

Romans



Lesson 1: *The Obedience of Faith*

Introduction

Paul's epistle to the Romans opens, as his epistles usually do, with a salutation identifying him as both "a servant of Jesus Christ" and "an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God." For Paul, being the "servant" or "bondslave" of Jesus Christ equals perfect freedom: faith means obedience, and obedience to God is the greatest liberty imaginable. So faith and obedience to the commandments of God, which for many people are distinct and even contradictory, are two sides of the same coin for Paul. However, modernity tends to confuse obedience with "slavery," while identifying "faith" (or "spirituality") with "freedom"—especially the freedom to do what "feels right." Such a concept is foreign to Paul, who sees no opposition between faith and obedience.

Likewise, while modern man often pits the "body" against the "soul," Paul instead saw a sacramental unity. Some Christians speak of "asking Jesus into your heart," as though the body's participation in salvation is a sort of extraneous afterthought. But Paul wrote (especially in chapter 6) of the physical sacrament of Baptism as a real, spiritual participation in the death and Resurrection of Christ. From the outset, we see that his way of looking at these important topics doesn't fit well with the basic assumptions of our modern culture. As we move into this study, we will be challenged by ways of thinking and seeing that are "outside the box" of widely accepted contemporary notions about the meaning of life, death, and everything in-between.

Romans 1:1-15

1 Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God 2 which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, 3 the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh 4 and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, 5 through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, 6 including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ; 7 To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

8 First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. 9 For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, 10 asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. 11 For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you, 12 that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. 13 I want you to know, brethren, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. **14 I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish:** 15 so I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

ONE OF THE BEST WAYS TO MEDITATE UPON GOD'S WORD IS THROUGH MEMORIZATION.
A SUGGESTED MEMORY VERSE IS PRINTED IN BOLD WITHIN THE BIBLICAL TEXT
OR YOU MAY WISH TO CHOOSE A VERSE ON YOUR OWN.

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Points to Ponder

Why Paul?

After training twelve other apostles for three years, why did Jesus Christ call Saul the Pharisee, the one responsible for zealously persecuting his Church, and make him an apostle? We may well answer that Jesus did so simply for the sake of Saul's soul, but there is a deeper and broader dimension.

Until Saul received the call on the road to Damascus, the fledgling Church had been limited, even hamstrung, in its evangelistic mission. The Church's missionary enterprise was at first principally to Jews, and it was led by men, such as Peter, who were regarded by the highly educated religious leaders of Jerusalem as unschooled rubes. There was also the stark content of the message Peter had preached: "God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36). In the face of such a shocking, confrontational proclamation, the reaction of the leaders in Jerusalem was the defensive response of nearly every elitist group in human history—they condemned the unwashed, uneducated masses: "This crowd, who do not know the law, are accursed" (Jn 7:49). "Why," the Jewish religious leaders must have thought, "should we listen to the wild statements of a few upstart, backwoods fishermen? What can they possibly know? Did the brilliant scribes, theologians, priests, aristocrats, scholars, and Temple officials, who have been studying, praying, waiting, believing, and hoping for the Messiah, really miss what these hicks think is so obvious? Of course not! Clearly, it is the Nazarenes, not us, who are mangling the Torah."

Enter Saul the Pharisee. He was a son of the tribe of Benjamin, proud heir to the heritage of one of the two tribes that remained faithful to the Davidic covenant. He was a Hebrew, "blameless" in his punctilious observance of the law, and a devout Pharisee (Phil 3:6). Saul, in fact, was the prize student of Rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). Who was Gamaliel? In addition to being briefly mentioned in Acts 5, we know of him from the *Mishnah*, a 3rd-century collection of Jewish oral traditions. He was a very brilliant and moderate Pharisee. He was not only a member of the Sanhedrin but, according to Jewish tradition, also the president of that esteemed body. Known by the title "Gamaliel the Elder," he was the grandson of Rabbi Hillel, among the most renowned rabbis in Jewish history.

Finally, he was the first rabbi in Jewish history to be called, not merely "Rabbi" (which means "my head" or "my master" or "my teacher"), but "Rabbon" (which means "our head" or "our master" or "our teacher"). The Talmud states, "When Rabbon Gamaliel the Elder died, the glory of the Torah ceased and purity and abstinence died." In other words, he was the best and brightest rabbi of the time, and Saul was his best and brightest student.

The importance of Saul's background is clear. Because of his training and reputation, the Jerusalem elites could not argue that Saul did not know the Torah, or that he was unschooled in the way the educated classes read and interpreted Scripture. He was ideally suited by both education and temperament to witness to his Jewish brethren, and to bear the burden of carrying the Gospel to the non-Jewish world as the Apostle to the Gentiles. He was also uniquely equipped to deal with the inevitable criticism from Jewish Christians when the Holy Spirit prompted the Church to bring Gentiles into the household of God. In his epistle to the Romans, Paul's gifts in this regard are evident in how he addressed both Jewish and Gentile Christians, and labored to bring about unity between those two groups in the Body of Christ.

