

# Is Romans Really the Greatest Letter Ever Written?

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## Introduction

The Apostle Paul's letter to the church at Rome has recently been called, "The Greatest Letter Ever Written." N. T. Wright has a 6-part video series with this title, and John Piper, pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, also gave his verse-by-verse expository sermon series the same title. Is Romans really the greatest letter ever written or is this merely a rhetorical device used by preachers and teachers? Wright and Piper are not alone in their assessment of Romans, however. Listen to the testimony of others before them who have greatly valued this epistle.

*Martin Luther:* This epistle is in truth the most important document in the New Testament, the gospel in its purest expression. Not only is it well worth a Christian's while to know it word for word by heart, but also to meditate on it day by day. It is the soul's daily bread, and can never be read too often, or studied too much. The more you probe into it the more precious it becomes, and the better its flavour.<sup>1</sup>

*John Calvin:* When any one gains a knowledge of this Epistle, he has an entrance opened to him to all the most hidden treasures of Scripture.<sup>2</sup>

*William Tyndale:* [T]his epistle is the principal and most excellent part of the new Testament and most pure evangelion, that is to say, glad tidings, and that we call gospel, and also is a light and a way unto the whole scripture; I think it meet that every christian man not only know it, by rote and without the book, but

also exercise himself therein evermore continually, as with the daily bread of the soul. No man verily can read it too oft, or study it too well; for the more it is studied, the easier it is; the more it is chewed, the pleasanter it is; and the more groundly it is searched, the preciouser things are found in it, so great treasure of spiritual things lieth hid therein.<sup>3</sup>

*Samuel Coleridge:* I think that the Epistle to the Romans is the most profound work in existence.<sup>4</sup>

*John Knox:* [I]t is unquestionably the most important theological work ever written.<sup>5</sup>

*John Stott:* It is the fullest, plainest and grandest statement of the gospel in the New Testament.<sup>6</sup>

*R. C. Sproul:* I really do believe that if there is any one individual book, out of the sixty-six, which God used to change lives more than any other, it is the book of Romans.<sup>7</sup>

Letters were common in the ancient world. In fact, hundreds of letters were written every week. Today, we have approximately 14,000 letters that have been preserved from antiquity.<sup>8</sup> But not all letters carry the same impact or importance. Some letters never arrive at their destination, while others are read and then forgotten. Only a few have an abiding influence. Paul's letter to the church at Rome is one such letter. Containing about 7,100 words, it is Paul's longest and most profound letter that remains. But is it really the greatest letter ever written? In seeking to answer this question in the

affirmative we will consider the value of Romans from three perspectives: (1) its historical impact, (2) its theological importance, and (3) its practical instructions.

### **The Historical Impact of Romans**

In assessing the impact that the book of Romans has made in history, we will focus our attention on three individuals: Augustine, Martin Luther, and John Wesley. No one can deny the great impact that these three men had in the history of the Christian church. What we will learn from our study is that the conversion of each of these men is directly linked to Paul's letter to the church at Rome.

#### ***Aurelius Augustine***

Augustine of Hippo was undeniably the greatest theologian of the early church. Before his conversion, however, he was a slave to sexual passions. After moving to Milan where he continued lecturing as a teacher of literature and rhetoric, Augustine came under the preaching of Bishop Ambrose. Augustine felt convicted of his sin but did not have the power to overcome sin by his own strength. His soul was tormented by this dilemma. In his *Confessions* he writes, "I was in torment, reproaching myself more bitterly than ever as I twisted and turned in my chain."<sup>9</sup> Being overcome by the depths of his depravity, he began to weep over his condition. He continues, "I stood up and left Alypius [his friend] so that I might weep and cry to my heart's content, for it occurred to me that tears were best shed in solitude. . . . Somehow I flung myself down beneath a fig tree and gave way to the tears which now streamed from my eyes."<sup>10</sup> As he cried out to God, he began to ask himself how long he would live in his sins.

I was asking myself these questions, weeping all the while with the most bitter sorrow in my heart, when all at once I heard the sing-song voice of a child in a nearby house. Whether it was the voice of a boy or girl I cannot say, but again and again it repeated the refrain 'Take it and read, take it and read'. At this I looked up, thinking hard whether there was any kind of game in which children used to chant words like these, but I could not remember ever hearing them before. I stemmed my flood of tears and stood up, telling myself that this could only be a divine command to open my book of Scripture and read the first passage on which my eyes should fall. . . . So I hurried by to the place where . . . I had put down the book containing Paul's Epistles. I seized it and opened it, and in silence I read the first passage on which my eyes fell.<sup>11</sup>

That text was Rom 13:13-14: "Not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desire."<sup>12</sup> At this Augustine recalls, "I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled."<sup>13</sup> The Word of God is powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword (Heb 4:12) and in his providence God used the book of Romans to pierce through Augustine's heart and transform his life.

