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Enjoying God Ministries

Romans #1

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“You are not your own”: Living as Slaves of Christ

Romans 1:1-7 (1)

I’ve grown accustomed to people charging me with exaggeration whenever I speak about Paul’s letter to the Romans. After you hear what I have to say, you may join the choir of those who insist I’ve gone too far. So here it is. *Paul’s letter to the Romans, quite simply, is the single most important and influential piece of literature ever written.*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge said: “I feel St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans to be the most profound work in existence.” Romans, declared 16th century Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther, “is the chief part of the New Testament and the perfect Gospel.” Frederick Godet referred to Romans as “the Cathedral of Christian Faith.” Princeton NT scholar, Bruce Metzger, has called Romans “the Constitution of Universal Christianity.” I do not think it an exaggeration to say that if Jesus Christ is the Alpha and Omega of the universe, Romans is the Alpha and Omega of all Scripture. Perhaps a few personal examples will make my point.

Augustine was a learned and well-respected teacher of rhetoric in the city of Milan in the 4th century. But he was tormented over the condition of his soul. By his own admission, he had lived a sexually promiscuous life. One day, when he was 32 years old, he threw himself to the ground in the garden of the house he shared with his friend, Alypius. Amid the river of tears, he kept crying out, “And thou, O Lord, how long? How long, O Lord wilt Thou be angry unto the end? Remember not our former iniquities.”

While weeping, Augustine heard the voice of a child from a neighboring residence, chanting repetitiously, “*Tolle, lege! Tolle, lege!*” which being translated means, “Take, read! Take, read!” Augustine hurriedly grabbed a Bible and opened it at random, his eyes falling on Romans 13:13-14, where he read:

“Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”

Augustine from that point on became the single most influential theologian of both the Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions.

Or consider the experience of Martin Luther. Born in 1483, Luther was a monk in the Augustinian order! Although he was quite religious, he could not find peace in his heart. He lived every moment of every day

in constant dread of God's wrath and judgment. Not all the good works in the world could put his heart at rest. Then, one day as he sat reading the book of Romans, this happened:

“Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfactions. . . . At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words [in Romans 1:17], . . . ‘for in it [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘But the righteous man shall live by faith.’”

“Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered Paradise itself through open gates” (LW, XXXIV, 328, Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings, 1545).

It was, then, the Holy Spirit's use of Paul's letter to the Romans that sparked what we know as the Protestant Reformation.

Finally, consider John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement. On May 24, 1738, near Aldersgate Street in London, Wesley listened attentively to the reading of Luther's preface to Romans. “About a quarter before nine,” wrote Wesley, “while [Luther] was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for my salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken my sins away, even mine; and saved me from the law of sin and death.”

There is simply no way to overplay or exaggerate the profound impact this letter has had on the unfolding of human history.

The Context for Romans

It's important to remember that Paul had never been to Rome and knew only a few of the Christians there (see Rom. 16:3-16). That is why he takes time to introduce himself to them here in vv. 1-2. He mentions three things in particular: **his captivity, his calling, and his consecration**. Or if you don't particularly like alliteration, he speaks of his Lord, his office, and his purpose.

But before we look at these truths about Paul, I need to say something about how the letter of Romans was composed and how it made its way to Rome. Paul most likely wrote this incredible letter in the winter of 57-58 a.d., some 25 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Several texts indicate that he was probably in Corinth when he dictated these 7,000 or so words to his secretary, Tertius (see Acts 20:2-3; Rom. 16:1-2). By the way, in the absence of shorthand or computers or any other recording device, it would have taken Paul approximately 11 hours to dictate this letter to Tertius.

Paul tells us in Romans 15:25 that before he can travel to Rome, he must first go to Jerusalem and deliver to the impoverished church there the collection that he describes in 2 Corinthians 8-9. You may recall his appeal to the church in Corinth that they step up and give generously to the poverty-stricken believers in Jerusalem. As soon as he has delivered this money to them, he will turn back west and make his way to

Rome. But Rome is not his final destination. Let me stop here and have you read his description of his travel plans:

“This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while. At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem” (Rom. 15:22-26).

We don't know if Paul ever made it to Spain. Most likely, he did not. In any case, Paul would first depart Corinth and journey east to Jerusalem, then turn west once again and make his way to Rome. This travel itinerary was arduous, demanding, and extremely dangerous. You couldn't book a quick flight on El Al or American Airlines. So, how did Paul dispatch this letter to Rome? He himself had to know how important the letter was. One can imagine that he hired a large security team, well-armed, to accompany at least one trusted man and perhaps many, to ensure that the letter arrived safely. Well, no!

We read in Romans 16:1-2, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.”

