



Romans 1:1-7

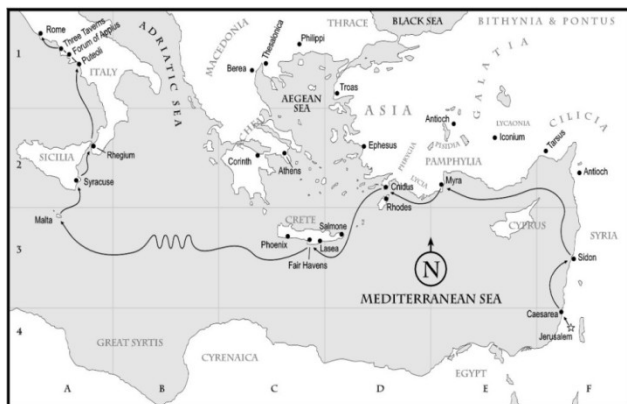
Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, 2 which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, 3 concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh 4 and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, 5 through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, 6 including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,

7 To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

To start off this series in the book of Romans I want to start with something Martin Luther wrote almost 500 years ago.

This letter is truly the most important piece in the New Testament. It is purest Gospel. It is well worth a Christian's while not only to memorize it word for word but also to occupy himself with it daily, as though it were the daily bread of the soul. It is impossible to read or to meditate on this letter too much or too well. The more one deals with it, the more precious it becomes and the better it tastes.



My prayer is that this description will be true of each of us as we spend many months working our way through this amazing book. Romans is often considered Paul's most important letter and therefore one of the most important, theologically rich and practical of all books in the Bible. I could start with a map of Paul's journey to Rome where he was on trial and house arrest for 2 years (left). I could show you a chart of

PAUL'S LETTERS	
1	Galatians (48)
2	1 Thessalonians (50)
3	2 Thessalonians (50)
4	1 Corinthians (55)
5	2 Corinthians (56)
6	Romans (57)
7	Ephesians (60-62)
8	Philippians (60-62)
9	Colossians (60-62)
10	Philemon (60-62)
11	1 Timothy (63)
12	Titus (64)
13	2 Timothy (65)

Paul's thirteen books and when the letter to the Romans was written (right). I could tell you that Roman is the longest of Paul's letters using 7114 Greek words or 9493 words in the ESV. These are all important details. I enjoy these small details as it helps to understand the New Testament and its history much better. Some people love this background information but I don't plan to spend any more time on it in this introduction. Instead, I want to show you how the message of the book of Romans has changed the world. Obviously this book has changed hundreds of millions of people but I plan to focus on three men who changed our world because they were changed by this book.

As we look at these men, I also want us to look at ourselves, to see where we may have made or are still making the same mistakes.



The first on our list is John Wesley. Wesley is one of the greatest hymn writers having written over 6000 hymns. He was the founder of the Methodist church. He traveled around the American colonies on horseback proclaiming the gospel and gathering new converts into churches. He developed a method for discipling these new converts because there were no local pastors to shepherd these young believers. Wesley's "methods" is how the denomination got its name—they were and are "methodists". The movement which he started now spans to 132 nations and includes about 75 million people, which is ten times the entire population of Great Britain when Wesley was born.

But the amazing thing about this story is that Wesley was not saved until he was 35 years old. All of his impact came about in the second half of his life. Wesley was converted by listening to someone read the introduction to Martin Luther's commentary on Romans. Listen to the description of his conversion in his own words.

In the evening (May 24 1738) I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans.

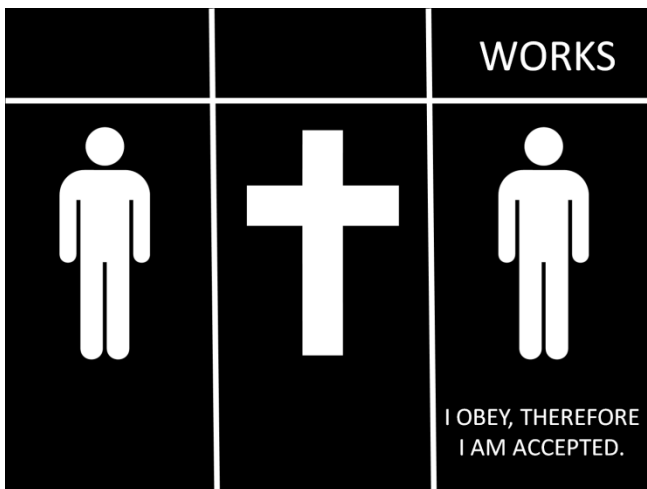
Please make note of these details. Wesley went to this meeting “very unwillingly.” He was not in the mood for a gospel meeting. He did not want to be there. On top of that, the man was reading from the preface to a commentary. I have read lots of commentaries but I rarely read the preface. Wesley was unwilling and possibly bored but that did not stop the Holy Spirit from working miraculously through his word.