Augustine went on to become a great leader in the early church, serving in various capacities for nearly forty years. He defended the truths of Christianity against Manichaeism, Pelagianism, Donatism, and paganism. He explained the doctrine of the Trinity in ways that surpassed those before him (*On the Trin-*

ity). He upheld the sovereignty of God and the utter depravity of man (original sin) against Pelagius (*On Free Will*). In his *City of God*, he defended Christianity against paganism and explained the theology of history. In sum, "Augustine was one of the great thinkers of all time. . . . His writings laid the foundation not only for later Western theology but also for a good deal of later philosophy."<sup>14</sup>

### **Martin Luther**

The Book of Romans also impacted the great reformer Martin Luther. He was born in Eisleben, Germany, in 1483 and, at the age of twenty-two, entered law school due to pressure from his father. On July 16, 1505, he was caught in a violent thunderstorm. As life-threatening lighting bolts hurled down around him, he fell to the ground and fearing for his life he cried out, "Help, St. Anne, I will become a monk." Approximately two weeks later he joined the Augustinian Hermits. In 1507 he was ordained to the priesthood, and in 1508 he was sent as an instructor to the University of Wittenburg. Finally, in 1512 he became a doctor of Bible. But Luther lived a miserable life as a monk, constantly trying to win God's favor by good works but never experiencing God's peace.

Luther's conversion occurred sometime between 1513 and 1519. He writes,

I had indeed been captivated with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the Epistle to the Romans. But up till then it was not the cold blood about the heart, but a single word in Chapter 1 [17], "In it the rightness of God is revealed," that had stood in my way. For I hated that word "righteousness of God," which according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically regarding the formal or

active righteousness, as they called it, with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner.<sup>15</sup>

The gospel of God's righteousness was not good news but was utterly terrifying for Luther. He viewed the gospel merely as declaring that God will punish sinners. He continues,

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners. . . . Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted.<sup>16</sup>

Luther seemed to be without hope. But he did not give up seeking to find the truth and comfort for his soul. He continued searching the Scriptures for answers.

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'" There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory.

And I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word "righteousness of God." Thus

that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise.<sup>17</sup>

In a word, Luther had rediscovered the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone. The passage that he once hated became to him more precious than he could have imagined. The book of Romans became the spark that ignited the Reformation through the life and ministry of Martin Luther. Or, as Leon Morris asserts, “The Reformation may be regarded as the unleashing of new spiritual life as a result of a renewed understanding of the teaching of Romans.”<sup>18</sup>

### **John Wesley**

About 200 years after the life of Luther, God again used Romans in a powerful way—this time to change the life of John Wesley. He and his brother Charles were desperately seeking God’s favor through their good deeds. After returning from a two year term of service in Georgia as chaplains and missionaries, they attended a Moravian worship service. On May 24, 1738, John Wesley repented of his self-reliance and trusted solely on the grace and mercy found in Christ. What did God use to change this self-righteous sinner? The answer, of course, is the book of Romans. During the meeting, somebody read from Luther’s *Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans*. Later, Wesley wrote in his journal,

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the *Epistle to the Romans*. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from

the law of sin and of death.<sup>19</sup>

Wesley’s bondage to sin and his losing fight against temptations gave way to victory as he came into a saving knowledge and experience of the Lord Jesus. He realized that by his own strength he could never gain the victory. Only when he looked to Christ, and to Christ alone for righteousness, did he find the strength to become more than a conqueror. John Wesley and his brother Charles had a profound impact on the Western world through the revivals during the Great Awakening and through their hymns.

### **The Theological Importance of Romans**

Romans is not only valued for its historical impact, but also for its theological importance. Romans contains the clearest and most complete expression of the gospel in the Bible. For eleven chapters Paul systematically explains the sinfulness of mankind, the means by which sinners can be justified, and the certainty Christians can have in the promises of God. He treats topics such as God’s wrath, the law, the Holy Spirit, God’s sovereignty, and the future of ethnic Israel. It is no accident that this letter, although not the first canonical letter written by Paul, stands at the head of the Pauline writings. In this section we will discuss some of the most important theological themes in Romans including the sinfulness of man, justification by faith alone, and the sovereignty of God.

It is wrong, of course, to view Romans as a mere theological treatise. Like Paul’s other letters, Romans is also an occasional letter. It is written to a specific location and addresses particular situations in the church. For example, Paul addresses the weak and the strong which almost certainly are references to Gentile and Jewish



Christians in the congregation (ch. 14). Paul also writes to explain his travel plans and how he planned to visit the church in Rome so that they could help him in his further travels to Spain (ch. 15). But we also know that these are not his main reasons for writing the letter because he waits until chapters 14 and 15 to address these issues. In the first 13 chapters Paul does not mention a specific circumstance in the church. Perhaps the best explanation is that Paul desired to establish the Roman Christians in his gospel (Rom 1:11; 16:25) thereby fulfilling his calling as the apostle to the Gentiles (1:5; 11:13; 15:16-18).<sup>20</sup> This provides a rationale for why Paul gives such an extensive presentation of the gospel of Christ. He knows he may never visit Rome because of the trials that await him in Jerusalem, his next destination. Thus, he pens the letter of Romans to ensure that they understand the gospel of Jesus Christ in case he can never teach them in person.

