

The Gospel First and Always

October 1, 2023

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Romans 1:1-17

Session Outline

1. The Gospel of God (Romans 1:1-6)
2. Encouragement for the Church (Romans 1:7-15)
3. Not Ashamed (Romans 1:16-17)

Theological Theme

The gospel is centered on Jesus Christ, and He makes all the difference. Christians are to be like Paul, who was ready at a moment's notice to talk about Jesus and make disciples without being ashamed of who Jesus was to him.





Leader Guide

The Gospel First and Always

Introduction

According to a study by Lifeway Research and Evangelism Explosion, Americans are widely accepting of spiritual conversations in a variety of settings. Although the study identified no specific reason, it also reveals that unchurched people feel curious about the religious devotion of others. This curiosity about faith should be an open door to spiritual conversations, but those same people who admit to being curious shared that they rarely have spiritual conversations with their Christian friends.¹

This study reveals that the lack of religious conversations is not about religious liberty or faith being off-limits; it is about Christians not bringing up their faith in conversations. Church people are not talking about Jesus, and that needs to change. Living out our calling to reach the world and make disciples requires being intentional about having gospel conversations like Paul was.

-  When did you last have a spiritual conversation with someone outside of the church?
-  What do you think stops Christians from having more gospel conversations? Why does it matter?

Session Summary


Paul wrote the letter to the Roman church for encouragement and teaching. He was clear about the point of the gospel, where the message came from, and the power found in the gospel message. Jesus Christ is both human and God. He demonstrated resurrection power when He rose from the dead after paying for the sins of mankind on the cross. This is the basis of the gospel of God.

All believers have opportunities to talk about their faith with those who don't know Christ. Paul wrote strong words about the need to be ready to preach and live unashamed of the gospel. His words remind us of the need to make disciples both near and far and of the call to live out our faith in a bold way.

1. The Gospel of God (Romans 1:1-6)

Most scholars believe Paul wrote the book of Romans from the city of Corinth. The book begins with an introduction from the writer, who first described himself as “a servant of Jesus Christ” (v. 1) and then as one called to be an apostle. He said he had been set apart for the gospel of God. The book of Romans starts with a focus on God and continues that theme throughout the book.

Paul pointed out that the gospel was not new and was not created by man. To understand the gospel of God, we need to realize it was not a plan B but was always part God’s plan, with Jesus at the center. Nothing about the gospel is accidental or impromptu, and man has not dictated or changed the details.


 Why is it important to recognize the gospel has always been a part of God’s plan? How does that challenge the way you’ve viewed the gospel in the past?

Jesus Christ is the center of the gospel. He had a human origin as a descendant of David according to the flesh, but He also is the divine Son of God. In a world where people tend to worship those who are elevated in some way according to worldly power, success, or fame, it is imperative to understand Jesus stands alone as the only person worthy of worship and glory.

 How does the truth about Jesus surpass any accolades given to or achievements made by people?

Paul highlighted Jesus’s resurrection from the dead. This is another defining factor in recognizing the power of God at work in the gospel. Only God has the power to raise dead. This reality gave evidence of Jesus’s deity several times in ministry in places like John 11 when He raised Lazarus. Following the death of Jesus, it was the power of the Holy Spirit that raised Him from the dead. The Spirit of God raised the Son of God from the dead. This is a reminder that God has given this power to every follower of Jesus who has received the gift of the Holy Spirit. He is the same One who supplied the power to raise Jesus back to life.


The gospel is not just a message we hear but is meant to affect us personally. Paul shared about the impact of the gospel in the first-person plural referring to himself and the church who had been changed by the message of the gospel. Once you understand the grace given to you through the gospel, your response should be obedience to go and share that message with others.

 Application: What sticks out to you from Paul's opening words about the gospel that you need to apply to your life?


2. Encouragement for the Church (Romans 1:7-15)

Following his introduction, Paul addressed his target audience—the church in Rome. No evidence points to Paul having founded the Roman church, as was the case with many of the other churches to whom he wrote letters. But Paul knew of this church and even spoke about some of the believers by name. Regardless of his type of connection with the Roman church, Paul knew God loved them and called them to be saints, along with all others who have been saved by Jesus.