About a quarter before nine, while he 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 salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

Wesley’s story is important not only because he was saved late in life and accomplished so much but because of the depth of his religiosity prior to his conversion. Listen to how he described his teenage years.

The next six or seven years were spent at school; where, outward restraints being removed, I was much more negligent than before, even of outward duties, and almost continually guilty of outward sins, which I knew to be such, though they were not scandalous in the eye of the world. However, I still read the Scriptures, and said my prayers, morning and evening. And what I now hoped to be saved by was,

1. Not being so bad as other people.
2. Having still a kindness for religion. And,
3. Reading the Bible, going to church, and saying my prayers.



Wesley was very religious. He depended upon his good works for acceptance before God. Like this diagram, he ascribed to a works based righteousness which says, “I obey, therefore I am accepted.”

This striving for acceptance before God only got worse as he grew older. He became ordained within the Anglican Church and so had opportunity to add more and more to his good works.

Again, in his own words:

In this vile, abject state of bondage to sin I was indeed fighting continually, but not conquering. Before, I had willingly served sin; now, it was unwillingly; but still I served it. I fell and rose, and fell again. Sometimes I was overcome, and in heaviness; sometimes I overcame, and was in joy. For as in the former state I had some foretastes of the terrors of the law, so had I in this, of the comforts of the gospel. During this whole struggle between

nature and grace (which had now continued above ten years) I had many remarkable returns to prayer, especially when I was in trouble. I had many sensible comforts, which are indeed no other than short anticipations of the life of faith. But I was still under the law, not under grace: the state most who are called Christians are content to live and die in. For I was only striving with, not freed from sin; neither had I the witness of the Spirit with my spirit, and indeed could not, for I sought it not by faith, but (as it were) by the works of the law.¹

You know a common definition of insanity, right? Insanity is when you continue to do the same thing but expect different results. Have you ever attempted to solve a particular problem but gotten stuck with one solution? You are convinced that you have it figured out so you keep doing the same thing over and over but nothing ever changes. This can happen when trying to fix something mechanical or electronic but it probably happens more in our relationships. We try to “fix” others, whether it is our kids or our spouse or ourselves. For example, if talking to our kids doesn’t work, we raise our voices. If raising our voices doesn’t work, we scream and if screaming doesn’t work we scream louder and more often. It is so easy to get stuck in a relationship rut, to walk the same path over and over and you make as much forward progress as you would on a treadmill.

Wesley was stuck in this way. What he had always done did not work so his solution was to do more of the same.

I omitted no sort of self-denial which I thought lawful; I carefully used, both in public and in private, all the means of grace at all opportunities. I omitted no occasion of doing good: I for that reason suffered evil. And all this I knew to be nothing, unless as it was directed toward inward holiness. Accordingly this, the image of God, was what I aimed at in all, by doing his will, not my own. Yet when, after continuing some years in this course, I apprehended myself to be near death, I could not find that all this gave me any comfort, or any assurance of acceptance with God.

Later he would write a hymn about his struggle for God’s acceptance.

I rested in the outward law,
Nor knew its deep design;
The length and breadth I never saw,
And height, of love divine.

To please thee thus, at length I see,
Vainly I hoped and strove;
For what are outward things to thee,
Unless they spring from love?

After decades of struggle, Wesley encountered Martin Luther’s preface to his Romans commentary. I read the whole preface and I don’t know exactly which parts the Lord used to break through to Wesley’s heart but the following section is a likely candidate.

Faith is not that human illusion and dream that some people think it is. When they hear and talk a lot about faith and yet see that no moral improvement and no good works result from it, they fall into error and say, "Faith is not enough. You must do works if you want to be virtuous and get to heaven." The result is that, when they hear the Gospel, they stumble and make for themselves with their own powers a concept in their hearts which says, "I believe." This concept they hold to be true faith. But since it is a human fabrication and thought and not an experience of the heart, it accomplishes nothing, and there follows no improvement.

