

We're in the 3<sup>rd</sup> of 14 weeks of readings from Romans. Beginning two week ago on June 14, and continuing all summer through September 13, our Epistle lesson each Sunday is from Paul's letter to the multiple Christian congregations in Rome, aka the Epistle to the Romans.

After the Gospels, Romans is probably the most influential book in the New Testament. Romans is Paul's longest letter. It's his most well written letter. It's hands down his most important letter. So today, during week 3 of our trek through Romans, I want to spend some time talking about the letter in general. Then I want to touch very briefly on our lesson this week from ch6.

Right off the bat, it's important to know the purpose of Romans. Paul didn't sit down to write a theological masterpiece. Instead, he was writing to perhaps 5 churches in the city of Rome asking for financial support. Romans is a fund-raising letter. Paul is at a turning point in his ministry.

So far in his career, Paul has had 3 different base camps or headquarters for his ministerial organization. His pattern was to establish some sort of base of operations in a region. Then he would use that base for himself and for his entourage, his staff, those whom he termed his "fellow workers." They would then go out and preach the gospel throughout the entire area and plant churches. Base camp 1 was in Syria. Number 2 was in Turkey. Number 3 was in Greece. And now, Paul wants to establish base camp number 4 in Rome, 1,300 miles west from where he originally started in Syria a couple of decades earlier.

Paul's not so interested in Rome itself. There are churches already established there. But he is interested in taking the Gospel even further west into present day Spain. And he wants Rome to be his base of operations for that Spanish missionary trip. So he writes the Roman churches to ask if they would be willing to support him and equip him in his missionary venture to Spain.

Paul didn't found any of these churches in Rome. He apparently only knew about 30 of the Christians there. The rest had no real ties to him. So he can't command them. He has no authority over them. Because of that, he has to send them a letter of persuasion soliciting their support.

But how do you persuade people to financially support you in preaching the Gospel when they've never heard you preach the Gospel? Paul's solution is this. In the letter, Paul lays out what he believes, what he preaches and what he teaches. And that summary of his teaching is what we call the Epistle to the Romans. It's hands down the greatest fund-raising letter of all time.

And here's the core of the entire letter. Paul is talking about the importance of what in Greek is called *pistis*. In English, we translate *pistis* as faith, or belief, or trust, or allegiance. The entire letter centers around *pistis*: faith/belief/trust/allegiance. In fact the thesis, the topic sentence for the whole letter, is found right after the opening greeting in ch1. There Paul lays out his central idea:

"I am not ashamed of the gospel... For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'"<sup>1</sup>

That's the key. Righteousness, right relationship with God, depends upon faith or trust in God. You're not made right with God by doing things. You can't earn your way to salvation by your deeds. Instead it depends upon belief/faith/trust in God. That's the central message of Romans.

And what's more, it's not so much about our faith. It's not that we have to have super faith or perfect faith to be made right with God. Faith is not one of our deeds or one of the things we do, at least not primarily.

Instead, Paul says in the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Romans that the kind of faith we're supposed to have is "faith in Jesus Christ."<sup>2</sup> He talks about this in Romans chapter 3. He also talked about it in his earlier Epistle to the Galatians, "faith in Jesus Christ."<sup>3</sup>

But "faith in Jesus Christ" is an older English translation. It probably owes more to theological choices from the Protestant Reformation than it does to an accurate translation of New Testament Greek.

The past quarter century or so, the scholars who specialize in Paul and in Romans have said there's a better translation. One of the first scholars to suggest this was a professor and later bishop from our mother church, the Church of England by the name of N.T. Wright. There was some push-back at first. But now it's really caught on. It's caught on so much that I was in a conversation last fall with a Church of Christ pastor who's a New Testament professor at LCU. He completely agreed that the newer translation is theologically more accurate.

So if it's not "faith in Jesus Christ," what is it? The better translation is the "faith of Jesus Christ," or the "faithfulness of Jesus Christ."

It's not so much that I have to have super-belief, super-faith. It's that I just have to have the tiniest bit of faith in the perfect super-faith of Jesus. It's not about how wonderful I am. It's about how wonderful Jesus is. Paul wants us to have even a tiny amount of faith in the super, perfect faith of Jesus.

Which brings us briefly to our Epistle lesson today, Paul speaks about what it means to place our trust, our faith in the faithfulness of Jesus.

In Jesus, through faith in his perfect faith, and through our baptisms into his death and resurrection, we have been freed from the power of sin and death.

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<sup>1</sup> Rom 1:16-17

<sup>2</sup> Rom 3:22

<sup>3</sup> See Gal 2:16 or 3:22

And Paul will bring that theme to a glorious crescendo in chapter 8 of Romans, which is perhaps the greatest chapter in the New Testament. We'll spend 3 weeks on that chapter beginning on July 12.

But for now look to Jesus, Paul is telling us. Have faith in his faithfulness. You've been freed, so seek to do the right thing. Love God. Serve others. Do what Jesus commands. Imitate what he did. Love the way Jesus loves.