

This series of lessons originally appeared in *The Lookout* magazine in 1987.

Welcome to Romans. This book, as you probably know – and fear – is heavy on doctrine. And it's powerful. The apostolic church used it to overturn centuries-old classical paganism and replace it with the eternal kingdom of God. Augustine read and became the definitive theologian of the historic church. Martin Luther prepared lectures on Romans at the University of Wittenburg; the book changed his thinking and changed the map of Europe. John Calvin created international Protestantism by writing a doctrine of God and salvation based on his misunderstanding of Romans 9. A troubled John Wesley wandered into a Moravian meeting where Luther's "preface to Romans" was being read; result: the Methodist Church. Karl Barth used his *Commentary on Romans* to set forth not the message of Paul but a skeptical version of Christianity we know as neo-orthodoxy. (Watch out for this book –it's explosive. Understand it right and you'll never be the same; get it wrong and it destroys like dynamite in the hands of the town drunk.)

For all it's deep theology, Romans is a practical book and an everyday issue – fellowship. The multicultural Roman church had a problem: some believers refused to accept other brothers in the body. Have you not seen local congregations crippled by the tragedy of Christians who can't tolerate a brother? The message of Romans is "accept one another." Paul's argument: There is no distinction between Jew and Greek; they have one problem – sin – to which there is one solution – grace. And since neither has a ground of boasting, each can climb down off his respective high-and-mighty and accept the other as a full brother.

As you work your way through this epistle, you will struggle with the profound concepts of sin, grace, justification, redemption, election, repentance, and love. But through it all, remember that Romans doesn't always wear it's academic robes; it also puts on overalls and work gloves. It forces us to face the nitty-gritty of the Christian life: my heart before God today and the connections between you and me I'm building – or destroying. Be honest with Romans and you'll never be the same.

Chapter one captures and embraces the theme with the grand proclamation that "the righteous man shall live by faith." Why does Paul go into such refined detail to make such a simple point? My guess is that he knew how hard it is to destroy prejudice. Paul remembered his own spiritual struggle to accept the Gentiles; he could not have forgotten how Peter, years after his Joppa experience, was still to be reprimanded for submitting to the prejudice of the Judean Christians.

No light stuff in Romans. Never does the apostle suggest that Christian fellowship stands on mutual congeniality. Oh, no. It stands on doctrine: Whether or not we find one another personally appealing, we belong to one another because we are all children of God in Christ, like it or not. Broken fellowship is a problem the local congregation can ill afford to tolerate, no matter what it's other strengths. Why? Because we are at war with Satan's world system, and if we present a divided front we cannot survive, let alone win. The fatal evil of internal strife – the Roman letter attacks this sin at it's roots.

It might also be true that Paul paid the Roman Christians a huge compliment by writing them this heavy letter. The church there was one of the best; it's faith was "spoken of throughout the whole world" – a good church with a real problem. Paul seems to be assuming that his readers in Rome could understand his profound teaching and would make the hard adjustments required to restore fellowship.

Good churches can have bad problems. Good Christians can have serious shortcomings and still be children of God. How? By grace – a dominant theme in the Roman letter. Paul understood the grace of God, and he knew how to be wisely gracious. Which is to say we learn not dry theology from Romans, but the dynamic attitudes that enable us to live in the light of our calling.

The last half of Romans 1 is bad business -- probably the most devastating indictment of the human race ever written, and the most accurate. *All* is a pivotal word in Romans. Chapter 1 describes the universal human condition: sin - deep, deadly sin - and the wrath of God upon sinners. *All* have sinned. Jew and Gentile are in the same sinking boat --equally without hope, apart from grace. Self-righteousness is the way of death. Paul clears the ground of human pride and lays the foundation of grace, upon which he will construct the edifice of salvation by faith.

We aren't going to get far in the way of making practical application of the Roman epistle unless we get squared away in chapter 1. There's no use believing the modern myth of fundamental human uprightness. The "goodness of man" is nonsense - always has been, and never more than now. Humanism, America's state religion, cannot admit the reality of human evil. The astounding thing is that western civilization denies the substance of evil while drowning in the stuff.

Paul's catalog of evil is the agenda for modern man, religious and secular. True, in 1987 the worship of nature is a tad more technical than in the first century, but all the same it is a piece of weak minded superstition (called mega-evolution). Modern technology has given momentum to evil, but sin remains otherwise unchanged. Greek culture was homosexual; ours is getting there. The kind of spiritual blindness described in Paul's accusatory essay is perhaps most obvious in the modern view of homosexuality.

