

**Core Seminar**

**New Testament**

**Class 10: Romans: The Subjects of the Kingdom**

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"At last meditating day and night, by the mercy of God, I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that through which the righteous live by a gift of God, namely by faith. Here I felt as if I were entirely born again and had entered paradise itself through the gates that had been flung open."

This is what Martin Luther said in response to his study in the book of Romans, a study which focused this anguished monk on the words of Romans 1:17, “For in the Gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’”

Later Luther would write a full commentary on the book of Romans, and in the preface to that edition he writes, “This letter is truly the most important piece in the New Testament. It is purest Gospel. It is well worth a Christian's while not only to memorize it word for word but also to occupy himself with it daily, as though it were the daily bread of the soul.”

And that is our goal this morning, perhaps not to memorize it all this morning, but to delve into this book of “purest Gospel.”

### Background

Written around 57 A.D. by the Apostle Paul, the Book of Romans was written to a Christian church in the capital of the world’s most powerful empire. Apparently, the church was established by a group of believers not known to us. Some scholars suggest that Jew and Gentile Christians, who converted to faith in Christ in Jerusalem at the time of Pentecost (Acts 2:10), might have founded the church. Despite the lack of well-known leadership, the church seemed to be growing at the writing of this letter. In 1:8, we are told that the church’s faith was reported all over the world and in 16:19 that their obedience was known to all.

Paul seems to have several goals in writing the letter. He wants to commend them for their faith (1:8), let them know of his hopes to visit them personally (1:9-13), gain their support in a planned visit to Spain (15:23-4), and ensure that they were firmly grounded in the Gospel. It is this last purpose that flavors the book and why Romans is a classic statement of the Christian faith and perhaps the best place to spend serious study if you want to get your understanding of the gospel straight. The book is a sustained logical treatise on the gospel, its implications, and answers to objections to that gospel.

The organizing/central theme to Romans is justification by faith alone. So, before we go through the book, we need to ask the question, “what does Paul mean by ‘justification’?” This is a crucial question for understanding the book.

Justification is a legal term, meaning ‘declared righteous’. When you stand before God on the last day, what will be His verdict on your life? Will he declare you guilty, or will he declare you righteous? Our great need is to be declared righteous on that last day. Our great need is to be justified. So what we’ll do for the rest of our class today is to simply walk through the argument that Paul builds in the book of Romans, from beginning to end, about justification. If you’re familiar with this book, as many of you I would assume are, my prayer is that by reviewing it as one grand narrative of logic, you will be able to understand more fully how all these pieces fit together. You can follow that overall flow on your handout.

**Justification by Faith Alone is Necessary (1:1-3:20)**

*We all deserve God’s wrath . . .*

The letter begins with Paul’s usual greeting, and prayer of praise to God for the Roman’s faith. But the theme of the gospel that Paul will expand through the book is prevalent right from the beginning:

“Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son . . . “

And , v16-17

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.’”

Paul summarizes this gospel as being a righteousness or justification that is by faith. Every religion, every person, is geared towards addressing what they believe to be the biggest problem facing man.

Islam says, “We face the problem of ignorance. We are ignorant of Allah’s will. If only people would read and follow the Koran, this ignorance would be removed.”

Buddhism would posit that, “The big problem is attachment to this world. If only we can achieve detachment, then our sorrow will be removed and bliss achieved.”

Even the secular humanism would attempt to address man’s problem, for example the secularist might say, “Intolerance is the problem. If only we could affirm each other, then the problem would be removed.”

Much of Judaism in the first century argued that the problem was disobedience. What was needed was a radical commitment to the law of God, and that would make God favorable towards us.

The first three chapters of Romans are crucial for understanding our greatest problem and greatest need. The problem is not ignorance. Everyone knows enough about God to know that they should honor him. Paul says,

“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.” (1:18-20).

We are not merely *ignorant* of the truth. We *hate* the truth that God is God, and so we suppress it. And so the problem that we have is God himself. Our problem is that the loving, perfect, holy, all powerful God is in fact our enemy.

As Paul says in verse 18, the Wrath of God is being revealed. Against whom? Against the ungodly. But not only is the wrath of God being revealed today. Paul goes on to say in 2:5, “But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed.”

So, who are the ungodly who are under God’s wrath? Well, Paul tells us there are two kinds of people. Those who do evil and those who, as 2:7 says, “by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality,” yet by chapter 3 Paul has shown that none of us are persistent “enough” in doing good. "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” (3:10-12).

