

Shepherding Notes

Romans

By Caleb Bunch

The book of Romans is the greatest defense and explanation of the gospel ever written. In chapters 1 through 11, Paul explains how our entry into salvation works (justification). In chapters 12 through 16, he describes the ongoing work of salvation as it plays out in our everyday lives (sanctification). Paul wrote this letter to the church in Rome in order to instruct them from a distance about the incredible depth of God's love that has been poured out through Jesus Christ. This epistle was sent to the church in Rome prior to Paul's arrival. Throughout the introduction and conclusion, you will see that Paul knew people who were part of that church but had not yet been there in person. Yet, he said, "I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome." (vs. 15)

Gospel Power

Paul describes the gospel as "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes." The gospel is not merely a story or a set of doctrinal or theological principles. But it is also not less than that. The gospel is truth — meaning it is information — that must first be in the mind before it can save. It is impossible to be saved without believing what Paul teaches in this book: justification by grace through faith. It is this incredible message of God's perfect plan to send Jesus to save sinners that must be proclaimed to sinners in order for them to be saved. It is this message that God uses to bring the spiritually dead to life. It is for this very reason that Paul spends this entire book detailing the nature of this good news.

The Just Shall Live by Faith

How is someone justified before God? There are only two possible answers to that question. Every religion other than Christianity claims that we are made right with God based upon our efforts to do something that pleases Him. They all preach salvation by works. Verses 16–17 serve as the thesis statement for the entire book of Romans. To summarize his argument succinctly, Paul references the Old Testament Minor Prophet Habakkuk, quoting, "The just shall live by faith." (Hab. 2:4) In other words, salvation has nothing to do with our ability to earn it, build it, or buy it. It is not something that we can receive by merit. We must instead receive it by faith. As we make our way through this book, you will discover that Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, will radically, emphatically, and exhaustively eliminate every other possible option conceived by the mind of man.

A Depraved Mind

Paul comes out of the gate swinging by declaring that all of us are worthy of God's wrath. He claims that we are all "without excuse." (vs. 20) This is true because God has not hidden certain things about Himself. Every person, by nature of having any of the five senses, is fully aware that God exists. "For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made." (vs. 19–20) God has revealed certain attributes to ensure that all people from all places at all times in history are aware of His power and existence. These things are not merely "displayed" — they are "perceived" by all people. This means that there are no true atheists. Everyone knows that God is there and that He has standards of holiness.

So then, why do people reject Him? Because they "suppress the truth in unrighteousness." As you make your way through these verses, you see the devolution of the human soul. From inward idolatry to outward rebellion, we find every avenue to express our refusal to live for the God who created us. In verses 29–32, Paul provides a short sampling of the kinds of expressions of sin by people who have suppressed the truth. From things that you might consider "small" (like disobedience to parents) to things that you know are a big deal (like murder), Paul is revealing that all sin is born out of a heart that has rebelled against God and refused to submit to His authority.

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In chapter 2, Paul continues his argument that we are all guilty before God. What is the natural response most people have to this kind of news? The fallacy of false equivalency. God says that we must be perfect according to His standards. Our response is to create our own imaginary version of what perfect standards are, and then compare other people to our standards.

"Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things." (vs. 1–3)

It is really easy to point out sin in other people. I have never met anyone who thinks that hypocrisy is acceptable. Even so, I have met many hypocrites. We are excellent at judging whether others color inside the lines of God's perfect standard. But we are blind to the myriad of ways in which we fall short.

Paul's particular focus in chapter 2 is to highlight the judgmentalism that was taking place between the Jews and Gentiles. The Jews were categorically judging the Gentiles as being far from God. For those who thought this way, verse 11 would have been a shocking statement: "For God shows no partiality." God does not have a different set of standards for different people. He is a judge who adheres to one set of rules. Everyone is required to stand before Him and present their record. Anything less than absolute, complete, and perfect holiness receives a guilty verdict.

The Jews were certainly given immense privileges by God. God had called out the Jewish people as recipients of the Law. It was to the people of Israel that the Lord sent the prophets. Sadly, many of the Jews in Paul's audience seem to have misunderstood this privilege. They believed that their relationship with God was built on their bloodline — that, since their people had been given the Law, they were automatically accepted by God. Paul destroys that belief system in verses 17–29. In verse 23, he points out the irony that the very people who claimed a relationship with God based upon receiving the Law refused to obey God's Law. "You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law."

