

# The Greatest Letter Ever Written

Romans 1:1

January 1, 2017

## **Introduction:**

It was late summer in the year 386 AD when a man by the name of Augustine was sitting out in a garden, weeping over his repeated weakness of giving into lust, when suddenly he heard a child's voice singing the words, "Tolle lege, tolle lege" which is Latin for, "Take up and read." Augustine could not recall such words as being part of a child's game and so took it to be a sign from God that he should read the scroll he had with him, which happened to be from Paul's letter to the Romans. He picked it up and read from Romans 13 where it says, "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."

In his *Confessions*, Augustine says, "No further would I read; nor needed I: for instantly at the end of this sentence, by a light as it were of serenity infused into my heart, all the darkness of doubt vanished away." From that one sentence in the book of Romans, Augustine was converted and thus one of the church's greatest theologians began his ministry, whose theological reflections would shape the church for centuries to come.

Fast forward over a thousand years later to 1515, when an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther wrested with the righteous requirements of the law, despairing of ever obtaining by his own efforts the righteousness God requires. Then he read Romans 1:17 where it says, "For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'" After reading this, Luther said,

"Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the 'justice of God' had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven."

Martin Luther went on to proclaim this gloriously good news he discovered in book of Romans and as a result sparked the Protestant Reformation.

Move ahead two more centuries to May 24, 1738 when John Wesley was listening to a man reading from Luther's *Preface to the Epistle to the Romans* and he says this,

"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 in 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 death."

John Wesley went on to transform England through his powerful preaching and his followers formed the Methodist church that diligently pursued a life of holiness in obedience to Christ.

I use these three giants of the faith to illustrate the life-transforming impact of Paul's letter to the Romans. There is no other letter in the history of mankind, and arguably there is no other book of Scripture, that has had such a profound impact on the history of the world. To study the book of Romans is to open up a treasure chest overflowing with the sparkling jewels of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Nowhere else is the gospel so clearly articulated, defended, and applied as it is in Romans.

This morning we are going to begin studying this amazing book and my hope and prayer is that it will be as glorious and life-transforming for you as it has been for so many others throughout history. Romans is one of those books I've always wanted to preach on, but I decided to restrain myself early on for two reasons. First, I felt I needed to get many years of preaching experience under my belt before tackling such an important epistle, in hopes that I might do it far better justice as an experienced preacher than as one who was still wet behind the ears right out of seminary. Even now, I fear I'm still inadequate to the task set before me, but I imagine I would feel this way even if I were to wait another ten years or more; so, if I insist on waiting until I feel ready, I may never preach on it at all.

Second, I waited because I thought that if there was ever a time in my lifetime to preach on Romans, it would be this year, 2017. This year marks the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther nailing his 95 Thesis to the door of the Witterberg Castle church, thus sparking the Protestant Reformation. If it weren't for the Paul's letter to the Romans, Luther might never have come to understand that righteousness came by faith and thus there would be no Reformation and subsequently, no Grace Fellowship Church, seeing how we are a Protestant church. So then, what better time for us to delve into the gospel riches of the book of Romans than on the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of the Protestant Reformation!

So this morning we are going to begin our journey through Paul's letter to the Romans, although I fear we won't be traveling terribly far since my message today is only on the very first verse! I promise that I won't go at a such a snail's pace throughout the whole letter, but as we begin this series on Romans, I thought it was important to give careful attention to the one who was responsible for writing this letter to begin with. So please open your Bibles with me to Romans 1. It can be found on page 939 of the hardcover pew Bibles if you happen to be using one of those, although I'd strongly encourage you to bring you own personal Bible with you each week, that you can highlight in it and write notes as needed.

In the ancient world, letters began by identifying the sender, and so we find the same cultural convention in Paul's letter to the Romans. Romans 1:1 begins thus: "**Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God...**" Unlike just about every other letter Paul wrote, he does not personally know the church to whom he was writing. While there were a few individuals he was aware of, for the most part the church was unfamiliar to him. Paul didn't plant the church in Rome: it most likely began after Jewish believers on the day of Pentecost returned to Rome and proclaimed the good news of the resurrection to family and friends. In time, a church composed of both Jews and Gentiles arose which Paul was hoping to come and visit, as a stopping point for a future missionary journey to Spain. Therefore, as a means of introducing himself to them and the gospel that he preached, Paul wrote this letter.

