



Paul's Great Letter

Romans 1:1, 7

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This morning we're just going to look very briefly at two verses to get an idea of who the sender and who the recipient is, because before we dive into the details of Romans we're going to take a bird's-eye, aerial view of the entirety of the book, what Paul is doing in this book. Now never fear. We *will* go through your favorite passages. There are 68 more sermons to come on this book, so Lord willing, I think we'll be camped out in the book of Romans for about two years. There will be a break or two in between and some various things.

Before we can look at the particulars, I want us to see the generality of Paul's argument. One of the pieces of advice I would give you is this afternoon, as you go home, sit down and read through the book in its entirety. You can do it probably in less than an hour. You might want to make a practice of that once a week or once a month so that as we go through particular passages you have the entire scope of Paul's argument before you.

Having said that, let us turn to God's Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, and the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative. Romans, chapter 1, beginning at verse 1:

"Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God..." Now down to verse 7. "To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints..."

This is Paul's majestic work. It is his longest, most comprehensive letter. Romans has more than 400 verses in it and more than 7,000 words. One of the things that is interesting about Romans is that it was not occasioned by a specific controversy. Like when Paul wrote to the Galatians to try to deal with the theological controversy that was in their midst and tearing up the church, or like when he wrote to the church at Corinth in 1 Corinthians as they were experiencing conflict and sin in their midst that was ripping the church apart.

Here Paul is simply writing a letter to the church at Rome covering the vast panoply of the doctrine of the gospel. The book of Romans has always been considered Paul's magnum opus, if you will. The New Testament is built on the foundation of the four gospels, and then you'll notice next is the book of Acts, describing the church as it goes forth with the apostles, and then the book of Romans is next.

The Canon was not put together in chronological order. It's not that Romans is Paul's first book. It's actually a much more mature book, but when the church fathers put the order of the books together in an uninspired order, if you will, it was easy to see that the book of Romans was the most significant of Paul's letters. Its length, its breadth, the topics it treats... It is a great summation of the gospel.

Paul's main focus in this book *is* the gospel. Romans is Paul's systematic exposition of the gospel. Now by that I do not mean Romans is filled with a series of statements that are unrelated to one another as if we are supposed to memorize them and repeat them back on a test. No, Paul sets forth a logical argument, building his case for the gospel, and it is almost as if he anticipates the questions that will come.

You may have had this experience as you read through the book. We're going to see it this morning as we look at an overview. Paul explains something, and a question comes to mind. Before you can get the question out of your mouth, his next topic answers your question, and so on. The big question in the book of Romans is...*How can sinners be justified before God?*

We're going to look at that big question with three statements, because this big question is *the* big question of life. If you've been in church for 60-plus years, this is the most important question you will ever answer. If this is your first time listening to a sermon ever, this is the question you must answer...*How can sinners be justified before God?*

We're going to look first at Paul's statement that *all need to be justified*. The book of Romans, then, is for you, because if you are a part of *all* you need to be justified. Secondly, Paul tells us *sinners are justified by God*...not by what *they* do but by God. Thirdly, *justification leads to righteous living*. The work God does in us and for us changes who we are, and as changed people we live before the world. All need to be justified, sinners are justified by God, and justification leads to righteous living.

All Need to be Justified

So, if we're taking up our big question (How can sinners be justified by God?) the first part of that we have to ask ourselves is... *What is a sinner?* Am I included in that category? Is it just people who are rude in public? Is it just people who are in jail for crimes they've committed? One of the great things about Paul's letter to the Romans is that Paul lived in a world that was very much like our world. Rome was a powerful nation with military commitments all over the world. Does that sound familiar at all?

In the Roman Empire, the family was in complete disarray. Divorce was rampant. Marriage was not held in an honorable estate. Adultery was common. Impropriety was everywhere, rampant. Morality had become more and more publicly suspect. The old ways of marriage and of respect were gone in the day Paul was writing this, and the church faced a world that thought the church was ignorant, crazy, and extreme. Again, does that sound familiar at all?

