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THE LETTER TO THE ROMANS 1-8

Bible Studies 4-6

June 2019

For starters

1. What do you think is the hardest aspect of the Christian gospel for unbelievers to accept? Why?

Unpacking Romans

In the previous study we followed Paul's careful and systematic presentation of the revelation of God's righteousness in the gospel. Through Jesus Christ's faithfulness in dying on our behalf, God declares all those who put their faith in Christ, whether Jew or Gentile, to be righteous. Apart from Jesus there is no hope for anyone. We are forgiven and restored to God, not through our moral or religious actions, but only through Jesus' death for us, as we trust in him.

From this point to the end of chapter 4, Paul draws this long presentation to a conclusion, using the example of Abraham, the father of Israel, to illustrate and confirm the truth of his gospel.

Read Romans 3:27-31

2. If all people are justified (declared righteous) only by faith and not by keeping God's law, then what is the first implication that Paul draws out (verse 27)? Why does the gospel imply this?
3. Why does Paul maintain that we can only be justified through faith? On what basis does he claim that this must be true (verses 29-30)?
4. What does Paul say to those who complain that this teaching (justification by faith) implies that the Old Testament laws were all just a waste of time (verse 31)?

NOTE: Those three points (questions 2, 3 & 4) Paul now goes on to explore in more detail in chapter 4.

A. No grounds for boasting

In the beginning of chapter 4 (verse 3) Paul quotes from Genesis 15:6. Genesis 15 occurs at a very significant moment in the foundation of the nation of Israel. In Genesis 12, God had promised Abraham that he would bless him and bless all the peoples of the earth through him and his descendents. But in Genesis 15, Abraham points out to God that he doesn't even have a single child, let alone enough descendents to bring blessing to the whole world! God's answer to Abraham, and Abraham's response, becomes a crucial moment in the whole history of salvation to follow.

Read Genesis 15:1-6 and Romans 4:1-8

5. How did Abraham come to be declared “righteous” by God? That is, what was the basis of his righteous status (verses 2-3)?

Therefore, did Abraham have anything to boast in before God? Why/why not (verses 2-5)?

6. At first glance, verse 5 is one of the most outrageous verses in the Bible. What legal principle does God appear to be trashing in this verse (see Exodus 23:7 and Proverbs 17:15)?

How, then, can God be just and, at the same time, justify the godless (see Romans 3:25-26)?

Therefore, if Abraham was justified by faith and not by works, what can we conclude about the type of person God justifies? That is, is it good, moral, religious people who are declared righteous? Why/why not?

B. Justified by faith – for Jew and Gentile alike

Once again, in the following section of Romans 4, Paul is relying on his readers’ knowledge of Abraham’s relationship with God in Genesis. In particular, he makes a big point out of the order in which two of the biggest events in Abraham’s life happened: first, in Genesis 15, God declared Abraham to be righteous and entered into a covenant with him; and second, in Genesis 17, God confirmed his covenant with Abraham and gave him the sign of circumcision.

Read Romans 4:9-12

7. Which came first: Abraham’s righteous status, or Abraham’s circumcision (verse 10)?

What was the purpose of Abraham’s circumcision (verse 11a)?

Why is all of this important, especially for Gentiles (verse 11b)?

What do verses 10-11 imply for Jews (verse 12)?

C. Justification by faith upholds the law

In the next section of Romans 4, Paul's defence of his gospel rests on the difference between laws and promises, and in particular, the different way a person responds to them. Laws call for obedience; promises call for faith.

Read Romans 4:13-17a

8. In verse 13 Paul summarises the status Genesis gives to Abraham: that Abraham would be "heir of the world". This is a very privileged status! But how did Abraham get that status – by obedience to laws or by faith in promises?

If Abraham had achieved that status through obedience to God's law, then would there have been any point in God making all those promises (verse 14)? Why/why not?

What does obedience to God's law actually achieve (verse 15), and so what is the outcome of rejecting righteousness by faith in order to pursue righteousness by works (verse 14)?

