
Day 341 – December 7

Christ's Church and the Apostles (30-100 CE)

Letter to the Romans

Readings: *Romans 3:21-8:39*

Reflections:

- Righteousness of God – Justification by faith: This opening statement is one of those complete shockers. “Now righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.” No religion. No legal code. No list of do’s and don’ts. The Torah pointed to something higher but it couldn’t deliver it. The next words of Paul capture the very essence of the salvation message offered through Jesus. “This righteousness (complete right standing before God) from God comes through faith (a trust relationship) in Jesus Christ/Messiah/King to all who believe (respond with trust/faith). There is no difference (gender, race, class, or religion), for all have sinned (missed the mark of God’s best) and fall short of the glory of God (unable to be what God wanted us to truly be), and are justified (made completely right as if you had never made any mistakes) freely by his grace (it is a gift that can’t be earned) through the redemption (rescue mission) that came by King Jesus (it all comes back to Jesus).” Paul goes on to explain how the death of Jesus served as a sinless/spotless sacrifice like a perfect Passover Lamb that dies in place of those who are worthy of judgment. Such a death would demonstrate that justice was served but it was not served against those who deserved it but rather someone took the punishment instead. Here is the mystery. How did God actually do this? How could he stockpile all of the sins of humanity past, present and future and then somehow do a divine accounting switch so that Jesus took all the judgment and punishment on himself so that everyone else can go clear if he says so? Also, why did someone have to die? Couldn’t God just forgive everyone? And if someone had to die, why was it God’s Son? Isn’t that insidious? As we have mentioned previously, we should view Jesus as “God with us” as ultimately God taking our sin on himself and dying for us. Also, I think it is safe to say that we have no ability to grasp the meta-physics of such a spiritual reality. Was this a huge divine demonstration so that we would get it into our heads and hearts how much God loves us? Was it God speaking our language and the language of world religions throughout time that had a huge developed system of sacrifice for sin? Or was this role playing essential to the internal realities of how God maintains righteousness and perfection as a holy God? We can speculate and rationalize these positions from Scripture but ultimately we will not know until we stand before him and can ask such profound questions. All we know is that God

loves us so much that Jesus died so that we can all be restored to a right relationship with God without having to deal with all the ways we have messed up, from the worst of us to the best of us. It may not make sense to some but that IS the message of Jesus.

- Lawkeeping not effectual: Paul argues here that when we grasp that we have been rescued by faith, there is no more boasting. God's way of saving us moves us toward humility. Religion quietly promotes pride as we become the masters of our religious systems. Faith drives us to humility and dependence. This is the same faith that saves both Jew and Gentile. We are all on the same footing before God.
- Righteousness without law: Paul notes that Abraham was accredited righteousness because of his trust relationship with God. This is long before Moses came along with the Law. If we work, we get paid. If we don't work but receive something, it then is a true gift. The math is pretty simple Paul points out.
- David recognized grace: Paul now points out David's affirmation of this truth as he quotes Psalm 32:1-2.
- Circumcision's value: Paul now points out that Abraham's faith based righteousness was secured before he even received the sign of circumcision. Therefore Abraham can be the spiritual father to both the uncircumcised believers as well as circumcised believers. We should note that circumcision as well as dietary laws was of huge concern to the Jewish people in the first century. They were afraid of losing their identity and so these boundary markers of community were strictly maintained and reinforced. The message of Jesus declared that these external markers no longer mattered and all that mattered was the heart. It is understandable why these two issues keep coming up over and over again.
- Promise based on faith: Paul now points out that Abraham didn't have any law when he received the promise. He only had faith. Paul notes again how law only helps you grasp that you are a lawbreaker. It really adds no other value. Abraham had what he needed to receive the promise of salvation: faith!
- Promise is for all people: Paul now argues that Abraham is therefore the father of all people of faith, both Jews and Gentiles. He is not just the spiritual father of the Jews because of ancestry and Torah but more importantly, he is the spiritual father of all people of faith. God can make us all Abraham's descendents because God is capable of calling things that are not as though they were...and then it happens, like raising someone from the dead. Abraham's promise of having more offspring than the stars is now realized in Jesus as both Jews and Gentiles are welcomed into his family of faith (See Genesis 15:5).
- Abraham's faith an example: Paul now zeros in on some key out workings of Abraham's faith. Abraham had some major facts of life to overcome in his life. He was approaching 100 years old and his wife wasn't far behind him. It was IMPOSSIBLE for this very elderly couple to have a baby. Abraham didn't believe God because it made sense, he believed God because God promised it and when God speaks, it happens. Period. The same God that gave Abraham and Sarah a miraculous child raised Jesus from the dead and still fulfills his