### *The Sinfulness of Man*

Although Paul begins his epistle with the good news of the gospel of Christ,—a gospel that reveals how sinners can receive the righteousness of God (1:16-17)—he does not expand on this good news until his readers first understand the predicament of their natural condition. According to Paul, man is not born neutral. He is born a sinner and continually offends his Creator by not honoring Him, nor giving thanks to Him (1:21, 28). Consequently, man will have to face God's mighty wrath which is already being revealed (1:18). Paul later explains that man is not only guilty of the sins he actually commits, but also for the sin of Adam. Whereas Paul hints at the doctrine of original sin in 1 Cor 15:22, it is made

much more explicit in Rom 5:12-21.

Because all mankind is united to Adam and thus responsible for Adam's sin and for their own subsequent sins, all are without excuse and guilty before God. This indictment is true not only for godless and immoral Gentiles who exchange the glory of the immortal God for images of man and animals (1:18-32), but also for the Jews who have access to God's law (2:1-29). For, although the Jews have the law, which is an advantage over not having the law, no one can keep the law perfectly. In the end, then, the Jews are no better than the Gentiles because the law was not given to gain righteousness but to show us our utter inability to attain to God's perfect standard. "For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin" (3:20).

Paul's description of the sinfulness of man is crucial for gaining a true understanding of the gospel. In our society we are constantly told that human beings are inherently good, eliminating the need for a savior. Even in many churches there is a hesitancy to teach about man's utter depravity and God's holy wrath. There is a tendency to skip over the bad news and go straight for the good news. But, oh, how we must first feel the weight of our sin and sense the righteous wrath of God. Paul did not spend three chapters (1:18-3:20) explaining the magnitude of our sin and consequent anger of God for nothing. We need to follow Paul's example and be unashamed of the gospel—including giving a biblical description of man's condition outside of Christ.

### *Justification by Faith Alone*

Paul also unpacks the great doctrine of justification by faith alone in Romans.

Although he deals with this topic extensively in Galatians, it is given more attention in his letter to the church at Rome. In fact, Rom 3:21-26, which begins the section on justification, is often viewed as the very heart of the letter. For example C. E. B. Cranfield calls these verses “the centre and heart” of Romans.<sup>21</sup> Martin Lloyd-Jones likewise affirms this text “is the acropolis of the Bible and of the Christian faith.”<sup>22</sup> Leon Morris describes it as “possibly the most important single paragraph ever written.”<sup>23</sup> Finally, John Piper comments that Romans 3:21-26 “is the Mount Everest of the Bible.... There are great sentences in the Bible, and great paragraphs and great revelations, but it doesn’t get any greater than this paragraph in Romans 3:21-26.”<sup>24</sup>

The gospel is good news because it reveals to us the way of salvation. God requires a perfect righteousness and the gospel declares that such righteousness is received as a gift to those who repent of their sins and place their trust wholly in Christ. Justification (being declared righteous by God) occurs at the moment of salvation and is a one-time act. God declares that the sinner is no longer guilty based on the deeds of another—Jesus Christ.

The sacrificial death of Jesus is at the very heart of justification. Because God is holy, he must punish sin. It is not as if God, simply because he is God and can do anything, could merely decide to forgive sin. By definition, sin is belittling God’s glory (3:23). If God chose not to punish sin he would be declaring that his glory is not worthy to be upheld. The Bible is clear that God does all things for his own glory and therefore he must punish sin in order to protect his glory. By not upholding his own glory by punishing sin, God would

be agreeing with sinners that his glory is not worth defending. He would be despising his own glory, and that is unrighteous. Before the death of Jesus, however, God had passed over sins because of his divine patience (3:25). As we read in the Psalms, “He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities” (Ps 103:10). But how can God just simply overlook our sins?

Paul informs us that Christ’s death was needed to demonstrate God’s righteousness. Thus, Paul explains the vindication of the righteousness of God through the death of his Son. Without the cross, God would not only appear to be unjust, but he would be unjust (3:26). God cannot simply justify the ungodly (4:5). In his great patience God had passed over sins in the past, but Jesus’ perfect life and sacrificial death declares to the world that God is indeed just. God’s righteousness is therefore vindicated by the death of Jesus. Paul tells us that God put forth Jesus as a propitiation—a wrath-absorbing sacrifice. That is, on the cross Jesus pays the penalty of our sin on the cross. God’s wrath is poured out on Jesus. According to Paul, Jesus’ death on the cross justifies the sinner and also justifies God. It justifies the sinner because those who place their faith in Christ are declared righteous based on Christ’s righteousness, and it justifies God the Father because it vindicates his glory.