Paul began with a familiar greeting. The language of grace and peace was not in reference to a wish or blessing from man but referred to certain gifts from God the Father. These words carried weight because grace and peace from God have been secured by the finished work of Jesus, which is the gospel message.


 How has Jesus secured grace and peace from God for all believers? How do these gifts affect the daily lives of Christians?

Paul went on to affirm the church in Rome for their reputation. It seems that the faith of this church had gained attention on a larger scale. Paul's words here were not meant to inflate his readers' confidence in themselves but to encourage further confidence in God, who had given them grace and grown their faith in Christ. In the face of all that was ungodly in Rome, these Christ followers were living out their faith sincerely. That is exactly what we are called to do today. The world we live in is often aggressive in its opposition to faith in God. Believers have opportunity to stand firm for the truth in such a way that people take notice, and God receives glory.

 What are some countercultural ways God calls us to live for Him in a time when most people are focused on fulfilling their own desires?


Paul offered encouragement by telling this church he prayed for them regularly. We should follow his example and be people who pray for individual and churches and the body of Christ as a whole. Calling God as his witness shows the seriousness with which Paul prayed for these believers. This wasn't just passing lip service to prayer—Paul meant it. Undoubtedly, God had answered Paul's prayers by blessing and growing the church in Rome. Prayer matters.

Paul also made clear his desire to come and see the church in person. He referenced an attempt to come to Rome before and being deterred. Paul wanted to come to Rome to encourage the church and to receive encouragement from them. When we fellowship with likeminded believers, it can be a time of strengthening and refreshing for both parties. Paul said he was ready to preach the gospel in Rome when the time came. Paul sought to encourage and support the church in Rome, both through this letter and his desire to visit them in person, by reminding them of the truth of the gospel.

 Application: How can you encourage a fellow church member this week by reminding them of the truth of the gospel?

3. Not Ashamed (Romans 1:16-17)

According to the Lifeway study mentioned in our introduction, many who profess to be Christians don't talk about their faith. One possible reason for this may be a sense of embarrassment or shame about some aspect of their faith. Maybe they are worried what people will think or worried that they won't share Jesus in the right way. Paul's words remind us that the power we trust in as we have gospel conversations is not ours but the very power of God for salvation. If we have trouble believing in the power of gospel, it may serve us well to remember who we were before believing the gospel and consider who we might be today without it.


 What is your biggest obstacle to sharing your faith with others? How does Paul's reminder about the power found in the gospel encourage you?

The gospel changes lives and gives freedom. Jesus is the answer to the sin problem of the world and still we let others' opinions keep us from talking about this amazing, good news. In contrast, Paul seemingly couldn't stop sharing his faith with others. As is evidenced throughout the New Testament, Paul was extremely aware of who he was without Christ and wanted to tell others the difference the gospel made in his life.

Paul called the gospel the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. This power is inherent to the gospel. We don't create it or bring it. Our job is to refrain from hindering the power in any way. As the only true message of salvation, the gospel often receives opposition as the world wants to believe they can find or achieve salvation in other ways. That is not unlike the world in Paul's day, but he continued to emphasize Jesus as the only way to salvation so there would be no confusion.


Not Ashamed

The gospel is the almighty power of God directed toward the salvation of men and women. Paul's understanding of the gospel made him not yield to the temptation to be ashamed of the gospel but live to proclaim it.

-  What are some ways people try to find salvation outside of Jesus today? How does trusting in God's power for salvation take the pressure off us in having gospel conversations?

When we think of God's power, we might think of creation, of God parting the Red Sea, or maybe God's power to heal the sick. The gospel is the power of God to salvation, and in it, we see God's power to cancel sin, defeat death, and make sinners sons and daughters of God. That is God's amazing power!

We need not be afraid to share the gospel because it is true. Jesus has triumphed over sin. Jesus has triumphed over the grave. Jesus is at the right hand of the Father interceding for us right now. God will vindicate our faith in the last day, and He will bless our testimonies now to bring others to Jesus.