promise today to completely forgive us and receive us as his precious and deeply loved children. We trust God because he is faithful and when he speaks, we know it will happen. God creates facts that don't yet exist that undo the facts that stand in the way of his will being done.

- Freedom from condemnation – Justification brings peace: Here is another passage that is simply a crystal clear summary of Christian belief. “Therefore since we have been justified by faith, we have peace (complete restoration to whole and complete relationship) with God through our Lord (title for God and Caesar) Jesus Christ (Messiah/King), through whom we have gained access by faith (complete trust) into this grace (free forgiveness and blessing) in which we now stand (grace is not a one-time experience but a position to defend and maintain). And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God (our eternal resurrected state of being fully rescued).” Now Paul transitions to talk about another kind of hope, not the hope of the future salvation of God but the hope of inner transformation now into the likeness of Christ. “...we also rejoice in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance (resolve to remain obedient and dependent on God), perseverance character (Christ-likeness), and character hope (certain confidence in the promise of God). And hope does not disappoint us because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom he has given us.” It all comes down to God loving us to life by pouring his very presence into our heart of hearts and changing us from the inside out.
- Christ's blood saves: Paul's understanding is that God does everything according to his sovereign plan and so “at just the right time” Christ died for us. This is after four hundred years of prophetic silence. God's timing is not our timing. Also, God's decision to wait also emphasized practically how powerless the human race is to save itself. Paul notes again how truly dependent we are for God to save us. Although someone may die for a good or righteous person (a very rare thing that anyone would die for someone else) God demonstrates the depth of his love for us as he in Christ died for us when we were positioned against him as rebellious enemies! If this is what his death and shed blood accomplished, how much more are we restored to God through his resurrection and the work of his life in us (his Spirit)? We have been raised with Christ and are not only restored to right standing but enveloped in God's presence to be restored to complete intimacy and communion with him through the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead.
- All die from sin: Paul now compares Adam to Jesus and makes the connection that sin came into the world through one man and God's salvation came through one man. We know from the story that Adam and Eve shared in the sin equally but for the sake of the illustration Paul just compares Jesus to Adam. Through sin, death reigned, now through Jesus' death, life can reign as Jesus triumphed over sin and death. If you think about the far sweeping consequences of Adam and Eve's sin on creation and humanity, it is awesome to think about the far sweeping consequences of Jesus' death, resurrection and the coming of the Spirit on humanity! Some ask how one person can have such an impact in determining the spiritual

destiny of an entire race of people. The answer is simple. We are relational beings and what we do impacts others. God knows this and he makes that clear that both sin and righteousness are spiritually systemic and work through entire communities. Now with this said, each person determines their own response to sin and righteousness but because of the influence of sin and righteousness, we all become involved by our own decision. So although we are influenced, we also make our own decisions that make us culpable. What is fascinating is that history proves this over and over and yet we as a human race love to live in denial about this.

