



# MAIN COMMENTARIES ON 'ROMANS'

## Chapter 1

St. Paul begins his Epistle with a greeting similar to the common ancient Greek greeting in letters: "Paul...to all who are in Rome" (Romans 1:1, 7). Between these two parts of his greeting (as well as immediately after the address to the people in Rome), however, St. Paul gives his readers significant information about himself and the Gospel message he preaches. Fr. Lawrence Farley explains why St. Paul gives all this information instead of the typical short greeting:

*St. Paul usually let the Gospel message that filled his heart overflow from his lips, turning even this customary epistolary greeting into a kind of Christian blessing. Thus, all his epistles begin with a more fulsome assertion of his apostolic authority and a 'double-barreled' blessing of grace and peace.*

St. Paul begins his extended greeting by describing himself. He is a "bondservant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God" (Romans 1:1). This tells us three closely related things. First, St. Paul is a bondservant (slave), meaning that his function in life is to obey and serve his Master, Jesus Christ. Second, he tells us that he was called to be an Apostle, emphasizing that Jesus called him to be an Apostle during his conversion on the road to Damascus, and therefore his Apostleship is "not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father" (Galatians 1:1). Finally, he says that he was separated - specially set apart, like the prophets of the Old Testament (Jeremiah 1:5) - by God in order to proclaim the Gospel message.

Some critics claim that St. Paul invented a new form of Christianity that differed greatly from the Jewish Christianity of the earliest Church. This accusation is not new: the Judaizers of the first century made the same claim. St. Paul refutes this accusation in verse two: the Gospel message he teaches was promised by the prophets of Israel. St. John Chrysostom explains, "See here both the name of the Gospel expressly and the temper of it, laid down in the Old Testament...Now since they have laid against it the charge of novelty also, He shows it to be older than the Greeks, and described aforetime in the Prophets."

St. Paul continues by describing the Gospel of God: it concerns "His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1:3-4). The Gospel is centered in, and focused on, "Jesus Christ our Lord." The statement "according to the flesh" means that Jesus became a human descendent of King David, thus fulfilling the prophecy that the Messiah would be a descendent of David. The statement that he was "declared to be the Son of God...by the resurrection" means that Jesus' Resurrection not only declares that Jesus is the Son of God (see Psalm 2:7), but also that Jesus is now the sovereign ruler of all (see Romans 14:9). Jesus' status as Messiah is therefore revealed, as Fr. Lawrence Farley says, "by both genealogical history (according to the flesh) and also by the suprahistorical history of the resurrection (according to the Spirit)."

We should note one word in verse three: Jesus was *declared* to be the Son of God. Some people read this verse and understand it to mean that Jesus was not always the Son of God, and therefore was not always God. This is not what St. Paul means. Instead, he is telling us that after His Resurrection Jesus was declared - or shown - to be the Son of God *with power*: Jesus' power is obvious after His Resurrection, whereas He lived in poverty and apparent weakness while on Earth. Blessed Augustine explains, "Christ is the son of David in weakness according to the flesh but Son of God in power according to the Spirit of sanctification."

The "Spirit of holiness" mentioned here is, of course, the Holy Spirit. St. Paul uses the term "Spirit of holiness," rather than the more direct "Holy Spirit," to emphasize that this same Spirit also makes us holy. According to St. John Chrysostom, the Spirit of holiness is "the Spirit which He gave to them that believe upon Him, and through which He made them all holy, wherefore he saith, 'according to the Spirit of holiness.' For it was of God only to grant such gifts."

St. Paul continues by emphasizing his special call by Jesus Christ to proclaim the Gospel (Romans 1:5). St. Paul is able to fulfill his calling to be an apostle because he is given the grace, or power and ability, from God (see Romans 12:3, 6; 15:15). The Apostle goes to all nations teaching people to be obedient to the faith, meaning that he teaches them to become Christians and remain faithful to the demands of the faith and relationship with Christ. The people to whom he preaches this message are not merely the non-Christians, but also those in Rome who are already Christians (1:6-7, 15): they, too, needed to be reminded of the need for obedience to God.