All of this is important, because as Paul tells us about justification and about sinners it describes the kind of people we are. It's not a history lesson. It describes the people of this world. The gospel, then, starts with a realization that there is a problem we have. Paul is the perfect man to bring us this problem, because Paul had had the experience of thinking he was the best of all men, that he wasn't a sinner, that he didn't need any help from God. He had no need for the gospel. He hated Christians. He thought he had it all together.

Then he came face-to-face with Jesus Christ, and everything changed for him. He realized *he* was a sinner. He realized *all* men were sinners and that the only hope they would have would be in Christ. So Paul begins this book in chapter 1 with a description of a universal need. Paul describes people as being separated from God by their actions and their desires, actions and desires that are contrary to the nature of God, because Paul tells us God is the Creator of all and that men are in rebellion against him.

Look with me at chapter 1, verse 21. Paul says, "For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things."

I want you to notice what Paul *doesn't* say. He doesn't say, "People really just don't have any idea who God is. People are ignorant. They don't know what's going on. They just need to be educated." No, Paul comes out and says people know exactly who God is. He doesn't say they know *about* God; he says they know God. He says they would rather live contrary to God. They would rather live without God than admit that he is the Creator of all things. They are in rebellion against him. So, instead, they fashion their own gods. They would rather worship a bird or a creeping thing than the Creator of the universe.

Stop and think about that for a moment. That is the rebellion that is seated in the heart of a sinner apart from God. Paul then goes on at length to show that by the light of nature all are sinners. I find this fascinating that Paul does not jump immediately to God's law. He could have quoted Deuteronomy. He could have quoted passages from Isaiah or from Jeremiah, all of which would show us our sin, but he doesn't start there. He starts in a universal way with what we call the *light of nature*.

That's a theological term that means look around you and see what you see. As we look around and see what we see, we see today what Paul sees: children rebelling against parents, husbands committing adultery on their wives, passions fueling sin, malice, hatred, covetousness, envy, murder, strife, slandering, hating of God, faithlessness, heartlessness...all of the things you and I see every single day on the evening news.

Paul says all you have to do is look around you and you can see there's a problem. "We'll get to the solution in a minute, but you have to admit with me," Paul says, "there's a problem here." We all understand this, don't we? No one says, "You know, I think everyone tells me the truth all the time, even that salesman."

If you want to know if people think that people are basically good and do good things all the time and are not sinful, all you have to do is ask them if the next time they go to a coffee shop they would leave their computer on the table and go away somewhere for 15 minutes. They'll look at you like you're crazy, because we have codes and locks and bags. There's no way we would leave it there, because we assume someone will steal it. It's not just that it *might* happen. We assume it *will* happen.

That's the world we live in. Paul describes that for us. Apart from God, we are known for societal and relational damage. We are selfish, wicked, and lost, Paul says. Look at verse 28 of chapter 1. "And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done." What Paul says is they decided not to believe in God and not to submit to God, so God said, "Have at it. See what comes of that." All of the wickedness that pours out in chapter 1 is Paul's description of a world without God.

Then Paul moves on to the Jews. The Jews would have "amened" chapter 1. "Yeah, we know those Gentiles. They're miserable people. They're not good, God-fearing people like you and me." They thought they were not sinners because of who they were, because they were descended from Abraham, because God had given them his Law and his Word.

Paul goes on in chapter 2 to say, "That's no excuse. Just because you *have* God's Word doesn't mean you *believe* God's Word, doesn't mean you're *obeying* God's Word." That's the critical thing. Rather, it points out the seriousness of rebelling against God when you have his Word in your hands. This is, I think, equally true of the church today.

There are many in the church who don't believe the truth of the Scripture, but they think because they show up at church or because they give some money or because they have a Bible on a shelf they're somehow excluded from the category of sinners, that they're different based on who they are. Paul says it is fundamentally critical that we not be concerned with who *we* think we are but with who *God* thinks we are. That is what is crucial.

