

New Testament Session #5
St. Paul's Letter to the Romans:
God Dying on Behalf of the Unworthy

Introduction to St. Paul's Letter to the Romans

The complexity and depth of St. Paul's Letter to the Romans means that we will only be able to touch on the most significant points of this letter. When it comes to Romans there is a depth of analysis that just is not possible in the time that we have. So there are many important themes that we will not have time to deal with tonight.

For example, Romans 9:1-11:36 deals with the continuing reality of the unique status of the Jewish people. Throughout the letter Paul makes it clear that mere ethnicity does not guarantee anyone salvation, or cut anyone off from salvation. Yet he also teaches that this one nation will always have a unique role in God's plan. How does that work? All I'm going to say about this passage is stay away from the apocalyptic nut jobs who love this passage and recognize that this is a complex issue.

Similarly Romans 13:1-7 has enormous implications for the Christian understanding of the role of political authority and the use of force. Any serious discussion of church/state issues and issues of war and peace needs to consider this passage. I've talked and written extensively about this passage at other times, but for tonight we have to set it aside and focus on the main themes of this letter.

It is universally agreed that this letter was written by St. Paul himself and that it was written in 57 or 58 AD.¹ The letter can be broken down into a prologue (1:1-15), a discussion of salvation in Christ (1:16-8:39), a section on the restoration of Israel (9:1-11:36), thoughts on Christian living (12:1-14:23), an epilogue (15:1-16:23), and a closing doxology (16:25-27).² This evening's session will focus exclusively on a discussion of the section on salvation in Christ.

Universal Condemnation as a Result of Sin

Romans 1:18-3:20 is a sweeping, total condemnation of everyone who has ever lived, at all times, and among all nations. The message of these verses is that if you are a human being you are lost and broken and helpless, that you are in rebellion against God, and that you can't do anything about this situation. Let's start by taking a look at Romans 1:18-32.

The wrath of God is indeed being revealed from heaven against every impiety and wickedness of those who suppress the truth by their wickedness. For what can be known about God is evident to them, because God made it evident to them. Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able

¹ Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, eds., *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2002), 13.

² *Ibid*, 15.

to be understood and perceived in what he has made. As a result, they have no excuse; for although they knew God they did not accord him glory as God or give him thanks. Instead, they became vain in their reasoning, and their senseless minds were darkened. While claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for the likeness of an image of mortal man or of birds or of four-legged animals or of snakes. Therefore, God handed them over to impurity through the lusts of their hearts for the mutual degradation of their bodies. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and revered and worshiped the creature rather than the creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. Therefore, God handed them over to degrading passions. Their females exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the males likewise gave up natural relations with females and burned with lust for one another. Males did shameful things with males and thus received in their own persons the due penalty for their perversity. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God handed them over to their undiscerning mind to do what is improper. They are filled with every form of wickedness, evil, greed, and malice; full of envy, murder, rivalry, treachery, and spite. They are gossips and scandalmongers and they hate God. They are insolent, haughty, boastful, ingenious in their wickedness, and rebellious toward their parents. They are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know the just decree of God that all who practice such things deserve death, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them. Romans 1:18-:32

This passage shows us several things

Those with limited revelation from God are still accountable, 1:19-:21 (1st section of underlined verses)

Idolatry separates us from God, 1:22-:25 (1st section of verses in bold)

Sexual Sin separates us from God, 1:26-:27 (2nd section of underlined verses)

Other sins separate us from God, 1:28-:32 (2nd section of verses in bold)

Anyone who has rejected the sole and ultimate authority of God is condemned. Anyone who has failed sexually is condemned. Anyone who lives a life marked by the sins described in 1:28-:32 is condemned. And this is the case even if we have only a limited knowledge of God, because nature itself gives us a great enough understanding of God and morality for us to be condemned for our actions

Some of the Jewish people who would have read this would have thought that this was an excellent description of the those horrible Romans and Greeks, and would have been very grateful that this didn't apply to them. Which is why St. Paul wrote Romans 2:17-:29:

Now if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of God and know his will and are able to discern what is important since you are instructed from the law, and if you are confident that you are a guide for the blind and a light for those in darkness, that you are a trainer of the foolish and teacher of the simple, because in the law you have the

formulation of knowledge and truth-- then you who teach another, are you failing to teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who forbid adultery, do you commit adultery? You who detest idols, do you rob temples? You who boast of the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? For, as it is written, "Because of you the name of God is reviled among the Gentiles." Circumcision, to be sure, has value if you observe the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. Again, if an uncircumcised man keeps the precepts of the law, will he not be considered circumcised? Indeed, those who are physically uncircumcised but carry out the law will pass judgment on you, with your written law and circumcision, who break the law. One is not a Jew outwardly. True circumcision is not outward, in the flesh. Rather, one is a Jew inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart, in the spirit, not the letter; his praise is not from human beings but from God.

