

ROMANS

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD AND REDEMPTION FOR MANKIND

BY
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ROMANS

Introduction to the Book of Romans

Author

The Apostle Paul

A pharisee and persecutor of the church, Saul of Tarsus was given the name, Paul, when God transformed his life and made him one of the most prolific writers, church planters, and evangelists in the early church.

Date and Place:

Paul most likely wrote from Corinth in AD 57.

Original Audience

Paul wrote to "all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints" (Rom 1:7). The church in Rome consisted mostly of Gentile converts and a few Jewish believers.

Purpose

With a number of factors in mind, Paul wrote this lengthy theological treatise to introduce himself to the Roman church and promote unity among God's people.

Anchor Verse

"But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."
—Romans 5:8

Where are we?

Following the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, the good news of the gospel spread like wildfire, starting first in Jerusalem and then throughout the rest of the world. Rome was the capital city of the world's greatest superpower—the Roman Empire—and even in the face of persecution, Christianity was growing all across the pagan empire. As the church grew, so did opposition on the outside and false teachers from the inside. As a result, apostles like Paul sought to not only plant churches but also to strengthen the faith and clarify the message of the gospel. Though the letter to the Romans is not a comprehensive theology of the whole Bible, it is perhaps the clearest presentation of the gospel message: Jesus Christ died to save sinners.

Who wrote Romans?

The Apostle Paul wrote the letter to the Romans (Rom 1:1) later in his life, probably around 10 years before his death (in Rome). Like many other writers in the ancient world, Paul used a scribe to physically write down what he wanted to say, and Paul tells us that a scribe named Tertius helped him write (Rom 16:22). Originally from a city called Tarsus, Paul made several missionary journeys spanning the Mediterranean coast, traveling throughout Palestine, Asia Minor, and Greece.

When and where was it written?

While Paul doesn't clearly give his location, we know who delivered the letter to Rome: Phoebe, a woman from the church in Cenchrea, which was right next to Corinth (Rom 16:1-2). Similarly, Paul says he's staying with a man named Gaius (Rom 16:23), whom Paul baptized as a member of the church in Corinth (1 Cor 1:14). Most likely, then, he wrote from Corinth. More explicitly, Paul tells us where he's going—first to Jerusalem, then to Rome, and then to Spain (Rom 15:22-29). It's hard to pinpoint exactly when Paul wrote from Corinth, but most scholars think he wrote Romans at the end of his third missionary journey, likely around AD 57.

To whom was it written?

Though Paul had never visited Rome (Rom 1:10-15), he wrote to an established church or churches there. Given the extensive greetings in Romans 16, it's likely that there were several congregations of house churches scattered throughout the city. Paul preferred to "preach the gospel in regions where Christ has not yet been named" (Rom 15:20), meaning he loved missionary work and church-planting in unreached regions. As a result, he had never visited Rome, but hoped to pass through the city on his way to Spain to spread the gospel there. Though we don't know who started the church in Rome, most scholars believe that Roman Jews returned from Pentecost (Acts 2:10) and proclaimed the gospel message of Jesus the Messiah. While the church in Rome initially carried this Jewish flavor, in 49 AD, Roman Emperor Claudius expelled all Jewish Christians from the city, opening the door for Gentile converts to become leaders in the church (Acts 18:2). Around AD 54, Claudius died, and Jewish Christians could return to the city, which caused considerable upheaval in the Roman church as Jewish and Gentile Christians had to learn how to live side-by-side. As a result, the Roman church was predominantly Gentile, but there were likely considerable theological and philosophical differences between the Jewish and Gentile believers.

Why was it written?

In his own words, Paul wrote "quite boldly on some points to remind you of them again" (Rom 15:15). The theological richness of the epistle—not to mention its length—set it apart from some of Paul's other letters. Still, because the book lacks an explicit purpose statement, scholars continue to debate the underlying *purpose* behind Paul's letter to the Romans. On the one hand, Paul probably wanted to introduce himself to the Roman church, given his desire to visit Rome on the way to Spain, and it's possible he needed their help in the form of financial or material support (Rom 15:24-29). It's also possible Paul was speaking to specific circumstances arising from Rome (Rom 14:1-15:13) or from other churches like Galatia or Corinth, which struggled with Jew/Gentile divisions. Most likely, however, we should consider the "several intersecting factors" that collided and inspired Paul to write this theological treatise. "The past battles in Galatia and Corinth, the coming crisis in Jerusalem, the need to secure a missionary base for the work in Spain, the importance of unifying the divided Christian community in Rome around the gospel—these circumstances led Paul to write a letter in which he carefully set forth his understanding of the gospel, particularly as it related to the salvation/historical question of Jew and Gentile, law and gospel, continuity and discontinuity of the old and new" (Carson and Moo, 407).

Why does this matter for our students?

Perhaps more than any other book of the Bible, Romans clearly lays out the state of man and God's plan of salvation. For students and adults alike, Romans gives us both the worst possible news and the best possible news: Not only do we desperately need a savior, but God has already accomplished that saving work through Christ. Romans tells us that we have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory (Rom 3:23), but that *while we were still sinners*, Christ died on our behalf (Rom 5:8). He gave us His righteousness, His record. Now, because of what God has done for us, if we confess with our mouths and believe in our hearts, we will be saved (Rom 10:9). The biggest problem in all of our lives is a broken relationship with God, and here, Paul simply gives us the good news of the gospel: God is for us.

What are the main themes?

