

Sin * Romans 1-3

March 6, 2022 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

When I was in grade 7-8-9 (somewhere in there), two or three people within our community died in a very short space of time. I came from a tightknit little community like Langford and so losing that many people in such a short period of time was a real blow to my young mind.

And I don't know why but it hit me especially hard. So hard in fact that I had my first experience of clinical depression. I didn't want to get up in the morning; I didn't want to get out of bed and face whatever it was the day held for me, but, being a good student, I got up and got off to school just like it was any other day.

Now eventually my parents figured out that there was something wrong and I started antidepressants for the first time, but that wasn't all that helped me through it. Some people had come into our class and given me this. And there's this little index in the front that says 'Where to find help when you're...' (discouraged, in pain, insecure, lonely) and I looked under 'when you're in sorrow' and it sent me to Romans 8:35-39. (I discovered this week that the post-it note is still there all these years later).

And I took my little children's Bible that I got from Sunday school and read:

35 Who then can ever keep Christ's love from us? When we have trouble or calamity, when we are hunted down or destroyed, is it because he doesn't love us anymore? And if we are hungry or penniless or in danger or threatened with death, has God deserted us?

36 No, for the Scriptures tell us that for his sake we must be ready to face death at every moment of the day—we are like sheep awaiting slaughter; 37 but despite all this, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ who loved us enough to die for us. 38 For I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from his love. Death can't, and life can't. The angels won't, and all the powers of hell itself cannot keep God's love away. Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow, 39 or where we are—high above the sky, or in the deepest ocean—nothing will ever be able to separate us from the love of God demonstrated by our Lord Jesus Christ when he died for us.

And that spoke right to my heart. It gave me courage and strength and confidence, knowing just how deeply God cared for me. I actually wrote 'nothing can separate us from the love of God' on my eraser at school, just to keep that truth close at hand.

And that began my lifelong love of the book of Romans. I'm sure if you went through my Bibles and counted all of the highlighted parts, Romans would be by far, the most highlighted of all. Because this book has everything – it is deeply personal, deeply pastoral, theological and practical. And it has grown with me all through life. There's an old saying that Scripture is shallow enough for a mouse to crawl in but deep enough for an elephant to swim in – and it's true. It spoke to me in my early years – and then I grew – and then it met me in my teens – and

then again and again through life – doctrine and practice – over and over the fundamental aspects of our Christian faith. And so I am excited to share with you the book of Romans under the title – ‘Faith basics.’

Here’s the thing though – Romans is really long. And although some preachers have given Romans a whole year in the pulpit – 52 Sundays in the book of Romans – I fear you might miss the forest for the trees like that. And so we’re going to take a birds-eye view look at the book of Romans and give you the broad strokes – the basics of what it’s saying. And you can see from the outline that I’ve given you, we’re going to be looking specifically at some pretty broad concepts on Sundays. And I really think that each is going to build one on the next, just like our last series.

Now, that being said, Romans is such a rich and meaningful book that I’m going to use Bible Talk Tuesdays to get into some of the details that we’re going to be skipping over. So Sunday and Tuesday are really going to work together here – listen on Sunday to get the basics and then join us on Tuesday to get into some of the deeper questions.

This morning, we are going to begin by looking at the first three chapters of Paul’s letter to the Roman church, because they really work together to make one singular point – all people have sinned. There is no one who has not sinned. All people have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

Now that’s a very counter-cultural idea, isn’t it? We like to think of ourselves as fundamentally good people and we don’t, as a culture, like the idea of sin. We’re a bit like Donald Trump who gave an interview while running for president where he said “Why should I ask for forgiveness when I haven’t done anything wrong?”ⁱ By and large, I think that most people would like to believe that they’re sin-free.

Romans 1-2-and-3 though beg to differ and I want to invite you to Romans 1 to see what I mean. Turn with me to Romans 1 and I do encourage you especially in the book of Romans to have your Bible open in front of you, because in order to paint the broad-strokes of the point that Paul is making, I’m going to have to skip certain parts of the text, but I’d like you to see how it all fits together. So Romans 1 and we’ll start at verses 16 and 17 –

Romans 1:16-17 –

16 I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.

17 For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

(Rom 1:16-17 NIV).

This passage is Paul's thesis statement for the whole letter – The Gospel is GOOD NEWS because it is God's way of saving sinners and making them right with Him by faith. The Good News of the Gospel is that God saves sinners who believe.