The Obedience of Faith

Paul told the Romans he received grace and apostleship in order to "bring about the obedience of faith," a term that opens the epistle (v. 5) and closes it (16:26). This phrase is key to understanding Romans because Paul's teaching in this book is often misinterpreted as stating that man is justified by faith *apart* from obedience to the law (including the Law enshrined in the Ten Commandments), and not merely apart from "works of the law" (3:28). This incorrect view claims that justification consists simply of "faith alone," in the sense of "accepting Jesus into our hearts as personal Lord and Savior," while also claiming that obedience to God's commandments is entirely secondary and not essential to salvation.

This theory admits such obedience is good, and states that any serious Christian will seek to be obedient, but claims that such obedience is unnecessary for salvation. In other words, this position claims we can be saved by calling Jesus "Lord, Lord" while not doing as he asks and commands. Jesus himself rejected this faulty idea with great force: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21). For both Jesus and Paul, justifying faith is an incarnate faith.



It is not a disembodied faith separating purely interior “acceptance” of Jesus from the external, lived “response” on our part. For Paul, separating faith from obedience was like trying to distinguish which blade on the scissors does the cutting, which wing on the aircraft does the flying, or which vital organ of the body keeps us alive. It is a nonsensical distinction.

Paul—who never wrote that man is saved by “faith alone”—insisted that salvation is accomplished, not according to the simple notion of “faith alone” described above, but in an organic and incarnational manner. Indeed, a more accurate picture of Paul’s description of justification is that man is saved by the *grace alone* of God the Father in Jesus Christ the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit through faith demonstrated in works of love. Take away any element from that formulation and you have something less than Paul’s true teaching on justification.

What, then, did Paul mean when he said that man is “justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Rom 3:28)? We will show that the term “works of law” is a sort of Pauline shorthand that refers to Old Testament ceremonies and rituals (e.g., circumcision, animal sacrifice, grain offerings, wave offerings, and ritual ablutions), which were many, awkward, and ineffective. In contrast to those works of the law, Jesus established the rites of the New Covenant, which are few, simple, and powerful. Christ did not sweep rites and ritual out of existence, but established new and transforming rites and rituals. This is why, for example, Paul did not speak about “asking Jesus into your heart” in Romans 6 (though, of course, Christ is to “dwell in your hearts through faith” [Eph 3:17]), but referred to the sacrament of Baptism as the means by which the believer enters into the Trinitarian life of God.

So, faith for Paul is always an incarnate and sacramental reality, not a merely verbal or abstract concept; and while man is “justified by faith apart from works of the law,” those “works of the law” do not include obedience to the Ten Commandments or adherence to the moral law (as if we could be justified and yet still blithely commit idolatry, murder, and adultery). They refer instead to the rituals, ceremonies, ablutions, dietary restrictions, and sacred feasts of the Old Covenant that Paul described elsewhere as “a shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ” (Col 2:17). Paul’s point is that the works of the law were powerless to make man obedient to the law; they merely pointed to the fact of man’s sin and his desperate need for Christ. It is through faith that we are enabled by the grace of God in Christ, in the power of the Spirit, to live lives of self-sacrificial love—and “love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom 13:10).

Why Rome?

Paul’s longest epistle is also the only one written to Christians he had not yet met, who were living in a city he had not yet visited. Paul told the Romans that he “longs” to see them, and that he had long intended to come to them. Yet, curiously, Paul also wrote of his “ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on another man’s foundation” (Rom 15:20). So why did Paul want to go to Rome since, obviously, the Church already existed there?

First, Paul wanted to go to Rome because of the strategic value of the church there for his anticipated apostolic work. Paul wished to use Rome as his home base for his future missionary activities in western Europe, especially Spain (Rom 15:24), just as he used the church at Antioch in Asia Minor as the home base for his apostolic work in the East. And since Rome was the imperial capital of the ancient world, he surely desired to preach the Gospel there, perhaps even to Caesar himself!

A second reason for Rome’s importance goes beyond the strategic significance of the city, and that reason is biblical prophecy. Paul, as we know, was a rabbi steeped in the Old Testament prophetic tradition. Part of that tradition includes the prophetic writings of Daniel, which Paul knew intimately. In Daniel 2, 7, and 9, there are a series of prophecies about four Gentile world empires (Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Greek, and Roman), which will dominate Israel from the time of Daniel until the coming of the Messiah. According to Daniel, the Messiah will come to destroy the fourth empire and establish a worldwide kingdom. In those prophecies, the fourth kingdom (pictured as the last and most terrible of four beasts) will be overcome by “one like a son of man,” who will take the throne of the universe and receive the worship and dominion and praise of all peoples.