It is disturbing when modern Christian authors reject the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement of Jesus by using mere human logic. For example, in his book entitled *The Lost Message of Jesus*, Steve Chalke writes, “The fact is that the cross isn’t a form of cosmic child abuse—a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offense he has not even committed. . . . If

the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus' own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil."<sup>25</sup> According to Chalke, to conceive of Jesus' death as bearing the wrath of God in our place is both offensive ("child abuse") and contradictory to the teaching of Jesus.

We find a more subtle rejection of the substitutionary atonement of Christ in the writings of Brian McLaren. In his book, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, he explains his understanding of the cross:

Absorbing the worst that human beings can offer—crooked religiosity, petty political systems, individual betrayal, physical torture with whip and thorn and nail and hammer and spear—Jesus enters into the center of the thunderstorm of human evil and takes its full shock on the cross. Our evil is brutally, unmistakably exposed, drawn into broad daylight, and judged—named for what it is. Then having felt its agony and evil firsthand, in person, Jesus pronounces forgiveness and demonstrates that the grace of God is more powerful and expansive than the evil of humanity. Justice and mercy kiss; judgment and forgiveness embrace.<sup>26</sup>

At first glance it seems that McLaren is simply recounting the brutal death of Christ. But McLaren states that he is explaining the "meaning of the cross." Notice there is no mention of Christ suffering to pay the penalty for our sins. Rather, in McLaren's view, Christ is merely "absorbing the worst that human beings can offer." That is, Christ is not absorbing our sin and the wrath of God but only the sin he experienced firsthand—"crooked religiosity, petty political systems, individual betrayal, physical torture with whip and thorn and nail and hammer and spear."

For McLaren, Jesus only experiences the sinfulness of man through those who betrayed him and were cruel to him. He does not bear our sin upon himself and pay the debt to God we owe by experiencing God's wrath. Instead, he merely feels sins agony and evil firsthand. McLaren then says that Jesus judges sin, which means sin is "named and shown for what it is." But God does not judge sin by merely calling it sin and stating that what we have done is bad. He must punish sin. Jesus cannot merely pronounce the forgiveness of God simply because sin is "named and shown for what it is." In his explanation of the cross, McLaren never mentions the wrath of God and the fact that Jesus paid the penalty of our sins. It is for these reasons that D. A. Carson laments that "both McLaren and Chalke have largely abandoned the gospel."<sup>27</sup>

Does the Bible teach that Jesus takes our sins upon Himself, receiving the punishment from God the Father that was due to us? We read in Isaiah 53, "But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed" (v. 5). In this verse it is clear that Jesus takes our guilt upon Himself. Some might respond, "Nowhere did the verse say that the *Father* wounded or chastised him." But verse 10 adds, "Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief." On the cross Jesus was not merely giving us an example of how to suffer or the extent of His love for us, He was also satisfying the wrath of God for our sins so that we would not have to endure the penalty ourselves. Other verses that clearly teach the substitutionary atonement of Christ include 2 Cor 5:21 ("God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him

we might become the righteousness of God”) and 1 Pet 3:18 (“For Christ suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God”).

The Old Testament sacrificial system foreshadowed Christ’s atonement. Animals without blemish were slain for the sins of the people. These sacrifices signified the need for atonement to be made on behalf of sins committed against a holy God. But, as the writer of Hebrews informs us, “It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb 10:4). Jesus, in his sacrificial death, fulfills the meaning of the Old Testament animal sacrifices. “Therefore he [Jesus] had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people” (Heb 2:17; also see 1 John 2:2 and 4:10 for uses of “propitiation”).

The doctrine of justification by faith alone stands at the center of Christian beliefs. In recent years this doctrine has been attacked, often from inside the church. The “New Perspective” on Paul seeks to take justification out of the area of soteriology (the doctrine of salvation) and place it under ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church). That is, some claim that Paul is not so much concerned with how one is saved, but rather how one relates to others in the church and what is expected of Gentile converts. Although this newer view can be dangerous, perhaps the greater problem in the church is simply lack of understanding regarding justification. Because many churches steer away from doctrine, in-depth teaching regarding key Christian beliefs are never explained. Paul did not take such an approach. He wanted the Roman Christians to be obedient to God and love each other. But he did not

simply give them practical instructions. He first laid a foundation upon which the Christians in Rome could build their life. Christianity is more than just “doing.” It is, at its root, about “being.” To simply seek to live a good life without the proper foundation of justification always leads to moralism. Christianity is not primarily about what we can do for God, but about what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Faith is central because it looks away from the self and looks to Christ for righteousness. As Paul writes, “To the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness” (4:5).