This portion of Paul's argument culminates with a statement vital to understand in order to grasp the rest of this book: "For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter." (vs. 28–29) In other words, there are

many biological Jews — descendants of Abraham — who are not part of God's family. And many Gentiles with no biological relationship to Abraham are part of God's family. The point of entry has nothing to do with bloodline. Throughout this book, Paul is going to make the argument that the true people of God are those who come to God by grace through faith in Christ.

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Everyone you know tends to overestimate themselves. That sounds a little bit backward in our modern self-esteem-based society, where we are constantly told that we are actually much better than we imagine. When it comes to righteousness or personal holiness, we like to think that the standard is conveniently set exactly where we are. Anyone who reads Romans 1–2 should come away with a deep sense of their own depravity. But due to the natural inclination toward self-delusion, Paul presents an exhaustive indictment against all humanity.

Just in case anyone tried to argue that they were somehow exempt from all that Paul has said so far, Paul drops this little line in verse 10: "None is righteous, no not one." In order to bolster his point, he references or directly quotes from nine Old Testament passages that underscore the depravity of the human heart, concluding with the statement that subsumes all the rest, "There is no fear of God before their eyes." Why does Paul go after this point so extensively? He tells us: "so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin." (vs. 19–20)

Sometimes, a person with cancer will respond to their diagnosis with denial. "I exercise. I eat right most of the time. It doesn't run in my family. It must be a mistake." A good doctor responds to that denial by putting forward the facts clearly and forcefully as necessary to get the patient to understand the problem. Why? Because the only way to get to the proper treatment is to first recognize that you have the disease. What is our bottom-line diagnosis? "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..." (vs. 23)

If the diagnosis was the conclusion, then we would all be in a terrible predicament. Our sickness is worse than any cancer — it is a lack of righteousness. Thankfully, that is not where Paul finishes his sentence. He continues to tell us exactly how unrighteous sinners like us can be made right with God: "...and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith." (vs. 24–25)

Justification means that we are declared righteous. Propitiation means that Jesus has appeased the wrath of God that stood against us. All of this was done apart from our effort or intention, which is why we have no grounds to boast. (vs. 27)

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The only difference between how people were saved in the Old Testament and the New Testament lies in the perspective from which they view the cross. All Old Testament saints looked forward to the coming Messiah who would save them from their sins. On this side of the cross, we look back to where our salvation was achieved.

Although this seems like a simple concept, it is very important because, for the last 2,000 years, there has been much confusion about how salvation works. Many people mistakenly believe that sins in the Old Testament were forgiven by the ceremonial acts of sacrifice or by obedience to God's Law. In Romans 4, Paul dismantles those arguments by going to the Old Testament and examining two of the greatest and most well-known believers who have ever lived: Abraham and David.

How was Abraham justified? The chief argument Paul was combatting in his day was the false belief that it was through the covenant of circumcision. Others contend it was by his obedience in leaving his ancestral homeland. Many would highlight the faith he showed when he was willing to sacrifice Isaac. Which of these works made him righteous? The correct answer is: none of them. Paul points out that it wasn't any of Abraham's works that made him righteous. He quotes Genesis 15:6, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." He did not earn righteousness. He was counted as righteous by God — not through works, but by faith.

Similarly, Paul points out David's cry of repentance in Psalm 51: "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin." For those holding to the idea that circumcision was a necessary component of salvation, Paul simply asks whether that means Gentiles are exempt from the blessing of having their sins covered. His argument is clear: "For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith."

Are Old Testament saints and New Testament saints saved in the same way? Absolutely. "But the words 'it was counted to him' were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification." (vs. 23–25) Abraham was saved by grace through faith. All of the Old Testament believers were saved by grace through faith. If you are a believer, you came through the same door.

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Peace with God

This chapter opens with one of the greatest lines imaginable: "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Prior to our justification, we are described as being God's enemies. (vs. 10) If you had the ability to choose your enemies, you would ideally want to find someone weaker than you so that you have a chance at victory. Because of our sin, we have become enemies of God — the most powerful and dangerous adversary with whom we could ever contend. In a battle against the Lord, you have no hope for victory. Unless you make peace with God, you are guaranteed to experience destruction. Justification changes everything. It brings a positional transition from the state of being an enemy to being a friend — even greater than that, a child of God.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones explains it this way: "Peace with God is not a feeling — it is a fact. It is the result of justification by faith, and it gives the believer a standing in grace that nothing can shake."

