

ST. ANDREW'S EXPOSITIONAL COMMENTARY

ROMANS

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Romans

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PREFACE

On the first page of Romans in my Greek testament, I have scribbled at the top of the page a few significant dates. The first one is the year AD 386. In the latter part of the fourth century lived a young man whose father was a pagan and whose mother was a devout Christian. This young man had devoted himself to immorality. He had already sired one illegitimate son, yet his mother continued to pray for his soul and sought the counsel of her pastor, Bishop Ambrose of Milan.

This young man was pacing one day in a garden where a copy of the New Testament was chained to a lectern. As he was walking, he overheard children playing in the grass, singing a refrain to one of their childhood games: *Tolle lege, tolle lege*, which means “take up and read.” So this young man, whose name was Aurelius Augustine, went to the Scriptures that were there. He allowed the volume of sacred writ to fall open where it would, and in the providence of God it fell open to Romans 13. Augustine’s eyes fell on this passage:

And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts. (Rom. 13:11–14)

As Augustine read these words, the Spirit of God took them and pierced between joint and sinew, bone and marrow, to the very depths of this young

man's soul. By the power of the Word of God with the Spirit attending it, Augustine was converted to the Christian faith, and we know him today as Saint Augustine of Hippo.

Later in church history, in 1515, an Augustinian monk who had diligently pursued his doctoral studies in the works of Augustine was consigned to a university to be the professor of biblical studies. He had already delivered his first series of lectures on the book of Psalms, and now his task was to teach his students the book of Romans. As he was preparing his lectures on Romans and studying this epistle's first chapter, he found a notation from an ancient manuscript of Augustine defining the righteousness of Christ. Augustine said that when Paul speaks of the righteousness of God in Romans 1, it is not the righteousness by which God himself is righteous, but the righteousness that he freely gives to those who put their trust in Christ. For the first time in his life, Martin Luther, whose conscience had been wounded by the burden of the law of God that daily exposed his relentless guilt, understood the gospel of Christ. The doors of paradise swung open and he walked through, and it was from Paul's teaching on the doctrine of justification by faith alone that Luther stood against the whole world in the sixteenth-century Reformation.

Another date I have scribbled in my Greek testament is the year 1738, when a man who was already ordained to the ministry in the Anglican church in England was listening to a message being delivered outside in London at Aldersgate. He mentioned later that as he was listening to the words of Romans, he felt his heart was strangely warmed. He said that was the moment of his authentic conversion, and it defined the life and ministry of John Wesley for the rest of his days.

I could mention the impact of Romans on John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, and a host of others throughout church history, but as we come to it now, I simply remind you that God has richly blessed those who have devoted themselves to the study of this book.

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THE GOSPEL

Romans 1:8–17



First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of His Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers, making request if, by some means, now at last I may find a way in the will of God to come to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift, so that you may be established—that is, that I may be encouraged together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me. Now I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that I often planned to come to you (but was hindered until now), that I might have some fruit among you also, just as among the other Gentiles. I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise. So, as much as is in me, I am ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also. For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “The just shall live by faith.”

Paul continues his greetings and opening comments to the church at Rome with a thankful heart: **I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout**

the whole world (v. 8). The word Paul uses for “thanks” is *eucharisto*, from which the church gets the term *Eucharist*. The word was used to describe the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. A profound spirit of thanksgiving lay at the heart of the Supper in the primitive Christian church, thanksgiving for what God had wrought in the work of Jesus Christ.

Paul conjoins the words *universe* and *cosmos* to say that the Roman Christians’ reputation for faith has been broadcast throughout the cosmos, or universe. In a sense Paul is using hyperbole, but it is important to pause and pay attention to his use of the term *world*, one of many times in the Bible, particularly in the New Testament, where it occurs. When we think of the world, we typically have in mind the entire planet. We think of the continents and all the people who live in far-off places. However, when first-century people spoke of the world, they were speaking of the known world, which, in their case, was the Mediterranean world. Therefore, Paul is expressing joy that people throughout the Mediterranean world are talking about the faith of the Roman Christians; their faith had made an impact.

Paul’s Vow

Paul follows this note of thanksgiving by swearing a vow—**for God is my witness** (v. 9). The fact that Paul swears a vow seems somewhat unusual. Jesus said:

Do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God’s throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No.’ For whatever is more than these is from the evil one. (Matt. 5:34–37)

Similar instruction is found in the epistle of James: “Above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath. But let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No,’ lest you fall into judgment” (James 5:12).