### *The Sovereignty of God*

God’s sovereignty is revealed to us throughout the Bible. But in Rom 9-11, it seems to be given more light than in other places. In this section Paul defends God’s ability and desire to keep his promises. In chapter 8 Paul describes some amazing promises of God.

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (8:28)

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (8:31-32)

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, not anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (8:38-39)

But we cannot bank all of our hope in God if we do not believe He is powerful enough to deliver on all His promises. Paul then addresses the problem of unbe-



believing Israel. If God is all-powerful and sovereign, then what about the promises He made to Israel? Why is Israel rejecting the Messiah and not experiencing the fulfillment of God's promises? Paul's answer to this massive dilemma is not that God's plan has been frustrated by man's stubbornness and unbelief but that we have misunderstood the nature of God's promises. Paul declares, "But it is not as though the word of God has failed" (9:5). God's word has not failed but we sometimes fail to understand what God actually promises. God never promised He would save all of ethnic Israel. Rather, within ethnic Israel there is a remnant consisting of the true Israel who are the recipients of God's promises: "For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel" (9:5). The promises were not given to Ishmael but to Isaac, and not to Esau but to Jacob.

We often question God's sovereignty because we misunderstand the promises of God. We read verses like Rom 8:31 ("If God is for us, who can be against us") and reason that God promises that nothing bad will ever happen to us. But we know that cannot be what Paul means because he goes on to state that neither tribulation, nor distress, nor persecution, nor famine, nor nakedness, nor danger, nor sword shall separate us from the love of Christ (8:35). What Paul means is that even in tribulations we are more than conquerors because even death cannot separate us from God's love but instead ushers us into his glorious presence.

Is there a limit to God's sovereignty? We might be tempted to think that at some point God's sovereignty yields to man's free will. After all, it is argued, God would never choose to save some people while passing over others. But this is precisely

what Paul argues in Romans 9. He chose Isaac over Ishmael and he chose Jacob over Esau. With the first example of Isaac and Ishmael some might reason that God's choice was based on man's actions—Ishmael was born of Hagar through Abraham's disobedience. So Paul proceeds to give a clearer example because Jacob and Esau had the same father and were in fact twins. Paul writes, "Though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call—she was told, 'The older will serve the younger.' As it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated'" (9:11-13).

Because God is God, He is free to do with His creation as He pleases. He has no obligation to man. In His perfect sovereignty, and because of His great love, He chooses to have mercy on some. We cannot indict God as being unjust for His decision not to save all. "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion" (9:15). Ultimately, salvation does not depend on man but on God (9:16). Because God is free, He can have mercy on whomever He wills and harden whomever He wills (9:18). We have become so accustomed to believe that man is ultimate in salvation. We cry out, "That is not fair!" We forget that God has no obligation to save anyone. We forget that all have sinned and deserve God's wrath. We forget that fairness would mean that we all fall under God's righteous judgment. God's sovereignty, however, not only decides our salvation, it ensures our salvation. If salvation was left to the will of man, no one would be saved. The gospel is good news because an all-powerful God chose to save a

people for Himself and promises to keep them to the end. The only way we can take refuge in any of God's promises is that He is completely sovereign and can work all things for our good. The ground of all our hope and assurance is based on God's sovereignty.

The book of Romans provides us with such a deep understanding of so many crucial doctrines. Oftentimes, these doctrines are mentioned in other texts, but their light shines the clearest and brightest in Romans. This truth is confirmed by the frequent references to Romans in New Testament theologies. A quick scan in the scripture indices demonstrates that Romans is always (at least in the four I checked) referenced more times than any other New Testament letter. Martin Luther concludes his introduction to Romans by stating,

It may therefore be said that this epistle give the richest possible account of what a Christian ought to know, namely, the meaning of law, gospel, sin, punishment, grace, faith, righteousness, Christ, God, good works, love, hope, and the cross. It tells what our attitude should be to our fellows, whether righteous or sinful, strong or weak, friend or foe; and to our own selves. . . . Therefore, it seems as if St. Paul had intended this epistle to set out, once for all, the whole Christian doctrine in brief, and to be an introduction preparatory to the whole of the Old Testament. For there can be no doubt that if we had this epistle well and truly in our hearts, we should possess the light and power found in the Old Testament. Therefore, every Christian ought to study Romans regularly and continuously.<sup>28</sup>