- All can be justified: Paul now unpacks this a bit more by pointing out that God's rescue and salvation is way bigger and more wonderful than the effect of Adam and Eve's rebellion and sin.
- Grace released: Paul again points out that the Law was given not to fix Israel or humanity but to make us more aware of our sin, to increase our self-awareness of how much we sin. In this way, the Law increased the experience of sin. Yet, where sin increased (we know what we shouldn't do and then we do it all the more) Paul states that grace increased more. Rather than increasing the judgment before God, God gave us more grace through Jesus. God will not allow sin to be bigger and more powerful than his nature and character. He by definition of being God will ensure that his character of love, grace and peace will reign supreme. This is the revelation of this great story of God. Only through the dust of humanity, this fallen, foolish and rebellion people, do we see how truly humble, loving and gracious God is. Only through this story do we discover that God is not defined by his power, wisdom and beauty but by his humility, love and mercy. These are his fundamental attributes. These are the qualities at the epicenter of ultimate reality.
- Freedom from sin – grace no excuse for sin: Paul now responds to some heckler's questions. So does God's grace mean we can go wild and sin all we want? The answer is obviously no! The point is that God is glorified when our weak, messed up lives are transformed through his life working through us. There is no glory in simply leaving us in a mess.
- Dead to sin: Paul now helps us get our mindset straight. As we fully surrender our wills and lives to God, we go through a very real death experience (loss of control of everything) so that then through his Spirit he releases a whole new life into our inner being that we might live in a completely new way. His life enables us to love God and others fully and this love then fulfills all of his righteous hopes and dreams for us. Baptism symbolizes dying and being plunged into Christ through the Spirit and so it is a memory maker to help us continually remember that we died to our old ways and now have been made alive to God through Jesus. This is a key part of renewing our mind and establishing new mental habits. Rather than beating ourselves up for being failures or simply caving into selfish lifestyle choices we are to partner with God to establish a new mental focus and way of thinking about dying to self and surrendering to the life God has placed in us. The more we do this the easier it becomes.

- Grace requires submission: Paul now reminds us that submission is a decision that leads to an ongoing process. As we partner with God to actively reject old self-centered habits and intentionally choose to follow his lead for our lives, we are transformed by his grace and Spirit working in us. We must submit our wills to the mastery of grace.
- Slavery to righteousness: Paul now uses the imagery of slavery to basically drive home the point. You were slaves of sin and had that experience of not being in control of your own lives. Now you must choose to be slaves of righteousness and make that now the complete focus of your life as you submit to God's leadership. In terms of developing mental habits, when we focus on trying not to do something, we actually reinforce the thing we are trying not to do by continually focusing on it. If we want to stop doing something we must replace it with something better and give that new focus our entire attention. We quit the old not by mastering it but rather by ignoring it and causing it to wither and die from lack of attention as we focus on the new. Paul calls us to focus on all the great things God wants us to do in terms of loving other people and serving him and to make living a life devoted to him our entire passion and focus. This new way of living will displace our previous self-centered way of living.
- Grace brings life: Paul reminds them that sin is a painful dead end. Like Jesus' story of the two brothers, both moral and religious sin is destructive to our lives and relationships. They both bring death to us. When we allow God's righteousness to control and direct our lives we are given the gift of true, lasting life. "For the wages (unavoidable consequences) of sin (our own self-centered, self-saving, self-indulging ways) is death (spiritual, relational and ultimately physical) but the gift (completely free) of God is eternal life (it starts now and lasts forever) in Christ Jesus (or King Jesus) our Lord (if you receive Jesus as Lord you also get him as Savior)."
- Freedom from the Law – Law binding during lifetime: Paul now uses marriage and death as an example of how Law works. A person is only married as long as the other spouse is alive. Once that person dies they are free to remarry. Within the Torah the wife could have also remarried if her husband divorced her but Paul only references death so that he can set up his next point, being united in Christ with his death so that you die to the Law and all its requirements. We see here that Paul's view of our relationship with Christ is of the most intimate and complete nature.
- Now married to Christ: Our union with Christ simply means we died to the old way of living and the old commitments and covenants. All of that is dead to us just like our relationship to sin. All of the old ways are now dead. Therefore as we are raised to life with Christ we now have a whole new approach to life, living by the Spirit. This is the only way something good will truly flow from our lives ("that we might bear fruit" – a symbol of something natural and good coming from our union with Christ). So we no longer live according to the written code, the attempt to change ourselves from the outside in by developing and trying to follow the codification of right living. We now live in a moment by moment dependent relationship with Christ.