Paul describes himself using three short phrases that I want us to unpack together this morning as we consider who it is God used to write this majestic epistle. I know how easily it is to quickly read through a verse like this and not give it much thought, but even something as ordinary as the personal greeting of a letter can be rich with beneficial theological insight if we slow down and reflect on what is being said. So let me draw out three observations from this opening verse in regards to the man who penned this letter. First I want us to consider...

## 1. Paul's master

Paul begins by identifying himself as **“Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus...”** Most modern translations state it this way, although the Greek word for “servant” here is more accurately translated as “slave.” Roman slavery, while not as harsh and brutal as 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century American slavery, was certainly something more significant than what the word “servant” implies to us today. When Paul calls himself a “servant of Christ, he has in mind the life of a Roman slave who was under the authority of his master. Such a person, says one commentator, “belonged entirely to another and from whom absolute obedience could be expected.” <sup>1</sup>

This is quite a remarkable thing to say, considering the history of the man who said it. Years before Paul wrote this letter, he was anything but a servant of Christ. The man we know as Paul was once Saul, a Jew of high distinction. Born in the city of Tarsus, he was educated under the distinguished Jewish rabbi named Gamaliel, which at the time was the equivalent of being educated at Harvard for a Jewish man. He went on from there to become a highly distinguished Pharisee due to his extreme zeal for the Law. His personal credentials were impeccable: in Philippians 3, Paul boasts of how he was circumcised on the eighth day, born of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, and in regards to the Law, blameless in his obedience.

Eventually Saul learned of this new movement taking place in the city of Jerusalem where Jews were preaching about a man named Jesus, who had claimed to be the Messiah and had been crucified by the Romans. This was outright blasphemy and Paul in his zeal sought to root this heretical cancer out. When testifying before King Agrippa in Acts 26, Paul described his earlier days like this,

“I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.” (Acts 26:9-11)

Saul went in with all the zealous fury he could muster to destroy the church. In Acts 8, after Saul approved on the execution of Stephen, Luke tells us that, “Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.” Imagine how terrifying it would have been to have the dreaded Saul of Tarsus come knocking on your door, dragging you off to prison and

possibly death right before the eyes of your terrified children. There could have been no greater dread of doom than to hear that Saul had come to town and was on the prowl for Christians. Saul would stop at nothing in his zeal to see every last Christ-follower either in prison, or better yet, dead. So relentless was Saul that he even traveled to other cities to persecute believers. In fact, Saul was on the road to do just that when his reign of terror finally came to an end.

Saul was traveling to the city of Damascus to arrest Christians there when the risen Lord Jesus confronted him, saying, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Then Jesus told him, "I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you..." (Acts 26:16). And thus was the end of Saul, persecutor of Christians. From that moment on he would be Paul, servant of Christ Jesus. Instead of raging against Christ and his church, he would now serve Christ and his people.

So then, when Paul describes himself as "**a servant of Christ Jesus**" that for Paul is a statement of amazing grace. Paul reflects on this in 1 Corinthians 15, where he says, "For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am..." Paul never forgot his past. He knew the blood he had on his hands. He was painfully aware that his actions nearly brought the early church to extinction. And yet to have been given grace instead of judgment for what he had done would forever be a fount of joy and thankfulness for Paul, who said this about himself in 1 Timothy 1:12-14,

"I thank Christ Jesus, our Lord, who enabled me, that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, who before was a blasphemer and a persecutor and injurious. But I obtain mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief and the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant with faith and love."

So then for us, regardless of whether your testimony is a dramatic one where God radically changed you later on in life or whether you were blessed to grow up in a Christian home where you trusted in Christ for as far back as you can remember, you have become a servant of Christ by grace. Christ purchased you by his blood to redeem you from your sin, not because you deserved it, but purely by grace alone.