Some have concluded from these statements that there are never situations in which it is appropriate to take oaths or vows, yet the Westminster Confession of Faith contains a chapter titled, “Lawful Oaths and Vows.” The Confession rehearses situations in which it is legitimate, and indeed delightful to God, for people to enter into covenant relationships and swear solemn oaths and vows. Such vows are exchanged when we contract marriages and when we join a church. The Bible shows us that there are appropriate times for the taking of oaths. From time to time the apostles swore

an oath to guarantee the trustworthiness of what they were saying, just as we do in a courtroom when we say, “I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God.” Paul does that here. He is eager that the recipients of his epistle understand the depth of passion he feels in his grateful heart for the remembrance that is being published throughout the known world concerning their faith, and he demonstrates his eagerness by swearing a vow. We will see later that this is not the only time in the epistle that the apostle takes such a vow to guarantee the truth of what he is saying.

For God is my witness, **whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of His Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers, making request if, by some means, now at last I may find a way in the will of God to come to you** (vv. 9–10). The basic purpose of Paul’s vow is to assure the Roman Christians that his desire to come visit them is not casual. He has made mention of them constantly in his prayers, and he has been hoping and planning that somehow, through the will of God, he will make it to Rome. He had no idea when he wrote those words that the manner in which he would finally make it to Rome would be in chains as a prisoner of the Roman government.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ

We noted in our last study that Paul identifies himself as one separated as an apostle and called by God to preach the gospel. I said that the phrase “the gospel of God” did not mean the gospel *about* God but, rather, the gospel that is *the possession* of God. God owns that gospel. He is the one who invented the gospel and commissioned Paul to teach it. The gospel did not originate with Paul; it originated with God. Here, Paul uses the same structure to refer not to the gospel of God but to the gospel of God’s Son, Jesus Christ. The gospel is the possession of Jesus, but, even more, Jesus is the heart of the content of the gospel.

We use it so glibly in the church today. Preachers say they preach the gospel, but if we listen to them preach Sunday after Sunday, we hear very little gospel in what they are preaching. The term *gospel* has become a nickname for preaching anything rather than something with definitive content. The word for “gospel” is the word *euangelion*. It has that prefix *eu-*, which comes into English in a variety of words. We talk about euphonics or euphonious music, which refers to something that sounds good. We talk about a eulogy, which is a good word pronounced about someone at his funeral service. The prefix *eu-* refers to something good or pleasant. The word *angelos* or *angelion*

is the word for “message.” Angels are messengers, and an *angelos* is one who delivers a message.

This word *euangelion*, which means “good message” or “good news,” has a rich background in the Old Testament. There, the basic meaning of the term *gospel* was simply an announcement of a good message. If a doctor came to examine a sick person and afterward declared that the problem was nothing serious, that was gospel or good news. In ancient days when soldiers went out to battle, people waited breathlessly for a report from the battlefield about the outcome. Once the outcome was known, marathon runners dashed back to give the report. That is why Isaiah wrote, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news” (Isa. 52:7). The watchman in the watchtower would look as far as the eye could see into the distance. Finally, he would see the dust moving as the runner sped back to the city to give the report of the battle. The watchmen were trained to tell by the way the runner’s legs were churning whether the news was good or bad. If the runner was doing the survival shuffle, it indicated a grim report, but if his legs were flying and the dust was kicking up, that meant good news. That is the concept of *gospel* in its most rudimentary sense.

When we come to the New Testament, we find three distinct ways in which the term *gospel* is used. First, we have four books in the New Testament that we call Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These books are biographical portraits of Jesus. *Gospel* in this sense describes a particular form of literature. During the earthly ministry of Jesus, the term *gospel* was linked not particularly with the person of Jesus but with the kingdom of God. John the Baptist is introduced as one who comes preaching the gospel, and his message is “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Matt. 3:2). Jesus did the same in his parables, proclaiming, “the kingdom of God is like . . .” On the lips of Jesus, the gospel was about the dramatic moment in history when, through the long-awaited Messiah, the kingdom of God had broken through in time and space. The good news was the good news of the kingdom. By the time the epistles were written, particularly the Pauline epistles, the term *gospel* had taken on a new shade of understanding. It had become the gospel of Jesus Christ. *Gospel* had a clear content to it. At the heart of this gospel was the announcement of who Jesus was and what he had accomplished in his lifetime.