- **Justification:** Particularly in Romans 1-4, justification by faith is a *major* theme of Paul's letter. Though everyone has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23), God has a plan to save sinners: justification by His grace through the redemption by the blood of Jesus Christ (Rom 3:24-25). Justification is a legal term meaning that God pardons our sins by placing them upon Christ, who bears the punishment for us. At the same time, our slate is not only wiped clean, but Jesus' perfect righteousness is actually imputed (given) to us as our own! In this way, we are righteous and blameless in God's eyes.
- **Righteousness:** The term "righteousness of God" appears throughout the letter, and the words "righteous" and "justify" are from the same word in Greek. At the beginning of the letter, Paul outlines the totality of human sin and our *unrighteousness* and contrasts that with God's perfect righteousness. God's solution, however, is not to tell us simply to "do better" but to offer Christ's righteousness as a gift that can be received by faith (Rom 3:21-31).
- **Assurance:** After establishing the theological rationale for our justification, Paul turns in Romans 5-8 to assure believers of their salvation. We have peace with God (Rom 5:1); we are united with Christ (Rom 6:1-14); we are freed from the dominion and slavery of sin (Rom 6:15-23); even when we struggle with sin, Christ will deliver us (Rom 7:7-25); there is no condemnation for us in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:1); we have been filled with the Spirit of God (Rom 8:3-11); we have been adopted as God's sons (Rom 8:12-17); we are assured of heaven even in our sufferings (Rom 8:18-30); and nothing can possibly separate us from God's love (8:31-39). With these promises and more, Paul hammers home the confidence and assurance that we can live with as followers of Jesus.
- **Living Out Your Faith:** Romans 1-11 is packed with rich theology that lays the foundation for the Christian life. In Romans 12-16, Paul transitions to exhort and encourage Christians to follow Jesus in their everyday lives. Because of what God has already done for us through His Son, we are empowered by the Spirit within us to live differently. This means that we are transformed vertically (in how we relate to God) and horizontally (how we relate to the people around us).

Outline:

Lesson 1: Gospel Foundations (Rom 1:1-17)

- God has one plan for salvation (1:1-5).
- God calls His people for a purpose (1:6-15).
- God saves those who believe (1:16-17).

Lesson 2: Exchanging the Glory of the Immortal God (Rom 1:18-32)

- We all know God, but we suppress the truth (1:18-21).
- We all worship something, but we worship the created rather than the creator (1:22-25).
- We know what is right, but we do what we know is wrong (1:26-32).

Lesson 3: God's Just Judgment (Rom 2:1-3:8)

- We have no right to judge others, but God judges justly (Rom 2:1-11).
- Hearing the gospel isn't enough; we must be transformed from the inside out (Rom 2:12-29).
- God's faithfulness shines through our unfaithfulness (Rom 3:1-8).

Lesson 4: A Distressing Diagnosis and a Miracle Cure (Rom 3:9-31)

- Everyone is under sin (Rom 3:9-18).
- No one can be justified by the law (Rom 3:19-21; 27-31).
- We are justified by the grace of God through the blood of Christ (Rom 3:22-26).

Lesson 5: Walking in the Footsteps of Faith (Rom 4:1-25)

- God has *always* justified His people by faith alone (Rom 4:1-8).
- The place of works and the law in salvation (Rom 4:9-15).
- Abraham modeled how to walk by faith (Rom 4:16-25).

Lesson 6: While We Were Still Sinners (Rom 5:1-11)

- The Christian life flows out of our justification (Rom 5:1, 8-9).
- Apart from Christ, we are enemies with God (Rom 5:6-7, 10-11).
- In Christ, we find peace and hope with God (Rom 5:1-5).

Lesson 7: A Tale of Two Adams (Rom 5:12-21)

- Sin and death entered the world through the first Adam (Rom 5:12-14).
- The greater gift of grace came through the greater Adam (Rom 5:15-17).
- The inheritance for those belonging to each Adam (Rom 5:18-21).

Lesson 8: Union with Christ in Death and in Life (Rom 6:1-23)

- In Christ, we have died to sin and been raised to life (Rom 6:1-11).
- In Christ, we are instruments for righteousness (Rom 6:12-14).
- In Christ, we are freed from the slavery and penalty of sin (Rom 6:15-23).

Lesson 9: Seeking Sanctification; Stuck in Sin (Rom 7:1-25)

- Christians are released from the law through our union with Christ (Rom 7:1-6).
- Sin corrupted the good law, which reveals our sin (Rom 7:7-14).
- Even as followers of Jesus, we are continually at war with sin (Rom 7:15-25).

Lesson 10: The Holy Spirit Changes Everything (Rom 8:1-17)

- By the Holy Spirit, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:1-4).
- By the Holy Spirit, Christians have transformed hearts and new life (Rom 8:5-13).
- By the Holy Spirit, Christians receive adoption into God's family (Rom 8:14-17).

Lesson 11: The Now and the Not Yet (Rom 8:18-30)

- In the face of trouble, you have even greater reason to hope (Rom 8:18-15).
- The Holy Spirit intercedes for you, strengthens you, and sustains you (Rom 8:26-27).
- God's purpose for your life will blow your mind (Rom 8:28-30).

Lesson 12: The Boundless Love of God (Rom 8:31-39)

- God is for you (Rom 8:31-32).
- No one can condemn you (Rom 8:33-34).
- Nothing can separate you from God's love (Rom 8:35-39).

Lesson 13: Have God's Promises Failed? (Rom 9:1-29)

- What about Israel? (Rom 9:1-13).
- Is God unjust? (Rom 9:14-23).
- God's surprising plan (Rom 9:24-29).

Lesson 14: Hearing and Believing (Rom 9:30-10:21)

- The difference between righteousness by the law and righteousness by faith (Rom 9:30-10:8).
- The importance of hearing, believing, and confessing that Jesus is Lord (Rom 10:9-17).
- The dangers of hearing and not believing (Rom 10:18-21).

Lesson 15: The Kindness, Severity, and Wisdom of God (Rom 11:1-36)

- God hasn't rejected Israel (Rom 11:1-10).
- God has revealed His plans for the Gentiles (Rom 11:11-24).
- God isn't done with Israel yet (Rom 11:25-32).
- God alone is worthy of praise (Rom 11:33-36).

Lesson 16: Living Sacrifices (Rom 12:1-21)

- Present your whole life to God (Rom 12:1-2).
- Receive the gifts God has given you (Rom 12:3-8).
- The look of a living sacrifice (Rom 12:9-21).