What is the outcome of pursuing righteousness by faith (verse 16)?

9. How, then, does Paul's gospel of justification by faith "uphold" the law (remember Romans 3:31)?

From this point, to the end of the chapter, Paul shows what it meant for Abraham to believe God's promise, and why we have even more reason to do the same.

Read Romans 4:17b-25

10. What extraordinary truth about God did Abraham believe (verse 17b)?

What was so outrageous about God's promise to Abraham, and yet why did Abraham believe it anyway (verses 18-21)?

11. Abraham knew that God "could give life to the dead and call into being things that were not" (verse 17b). We're not told what he based that belief on. (It was probably a combination of recognising God's power in creation (remember Romans 1:20), as well as his experience of God's faithfulness to him over two and a half decades and through many seemingly impossible challenges.) However, what even more certain basis do we have for accepting God's promise that he will accept as righteous everyone who puts their faith in him (verses 23-25)?

Reflection

12. Why is grace – that God justifies the godless as an undeserved gift – such a difficult idea for non-Christians to accept?

What are some of the things you've heard people say which indicate that they don't understand grace? What do you think is a helpful way to respond?

13. We often assume that being forgiven and made right before God is an easy thing. Isn't it God's job to do this, after all? But why is it, in fact, impossible?

What did it take for God to make the impossible possible?

So, when we see that we continue to struggle with sin even after believing in Jesus, how should we – and how *shouldn't* we – respond?

For starters

1. On a scale of 1 to 10, how sure are you that you are going to heaven? Explain why you gave that score.

Unpacking Romans

In the passage we looked at last time, Paul showed how the experience of Abraham, the founder of the Israelite nation, confirms his gospel message. There were three points he drew out in particular:

- i. That Abraham was counted righteous through faith and so had nothing within himself to boast in.
- ii. That Abraham was counted righteous before he was circumcised and so shows that faith is the way to righteousness for everyone, Jew and Gentile alike.
- iii. That since Abraham's privileged status as "father of many nations" was given to him through believing God's promise and not through obeying laws, the point of the laws must have been to lead us to faith; therefore righteousness through faith is not anti-law, but upholds the law.

So then, having established what his gospel is (Romans 1:16-3:26) and having confirmed its truth in the case of Abraham (Romans 3:27-4:25), from chapter 5 Paul begins to spell out the implications of this gospel message for us. And he begins by returning in more detail to the idea of "boasting": if we can't boast in ourselves, what does the gospel say we *can* boast in, and why?

Read Romans 5:1-2

2. There are three things Paul says we now either have or do as a result of being justified (counted righteous) through faith. What are they?

- We have _____ (verse 1b)
- We have _____ (verse 2a)
- We _____ (verse 2b)

What does each of these mean?

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-
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Read Romans 5:3-4

3. What additional thing does Paul now instruct us to do?

Note: The NIV's word "glory" in verse 3 translates exactly the same word as "boast" in verse 2. In other words, verse 3 instructs us about a second thing to "boast" in.

Where does the “production chain” in verses 3-4 end? ... (a) produces (b) produces (c) produces ...

So why does Paul instruct us to boast in suffering?

How does this contrast with the kind of boasting that “righteousness through works” encourages?

Read Romans 5:5

4. What does Paul mean when he says “hope does not put us to shame”?

What other “hopes” would put us to shame? Why?

Why can we be so sure that our hope will not put us to shame?

Read Romans 5:6-8

5. Reflect on God’s love. How is it totally different from every other love we ever experience?

So then, what is it about God’s love that makes it such a powerful guarantee of our hope?

Note: In the verses we are about to read, Paul talks about being “justified” in the present, but being “saved” only in the future. We tend to think of justification and salvation as being basically the same thing. However for Paul, justification is about our status before God right now, but salvation refers to the final completion of all of God’s promises: our experience of glory in the new creation. We are justified now so that we will be saved in the future.