- Law gave opportunity to sin: The heckler now asks, “So is the Law sin?” implying that is the reason it must die and be done with. Paul again clarifies that the Law as a diagnostic tool reveals sin, helps me face my sin, and causes sin to be shown for what it is. He states how he once felt alive apart from the Law but then sin brought him to terms with his own spiritual death. We should not see Paul as saying that apart from the Law he was truly spiritually alive before God. Paul makes it clear that everyone in our nature lives as enemies of God and are under judgment. We simply don’t know that. We think we are alive when we aren’t. The Law makes it all clear to us now messed up we are. In fact, as we live with the Law the tendency toward independence and rebellion actually gets provoked by the Law because when someone says “don’t touch the wet paint,” inside all we want to do is touch the wet paint. So the Law is bad news in two ways. First it tells me I am sick. Second, it stirs in me the desire to rebel because someone is telling me what not to do!
- Law did not cause sin: We can’t blame the Law for these things because it is actually sin living in me, the spiritual disease that is reacting to the Law. The Law did what it was supposed to do. It was to lead us to Christ just as the diagnosis prepares us for the cure. The Law is a spiritual tool revealing how disconnected from God (unspiritual) and enslaved to sin I really am a part from Christ.
- Law is Good, man is sinful: Here is one of the most deeply loved and convoluted passages in Scripture. If you can follow Paul’s logic, he nails it! Simple summary: “We all know the good we want to do, yet we don’t do it. What we don’t want to do, this is what we keep doing.” This is the maddening condition of the human heart. We can see righteousness but we have no capacity to live it apart from God changing us from the inside out.
- Flesh and spirit struggle: Paul now continues his own personal struggle, the struggle we all share in as fellow humans. My true inner self knows what is right but my self-centeredness (Paul calls the flesh) is constantly moving me to do what I know is wrong. It is like sin has control and ends up torturing me because I never do what I really want to do. So who can rescue us from this sick cycle? “Thanks be to God – through Jesus our Lord!” Remember when you submit to Jesus as the Lord of your life, you get him as your Savior too! If you just want him to rescue you but not allow him to be the Lord of your life, then you will remain stuck in your cycle of sin and failure. Paul now concludes that within every person their true selves is bound to righteousness (a deep understanding and conviction of what is right and wrong) and yet in their actual living of life because of self-centeredness they are bound to sin (consistently miss the mark of a doing what is right).
- Freedom from death – no condemnation: This first statement is powerful. “There is no condemnation.” In Jesus, we are completely free to stand confidently in God’s love and complete acceptance. Over and over again in the New Testament the writers try to find every possible way to express how complete and perfect is the forgiveness that is ours in Christ. Paul again walks through the basic teaching that the Law or an outside in religious approach to God just simply doesn’t work because we are fundamentally self-centered (controlled by the sinful nature or “flesh”) and that the only thing that really works is being

changed from the inside out by God's Spirit dwelling in us and enabling us to live the life God desires for us. Paul also again points out the importance of renewing our minds (learning new mental habits). Paul here describes this as a mindset. "Those who live according to the sinful nature ("flesh" or self-centeredness) have their minds set on what that nature (self-centeredness) desires; but those who live according to the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires...the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace." Paul makes it clear that we must submit to the Spirit to intentionally partner with the Spirit to develop new mental habits that enable us to remain focused on a full trust relationship with God.

- Spirit gives life: Paul makes it clear that to belong to Christ or to be in Christ you must be filled with the Spirit. Now many people stress about this. Everyone who places their trust in Jesus has the Spirit. The question is whether or not you are seeking to be filled over and over with the Spirit. All aspects of relating to God is relational. The Spirit is not an impersonal force like electricity – is the switch on or off? The Spirit of God relates to us personally and responds to our seeking and submission. Paul also makes it clear that the work of the Spirit is to make dead things come alive, just as the Spirit raised Jesus from the dead. This is good news as the Spirit then has the power to make our dead and messed up lives come alive. See Ephesians 1:15-23.
- Duty to live by the Spirit: Paul calls all Christ-followers to partner with the Spirit to actively cut off, abandon and end all expressions of living self-centered lives and to proactively seeking to be led by the Spirit, being open to God speaking and directing our lives. As we are led by God's Spirit we truly become his children doing his will in this world. Here is another key passage in grasping God's work in our lives. "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you slaves again to fear (this was the spirit humanity received in the garden when we rebelled against God and Adam said, "I was afraid because I was naked and so I hid.") but you received a spirit of adoption (they translate it "sonship" but this is incorrect). And by him we cry 'Abba, Father'... Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs of Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory." This passage is one of the key verses that makes it clear the great reversal Christ accomplished in undoing the effect of the Fall. We are now fully embraced as deeply loved children that can freely approach God as our dad/mom and in this restored relationship we become royalty. Now to truly be aligned with God means we will also be aligned with his rescue mission and this means we must be willing to suffer as Jesus did to see people rescued out of the mess of this world. We must remind ourselves how amazing it is that the Creator of the universe is so humble and loving and gracious. The notion of God being a dad/mom is revolutionary and radically subversive to the common religious ideas that God is a distant angry judge or an impersonal life force. God is consistently relational and desiring to share life with us.
- Sufferings diminish in hope: Paul now uses the illustration of childbirth to help people grasp this "now but not yet" reality of how God has initiated his rescue mission but the work isn't

