

Romans Lesson 1

Romans 1:17 - The Key That Unlocked the Reformation

The Letter of Paul to the Romans can be linked to all the great revivals and reform movements in church history. Romans has also been the written force behind the most significant conversions in church history. The first great theologian of the fourth century who is still the greatest theologian in church history was Augustine. Augustine was a respected teacher of rhetoric in Rome, Carthage and Milan. By his own admission, Augustine led “a sinful and immoral” life, but Ambrose and his other friends witnessed to him to accept Christ. They gave him a Bible and he went into a garden to contemplate becoming a Christian at the age of 32. In his book *CONFESSIONS*, Augustine wrote that while he was in the garden he heard some children singing “Take it and read” so he picked up the Bible and began reading from Romans 13. When he got to “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the lusts of the body”, he wrote that “a light infused into my heart, and all the gloom of doubt vanished away”. He received Jesus as his Savior and went on to become the Bishop of Hippo and the church’s most outstanding author and theologian.

Over a thousand years later, an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther was teaching Romans at a Seminary in Wittenberg, Germany. Romans 1:17 talked about “the righteousness of God”, which stirred up his soul. He had always defined the righteousness of God in a very negative way assuming it meant that God was righteous in punishing unrighteousness. This bothered him because it just didn’t fit Paul’s message in Romans. Night and day he thought, dwelled on, and studied Romans until the light bulb came on that the righteousness of God is a gift we receive by faith. We are justified by God through our faith. Luther said that “I felt myself reborn and to have gone through open doors into Paradise”. Before, the righteousness of God had filled him with anger, but now he was filled with God’s love, and he became a different man. Like all his peers, Luther had previously tried through piety and hard work to earn righteousness, but he had always felt convicted of his sin and the lusts in his heart. He had been frustrated because he couldn’t earn what he knew he needed. He was also very candid about the hypocrisy and fake piety in the leaders of the church at that time. Luther went on to spark the Reformation in 1517, and to become the leader for the Protestant Church movement.

In 1738, while listening to the reading of Martin Luther’s commentary on Romans, John Wesley felt his heart “warmed” as he was converted to true Christianity. After his born again experience while studying Romans, Wesley was the catalyst of the great evangelical movement of the 18th century. Amazingly, he had been ordained an Episcopal priest in 1728, and he led the “Holy Club” at Oxford, which was dedicated to the pursuit of a devout Christian life. He was a missionary to Savannah, Georgia for two years. He served as a parish priest in Savannah from 1735-1737, but in 1738 he had what he called his “evangelical conversion” at a Bible study on Romans. Wesley himself said he was not a Christian until May 24, 1738, and “I trusted in Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was mine that He had taken away my sins and saved me.” These are just a few of the wonderful Christian leaders whose lives were changed by studying the book of Romans, and it is interesting to see how many of them actually felt the change occurring in their heart. This affirms what Paul wrote in Romans 1:16, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes”. The Word of God is a form of God’s power to change hearts and minds for Christ. Paul, the author of Romans, had personally experienced this life-changing power in his own life, and he had seen it working in literally thousands of lives throughout the Middle East, Asia Minor, and Greece. The Greek word translated power in English is “dunamis” which we derive our word for dynamic and dynamite. The good news about Christ has a power to change the inner person—just like Augustine, Luther, and Wesley testified to in their own lives. Paul said he was “not ashamed of the gospel”, because he was confident of that explosive power to change lives. He used that term “not ashamed” because he knew that many of the religious, pious people were offended by the gospel because they held that they kept the law and were good people and had earned righteousness. The very idea that that scoundrel Paul had said that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” to upstanding religious people like themselves was outrageous. The gospel of grace offended them as it does the majority today. Paul knew that the Jews in Rome would persecute him, and the Romans would ridicule him, yet he couldn’t wait to get there because he knew the power of God would save lives.

Romans 1:16-17, the Theme of Romans

The theme of Paul’s Letter to the Romans is that the righteousness of God is revealed and received by faith, and that the righteous should then live by faith as well. To understand and respond to this truth is to have one’s time and eternity altered. In Romans 1:16-17, Paul used four key words—power, salvation, faith, and righteousness. Paul had been imprisoned, beaten, stoned, mocked, and run out of town many times, but he had always witnessed God radically changing lives through the POWER of the Word of God. All people have a desire to improve themselves, and this is the premise of advertising. We want to feel better, look better, and live better, so book stores are full of self help schemes, philosophies, and religions, but none of

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them have the power to remove guilt and sin. None of them can make us feel right with God, and none can give us eternal life. People cannot change themselves in this way---only God can change hearts and grant us eternal life. Good works can't do it, the church can't do it, religion can't do it, but the POWER of God can do it. A leopard can't change its spots, but the God that created the leopard can change them. This POWER was revealed when Paul first came to Corinth (1 Cor.2:1-4). Paul was alone and scared to death as he related that he was weak and fearful, and even trembling; but God demonstrated the power of the message of the gospel such that many people believed and were saved. Therefore, their faith did not rest on the wisdom of men, but in the POWER of God.

The second word in Romans 1 we must understand is SALVATION. Verse 16 tells us that the power of the gospel results in our SALVATION. The idea here is that we are delivered from death, rescued from the penalty of sin, and God has declared us justified before His court.

The third word we must pay attention to in Romans 1 is FAITH. FAITH, trust, and belief are used interchangeably. We believe the message of the Gospel, we receive it as ours by faith, and we trust our lives to it. It is interesting that God does not tell people to first behave, no, they must first believe. Efforts at behavior will always fall short of God's perfect standard. Therefore, in God's eyes, good works are a product of salvation, not a means to salvation. We must first have our hearts changed, and then we can live for the Lord. Spiritually, what we do is based on what we believe. The world always says that "Seeing is believing", but in God's economy "Believing is seeing".

The fourth key word in this passage is RIGHTEOUSNESS. The definition of this word changed Martin Luther's life, as well as all who believe. Martin Luther had been falsely taught that the righteousness in Romans 1:17 was God's wrath against sinners, or even worse that this righteousness was earned by good religious people. The Spirit of God revealed to him that the RIGHTEOUSNESS of God is given to all who believe. Faith activates the divine power that brings salvation, and in that act of God the RIGHTEOUSNESS of God is given to us. It is the greatest deal ever made. God imputes His own RIGHTEOUSNESS to those who believe and we impute our sin to Him. When my kids were in college, I deposited riches into their bank account and they sent me the bills. In the same way, but spiritually, the riches of heaven have been put in my empty bank account, and I send my debts to Him.

Misconception of the Human Race

Most people are trying to work and obey in order to get righteous, to get right with God, but what they don't understand is that their own (supposedly) earned righteousness is not an asset but a liability that keeps them away from Jesus. In Philippians 3:3-10, Paul wrote that if anyone had reason to believe they could earn righteousness it was him. Paul gave a long list of his ancestors, religious position, education, and accomplishments, but Paul learned that all of that was actually keeping him away from Christ. Spiritually, there are no self made men, therefore Paul moved all his own assets into the liability column, and left only one asset which more than paid for all the liabilities, and that asset is Jesus Christ alone!

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