### **The Practical Value of Romans**

A third reason that Romans is the greatest letter ever written involves its practical value. This letter not only gives us clarity regarding important doctrines,

it also gives us unparalleled implications of what such theology means for our daily living. God is not only concerned about what we think but also how we live. Thus, Paul does not stop at the doctrinal level, but also gives us practical admonitions and advice. It is significant that the doctrinal section comes first. We need to know the "why" and "how" of living godly lives. It is no accident that when Paul transitions from the doctrinal section (chs. 1-11) to the practical section (chs. 12-16), he bases his exhortations on the mercies of God. He writes, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present yourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (12:1). The word "therefore" refers the reader back to the previous 11 chapters. The gospel of Jesus Christ is God's mercy to undeserving sinners in giving his precious Son to die for them, in justifying them freely by faith, and by giving them his Holy Spirit, and in adopting them as his children. But that mercy has been especially highlighted in chapters 9-11. Salvation "depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy" (9:16). God's purpose in saving some is "to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy" (9:23). Just as disobedient Gentiles "now have received mercy" (11:30), so too, disobedient Jews will "now receive mercy" (11:31) and thus he will "have mercy on all" (11:32).

Paul recalls for us the mercies of God. It is because of God's mercy in Christ that we can live holy lives. It is because of God's mercy in Christ that we can present our bodies as living sacrifices. All that we do should always be in view of God's mercy in Christ. This section will consider the value of the practical implications given in Romans including the general exhor-

tations of (ch. 12), the relationship of the Christian to the government (ch. 13), and the relationship between the weak and strong brothers (chs. 14-15).

### *The Exhortations of Chapter 12*

In chapter 12 Paul gives a string of more than thirty commands: “present your bodies as a living sacrifice ... do not be conformed to this world ... be transformed ... not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think ... think with sober judgment ... let us use [our gifts] ... Let love be genuine ... Abhor what is evil ... hold fast to what is good ... Love one another with brotherly affection ... Outdo one another in showing honor ... Do not be slothful in zeal ... be fervent in spirit ... serve the Lord ... Rejoice in hope ... be patient in tribulation ... be constant in prayer ... Contribute to the needs of the saints ... seek to show hospitality ... Bless those who persecute you ... bless and do not curse them ... Rejoice with those who rejoice...weep with those who weep ... Live in harmony with one another ... Do not be haughty ... associate with the lowly ... Never be conceited ... Repay no one evil for evil ... give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all ... live peaceably with all ... never avenge yourselves ... If your enemy is hungry, feed him ... if he is thirsty, give him something to drink ... Do not be overcome by evil ... overcome evil with good.” Nowhere else in Paul’s writings, and possibly the entire Bible, are we given such concentration of ethical commands. Perhaps the closest parallels are found in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) or the book of James.

Paul wants believers to base their lives on God’s mercy. Mercy is needed if we are going to be successful in living faithfully to God’s commands. We cannot do

it alone. Willpower will never suffice for at least two reasons. First, obedience to God’s commands takes a supernatural work of God. The natural man does not want to think soberly of himself. The natural man does not abhor what is evil. The natural man does not want to bless his enemies. Second, obedience to these commands involves more than outward conformity. We are called to obey out of a deep, heartfelt conviction. It is possible to achieve outward conformity to some of the commands such as associating with the lowly. But it is not possible for the natural man to obey God’s commands from the heart (such as to never be conceited). Furthermore, as Christians we are to do everything to the glory of God. If we try to obey God without being mindful of and reliant on his mercy, then we do not honor God. At all times we must depend on and rest in God’s mercy in Christ.

### *The Christian and the Government*

In his letter to the Romans, Paul does not only instruct Christians how to live personally and in communion with other believers, but also how to view their relationship with the government. Paul devotes seven verses to this topic (13:1-7). Although it is true that Peter also gives instruction concerning the Christian’s attitude and view of the government (1 Pet 2:13-17), Paul treats the subject in more detail. Paul opens by saying, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God” (13:1). What makes Paul’s command to submit to governing authorities extraordinary is the context in which he writes.

Paul sent his letter to Rome sometime between A.D. 55-57. Only a few years

earlier (A.D. 49 or 50), the Roman emperor Claudius had expelled all Jews from Rome. The historian Suetonius states that Claudius expelled all the Jews from Rome because they were continually making disturbances at the instigation of “Chrestus.”<sup>29</sup> Most scholars believe that Chrestus is a corruption of the name Christos [= Christ]. Apparently, violent debates between Jews and Jewish Christians broke out in Rome over the claims as to whether Jesus was the Messiah. This event is confirmed in Acts where we read that Paul stayed with Aquila and Priscilla who had recently come from Italy “because Claudius had commanded all Jews to leave Rome” (Acts 18:2). Because the Roman government made no distinction between Judaism and Christianity, both Jews and Jewish Christians were affected. This edict lasted about five years (until the death of Claudius) so that, by the time Paul writes Romans, Aquila and Priscilla are back in Rome (16:3).

What is amazing, and almost inconceivable, is that Paul knew the history of the Roman government and their treatment of Christians and still commands all Christians to be subject to their governing authorities. Perhaps Paul meant we are to be subject to only some governments—that is, the good ones? But Paul gives the reason that Christians must obey *all* governments: they are all appointed by God. Paul is declaring that God, in his divine sovereignty, is in control and actively appoints leaders in the world. Although this truth may be difficult for us to understand and approve of, it is well-attested in Scripture.