Lesson 17: Earthly Citizens with a Heavenly Calling (Rom 13:1-14)

- Submit to earthly authorities (Rom 13:1-7).
- Obey the law of love (Rom 13:8-10).
- Put on Christ (Rom 13:11-14).

Lesson 18: Unity Amid Diversity (Rom 14:1-23)

- Don't let small issues tear the church apart (Rom 14:1-6).
- Ultimately, Christians belong to Christ (Rom 14:7-12).

- Do not judge or tempt one another (Rom 14:13-23).

Lesson 19: The Micro and Macro Missions of the Church (Rom 15:1-33)

- Live for one another as Christ lived for you (Rom 15:1-13).
- Live for one another as Paul lived for the Gentiles (Rom 15:14-21).
- Live for one another to the ends of the earth (Rom 15:22-33).

Lesson 20: The Final Word (Rom 16:1-27)

- Paul's final greetings to the church in Rome (Rom 16:1-16).
- Paul's final instruction to the church in Rome (Rom 16:17-24).
- Paul's final praise to the Lord God Almighty (Rom 16:25-27).

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ROMANS 1:1-17

Gospel Foundations

Memory Verse

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first but also to the Greek.”

—Romans 1:16

Real-life Problems

Self-reliance—While Paul doesn't explicitly name "self-reliance," he makes two important implications in this introduction: First, we are all sinners in need of a savior. And second, we cannot save ourselves. For many teens and adults alike, we're tempted to try to earn God's favor (and approval from others) with our performance, but this will only leave us more broken and empty. No amount of effort on our part can make us right before God.

The Good News

From the very opening of his letter, Paul reminds us that God has had one plan for salvation all along. The gospel message, the good news of Christianity, has always been about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who came to earth to save sinners. Because of Jesus' work on the cross, we don't have to earn our way to God, but simply believe in Him and live by faith.

I. Introduction

OPENING QUESTIONS

Idea #1: Pretend you're introducing yourself to someone you've heard about, but never met. What would you say to them in that first encounter? How would you introduce yourself?

Idea #2: If you had to choose one topic to talk about for five straight minutes, what would you choose? (i.e., What is something you're surprisingly an expert at?)

Idea #3: When was the last time someone (a parent, teacher, or coach, for example) asked you to complete a task for them (not homework or a chore, but a personal task)? Was it something small, or something important? How did you respond when they gave you that assignment?

PRAY

Open your time together in prayer.

REHEARSING THE GOSPEL

What does gospel mean?

Good news

What's the good news?

Jesus died for my sins

Why did He die for your sins?

So that I can have abundant life in relationship with Him now and forever

What is grace?

God's love for undeserving sinners

REVIEW

1) Who wrote the book of Romans?

The apostle Paul wrote the book of Romans sometime around AD 57.

2) Who was the original audience of this book?

Paul wrote to the churches in Rome, which consisted of both Jewish and Gentile Christians.

3) Why was the book of Romans written?

Paul wrote to introduce himself to the church before visiting, to clarify any theological disputes between Jews and Gentiles, and to remind them of the gospel of God.

What's going on?

REMINDE

Though Paul had never been to the churches in Rome, their "faith is proclaimed in all the world" (Rom 1:8). Still, a disagreement between Jew and Gentile believers threatened disunity in the church, and Paul sought to remind them of God's one plan for salvation for both Jew and Greek. In this chapter, he introduces himself, but more importantly, he begins to highlight the "gospel of God" (Rom 1:1) to set up the rest of the letter.

TODAY WE'LL LEARN

- 1) God has one plan for salvation (Rom 1:1-5).
- 2) God calls His people for a purpose (Rom 1:6-15).
- 3) God saves those who believe (Rom 1:16-17).

Read

Read **Romans 1:1-17** aloud in your group.

II. Questions for Discussion

A. WHAT?

1) How does Paul introduce himself (Rom 1:1)?

Paul calls himself both a "servant" (literally, a "slave") for Christ and an apostle (one who is sent). In this way, he acknowledges that he humbly submits before God, and also that God has called him and set him apart for a specific purpose: to proclaim the gospel of God.

2) What does Paul say about the "gospel of God" in verses 2-5?

When we hear the word "gospel," we think of the good news that Jesus died for our sins. And that's true. But most fundamentally, Paul says that the gospel isn't a just a message, but it is a *person*: Jesus Christ. Because Paul has been sent to proclaim the gospel, he has been sent to proclaim the name of Jesus, the Son of God. Moreover, Paul suggests that the gospel isn't a new idea, but that it was "promised beforehand" through the prophets throughout the Old Testament. In other words, this was God's plan all along.

God's Master Plan

In the movie *Ocean's 12*, a group of 12 slick thieves (led by Danny Ocean, played by George Clooney) enter a winner-takes-all competition with a rival thief nicknamed "the Night Fox." In a race to steal a priceless Fabergé egg, Ocean and his crew are on the run from multiple enemies at once. Moreover, as the film plays out, it's one disaster after another, and when Ocean's crew tries to steal the egg, they're arrested, and all hope seems lost. When Danny Ocean pays the Night Fox a visit, the villain gloats as he recounts how he stole the egg in an elaborate and acrobatic display of agility. Truly, the Night Fox seems to be the superior thief.

But when the Night Fox is done bragging, Ocean reveals that he and his crew stole the egg *before* it even got to the museum. In fact, most of what we see in the movie—the arrests and apparent failures—were all a setup to distract the Night Fox. In reality, Ocean and his crew had been three steps ahead the entire time. They had one plan all along, and no matter how hard the Night Fox tried, there was nothing he could do to foil Ocean's master plan.

Comparing God's plan for salvation to a heist movie may sound silly, but throughout the course of human history, God has always had one master plan. No matter what the devil may try, nothing can thwart the advancement of the gospel of God. Throughout history, God's people couldn't always see God's plan clearly, but Romans 1:1-4 reminds us that God had one plan foretold through the ages, and that plan was unstoppable. The Son of God was *always* going to come to earth to save sinners, and they would be saved by faith in *His* work, not their own.