It is most likely that Paul, intimately familiar with these prophecies, was acutely aware of the prophetic significance of the conquest of Rome by Christ. Certainly, this point was not lost on early Church Fathers, such as Jerome and Augustine, who identified Rome as the fourth empire foretold in the book of Daniel and conquered by the “Son of Man.” It is easy to see what significance such prophecies would have for a man who was both a highly trained scholar of Hebrew Scripture and the Apostle to the Gentiles.

Catechism Connections

- Jesus is the Messiah promised to Israel, from the lineage of David. CCC 437
- Ministers are slaves of Christ, who must be completely committed to working for others. CCC 876
- Jesus' divine sonship is shown forth after his Resurrection. CCC 445
- Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, crucified for man's salvation, and risen from the dead. CCC 496
- The Messiah is the "anointed one" who will pour out the Holy Spirit on the saints. CCC 695
- Faith is the submission of intellect and will to God. CCC 143
- Mary's obedience of faith was a perfect response to the will of God. CCC 494

Rome to Home

The Apostle Peter states in his First Letter: "Christ also suffered for sins once, the righteous for the sake of the unrighteous, that He might lead you to God. Put to death in the flesh, He was brought to life in the Spirit" (1 Pet. 3:18). The Apostle Paul also states the same truth in his introduction to the Letter to the Romans, where he introduces himself as the herald of the very Gospel of God. He writes: "The Gospel is about His Son, descended from David according to the flesh, but established as Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness through resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 1:3-4). In this regard I wrote in the Encyclical *Dominum et Vivificantem*: "It can be said that the messianic raising up of Christ in the Holy Spirit reaches its zenith in the Resurrection, in which He reveals Himself also as the Son of God, full of power."

Scholars hold that this passage of the Letter to the Romans—as well as the passage from the letter of Peter (1 Pet. 3:18, 4:6)—contains an earlier Profession of Faith which the two Apostles took from the living resource of the earliest Christian community. Among the elements in this Profession of Faith is found the statement that the Holy Spirit working in the Resurrection is the "Spirit of holiness." Therefore we can say that Christ, who was Son of God from the moment of His conception in Mary's womb by the power of the Holy Spirit, is "constituted" as the source of life and holiness in the Resurrection—"full of sanctifying power"—by the action of the same Holy Spirit.

Pope John Paul II
Homily, August 8, 1990

Study Questions

It's best to read the entire Scripture readings for this lesson and Points to Ponder before responding to the study questions.

1. In his greeting to the Romans, Paul speaks of himself as both a "servant" and an "apostle." In this context, what is a servant? What is an apostle? What is the "gospel" message to which both servant and apostle are obligated? (See Rom 1:1-5; CCC 876, 76)

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2. What was unique about Paul's background compared to some of the other apostles? What did he share with the apostles? How did Paul's background help him in dealing with the religious authorities and their challenging theological questions? (See *Points to Ponder*; Acts 13:1-3, 22: 3-4; Phil 3:3-7).

 3. Paul writes that Jesus Christ "was descended from David according to the flesh and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit..." (Rom 1:3-4). Why does Paul emphasize Jesus' lineage as a descendant of King David? (See 2 Sam 7:10-17; CCC 437)

 4. What does Paul mean by the "obedience of faith?" Are faith and obedience contradictory concepts to Paul? To what does the obedience of faith ultimately lead? (See Rom 1:5-7; *Points to Ponder*; CCC 143, 1812)

 5. Paul mentions that he has long desired to come to Rome (Rom 1:10-11). Why is Rome important to Paul? Why is Rome important in biblical prophecy? (See Rom 1:11-13, 15:24; *Points to Ponder*)

2. Paul's life circumstances helped make him an unique instrument for crucial apostolic work. Similarly, you are able to speak to people in your life who will never be reached by the Pope, your bishop, a priest, or some other member of the Church. You may be, as St. Teresa of Avila remarked, the only hands Christ has on earth now to touch certain people in your life. What in your background uniquely suits you to speak to those people in your life whom no one else on earth may be able to reach with the Gospel of Jesus Christ? How can you use your gifts to impart grace to these people in your life?

Summary: Lesson 1

In this lesson, we observed that:

1. Paul's apostolic work was the result of God's call and empowerment through Jesus Christ.
2. Paul's unique gifts as a highly trained Pharisaic rabbi made him uniquely able to act as apostle to both the Jews and the Gentiles.
3. Paul clearly taught that Jesus is both the fully human "son of David" and the fully divine "Son of God."
4. Paul understood the Gospel to be the fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures.
5. Paul saw faith in Christ and obedience to Christ as two sides of a single coin.
6. Romans is unique because it was written by Paul to Christians he had not yet met.
7. Paul strongly desired to go to Rome for apostolic and prophetic reasons.
8. Paul saw himself as both apostle and servant to the Gentiles.