Justification by faith alone is necessary because no one can be justified by their works! Our works will only serve to condemn us. But the great news of Romans, and of the Gospel is that Justification by Faith alone is not only necessary it is Sufficient! There is a way that we can be declared right with God that is not dependent upon our actions.

**Justification by Faith Alone is Sufficient (3:21-28)**

*. . . but by God’s grace may be justified through faith because of Christ’s sacrifice for us . . .*

Illustrating our need for Christ over the law for justification, our pastor Mark Dever in Promises Kept uses an example from Bunyan’s Pilgrims Progress, “Early in the story, the main character, named Christian, feels the weight of his sin before God and knows he needs to be justified; he needs to be saved. Christian sees Mt. Sinai, which represents Moses’ law, and he runs over to it, hoping to climb it and remove the weight of his sin from his back. From a distance the mountain looks easy enough to climb. But as he starts to ascend, he finds it steeper than he expected. He continues, yet it gets steeper and steeper until finally the hill curves over on top of him. Christian discovers that justification cannot be found on Mt. Sinai. He cannot get to salvation by the law. So he descends from the mountain, and only then—despairing of the law—does Christian turn and find the gate that leads to salvation. And the gate is Christ.”

This analogy from Pilgrim’s Progress represents exactly what Paul is spelling out for us in 3:21-24, he says, “**But now** the righteousness of God, has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it- the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus”

Paul tells us that Jesus was presented as a sacrifice of atonement (3:25-26), or, if you have an ESV, a propitiation, a sacrifice that takes away God’s wrath. As we have seen, God’s wrath is the great problem we all face. We need to be justified in order not to face God’s wrath. We all deserve to face God’s wrath eternally, yet God sent his Son, who willingly went to the cross, so that he might bear the righteous anger and punishment that people like us deserve.

There are two places where God’s righteous anger can be satisfied: in Hell, where God pays us back for what we have done; or, on the cross where Jesus willingly takes the punishment for what we have done. Because our sins are against an infinitely holy God, only Christ’s sacrifice will be sufficient, apart from Christ, our payback to God will be infinite.

**Justification by faith alone did not begin in the New Testament (4)**

*. . . and this is how God has always done things . . .*

After summarizing the Good News of the sufficiency of Christ to take away God’s wrath towards our sins, Paul turns next to an obvious objection of justification by faith alone. Is it really biblical? Does this tie in with the dealings of God with his people in the Old Testament? The short answer is yes it does! This is chapter 4.

Paul says, “What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.’” (4:1-3).

Abraham wasn’t justified when he was circumcised or at the end of his life after he had overcome and been willing to sacrifice his son. He was justified the moment that he believed the promise of God, the moment he had faith. Thus his righteousness must have come not from himself, but in fact, from God. Paul seizes on the chronological order of these two events as crucial for understanding the Old Testament and salvation.

### This example of Abraham, and the idea that God credited him with righteousness, answers the big question of how an individual’s faith in Christ can result in justification. The theological term for the crediting of righteousness to one who has faith is called “*imputation*.” It is an accounting term indicating the transfer of an amount from one account to another. And it is through faith in the sacrifice of Christ that this transfer of Christ’s righteousness takes place. This is not a new idea, but has been laced through the fabric of redemptive history.

**The benefits of Justification by faith alone in Christ (5)**

*. . . resulting in eternal life for all who believe . . .*

So, what happens as a result of our obtaining this imputed righteousness? That brings us to chapter 5, where Paul gives consideration to the benefits we have in Christ: We are Justified (5:1), we have peace with God (5:1), we have access to His grace which preserves us (5:2), we have hope of glory (5:2), we are able to have an attitude of rejoicing even in suffering (5:3), we experience the love of God poured out into our hearts (5:5), we are saved from God’s wrath (5:9), and we are reconciled to God (5:10).

### Christian—these benefits of having received Christ’s imputed righteousness should fuel our praise and worship of the Lord. Have you spent time praising Him for the many benefits which have accrued to you as a result of His work on your behalf?

### The availability of these benefits in Christ is not merely accessible to certain ethnic or religious groups. Paul says, “For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.” (5:19). Paul explains that in the same way that the entire human race was plunged into sin by the one trespass of one man—Adam; likewise, the second Adam (Christ) serves as the representative before God for the sins of all those who repent and trust in His work.