This peace was produced by Jesus Himself when "Christ died for the ungodly." (vs. 6) A war only has two possible conclusions: total annihilation or terms of peace. Typically, the weaker party has to make concessions, provide tribute, and suffer immense loss in order for peace to be brokered. Not so for the Christian. The cost of our peace treaty with the Father was completely paid by the Son. J.C. Ryle describes it like this in his book *Holiness*: "Christ's death upon the cross for sinners is the grand proof of God's hatred of sin, and at the same time of His willingness to save the sinner. He gave His only Son to be a propitiation for us, though we were yet rebels and enemies in our minds by wicked works."

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Jesus > Adam

In the second half of this chapter, Paul argues that every person exists in one of two possible camps. To use the language found in 1 Corinthians 15, they are either "in Adam," or they are "in Christ." By nature of our birth, we are all born into Adam. It was through Adam that sin entered the world and brought a friend along: death.

Sometimes, people become disconcerted with the wording of verse 18: "Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men." It is essential to understand that the word "all" is used in the Bible to describe subsets of people. Another way to accurately phrase this would be: "Adam's one sin led to condemnation for all who were in Adam. Similarly, Jesus' act of righteousness provides justification and life for all who are in Christ." Thomas Schreiner explains this clearly in his commentary on Romans: "The 'all' in Romans 5:18 does not imply universal salvation but refers to the two humanities: all in Adam face condemnation, while all in Christ receive justification."

You will remember that Paul's argument in chapters 4–5 is that we are justified — made righteous — only by the work of Christ on our behalf. Our "good works" do not contribute to our salvation in any way. Paul rightly anticipated that some of his readers would wonder, "If our good works don't cause our salvation, what is the point of doing good works at all? If God's grace will cover all of my sin debt, why not rack up a massive bill?" Paul demolishes that thinking immediately. "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?" (vs. 1–2)

The key to understanding our calling to live lives of righteousness is to understand the doctrine of union with Christ. When Christ died, you died. When He rose, you rose to life with Him. Romans 6:6 isn't a suggestion — it's a divine declaration: your old self was nailed to the cross with Him! For the Christian, sin is a dethroned tyrant. Do you really believe verse 7? "For one who has died has been set free from sin." You never have to sin again.

Meditate upon your freedom from sin. Verse 11 commands that you actively "consider yourselves dead to sin." This word "consider" is sometimes translated as "reckon" or "think of" yourself as dead to sin. In his book *Walk by the Spirit*, John Piper helpfully explains: "That's the Christian life: a constant putting to death, a constant reckoning of the flesh as dead. It's not that the flesh isn't there — it fights, it claws, it tempts — but we pile stones on its grave by the power of the Spirit, trusting Christ to hold us fast."

Right thinking always leads to right action. Paul concludes that those who truly recognize that sin has no further power over them will go on to live for Christ. In verse 12, he bluntly commands, "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions." Don't let the deposed tyrant of sin waltz back in and take control. Instead, Paul explains that we are to recognize that we have a new Master. "...having been set free from sin, (you) have become slaves of righteousness." (vs. 18)

Commentator Richard Longnecker explains this well: "The phrase 'you became obedient from the heart' underscores the transformative nature of the gospel — it is not mere external conformity but an inner reorientation. The shift from slavery to sin to slavery to righteousness is not a loss of freedom but a transfer of allegiance, a new bondage that paradoxically liberates for life and holiness."

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Romans 7 was written to answer questions about the human relationship to the Law. A great debate has waged on for centuries about the subject of this chapter. Today we will examine the two viewpoints.

Romans 7 Describes a Saved Person Battling Besetting Sins

Some believe that Paul is describing a Christian who is battling against sin. Those who hold this view will emphasize verse 15: "For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." Scholars who adhere to this view highlight that Christians are the ones who hate sin. Even so, we still find ourselves falling into it. John Piper refers to this as "the tension of a divided man." Similarly, verse 22 says, "I delight in the law of God, in my inner being" — this appears to be the heart of someone who has been converted.