As a matter of fact, he says in chapter 3, verse 9, that the Jews are no better than the Gentiles. He says, "What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all." Get used to Paul being blunt. "For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin..." All have sinned. This is, of course, the well-known verse from Romans 3:23. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

What does Paul mean, then, when he says the "glory of God"? If all are under sin, if all are sinners because all fall short of the glory of God, what does that mean? Why is *that* the standard we have to reach? Why can't we construct our *own* standard? After all, that's what we want to do. Isn't it enough for me to just live a good life? Isn't it enough for me to just be happy? Can't I set up my own standards?

Well, Paul anticipates that question from you. He begins, then, to tell us about God. He says God is the Creator of all things, including us. That means God is owed thanks and worship from us, and he has given us his law so we will not fall into conflict, hate, and destruction. God has actually revealed himself in creation. All we need to do is look at the world and we can see the handiwork of the Creator. We see order in life.

Now think about this for a moment. Have you ever wondered why there is the exact perfect distribution of nitrogen and oxygen in the air? Some of us remember a few decades ago when physicians thought it would be

a good idea to put infants in an oxygen-only environment. They were smart doctors, and they thought, "We breathe oxygen not nitrogen, so if some oxygen is good, lots of oxygen is even better. Right?"

The problem is that when they put these infants in these oxygen-only environments it actually harmed them. It caused problems with their eyes, because we are made not for a 100 percent oxygen environment but for the perfect distribution of oxygen and nitrogen. Do you ever wonder why the seasons just happen to come in order year after year after year?

Even in Houston we sort of have four of them. There's cold, starting to get hot, really hot, and "Oh my, it's hot." You don't expect "Oh my, it's hot" in December, do you? You brace yourself for July because you know every July it's going to be hot. This is not random. It happens time after time after time. Have you wondered how the sun is exactly the perfect distance so if it was just a little bit closer we would be a fireball and just a little bit farther we would be an ice cube?

Does all this happen randomly? No, Paul says. This is the work of God. Now this doesn't stop people from rebelling against God and declaring against all that we see that God doesn't exist. The famous physicist Stephen Hawking, who recently died, is an example of this. He taught us more about black holes than we knew before. He was trying to unify Einstein's theory of relativity with the theories of quantum physics, yet a man who had all this knowledge, all of these degrees, could make a statement like, "The universe doesn't need a beginning. It could spontaneously arise from nothing."

Now, I don't have a PhD from Cambridge, but I'm going to ask my kids here this morning...What comes from nothing? Nothing! Right? When you have nothing, what do you have? Nothing. You don't have something, because if you had something what would it be called? *Something*. This sounds very basic, but this is a principle the world operates on.

I don't know if you've ever been to New York City where the men on the streets play those card games or "Hide the pea." They're always trying to make you look in a different direction. That's what the world does. You say, "Well, take me back to ultimate sources," and they say, "Well, let's talk about billions and billions of years."

"No, no, no. Go past the billions and billions. Let's go back to the beginning."

"Oh no, let's talk about black holes."

"I don't want to talk about black holes. Let's go all the way back to the beginning."

They won't go there because it's not about knowledge; it's about rebellion in the heart. God is who he is. Paul tells us in this letter that God not only exists but that he is good and he desires a relationship with his people

and he grants them and leads them to repentance so he might have a relationship with them. Yet Paul also tells us that because of who God is he has to deal with sin. He must punish sin. He tells us this in Romans 2:12. He says, "For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law."

Sinners are Justified by God

This brings us to our second point. If all need to be justified, how can that be accomplished? The first question we ask is, "What can I do?" Everyone knows this. Help me out again, kids. When you're having trouble in your home, when Mom or Dad is angry with you for something you've done, what do you do? You go up to them and say, "What can I do to make it better? Can I clean my room? Can I make a snack? What can I do that will make it better and get me out of trouble, because I don't want to be in trouble anymore?" That's what we do.