Some will contest at the point of all being made sinners because of Adam’s sin. The objection goes along these lines, “I should be responsible for my own standing before God. If I had been there, I might have chosen otherwise, it’s not fair that Adam’s mistake has impacted everyone.” Be careful if you are tempted by this logic, it both contradicts Scripture’s teaching about original sin and arrogantly assumes a level of potential personal piety that none of us would have achieved had we been in Adam’s place. But beyond the connection to Adam’s sin, consider the weight of what Paul is saying. He says, “And the gift is not like the result of that one man’s sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification.” (5:16). When you or someone you are sharing the Gospel with is tempted to believe that it is unfair that all mankind is sinful because of Adam’s sin, that condemnation and death are the lot of everyone because of that sin; show them the logic of Paul. You think it is unfair that one sin brought condemnation, how gracious is God to allow many trespasses to be covered through the act of one man, Jesus Christ!

The other implication of what Paul is saying in this comparison of Christ to Adam is that just like all were plunged into sin by Adam, so through Christ, the opportunity to be reconciled to God has been made available to all men. The benefits of justification are not for a privileged few, but for any who have faith alone in the Risen Christ!

**Justification by faith alone but justifying faith is never alone (6-8)**

*. . . but don’t be mistaken: justification is by faith alone but never by faith that is alone.*

And that brings us to the next three chapters: 6, 7, and 8, where we see that justification is by faith alone by not by faith that is alone, to quote a common phrase. We have been justified by faith alone. No good works, no religious duties or rituals can accomplish this reconciliation to God. No human effort can produce salvation. In the advent of this rich teaching Paul knows what Believers may be tempted to think next. We are no longer constrained by the law in the way Israel seemed to be, so why not take our new place in Christ by faith, and then “continue in sin that grace may abound?” (6:1)

Does the fact that we are declared righteous not by our own actions, but by those of Jesus give an incentive to sin? Paul answers: “By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” (6:2-4). Why do we want to be justified? Simply because we want God’s wrath removed from us or so we can be reconciled with Him?

When a husband has sinned against his wife, why does he want her wrath removed from him? Is it merely to remove the pain of someone being angry? No! It is because he loves his wife and longs to be restored to a loving relationship with her.

Thus justification by faith leads to a more righteous life – by having Jesus as our representative, we have died to sin so that we might live a new and wonderful life with Jesus Christ as Lord.

Yet the reality is, that we go on sinning. Chapter 7 & 8 face the reality of ongoing sin, but also the certain hope of final victory for all who believe. For lack of time, I’ll skip right to the good news at the end of this section, in Romans 8:29-30:

### For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

### The work of God in the salvation of people is outlined in five key verbs: foreknew, predestined, called, justified, and glorified. God foreknows in the sense that he knows our personalities, etc. but also in the sense that he “foreloves” his people. We are told that whom He foreknew he also predestined. In eternity past, God decided that some would “be conformed to the likeness of his Son” and that some would be adopted as sons “according to the purpose of his will” (Eph. 1:5).

### Hence, those he predestines are also those He calls. This is not the general call of the gospel that demands all to repent and believe, but the effectual call that produces faith in the believer. And the resultant justification and ultimate glorification follow naturally. In this chain of redemption, we see that God works without fail to redeem for himself a people.

This is great grounds for assurance of salvation. If we have come to receive forgiveness of sins –it is because Jesus has already borne our sin. Nothing can take that away, not even our sins as a Christian.

Chapter 7 & 8 holds out to us the most marvelous assurance of salvation. Even though we continue to fight against sin in this life. If we have come to believe in Christ, our salvation doesn’t depend upon any future unforeseen circumstances, it depends upon the promises of God.

**Justification of God to man (9-11)**

*Does this mean God’s promises failed? By no means! God’s promises were always intended for those to whom he gave faith.*

And that this point, we see a shift in Paul’s argument. Having explicated the theology of justification by faith alone in the first eight chapters, Paul now moves his focus to an objection that would surely be in the mind of Jewish Christians, if not others. The objection is this: does God really keep his promises about salvation? Didn’t he make other promises that appear not to have been kept? Didn’t he promise salvation to Israel, and yet, at the time that Paul is writing, the majority of Jews had rejected Jesus as their Messiah, and therefore had not received salvation. Has God broken his promises?

Paul begins to address this objection in 9:6-7, “It is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but ‘Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.’”

Just because someone is a physical descendant of Abraham doesn’t mean that God has promised them salvation, says Paul. We see this right from the call of Abraham.

From Abraham’s sons, Isaac was chosen, Ishmael wasn’t. Isaac’s son Jacob was chosen, but not Esau.

Have you ever wondered why there is a two generation gap between Abraham, to whom the promises are given, and Jacob/Israel, after whom the nation is named? Paul says here that it shows categorically that being a direct physical descendant of Abraham doesn’t make someone a recipient of the promises to Abraham.