In other words merely being of a certain ethnicity, merely being circumcised, and merely getting the externals right guarantees you nothing. You can have the best parents, go through all the right rituals, and 1:18-:32 still applies to you.

In case there were any remaining doubts about this Paul wrote 3:9-:20:

Well, then, are we better off? Not entirely, for we have already brought the charge against Jews and Greeks alike that they are all under the domination of sin, as it is written: "There is no one just, not one, there is no one who understands, there is no one who seeks God. All have gone astray; all alike are worthless; there is not one who does good, (there is not) even one. Their throats are open graves; they deceive with their tongues; the venom of asps is on their lips; their mouths are full of bitter cursing. Their feet are quick to shed blood; ruin and misery are in their ways, and the way of peace they know not. There is no fear of God before their eyes." Now we know that what the law says is addressed to those under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world stand accountable to God, since no human being will be justified in his sight by observing the law; for through the law comes consciousness of sin.

Jews and Greeks, a rhetorical way of referring to the Jewish people and all other nations, stand under the condemnation of sin. We are all in the same situation. We are incapable of doing what is needed. Even God's law does us no good. We know enough about God from nature to be accountable for our condemnation, but the giving of the law gives us an even greater understanding of our sins and failings.

Our Complete Dependence on Christ

So the medical equivalent of the spiritual state we are placed in by our sins would be a terminal cancer patient who was having a stroke and a heart attack, while trapped in a flaming car that was plunging off a cliff.

That's not the whole story is it? Of course not. But once we understand the natural condition of humanity we are in place where we can begin to understand that the gospel is good news. Otherwise, what's the big deal about what Jesus did? If we're basically

well enough off on our own then why do we need a Savior? Why a sacrifice? Why the cross? If we see the situation we're in if nothing is done for us, then we can begin to understand how grateful we should be for what has been done for us.

So let's look at what has been done for us.

In light of how desperate our need is, and how great a work has been done to rescue us in our need, this introduction to Christ's saving work is going to be amazingly inadequate, but hopeful it can be useful nonetheless.

Paul gives us a full understanding of our helpless and the destruction we face, and then he gives us this:

*But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, though testified to by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. **For there is no distinction; all have sinned and are deprived of the glory of God.** They are justified freely by his grace through the redemption in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as an expiation, through faith, by his blood, to prove his righteousness because of the forgiveness of sins previously committed, through the forbearance of God--to prove his righteousness in the present time, that he might be righteous and justify the one who has faith in Jesus. Romans 3:20-:26*

We are justified through Jesus, apart from our obedience to the law. He is called our expiation. Expiation is the act of removing guilt through the paying of a penalty. Jesus has paid our penalty on the cross, and through faith in him we are given the forgiveness which results from this.

As a side note, I believe that Romans 3:23 "For there is no distinction; all have sinned and are deprived of the glory of God" is one of the most important verses in all of the bible. It effectively sums up Romans 1:18-3:20 and makes it crystal clear that the desperate need to be saved by grace is something that we all stand in need of.

Romans 3:20-:26 makes it clear that all salvation comes from the freely given expiatory sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Paul drives home this point again and again.