This is a viable position. Multiple places in the Bible describe the Christian's battle against sin similarly (see Galatians 5–6, for example). If this is the correct interpretation, the key applications are: recognize that all of your sanctification and growth comes from God's work in you; and wage war against your sin — this is not a neighborly relationship. "But I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members." (vs. 23)

Romans 7 Describes an Unsaved Person Prior to Salvation

The second view is that this chapter refers to the conviction in a person's heart prior to their salvation. They have seen their sin, they recognize their need to live rightly, but they can't do it on their own. Paul says, "I am of the flesh, sold under sin." (7:14) This language echoes Romans 6:17–20, where slavery to sin characterizes the pre-conversion state. Proponents of this position argue that a believer, redeemed by Christ and no longer a slave to sin, would not describe themselves this way. Their argument is bolstered by the fact that there is no role of the Holy Spirit's work in this chapter, nor is there any victory over sin displayed. Instead, it appears that this is the final cry of the unbeliever before their conversion. It is only when someone realizes how wretched they are that they turn to God and experience grace from Him.

There is still a third argument, made by Martyn Lloyd-Jones, which argues that Paul is not making a clear statement one way or the other about the person's state of salvation. He argues: "No matter who you are, if you seek your sanctification this way it will slay

you. Paul had already proven justification through the law is impossible, now he seeks to prove the same with sanctification."

"Regardless of which of these positions is correct, the closing cry of Romans 7 should always be the cry of our heart: 'Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!'"

Romans 8 may be the most uplifting chapter in the entire Bible. It is impossible to exhaust the endless well of encouragement contained in this passage. Today, we will simply meditate on five of the greatest truths that God has presented for your edification in Romans 8.

God's Acquitting Work

VS. 1

The believer is declared not guilty before God — not by their deeds, but through their union with Christ Jesus. Theologians refer to this as forensic justification. It signifies that the punishment for sin is judicially removed through the Savior's substitutionary death. The Just Judge of the universe has banged the gavel and declared you forever innocent. Christians are free from any and all penalty. For those in Christ, there is no wrath, no punishment, and no despair. The judgment has been rendered; it rings out with acquittal — not due to our merits, but because Christ fully endured the judgment intended for us.

God's Cognitive Work

VS. 5–9

Two mindsets define humanity: the flesh, hostile to God, leads to death; and the Spirit, aligned with God, brings forth life and peace. Paul is not describing psychology — it's theology. True Christians will set their minds on the Spirit. Those who are unsaved can't, due to their inherited limitations. Our minds were distorted by the fall of Adam and Eve in the garden — theologians refer to this as "the noetic effects of the fall." God begins the reversal of the fall in us at salvation. We are then able to set our minds on God in ways that we could not prior to God opening our eyes.

God's Adoptive Work

VS. 14–15

Those led by the Spirit aren't just servants — they are sons, adopted into God's family. The cry "Abba, Father" goes beyond an emotional relationship. It describes your privilege as an heir. In J.I. Packer's insightful book *Knowing God*, he states: "Adoption is the highest privilege that the gospel offers: higher even than justification... To be right with God the Judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father is greater... Were I asked to focus the New Testament message in three words, my proposal would be

adoption through propitiation."

God's Perfect Work

vs. 28–31

For the called, every circumstance — good or ill — is orchestrated by God for their ultimate good. This isn't blind optimism; it's divine providence conforming us to Christ. Theologians refer to verses 29–30 as the "golden chain of redemption." All of the people whom God set His affection upon before the foundation of the earth are the same people that will eventually be glorified. God's work in our salvation has taken into account both the ends and the means of our salvation.

God's Love

vs. 32–39

This chapter closes by revealing that God's love for you is absolutely insoluble. Nothing in all of creation could separate you from His love. In verse 32, Paul is hammering home that you have objective proof of the unbreakable, boundless love of God: "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" Arguing from the greater to the lesser — it would be foolish to say that God would show His love for you by sending Christ to die for you, then to also believe that God is going to leave you high and dry at the first sign of trouble. Take time to slowly read through these verses and rest your attention on the unfathomable expanse of God's love for you.