This text has led virtually every scholar of Romans to conclude that it was Phoebe who carried the Epistle to the Romans to the church in that city! Yes, what I will say next is a joke, so please, no angry emails. This text in Romans 16 ***forces one to have great confidence in the providence of God that he would entrust the most important letter ever written to a woman's handbag.***

Paul's Description of Himself:

His Captivity

The first thing Paul mentions about himself is that he is “a servant of Christ Jesus” (v. 1a). Although Paul might have appealed to his educational credentials, his reputation, his other literary works, or some special accomplishment to distinguish himself in the eyes of the Romans, he is first and foremost *a bondservant of Christ Jesus!* In view of the fact that Paul doesn't personally know many of these people, one might have expected him to “drop names” or appeal to past achievements or to his list of publications! But he chooses only to be known as a bondservant of Christ.

It is reflective of Paul's high view of the person of Jesus that it is no longer YHWH but *Christ Jesus* whom he serves as sole master. But then, of course, Christ Jesus **is** YHWH incarnate.

We're going to take some time today in this our first study of Romans to examine the implications of Paul's self-designation. This man simply could not conceive of himself or his role in life and ministry in any other terms than that he was the slave of Jesus Christ. We often speak of the importance of Christians knowing who they are. Their sense of personal identity is crucial to how they live and minister to the

glory of God. It is important that we understand that we are the children of God and therefore heirs, adopted and forgiven. But before Paul would call himself an apostle, before he would describe himself as a believer, Paul would loudly declare that he was a slave of Jesus Christ.

Sadly, the English word “servant” doesn’t adequately express what Paul meant by the Greek word *doulos*. The word *doulos*, by the way, appears no fewer than 130 times in the NT. A servant still retains freedom to do what he/she pleases. A servant can perform his/her duties and then return home to live however one pleases. But not a slave!

Most English translations avoid using the word “slave” for obvious reasons. It suggests an oppressive and even cruel dehumanization and domination of one person by another. It is quite difficult for us in the U.S. to think of a “slave” without our minds immediately rushing back to the race-based slavery that plagued our country and largely provoked the Civil War.

But race or ethnicity has absolutely nothing to do with being a “slave” of Jesus Christ. White believers are slaves of Christ. Black believers are slaves of Christ. Asian and native American Indian believers are slaves of Jesus Christ. So, if our being slaves of Jesus Christ has nothing even remotely to do with our individual ethnicity, why did Paul choose this term? Why did he make it such a vital element in his own sense of personal identity? I think there are a couple of reasons.

First, in most forms of slavery, one person is in some sense “***owned***” by another. This is true even in the case of economic slavery. In this instance, a person becomes the “property” of another in order to discharge or pay off a debt. But economic slavery isn’t a good analogy for what Paul means, because that was a form of slavery from which one could eventually emerge and obtain one’s freedom. But as we’ll see in just a moment, we who believe in Jesus will remain his slaves forever, into the far reaches of eternity future.

But is it really the case that slaves of Jesus Christ are in any sense “***owned***” by him? Can it be said that the Christian is someone else’s “property”? Again, I understand why saying Yes to this question can be quite offensive. So bear with me as I try to explain what it means to be owned by Jesus.

Let’s be perfectly clear about one thing: In our world today, indeed in the totality of human history, the idea that one human could actually own another human is abhorrent. It violates everything we know of what it means for a person to be created in the image of God. But Jesus was more than a human. Yes, he was fully human, but he was also fully God. And he didn’t purchase people on an auction block by offering the highest price in dollars and cents.

The Apostle Peter, no less than Paul, also referred to himself in 2 Peter 1:1 as a “servant” (“slave”) of Jesus Christ. But Peter also made it clear that Christians were not “ransomed” or “redeemed” or purchased “with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Peter 1:18-19).

In several places in the NT Christians are described as belonging to Christ. A couple of examples will suffice:

“For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” (Rom. 14:7-8).

“and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s” (1 Cor. 3:23).

“If anyone is confident that he is Christ’s, let him remind himself that just as he is Christ’s, so also are we” (2 Cor. 10:7).

“And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Gal. 3:29).

Clearly, then, there is a sense in which we are “Christ’s.” We belong to him. We are not the captain of our own souls. We can make no claim to anything in us or about us. Does this mean that he “owns” us? Yes. Listen again to the testimony of the NT:

“Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? *You are not your own, for you were bought with a price.* So glorify God in your body” (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

“You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants [slaves] of men” (1 Cor. 7:23).