Right about here you can almost hear Wesley screaming within his heart, "That's me! That's what I have been doing for my entire life!"

Faith is a work of God in us, which changes us and brings us to birth anew from God. It kills the old Adam, makes us completely different people in heart, mind, senses, and all our powers, and brings the Holy Spirit with it. What a living, creative, active powerful thing is faith! It is impossible that faith ever stop doing good. Faith doesn't ask whether good works are to be done, but, before it is asked, it has done them. It is always active. Whoever doesn't do such works is without faith; he gropes and searches about him for faith and good works but doesn't know what faith or good works are. Even so, he chatters on with a great many words about faith and good works.

Faith is a living, unshakeable confidence in God's grace; it is so certain, that someone would die a thousand times for it. This kind of trust in and knowledge of God's grace makes a person joyful, confident, and happy with regard to God and all creatures. This is what the Holy Spirit does by faith. Through faith, a person will do good to everyone without coercion, willingly and happily; he will serve everyone, suffer everything for the love and praise of God, who has shown him such grace. It is as impossible to separate works from faith as burning and shining from fire. Therefore be on guard against your own false ideas and against the chatterers who think they are clever enough to make judgments about faith and good works but who are in reality the biggest fools. Ask God to work faith in you; otherwise you will remain eternally without faith, no matter what you try to do or fabricate.²




Once again, here is Wesley's response to this teaching from Romans.

About a quarter before nine, while he 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 salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

Shortly after this he wrote his first of thousand of hymns, *And Can it Be?*

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;

my chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

	FAITH	WORKS
		
	I AM ACCEPTED, THEREFORE I OBEY.	I OBEY, THEREFORE I AM ACCEPTED.

As opposed to works, faith in Christ alone says just the opposite of works—I am accepted, therefore I obey.

The second example I want to share this morning is none other than Luther himself. You probably know that Luther was a Catholic priest and he had the exact same struggle as Wesley.

"I hated that word, 'the righteousness of God,' by which I had been taught according to the custom and use of all teachers ... [that] God is righteous and punishes the

unrighteous sinner."

Like Wesley, he sought to be accepted by God—to be 'righteous'—so he worked as hard as he could.

By all evidence, Luther was extraordinarily successful as a [monk], just as he had been as a student. He did not simply engage in prayer, fasts, and ascetic practices (such as going without sleep, enduring bone-chilling cold without a blanket, and flagellating himself), he pursued them earnestly. As he later commented, "If anyone could have earned heaven by the life of a monk, it was I."³

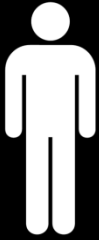




Also like Wesley, it was his encounter with the book of Romans that God used toward his conversion.

"At last, as I meditated day and night on the relation of the words 'the righteousness of God is revealed in it, as it is written, the righteous person shall live by faith,' I began to understand that 'righteousness of God' as that by which the righteous person lives by the gift of God; and this sentence, 'the righteousness of God is revealed,' to refer to a passive righteousness, by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, 'the righteous person lives by faith.' This immediately made me feel as though I had been born again, and as though I had entered through open gates into paradise itself. From that moment, I saw the whole face of Scripture in a new light. ... And now, where I had once hated the phrase, 'the righteousness of God,' I began to love and extol it as the sweetest of phrases, so that this passage in Paul became the very gate of paradise to me."⁴

The final man I want to talk about is Augustine, the bishop of Rome. He had the exact opposite struggle of Wesley and Luther. Augustine had a Christian mother who prayed for his salvation but he wanted nothing to do with her faith or the rules that would restrain his behavior. He lived

a life of unbelief and wanted to live his life as he pleased. Augustine described his rebellious youth in his book, *Confessions*.

UNBELIEF	FAITH	WORKS
		
I LIVE AS I PLEASE.	I AM ACCEPTED, THEREFORE I OBEY.	I OBEY, THEREFORE I AM ACCEPTED.

