

ROMANS

MOMENTOUS NEWS

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In these verses, Paul introduces himself, his message and his readers.

The letter begins starkly: 'Paul, servant.' A servant was without rights in the ancient world; a servant's marriage and family were not recognised; a servant's death went uninvestigated. To be a servant was a terrible thing.

However, Paul uses the title as a badge of honour, for he is Jesus Christ's slave. To be the slave of Jesus Christ was liberating.

Note that Paul's description of himself in verses 1 and 5 is a description of how he has been shaped and affirmed by the gospel.

In verses 2-4, Paul describes his message. The gospel is all about Jesus. In verse 3, Jesus' humanity is real, not imagined. In verse 4, Jesus' deity is confirmed by His bodily resurrection. The gospel is all about 'Jesus Christ our Lord'.

In verses 6-7, Paul describes his readers. Again, he describes them according to the gospel's work in them. In verse 6, they are 'called'. In verse 7, they are 'loved by God', and 'saints'.

In verse 7, Paul changes the traditional greeting 'joy and prosperity' to the more gospel-focused 'grace and peace'.

In these introductory verses note:

1. Paul describes the Scriptures (v 2), the Spirit (v 4) and God's people (v 7) as 'holy'.
2. Here, as in the rest of the New Testament, 'saints' is always in the plural. The word is derived from the word 'holy' and means 'set apart, separate'.
3. Paul forms his self-image, and the way he sees others, from the gospel. Here, according to JI Packer in *Knowing God*, is our identity: 'I am a child of God, God is my Father, heaven is my home, every day is one day nearer, my Saviour is my brother, every Christian is my brother, too.' It is an identity shaped by the gospel.

REFLECTION

How carefully do you form your self-image around the gospel's affirmation of you? Are you determined to see and treat others as God sees them? What difference will this make to your relationships?

Paul planted significant churches within the Roman Empire – at Thessalonica, Corinth and Ephesus – but he did not plant the church at the centre, Rome.

He had not met the church at Rome. Yet we see his real interest in the progress of these ‘brothers’. Paul gives thanks for them (v 8). He prays for them as if they were his responsibility (vv 9-10). He is a man of generous spirit. He is not given to parochial interests. If God is at work, Paul prays for and supports the work. What a model he is in ministry in contrast to other examples of professional jealousy and territorial insecurity. Paul’s attitude provides a necessary corrective.

How often are our sharp criticisms of other ministries simply a thin veneer for envy?

Whether God does His work through Paul or not, Paul rejoices that God’s work is being done. He gives thanks. He prays in particular that a ‘way may be opened’ (v 10) so that he might come to them.

Paul wants the work to continue growing and he wants to impart some spiritual emphasis (v 11) – probably the gospel – so they will be strengthened.

Paul, however, is not coming as a superior. Verse 12 makes it clear that he

expects there will be mutual blessing in the visit – note the emphasis ‘you and I’, ‘mutual’ and ‘each other’ (v 12).

There is no aura of detached self-sufficiency about Paul. Some were alleging that he had not visited them because he was not interested. He corrects that in verse 13. His desire is for a harvest in Rome among the Gentiles because he is the apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15). It is apparent that, as well as being a great theologian, Paul was a passionate missionary and evangelist.

REFLECTION

Reflect on Paul’s generosity of spirit and his enthusiastic support of gospel work. Are you challenged by his attitude and his activities towards a people he had never met?

John Wesley said that parochialism has always been the enemy of the gospel. In what ways does parochialism creep into your thinking?

Paul concludes the introduction to his letter with three 'I am' statements in verses 14, 15 and 16.

First (v 14), he says 'I am bound'. He is bound (literally, indebted) to 'Greeks and non-Greeks' – that is, to all culture – and to 'the wise and the foolish' – that is, to all classes within those cultures.

What was the source of this obligation? It came from God's grace to Paul. Once, he was the persecutor of the church. Now, he is Christ's apostle. Such grace rendered Paul a debtor to all people.

There is no sense in which grace can be earned. But receiving it so freely puts us under obligation to all. Paul probably felt more at home with people from a similar background to himself, but his sense of obligation extended to everybody without discrimination.

That is why he says (v 15) 'I am so eager'. This is a rare word in the New Testament. It means, literally, to be single-minded. Such a mind is the essence of maturity. See, for example, in Philippians 3:15 where maturity refers to the eagerness of mind expressed in the two preceding verses. Contrast that with the immaturity which Ephesians 4:14 describes as 'being tossed back and forth', as moving from one novelty to the next. FF Bruce says of Paul, 'He strikes us as a man possessed of an uncommon strength of will', such is his eagerness to preach the gospel in Rome.

Finally (v 16), he says 'I am not ashamed'. Far from being ashamed of the gospel, Paul is ready to share its message because it is the power of God to bring people to salvation. Its scope is 'everyone'. It is received by faith. Works do not earn it.