3) What things does Paul say Christians are called to in verses 5-7?

Like Paul, all followers of Jesus are "loved by God" and "called to be saints" (v. 7). Even more simply, we "belong to Christ" (v. 6). That is, we are set apart as holy and as His. At the same time, as part of our calling, Jesus has called us for a reason. He has given us grace "to bring about the obedience of faith" (v. 5a) so that His name could be proclaimed among the nations (v. 5b).

4) What are some of the things Paul prays for in verses 8-15? What's unique about his desire in verse 12?

Paul is grateful for the faith of the Romans, and he thanks God that their faith has already been heard throughout the world. Though Paul has tried to visit before, he hopes that he can finally meet the Roman churches, see them in the flesh, and preach the gospel to them (v. 15). In verse 12, he specifically desires to visit them so that they can be

mutually encouraged. Yes, he's a famous apostle, but even he knows he needs encouragement and support from other believers!

5) What is Paul unashamed of (v. 16)? What is the essence of this gospel?

Paul is unashamed of the gospel, which is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes." The good news of the gospel is that God has a plan for our salvation, and He doesn't withhold it from anyone who believes in Him.

6) How does Paul instruct the righteous to live (v. 17)?

Paul quotes the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk, who prophesied, "Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but *the righteous shall live by his faith*" (Hab 2:4). As Christians, we are called to live by faith, not by sight (2 Cor 5:7).

Tough Topic

In Romans 1:17, Paul uses the phrase "righteousness of God," which appears seven other times in Romans (vv. 3:5, 21, 22, 25, 26; 10:3), but only one other time in the New Testament (2 Cor 5:21). While Paul's intention has been debated for centuries, Douglas Moo offers a helpful explanation: "Could we not take 'righteousness of God' here to include *both* God's activity of 'making right'—saving, vindicating—and the status of those who are made right, in a relational sense that bridges the divine and human?" (Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 74). In other words, the challenging term has a double meaning that encompasses God's faithfulness and righteousness to save us, *and* our new status, being made right before God by Christ's blood. Moo concludes, "righteousness of God' is a relational concept. Bringing together the aspects of activity and status, we can define it as *the act by which God brings people into right relationship with Himself*" (Moo, *Romans*, 74). While this may seem like a small detail, given the prevalence of the term (especially in Romans 3), it's important to get a handle on it from the beginning.

B. SO WHAT?

1) To whom do we belong? How are we called to live in verse 5? What enables us to live in this way?

In verse 6, Paul declares that we "belong to Christ." We are His. Nothing and no one can take that away from us (look ahead to Rom 8:35-39). Because we belong to Christ, it's no surprise that we're called to live in a new manner: "the obedience of faith" or "the obedience that comes from faith" (v. 5). As we will see in verse 17, Paul isn't suggesting that God's plan for salvation looks like faith + obedience = salvation. What he is saying, however, is that faith in Jesus leads to obedience. Pastor Tim Keller writes, "Obedience flows out of faith; it is a consequence of faith, not a second condition for salvation" (Keller, *Romans 1-7 for You*, 14). At the same time, when we take a step back, we see the ultimate source for our faith and resulting obedience: the grace we have received from Jesus Christ (v. 5a). Without God's grace in our lives, our faith and obedience would be meaningless. But because God has already poured out His grace through Christ on the cross, now we are freed and empowered to believe and obey. And our obedience isn't simply something between us and God, but it's part of how we can make God's name known "among all the nations" (v. 5b).

2) Why does Paul give a brief history lesson in verses 2-6? Why is this significant?

In verses 2-6, Paul describes the "gospel of God" mentioned in verse 1. Surprisingly, however, the good news of the gospel didn't come about when Jesus was born; instead, this was "promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy scriptures" (v. 2). In other words, the gospel of God—which concerns Jesus, the Son of God—has been the same plan since the beginning of time. The Old and New Testaments are all telling the same story and pointing a spotlight onto one person: Jesus. God's plan didn't change when Adam and Eve sinned, or when Israel failed to uphold the Mosaic laws, or when Assyria, Babylon, and other countries destroyed Israel. Instead, God's plan to save His people through the cross of Christ has been the plan all along. He is in complete control, and we can search the Scriptures to see His purposes.

3) What does Paul's prayer in verse 12 tell us about him? How does the church in Rome model the Christian life for us?

Even though he was arguably the most influential Christian in the world (and possibly of all time), Paul was humble enough to know that even he needed encouragement. Rather than desiring to visit the Romans simply to revitalize their church, he knew that he also needed the strength and support they could offer as brothers and sisters in Christ. Hebrews 10:25 says we ought to meet regularly and encourage one another, and Paul models that for us here. No matter who we are, we are no better than our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, and God designed the church to be a place of encouragement and building one another up (1 Thess 5:11).

4) Why is Paul so eager to preach to the Romans? What does this tell us about preaching and about church?

First, Paul is eager to preach because he is "not ashamed" of the gospel. He earnestly desires to meet the Christians in Rome, and the thing he most desperately wants to do is preach the gospel to them. Even though Paul wasn't planting the church in Rome—he wasn't sharing the gospel message with them for the first time—the good news of the gospel is still *the* message of Christianity. Preaching the gospel isn't just for evangelism, but also for discipleship and growth for all Christians. Finally, while we believe that this letter to the Romans was inspired by the Holy Spirit, Paul clearly saw a difference between writing to fellow Christians and being with them face-to-face. Writing was good; preaching in person was better. Today, we're often tempted to think that we don't need to see each other in the flesh or even attend church in person, but we should follow Paul's example: There's something about being in person with one another and something about *preaching* that simply cannot be replaced.

5) In these first 17 verses, Paul introduces the gospel message. How would you summarize it, especially following verses 16-17? How does the gospel change our future, and how we live today?