But that kind of begs the question – Are we really sinners? And do we need salvation? Why do we need forgiveness if we're not doing anything wrong? Paul's going to tell us – starting in verse 18. And the way he sets it up is really interesting – you'll notice in verse 16 – Paul is very specific – salvation is for both Jewish and Gentiles – starting in verse 18, he's going to explain to us why both Jews and Gentiles need salvation.

Gentiles first – and when we say Gentiles – that's us, right? The Bible thinks in two categories – Jewish – God's chosen people – and Gentiles everybody else. So what Paul is saying here is all about us as a non-Jewish people. So he says – verse 18 –

18 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness,

19 since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.

20 For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools

23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

What's Paul saying here? Two things.

1. All that you need to know about God can be seen in the world He created. Go outside – look at the beauty of Creation, the order of the seasons, the infinity of the sky, the reliability of growth and renewal – all these things proclaim that there IS a God and that God is good. Creation tells us that God is there and God is good.

Even so, 2. We as human beings tend to take that awareness of God and set it aside in order to give our attention to lesser things. Like 21 says – 'we intuitively sense that God is there, but we neither glorify Him nor give thanks for what He has done.' Why? Because we don't want to consider the possibility that there is somebody higher than us. We want to be gods in our own right, doing what's right in our own eyes. Because of the Fall, our hearts are all oriented away from God, and so we ignore what Creation tells us about God and go our own way.

But look at what Paul says about that in verse 25 – when we do that... (we)

25 They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator--who is forever praised. Amen.

I think a lot of people think of sin in terms of breaking rules – like don't steal, don't murder, don't drink, don't dance, don't smoke – but those are only symptoms of a larger problem. The orientation of our heart.

We believe in that lie that we know better than God and so we worship and serve ourselves (created beings) rather than the Creator who made us and loves us. That's the essence of sin. Not breaking a bunch of rules; the essence of sin is a heart pointed away from God that honours lesser things leads us into all kinds of rule breaking. We take what we know about God, set it aside and believe in the lie that we have the highest authority in our lives.

And Paul says 'all you Gentiles, you do it all the time.' That's chapter 1, Paul essentially saying 'Here's why Gentiles are sinners.'

But chapter 2, Paul imagines a Jewish audience listening to chapter 1 and feeling quite superior to the Gentiles as God's chosen people, but then he says 'hold on – you're not so hot yourself.'

Look at chapter 2, verse 1.

You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.

Paul is cutting through the façade of religiosity and saying to his Jewish audience, 'just because you're a Jew doesn't make you right with God.' You can't say – 'well I know YHWH so I'll be ok' – and then just go on living however.

Paul goes on in verse 17 –

17 Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and brag about your relationship to God;

18 if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law;

19 if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark,

20 an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth--

21 you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal?

22 You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?

23 You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?

24 As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

Paul says – ‘you Jewish people, you’re just as bad. Maybe even worse, because you devalue God in the eyes of the Gentiles by the way that you act.’

So chapters 1 and 2 are quite easy to summarize – chapter 1 - Gentiles are sinners — and chapter 2 – Jewish people are sinners too. That’s the first two chapters of Romans and they establish that all of us need saving because all of us are sinners.

Now, in case that wasn’t clear, Paul takes chapter 3 to drive the point home. Chapter 3, verse 9, about halfway through the verse.

9... We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. [But now let me drive home the point-]

10 As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one;

11 there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.

12 All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one" (Rom 3:9-12 NIV).

I put up on Facebook this week a picture from a cereal box looking for ‘a good Canadian’ – ‘the search for genuinely good Canadians’ⁱⁱ I think it said. Paul would look at that and say – ‘doesn’t exist.’ None is righteous, not even one. No one is good, not even one. No one lives up to the moral and ethical purity of the living God.

Now, let’s pause for a minute for a little aside, because this is a complex and complicated idea. Because there’s a sense in which we are all good people. Because of God’s common grace, all people have the capacity to do good things. I mean, you read through the descriptions of people fleeing right now from Ukraine and you hear story after story that renews your hope in the goodness of humanity. We band together to help each other when the going gets tough. As people who are made in the image of God, we all have good in us.