Paul longs to come to Nero's Rome as an ambassador of this gospel, with a conviction about this gospel. He will not come with a large entourage. He will not come with conventional weaponry. He will come with a message. It is a message about a crucified Jew. In Nero's Rome, this message must have seemed laughable, yet the historian, TR Glover, said that the day would come when men would call their dogs 'Nero' and their sons 'Paul'.

REFLECTION

How has your experience of God's grace led you to recognise your obligations? How does your sense of indebtedness show itself in your giving, your praying and your activities? Does being unashamed of the gospel lead you to share it with others?

Most commentators agree that verses 16 and 17 constitute the theme of the letter.

Verse 17 tells us that the gospel reveals ‘a righteousness from God’. Righteousness is normally used to speak of a relationship that is right. Paul may be speaking here of the righteous character of God – that God is just. When the gospel is preached, it reveals God’s justice and yet, at the same time, it reveals how sinful humans can have a right relationship with Him.

Paul makes it clear that this relationship is by faith as distinct from being earned. He quotes Habakkuk 2:4, that those who are righteous are righteous simply by faith – by trusting God.

Martin Luther, the 16th century Augustinian monk, was haunted by God’s righteousness and by his own sin. He tried every means the church offered in his quest for peace with God. ‘I greatly longed to understand Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, ‘the justice of God’, because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience ... Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by

which, through grace and sheer mercy, God justifies us through faith. Then I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise.’

Luther went on to lecture on Romans and to write a commentary on it. It was on hearing a public reading of the introduction to Luther’s commentary that John Wesley felt his heart ‘strangely warmed’ and was converted.

Here is a truth that has changed the course of history, a righteousness coming to us by grace, through faith, based on the finished work of Jesus Christ. This is what the gospel and ‘the righteousness from God’ is all about.

REFLECTION

What does it mean in your life each day to enjoy a right relationship with God, not because it has been earned or through merit, or even because of faith – but all because of Jesus? Why do you think seeking to win God’s favour by religious activity is both impossible and unnecessary?

Good news, bad news! Paul gives us the bad news first. (In fact, the bad news doesn't conclude until 3:21.)

God's wrath is the bad news. The reason for His wrath is people's godlessness and wickedness, as seen in their suppression of the truth (v 18). The truth is suppressed because of a determined, rebellious will. Verses 19-20 tell us that people know about God's power and deity by observation of the created order. Rather, people deliberately suppress the truth about God by exchanging the truth and glory of God for the lie of idolatry (vv 23, 25). The truth is suppressed because of a determined will.

The proper response to God is to glorify Him and to give Him thanks (v 21). Instead, people worship and serve created things as though those things were the creator (v 25).

What is the nature of God's wrath? Verses 24, 26 and 28 say that God 'gave them over'. God leaves humanity to live with the fruit of its choice. This fruit comprises of general uncleanness (v 24), shameful lusts and perverse sexual activity (vv 26-27), and living contrary to God's standard (vv 28-32). Such a lifestyle becomes, therefore, the judgement of God. It is ironic that our society describes as 'gay' a lifestyle characterised by a desperate search for the fulfilment of lusts which ought

never, and will never, be satisfied.

God 'gave them over'. How different is His judgement on Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5) which is swift and obvious, removing their hypocrisy from the church. This 'giving over' is a less obvious and more passive form of wrath. It allows sin to meander on through the life of the church and it makes life hard for God's people.

Yet mercifully, an opportunity for repentance and salvation is provided.

REFLECTION

How often do we get sidetracked by the symptoms rather than looking for the root cause as to why the world is the way it is?

According to the logic of these verses, people act the way they do (vv 24 -32) because of a theological infection: they suppress the truth of God in favour of idols (vv 18, 23, 25). The appropriate antibiotic for such an infection is theological – only the gospel provides the cure. What are the implications of this truth?

In these verses, Paul shifts attention from the pagan idolater to the good living moralist. He shows that passing judgement on others does not exempt a person from God's wrath (vv 1-3). Passing judgement is mentioned five times.

God is generally kind, tolerant and patient. Yet, if the moralist interprets this as approval of his or her lifestyle, that attitude builds up cardiac sclerosis, a hardening of the heart (v 5). God's kindness and patience are designed to lead the unrepentant to repentance (v 4). Peter echoes this thought (2 Peter 3:9).

The Lord also makes it clear (Luke 13:1-5) that calamities remind us we are living in rebellion against God in a post-Garden of Eden environment. Calamities, too, are designed to lead us to repentance.

Thus, God speaks one message to the world: when things are good, repent; when things are disastrously bad, repent.

Repentance involves a complete change of attitude and action. It means turning away from rebelling against, or ignoring, God's claim upon us; and instead recognising that claim and, in reverence, serving Him.

