

THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE ROMANS  
*Commentary by Rev. Msgr. Gregory Mikesch*  
*Lesson 2 - Romans 1:1-17*

**Romans 1:1-7**

The one who had been persecuting the Church is now proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul opens his letter with his own name. Notice that he does not designate a city of origin after his name. There could be several reasons for this: First, even though Paul had never visited Rome, his name could have been known by the Roman community. There were Jewish Christians present who possibly knew Paul. They could have shared their knowledge with the Gentile Christians. Second, it could be that Paul did not want to be identified with a particular city. His ministry was to the Church, and the Church is universal. Third, in the place where we would expect to see the name of a city, we see the phrase, “a servant of Jesus Christ.” This is the primary identification that Paul wants for himself.

The second phrase which Paul uses to identify himself is “called to be an apostle.” An apostle is “one who is sent.” Paul goes on to describe how he was sent to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God. People sometimes ask how Paul could consider himself an apostle, since he was not a member of the original group of twelve. As Paul understood the term “apostle,” there were at least two essential elements: the person had to have been called to proclaim the gospel, and the person had to have seen the Risen Lord. Paul fulfilled both of these requirements, and so he counted himself among the apostles.

The third identifying characteristic used by Paul is that he was “set apart.” To be “set apart” is one of the original meanings of the word “holy.” If something or someone is considered holy, it is because this thing or person is dedicated to God, to be used for a sacred purpose. Paul was “set apart” by God to be used for the sacred purpose of proclaiming the gospel. In this mission he experiences fulfillment and suffering.

Having described himself, Paul now describes his message, the gospel. He says that the gospel was “promised beforehand.” The whole plan of redemption has been in place since the fall of Adam and Eve. God initiated this plan and it is progressing as he intended. By citing the prophets and Holy Scriptures, Paul is showing how his ministry is a continuation of God’s original plan. Paul is in the mode or tradition of the prophets of old, and he now proclaims Jesus, the very one foretold by the prophets.

In verses 3 and 4, Paul speaks of the Davidic family line and the divine sonship of Jesus. These two verses became very significant in later Christology, as the Church struggled to define how the divine and human natures were present in the one person of Jesus. For the savior's sacrificial death to be redemptive, he must represent both humanity and divinity. In his humanity he carried all of our sins to the cross. In his divinity he offered the perfect sacrifice to the Father.

In verse 4, Paul makes reference to the initial thoughts which led to his substitution theology. (see page 5, lesson 1) The Torah had said that anyone who was hanged on a tree, i.e., crucified, was cursed. But here was Jesus, who had been crucified, who was raised up with power in the resurrection. This resurrection is the infinite sign of God's blessing, and so Jesus was not cursed but blessed. This realization caused Paul to change his view of the Torah. The Torah was no longer the perfect description of God's will and activity. The Torah had been supplanted by Jesus. Jesus is now the ultimate sign of God's presence among his people.

This verse also introduces one of the major themes which Paul will develop in his letter. He will repeat numerous times that salvation comes through faith in the person of Jesus Christ. Through his death-resurrection, our redemption was accomplished.

One caution is worth noting here. Sometimes people will interpret verse 4 as saying that Jesus became the Son of God at his resurrection, or that Jesus became divine at the resurrection. This is not what Paul is saying. The second person of the Trinity has always been divine. When the second person took on our human nature, he did not cease to be divine. What Paul is saying is that the resurrection is the ultimate sign of Christ's power over sin and death.

In verse 5, Paul's thought can be summed up in the words "gift" and "response," or as Paul says, "grace and apostleship." Grace is always a free gift and this gift is faith. Paul reminds the Roman Christians, and all Christians, that salvation is not something we earn. Salvation is freely bestowed on us by our loving God. But this gift by its very nature seeks a response. The response is apostleship, a willingness to proclaim what God has done. Paul's unique response is to be the apostle of the Gentiles. His ministry is to bring them to obedience of faith, so that they, too, may honor the name of Jesus. Paul reminds the Romans that they are called to "belong" to Jesus Christ." This is a call to life, to service and ultimately to look upon the face of God.

Paul concludes the introduction of his letter in verse 7 as he wishes them "peace" – in Hebrew "shalom," the fullness of union with God. He repeats that they are called to be saints. So often, saints are thought of as people who have died and are now canonized. But in Paul's use of this term, he means anyone who shares God's life, even while still in this earthly life. (see Romans 15:25, 26, 31)

Finally Paul asks a blessing upon them from “God our Father.” Here Paul is stressing the unity that he shares with the Roman Christians. They may not ever have seen one another, but they are still united in the one Father and one Lord Jesus.

### **Romans 1:8-15**

Paul now offers a prayer of thanksgiving. He is thanking God for the Christians in Rome whose faith is such an example for all believers. Paul offers his thanks to God “through Jesus Christ,” being mindful that there is but one mediator with the Father, Jesus the Lord. We should be aware of this whenever we speak of asking the saints to intercede for us. This should never imply bypassing Jesus. When we speak of praying to the saints or asking their intercession, what we mean is that we are joining our prayers with their prayers. Together we offer praise to the Father through Christ and in his Holy Spirit. It is a prayer of partnership.

There was something extraordinary about the Christian community in Rome. Paul says that their faith is “proclaimed throughout the world.” Paul does not specify why the Roman community was so unique. Was it their charity toward one another? Was it their willingness to suffer martyrdom? Were they unique in their hospitality toward Christians from all over the world, or was it their enthusiasm in proclaiming the gospel message? Perhaps it was a combination of all of these. Whatever this uniqueness was, it motivated both Paul and Peter to leave the city of Jesus’ death and resurrection and take up residence in Rome.