In addition, all the many texts that speak of our having been “redeemed” by the blood of Christ point to the fact that the purchase price to deliver us from slavery to sin and death was the blood Christ shed on the cross. See Eph. 1:7; Gal. 4:5; Col. 1:13-14; 1 Pet. 1:18-19; etc. But doesn’t Christ’s purchase of us only apply to our souls? Isn’t it little more than a figure of speech? No. I, in the totality of who I am, have been purchased by Jesus Christ. He literally owns me. I belong to him, body, soul, spirit, mind, affections, abilities, talents, heart, will, and emotions. ***There is nothing in me or about me that belongs to me.***

This runs directly counter to the mindset of our society where demanding one’s “rights” has become something of a national pastime. This world tells me that I have a “right” to do with my body whatever I want. I have a “right” to conduct my sexual life however I please. I have a “right” not to be treated disrespectfully by others. And on and on it goes.

No one has pushed back against this misguided notion more than did Jonathan Edwards (1703-58). Edwards believed he had no “rights”. Let’s be clear about this. We’re not talking about political rights or the right to an education or property rights, or any such thing. We’re talking about our relationship with God. Edwards rightly declared that he has no “rights” in himself, no claim to autonomous freedom, as if he can arbitrarily determine what he will do with his body or his time or his mind or his talents or his money.

Edwards, like Paul, understood that he had been “bought with a price”, the precious blood of Jesus, and has no claim to anything in himself or regarding himself. Neither he, nor we, have any “right” to look at whatever we please or think whatever we please or sleep with whomever we please or spend our money however we please or pursue whatever career or course in life as suits our fancy. We are not the “lord” of our lives. He is. We are not the captain of our own souls or the master of our fate.

What would life look like if we were to take this seriously, if we were to awaken each day conscious of the fact that the only reason we woke up at all is because God mercifully willed it so? My mind is not free to think whatever it wants nor my fingers to type whatever I please nor my eyes to read whatever they fall upon. Every fiber of my being, body, soul, and spirit, belongs to the Lord who loved me and gave himself for me. Like Paul and Peter, I am a slave of Jesus Christ. And there is no more glorious or higher privilege and blessing than that.

Edwards was only 19 years old when he made this declaration of personal resolve, as recorded in his *Diary*, on Saturday, January 12, 1723.

“In the morning. I have this day, solemnly renewed my baptismal covenant and self-dedication, which I renewed, when I was taken into the communion of the church. I have been before God, and have given myself, all that I am and have, to God; so that I am not, in any respect, my own. I can challenge no right in this understanding, this will, these affections, which are in me. Neither have I any right to this body, or any of its members: no right to this tongue, these hands, these feet; no right to these senses, these eyes, these ears, this smell, or this taste. I have given myself clear away, and have not retained anything, as my own. I gave myself to God, in my baptism, and I have been this morning to him, and told him, that I gave myself *wholly* to him. I have given every power to him, so that for the future, I’ll challenge no right in myself, in no respect whatever. I have expressly promised him, and I do now promise Almighty God, that by his grace, I will not.”

This is precisely what Paul had in mind when he identified himself, above all else, as a slave of Jesus Christ. Can you do the same? Will you do the same?

Second, Paul spoke happily of being a “slave” of Jesus Christ in order to make it clear that his ultimate allegiance and loyalty was neither to himself, his family, his country, or to anyone other than Jesus. His time was not his own to spend. His mind was not his own to think whatever he pleased. He didn’t consider himself free to develop his own ideas about what is true and false, or good and evil. He couldn’t formulate his own worldview. What made sense to him didn’t matter. What felt right to him didn’t matter. The only thing that mattered was what Jesus said regarding truth and goodness.

In what sense, then, could Paul or any Christian say that he/she is “free”? For Paul, freedom was not the opportunity or power to do whatever one wishes. Freedom is not the liberty to choose one course of action over another. Freedom for Paul, freedom for the Christian, freedom for the slave of Jesus Christ is the joy of aligning our will with that of Christ, obeying Christ, doing whatever Christ commands.

Thus, being a slave of Jesus means that we are altogether loyal to him. What he says is true, is true, because he says it. We are not free to disagree. To disagree is sin. What he says to do, we do. We are not free to disobey. To disobey is sin. This may strike some of you as horrible, but it is in fact where true joy and heartfelt satisfaction are found. God knows what is true and right and what brings greatest delight to the human heart.

Let me press this point. When the Bible clearly teaches something as true, the slave of Jesus Christ cannot respond and say: “Well, that may be true for you but not for me.” Or, “Well, God, that’s just your opinion.” When the Bible teaches something that you don’t like, what you like or don’t like doesn’t matter. I’m not trying to be mean or heavy-handed. But the fact is that there are things in the book of Romans that some of you won’t like. But if you regard yourself as a Christian, a slave of Jesus Christ, the only thing that matters is what he likes.