We're a little bit more sophisticated at that when we're on the university level or when we're at work, but that's essentially the way we operate. "What can we do to fix it?" It's natural for us to want to do that, because it gives us certainty. It gives us control over the process. "You tell me what I have to do, and then I will do it, and then you *have* to fix it. You have no choice because I've done it."

Now at first when we talk about something like work it might seem hard and difficult, but it really isn't, because it's easier for us when we have control, especially when we get to set the standard for what accomplishes the work. Back when I was much younger, one of the jobs I had around our house was to mow the lawn. I didn't realize this, but my father and I had different conceptions of what it meant to mow the lawn.

His idea of mowing the lawn (which, by the way, I've come to adopt; I've converted) was to mow the lawn, make sure there were no strips left in the middle of the lawn that were empty, make sure there were no grass clippings all over the place, and if there were portions on the edge that were high to get out an edger and edge them so the lawn looked good and clean and neat.

I just assumed mowing the lawn meant going as fast as you possibly could to get through the job and get it done, and it didn't really matter what was left lying around. It was much easier for me to do the lawn *my* way with *my* standard than *his* standard. That's often the way we approach life. We set up our own standards. Have you ever wondered why the Pharisees always came up with aspects to the law that were just enough that they could always fulfill them?

They were able to say you could only walk so far because they knew they could handle that or you could only do *this* because they knew they could do it. That's the way we operate as people. Paul is telling us we need to look for something else. We need to look outside ourselves. He says God reveals a righteousness to us that is not our righteousness.

In chapter 3, verse 21, he says, "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law..." What he tells us is that there is a righteousness we can have that is outside of ourselves. Because we have all sinned and we all fall short, we need a Savior. Do you remember that statement from verse 23 of chapter 3 that I read, that statement of great despair? "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God..." Look at what the next verse is. "...and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus..."

Paul follows up his statement of great despair with a statement of greatest hope. Sinners will not be justified by what they do but only by Christ. Christ is God's gift to us. He is the one who reconciles God to us, and because of that Jesus is who we ultimately need. We can have no boasting in who we are or what we have done. We need Christ to be justified. It is by the sacrifice of Christ, by his blood that we are justified, Paul says in chapter 3, verse 25.

The cross of Christ is central to the entirety of the book of Romans. This is how God can be just in judging sin and yet the justifier of sinners: he judges sin in Christ and judges sinners with the righteousness of Christ. It is the great transaction he describes over and over again in this book. So then you may ask yourself, "Well, Paul, if I can't be justified by what I do but I can only be justified by Christ, my next question is...How do I get to Christ? How does Christ come to me?"

That's a pretty good question. Paul anticipates it. He says sinners are justified by Christ and sinners are justified only through faith. We come to Christ through faith. Paul shows us how Christ can be ours. He has shown us the emptiness of works. If we can't do it, then where do we go? What he says is we must have faith. Faith is the opposite principle of works. Faith says, "I can't" and then trusts what God did.

We must trust God and have faith, Paul says. That is how we come to Christ. That is how we find our justification. Paul pulls an example of the most famous Old Testament hero. He takes Abraham. Now if anyone would be able to say, "I did it; I need credit," it's Abraham. God tells him to leave his homeland, and he does. God tells him he'll make of him a nation. God tells him to keep the covenant. God tells him to keep the sign of the covenant. Abraham does all of these things.

As a matter of fact, the Jews looked at Abraham as having purchased for them their own justification because of what he did, but the truth is Paul tells us that Abraham was actually a man of faith. Look at chapter 4, verse 3. "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." Paul shows us that this happens on the front end, if you will.

Before Abraham was circumcised, before the covenant was put in place, before he did anything, Abraham first believed God. That is the distinguishing action of Abraham. You see, to be justified is to receive the promise of God, and that promise can only be received by faith. It is faith that brings us peace with God, Paul says in

Romans 5. Faith trusts what Jesus has done and trusts that it is enough. We are reconciled through the work of Jesus, and faith rests on that work.