We see it in the fact that the great Old Testament heroes Abraham and David show us that salvation is solely rooted in God:

What then can we say that Abraham found, our ancestor according to the flesh? Indeed, if Abraham was justified on the basis of his works, he has reason to boast; but this was not so in the sight of God. For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." A worker's wage is credited not as a gift, but as something due. But when one does not work, yet believes in the one who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness. So also David declares the blessedness of the person to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: "Blessed are they

whose iniquities are forgiven and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not record." Romans 4:1-:8

Jesus died for those who are described as ungodly, sinners, and enemies of God. Clearly no prior efforts of their own caused God's love to be offered to them, this was given not because of their works but despite them:

For Christ, while we were still helpless, yet died at the appointed time for the ungodly. Indeed, only with difficulty does one die for a just person, though perhaps for a good person one might even find courage to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. How much more then, since we are now justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath. Indeed, if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, how much more, once reconciled, will we be saved by his life. Not only that, but we also boast of God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. Romans 5:6-:11

And, as if there was any remaining room for doubt, Paul tells us that spiritual death is what we earn, while spiritual life is what we are given:

*For when you were slaves of sin, you were free from righteousness. But what profit did you get then from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now that you have been freed from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit that you have leads to sanctification, and its end is eternal life. **For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.** Romans 6:20-:23*

We do not earn salvation as a result of our works, we are freely given salvation by Jesus Christ despite the works we have done which are worthy of damnation.

As a another side note, Romans 6:23 is another one of the most important verses of the bible. Combined with 3:23 it gives us a brief summary of our spiritual condition, and God's solution for this problem.

Protestants and Catholics

Those who are familiar with Christian debates surrounding the issues of justification and salvation might think this sounds pretty Protestant.

It is.

Don't worry it's Catholic too.

If we are going to properly discuss the differences between Catholic and Protestant views on faith, work, and salvation we need to understand the common ground which lays the foundation for both sides of this debate, and allows us to stand side by side with all

Christians against a host of views which people have which are far more dangerous than those of Martin Luther. There is so much New Age, Oprahfied, self reliance nonsense out there about basic human goodness, about finding the truth within us, and about unlocking our own potential that it would seem that the greatest threats to correct Catholic views about salvation are not Protestants, but those who systematically reject the core truths about sin and redemption which we share in common with Protestants.

When people point to their belief in basic human goodness we should point out that we've all rejected God and violated his law.

The truth within us? The truth is we are enemies of God.

Unlocking our own potential? The potential we have to separate ourselves from God and earn our way into Hell?

Yes we need to deal with the differences between Catholic and Protestant views of human works, we'll do that in a moment, but we need to recognize how much more we have in common with Martin Luther, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, John and Charles Wesley, Dwight Moody, Charles Spurgeon, Billy Graham, John Piper, Mark Noll, George Marsden, Alan Jacobs, Alister McGrath, Craig Blomberg, Ben Witherington, JI Packer, Charles Colson, Timothy George and Mark Driscoll (and I am name dropping in the hopes that you'll figure out who all of these people are) than we do with Oprah Winfrey, Joel Osteen, Marianne Williamson, and all those who preach human potential and self fulfillment.

Solving the Dilemma: Which Works Have Value and Which Ones Do Not

Are there differences between Catholic and Protestant views of faith and works?

Yes.

Are there biblical grounds for holding to the Catholic position?

Yes.

Are there any human works that are of value in God's eyes?

Yes.

How do we make sense of these things in light of the themes and ideas from St. Paul's Letter to the Romans that we've already discussed?

Well, let's give it a try.

What occasion is there then for boasting? It is ruled out. On what principle, that of works? No, rather on the principle of faith. For we consider that a person is justified by

faith apart from works of the law. Does God belong to Jews alone? Does he not belong to Gentiles, too? Yes, also to Gentiles, for God is one and will justify the circumcised on the basis of faith and the uncircumcised through faith. Are we then annulling the law by this faith? Of course not! On the contrary, we are supporting the law. Romans 3:27-:31

Does this blessedness apply only to the circumcised, or to the uncircumcised as well? Now we assert that "faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness." Under what circumstances was it credited? Was he circumcised or not? He was not circumcised, but uncircumcised. And he received the sign of circumcision as a seal on the righteousness received through faith while he was uncircumcised. Thus he was to be the father of all the uncircumcised who believe, so that to them (also) righteousness might be credited, as well as the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised, but also follow the path of faith that our father Abraham walked while still uncircumcised. Romans 4:9-:12

So in Romans 3:27-:31 and 4:9-:12 St. Paul talks about circumcision. In 3:27-:31 he talks about a law that applies to Jews and not to Gentiles. So Paul is saying our justification by faith has nothing to do with circumcision or the other aspects of the Jewish ritual law. (See last week's discussion of Acts 10:1-11:18 and 15:1-:35 http://www.sspeterandpaul.net/gfw/week4_4_23_09.pdf). These external and ceremonial works do not fundamentally impact our salvation. Catholics and Protestants are in total agreement here. The ceremonial and ritual works of the Old Testament are not the basis of our justification.