Our first problem is not, however, the effect of evil on the society in which we must live and raise our families: rather it is the God with whom we have to do. Before the gospel explains salvation, it necessarily reveals the wrath of God against all sin. Now that's a problem we can't solve. So aren't we glad that, in the verse before this text, Paul has introduced the positive side of the gospel-the righteousness of God; not that God is righteous in himself (which is true, of course), but that God has a plan of righteousness for man? Paul pursues this theme later in the Roman letter.

So what is our response to all this? First, we check our attitude. We are not spectators of the human condition described in these verses, we're in the text right along with everyone else. We must leave the Pharisee and go find a seat with the publican and join his song: "God be merciful to me, a sinner." That will do wonders for us; it might even heal some broken fellowship. Then we confront sin as the operative principle of Satan's world system. We find some ground we can occupy for God and the right, and we take our stand. Christianity - the real thing - has become what sociologists call a "deviant subculture." Eighty years ago the French poet Charles Peguy declared that the true revolutionaries of the twentieth century would be the fathers of Christian families. We cannot be for God unless we are willing to publicly defend life and righteousness. Personal piety and a spiritual church are not enough; we must seek morality and justice in society. The world belongs to God too. In all this we must never move away from our primary work on earth: letting dying men and women in on the news of life in Christ. But it's not easy. Often, individuals are happy that we give them the gospel; seldom is the world patient with those who confront its amorality.

Joseph Sobran writes that modern man has white smoke coming out of his ears, signaling that he has just elected himself pope. That's true. We are all pretty much persuaded that when we get our trousers on, the whole world is dressed. Sin is the stuff human pride is made of. If we'll let it, Romans 1:18-32 will bring us down to where we can see ourselves as we really are, accept one another, and let God do something with us He's never done before.

Benjamin Franklin thought he could make himself morally perfect, believe it or not. Disillusioned with the Presbyterian Church, the religion of his upbringing, the celebrated colonial American decided to write his own creed; he called it Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion. Dr. Franklin tells us in his autobiography: I wish'd to live without committing any fault at any time; I would conquer all that either natural inclination, custom, or company might lead me into. As I knew, or thought I knew; what was right and wrong, I did not see why I might not always do the one and avoid the other. But I soon found I had undertaken a task of more difficulty than I had imagined.

Yes, Mr. Franklin, we could have told you that. Moral perfection is a project not easily carried through. Not many have done it - only One, as a matter of fact, a fellow from Nazareth.

The inventor-statesman drew up a list of 13 comprehensive virtues and made for himself a daily log to chart his journey to the flawless life. He recorded his faults in the ledger and triumphantly scratched them out as his shortcomings diminished. The worthy gentleman, however, found that his little book, as he scraped old faults off the pages to make room for new ones, became full of holes. Franklin finally adopted the use of a pencil so he could keep track of his backslidings without wearing out his book so often.

After a few years of failure, the statesman was forced to admit that moral perfection was beyond even his superior intellect and discipline. Franklin's pride became as tattered as his ledger. On the way to reality, his own humanistic reasoning had suggested that "a perfect character might be attended with the inconvenience of being envied and hated; and that a benevolent man should allow a few faults in himself, to keep his friends in countenance."

This kind of self-righteousness is absurd when cast alongside the universal human moral condition; it stands exposed as self-evident lunacy, comic-relief hypocrisy. Self-pride, however, isn't funny; it is a lethal force with the mark of Hell on it.

Translated into life, self-righteousness destroys everything it touches, like a virulent plague. Such was the problem in Rome that Paul spoke to. The apostle-author prefaced his bill of condemnation (chapter 1) with the affirmation that the gospel reveals the righteousness of God available to all of us and by which He rescues us from our just condemnation. And it's a good thing too. Franklin thought his moral failure a cause of slight embarrassment, nothing more. Our sin, in fact, makes us an enemy of God. Our goodness, at its best, falls infinitely short of that required to restore fellowship with the absolutely holy God.

Paul makes this clear to the self-righteous church members at Rome. They can quickly get out of the business of mutual condescension. No one, Jew or Gentile, is better than anyone else, simply because neither, in himself, is any good at all. This is the church, you see. None but bankrupt sinners need apply.

The early chapters of the Roman letter give off a vibration that can barely be picked up by our generation. Paul gives self a real beating, and this is not a self-effacing age. Quite the contrary: modern man has joined Franklin's religion - the First Church of Narcissus.