-  Application: How are you encouraged toward seeking further gospel conversations in response to today's study?

Conclusion

The world we live in is confused about many things. There are a wide variety of messages being taught about finding salvation, satisfaction, and even eternal life in many things that are not Jesus. The world Paul lived in was full of false teaching and he spent much of his time preaching, teaching, and writing about the gospel that changed his life so drastically.

We are all called to obey the Great Commission and make disciples as we are going about our lives (see Matthew 28:18-20). Yet many Christians have few to no conversations about spiritual things with those outside our church. Paul focused on the true meaning of the gospel. He clearly shared the truth and boldly proclaimed Jesus every chance he got.

We should evaluate our lives to discern what keeps us from talking about the power of God that is available for anyone who believes. The same power of the Holy Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in believers and makes all the difference. Once we recognize the calling and command of God to share our faith, we can look to Paul and follow his example as we trust God's power for salvation and live obediently for Him.

- ❓ What challenges you the most from today's study?
- ❓ How can we as a group encourage and support one another toward seeking more gospel conversations?
- ❓ Who can you plan to have a gospel conversation with this week?

Prayer of Response

Thank God for His plan of salvation. Confess your lack of spiritual conversations and ask for boldness like Paul so you can be more intentional about making disciples as you go about daily life.

Additional Resources

- *Turning Everyday Conversations into Gospel Conversations* by Jimmy Scroggins
- *Tell Someone* by Greg Laurie
- *Evangelism* by Mack Stiles

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



Questions to Guide Your Group's Discussion

1. What does this passage say?
2. What did this passage mean to its original audience?
3. What does this passage tell us about God?
4. What does this passage tell us about man?
5. What does this passage demand of me?
6. How does this passage change the way I relate to people? (*How can you use this information this week at work or with friends and neighbors?*)
7. How does this passage prompt me to pray to God?

*Adapted from Seven Arrows by Matt Rogers pastor of The Church at Cherrydale, Greenville, SC

For Next Week

Session Title

- Gospel Conversations Part 1: Know the Gospel

Main Passages

- Ephesians 2:1-10

Session Outline

1. Dead in Sin (Ephesians 2:1-3)
2. Alive in Christ (Ephesians 2:4-7)
3. For God's Glory (Ephesians 2:8-10)

Memorize

For I am not ashamed of the gospel,, because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew, and also to the Greek.

- Romans 1:16

Historical Context of Romans

Purpose

Paul's purpose in writing Romans can be identified from his direct statements in the text and inferred from the content. He expressly wrote that he wanted to impart spiritual strength to the believers at Rome (1:11–12; 16:25–26). He asked for prayer for the difficult task he was undertaking (15:30) and that he might be able to come and see them (15:32). He hoped to enlist the Roman churches to support a mission to the west (15:23–29). The content of the letter shows that the churches experienced tensions between believers from different backgrounds. Paul wanted them to be united and to avoid dissension and false teaching (16:17–18). The content also reveals his exposition of what is essential Christianity and what are matters of indifference.

Author

Paul the apostle is the stated and indisputable author of the book of Romans. From the book of Acts and statements in Romans, we learn that Paul wrote this letter while he was in Corinth and on his way to Jerusalem in the spring of AD 57, to deliver an offering from the Gentile churches to poor Jewish Christians (Ac 20:3; Rm 15:25–29).

Setting

All of Paul's writings grew out of his missionary/pastoral work and were about the problems and needs of local churches. The book of Romans is also of this genre, but it is the least "local" in the sense that Paul had not yet been to Rome. This letter was his opportunity to expound the good news message (the gospel). He could discuss the essence of sin, the salvation accomplished on the cross, the union of the believer with Christ, how the Spirit works in the Christian to promote holiness, the place of the Jewish people in God's plan, future things, and Christian living or ethics. Though Paul did not write Romans as a systematic theology, his somewhat orderly exposition has been the fountain for the development of that discipline.

