

The Epistles of Paul

Week 6: Romans

Purpose:

The final “undisputed” letter of Paul, the Epistle to the Romans is a dense theological work that delves into many of the topics discussed in previous letters. Moreover, Paul likely never actually visited the church, but was contacted by them for a specific purpose. This makes the letter unique and even more important to understanding Paul.

1. Have you read Romans before? Have you studied it? What did you think?
2. How do you think the Church in Rome found out about Paul? Why did his input matter?
3. What stands out to you most about Romans?

Key Verse(s) of the Week, Romans 3:21-22a

But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, ²²the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

Opening Prayer:

Hear our prayer, O God, as we are opened to the promises of your word. May your Holy Spirit lead us in your path. May you reveal to us your grace and love through the words to the Corinthian Church. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Introduction and Background:

The background of Romans is complicated, more so than the other epistles. First, the epistle is thought to have been written sometime between 58-62 CE, the latest of the undisputed epistles. Some sources even place it later, perhaps 64 or 65, but most scholars place it around 58 or 60. The reason for Paul’s letter seems to be two-fold.

First, Paul is asking for support for his mission to Spain. Historically it is unclear exactly how successful this mission was (or if he was able to go), but this was a goal of Paul. He even references friends (Prisca and Aquilla) who are known by the Roman church and have had dealings with Paul before.

Second, Paul is seeking support for the churches in Jerusalem. He has already collected from other Gentile churches and is now connecting with Rome. The church in Rome is a majority Gentile, with a substantial Jewish minority. This helps to bridge the gap between the Jerusalem church and those other gentile churches.

The theological commentary offered serves as a uniting document, focusing upon faith in/of Jesus, as well as encouraging the community to look deeper into how they live out their faith. The epistle is rather lengthy, though most scholars do not feel it was a compilation, and was indeed written as an entire unit.

1. How does Romans differ from the earlier epistles we studied?
2. What stands out to you most in this epistle? Why do you think there is such an emphasis on the Law and faith?
3. What changes have we seen to Paul from our first letter to this one?

Today's Focus Passage, Romans 3:21-31

²¹But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, ²²the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, ²³since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; ²⁶it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. ²⁷Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. ²⁹Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, ³⁰since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. ³¹Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

1. What is the main point of this passage?
2. What does it mean to have faith in Jesus? What about having the faith of Jesus?
3. How does one's faith "uphold the law"?

Discussion:

Seeming to hold nothing back, Paul delves deep into theological headwinds regarding faith, atonement, law, and works. First, there is an emphasis placed upon faith. However, this is more interesting than one might expect. There has long been a debate among scholars regarding whether the proper translation is "faith in Jesus" or "faith of Jesus". This may seem like semantics but goes to a deeper question regarding how we follow Jesus and live out our lives. Moreover, Paul solidifies the belief that Jesus died as an atonement for sin. This is an established theology today but was still in question early in the life of the church.

Later in the passage, Paul debates law and faith. Rather than arguing for an overturning of the law (problematic in a mixed Jewish/Gentile community), Paul instead points out that those following Christ in faith are indeed following the law in their hearts. While this does not mean they should "follow" the law, it does once again point to an adoption of sorts into the family of God.

1. So what do you think? In or Of? Or perhaps both?
2. How does the idea of Jesus dying for sin effect our modern theology?
3. What does it look like to follow the law in your heart? What are the most important aspects of the Law?

Conclusion:

Romans concludes the undisputed letters of Paul in grand fashion, establishing powerful doctrine and empowering persons into faith. While the original intent is focused on helping Paul's mission and the churches in Jerusalem, the outcome is profound. Romans forces us to not just follow Jesus, but to trust where he leads and how we are disciples through faith. Whether we should have faith in or of Jesus, the meaning is clear: trust in Christ and see the world change through Jesus.

Close in prayer