"Adoption is the highest privilege that the gospel offers: higher even than justification... To be right with God the Judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father is greater." — J.I. Packer

Throughout the book of Romans, Paul anticipates the arguments his opponents may raise regarding his doctrinal positions, and he promptly presents and refutes them. He knew that some would argue that God's promises to Israel had failed if not all Israel were to be redeemed. So, he began with a heartfelt declaration of his great love for his national kinsmen. He went so far as to say that he would be willing to lose his own eternal inheritance if it meant that the rest of his Hebrew people would be saved. But even though they certainly would not all be saved, Paul argues, "But it is not as though the word of God has failed." (vs. 6)

True Children of Abraham

The first major argument that Paul anticipated was that all of Abraham's descendants would be recipients of the Abrahamic covenant. Paul instantly guts this theory with two of the most well-known stories in the Old Testament. Abraham had multiple children. The first child of Abraham, Ishmael, received no inheritance and had no share in the covenant. Similarly, Jacob was chosen to receive the covenant blessing over Esau, "though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad." Why did God choose one over the other? "In order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls." (vs. 11) God has always chosen His people according to the good pleasure of His will.

Mercy Is a Free Gift, Not a Right to Be Claimed

Paul expected the next objection to be, "What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part?" (vs. 14) In other words, is it unfair for God to choose some and not others? This idea is quickly debunked by highlighting that God is never obligated to show mercy to anyone. If He chooses to impose just punishment on a sinner, He is justified in doing so. However, mercy is a gift that He chooses to bestow on some. This is precisely what God told Moses on Mount Sinai: "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." (vs. 14) Paul then presents Pharaoh as an example of someone whom God has not saved. He hardened Pharaoh's heart to reveal the greatness of God's power and ensure that the entire world would hear of His work in freeing His people from their bondage.

If God Chooses, Are We Responsible?

The objection that is still always raised against God's sovereign choice is the argument Paul anticipated in verses 19–29: "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" In other words, if God didn't choose Pharaoh, doesn't that mean it is God's fault that Pharaoh didn't repent? Paul's answer to this argument is brilliantly rooted in the difference between the Creator God and created man. He makes the analogy of a potter who makes vessels out of clay. Who has the authority regarding the nature of the pots? The creation has no business complaining to the Creator about how they were made.

"God has always chosen His people according to the good pleasure of His will — not because of works, but because of Him who calls."

ROMANS 9:11

To understand the argument in Romans 10, it's important to remember that this chapter is part of a broader discussion about the relationship between salvation and both Jews and Gentiles. The primary goal of this chapter is to emphasize that God has not revoked salvation from the Jews. Instead, He has established a single entry point through which anyone — whether Jew or Gentile — can attain salvation. "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'" (vs. 12–13) Consider how this is seen in various familiar passages:

- Acts 4:12 — "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." — Peter proclaimed a gospel of exclusivity. This exclusivity does not revolve around a club, a nation, or a bloodline. Salvation is exclusive because there is only one person who can provide it — Jesus alone.
- John 14:6 — "Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'" — Jesus utilizes the universal negative — NO ONE — in order to make it abundantly clear that He provides the only access point to the Father.
- Galatians 3:28 — "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." — This sentence would have been an atomic declaration to first-century society. There is to be no privilege associated with Judaism. There is genuine equality of value within the church.

Paul concludes the chapter by making the argument that this has always been true, even throughout the Old Testament age. He quotes various verses from the prophets that show that God's plan was always to bring the Gentiles into the family.

Motivation for Mission

VS. 14–15

"How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!'" Although it is not Paul's main point, these verses highlight the necessity to carry the gospel to everyone. It is easy to imagine that the only people who have not heard the gospel live in some far-off,

remote corner of the world. In reality, you come into daily contact with people who have never truly heard the gospel explained to them. They will not believe the gospel if nobody tells them. Sow the seed of the gospel and let God bring the increase!

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Jews Not Abandoned

One of the most jarring realities of the burgeoning early church was the melding of the Jewish and Gentile believers into a single entity: the church. 1 Peter 2:9 describes all Christians as a "chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession." This race is not based on ethnicity, this priesthood is not based on ancestry, this nation is not based on borders, and this people is not identified by common language, shared history, or physical characteristics. The unifying factor is that we have all been purchased by Christ as a people for His own possession.

In Romans 10, Paul addresses a significant concern shared by many Jewish believers of that time: Has God abandoned the Jews? To quote him precisely, "I ask, then, has God rejected his people?" The emphatic response is, "By no means!" Paul explains that there was never a time when all Jews truly followed the Lord. It has always been true that the majority rejected God's commands and did whatever was right in their own eyes. However, there has always been a remnant minority of truly faithful believers. He concludes, "So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace."