Special Features

Paul's letter to the Roman house churches has been preeminent among the New Testament writings for its theological and pastoral influence. It focuses on the doctrine of salvation, including the practical implications for believers as they live out the salvation given to them through Jesus Christ.

Extended Commentary

Romans 1:1-17

1:1 Paul was an apostle by the call of God. In God's summons of Paul from his previous way of life, he commissioned him as an apostle (Ac 9). Paul had been assigned by God to proclaim and teach the good news about Jesus Christ—the gospel of God.

1:2 The good news is the fulfillment of the OT prophecies, and the OT is not correctly understood apart from the NT.

1:3 Jesus is God's Son in a different sense than are Christians, who become children of God due to spiritual new birth (Jn 3) and adoption into God's family (Rm 8:15). Jesus is God's Son first by being the eternal Son and Second Person of the Trinity (Is 9:6; Gl 4:4), and second by being the virgin-born incarnate Son, conceived as the Spirit came to Mary (Lk 1:35). Jesus was also the messianic Son who came in the family line of David (2Sm 7:12–16; Ps 2:6–7; 89:26–29, 36). Flesh here means the real human nature of Jesus.

1:4 Jesus in his humiliation was despised and rejected (Is 53:3) and had the form of a servant (Php 2:7). He spoke as the Son of the Father (Jn 5:19–23), but he was persecuted because “he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal to God” (Jn 5:18). At the cross, his sonship was called into question (Mt 27:39–43). But the Spirit of holiness (another title for the Holy Spirit) raised Jesus from the dead. This event testified that he was as God's unique Son exalted over death and Satan, and invested with all power (Mt 28:18).

1:5 The obedience of faith (cp. 10:16; 15:18) is best understood as the faith that issues in obedience. Paul's ministry sought to bring all the Gentiles to obey Jesus and his Father.

1:6 Christians are called by Jesus. This calling is not a mere invitation. It is instead a sovereign summons that results in salvation as people respond in faith. By this language Paul reminded the Roman believers that God took the initiative in saving them.

1:7 Called as saints does not mean called “to be” saints, as if this is something Christians might become in the future. Neither does it signify an honorary title or an unusually holy person. Rather, all Christians are saints by the sovereign call of God. They have been set apart just as the nation of Israel was set apart (Lv 11:44; 19:2). Christians are those who have the forgiveness of sins and are sanctified by faith in Jesus (Ac 26:18) and therefore are “saints” (1Co 1:2). The Christian belongs to Jesus and is set apart from the world.

1:8 It was common in ancient letters to begin with a prayer. Paul adopted the form, but his prayers were never just formal. As there is joy among the angels at the conversion of one sinner (Lk 15:10), Paul rejoiced over the fact that there were house churches in the capital city of the Roman Empire. He was thankful for the spread of the faith.

1:9–10 Paul continually prayed for the Roman Christians in his spirit. Though too often perceived as otherwise, prayer is just as necessary as teaching or preaching in Christian ministry. Paul had wanted to come to Rome, but God was in control of all his circumstances. The believer must seek God's will in his activities (Jms 4:13–17).

1:11–12 Paul was sure he would bring certain benefits or blessings as he taught among the house churches of Rome. The spiritual gift mentioned here was not the special gift(s) in 1Co 12–14 which were given by God (1Co 12:11) but gifts that Christians gave to one another. Paul was certain that the Roman Christians would minister to him since every part of the body of Christ has useful functions in relation to other parts (1Co 12:12–27).

1:13 How is it that the most important city in the world had not yet had a visit from an apostle? Why especially had the “apostle to the Gentiles” (11:13) not come? Paul often planned to come, but these plans had not come to fruition. In the mysterious providence of God it all worked out for the best. After all, Paul's delay in fulfilling his trip to Rome caused him to write this wonderful letter. Furthermore, he eventually went to Rome as a prisoner (Ac 25:10–28:16), spending two years in the city preaching the gospel “without hindrance” (Ac 28:31). Believers must learn that God works out events in ways we could never imagine (Rm 8:28).