So, when the Bible commands a particular kind of behavior, like not committing fornication or stealing or lying, you are not free to do otherwise. If you are a slave of Jesus Christ, you can't say: "Well, sorry, but it's my body and I can do with it whatever the heck I please."

In Galatians 1:10, Paul says, "Am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bondservant [slave] of Christ." In other words, being a slave of Christ means complete, unquestioning submission to what pleases him, not what pleases me or anyone else. You can see how this plays itself out in Paul's life from what he says in Philippians 1:20. Remember, he is in prison and doesn't know if he will die there or be released. All that matters to him is that "now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death" (Phil. 1:20). That's the perspective and mindset of a slave.

If this offends you or if you find it repulsive or repugnant to think of yourself as not your own but the property of someone else, Christianity is not for you. ***In order for Christ to be for you, you have to be wholly and altogether for him.*** The fact is, everyone is a slave. Either you are a slave to your sinful flesh and your own ego or you are a slave to Jesus Christ.

By the way, this status as the slaves of Christ is not for this life only. Don't ever think that once we find ourselves in the new heaven and new earth that we will advance beyond slavery, that we will somehow gain a new freedom that releases us unto ourselves. No, we will be slaves of Christ throughout all of eternity. In his description of the new heavens and new earth, John the Apostle said, "No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants [lit., slaves] will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads" (Rev. 22:3-4). In saying that his name will be on our foreheads he is saying that we will be branded as belonging to Christ, forever.

As I said earlier, Paul describes his captivity, his calling, and his consecration. His captivity is unmistakable: he is a slave of Jesus Christ. Let's look now at his calling.

Paul's Description of Himself:

His Calling

I am "called to be an apostle," he says here in v. 1. More literally, he says, I am "an apostle by calling" or "a called apostle." Paul wants to contrast the divine calling by which he became an apostle with human self-appointment by which others claim authority. It wasn't ambition or personal effort, but grace alone,

that put Paul in the office of apostleship. He didn't run for the office of apostle. He didn't look to a majority vote from other Christians. He was called by Christ.

The people of Rome would immediately have recognized what this meant. It meant that Paul had been personally commissioned by the risen Christ Jesus and invested with an authority to speak into the lives of God's people. It is equally a wake-up call for us today. The apostle of Christ Jesus is speaking on behalf of his owner and Lord. So listen!

Paul's Description of Himself:

His Consecration

When did this happen? We know that Paul became a slave of Christ when he put his faith in what Jesus had done for him on the cross. At that moment he experienced redemption, and ownership transferred from Paul to Jesus. He was called to be an apostle on the Damascus road when the risen Christ appeared to him and commissioned him to this ministry.

So when, precisely, was he "set apart for the gospel of God"? Although he doesn't say it here in Romans, he makes it clear in Galatians 1:15 where he declares that God "set me apart before I was born, and . . . called me by his grace." In other words, before Paul was redeemed by the blood of Christ on the cross and before he saw the risen Christ on the Damascus road, indeed before he had been born, God had consecrated or set him apart for this ministry.

One thing that makes this even more remarkable is that between the time that God set him apart before he was born and the time the risen Lord Jesus Christ encountered Paul on the Damascus road, this man had persecuted Christians and even killed many of them.

But, to what had God called and consecrated Paul before he was born? Answer: the gospel of God!

I've entitled this series in Romans, *The Gospel of God*, based largely on the use of those words here in Romans 1:1. We will come back time and time again during our study of Romans to this notion of the gospel of God. In fact, in Romans 1:15 Paul makes clear how eager he is "to preach the gospel" to those who are in Rome. He is "not ashamed of the gospel," he tells us in Romans 1:16, because "it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes."

What, then, is the gospel of God? Paul declares in v. 3 that it is good news "concerning" God's Son, Jesus Christ. Today I only provide a simple definition of the Gospel of God.

The “gospel” is the gloriously great good news of what our triune God has graciously done in the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ to satisfy his own wrath against us and to secure the forgiveness of sins and perfect righteousness for all who trust in him by faith alone. Christ fulfilled, on our behalf, the perfectly obedient life under God’s law that we should have lived, but never could. He died, in our place, the death that we deserved to suffer but now never will. And by his rising from the dead he secures for those who believe the promise of a resurrected and glorified life in a new heaven and a new earth in fellowship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit forever.

The gospel is not your life. It is not your testimony. It is not anything you or I have done or plan to do. It is entirely what God has done in and through his Son to redeem and ransom us from sin and bring us into his glorious kingdom as his willing and joyful slaves!