If we give our testimony to our neighbors, saying, “I became a Christian last year. I gave my heart to Jesus,” we are bearing witness about Jesus, but we are not telling them the gospel, because the gospel is not about us. The gospel is about Jesus—what he did, his life of perfect obedience, his atoning

death on the cross, his resurrection from the dead, his ascension into heaven, and his outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the church. We call those crucial elements the *objective aspects* of the New Testament gospel of Christ.

In addition to the person and work of Jesus, there is also in the New Testament use of the term *gospel* the question of how the benefits accomplished by the objective work of Jesus are subjectively appropriated to the believer. First, there is the question of who Jesus was and what he did. Second is the question of how that benefits you and me. That is why Paul conjoins the objective account of the person and work of Jesus (particularly to the Galatians) with the doctrine of justification by faith alone, which is essential to the gospel. In preaching the gospel we preach about Jesus, and we preach about how we are brought into a saving relationship with him.

The gospel is under attack in the church today. I cannot stress enough how important it is to get the gospel right and to understand both the objective aspect of the person and work of Jesus and the subjective dimension of how we benefit from that by faith alone.

Recently, a Protestant seminary professor, supposedly evangelical, was quoted to me as having said that the doctrine of imputation—by which our sins are transferred to Christ on the cross and his righteousness is transferred to us by faith—is of human invention and has nothing to do with the gospel. I wanted to weep when I heard that. It just underscored how delicate the preservation of the gospel is in our day and how careful the church has to be in every age to guard that precious good news that comes to us from God.

Paul's Longing

Paul has a deep yearning, a passion in his soul, to meet the Roman Christians face-to-face: **that I may impart to you some spiritual gift, so that you may be established** (v. 11). Paul is not referring to starting out in the Christian faith but to becoming confirmed, built up, and edified in it. Nor is he writing about charismatic gifts here but about establishing believers in confidence and maturity in their faith. This is why Paul wrote the letter to the Romans, and it is why, in the providence of God, his letter is given to us—that the faith that has taken root in our souls may be established so that we may grow to maturity and full conformity to the image of Christ.

Paul adds this reason to his desire to visit them: **that I may be encouraged together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me** (v. 12). He makes that comment in passing, so I do not want to labor it, but I do want to mention that Paul was such a tremendous pastor, as well as a theologian, a missionary, and an evangelist, because his heart was involved.

When he wrote to the church at Corinth recalling the experiences he had shared with the Corinthian Christians, he mentioned specifically that he had been with them in their trials and afflictions (1 Cor. 2:3). Paul did not just preach at or to people. He longed to be with the Roman Christians, not just so that he could encourage them but so that they could encourage him.

Every pastor needs to be encouraged. So often, the work of the pastorate in our day is an exercise in discouragement. The pastor is fair game for all criticism, and every Sunday afternoon people have roast pastor for dinner. When a pastor stands at the door at the end of the service and speaks to fifty people, forty-nine will say, "Thank you, pastor, for bringing the Word of God to us today. It ministered to me, and I appreciate that message I heard this morning." However, there is one who says, "I cannot believe that awful sermon you preached this morning." When the pastor goes home, is he going to remember the forty-nine words of encouragement or the one word of discouragement? If other pastors are like me, that one remark will eat away at them for the rest of the day. That is why pastors have to be encouraged. Paul needed that kind of encouragement.

Now I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that I often planned to come to you (but was hindered until now), that I might have some fruit among you also, just as among the other Gentiles (v. 13). Paul refers to the Roman Christians as "Gentiles." I am sure there were Jewish converts mixed in among the Gentiles there, but the Christian Jews had been kicked out of Rome by the Emperor Claudius a short time before this epistle was written, and Gentiles were primarily the ones left.

I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise (v. 14). He does not say he is a debtor to the Jew and the Greek but to the Greek and the barbarian. The Greeks were the highly cultured, civilized, intellectual elite of the ancient culture as distinguished from the rest of the Gentiles, who were pagan barbarians. Paul is in debt both to the high-minded Greek and to the barbarian, but he is not talking about a pecuniary obligation or debt; he does not owe them money. Paul is writing about a moral debt. He is burdened by an obligation that accompanied his office as an apostle.