The same is the case throughout Israel’s history. At the time of Elijah, the vast majority of Israel did not trust the promises. Yet, within Israel there was always a faithful remnant – a people within a people, who were the true spiritual children of Israel.

So, God’s promises are kept – he keeps them to all whom he made them to – to all who depend upon him in faith. Within this section, we see that this salvation by God’s grace brings great glory to God. Salvation isn’t a birthright, but something that God works as he chooses for His Name’s Sake!

A few guidelines as we consider this difficult topic:

### First, God has the right to save some, and not save others (9:19-21). And in thinking about such immense issues as election, it would be wise of us to humble ourselves and remember that God’s ways are well past our finding out (11:33-36).

### Second, in both condemnation and salvation God reveals both His justice and His mercy in the hardening and the pardoning of sinners. As Paul writes, “What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory – even us whom he has called . . .” (9:22-24a) In no case is anyone given worse than they deserve.

### Third, God has not changed his way of dealing with people and he continues to maintain a remnant who will believe. All must confess and believe – from Abraham to you and me (10:9-10) and “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (10:13).

In all this, Paul’s effort to justify God is not merely an attempt to win his readers to his way of understanding God. Ultimately, Paul’s justification of God in the eyes of sinners comes down to a simple declaration of the power, the purposes, and the prerogatives of God as God. Paul does not try to persuade so much as he tries to instruct. He is not interested in placating us with a rationalization, such as, ‘Will this be okay? Do we have a compromise measure that will pass?’ No, Paul tells us what is true. This is God, and there is no other. He alone is God.

**Justification by faith alone produces renewed lives and relationships (12-16)**

*Our justification will produce fruit as individuals, as citizens, and most obviously, as members of Christ’s body.*

Though the major portion of this book is dedicated to theological issues, Paul finishes the book with a practical outworking of Gospel truth: individually, civically, and corporately within the church, for those justified by faith alone.

Individually, we are to live lives in the Spirit, characterized by freedom and victory over sin. We are no longer to submit our lives to unrighteousness, but to righteousness. We are to be governed by the Spirit of God. Accordingly, we are to renew our minds (12:1) and present our entire selves as sacrifices to God. Moreover, we are to use our spiritual gifts in service to the body (12:4-8).

Love, joy, patience, generosity, good will toward others, and humility are to mark our lives because of the truth we have embraced in Christ Jesus (12:8-21).

Our civil and social responsibility is to live in submission to the authorities established by God. In doing so, we demonstrate our submission to God in so far as the government does not coerce us to sin against God (13:1-7).

### And the love of God poured so abundantly into our hearts should also flow from us to those around us. All of the commandments, Paul says, are summed up in one rule: Love your neighbor as yourself. “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law” (13:10).

In the church, we are to think of others more highly than we think of ourselves and we are to accept one another. Apparently, the Roman church was struggling with some disputes inside the church where more mature members were “wounding” less mature members through disputes over dietary laws and special religious observances. Paul admonishes them to receive one another without “doubtful disputations” and to use their liberty to foster peace and mutual edification (chap. 14).

Finally, Paul urges the church there to contribute to his missionary efforts (15:23-29), to pray for him (15:30-32), and to avoid false doctrines and those who cause divisions (16:17-20).

### Those who have been justified by faith alone demonstrate this kind of love, a respect for civil authority, love and concern for one another in the church, and individual marks of holiness and righteousness all because God in Christ has reconciled sinners to himself through the cross and through faith in His blood.

**Conclusion:**

So that’s the book of Romans, end to end. What to do with this? Well, for starters, use the book of Romans to dwell on the glory of justification by faith alone. This isn’t just part of our faith, it *is* our faith. And it deserves all the importance that Paul gives it, not only in this letter but in all of his letters.

And secondly, make sure that you see how this entire book pieces together. Are you an “uber-reformed” type who is well-versed in Paul’s doctrines of election and repropation in the middle chapters of the book but have need to rediscover in chapters 1-3 how infinitely implausible your salvation is? Have you become intimately familiar with the impeccable chain of logic that constructs the gospel in chapters 1-8 but have rarely spent time in the tragically overlooked chapters on our corporate life together that complete this book? If the beginning is so amazing, don’t you think the ending might be equally worthy of intense study?

All these things: our sin, God’s grace, God’s choice, our life together, hang together as one divinely inspired letter to Christ’s church. Let us work hard to piece together all of what Paul has written for us so that we might know, and do, in a way that is cognizant with such beautiful truth. That we have been justified through the death of Jesus.