Read Romans 5:9-10

6. God’s love demonstrated in the death of Christ for sinners is not the only guarantee of our hope. What gives us even more confidence still that God will keep his promise to give life to those who trust him?

By his death and resurrection, Jesus has done more for us than just pay the penalty for our sins. What else has he done?

Read Romans 5:11

7. Paul now gives us a third thing to “boast” in: to boast in God. Why boast in God? That is, what is the connection between boasting in God and boasting in “the hope of the glory of God” (verse 2)?

What follows from here to the end of the chapter is quite a difficult passage. Paul is considering a potential threat to the confidence he has been discussing in verses 1-11: sin, with its penalty, death.

Since death is God’s judgment on sin, and since everyone dies, Paul reasons that everyone must be a sinner. Therefore, boasting in your moral or religious performance is foolish, because no matter how good or devout you are, you will still die, which will prove that you weren’t moral enough. Death puts an end to boasting.

The problem is that Christians, too, die. Does that mean that God hasn’t actually overcome our guilt and condemnation? – that our salvation is not secure and our boasting is misplaced? – that faith-righteousness is also doomed to failure?

To answer, Paul compares and contrasts what Adam did for the human race with what Jesus has done.

Read Romans 5:12-21

8. How did sin enter the world (and with it, condemnation and death)? How many people did it take to bring sin into the world?

How did grace enter the world (and with it, justification and life)? How many people did it take to bring grace into the world?

9. How is Jesus' act and its effect different from Adam's act and its effect (verses 15-16)?

Why is Jesus' act and its effect more powerful than Adam's act and its effect (verse 17)?

10. Do the realities of sin and death destroy our confident boasting in God (verses 18-21)? Why/why not?

Reflection

11. Is it possible to have assurance of salvation (to know absolutely for certain that you are going to heaven), and if so, how is it possible?

Many people think that "boasting in hope" (saying you are sure you will be saved) is the height of arrogance. Do you agree? Why/why not?

What would it look like on a regular weekday for you to:

- "boast in the hope of God's glory"?

- "boast in your sufferings"?

- "boast in God"?

12. Jesus' grace is more than a match for all your sin. Who in your circle of friends and family needs to hear that?

For starters

1. Is it possible to create the perfect society through stronger rules (whether legislated or just culturally enforced)? Why/why not?

Unpacking Romans

We are justified – made right with God – through the faithfulness of Jesus in his sacrificial death, as we put our faith in him. As thoroughly condemned sinners, we don't contribute anything to our righteous standing with God. God has unilaterally done everything that was needed; he has satisfied his own justice. And so we are justified by faith alone, apart from any moral or religious works of our own. That is the foundational truth on which Paul's letter to the Romans is built, and which Paul outlined very carefully and comprehensively in chapters 1-4.

From chapter 5, then, Paul began to address various objections and threats to his gospel of justification by faith alone. Is it reasonable? Does it actually work? Is it too good to be true?

And so last time, in chapter 5, we considered the problem of death, and we saw that even though we still experience sin and suffering and death, the grace of Jesus and his gift of eternal life is more powerful than anything. No matter how weak we are, or how many sins God's law identifies in us, Jesus' grace is more than a match for it. Jesus' death and resurrection are sufficient for everything, and so we can have full confidence in him. As Paul says, "we boast in God" (Romans 5:11).

But Paul's readers were not convinced. Surely the gospel of free grace (Romans 3:24) gives us licence to live as we want. In fact, if God's grace grows greater the bigger our sin gets, then why not make his grace as big and as beautiful as possible by sinning more and more? Why not sin to the glory of God?

Chapter 6 gives us Paul's answer.

Read Romans 6:1-14

2. In verses 2-4 Paul gives two reasons why it is completely out of the question that a Christian should continue to sin. What is the first reason (verses 2-3), and what does this mean?

What is the second reason (verse 4), and what does this mean?

3. Because our old life of sin was put to death by Jesus' cross, our relationship to sin has completely changed. What does Paul say our relationship to sin used to be, and what is it now (verses 5-7)? What does this mean?