Paul is only scratching the surface here, but he's setting up the entire letter with this brief outline of the gospel of God. The gospel is God's plan throughout history, and it is the power of salvation for everyone who believes in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This good news means that God has already shown us grace (v. 5) through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and by calling us to Himself (vv. 6-7). Second, the only qualification for salvation is "belief" (v. 16) or "faith" (v. 17). The gospel frees us from having to save ourselves (which is futile), and allows us to trust in Christ's saving work instead. When Paul says that the righteousness of God (see "Tough Topics") is revealed "from faith for faith," he simply intends to "emphasize that faith and 'nothing but faith' can put us into right relationship with God" (Moo, *Romans*, 76).

C. NOW WHAT?

- 1) God hasn't changed His mind as history has unfolded. He has always had one plan for salvation, which runs through the Old and New Testaments: The righteous shall live by faith. What does it mean, practically, to live by faith?**
- 2) How does the gospel of God affect how you live and interact with one another today?**
- 3) How do you respond when you hear that God has a plan to save you? Do you feel your need for salvation? Or do you feel too far gone to be saved?**
- 4) The word "ashamed" in verse 16 can also mean "offended." How might the gospel be offensive to you or your friends? Are you ashamed or offended about the gospel?**

Main takeaway

From the beginning of time, God has always had one plan for salvation. The good news of the Gospel is that God's Son, Jesus Christ, would come to save us from our sins, and all He asks of us is that we believe.

III. Closing

REMEMBERING THE GOOD NEWS

From the very opening of his letter, Paul reminds us that God has had one plan for salvation all along. The gospel message, the good news of Christianity, has always been about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who came to earth to save sinners. Because of Jesus' work on the cross, we don't have to earn our way to God, but simply believe in Him and live by faith.

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Father God, thank You that You have chosen us from before the beginning of time and called us to Yourself. Help us to trust in Your plan, not our own, and help us to see daily that we desperately need Your salvation. Father, You stay the same through the ages, and I pray that we would see You as more and more beautiful each day. In Jesus' name, amen.

Supporting Resources

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1) What might it look like in your life to "live by faith"? In what ways is this easy or hard for you? Spend some time in prayer asking God to help you walk by faith.
- 2) Paul opens his letter with an implication that he'll unpack to a greater extent later: You need salvation, and God has a plan to save you. Take a moment to reflect on this message. Do you know that you're in need of a savior? Or, on the other end of the spectrum, do you think of yourself as too far gone to be saved?
- 3) Do you ever find yourself ashamed or offended by the gospel? How do verses 16-17 help turn shame into eagerness?

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- 1) Parents, how has the gospel transformed your life? How has God's grace and plan for salvation changed the way you live?
- 2) When was a time when you had to completely trust God with your life? Share a specific story with your family of what it looked like to live by faith.
- 3) As a family, go around and talk about a time when you were eager to tell someone about Jesus. Then, take a moment to talk about a time when you were hesitant to share the gospel. What was the difference between those situations? How does the gospel message make us eager rather than ashamed?

ROMANS 1:18-32

Exchanging the Glory of the Immortal God

Memory Verse

“Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.”

—Romans 1:22-23

Real-life Problems

Idolatry—As human beings, we were all created to worship God. All of us, however, have chosen to worship images and created things rather than our creator (Rom 1:22-25). The Bible calls this idolatry, and in many ways, this is the sin at the root of all sins. When we treat something or someone as more important and worthy of our time, resources, and worship than God, we’re committing idolatry against God.

The Good News

By itself, this passage would be incredibly depressing. Paul’s assessment of humanity is dire: We are all horrible, rotten sinners to the core. But Paul is simply setting up the first half of his argument: We are all sinners. But as we will see, that’s not the end of the story! When we remember where Paul started from in verses 16-17, we’re reminded that God has a plan to save sinners, and we will see that plan is even more miraculous than we could ever imagine (Rom 3:20).

I. Introduction

OPENING QUESTIONS

Idea #1: Have you ever been to a packed stadium for a concert or a game of some kind? What was it like? What were you and everyone around you doing?

Idea #2: What’s a movie with a surprise twist ending? What happens when you watch the movie again? What do you notice this time around?

Idea #3: When was the last time you admitted or apologized for a mistake? Whether it was something big or small, what helped you realize that you were wrong?

Idea #4: What is the most beautiful place you’ve ever visited? What made that place so special?

Idea #5: What was the best gift you’ve ever received? Why was it such a great gift? What did you do with it after you got it?

PRAY

Open your time together in prayer.

REHEARSING THE GOSPEL

What does gospel mean?

Good news

What’s the good news?

Jesus died for my sins

Why did He die for your sins?

So that I can have abundant life in relationship with Him now and forever

What is grace?

God’s love for undeserving sinners

REVIEW

1) Who wrote the book of Romans?

The apostle Paul wrote the book of Romans sometime around AD 57.

2) Who was the original audience of this book?

Paul wrote to the churches in Rome, which consisted of both Jewish and Gentile Christians.

3) Why was the book of Romans written?

Paul wrote to introduce himself to the church before visiting, to clarify any theological disputes between Jews and Gentiles, and to remind them of the gospel of God.

What's going on?

REMIND

Last week, Paul introduced both himself and the "gospel of God," which is "the power of God for salvation to all who believe" (Rom 1:2,16). He reminded the Romans that God has always had one plan to save His people, and that all He asks of us is to believe in His Son. After those introductory remarks, Paul will begin his main argument today in verse 18.

TODAY WE'LL LEARN

- 1) We all know God, but we suppress the truth (Rom 1:18-21).
- 2) We all worship something, but we worship the created rather than the creator (Rom 1:22-25).
- 3) We know what is right, but we do what we know is wrong (Rom 1:26-32).

Read

Read **Romans 1:18-32** aloud in your group.

II. Questions for Discussion

A. WHAT?

1) What is "revealed" in Romans 1:17? What is "revealed" in verse 18? Why is God's wrath revealed?