He had been set apart as the apostle to the Gentiles, and he spends his life discharging that obligation. Ultimately, the debt Paul owes is owed to God and to Christ, but he transfers that indebtedness, that obligation, to the people who need to hear the gospel. To Paul's way of thinking, so long as he is alive he cannot pay that debt because he owes his life to every person he meets. Someone said to me, "R. C., I want you to know that I

have decided to dedicate the rest of my life to serving Jesus.” I have heard that many times from people, but it never gets stale. Such fervency of soul should be the heartbeat of every believer. Once again Paul reaches down into his soul to speak of the depth of his passion: **as much as is in me, I am ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also** (v. 15). Paul is saying, “Every fiber of my being is ready to preach the gospel to you. I cannot wait to get there.”

Unashamed

It should be for the pastor as it was for Paul: **for I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ** (v. 16). If we think our culture is hostile to the gospel, the first-century culture Paul lived in was much more so. Yet Paul was not ashamed of the gospel; he gloried in it. “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord” (2 Cor. 10:17 NIV). Paul enjoyed nothing more than being known as a Christian. He had no shame.

Jesus warned us that if we are ashamed of him before men, he will be ashamed of us before his Father (Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26). That is the real crunch for many Christians. They want to be Secret Service Christians. They do not want to be known as “holier than thou.” They know that if they say one word to their friends about Christ, they will be accused of trying to shove the gospel down their throats. If we get rebuffed enough times, pretty soon we find ourselves tempted to be embarrassed about our faith, but not the apostle. He could not wait to get to Rome because he was not ashamed of the gospel. The gospel is **the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek** (v. 16). This word *power* is the Greek word *dunamos*, from which we get the word *dynamite*. The power of the gospel is, literally, dynamite.

Martin Luther preached his last sermon on February 15, 1546, in his hometown of Eisleben, Germany. Luther had been summoned from Wittenberg, where he was a professor, to his hometown. A serious rift had developed between two nobles, and the townsmen hoped that if Luther came and mediated the dispute peace would come back to the city. Luther agreed to make the arduous journey to Eisleben, where he preached the sermon two days before his death. In that sermon Luther expressed concern about the gospel. He had warned people on prior occasions that any time the gospel is preached accurately and passionately, it will bring conflict, and since people flee from conflict, every generation will tend to water down or hide the gospel, allowing it to be eclipsed by darkness as it had been for centuries

before the Reformation. At the time of Luther's death such an eclipse was already occurring in Germany.

Luther said that in times past, people would run to the ends of the world had they known of a place where they could hear God speak. Now that we hear and read God's Word every day, this does not happen. We hear the gospel in our homes, where father, mother, and children sing and speak of it. The preacher speaks of it in the parish church. We ought to lift up our hands and rejoice that we have been given the honor of hearing God speak to us through his Word. People say, "There is preaching every day, often many times every day, so that we soon grow weary of it. What do we get out of it? I go to church, but I don't get much out of it." The people who teach us how to grow churches tell us we have to be sensitive to what people want. We have to scratch people where they itch, or they will not come back. We are told that we have to cast our sermons and messages not on the basis of what the Word of God declares but on the felt needs of the people. That is not what people need. God's priority is that people understand his holy character. People may not feel their need of that, but there is nothing they need more than to have their minds exploded in their understanding of who God is. God forbid that we listen to Madison Avenue and those who tell us to become hucksters, which is what Luther was complaining about.

Luther said, "If you do not want God to speak to you every day in your house and in your parish church, then be wise. Look for something else. In Trier is our Lord God's coat; in Aachen are Joseph's britches and our Blessed Lady's chemise. Go there and squander your money; buy indulgences and the pope's second-hand junk." Luther said the people were crazy, blinded, and possessed by the Devil:

There sits that decoy duck in Rome with his bag of tricks, luring to himself the whole world with its money and goods, and all the while anybody can go to baptism, the sacrament, and the preaching desk. But the people say, "What, baptism? The Lord's Supper? God's Word? Joseph's britches—that's what does it!"

In their madness people were going all over Germany to find the nearest collection of relics: a piece of straw from the crib of Jesus; milk from the breast of his mother, Mary; or part of the beard of John the Baptist. That is what the church was selling. Why did people buy it? What do people want today when they go to someone who promises healing and who slays them in the Spirit? They are looking for power. They want a powerful Christian

experience. They want power to manipulate their environment, which is the great goal of the New Age movement.