Verses 8-9 demonstrates for us that membership in the Church is a relationship as part of the body of Christ. St. Paul is not merely pleased by the vitality of the Roman church (which was apparently so active and strong in their faith that they were becoming known throughout the Roman Empire). He also does not simply write a letter to encourage them. While he *is* pleased with the Romans, and he *does* write an encouraging letter to them, notice the additional thing he mentions: he *prays* to God about and for them. In these verses he shows us that our relationship with each other, and our relationship with God (both as individuals and as members of His Church), are inseparable.

St. Paul refers in verses 11-12 to two of his reasons for writing and visiting the church in Rome: he wants to give them a gift that will result in their being established, and he wants to encourage - and be encouraged by - the Romans. The gift St. Paul wants to give is his apostolic teaching (see verse 15): by instructing them in their faith, St. Paul will help strengthen the church in Rome. Furthermore, his presence among the Romans will encourage them, just as their faith will encourage him.

As we can see in the article on the theme of Romans, verses 16-17 provide the theme for the entire Epistle. St. Paul shows that salvation is a righteous act of God, accomplished in Jesus Christ's death and Resurrection, and proclaimed in the Gospel message that he (and the Church) teaches. A relationship with God transforms the Christian, empowering him or her to become the person intended by God.

St. Paul states that he is "not ashamed of the gospel of Christ" (Romans 1:16). The Apostle bravely spoke to everyone about the Gospel, including rulers, philosophers, and religious leaders. He never suffered fear or embarrassment about sharing his faith, even when he knew that the people to whom he was speaking would probably reject his teaching, and even imprison or attempt to kill him. Fr. Lawrence

Farley also notes that the Judaizers claimed that he should be ashamed for the message he taught (see Romans 3:8); St. Paul here says that he is not at all ashamed to teach the truth about God's salvation for humanity.

St. Paul offers the Gospel message first to the Jews (Romans 1:16); in every city he visited, St. Paul began by preaching in the local synagogue. He did this because he wanted to give the children of Israel - through whom the Messiah came - the opportunity to receive the salvation their faith had promised. Unlike his critics, however, St. Paul did not limit his preaching to the Jews: he also went to the Greeks (the word here refers to all Gentiles, and not only ethnic Greeks). Jesus truly came to save all people.

Verse 17 - "For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'The just shall live by faith' - can at first seem confusing. In this verse the righteousness of God refers to the righteousness and holiness that comes from God to the believer through faith. St. Paul explains this in Philippians 3:8-9:

*Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith.*

Fr. Lawrence Farley further explains:

*By God's righteousness, St. Paul means all of God's abundant kindness and saving love. He means that all His lavish forgiving heart is revealed and experienced by those who will approach Him. And this approach is entirely, he asserts, a matter of faith and trust.*

St. Paul quotes Habakkuk 2:4 when he writes, "The just shall live by faith" (Romans 1:17). This means that the righteous, faithful Christian experiences God's righteousness, and then lives faithfully and lovingly in relationship with God and in obedience to His commandments. St. Gregory of Sinai, a 14<sup>th</sup> century Christian, says about this type of faith:

*Faith, like active prayer, is a grace. For prayer, when activated by love through the power of the Spirit, renders true faith manifest - the faith that reveals the life of Jesus. If, then, you are aware that such faith is not at work within you, that means your faith is dead and lifeless. In fact you should not even speak of yourself as one of the 'faithful' if your faith is merely theoretical and not actualized by the practice of the commandments or by the Spirit. Thus faith must be evidenced by progress in keeping the commandments, or it must be actualized and translucent in what we do. This is confirmed by St. James when he says, 'Show me your faith through your works and I will show you the works that I do through my faith' (see James 2:18.)*

Romans 1:18 begins an extended part of the Epistle in which St. Paul presents the Gospel of the righteousness of God that is offered by faith to all humanity. For the remainder of this chapter he focuses on what we might call the "bad news" for Gentiles: their willfully ignoring God, and instead living in wickedness and depravity, will result in their destruction.