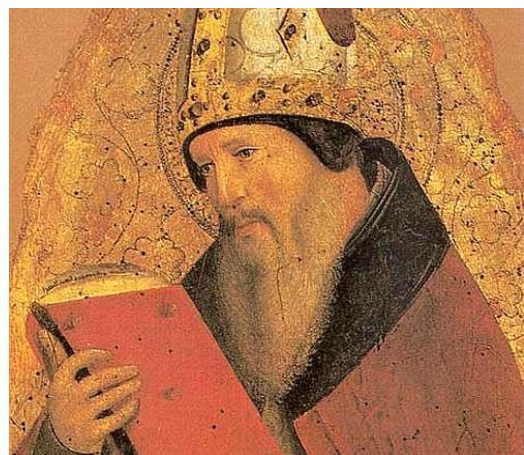
There was a pear tree close to our own vineyard, heavily laden with fruit, which was not tempting either for its color or for its flavor. Late one night--having prolonged our games in the streets until then, as our bad habit was--a group of young scoundrels, and I among them, went to shake and rob this tree. We carried off a huge load of pears, not to eat ourselves, but to dump out to the hogs, after barely tasting some of them ourselves. Doing this pleased us all the more because it was forbidden. Such was my heart, O God,

such was my heart.

Those pears were truly pleasant to the sight, but it was not for them that my miserable soul lusted, for I had an abundance of better pears. I stole those simply that I might steal, for, having stolen them, I threw them away. My sole gratification in them was my own sin, which I was pleased to enjoy; for, if any one of these pears entered my mouth, the only good flavor it had was my sin in eating it.

Finally at the age of 33 and based upon his mother's faithful prayers and the book of Romans, he was converted.




I was saying these things and weeping in the most bitter contrition of my heart, when suddenly I heard the voice of a boy or a girl I know not which--coming from the neighboring house, chanting over and over again, "Pick it up, read it; pick it up, read it." Immediately I ceased weeping and began most earnestly to think whether it was usual for children in some kind of game to sing such a song, but I could not remember ever having heard the like. So, (ignoring) the torrent of my tears, I got to my feet, for I could not but think that this was a divine command to open the Bible and read the first passage I should light upon.



I snatched it up, opened it, and in silence read the paragraph on which my eyes first fell: "Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to fulfill the

lusts thereof." I wanted to read no further, nor did I need to. For instantly, as the sentence ended, there was infused in my heart something like the light of full certainty and all the gloom of doubt vanished away.⁵

Three men—all held back by sin. Two of them were held in the bondage of works and one was held in the chains of rebellion and immorality. As individuals, each of the three has had an incalculable impact on the growth and spread of genuine, Biblical faith but collectively their impact is beyond measure. All three were bound by sin and all three were released by the power of the gospel. But what about you?

LICENTIOUSNESS LICENSE	GOSPEL	RELIGION LEGALISM
		
I LIVE AS I PLEASE.	I AM ACCEPTED, THEREFORE I OBEY.	I OBEY, THEREFORE I AM ACCEPTED.

I think to varying degrees we are all like these 3 men. We swing back and forth between unbelief, or at least a practical atheism and good works. By the way, this chart describes believers and unbelievers. Some unbelievers live a life of licentiousness. They are like Augustine, living fully as they please and enjoying every minute of their sin. But there are believers who live like this who believe that the grace of God has given them a license to sin. They believe that no matter what they do, God will forgive them because after all, that's his job, that's what he does.

On the opposite spectrum, there are unbelievers who live like Luther and Wesley. They do good works and trust in religion to save them. But there are untold believers who also live under legalism. They may have trusted Christ for salvation but now they trust their good works. They work tirelessly for Jesus but they can never fully rest in his finished work on the cross, in the amazing grace of Christ. Worse still, some believers swing wildly between good works and license. When the good works don't seem to—well, work—they give up and dive deep into sin. Eventually they feel guilty about it until they start the treadmill of good works all over again.

As we work through the book of Romans, my prayer is that the gospel of Christ will have a transforming effect on us, starting with your pastor and trickling down into the pew.

Rich Maurer
September 15, 2013

¹ http://www.forthegospel.org/articles/the_conversion_of_john_wesley

² http://www.ccel.org/l/luther/romans/pref_romans.html

³ *Christian History Magazine-Issue 34: Martin Luther: The Reformer's Early Years*. 1992. Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today.

⁴ *Christian History Magazine-Issue 34: Martin Luther: The Reformer's Early Years*. 1992. Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today.

⁵ <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/aug-conv.asp>