Justification Leads to Righteous Living

What does it mean, then, to be justified? Paul has been stressing the work of God outside of us in Jesus. Does that mean that while our relationship with God has changed we haven't? If so, that's a real problem, isn't it? If I'm still beset by all of the desires and all of the actions Paul describes in Romans 1, I'm in a load of trouble. I'm just going to recur my sin. I'm just going to rebel against God. If I'm not changed by Jesus, what hope do I have?

So then our question might be...*How can we be free from all of the desires and sinful actions that condemned us in the first place?* Paul looks at us and says, "I'm glad you asked that." The work of God is not just outside us but it is also *in* us. It is the work of Christ *in* us, changing us. Paul introduces us to perhaps his most constant theme in all of his letters, the theme of being in Christ.

He puts it this way in chapter 6, verse 11: "So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." We are united by faith to Christ, and we receive the blessings of Christ by faith. It is not that justification is merely a "get out of hell free" card. It is that we are changed in who we are. We are made more and more like Jesus. We love God's law. We love to worship and adore God because of what Jesus is doing in our lives.

Now if you think about it, God did not reconcile with us, forgive us, justify us just to leave us in sin, would he? No, the purpose of our justification is to make us more like Christ. Our old self, Paul says, is being put to death day by day. Look at chapter 6, verse 6. "We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin."

Jesus has set us free from sin. This is the work of God in us. We also have the Holy Spirit who dwells in us. He is the Spirit of Christ. The Holy Spirit gives us this principle of life in our lives to live for God. Paul puts it this way in Romans 8:11: "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you."

Because of what God has done we are children of God. We are heirs with Christ, and there is no going back from this, Paul says. In chapter 8, verse 16, he says, "The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ..." This is the work of Christ in our lives. This is what justification leads to. We experience our great hope and are assured of the continued work of God in our lives.

So what does this practically mean? We've just been saying our relationship with God doesn't depend on what we do, so why are we now talking about what we do? Paul makes a very careful argument here, because he has already said we don't change our actions in order to be right with God. What Paul says here is that works are not necessary to be justified but works *are* the necessary consequence or follow-on of being justified.

How do you tell what kind of a tree a tree is? I suppose you could have a book six inches big and try and look at the bark and taste it or something, but I don't know about you, but I look at a pear tree and see pears and I say it's a pear tree. I look at an apple tree and see apples and I say it's an apple tree, not an orange tree, because it has apples on it.

It's the same with us. If we have been changed by God, if we have been reconciled with him, if we are justified and made holy in his sight, then that changes who we are and it changes how we live. This is how Paul introduces the second half of his letter in chapter 12. He says, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."

Follow Paul's argument. He says, "I want you, because you know the mercy of God, to live like this." He doesn't say, "I want you to live like this so you can know the mercy of God." There's a definite and distinct order, and that order is crucial. It's the difference between life and death. It's the difference between faith and works. It's the difference between justification and condemnation. It's a simple but very important argument Paul makes.

The mark of someone who is justified by God is found in the Christian. First and foremost, I think it is love...love for God, gratitude for what he has done for us, but also love for fellow man who is made in the image of God. Paul ends this book in the last few chapters describing what it means to be changed and to live as justified sinners.

We are to serve the Lord because of what he has done. We are to see all of our abilities as coming from him, not from ourselves. We are to be practical in our love for one another. We are to show our trust in God by submitting to the authorities he has placed over us. We are to acknowledge our own need of grace by not thinking more highly of ourselves than others, because we are the recipients of grace. In all of these things we are to follow the example of Christ.

Well, I hope you are excited to start off on this journey through Paul's great letter. He will show us what we are to believe, he will show us how we are to live, but most of all, he will show us Jesus. As Paul sets forth his argument in this book, we will see that Jesus is all we need.