over yet. The tremendous pain of childbirth is weighed off against the joy of having a baby. Paul uses this image to help us understand God's wisdom to use such a painful process in humanity to bring forth his own children. Just as a baby is born in great pain, so the story of humanity is a story of tremendous pain and suffering and yet it is revealing the true heart of God as well as bringing forward true children of the divine, people who are humble, loving and willing to suffer that others may be saved. A perfect world with no pain, suffering or sin could not reveal these essential qualities of the divine nor perfect love. God in his wisdom allowed humanity to choose this path for their lives as he would then use their failure to set the stage to reveal his true character as well as redeem humanity to become not his image bearers but his children. From our perspective it is easy to rebel against the pain and hate this life because of the suffering. God calls us to see past the pain and to see the hope of his eternal redemption and salvation. Paul also makes it clear that we are not the only ones suffering. Creation itself is suffering with us as humanity mars and scars this planet with their sin. The destruction of the environment and life on the planet are powerful reminders of how human sin brings suffering to the earth. As our bodies and the bodies of our loved ones age and approach death, we also feel the pain of this broken world. In all of this we must look to the future redemption of humanity and our hope of the resurrection and the new earth.

- Spirit bridges gap: God does not leave us alone in our pain and suffering but actually enters into our lives and suffers with us. God fully identified with us in being Jesus (God with us, the word became flesh) and then again fully identifies with us as his Spirit fills us and again God takes on our flesh and our pain. Many see this passage as an explanation of praying in tongues. That at times the Spirit prays in a divine language to intercede for us as God's children (See 1 Corinthians 13:1 – "If I pray in the tongues of men or of angels...").
- Eternal plan for believers: These words from Paul are some of the most encouraging words in the New Testament. God in his sovereignty is working everything, both the good and painful, for our good. God takes everything in our lives and uses it to shape Christ-likeness and intimacy with him. Everything the devil throws at us God boomerangs to take out the devil. God loves to beat the devil with his own stick. God is not caught off guard but he foreknows everything and this allows him to always be ahead of the game. As God foresaw what would happen (how people will choose and make decisions to follow Christ), he decided to predestine all those who would follow Christ to be conformed into the image of Christ. We must note that God's predestination in this passage focuses not on God choosing for us to follow Christ (like we are his puppets) but that he chose to conform us to be like Jesus. God's predestining work is not to make choices for us but rather to give us confidence that the seemingly impossible work of making us be like Jesus. God takes responsibility to do that work with us and through us. We don't have to fix ourselves up to be acceptable to God but we can relax knowing that he has already chosen to do that for us! If God gave Jesus for us, his own Son, why do we worry about anything? If God gave what is most precious to us, won't he give us everything else too that we need? Again everything we could have hope for

need is all found in Jesus. When in doubt, just focus on Jesus. Here we see all of God's love and provision lavishly poured out on us!

- God's love unfailing: This is why Paul goes on to say if God is for us we are completely set! Nothing can stop his love for us or his power from flowing through us to save us. Nothing in all of creation can get in the way of God saving us, loving us and keeping us for eternity. What incredible confidence we can have!!!! This means we are more than conquerors! The triumph we have already received in Jesus is total, complete, and perfect. Hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger and even death...none of these can stop God's love from holding us and keeping us for eternity as his deeply loved children. This complete security frees us to abandon ourselves to God and his purposes in this world knowing nothing can get in the way of his will being done in and through our lives.