something that Abraham's physical descendants can do. Jews both then and now aren't saved by their DNA. Instead, they are saved by their faith in Jesus. They are not saved by the works of the Law of Moses because none of them have perfectly kept that law. Because salvation doesn't have anything to do with Moses, Gentiles can be saved too, so long as they share in Abraham's faith. This is not the do-nothing faith of the demons in James 2. It's the faith of a man who left everything to follow God.

The same thing is true for us too. If we want to know whether we have the faith of Abraham, we need to compare our lives to the life of Abraham. Faith isn't something that we can keep bottled away in our hearts like acid in a glass jar, incapable of reacting to anything. Instead, just as Abraham's faith changed his life, if we share that faith, it will change our lives too. We will do things that our friends and neighbors think are crazy because we trust in God's promises. If our lives aren't changed, we don't share Abraham's faith.

After this, Paul explains the significance of **CHRIST'S SAVING DEATH**. The verse that best captures his point here is Romans 5:8. Recently, I read a book about soldiers and their actions during the war in Iraq. Several times in the book, the author made the point of telling the story of Sergeant So-and-So or Corporal Thus-and-Such, who was with his comrades when the enemy threw a grenade into their position. The brave soldier then throws himself on the grenade, giving his life so that his comrades could live. Generally, American soldiers who do this are posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. Everybody understands that in war, the sacrifice of oneself is the highest possible display of courage.

That's what Romans 5:8 means when it says that Jesus died for us. He threw himself on the grenade of our sin so that we would live at the cost of His life. That sacrifice is what makes Christianity logically coherent. It's the reason why God can count us as righteous even though we aren't righteous. Jesus has already died for those sins, and to kill us for them too would be, in legal parlance, double jeopardy. You can't execute a second man for some crime when the first man has already died for it. Jesus' death thus saves us.

Finally in this section of the text, Paul describes Jesus as **THE SECOND ADAM**. Paul distinguishes between these two Adams in Romans 5:17. Scripturally speaking, Adam is noteworthy for two things. First, he was the first man, and all of us are his descendants. Second, even though Adam wasn't deceived like his wife was, he made the foolish decision to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil anyway. This opened his eyes, made him capable of abstractly appreciating sin and righteousness, and brought death into the world. Today, because he is our ancestor, we inherit both mortality and the capacity to sin from him. Sadly, sooner or later, we all choose to do evil, and so we die spiritually too.

Adam, then, is the source of our misery. He is the reason why we both die and face separation from God. His impact on our physical and spiritual lives can scarcely be overstated. Paul wants us to understand, though, that the physical and spiritual impact of Jesus is equally great. Because Jesus took the punishment for our sins Himself, we who are Christians don't have to fear that we will die for them. Similarly, even though the grave awaits every one of us unless our Lord returns first, He has promised to raise us from the dead. So it is that all the evil that Adam did, Jesus has either undone or will undo. Before the Lord's Supper, then, let's remember the greatness of the sacrifice of Jesus and how much we owe to Him.

Righteousness in Christ

The final section of Romans that we're going to look at this morning concerns the nature of righteousness in Christ. First, he reveals that as Christians, we should understand ourselves as **SLAVES OF RIGHTEOUSNESS**. Look at Romans 6:15-16. Romans 6 actually contains not one, but two closely related arguments. His first question is not one we would ask. I've never met anyone who would argue or even think that we could glorify God by sinning more and more, so that He could forgive us more and more.

The second, however, is one that makes sense to lazy, ungodly people in every place and time. If we are justified by faith rather than by perfectly keeping the Law, why should we do anything? Why not live as wickedly as we please and let Jesus slather another bucket of grace all over us?

Really, both of Paul's arguments in Romans 6 answer this question. The first is that when we were baptized, we died to the old sinful self that would want to live that way. After all, godly sorrow and repentance are a necessary part of our salvation. When we obey the gospel, we must acknowledge not merely that sin is deadly, but that sin is inherently wrong. We don't only want to escape the consequences of sin; we want to stop being sinners. If that's where we're supposed to be before we die to sin in the waters of baptism, why, in our new lives with Christ, are we looking back longingly on that old sinful life?