In verse 9, Paul says that he serves God “with my spirit.” This implies an attitude of total dedication. With his entire being, Paul has given himself to God to be of service to the gospel. One element of Paul’s ministry is the constant prayer he offers for the members of the community. In each of his letters, he speaks of remembering them in prayer. This attention to prayer is rooted in the belief that all Christians are intimately united with each other in the person of Jesus.

In this prayer of thanksgiving, Paul mentions four times that he is planning on visiting the Roman Christians. Verse 10 contains the first of these four expressions. Paul prays that it be God’s will that he arrive in Rome. Paul is aware that his entire ministry is guided by the Spirit, and when the time is right the Spirit will lead him to Rome.

Notice the shift which Paul makes in verses 11 and 12. In verse 11 he says that he wants to visit the Romans, so that he can strengthen them in their faith. Then, in verse 12, he speaks of his being strengthened by the Romans. Paul knows the support that comes from Christians joining as a community for worship and faith sharing. He is also aware that he is introducing himself to the Romans by means of this letter. He does not want to appear arrogant as if he has all knowledge and faith, and the Romans have nothing. This is a prudent reflection by Paul as he continues to win the affection of the Romans.

In the parentheses in verse 13, “(but thus far have been prevented),” we have an example of what is called a “divine passive.” The Jewish people had a tremendous respect for God’s name. They would use the passive tense as a way of avoiding the use of his name. For example, if they wanted to say, “God prevented me from doing...” they would make use of the passive and say, “I have been prevented...” The reader would know that God is the active one. Paul uses this technique in his own writings. The idea that God prevented Paul from visiting Rome is consistent with Acts 16:6-7. In these verses St. Luke said that the Spirit of Jesus prevented Paul from preaching in Asia and Bithynia. Paul believed that the Spirit was guiding his ministry, and everything that happened was caused by God.

In verse 14 Paul calls himself a “debtor” to Greeks and barbarians. He considers himself a debtor because of what God did for him in bringing him into the faith. Although the debt is owed to Christ, Paul knows that the way the debt is repaid is by all people. By this time in history, the term Greek was not restricted as a reference to the area of Greece. The Greek culture had become so widespread that it meant any educated person or culture. Even the educated Romans spoke Greek. Paul repeats what he has just said by equating Greeks with the “wise,” and barbarians with the “foolish.”

In verse 15, Paul mentions for the fourth time that he wants to visit the Romans to “proclaim the gospel.” He has just stated that he wants to do this for the wise and the foolish. The Romans would probably have placed themselves among the wise and educated, for they were living in the capital of the empire. And this would be the interpretation that Paul would want them to make, as he seeks to deepen his relationship with them.

### **Romans 1:16-17**

These two verses, 16 and 17, establish the main theme of Paul’s letter. He speaks of the gospel and how faith in the gospel leads a person to salvation.

Paul begins by saying that he is “not ashamed of the gospel.” He might be calling to mind an event which took place in Athens during his second missionary journey. Paul knew that the Athenians prided themselves on their philosophy and intellectual sophistication. Paul tried to preach the gospel to them by means of human knowledge, addressing their philosophical questions. But when he spoke of the resurrection of the body, they summarily dismissed him (Acts 17:32). For the Athenians, the resurrection of the body was not desirable. They looked upon the body as a prison from which to be freed. After this experience Paul said that he would preach nothing “except Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). Though the gospel of Jesus Christ might be “a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles” (1 Corinthians 1:23), for Paul it is the power of God. And it is Paul’s privilege to proclaim it.

In the second part of verse 16, Paul describes the gospel in terms of what it can accomplish, rather than in terms of its content. The gospel is God's power leading a person to eternal life. Paul is thinking of salvation as a future reality. We are redeemed here and now by the death-resurrection of Jesus, but salvation in its fullest sense is something that comes when we pass from this earthly life into the presence of God. Salvation is not something that is earned, it is a gift. It is not something that we do, it is what God does. The Jews are the first to be granted knowledge of salvation because they are the chosen people. But ultimately God's gift is universal.

Verse 17 is the most concise summary of Paul's theology. He says "the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith." Remember that we are equating "righteousness" and "justification." By this term Paul is saying that by the death-resurrection of Jesus, we are put in right relationship with God. We are at peace with God. If we use the term "justification," then we can say that God has justified us. He has made us acceptable in his sight. Again, this is not due to our own initiative, it is God's initiative. This is what God has accomplished through Christ.

The phrase "through faith for faith" has been given many interpretations. The most common one is that life with God is the beginning and end of faith. With the gift of faith, we begin to accept the love which God desires to bestow upon us. If we continue to live this faith, then in the end it will bring us to the fullness of life in heaven. The wonder of this unimaginable gratuity on the part of God is revealed to us in and through the person of Jesus. Jesus is the sign and the reality of God's love for us.

At the end of verse 17, Paul quotes the prophet Habakkuk. The historical setting for this prophetic book has to do with the invasion of Judah by the Chaldeans around the year 600 B.C. The prophet says that the one who remains faithful to Yahweh will survive the invasion. Habakkuk is referring to survival in this earthly life. When Paul uses this quotation, he extends its meaning to eternal life. The one who remains faithful and accepts the righteousness granted by God will live forever.

**Side Note: Septuagint**

When you read scriptural commentaries, you might come across the name "Septuagint." This refers to the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. The empire of Alexander the Great had brought the Greek influence into Egypt. Around the year 250 B.C. in Alexandria, Egypt, Jewish scholars who also spoke Greek, translated the scriptures. The legend associated with this even says that there were seventy translators, and therefore the name "Septuagint." (In some commentaries, LXX is used as an abbreviation for the Septuagint.) This Greek translation was used by the Christian Church in the missionary outreach to the Gentile world.