Only one is omnipotent, and he is the Lord God, and the Lord God has power to spare. He does not need Joseph's pants. He does not even need the gospel, yet it has pleased the Lord God omnipotent to invest his power there. Power is not found in Joseph's pants or in the preacher's ability to slay somebody in the Spirit. God's power is invested in the gospel. God has promised that his Word will not return to him void (Isa. 55:11). The foolishness of preaching is the method God has chosen to save the world. That is why Paul said he was not ashamed. He wanted to preach the gospel because it is the power of God to salvation. It is not the power of the preacher's eloquence or the power of the preacher's education; it is the power of God.

Martin Luther's Text

We need the power of God to salvation, **for in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live by faith"** (v. 17). In the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith. I mentioned in the preface that this was the verse the Holy Spirit used to awaken Luther as he was preparing his lectures on the book of Romans. He glanced at a manuscript from Augustine and found where Augustine said that the righteousness here is not God's righteousness but that which he provides for people, who do not have any righteousness. It is the righteousness he makes available by free grace to all who believe. Luther called it "alien righteousness." This righteousness is not our own; it is Jesus' righteousness.

Luther sought every means he knew within the confines of the monastery to satisfy the demands of God's law, yet he had no peace. Luther was an expert in the law of God, and every day he was in terror as he looked in the mirror of the law and examined his life against God's righteousness. We are not in terror, because we have blocked out the view of God's righteousness. We judge ourselves on a curve, measuring ourselves against others. We never judge ourselves according to the standard of God's perfection. If we did, we would be tormented like Martin Luther was in the monastery. When Luther finally saw the doors of paradise swing open, he walked through, which is why he stood against kings and officials of the church. He refused to compromise. Once he had tasted the gospel of Jesus Christ and had been delivered from the pangs and torment of the law, nobody could take it from him.

I understand the sense of liberation that Luther experienced from reading that text. It is the thematic verse for the epistle. Everything that comes after

it will be an explanation of this one line: “For in it the righteousness of God . . .” The Greek word *dikaïosune* is the word used in the New Testament for “justification.” We are going to see that word again and again as we pour over this letter to the Romans.

The Life of Faith

“The just shall live by faith”—that phrase, which comes from the Old Testament book of the prophet Habakkuk, is quoted three times in the New Testament: here in Romans 1:17, in Galatians 3:11, and in Hebrews 10:38. In its original context, Habakkuk was deeply distressed. The people of God were being invaded by pagans, the pagans were triumphing, and Habakkuk was confused. He asked:

You are of purer eyes than to behold evil,
And cannot look on wickedness.
Why do You look on those who deal treacherously,
And hold Your tongue when the wicked devours
A person more righteous than he? (Hab. 1:13)

Then Habakkuk stood in his watchtower and set himself on the rampart, waiting to see what God would say to him. The Lord answered:

Write the vision
And make it plain on tablets,
That he may run who reads it.
For the vision is yet for an appointed time;
But at the end it will speak, and it will not lie.
Though it tarries, wait for it. (2:2–3)

Do you ever feel tension because the promises of God do not show up when you want them to? You cry and say, “God, where are you in this?” That was the complaint of Habakkuk, and yet the God we worship is a promise-keeping God. He tells Habakkuk to be patient

Because it will surely come,
It will not tarry.
Behold the proud,
His Soul is not upright in Him;
But the just shall live by his faith. (2:3–4)

One who lives by faith is a righteous person in the sight of God. The righteous live by trust. When Jesus was in the Judean wilderness under the unbridled assault of Satan, lonely and hungry, Satan told him to take stones and make them bread. Jesus said he would not do that: “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’” (Matt. 4:4). Anybody can believe *in* God. What it means to be a Christian is to trust him when he speaks, which does not require a leap of faith or a crucifixion of the intellect. It requires a crucifixion of pride, because no one is more trustworthy than God.

When we do not trust God, it is because we transfer to him our own corrupt qualities, but God does not have any of those corrupt qualities. You can trust him with your life, and that is the theme of this epistle—the just shall live by faith—and from that vantage point, Paul opens up the depths and the riches of the whole gospel for the people of God.