Second, Paul points out that in ordinary human conduct, we can tell to whom somebody belongs by whom he obeys. If somebody shows up at McDonald's dressed in a McDonald's uniform and spends 40 hours a week behind the counter handing people Big Macs, we know he's a McDonald's employee. Likewise, our conduct reveals to whom we belong in a spiritual sense. If we lead lives that are righteous, godly, and loving, we show that we are servants of Christ. If, on the other hand, those same lives are filled with striving for evil rather than good, we belong to the devil, whether or not we got wet once.

Second, Paul reveals **THE FAILURE OF THE LAW**. This failure is best captured in Romans 7:13. In the first part of this chapter, Paul tells his Jewish audience that just like a woman is no longer bound to her husband once he dies, they were no longer bound to the Law of Moses once they died with Christ.

To the Jews, this probably sounded like a bad thing. After all, they had a tremendous attachment to the Law. In reality, Paul points out, it's a very good thing. Even though the Law itself was inherently good, as all of God's commandments are, it could never justify because no one kept it perfectly. It could only enlighten and then condemn. Sin took advantage of the Law to spiritually ruin even the best Jews. This left Paul and others like him in an unhappy in-between ground. Even though they wanted to do right, they found themselves doing wrong instead. The perfect Law only revealed their own imperfections.

Sadly, I think some Christians today live in this unhappy middle ground too. Typically, they're what we would think of as "core Christians", those who devote a lot of time and money to the Lord and are determined to do what is right. They live faithful lives. However, these Christians are racked with fear and guilt because their faithfulness is not perfection. They're afraid because their works don't justify them.

While sorrow for sin is a good thing, it's also something we can take too far. None of us should ever worry about relying on our own righteousness. Jesus came precisely because our righteousness is not reliable. As long as we sincerely seek to serve Him, His grace frees us from our own misdeeds.

As always, though, Paul balances this argument about grace with one about obedience. As Christians, we are expected to **REJECT THE FLESH**. Look at Romans 8:12-13. Here too, Paul's point is that we can't play games with God and expect to get away with it. Christ is for those who want to be righteous. His grace frees them from their sins so that they can live lives filled with good works, the way they have always wanted to live. They don't seek fleshly things. They seek spiritual things.

However, there are also nominal Christians who think they can exploit God's grace. They're not interested in glorifying Him. Instead, they only want to do the minimum that they think is necessary for them to escape hell. With the rest of their lives, they determinedly pursue the works of the flesh.

No one action of ours can put us into either one of these camps. Instead, if we want to know who we really are, we need to take the 30,000-foot view of our lives. We need to look for the patterns. In our lives, is the pattern one of seeking God, with occasional missteps, or is it a pattern of seeking what pleases us, and that occasionally coincides with what God wants us to do? The first is walking according to the spirit; the second is walking according to the flesh. The first leads to life; the second, to destruction.

If we do walk according to the spirit, though, we can anticipate **VICTORY IN CHRIST**. Consider Romans 8:37. In life, there are some things where we can't affect the outcome. I might want Mizzou to win on the football field, but there is nothing I can do to make that happen. Sometimes, we can influence but not control an outcome, as with the godliness of our families and friends.

Sometimes, though, the outcome lies entirely within our power to control, and that is the case with our eternal destiny. I find this extraordinarily reassuring. I recently read a book about English Calvinists in the 17th century, and one of the predominant features of their spiritual landscape was that they were never sure whether they were part of God's predestined elect or not. Every time they sinned, they worried that it was a sign that God had destined them for wrath. If so, they believed they were helpless to avoid destruction.

What an awful thing that would be to believe! How wonderful it is that we can choose where we are going to spend eternity. Jesus has done the hard work. All we have to do is seek Him, and we will be safe.