Gentiles Grafted In

Paul took the opportunity to address the Gentiles who misunderstood God's plan of uniting Jews and Gentiles. He taught them to be humble, recognizing that they were branches grafted onto the Jewish tree. They were not to boast about the fact that more Gentiles than ethnic Jews were coming to saving faith. Rather, they were to acknowledge the expansive mercy of God, that He would graft undeserving sinners from the Gentile nations into His grand plan of salvation.

Ecstatic Praise

Paul concludes chapter 11 with an outpouring of seemingly unrestrained praise. He has finished his theological treatise on the nature of salvation and will soon begin describing how Christians should live in chapter 12. After these eleven chapters of theology, what is his conclusion? "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (vs. 33) You can explore a greater percentage of the universe with your naked eye than you can uncover the boundless wisdom of God! No human mind could ever devise a plan of salvation so

magnificent.

What is all of it for? "For from him and through him and to him are all things."

- All things are from Him — Our existence hangs on His sovereign will.
- All things are through Him — His power sustains every molecule.
- All things are to Him — God's glory is the goal of history.

Everything that has ever existed was created for the singular purpose of giving God glory. Knowing that you are not the center of the universe should liberate you. This life is ultimately not about you. God's purpose in your life is to bring maximum glory to Himself. He accomplishes this by saving ruined sinners like you and me. To Him be glory forever and ever, amen!

"Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" — Romans 11:33

Few chapters in the Bible contain as many instructions about the Christian life as Romans 12. In the first two verses, Paul makes a breathtaking pivot from orthodoxy (right understanding) to orthopraxy (right doing). It is essential to recognize that these two sections of Romans are not intended as separate volumes. Every practical application found in the rest of the book is grounded in "the mercies of God," specifically those meticulously cataloged in chapters 1–11. The gospel empowers us to fulfill our calling as Christians. Understanding that God has justified us apart from our own works fuels our ability to be living sacrifices. With that in mind, here are six rapid-fire applications to implement immediately from Romans 12.

- Vs. 2 — "Do not be conformed to this world..." The natural penchant of the human heart is to conform to others around you. From your way of driving to your accent, you adapt to your environment. This is true spiritually as well. The world will always press you into conformity. As Christians, we must reject the natural inclination to be like the world.
- Vs. 2 — "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind..." The Christian life is a contemplative life. If you live by instinct, you will conform to the world and its ungodly ways. Instead, we are called to lift our eyes to heaven and have our minds renewed in the truth.
- Vs. 3 — Don't think of yourself more highly than you should. A tidal wave of commands follows immediately after this one. Realistically, you won't obey any of them if you have an inflated view of yourself. God calls you to put to death the idolatrous fantasy that you are the most important person in your life.
- Vs. 9 — "Let love be genuine." Paul reminds us that God is not only interested in what you do but also in how you do it. He doesn't merely command you to perform loving actions but to do so out of genuine love. God is not interested in you showing others half-hearted, disinterested, or compulsory kindness. He has lavishly showered His genuine love upon you. Now, He calls on you to extend the same to others.
- Vs. 14 — "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them." There is nothing more natural to the human heart than to respond to persecution with curses, anger, bitterness, and animosity. Do not be conformed to the world. Imitate Christ by blessing the very same people who mistreat you. This kind of response is more than just countercultural — it is supernatural.

- Vs. 18 — "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." Look to Jesus, who came to a world of His enemies and lived peaceably. In our era of keyboard warriors who seek out duels on every corner of the internet, be peaceable. In a high-stress, high-traffic, high-intensity community like New York, be peaceable. It doesn't always depend on you. But it is always required of you.

"The Christian life is a contemplative life. If you live by instinct, you will conform to the world. Be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

Submission to Earthly Authorities

The Scriptures teach that the world's systems, including its governments, oppose the kingdom of God. It's easy to feel that earthly rulers are devil-appointed, especially when authoritarian leaders attack the church. Paul reminds us that this could not be further from the truth. It is God who appoints every leader. Whether you live under a monarchy, a democracy, an oligarchy, or a totalitarian state, each one of those leaders was hand-selected by God to serve in their appointed place.

Consider the context in which Paul was writing these words. Nero was the emperor of the Roman empire when Paul wrote this letter. John MacArthur describes Nero's treatment of the saints of the early church: "Nero's reign was marked by a savage hatred of Christians. After the Great Fire of Rome, he falsely accused them, subjecting them to horrors — torn apart by dogs, crucified, or set ablaze as human torches to illuminate his gardens."