Take, for example, the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. He was an evil king who utterly destroyed Jerusalem, either killing its inhabitants or taking them into exile

to Babylon. God told Jeremiah, “Now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, my servant” (Jer 27:6). Similarly, Paul states that the civil authority is “God’s servant [*diakonos*] for your good” (13:4). According to the Bible, God established Nebuchadnezzar as king to accomplish His purposes.

Perhaps a better example is the rule of Pontius Pilate. He was not a righteous ruler but always did what was expedient. Moreover, he orchestrated the greatest injustice of all—the death of Jesus. Did God appoint Pilate as governor over Judea? Pilate says to Jesus, “You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?” (John 19:10). To this Jesus replies, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above” (John 19:11; also see 1 Kgs 12:15; Prov 21:1; Dan 2:21). According to the Bible, God—and no one else—gave Pilate his authority. Paul’s admonition to obey governing authorities is based on God’s sovereign appointment of such authorities. “Therefore, whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed” (13:2). By living in subjection to the authorities we “avoid God’s wrath” (13:5). Consequently, it is necessary for Christians to pay taxes to whom taxes are owed (13:6).

Is there ever a time when Christians should *disobey* the government? Of course there is. Whenever the government commands Christians to do things that are forbidden (e.g., confessing Caesar as Lord) or forbids Christians from doing what God commands (e.g., telling others about Jesus). This latter principle is well illustrated in Acts. After the apostles were arrested for preaching the gospel,

they were miraculously freed by an angel during the night. The next day, in obedience to the Lord (Acts 5:20), the apostles entered the temple and began to teach the people. After being arrested a second time the high priest stated, “We strictly charged you not to teach in this name” (Acts 5:28). To this Peter replied, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

It is not easy for a Christian to navigate life seeking to glorify God and, at the same time, honoring government officials that God has appointed. Our highest allegiance must always go to Christ. But we must realize that we dishonor Christ when we fail to give respect to whom respect is owed and honor to whom honor is owed (13:7). Paul’s instruction in Romans 13 helps the Christian maintain this important balance.

### *The Weak and the Strong*

The final practical area we will consider is Paul’s advice to Christians in relation to those who are “weak in faith” (14:1) and those “who are strong” (15:1). Although Paul does not describe the identity of the “weak” and the “strong,” these references most likely refer to the Jewish and Gentile division that was occurring in the church. When the church first began, it probably consisted primarily of Jewish Christians. After the edict of Claudius expelling all Jews from Rome, the Gentile believers found themselves in control of the church. But when Paul writes Romans, many Jews would have returned to Rome (e.g., Aquila and Priscilla), although the Gentiles would probably still have been the majority. The issue Paul addresses, then, is how weak Jewish Christians (who sometimes get hung up on food laws) and strong Gentile Christians (who might insist on their freedom in Christ) relate

to each other.

Paul’s instruction focuses on the role of the strong. It is likely that the Gentile Christians, still holding the majority, were being insensitive to the Jewish believers and thus causing them to stumble. This emphasis on the strong is seen in a number of texts. In 14:1 he commands the congregation to “welcome” the one “who is weak in faith.” In 14:13 he urges them “never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another.” He then gives an example of a strong brother causing a weak brother to stumble: “For if your [weak] brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love” (14:15). Again he writes, “Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats” (14:20). Lastly, Paul concludes, “We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves” (15:1). So it is clear that although Paul sometimes exhorts both the weak and the strong (14:3, 10), his main task is to encourage the strong to be loving and considerate of those who are weaker in their faith.

Paul’s teaching about the weak and the strong is important because these groups always exist in the church. Paul gives us necessary instruction about how we are to view our freedom in Christ. He teaches us that sometimes we need to be flexible with our convictions (in the realm of *adiaphora*) and yield to the practices of others.

We have been seeking to demonstrate that part of the reason that Romans is the greatest letter ever written is due to its practical nature. Paul does not leave us at theology but builds on that theology giving us practical instructions as to how we ought to live in view of God’s mercy. Paul



deals with many more practical issues than those mentioned in chapters 12-15. He speaks on homosexuality (1:26-27), fighting against sin (6:12-14), freedom from the law (7:1-25), walking in the Spirit (8:1-27), and evangelism and mission (10:14-21; 15:14-33).