In verse 17, the "righteousness of God" is revealed in the gospel, but here in verse 18, in a parallel sentence, the "wrath of God" is revealed. This isn't a future unveiling, but the present revealing of God's wrath *because* of "ungodliness" and "unrighteousness." Ungodliness highlights our rebellion against God, while unrighteousness points to our sins against one another.

2) What is "plain" (v. 19) and "clearly perceived" (v. 20) about God in nature? Who can see these things?

In these verses, Paul is speaking about the condition of all men (before they come to know Jesus). He's saying that everyone, no matter where they were born, no matter what their parents taught them, can see certain things about God that are *obvious* in creation. Theologians have called this "common grace," and Paul ironically says that it is God's "invisible attributes," specifically, His eternal power and His divine nature, that are "clearly perceived" (v. 20). While creation cannot tell us everything about God—we can't see God's fatherly love or mercy or triune nature, for example—we can still see basic truths about God in the world around us. Most basically, when we look at the grandness of the stars or the most intimate details in human DNA, we see that there must be a creator behind all of this beautiful creation. We may not know everything about God, but to deny His existence is folly.

Too Much of a Good Thing

A few hundred years ago, botanists (people who study plants) made a terrible mistake. Hoping to prevent soil erosion in the United States, they looked abroad and saw that a plant native to east Asia called kudzu might be a good solution. In places like Japan, kudzu was very popular, and had many good uses. In addition to preventing erosion, different parts of the plant could be used to make baskets or natural medicines, and it was a good source of food for livestock.

However, while kudzu was a useful and natural plant in east Asia, when people brought it to America, it quickly became disastrous. Today, kudzu is known as an invasive species because it has completely taken over. Without realizing it, you've probably seen it all over the side of the road and in forests because its growth is virtually uncontrollable.

In its natural environment, Kudzu has a useful purpose. But in America, it invades every new environment and literally chokes out other plant growth. It completely wrecks the ecosystem by soaking up nutrients from the soil and blocking the light from reaching other plants. In other words, it prevents plants from doing the thing they were created to do; live and grow by absorbing sunlight.

Our idols are a lot like kudzu. They might not be inherently bad things, but when we misuse them or elevate them to godlike status, they invade our hearts and completely take over. It's really, really hard to get rid of kudzu, and it's really, really hard to see our idols for what they are before it's too late. Just as kudzu invades an ecosystem and chokes out the plant life, our idols invade our hearts and threaten to choke us out by blocking us from the one we were made to worship.

3) What sin does Paul single out in verses 22-25? What sin does he condemn in verses 26-27?

First, Paul focuses on the sin of idolatry. Humans "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images" (v. 23) and "exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the creator" (v. 25). When we think of idolatry, we first think of Old Testament-style worship of images or carvings resembling men or birds or other animals, such as the golden calf in Exodus 32. At the same time, verse 25 takes it one step further,

showing that idolatry is any *worship* of a created thing rather than the creator. Whenever we put anything before God, that is idolatry.

Second, Paul explicitly condemns the sin of homosexuality in verses 26-27. Just as humans traded the glory of God for created things and lies, men and women alike have exchanged natural sexual relationships for unnatural ones. We'll talk more about this later, but Paul highlights these two sins not to elevate them as "worse" than other sins, but to highlight how our fallenness leads to a broken relationship with God (idolatry) and broken relationships with one another (homosexuality).

4) What are some of the things God gives us up to (verses 24, 26, 28)?

While the language of "giving up" may sound harsh, Paul uses it three separate times. He says that God "gave them up" to a few different things: "in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves" (v. 24), "to dishonorable passions" (v. 26), and "to a debased mind to do what ought not be done" (v. 28). In other words, God allowed us to chase after the sins that we so desperately desire.

5) In verse 25, Paul offers a hint at a better way forward. Who alone is worthy of praise?

It's easy to miss, but at the end of verse 25, Paul reminds us of the way things *should* be: "they...worshipped and served the creature rather than the creator, *who is blessed forever! Amen.*" Other translations say "who is worthy of eternal praise" (NLT) or "who is forever praised" (NIV). That is, only God is worthy of eternal praise. As we will see later, when our praise priorities are properly oriented, then we are living according to the way God created us.

6) What does Paul criticize in verse 32?

After outlining his concerns with humanity's rebellion against God, and specifically listing certain ways in which we "do what ought not to be done," Paul levies one final critique: We not only do the wrong things, but we "give approval to those who practice them" (v. 32). In other words, we condone and even applaud sin in others.

B. SO WHAT?

1) What do we learn about God in verses 18-21? What do we learn about humanity and human wisdom?

Just as the "righteousness of God" is revealed in the gospel, Paul takes a step back to detail *why* the gospel is necessary in the first place—because God's wrath is presently being revealed to the world. And why is God's wrath being revealed? Because humanity turned away from God. Without Jesus in our lives, every human being suppresses the truth about God and practices unrighteousness and ungodliness (v. 18). That's a hard pill to swallow! Without Jesus, we're not only totally sinful, but we actually *bury the truth about God*. Paul tells us that the evidence of God's existence is overwhelmingly obvious in creation. And yet, throughout history, humans have lived and acted as though God did not exist.

On top of rejecting God as God, we humans take a bad situation and make it worse: "Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images..." (vv. 22-23). Put another way, the very things we do that we *think* are wise are actually "futile" and "foolish" (v. 21). If we take a step back and assume (for the sake of argument) that the infinite, immortal God does exist, then it would be the most unthinkable thing imaginable to worship something other than Him. And yet that is what we do, each and every day. In other words, without God, human wisdom is total foolishness (Jas 3:13-18).

2) How do these verses (Rom 1:18-32) answer the question, "what happens to people who never hear the gospel?"

