

The Disruption of Peace and the Faith of God

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Date: 28 July 2024

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[0 : 0 0] All right. Okay, that's on. All right. All right, so today what we're going to do is jump back into the sermon series that we started last week that we are calling Romans Reclaimed as the Gospel of Peace. In my experience, I've far too often seen the book of Romans cause an incredible amount of theological hand-wringing and active church strife. Romans has often been cited when one side on a particular theological or ethical debate wants to exclude the other side.

The first aim of the letter that Paul wrote to the Romans was to bring peace. Peace within and among the five or so house churches meeting in Rome. A peace that would flow out from those small churches of 40-so people and flow into the heart of empire, into the machinery of Rome's domination, proclaiming Jesus as the true bringer of peace. So for the next few weeks, we're going to camp out in Romans to reclaim the beauty of this book as fundamentally a gospel of peace.

Last week, we started by looking at chapter 16, the final chapter in the book. And I noted that Phoebe is the one who delivers this letter to the Roman house churches.

She's likely the one who would have read it to them, who would have interpreted it for them. So when you encounter the book of Romans, you have to remember that the truth it contains comes first through the body of a woman.

[1 : 5 5] And then the majority of the folks that Paul sends greetings to in that final chapter of the letter, or either those folks were either enslaved or formerly enslaved.

So those five or so churches that Phoebe reads the letter to were likely in the lower half of society, socially and economically. So whenever you encounter Romans, never forget that Phoebe would have spent time going from house to house, hours performing this letter and diving into its ideas. And she would have been doing that with mostly marginalized people. What she presented to them was anything but an abstract theology that was removed from their lives.

It was not first about individual salvation. Rather the letter was meant to, it was meant to disarm the prejudice that they held toward one another and to help them understand the expansive nature of the family of God.

I said too that in Romans 14 and 15 you get this, a sense of that conflict. You've got these two groups of people in the churches. Paul talks about what he calls the strong.

[3 : 1 3] They're people who essentially feel like they don't need to practice the ritual commands of the Old Testament of the Torah. And then you've got this other group of people who are mostly Jewish Christians who think, no, we've got to keep the Torah.

We've got to continue to observe it. And the Jewish church members are judging the Gentile church members and the Gentile church members are judging the Jewish church members. And then on top of that, all of that tension, you've got the fact that the previous empire had expelled the Jews from Rome.

And Paul is writing in a context in which they finally returned home and they now find themselves in majority Gentile churches that are dominated by a Gentile way of thinking.

That's the primary context into which this letter is written. And reading the letter is written. And reading the letter with that reality in mind can help us fully claim what the letter bears witness to as a part of our own faith formation.

See, I know that for many of us, the letter to Romans has had a negative impact on our faith. And I also think that's probably true of other parts of what Paul wrote.

[4 : 3 0] You might have heard me or somebody else at one point or another talk about the story of Howard Thurman, who was a contemplative pastor and scholar. He worked at Howard for a time.

He deeply influenced Martin Luther King Jr. And he would tell the story about his grandmother who raised him and how she would ask him to read the Bible to her.

But she was explicit that he should never read from anything that Paul wrote. As a former slave, she could remember how the master's minister would rely on Paul to insist that slaves should be obedient.

She knew intimately how the words of Paul had been among the first those in power reached for to try to control the imagination of the enslaved.

And if I'm honest, I think that the situation is pretty similar now in the contemporary church.

[5 : 30] Some of the most damaging understandings of the gospel come from or rooted in or reference Paul. And then on the other hand, more liberative understandings of the gospel, they tend to center things like or books like the Exodus, or they center the prophets, or they center the gospels.

And I want to be clear that I don't actually blame this on Paul fully. My sense is that between the specificity of the context in which he was writing his letters and just the difficulty of the Bible, it's pretty easy to either intentionally or unintentionally misread him.

I think that Paul was often on the leading edge, the cutting edge of what the Spirit was doing.

But I also think that Paul was often holding on for dear life to keep up with what the Spirit was doing. And I'm not going to lie.

The writings of Paul are not always the first ones that I go to in my own devotional life. I'm one of those queer folks who probably could go the rest of my life without ever needing to hear the second part of Romans 1 again.

[6 : 50] We're going to talk about it today. And hopefully that will take the teeth out of it. But when I was in my 20s and trying to figure out my identity as a queer person and my desires as a queer person, whether those things could coincide with being a Christian, I spent so much time in Romans 1.

I was told over and over that contain this. The most important passage about this because it has a theological context that none of the other verses do that deal with this. I can still remember reading Richard Hayes' book, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*.

It's a really important book in Christian ethics. And he says of Romans 1, the few biblical texts that do address the topic of homosexuality, homosexual behavior, are unambiguously and unremittingly negative in their judgment.

Now, I was this kid, this young person at American University, when I was kind of doing this, you know, research. And it took all of my courage back then, all of it, to even step into the campus LGBTQ center.

I was one of those people who I walked by the door a few times. I walked back again. Did that a couple more times.