## Conclusion

Christians believe that Romans is no ordinary letter written by an ordinary man. Rather, we believe that God used the life and personality of the Apostle Paul so that the words that he wrote are the inspired, infallible words of God. Although Romans was written nearly 2,000 years ago, it is still read by millions of Christians and is the focus of countless sermons. No other letter in the history of the world has received as much attention or has been given as much consideration as Paul's letter to the church at Rome. For example, Martin Lloyd-Jones preached verse-by-verse through the book of Romans at Westminster Chapel, London, on Friday evenings for thirteen years (1955-68). In his very first sermon at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Donald Grey Barnhouse began preaching through the book of Romans. For three and one half years he preached Romans week-by-week without ever preaching a sermon outside of Romans. What effect did this type of preaching have on the congregation? Barnhouse comments, "I saw the church transformed."<sup>30</sup> Twenty years later he decided to preach through Romans once again—this time at a much slower pace. The first chapter alone took twenty-seven Sundays. John Piper preached more than 200 sermons in his Romans series that spanned more than eight years (1998-2006). Rick Warren preached a thirty-six

week series to his congregation at Saddleback during the mid-week service. He writes, "I believe this is one of the greatest Bible studies I've taken our church through over the years."<sup>31</sup> The power of Romans will never diminish because the God of Romans will never diminish. Paul's letter to the church at Rome is the greatest letter ever written because of its great impact in history, its grand theology about Christ, and its practical instructions for Christian living.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>John Dillenberger, ed., *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings* (New York: Anchor, 1962), 19.

<sup>2</sup>John Calvin, *Epistle to the Romans*, in *Calvin's Commentaries* (22 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), xxix.

<sup>3</sup>William Tyndale, "A Prologue upon the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans," n.p. [cited 9 July 2007]. Online: <http://www.williamtyndale.com/0romans.htm>.

<sup>4</sup>Samuel Taylor Colridge, *Table Talk* (Oxford: Oxford University, n.d.), 232.

<sup>5</sup>John Knox, "Romans: Introduction," in *The Interpreter's Bible*, (12 vols.; ed. George Arthur Buttrick; New York: Abingdon, 1954), 9:355.

<sup>6</sup>John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1994), 19.

<sup>7</sup>R. C. Sproul, *Romans* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 1994), 9.

<sup>8</sup>Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 1.

<sup>9</sup>Aurelius Augustine, *Confessions* (trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin; New York: Penguin Books, 1961), 175.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>12</sup>All Scripture citations are taken from the English Standard Version.

<sup>13</sup>Augustine, *Confessions*, 178.

<sup>14</sup>Colin Brown, *Christianity & Western Thought: A History of Philosophers, Ideas & Movements* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), 93, 95.

<sup>15</sup>Dillenberger, *Luther*, 10-11.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 11-12.

<sup>18</sup>Morris, *Romans*, 1.

<sup>19</sup>Nehemiah Curnock, ed., *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley* (8 vols.; London: Robert Culley, n.d.), 1:475-76 (from the entry for May 24, 1738).

<sup>20</sup>For the importance of framing brackets in determining a letter's purpose, see Ann Jervis, *The Purpose of Romans: A Comparative Letter Structure Investigation* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1991).

<sup>21</sup>C. E. B. Cranfeld, *Romans: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1985), 68.

<sup>22</sup>D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapters 3.20-4.25, Atonement and Justification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 65.

<sup>23</sup>Morris, *Romans*, 173.

<sup>24</sup>John Piper, "The Demonstration of God's Righteousness, Part 3," n.p. [cited 9 July 2007]. Online: [http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/1999/1080\\_The\\_Demonstration\\_of\\_Gods\\_Righteousness\\_Part\\_3/](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/1999/1080_The_Demonstration_of_Gods_Righteousness_Part_3/) (preached May 23, 1999).

<sup>25</sup>Steve Chalke, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 182-83.

<sup>26</sup>Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 97. C. S. Lewis also downplayed, if not outrightly rejected, the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement of Christ. In his *Mere Christianity* he writes, "According

to that theory God wanted to punish men for having deserted and joined the Great Rebel, but Christ volunteered to be punished instead, and so God let us off. Now I admit that even this theory does not seem to me quite so immoral and so silly as it used to" (C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* [London: Fontana Books, 1961], 53). He continues, "The [theory of the atonement] most people have heard is...the one about our being let off because Christ had volunteered to bear a punishment instead of us. Now on the face of it that is a very silly theory. If God was prepared to let us off, why on earth did He not do so? And what possible point could there be in punishing an innocent person instead? None at all that I can see." (55).

<sup>27</sup>D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 186.

<sup>28</sup>Dillenberger, *Luther*, 34.

<sup>29</sup>Suetonius, *Life of Claudius* 25.4.

<sup>30</sup>Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Exposition of Bible Doctrines: Taking the Epistle to Romans as a Point of Departure* (10 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 1:iii.

<sup>31</sup>Rick Warren, "Grace: The Truth That Transforms. A Verse-by-Verse Study Through Romans," n.p. [cited 9 July 2007]. Online: <http://www.pastors.com/en-US/BibleStudies/Romans.htm>.