Verse 18 summarizes what follows in the rest of the chapter (as well as into chapters two and three): “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.” St. Paul’s argument starts with the statement that God’s wrath is revealed from heaven. When we think of wrath, we think of an almost out-of-control anger, a rage that is intended to wreak vengeance upon an enemy and destroy them. Such wrath, however, is not the wrath of God: the Greek word translated as “wrath” in this verse - *orgē* - refers to reasoned and determined indignation against something. God’s wrath, like His love, is part of His righteousness.

What, you might ask, provokes God’s righteous wrath? The Holy Prophet Habakkuk answers this question: he says to God, “You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on wickedness” (1:13). The Psalmist also explains, “For we have been consumed by Your anger, and by Your wrath we are terrified. You have set our iniquities before You, our secret sins in the light of Your countenance” (Psalm 90:7-8). God’s wrath is provoked when people reject Him and turn instead to evil. St. Paul’s description of God’s wrath is very similar to these descriptions in the Old Testament: humans have provoked God’s wrath by suppressing the truth through their unrighteous lives.

What does St. Paul mean when he says humans have suppressed the truth of God? He goes on to explain:

*Because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse. (Romans 1:19-20).*

By looking at the created world - such things as the beauty and majesty of nature, the complexity of the human body, the diversity of animal life - humans can learn something about the God responsible for this creation. As St. John of Damascus wrote in the eighth century, “The very creation, by its harmony and ordering, proclaims the majesty of the divine nature.” Because these things make it possible to know something about God, humans have no excuse for ignoring or rejecting Him.

The problem for the Gentiles is that, having seen God’s attributes in His creation, they refused to acknowledge Him and instead created idols to worship (Romans 1:21-23). They could have been in eternal, transforming relationship with the glorious God Who created all the wonderful things they could see and experience, but instead they chose to worship the far less glorious, corruptible images of humans and beasts. In other words, they “exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever” (1:25).

When you think about how shocking it is to worship creation rather than the Creator, you can understand why St. Paul describes the people who do this as professing to be wise, but instead becoming fools (Romans 1:22). St. Gregory the Theologian, one of the Three Hierarchs of the fourth century (along with St. Basil the Great and St. John Chrysostom), shares this attitude with St. Paul: “People like this make it hard to tell which is more contemptible, the worshipers or the worshiped. Perhaps the worshipers by far, since as rational beings and recipients of God’s grace, they chose their inferior for patron and better.”

Ralph P. Martin concisely summarizes the result in the lives of the Gentiles of this rejection of God: "An impure religion results in an impure life." God allowed the religious decisions of the Gentiles to result in an inevitable conclusion (Romans 1:24, 26, 28): their idolatry led to incredibly destructive sinfulness and wickedness. Their minds became utterly depraved; the Greek word for depraved, *adokimos*, means worthless.

Some modern readers argue that verses 26-27 do not refer to homosexuality, but instead refer to prostitution or ritual sexual activity in pagan religious ceremonies. Such people therefore believe the Epistle to the Romans cannot be used as evidence that God disapproves of committed homosexual relationships. In reality, however, one of the words used by St. Paul to describe this activity - "uncleanness," *orakatharsia* - is usually used by the Apostle to describe sexual immorality. Furthermore, the Church Fathers understood these passages to refer to homosexual activity: such early Christians as St. Cyprian of Carthage (third century), and St. John Chrysostom and Ambrosiaster (fourth century) commented on the passage's condemnation of homosexual activity.

At the same time, while St. Paul gives this form of sexual immorality as an example of the depravity of the Gentiles, you should not focus on this sin while ignoring all the others listed by the Apostle. St. Paul lists twenty-two ways in which people could be unrighteous, including such things as envy, boasting, and even being disobedient to one's parents. St. Paul was not a prude who was simply opposed to sexual activity: his list shows us how we can make idols of ourselves by focusing on our own passions and rejecting the God Who created us.