[8 : 10] And then I finally walked in. And when I did walk in, I tried to act like, oh, this is just, you know, it's for a friend. I'm here for a friend, you know.

And I know now that that probably wasn't that convincing. My friends tell me that, you know, I was one of those people who was in the closet, but the door was wide open, y'all.

It was wide open. Everybody knew. But I didn't know. I didn't know that. And I was scared to death that someone would find out. So when I did start to explore and then read a statement like that from a renowned scholar, it only distanced me from the book of Romans.

But I've since learned that the antidote to the poison is often made from the poison itself. And that's been true for me for a lot of Paul's writing.

So what I'm going to do today is talk a little bit about Romans 1. I'm going to start in Romans 1, 18 through 32. If it's hard for you to hear, feel free to walk out.

[9 : 24] I do hope to take the teeth out of it to explain it a little bit more. And then we'll talk about the rest of Romans 1 to continue to move through our series and set it up well. So here is Romans 1.

I'm going to say it slow, so anybody needs to walk out. 18 through 32. Okay. For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and injustice of those who by their injustice suppress the truth.

For what can be known about God is plain to them because God has made it plain to them. Ever since the creation of the world, God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been seen and understood through the things God has made, so they are without excuse.

For they know, for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him. For they became futile in their thinking and their senseless hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal humans or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

Therefore, God gave them over, and here's the part that's so hard, to the dishonoring of their bodies. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the creator who is blessed forever.

[10:50] Amen. And then I will let you look at the rest of that while I take a sip of water, 26 and 27, which I'm sure so many of you have seen before. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Now, again, if any of that is hard for you to hear or hard for you to read, again, hopefully we can come to a better understanding of why this is at the beginning of the book of Romans or early in the book of Romans today.

See, a part of what happens with this text is that we try to universalize it. We take it completely out of context. The header in my Bible titles this section The Guilt of Humankind.

That's misleading. Rather, in the midst of the tensions in the churches between Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus, Paul sets up a stereotype to make a point.

He's painting a picture of the decline of civilization through idolatry. He mentions people who had access to God, who had knowledge of God, but were unwilling to follow God.

[12:16] Instead, these people become futile in their thinking. They become senseless in their hearts, and they worship images instead of the creator. Now, as a teenager reading this, this imagery always seemed like really dark and dangerous.

Like these people were conniving villains in some kind of suspenseful horror movie. They were plotting the downfall of everybody. They are intentionally worshiping illicitly, and then they start having sex illicitly.

Just like that, there are these hot homosexual orgies everywhere. Just like that, boom. And that's how I saw it in my mind. As a teenager, I never really understood the logic of that passage.

It just felt scary. And that's the thing. It's a wooden, awkward scene that strains logic because it is a stereotype.

Paul is setting up a version of who the Gentiles are that a Jewish follower of Jesus would automatically shake their head at and say, mm-hmm, yep, I knew they would like that.

[13:31] That's right. Preach on, Pastor Paul. Preach on. And then he adds this whole laundry list of other things that the people are doing. They're full of envy and murder and strife and deceit and craftiness and gossip.

If it's wrong, these people are into it. And that's, of course, in between all these hot homosexual orgies, y'all. Then Paul makes a killer rhetorical turn.

I love this. It's brilliant. He says, therefore, you are without excuse whoever you are when you judge others.

for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. Paul has effectively set up any Jewish believer who would have felt like that.

He set them up. These folks who would have been judging their Gentile siblings in Christ. Paul says that you who judge do the same things and it is an indictment of the highest order.

[14:50] Paul's point here is that judging others harshly and boasting about your rightness and your righteousness are both rendered problematic in the church. Becoming the judge as Paul labels this person is off limits.

Both those who observe Torah and those who did not are counseled to live together as siblings building up one another. Whatever privilege you think you have based on the people you come from, the righteousness or justice of the way you live, your free thinking, open-mindedness, or your status within society, all of that has to be laid down in conformity to Christ.

Christ. So this section of scripture, this beginning to Romans, asks us to interrogate our hearts in a particular way and that particular way has nothing to do actually with homosexuality itself.

It asks very simply, as a Christian, what are you tempted to boast in aside from Christ? in this community of faith and among other Christians, where do you feel a sense of pride that leads you to judge others?

Where do you say with the judge, well, at least I'm not like those people over there. Who? Who are those people for you?

[16 : 20] The people that are ruining everything and holding faithful people back. I know that for many of us, those people are ones who are either more liberal or less liberal than we are theologically or more liberal or less liberal than we are in what they consider faithful Christian behavior.

It's like the centuries-old problem of what tears apart churches. For Paul, the only thing that matters is what he calls the obedience of faith.

And notably, I'm going to show you that phrase in a second, but he mentions it both in Romans chapter 1, the beginning of the letter, and in the last chapter because it's extremely important to him.

All right, so now we're going to read the very opening to Romans and put all of this in context a little bit. Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God.

This is his greeting to the church, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures. The gospel concerning his son who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead.