This is precisely what the self-righteous moralist does not do. He or she has nothing to repent about. He or she is storing up God's wrath for the day it

will be revealed (v 5). We are lost because God's justice dispenses punishment on the basis of our sinful acts.

Verses 7-11 are the most difficult verses of the letter. This is because they appear to contradict its central message: that we are justified, not by works, but through faith. But Paul does not contradict himself. Neither does he speak hypothetically.

Paul is clear that God does not have one standard for the Jew and a different one for the Gentile. God does not play favourites (v 11). Paul gives the following affirmation. Judgement is based on works, it is universal, and it is individual. There is one standard and only one. God will not be fooled by the hypocritical judgements made by self-righteous people on others. God will not be swayed by our moralising, or by our condemnation of others. God is interested in what we do (v 6) as the key to what we are.

REFLECTION

Where do you stand in the light of moral judgement of others? Do you think too highly of yourself? At the end of Chapter 1, did you think that you would never do the things listed there?

Although Paul doesn't mention the legalistic Jew specifically until 2:17, he probably has such a person in mind from 2:1 as he addresses the hypocritical, self-righteous attitude of the moralist.

God does not show favouritism (v 11). When judgement comes, it will be impartial (v 6). In these verses, Paul echoes Peter's conviction at the time of Cornelius' conversion as to God's impartiality (Acts 10:34-35). Paul stresses God's impartiality in verses 9-10 with his repetition of Jew and Gentile.

So, those whose hearts are set for glory, honour and immortality (v 7) will be given eternal life, whether they are Jew or non-Jew. Similarly, those who live for self, reject truth and follow evil, will know wrath, trouble and distress (v 9).

In verses 12-16, Paul shows that God will judge people not only by their actions. They will also be accountable according to the truth they possessed. All people (Jew or non-Jew) know something of God (1:19-20) and therefore all people have a sense of right and wrong. Such truth as people possess will provide their definition of sin. People will be judged for sin, either sin as defined by Moses' law or sin as defined by conscience. Paul shows that an inner morality is evident in the Gentiles who, without having Moses' law, often do naturally the

things required by that law (vv 14-15). At judgement day (as Paul indicated in verse 16), their thoughts will accuse and excuse them when they realise it was God's law they were disobeying and obeying.

Remember, Paul is showing here how people are lost, not how they are saved. We will be judged by what we do in the light of what we know, whether it is Moses' law (as in the case of the Jew) or the law of conscience (as in the case of the Gentile). Universally, we will be found to be sinners who have acted contrary to the standard we possess.

Only the gospel, which Paul comes to in 3:21, will be able to give relief to all of us who are under the threat of God's wrath because of our sin.

REFLECTION

There are those who say that the pagan is better off without the gospel – let the pagan stand before God to be judged in the light of what he or she knew, for if the pagan hears and rejects the gospel, he or she will be condemned for that. Do you agree?

What part are you playing in seeing the gospel taken to the world? How does it affect the way you give, pray and live?

While the Jew has not been excluded to this point, Paul now has the Jew specifically in mind.

Jews were entrusted by God with the law. Yet Paul makes it clear that mere possession of the law does not qualify one to be a guide, a light, an instructor or a teacher (vv 19-20). If the law is not lived, God is dishonoured (vv 21-23). Verse 24 is heavy in its condemnation that the Gentiles blaspheme God's character because of the lawless lives of the Jews, God's people.

Paul now turns from the law to the issue of circumcision and its inner, spiritual meaning. He argues that, just as mere possession of the law is no protection against God's condemnation, circumcision is only of value if it indicates a circumcised heart. A non-circumcised Gentile, who keeps the law and lives as though he were circumcised, will condemn the disobedient, circumcised Jew (v 27). Jewishness is not outward and physical. It is inward and spiritual. It is a circumcision of the heart (see Deuteronomy 10:16; Jeremiah 9:26; and John 8:39-45).

Thus the Jew who depends on the superiority of having God's law and the mark of the covenant in his flesh is in for a big surprise. Unless these outward signs are matched by inward experience and integrity, they are empty. (Paul illustrates this later in the case of Abraham, 4:11.)

The application to the issue of sacraments is obvious. Sacraments are empty signs if they are not matched by the inner reality they symbolise. Baptism, the initiating rite, is a symbol of our new birth, our death with Christ, and our resurrection to new life. The Lord's Supper is a reminder to us of the foundation of our right relationship with God through the work of His Son on the cross. Unless these truths are real in our experience, participation in the sacraments is of no use.

Paul's concern is to show how the Jew is lost. The Jew is lost because of disregard for God's lordship, and no amount of religious activity can compensate for that before God.

What of your heart? Is it right with God? That is the thing that counts today!

REFLECTION

Think about how you may be tempted to put some of your faith in doing thoroughly good things, even things like this Bible reading time. Such things can become a basis other than Christ for relationship with God.