Paul's discussion in the opening chapters of Romans does go far beyond just a focus on the inadequacy of the Old Testament ritual law. He shows us the complete and total failure of any and all human efforts when it comes to receiving God's salvation. Paul has shown us the uselessness of placing our trust in anything but Christ's saving work on the cross. Again, Catholics and Protestants are essentially in agreement here. Our salvation is grounded in nothing but Christ's saving work on the cross.

So what is the difference between the Catholic and Protestant positions?

Let's go back to Romans 2.

By your stubbornness and impenitent heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself for the day of wrath and revelation of the just judgment of God, who will repay everyone according to his works: eternal life to those who seek glory, honor, and immortality through perseverance in good works, but wrath and fury to those who selfishly disobey the truth and obey wickedness. Romans 2:5-:8

For it is not those who hear the law who are just in the sight of God; rather, those who observe the law will be justified. For when the Gentiles who do not have the law by nature observe the prescriptions of the law, they are a law for themselves even though they do not have the law. They show that the demands of the law are written in their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or

even defend them on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge people's hidden works through Christ Jesus. Romans 2:13-:16

There are two main ways to understand Paul's references to those who receive eternal life because they "seek glory, honor, and immortality through perseverance in good works" , and his references to "those who observe the law" and as a result are justified. The typical Protestant view is to see this as a rhetorical device. If anyone did observe God's moral law they would be saved, but no one does so the number of people who fall into these categories is zero.

The Catholic view is different, more subtle, and thankfully (I would say) correct. But how can this be true? How can we understand this in a way that does not take away the fact of our complete dependence on Jesus Christ? Martin Luther and John Calvin made serious errors when they taught the non-biblical doctrine of salvation by faith alone. But those who understand salvation in a way which gives human beings credit we do not deserve have just as surely fallen away from a truly Catholic and biblical understanding of faith and works.

So as Catholics we are supposed to believe that there are people who do God's law, who do fall into the categories Paul described in Romans 2. We believe what St. James wrote:

Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by the works. Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called "the friend of God." See how a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. James 2:21-:24

How do we reconcile James and the 1st half of Romans 2 with the rest of what we read in Romans?

To resolve this dilemma, and to wrap this evening's session up, let's go 1st to 1 Corinthians 3, and then to Romans 8, and then back to Romans 6.

What is Apollos, after all, and what is Paul? Ministers through whom you became believers, just as the Lord assigned each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God caused the growth. Therefore, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who causes the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters are equal, and each will receive wages in proportion to his labor. For we are God's co-workers; you are God's field, God's building. According to the grace of God given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building upon it. But each one must be careful how he builds upon it, for no one can lay a foundation other than the one that is there, namely, Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or straw, the work of each will come to light, for the Day will disclose it. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire (itself) will test the quality of each one's work. If the work stands that someone built upon the foundation, that person will receive a wage. 1 Corinthians 3:5-:14

So according to this passage those who work on God's behalf, even Apostles, aren't anything. So Paul essentially says they are nothing, and goes on to say that anything they do that is of value can only be built on the foundation of Jesus Christ. This is completely consistent with what St. Paul has said in Romans and is in line with the common Catholic and Protestant beliefs about human works that we've already discussed. But Paul goes on to say that we can build on this foundation, and he even describes God's response to this work as the giving of a wage. So Paul is talking about people doing work, and being rewarded for this work by God.

What works is this referring to?

Not merely external ritual or ceremonial works.

Not works done through our natural human abilities.

Works for the Kingdom of God, done by those who recognize that in and of themselves they are nothing, and which are only of value because they build on the foundation of the grace of Jesus Christ.

It is in this context that we can say that works save us. Works done in response to God's grace can draw us closer to God and increase our share in the freely given share of God's life that has been placed within us. That is what being saved by faith and works means, this is where Catholic theology parts ways with Reformation thought. It has do with the value of works done in faith, in humility, and in complete dependence on Jesus Christ. The Protestant Reformers deviated from the mainstream of Christian thought because they were not willing to grant this status to any human efforts. Similarly anyone who goes beyond 1 Corinthians 3 when it comes to the status they grant to human works has deviated from the mainstream of Christian thought.

