

December 6

### Romans 1-3

Hi, my name is Marty Barnhart. I am responsible for our overseeing our multi-site ministry here at Christ Community Church as the Director of Ministry Expansion.

Today you read Romans 1 through chapter 3.20, and have begun to read what might well be the single most important book of the Bible. I am very sure that no other book in the Bible has had such a profound impact on so many people as this one. William Tyndale wrote, "No man can read it too often or study it too well..."

Martin Luther, wrote, " The whole of scripture took on a new meaning and whereas before 'the righteousness of God had filled me with hate, it now became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love.'"

J.I. Packer, one of the great theologians of our own day: "There is one book in the New Testament which links up with almost everything the Bible contains -- that is the epistle to the Romans."

Now, before we start, I want you to keep in mind that every one of Paul's epistles can be divided into two parts. He always starts by laying out the doctrine, the theology, and then in a later part of his letter he moves to practical applications of what he has written. Nowhere is that pattern more easily discernable than here in the letter to the Roman Christians. Chapter 1-11, part 1, deal with doctrine and theology. Then in chapters 12-16, part 2, Paul applies that theology to the daily lives of men and women in the church. Within each of these two major sections there are a number of subsections.

The introduction to Paul's letter is contained in the first 15 verses of chapter 1, and verses 16-17 are the bridge between the introduction and the main argument. In these two verses, Paul states the theme for the entire letter.

*16 I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. 17 For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."*

I'm sure you noticed that Paul is writing to a group of Christians he has not yet met. This letter was written while he was in Corinth before he took the offering to Jerusalem. He doesn't know them yet, but he prays for them all the time. That is one of the secrets to Paul's tremendous success. Everything was continually bathed in prayer. He even prayed consistently (he says constantly) for people he didn't know yet! He knew who he was -- he prayed all the time -- he had a clear sense of purpose. Those things we've noted already -- and one more -- He felt a heavy obligation. "I owe the gospel to both the Greeks and the Jews." That is truly how he felt.

According to Romans 1, there is no such thing as a real atheist. Deep down inside, some place, perhaps subconsciously, every single created human being knows that they were created. They know that God exists.

Next, we learn that all people are responsible to respond to the light given to them by their Creator. Here then is a clear and understandable answer to at least a part of the

age-old question: "What happens to people who have never heard of Christ? Is it fair for God to judge men and women who never had a chance to hear about salvation?"

The part of the answer that is here is that it IS fair for God to judge the heathen who have never heard, because He only holds them accountable for that portion of the law that they have -- *i.e.*, the part that is written on their hearts.

The other part of the question is, of course, "How can God judge people -- even if they are guilty -- if they have never heard of Christ, never had a chance to repent?" That portion of the question is a little harder to answer, but I believe that there is a little verse tucked away in the Book of Jeremiah that helps us a lot. In Jeremiah 29:13 there is a fascinating verse, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." I believe that there is a broad Biblical principle there. I believe that if there is a person who is seeking God, that somehow -- some way -- the Good News of Jesus Christ will reach them, perhaps supernaturally by an angel through a dream, perhaps by the word of some Christian who passes their way.

The cycle of sin described in chapter 1 is like a downward spiral. Mixed into the terrible list of sins including same sex relations by men and women, are envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice are disobedience to parents. Mark this well. Some of the things we dismiss as character flaws, God, pure and simple, calls sin. As far as God is concerned, sin is disobedience that misses the mark of his holiness, and it all gets lumped together in one category.

Many in the Jewish nation of Paul's day (and of many Christians today) believe themselves to be the 'special' people of God, and therefore, He will 'ignore' their sin. Paul assures complacent Israelites and professing Christians alike that God does not play favorites. If He judges Gentiles who sin without knowledge of God's laws, the judgment visited upon those who know but ignore those laws will only be greater.

Romans chapter 3 is one of those monumental "great chapters of the Bible" with that most familiar verse, Romans 3:23, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Now this kind of thinking would have been absolutely revolutionary to most of the Jews of Paul's day. Their view had always been that just being Jews was a tremendous advantage -- having God's law, being circumcised -- made them superior to other people, and secured for them God's special blessing. And now Paul was saying, not only does just having the law not get you "extra points" with God, it exposes you to greater condemnation, because you, above all people, know better. That precipitated a series of three objections that Paul deals with in the first part of chapter 3.

I am sure that you noted the whole string of Old Testament quotations with which the third part of this sub-section ended. The conclusion of the matter, bolstered by the rather long set of Old Testament proof texts, is that all people -- Jews and Gentiles alike -- are under the power of sin, and have failed to keep God's law. Verse 20 is critically important. "No one will be declared righteous in His sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin."

It's time for a short theology lesson. This word "justification" -- the NIV here translates it "be declared righteous" -- is a very important word in the Christian's vocabulary.

"Justification is a legal sentence or declaration issued by God in which He pronounces the person in question free from any fault or guilt and acceptable in His sight." The person is declared to have met all the requirements of God's holy law and to possess a perfect righteousness. This term is a forensic (or legal) term denoting a judicial act of administering the law -- in this case, by declaring a verdict of acquittal and so excluding all possibility of condemnation.

Remember -- the main point that Paul is trying to drive home here is that all people, be they Gentiles or Jews, are right now under the wrath of God because of sin. The Gentile cannot use his very real ignorance of special revelation as an excuse, and the Jew is in an even worse position because they have the very words of God. God loves all people and is seeking to draw them to himself. I hope this was helpful to you today and answered some questions we are often asked. Tomorrow, I will have some good news for you. Thanks so much, keep reading and enjoying your time in God's word.