To our great shame, we struggle to show honor to politicians that we don't like. Social media is littered with millions of examples of professing believers badmouthing the people that God has put in place to rule over them. Paul is not saying that Christians should retreat from the public square altogether. Nor is he suggesting that there is no place for careful critique of wickedness in our leaders. This is a matter of the heart. Recognize that your governing officials are going to be judged for how they rule. Pray for them. Respect them. Speak graciously of them, even when you disagree with them. Debate their positions, argue against their erroneous beliefs, and point out their sinful practices. But do not do so arrogantly, aggressively, or violently. The kingdom of God is not a political kingdom. Vote in accordance with God's Word, and trust God with the outcome of every election. He is the King of Kings. He is above every king. He appoints every king. He limits the authority of every king.

The Law of Love

"Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." Notice that Paul describes your responsibility to love others in terms of debt. You owe it to them — not because they have earned it, but because God has declared them worthy of your love. Jesus Himself commanded His disciples to love in this way: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved

you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35) You are able to display this kind of love because you have been loved by God. He empowers you to love others, thus fulfilling the law.

"Vote in accordance with God's Word, and trust God with the outcome of every election. He is the King of Kings — above every king, appointing every king, limiting the authority of every king."

Everyone possesses the same rulebook from God: the Bible. However, not everyone shares the same convictions. It can be challenging for contemporary Americans to grasp some of the cultural allusions in this chapter. Most people who choose not to eat certain foods in our day do so for health reasons. Even in their society of food scarcity, the people of the first century had many traditions regarding what was morally acceptable to consume.

Some Christians came from a Jewish background. Having been raised under the strict dietary laws of the Old Testament, it was difficult to transition to eating things that the Lord had previously called unclean. Gentiles who came to Christ were exiting a system in which the meat markets were directly tied to pagan temples and the false gods that inhabited them. For example, if you went to purchase a ham hock at the local market, the vendor would inform you that part of that animal had been donated to a particular temple in honor of a god such as Jupiter or Apollo. Paul reminded the Corinthians that, before God, all meat was acceptable to consume regardless of whether it had been dedicated to idols. "Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. For 'the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof.'" (1 Cor. 10:25–26)

It is clear that all of these foods are acceptable. However, Paul acknowledges that there are some who have "weak" consciences. There are two main applications that Paul consistently hammers home regarding this issue. First, "whatever does not proceed from faith is sin." This means that you should not eat these foods if your conscience is uneasy about them. Paul explains it like this in verse 14: "I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean."

Secondly, Paul commands those who have no conviction over these food issues to care for the souls of the people who struggle with it. He tells them to "decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother." (vs. 13) In verse 20, he emphatically states, "Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God." Every saved person is a unique work of God. Paul spells out this command more clearly in 1 Corinthians 8:13: "Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble."

Here is a simple, modern example from my own life. I do not believe that there is any biblical mandate against alcohol consumption unless it leads to drunkenness. However, I

know that there are many who abstain from alcohol as a matter of conviction. As such, I happily surrender my freedom to consume alcohol so that I would never be the cause for a brother or sister to stumble. Their sanctification and stability in the faith is infinitely more important than whatever momentary pleasure might be gained by alcoholic beverages on my part.

"Every saved person is a unique work of God. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God." — Romans 14:20

Today, we begin to see the argument of Romans winding toward a conclusion. As we have progressed through this book, you have likely noticed that Paul has devoted a great deal of time discussing the tenuous relationship between Jews and Gentiles. The church in Rome, like all early churches, was striving to live together in harmony while uniting two historically separate groups into one unified body.

Paul concludes the discussion about Jews and Gentiles in two ways. First, Paul makes one last appeal to them to prefer one another just as "Christ did not please himself..." The power that produces true peace is found in the gospel. This remains true to this day. The church of God can overcome past prejudices and injustices through the commonality we find in the gospel. It is beautiful that through the unity we find in Christ, we are able to "live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together we may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." (vs. 5-6)

Lastly, Paul emphasizes the importance of recognizing that it was always God's plan to include the Gentiles in the promise. He cites four Old Testament passages, each underscoring God's purpose to expand His family's reach to encompass the Gentiles, demonstrating His mercy and offering hope, joy, and peace to all nations. To honor and commemorate God's work among the Gentiles, Paul provides a brief summary of his successful mission, noting their faithful responses from "Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum" (modern-day Croatia). As if to convey, "The gospel has much farther to go," Paul expressed his desire to continue taking the gospel to places where Christ's message had never been heard.