1 Corinthians 3 helps us to understand the final picture Paul gives us in Romans when it comes to faith and works. We find this in Romans 8, as Paul describes life lived in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Hence, now there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has freed you from the law of sin and death. For what the law, weakened by the flesh, was powerless to do, this God has done: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for the sake of sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the righteous decree of the law might be fulfilled in us, who live not according to the flesh but according to the spirit. For those who live according to the flesh are concerned with the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the spirit with the things of the spirit. The concern of the flesh is death, but the concern of the spirit is life and peace. For the concern of the flesh is hostility toward God; it does not submit to the law of God, nor can it; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh; on the contrary, you are in the spirit, if only the Spirit of God dwells in you. Whoever does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although

*the body is dead because of sin, the spirit is alive because of righteousness. If the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also, through his Spirit that dwells in you. Consequently, brothers, we are not debtors to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. **For if you live according to the flesh, you will die, but if by the spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.** For those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption, through which we cry, "Abba, Father!" The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if only we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. Romans 8:1-:17*

The highlighted and underlined words of Romans 8:13 tell us that if we live according to the flesh, which here does not mean merely the human body but the whole of human nature - body/mind/soul – infected by sin, we will die. This does not mean that by our own efforts we must somehow overcome our tendency to sin. If at this point we were turning back to our own efforts we would be going against everything else Paul had already written in Romans. 8:13 tells us that it is through the Holy Spirit that we put to death the deeds of the body.

So for us to have life within us we must fight against sin, but this isn't to say our salvation comes from anywhere but the grace of Jesus Christ.

Any ability we have to do good or to fight against sin is the result of Christ's life being placed within us. Faith is not merely intellectual assent to an idea, or even a one time experience of conversion. Christian faith is entering into Christ's death and resurrection, so that the life of Jesus Christ might be placed within us. (See the discussion of the sacrament of baptism in our study of the Gospel according to St. John http://www.sspeterandpaul.net/gfw/week3_4_16_09.pdf, as well as the second New Testament session which shows us that salvation is nothing but a sharing in the death and rising of Christ http://www.sspeterandpaul.net/gfw/week2_3_26_09.pdf) Those who have received Christ's life with them are God's adopted children and are able to call upon him as Father. They have gone from being his enemies to being his sons, they have passed from death to life.

It is those who have died and risen with Jesus Christ who are told that they must now live for him by fighting sin:

What then shall we say? Shall we persist in sin that grace may abound? Of course not! How can we who died to sin yet live in it? Or are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life. For if we have grown into union with him through a death like his, we shall also be united with him in the resurrection. We know that our old self was crucified with him, so that our sinful body might be done away with, that we might no longer be in slavery to sin. Romans 6:1-:6

Because we can become God's children, because we have his life within us, we have the chance for the nature of the works we perform to be completely transformed. God's spiritual dead enemies cannot perform works which please him. His children, living in the power of the Holy Spirit, can.

What Paul has taught us in Romans can be summarized, step by step, in this way.

1. All human beings, Jews and Gentiles alike, have sinned in a variety of ways, and sufficiently enough to be deserving of God's condemnation.
2. Our own natural human goodness, as well as the external observance of rituals and ceremonies, is totally useless when it comes to rescuing us from this condemnation.
3. Jesus gave himself as a wrath removing sacrifice so that with the penalty of our sins paid we could be saved by receiving this free gift in faith.
4. The reception of this gift is not merely an act of intellectual assent; it is an entering into Christ's dying and rising which results in our adoption as God's children and the placing of his Spirit within us.
5. God's children, building on the foundation of his grace, and living in the power of the Holy Spirit can perform works which please God.

The status these works (the works referred to in point #5) have in God's eyes leads Catholics to the conclusion that saying we are saved by faith alone is not an accurate way of summing up the biblical depiction of God's work of salvation. This does not do away with the immense common ground Protestants and Catholics share as they stand in opposition to all viewpoints which place greater trust in human efforts than in the grace of Jesus Christ.

Fully understanding the book of Romans might be compared to winning the Olympic marathon. We've now jogged a couple laps around the block, but at least we've gotten off the couch and we're still on our feet.