And it is because Christ has redeemed us that we now belong to him. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:20, "You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies." That's why not only Paul but every Christian whom God purchased at the infinite cost of his Son's blood is a "**servant**" or "**slave**" of Christ. We owe him our very lives. Paul was keenly aware what he deserved for the evil he committed against Christ, and yet God in his grace saved him anyway.

My friends, do you view your life through this lens? You, no less than Paul, are a "**servant of Christ Jesus.**" That means he's your Lord and master. It means you have no rights to do what you want when you want in whatever way you deem fit to do it. You aren't the captain of the ship of your life: Christ is. You're to go where he wants you to go. You are to do what he says you should do. Obedience to him is not some

optional clause in the redemption contract. Your life is not your own so don't live it as if it is. Mind you, his yoke is easy and his burden is light, and it is not drudgery but a joy to serve Christ, but to be a Christian is surrender your life in complete obedience to him.

So then, when Paul describes himself as a “**servant of Christ Jesus,**” he is simply stating something that is true for all Christians, because to be a Christian is to be purchased by Christ's shed blood and thus belong to him. But the next description Paul gives of himself is one that's uniquely given to him by Christ that isn't true of any of us. So then, let's move on now to our second point which concerns...

## 2. Paul's calling

The second phrase Paul uses to describe himself is that he was “**called to be an apostle.**” This must have been utterly shocking to Paul and to just about anyone else who had known of his life back when he was Saul, the zealous persecutor of the church. It is astonishing enough that God would have the mercy to allow Paul to find forgiveness for his grave and heinous sins through faith in Christ. To learn that the former persecutor of Christians was now a Christian was itself unbelievable news to the ears of those who heard it. But God's amazing grace toward Paul did not end there. Not only did God's forgive his sins, but he then called Paul to serve him not just as a normal everyday Christian but as an apostle.

Now to be called to be an apostle was to be called to the highest role in the kingdom of God anyone could have. An apostle is one who had seen the risen Christ and could testify authoritatively to what Jesus taught. Peter, John, and the other disciples were of course apostles seeing how they had been with Christ throughout his earthly ministry and were all witnesses to his death and resurrection. But Paul? How could Paul, a man who had violently persecuted the church, be called to such a position as this? I know that God is gracious and all, but isn't this going too far? How could God take such a violent and wicked man who terrorized the church and call him to be of all things an apostle? To which I can only say,

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, to save a wretch like me,  
I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see.”

Paul is example *par excellence* of what the grace of God can do. Paul's life was to be a vivid, living example of the endless, boundless, overflowing grace of God. Paul says as much in 1 Tim. 1:15-16 where he says this about himself,

“Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners - of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.”

So there is a double-whammy of grace in Paul's opening description of himself. Not only was he saved by grace and thus became a servant of Christ, God also graciously

called him to serve as an apostle. And while Paul was not like the other apostles who had traveled side-by-side with Jesus during his earthly ministry, he was confronted by the resurrected Christ on the Damascus Road and was personally instructed by Jesus afterwards. In Galatians 1, Paul says that after his conversion,

“I did not immediately consult with anyone; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.”

So how then did he learn of the gospel? He says in Galatians 1:11-12,

“For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man’s gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.”

As we start the book of Romans, it’s a good reminder for us that what Paul teaches here comes with apostolic authority. This isn’t Paul’s opinion: it comes from Christ himself. Sometimes you hear about people who identify themselves as “red-letter Christians.” The term means they hold to what Jesus said in the gospels – which was sometimes off-set in red typeface in older Bibles – as being their only source of authority. Now it’s good to hold what Jesus directly said in the gospel narratives in high regard, but those words are not any more important or authoritative than what Paul wrote. When the apostles spoke, they spoke on behalf of Christ, with his full authority. You cannot create a false dichotomy between the words of Jesus and the words of Paul. Paul speaks for Christ with the authority of Christ. The apostles were commissioned by Christ to preach and teach in accordance with what they were taught by him and that was true of Paul no less than any of the Twelve Disciples. Paul’s teaching in Roman carries with it the authority of Christ.