The cult of Narcissus preaches the gospel of personal fulfillment, and the tidal wave of evangelistic selfism has swept over the church. A preacher can build his private kingdom today, and in short order, if he will bless the popular idols of wealth, power, and well-being. False Christianity says, "Rejoice in yourself." True Christianity warns, "Repent of yourself." Which brings us back to the text: "As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one."

Are we worth nothing? Much, in Christ. Have we no ground of boasting? Yes, in the cross. Is our righteousness without value toward salvation? Well, let's see: What's the going rate for filthy rags these days? Would we find ourselves under grace? Then we must see ourselves under sin. Am I better than you? No, I am worse than all. We accept each other by grace because our Father has received us both by grace. We are equal brothers in our helplessness and in our hope, which is in Christ-in Him and nothing else.

Herodotus couldn't resist telling the story of the Babylonian bride market. Once a year the villagers collected all the girls of marriageable age for an auction. Because some were more marketable than others, they worked out a system to level the thing out. The auctioneer started with the town's number-one beauty, then the second best, and so on. The rich men bid against one another for the prettiest wives, building up a reserve in the community treasury. When all the salable females were gone, the auctioneer put the ugliest candidate on the block and asked who would take the least money to marry her, paying the bribe out of the money collected from the first batch. He then worked his way up to the average. In this way every girl got a husband, and the humbler folk went home with a woman and a cash dowry to boot. The payoff, you see, made the unacceptable acceptable.

Herodotus' story is funny to most of us, especially if, in our heart of hearts, we know that we're one of the beautiful people; we would go first, and for top dollar at that. If, however, we see ourself as one of life's leftovers, the Babylonian tale comes across as a piece of insensitive chauvinism.

It's easy to be an "ugly" in our culture. The superficial values of Western civilization have been exalted, and almost any shortcoming disqualifies us in the race for acceptance. To be "in" these days, you must be young, thin, upwardly mobile, dressed in this month's fashion, financially secure, have braces on your teeth (if needed) but none on your morals, and be up on whatever the ups are up on at the moment. The penalty for failure is humiliation, isolation, and loneliness.

We spend immense energy working at being accepted. Teenagers sell their virtue and their future to be in with the in crowd. Adults sacrifice whatever it takes to be accepted in the right circles. Preachers trim their sails to the prevailing winds lest they exclude themselves from the fellowship of the movers and shakers.

And we get downright particular about whom *we* accept. We declare with our mouth a Christlike love for all men, but before we notice, we're holding at arm's length the wrong people with the wrong smell. We may empty our pockets to help, but we won't accept them. Which brings us to Romans, chapters 3 and 4, and the rhetorical question, "Where is boasting then?" Answer: everywhere, especially - and sadly - in the church.

Justification by faith obliterates all ground of disassociation. Proof: Abraham himself, the Jews' ground of boasting, was justified, receiving the promise by grace on the basis of his faith, not his works. Descendancy from Abraham, therefore, doesn't give the Israelite an edge on the believing Gentile.

In the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church worked out a theory of salvation that could have used Herodotus' Babylonian bride market for a model. They called it "supererogation." It meant that some Christians, saints for the most part, did much more than was required to pay the penalty for their sins. Not only did these spiritual "beauties" not have to spend a minute in purgatory, they had credits to their account, an accumulation of excess merit. Believers on the other end of the spectrum, the spiritually unwashed and unwanted, could take advantage of the overpayments stored up in the "treasury of the saints."

The Jewish Christians at Rome had their own system of supererogation, as we have seen. Abraham and the law imputed enough merit that the Jew needed less grace to be saved than did the Gentile. Paul rejected that system of religion out of hand, and so do we. Or do we? Jesus taught the principle that "he who is forgiven much loves much." Do we, in fact, love much? If not, could there lurk in our heart some unacknowledged, perhaps

unrecognized, sense of supererogation - the forbidden notion that we have not been forgiven as much as the other fellow?

When God's Christ went looking for a bride, He couldn't find a single spiritual beauty. Men are hopelessly mutilated by sin. We're *all* the number-one ugly on the auction block. But Jesus took us for wife anyway; He graciously paid the infinite price, His death, for we who have no value at all. He gives us His name and His home and makes us heirs and treats us as if we had been the town lovely. And we very often forget that we weren't worth having and act as if our Master were privileged to buy us - the catch of the day. May God forgive us! And may we get on with the business of accepting one another as sin-uglified losers who have been made new by grace, by grace, by grace, by grace.