[17 : 43] Jesus Christ, our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including you who are called to belong to Christ Jesus.

To all God's beloved in Rome who are called to be saints, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. And then there's this section where Paul basically spends some time giving thanks for the Romans and explaining how eager he is to see them and he ends that section with this famous, famous sentence that some people consider the thesis of the book, the entire letter.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is God's saving power for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it, the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith as it is written, the one who is righteous will live by faith.

Paul opens this entire letter by making clear that Jesus is the one whom the Hebrew scriptures spoke about and that he is the one who has been declared Lord of the cosmos because of his resurrection.

Paul's job is to help the Christians grow in their obedience of faith. faith. And that term, obedience of faith, that phrase is about entrusting ourselves to Jesus, to God.

[19 : 17] It's about entrusting ourselves to God in the same way that Jesus did so that our lives produce good fruit. It's about letting go of anything that we boast in.

Again, whether the people we come from or the rightness or justice of the way we live or our free thinking, open mindedness or our status within society, what matters is what our lives actually produce.

And no one is off the hook when it comes to faithfulness. Not even God. that's what this passage tells us. It is actually God's faithfulness that makes possible the faithfulness of the church.

Paul says, the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith as it is written, the one who is righteous will live by faith. Sorry, the one who is faithful will live by faith.

Last week, I said that one of the key questions that the church is asking is this. If the majority of Jews are not becoming followers of Jesus and sharing in the joy of the kingdom, then how can people say that God has been faithful to his covenant with Israel?

[20 : 33] And here's Paul's answer. The sending of Jesus to walk the road of Israel and succeed at every turn demonstrates God's faithfulness.

And then the one who was righteous, that is faithful to God. Jesus, this one who was righteous, faithful to God, is raised to life from the dead because of the faithfulness of God.

And now we are invited into that same faithfulness. It's like this circle of faithfulness that is God initiated and that undergirds the family of God that God herself is creating.

and because God has initiated this faithfulness there is absolutely nothing to boast in. Now next week Becky is going to come to us and talk about the obedience of faith kind of life that Paul envisions among the believers in Rome in chapter 12 in particular.

We're going to stay pretty practical next week and then in the next three weeks the last half of the series on Romans we're going to talk about kind of the middle of the book and how Paul's letter relates to these big themes that you've often heard about like sin and atonement and resurrection

and the flesh and all of that.

[21 : 56] But before I do sit down I want to tie up one more loose end. I shared about Romans 1 18 through 32 and I say that Paul is clearly setting up a stereotype to indict an over eager listener who is prone to judgment.

That's what that passage is about. But Paul does portray homosexual sex as problematic and while we can't exactly tell what Paul himself would have thought about all of this we can guess that because he lived in a world of patriarchy he might have believed some of this.

It's hard to tell. In the ancient world to undermine and transgress sex roles was to transgress and undermine gender roles and gender roles were based on strict hierarchy.

Men were considered superior to women and anything that confused that order was shameful. How many times have y'all heard someone say in the beginning God created male and female or God made Adam and Eve not Adam and another thing I can go the rest of my life without ever hearing. People say it all the time. Well in Paul's thinking there's something that trumps the first creation and it's the new creation. In Galatians Paul himself says that in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female.

[23 : 28] In Christ all of those distinctions are irrelevant. And if that is true, then patriarchy is turned on its head. The gender roles that define sex roles are revealed for the lie that they are.

To put it really, really straightforwardly, if a man having sex with another man was considered shameful because at least one of them might become like a woman, then that shame is removed when being like a woman is no longer an inferior status.

And in Christ, who has initiated the new creation, being a woman is not considered inferior. The same logic is at work in Acts 2.

When Peter, after the Spirit is given at Pentecost, he's referencing Joel, he says, your sons and your daughters will prophesy. It's this radical viewing of the new creation world as equal.

It's a world of egalitarianism. And again, if women are revealed as equal, then rigid sex roles no longer apply. Now, there is so much more I want to say about this.

[24 : 42] But I think this final thing I'll say is kind of a crazy thing that I think is important for us to remember. And that is that Paul himself understands that if a group of people is receiving the Spirit and bearing fruit, like the Gentiles were, that actually reconstitutes what sin is.

I know that sounds crazy, but that is what Paul is talking about here. Whereas before the Gentiles were considered sinful because of their lack of ritual observance, Paul now sees them as a part of the family of God because of their lives which demonstrate the Spirit's presence.

And that is true for so many groups and for queer people who have been marginalized and excluded but who bear the Spirit's presence so clearly.

All right, y'all, this has not been a neat three-point sermon. I wanted it to be nice, but it's not. But what I want to make clear is that the first chapter of Romans puts us on this trajectory to think for the rest of the letter about what it means to be faithful, what it means to exchange privilege and power, to exchange any type of boasting for a life of peace and fruitfulness within a very diverse family, a Spirit-filled family, what it means to live inside the faithfulness of God to his own people, and what it means to trust that the same faithfulness that raised Christ from the dead is pursuing us too.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.