But beneath that, and this is what Paul is talking about, our hearts are all oriented away from God. This is Ephesians 2 from our last series – without Christ, we were dead in sin, following our own desires and stumbling around in the darkness. Yes, we may do good things, but as sinners we are fundamentally disconnected from the source of all goodness in the universe – God. By pursuing lesser things, we separate ourselves from God, to the point that Paul can say – ‘No one seeks after God, not a one. No one is good, not even one.’

And this leads Paul to one of the most famous statements in all of the Bible – it’s easy to remember too – Romans 3:23 - 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23 NIV). All have sinned – Jews and Gentiles, men and women, LGBTQ people and straight people, people who’ve gone to church all their lives and people who’ve never darkened its doorway. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Me and you and you and you.

Well that’s a bummer. And not only that, it’s a problem too, isn’t it? Because – remember chapter 1 verse 28?

18 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness (Rom 1:18 NIV).

Look, we've all at various time ignored what we know to be true about God – we've all 'suppressed the truth of God' - and so all face God's judgment in the end.

That's the point that Paul is driving to in Romans 1-2-3. Romans 1 – Gentiles are sinners. Romans 2 – Jewish people are sinners. Romans 3 – All people are sinners.

But it's only half of the point. And Romans 3:23 is not a whole sentence.

Look at Romans 3:21. Paul takes three chapters to say 'we've gotten ourselves into big trouble as sinners – none of us is righteous in and of ourselves' and then he says –

21 But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. (The OT anticipated this righteousness).

22 This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference,

23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

24 and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

25 God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. (Rom 3:25 NIV). (Rom 3:21-24 NIV).

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. On our own, we have no chance of being morally right enough to deserve God's favour. BUT God freely justifies people by His grace when they believe in Jesus. He takes us as sinners and gives us the goodness that we could never have on our own and could never muster on our own. He forgives our sin and makes us right with Himself, all by faith. We have all sinned, but God will freely save us when we put our faith in Him.

That's the message of the first three chapters of Romans – all have sinned, but all can be saved by trusting in Jesus.

Paul tells us why in verse 25 - God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. (Rom 3:25 NIV).

You know that wrath that was stored up for us as sinners? It fell upon Jesus, who willingly died in our place, so that we could be redeemed, the way the Passover lamb redeemed the Israelites. He laid down His life to make up for the moral deficiency in our lives. To atone for our sins, to clear our ledgers and to turn our hearts back to God.

And notice how God gives it – verse 24 – FREELY, BY HIS GRACE – Paul doesn't want us to miss that point. If we were going to work off our sin, we'd be washing A LOT of dishes – did you ever

do that to your kids? When we were kids, every so often we'd go out to a restaurant and dad would get the bill and then pretend that he'd forgotten his wallet and say – 'I guess we're going to have to go to work doing the dishes.'

If we were going to pay back our rejection of God, we could never do it; the cost is just too high! But God is so rich in mercy, so complete in His love that He gives us this salvation, freely, by grace, when we simply trust our hearts to Jesus to walk in His way.

We have all sinned but we are all saved when we put our faith In Christ, trusting in His atoning sacrifice. That's Romans 1-3.

What do we do about that?

Let me put it to you like this. Before I came to faith, I really wrestled with this idea. The culture all around me said 'pffh – we're not sinners; we're all good people' and yet my conscience kept saying 'are you sure?' I couldn't shake the sense that my life fell short of God's goodness and morality. I knew I was 'socially good;' not so much 'spiritually good.' And that's where the problem lay. I didn't want to admit that I was a sinner, but I knew all too well in my heart that I was running away from God. And yet God came after me, like a good Father, chasing down a prodigal son, and I finally had the courage and humility to say – 'yes I have fallen short of Your glory and yes I am a sinner but You God save sinners. Forgive my sin, make me right with you.' And that changed the course of my life. For better. Eternally. If you're like me before – come over to the other side. God gives this freely as a gift of grace. Take hold of it by grace.

Now, I know that many of us are here, so let me give you three points of application – one for how you think, one for how you feel and one for how you act.

We have all sinned and salvation is only through faith in Jesus – how does that shape the way we think? Well, it means that we start to see the world in theological terms – understanding that we've all sinned and that's a big reason why the world is the way it is. When you make this part of your worldview, all of a sudden, the world makes a lot of sense – why one nation would invade another, why people would take advantage of others, why injustice and intolerance are so common. It's because we've all sinned and put our own failed purposes before God's good master purpose for the world. That's why the world is as it is. We are all sinners and that's why things are like this. That changes the way we think.