Instead of being under the power of sin, who or what is now in charge in our lives, and how is that relationship different from our old life (verses 8-11)?

4. What, practically, does all of this mean for how Christians should live (verses 12-14)?

5. So does Paul's gospel of free grace give us a free pass to sin as much as we like? Why/why not?

In verse 14, Paul deliberately shifts his language so that he can address a second, although related, objection to his gospel of free grace. He links the tyrannical rule of sin over us with submission to God's law. Those who seek works righteousness through keeping God's law, says Paul, find themselves to be enslaved to sin. Freedom from sin can only come through being liberated from the control of God's law.

In Romans 5:20 Paul had said that one of the reasons God gave his law in the first place was "so that the trespass might increase." That is, because the law defines and clarifies what sin is, when God gave his law to his people, what he was effectively doing was shining a spotlight on their sin; revealing a whole host of sinful attitudes and behaviours that they had never realised were so wrong. And, in the passage for our next study (Romans 7:7-11) Paul will show that we are so twisted by sin, that when the spotlight of God's law shines on us, instead of helping us to step back from sin, we are actually enticed to sin even **more!**

So to be set free from the power of sin means that we must also be set free from the rule of God's law and come under the rule of his grace instead.

But at this point, the objection is raised: so if we're free from the rule of God's law, then there is no longer any moral standard to live by, so it doesn't matter what we do. If we're not under law, then do whatever you like!

Read Romans 6:15-23

6. Again, in verses 16-23 Paul gives two reasons why being under grace means that it's out of the question for a Christian to continue to sin. What is the first reason (verses 16-18) and what does this mean?

What is the second reason (verses 19-23 – especially verses 21-22) and what does this mean?

7. The word translated “wages” in verse 23 was commonly used for an allowance given to a soldier for rations or other costs. It was the ancient equivalent of “work-related expenses reimbursement” for the employee on the road. But what is the “employee’s perk” that the slave-master, sin, distributes?

How is being a slave of God different? What kind of “payment” does God hand out, and what “benefit” do we receive?

If God gives us eternal life as a gift and not as a reward for something we’ve done, then what motivation do we have for righteous living?

Read Romans 7:1-6

8. Paul gives an everyday example here to illustrate how the law relates to death. What is the legal principle he is highlighting in verses 1-3?

What does this principle have to do with our relationship to sin and the law and living a holy and righteous life (verses 4-6)?

9. So then, summarise everything you've learned from today's passage: Why is it out of the question for a Christian to continue to sin? Why, in fact, does Paul's gospel of free grace lead to a life of much **greater** righteousness and holiness, not less?

A final note

At this point, you might be starting to feel a bit nervous. Paul is clear that it is unthinkable for a Christian to continue to sin. But I know that I **do** continue to sin, and I'm sure that you do, too! What does that mean? Does that mean I'm not a Christian after all?

We need to be very careful here that we don't sneak "works righteousness" back in by stealth. I am not a Christian because I live a sin-free life. I am a Christian despite the fact that I am a sinner. That's what grace means! And I will **continue** to be a Christian despite the fact that I **continue** to sin. Justification is **still** by grace. It is not by grace at the beginning and then by works after that; it is always and only by grace.

But that still leaves us with this very important question: what happens if I continue to sin, even after becoming a Christian?

That is the question Paul turns to next, which we will look at in study 7. For now, just be reassured that Paul has very good news for us, and that, if you trust in Jesus, you still have nothing to fear!

Reflection

10. Can you think of examples where people who were apparently committed to stringent rule-keeping (whether Christian or non-Christian) ended up doing very sinful things? Did this surprise you at the time? Why/why not?

Why is grace so much more practical than law, when it comes to doing the right thing?

Where do you think you are inclined to slip out of grace and back into law in the way you live?

11. Have you ever thought of yourself as "God's slave" before? How does that make you feel? Are there areas where your attitude to your life needs to change so that you are more consistently "living to God"?