1:14 Paul's conversion placed a special commission and obligation on him (Ac 9:15; 13:47; 1Co 9:16; Gl 2:8–9). The revelations granted to him gave him greater responsibility. His training and Roman citizenship equipped him to reach all varieties of pagans, including the educated and the barbarians. These barbarians included people from Spain and Asia Minor (Ac 14:11–18).

1:15 Paul was eager to fulfill his obligation because he expected God to do great things through his ministry.

1:16 Why might someone be ashamed of the gospel? On the surface, the gospel seems like a very strange message. It is about a Jewish carpenter and teacher who was put to death on a cross by Pontius Pilate, Roman governor of Judea in AD 26–36. The message says that this man Jesus was raised from the dead and is now Lord—the (Gk) kurios. This title was used of God in the Greek Bible and was applied to the emperor by some Romans. Paul himself wrote that this message seemed foolish to Gentiles (1Co 1:23) and was a stumbling block to Jews. A crucified Messiah seemed to be a contradiction in terms to the Jews. A crucified Jew seemed like foolishness to the Romans, who despised Jews in general. Anyone who was crucified was considered among the lowest members of society. Paul had no confidence in his rhetorical skills to overcome the human objections to the message, but he knew the power of the Spirit to change the lives of people as they heard the good news about Jesus's death and resurrection. People are saved by faith, but faith is not the cause of salvation. The cause of salvation is the grace of God, the will of God, and the power of God working through the message.

1:17 The righteousness of God was the core of Paul's message. Martin Luther came to better understand God's grace as he studied this verse in the original Greek rather than in the Latin translation. It forever changed his view of God. God's righteousness can be understood in several ways. First, God always does what is right and can be said to have righteousness as one of his attributes (Dt 32:4; Ps 119:142). Second, since God always does what is right, his actions or activities are sometimes identified as his righteousness

(Is 45:8; 46:13; 51:5–6, 8; 56:1). Third, God’s righteousness is as a gift from him to us, justifying us in his sight. “Justification” is a courtroom term signifying that a judge declares a person to be “right” or “just.” In the gospel, God reveals his righteousness (his nature, his activity, and his gift of right status) by faith. In the course of this letter, Paul will explain how God is able to declare sinners to be righteous because of Jesus’s work on the cross. From faith to faith emphasizes that the entire process of being declared righteous comes to us from start to finish by faith.²

References

1. Aaron Earls, “Most Open to Spiritual Conversations, Few Christians Speaking,” Lifeway Research, February 22, 2022, <https://research.lifeway.com/2022/02/22/most-open-to-spiritual-conversations-few-christians-speaking/?ecid=PDM269104&bid=-2056320497>.
2. *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).

Author Bios

Jimmy Scroggins (Turning Everyday Conversations into Gospel Conversations)

Jimmy Scroggins serves as the Lead Pastor of Family Church in West Palm Beach, FL. Jimmy is married to Kristin and they are blessed with eight children – James, Daniel, Jeremiah, Isaac, Stephen, Anna Kate, Mary Claire and Caleb. Jimmy earned his PhD from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY. Jimmy is dedicated to building families in South Florida through a network of neighborhood churches. His vision is to see each Family Church campus on mission to help people in their community discover and pursue God’s design. The Family Church Network has a vision to plant 100 churches in South Florida.

Greg Laurie (Tell Someone)

Greg Laurie is the senior pastor of Harvest Christian Fellowship in Riverside and Irvine California. In 1990, Laurie began holding large-scale public evangelistic events called Harvest Crusades. Since that time, more than 5,242,000 people have attended Harvest Crusades events around the United States, and in Australia and New Zealand. More importantly, more than 439,900 people have registered professions of faith through these outreaches. Greg and his wife Cathe have two sons, Christopher and Jonathan, and five grandchildren.

Mack Stiles (Evangelism)

J. Mack Stiles is a pastor of a church in Iraq. He used to work as CEO of Gulf Digital Solutions and general secretary for the Fellowship of Christian UAE Students (FOCUS) in the United Arab Emirates. He worked for many years with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in the United States. He is the author of *Marks of the Messenger* and *Speaking of Jesus*.