Feel – how does this change how we feel – well, listen – if you believe in Jesus, that means that the Father above loves you deeply. It means that Galatians 2:20 – the Son of God loves YOU and died for YOU. Forget what the world says about you – you are loved lavishly as a child of God. You are an absolute treasure in Him. How do I know? Because He laid down His life as an atoning sacrifice for you – an offering to make up for your sin and give you a new start. That's the extent of His love for you! Find grace in that. Find satisfaction in that. Enjoy being valued by God. Cultivate thankfulness for this free gift. Paul says in Romans 2:4 that the Jewish people showed [... contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience (Rom 2:4 NIV)' by

saying one thing and doing another; don't take this gift for granted, but say thank you every day for His give of grace.

And finally – act – how does this change the way we act? Two things – one – there's always the possibility that we might start to act like the Jewish audience that Paul imagines at the beginning of chapter 2. They think they've got it all together and so they look down their noses at these 'sinners,' but look – we've all been there. That was us before Jesus. Different sins, same heart condition, oriented away from God. Nobody here is like this but it bears repeating – no holier than thou stuff. They need grace just as much as we do.

And two – a little relatedly – no hypocrisy stuff either. Again that imaginary Jewish audience says they're sacred but acts like scoundrels – nope – walk the talk. God gives salvation freely by grace to all who will receive it; receive it and then walk in a way that is consistent with the humility, selflessness and love inherent in it. Live your life like Jesus did.

We have all sinned, but God will deliver everyone who believes in and walks with Him.

The Lord's Supper

As we gather together here today, we remember the sacrifice of atonement that made us right with God. Our sin separated us from God but Jesus' death on the Cross paid the price and brought us back to Him. He put us 'at one' with God. If you have believed and been made right with God by faith then you are welcome at this Table today.

Let's prepare our hearts for Communion by praying the prayer of confession found in the bulletin.

Almighty God, maker of Heaven and Earth, the world that You created reveals who You are. We see your eternal power and divine nature in every snowstorm, sunrise and newborn being.

And yet Lord, all too often, we neither glorify You as God nor give thanks to You as we should and so our foolish hearts are darkened. We exchange the truth of God for a lie and worship and serve created things instead of You in all your righteous goodness.

*We have sinned and fallen short of your glory.
I have sinned and fallen short of your glory.*

And yet You Lord are gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. You gave your Son as an atoning sacrifice to deal with our sin so that we could receive a righteousness not of our own, but as a gift from You.

Thank You for this redemption, freely given by grace.

Thank You for this forgiveness that makes me right with You.

I put my trust in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me.

I commit myself, having been made new, to live by faith in the Son of God.

In His name we pray, Amen.

BREAD

There's a picture going around social media right now of the President of Ukraine sitting at a table in army fatigues with a number of his soldiers and I think it's such a poignant image. These are men who are willing to lay down their lives for the benefit of their country. And here they are, gathered together over a meal.

Whenever I see that picture, it makes me think of the Last Supper. Except that at the Last Supper, there was only one man willing to lay down His life, and rather than facing the weight of the Russian Army, He was facing the weight of every sin, in every time and place, the wrath of God poured out against all unrighteousness in the world, even that being perpetrated around the world today. He was facing down the very wrath of God, and yet He still thought of you, thought of me and chose to bear that weight, so that we might live. Imagine the courage that it took, the steadfast love that would move Him to lay down His life for me. Let's take the bread together and pray.

Prayer – Jesus, Your word says that those who ignore Your righteous decrees deserve death and that's all of us. We've all ignored Your Word and gone our own way. And yet, You, Lord, are so gracious, that You chose to die instead of us. You allowed Your body to be broken as bread, so that our lives, body and soul, could be made whole. May this bread and You, our living bread, nourish us and prepare us for the righteous life of faith that You have set before us. Amen.

The Words of Institution for the Bread.

Prayer – Again Lord, Your Word says that atonement comes through faith in your blood. You laid down Your life to give ME life and Your blood sealed the covenant that made it so. May Your life now flow in my veins to live out my faith and to persist in doing good and seeking glory, honour and immortality.

We pray in Jesus' name.

The Words of Institution for the Cup.

Gettys Behold the Lamb

BENEDICTION

2 John 3 – May grace, mercy, and peace be with you all, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father’s Son, in truth and love.

ⁱ <https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-on-god-i-dont-like-to-have-to-ask-for-forgiveness-2016-1>