That then brings us to what it was that Paul the apostle was called to preach, which is the subject of our third and final point,

### 3. Paul’s purpose

In v. 1 Paul has identified himself as, “...**a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle**” and now in the third description he says he has been “**set apart for the gospel of God...**”

The idea of being “**set apart**” is to make a distinction from the rest. Paul was being separated from other believers by being given this special calling to apostleship by God. Paul elaborates on this idea in Galatians 1:15 when he says, “But when he who had set me apart before I was born...” Even though his conversion took place when Paul was an adult, God had planned to save Paul and call him to serve him as an apostle back when he was in his mother’s womb. Paul didn’t volunteer for the role. God wasn’t wringing his hand hoping that Paul would eventually repent of his sins and decide to take upon himself the role of being an apostle. Rather, God sovereignly determined long before Paul could ever utter a word that he would be God chosen

messenger to proclaim the excellencies of Christ to the nations. Paul recognized the position he held as an apostle was one divinely appointed to him, apart from works and purely by grace.

In particular, Paul was “**set apart for the gospel of God...**” His role as an apostle was to proclaim the good news of the gospel that Jesus Christ, who had died and was raised again after three days, was the promised Messiah, and that whoever would believe in him would have their sins forgiven and be declared righteous in God’s sight. Paul’s life after his encounter with the risen Lord Jesus on the Damascus Road was dedicated to just that purpose: to proclaim the gospel to those who had not yet heard the good news through the work of missions as well as by instructing believers through his work of discipleship both by personal example and by written word which inspired by the Holy Spirit has come to us today in the form of Paul’s epistles in the NT.

Now while Paul had a unique calling to proclaim the gospel as an apostle, we also as normal Christians have been set apart for the gospel by virtue of our salvation. While apostles or pastors have specialized roles in which they serve, every believer has been set apart to proclaim the good news of Christ’s love in whatever place in life they find themselves. When Jesus commissioned his disciples in Matthew 28 to “Go and make disciples of all nations...” he was calling them first and foremost to proclaim the gospel because the way you make disciples is by telling the lost the gospel message. If you don’t do that first, then you can neither baptize them nor teach them to obey everything Christ commanded. The gospel must be proclaimed first.

In fact, the priority of proclaiming the gospel is something Paul will highlight later in his letter. He says in Romans 10,

“How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’”

So then, we all share in this responsibility. You and I no less than Paul have been set apart by belief in the gospel for the proclamation of the gospel. It’s not a task appointed only to apostles but to all of us who have been saved by faith in Christ. So let me encourage you each to be about it proclaiming it. Our goal for every member of Grace Fellowship is to be *Salt & Light* to at least three unbelievers that you know, by regularly praying for them, entering into conversations with them, inviting them into your home or out to coffee, and finally and most importantly, proclaiming to them the good news that God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son to die as a sinless substitute on our behalf, to take the punishment we deserved for our sins, so that if we believe in him, we can be forgiven and enjoy eternal life. That is our job: not just mine or the elders but each and every one of us who call Jesus our Lord. The Great Commission is a gospel commission, to proclaim the good news to those who need to hear it and each of us have the responsibility to do so.

## Conclusion

Paul has much more to say about the gospel in his introduction to this letter to the Romans which we'll have the opportunity to unpack next week. But for now, while we stand at the headwaters of the book of Romans, I think it was worthwhile to consider the man whom God used to pen this letter. Paul is a man thunderstruck by the reckless raging grace of God and it is good for us to recall what God did in Paul's life as we also recall what God has done for each one of us. We may not have been guilty of the sins Paul committed in his younger days as Saul the persecutor of the church of God, but we each have been saved by grace, forgiven of sins which deserved no less the wrath of God than Paul's sins. And while none of us have been called to the office of an apostle, we like Paul share in the wonder of being allowed to become servants of Christ our Lord, and are given the joyful duty of proclaiming the beauty of our Savior through the message of the gospel. May the joy and privilege of being the recipient of God's grace in your life be no less amazing to you as it was for the apostle Paul. Let's pray.

1. Kruse, Colin G. Paul's Letter to the Romans. Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids: 2012.

**This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Fellowship of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2017.**