For most Christians, this is a question we will wrestle with at some point (or points) in our walk with God. Especially when we have non-Christian friends or wonder about people who live in remote parts of the world, this is a really hard question, and we should acknowledge that God's ways are higher than our ways (Is 55:8-9). But here, Paul gives us an answer in no uncertain terms: "They are without excuse" (Rom 1:20). While creation cannot tell us everything about God, and can't even tell us the good news of the gospel, the mere existence of the world around us proves the existence of God. Theologians call this "common grace" because it is common to all people. Paul isn't speaking to people who have heard the gospel and rejected it; he's describing the state of all mankind. Every person, before he or she knows Jesus, knows God exists in creation but fails to honor Him as God (v. 21).

We don't know everyone else's story, but we do know that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life (Jn 14:6). We know that all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory (Rom 3:23), and that we all deserve judgment and hell apart from the saving work of Christ (Rom 6:23). All people—Christians and non-Christians—deserve eternal judgment because all are sinners. For Christians, however, the blood of Christ covers our sin and justifies us before God (Rom 3:24-25). Rather than leading us to declare that it's "unfair" of God to judge those who have never heard the gospel, Paul would respond in two ways. First, it is fair because everyone can clearly see the existence of God (Rom 1:18-21). Second, like Paul, that should make us *desperate* to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth.

3) Why do you think Paul particularly singled out idolatry and homosexuality in verses 22-27? Are these two sins "worse" than those listed in verses 29-31?

Despite what some people may think about Christianity, homosexuality isn't a "worse" sin than any other. At the same time, despite what some people may think about Christianity, homosexuality is still a sin. In these verses, Paul uses idolatry and homosexuality as examples of man's depravity. Paul saw that these two sins were prevalent in the world around him, and he recognized that each represented part of man's fallenness. In idolatry, he saw mankind's broken relationship with God. In homosexuality, he saw mankind's fractured relationship with one another. In other words, these sins represent the vertical and horizontal brokenness we all experience. Note that Paul lists idolatry first, and then he doubles down on it (vv. 21-23, 25). Our vertical brokenness with God is the reason we experience horizontal brokenness with those around us. It's really the sin behind all sins. There's a reason the first commandment reads, "You shall have no other gods before me," and the second commandment forbids the creation or worship of idols (Ex 20:3-4). If our relationship with God is right, then our relationship with other people can be right, but if our relationship with God is wrong, then our relationship with other people will also be wrong.

It may be hard to recognize the idolatry in our lives because it's often the sin underneath other sins. It's hidden by more "obvious" diseases like murder, deceit, pride, gossip, and others (see Rom 1:29-31). Pastor and commentator Ray Ortlund describes the sneaky dangers of idolatry:

"So, this category *idolatry* really explains something about us. It explains why we all struggle with persistent, enslaving sins that hold us back. The sin itself is only the surface problem, and mere willpower can't get rid of it. The real problem causing the sinful behavior is some idol or other captivating our hearts by promising to make us happy, and we fall for it. We tell ourselves that our joy and freedom and significance and security require something more than Christ. Our faith in Him is so unimaginative. Our expectations are so low...we run from Him to stuff ourselves full of counterfeit pleasures and empty salvations" (Ortlund, *Isaiah*, 268).

In other words, *idolatry* is often the root cancer at the heart of all our other sinfulness. Later, in verses 29–31, Paul lists a number of other sins that are no more or less awful in the eyes of God than any other sin. But these sins—many of which mirror the Ten Commandments—reflect our sinful behaviors toward other humans as a result of a shattered relationship with God. Like a doctor, Paul examines the patient (humanity) and sees a grim diagnosis: Our hearts are corrupt, foolish idol factories. Bible teacher Paige Brown sums it up by saying, "Before there is a transgression, there was a rejection."

Tough Topic

Perhaps more than ever, the topic of homosexuality looms large over Christianity, particularly in America. As the surrounding culture becomes more and more affirming of homosexuality and other LGBTQ issues, this is a topic that students increasingly care more about, and it's one that cannot be avoided. While we must be sure to admit and repent of the damage that many churches have caused for people wrestling with same-sex attraction, that does not mean we have to change or ignore what the Bible teaches. Here, Paul clearly condemns both male and female same-sex activity as "contrary to nature" and "shameless" (Rom 1:26–27). Gay and lesbian sex is a distortion of God's design of marriage for men and women (Gen 2:24). At the same time, while we can condemn homosexuality according to Scripture (see also 1 Cor 6:9–10; 1 Tim 1:10), we should be careful not to elevate one particular sin. In fact, earlier in Romans (v. 1:24), Paul denounced *all* sexual sinful acts: "God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves." The Bible's teaching on homosexuality is clear, but we should also be gracious and gentle when we discuss the topic, understanding that it is likely something that weighs heavily on the minds of some (if not most) of our students.

Finally, while some people have argued that Paul was only referring to *exploitative* same-sex relationships specific to his time period, we know that "as a cultured Roman citizen, Paul would have been very familiar with long-term, stable, loving relationships for same-sex couples. That does not stop him from identifying them as not the creator's intention for human flourishing" (Keller, *Romans 1–7 for You*, 32–33). In other words, Paul was condemning the same kind of homosexual relationships that we still see in our culture today. We trust that his words are the inspired Word of God, and that God's instruction for our lives is for our own good. After all, human wisdom is folly (Rom 1:22), and Paul reminds us to trust God's plan for our lives rather than what we deem best.

4) What does it mean that God "gave them up..." in verses 24, 26, and 28? Why did God "give them up" in the first place? What does Paul suggest about these desires?

God "giving them up" was simply God allowing humans to chase after the ungodly things they wanted to chase. Rather than forcing people back to Him, He gave them the very things they wanted: sinful desires. Rather than seeking freedom in God, we chase after the very idols that enslave us and keep us wanting more. In verse 18, Paul told us that God's wrath was being poured out on ungodliness and unrighteousness, and these following verses tell us what that means: He gives us over to our sinful desires. While our sinful desires can undoubtedly be tempting, they don't tell us the entire truth about themselves. As Tim Keller explains, "The things we serve will not free us; rather, they control us. We *have* to have them. And, since our hearts were made to be centered on God, since He is the only true provider of satisfaction and significance, they do not satisfy—we always feel we need more, or

something else. The tragedy of humanity is that we strive for and fail to find what we could simply receive and enjoy. We suppress the truth which could free and satisfy us" (Keller, *Romans*, 29).