Interestingly, this chapter helps us understand how to date the book of Romans. Although Paul had not yet been to Rome, he was on his way back to Jerusalem to deliver funds he had collected for the church before returning to the mission field in an effort to reach Spain. However, from the book of Acts, we see that God had other plans. While in Jerusalem, Paul was arrested and spent over two years awaiting a trial. Finally, when he did have a trial, he made an appeal to Caesar in Rome. Although he never reached Spain, the Lord allowed Paul to arrive in Rome, even though he came as a prisoner.

Despite Paul's request to the Roman church to pray that the Lord would allow him to be "delivered from the unbelievers in Judea," the Lord chose a different outcome. Just as God often does for us, He radically altered Paul's plans because He had a superior purpose. Paul would eventually die in Rome, remaining faithful to the end for the Lord who

graciously saved him. Thus, Paul was not mistaken when he said, "I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ." It was in those moments of suffering, as his death drew near, that "the Lord stood by" Paul (2 Timothy 4:17).

"When God leads you into a difficult challenge, He stands with you and fights the battle through you — displaying His power and strengthening His people."

Today, we arrive at the conclusion of the greatest letter ever written. You likely noticed that it resembles a church directory from the early church, with 37 Christians mentioned by name. Similar to genealogies, passages like this one contain an incredible wealth of information for those who take the time to examine them. Allow me to highlight a few simple observations in no particular order.

Amanuensis

In verse 22, we are told that Tertius wrote this letter. Don't panic — this does not mean anyone was lying in Romans 1:1 when it states the letter comes from Paul. Tertius was an amanuensis, a term we now often use to refer to a secretary. The primary role of an amanuensis was to write whatever was dictated to them. So, yes, it is true that the actual pen-to-paper writing of this letter was done by a faithful man who worked closely with Paul.

Transience

It is remarkable how many people Paul knew in the Roman church, even though he had not yet visited Rome. As the capital of the empire, Rome served as the arrival point for tens of thousands of new residents each year. Consider New York City: the most recent national census reveals that 36.4% of NYC residents were born in another country. This statistic does not account for the large percentage of individuals, like myself, who have moved here from other states. One way that God has been growing His church since those early days is by using a local church to strengthen someone in the Lord, then sending them out to another place to be a blessing to another congregation.

Diversity

The names and information included provide us with an incredible picture of the diversity found in the church. There was no other realm in Roman society that would have included all of the following:

- Men and Women — In most societies of this time, men and women did not typically participate in life outside the home together. Nevertheless, Paul names eight women as significant members of the congregation in Rome. Within the church, both men and women have a high calling to serve and love one another well. A healthy church will embrace and utilize the gifts of believers from both genders.
- Blue-Collar and White-Collar Workers — There were people on this list who worked with their hands, like Priscilla and Aquila. There were also those listed of the ruling class, such as Erastus, the city treasurer. (vs. 2, 23) The church of God should represent a cross-section of the community's social demographics.
- Greeks, Romans, and Jews — The names in Romans 16 are not just regional expressions; they are rooted in language. You can likely hear the Latin sound in names like Tertius, Gaius, and Quartus. There are also unmistakably Greek names, such as Olympas and Hermes. To underscore the point of all that he had written regarding Jew/Gentile unity, there are Jews found in Romans 16, such as Priscilla, Aquila, Appellas, and Rufus. The church in Rome was as diverse as the city it inhabited. Every church should aspire to be a true representative sample of its neighborhood.

Commendation

No one should serve the Lord or His people merely to gain glory for themselves. However, it is important for us to recognize the excellence of those who serve, expressing our gratitude privately and commending them publicly. Paul speaks very highly of many individuals in this list. Their service to the Lord is eternally established in the Word of God, which lives and abides forever. While you cannot do that for anyone, let's pay attention to the qualities Paul valued, and when we observe those in the lives of others, let's acknowledge them. As the saying goes, "If you see something, say something."

"The church in Rome was as diverse as the city it inhabited. Every church should aspire to be a true representative sample of its neighborhood."