5) All in all, what does Paul tell us about the human heart? How does verse 32 compound Paul's concerns about the state of human culture?

These verses are hard to hear because they paint a bleak picture of human life apart from Christ. In sum, Paul argues that we are all fallen, depraved, and hopeless sinners on our own. Even though God can clearly be seen in creation, we all turn away and trust in ourselves and in created things. Thinking we are wise, we suppress the truth and turn to futility and foolishness instead of God. As a result, God gives us over to the lusts and desires that we so desperately choose over Him. In other words, apart from Christ, we can't trust ourselves; we were originally created to be in right relationship with God, but idolatry has become our default, and we choose to worship created things rather than the creator.

In the final verse of Romans 1, Paul re-emphasizes two ideas: first, he suggests that all humans know the difference between right and wrong. Deep down, we know there is a moral law—"God's righteous decree"—and yet we still do what is wrong (v. 28). Second, we not only do what is wrong, but our sense of good and evil has become so warped that we actually *approve* or *endorse* sin. We encourage one another to pursue paths of idolatry and sinfulness rather than urging one another to walk in the light and obey Christ (1 John 1:7).

C. NOW WHAT?

1) Have you ever thought (or heard someone say), "If God wanted me to believe, why doesn't He make Himself more obvious?" How does Paul respond in these verses? What does he tell us about our natural human wisdom and reason? How might Paul respond to the common saying, "follow your heart"?

2) "Claiming to be wise, they became fools" (v. 22) sounds like a fitting summary of our culture today. Have you experienced or seen this denial of God in your own life or in people around you? How does Paul equip us to respond when people attempt to deny God's existence?

3) What were you created to do? What does it mean to worship? Where do you see idolatry or misplaced worship usurping the glory of God in your life? (Hint: Where do you devote most of your time, energy, and resources? What in your life would be most difficult to live without?)

Main takeaway

Apart from Jesus, we are all hopeless sinners and idolaters. In creation, all humanity can clearly see God's existence, but we foolishly suppress the truth and turn away from God. Worse, we all commit idolatry, exchanging the glory of our creator to worship created things, and as a result, God allows us to chase these idols to our own demise.

III. Closing

REMEMBERING THE GOOD NEWS

By itself, these verses would be incredibly depressing. Paul's assessment of humanity is dire: we are all horrible, rotten sinners to the core. But Paul is simply setting up the first half of his argument, that we are all sinners. But as we will see, that's not the end of the story! When we remember where Paul started from in verses 16-17, we're reminded that God has a plan to save sinners, and we will see that plan is even more miraculous than we could ever imagine (Rom 3:20).

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Father God, this is a really challenging text, but we pray that You would break the idols we have created and reveal the sin in our hearts. Forgive us for worshiping anything other than You, and help us to put You back where You belong in our lives. You alone deserve all praise, oh God. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Supporting Resources

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1) What does idolatry look like in your life? What thing (or person) do you worship more than God? Where do you spend most of your time and energy? What do you worry about losing?
- 2) Take some time to reflect on the sins listed in verses 22-31. Which of these do you struggle with the most? Take some time to confess these to God and ask for Him to help you repent and walk in obedience to Christ.
- 3) Do you know anyone who denies that God exists? Have you ever talked to them about it? Alternatively, in what ways do you see yourself or others approving of sin?

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- 1) What was your life like before you knew Jesus? Did you see patterns of idolatry and sin in your life? What made you exchange your worship of idols to worship the glory of God?
- 2) As a family, take some time to share something that you worship more than God sometimes. Work? School? Relationships? Your own kids? How do these things become idols, and how can you put them back in their proper place?
- 3) Parents, in what ways do you approve of your child's sin? How do you "promote and encourage idolatry" in their lives? Do you idolize test scores, performance in sports, or gossip to preserve a good reputation? (See Keller, *Romans 1-7 for You*, 35-36).

ROMANS 2:1-3:8

God's Just Judgment

Memory Verse

"For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified."

—Romans 2:13

Real-life Problems

Judgmental of others—Rather than being salt and light in the world and being a good witness to Christ (Rom 2:24), so often, Christians are known for being judgmental. In fact, D.A. Carson has suggested that Matthew 7:1 ("Judge not, that you be not judged") has surpassed John 3:16 as the most well-known Bible verse among unbelievers. Why? Because non-Christians look at Christians and get frustrated with how judgmental we can come across. Self-righteously judging the sins of others—whether they are Christians or not—comes far too easily, especially for many young Christians.

The Good News

Ironically, the good news this week is that even religious people are in need of a savior. We are in no place to judge because we are just as sinful as everyone else. At the same time, God offers us the salvation we need; not in our own self-righteous performance, but in a Savior who did live the perfect life on our behalf.

I. Introduction

OPENING QUESTIONS

Idea #1: Evaluate the saying, "If you're gonna talk the talk, you better walk the walk." What does this mean?

Idea #2: Have you ever worn a Halloween costume or a disguise? What did you dress up as? Did what you were wearing change who you are on the inside?

Idea #3: Think about a time when you messed up. Did you get in trouble? Was your punishment fair or justified?

PRAY

Open your time together in prayer.

REHEARSING THE GOSPEL

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Good news

What's the good news?

Jesus died for my sins

Why did He die for your sins?

So that I can have abundant life in relationship with Him now and forever

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REVIEW

1) Who wrote the book of Romans?

The apostle Paul wrote the book of Romans sometime around AD 57.

2) Who was the original audience of this book?

Paul wrote to the churches in Rome, which consisted of both Jewish and Gentile Christians.

3) Why was the book of Romans written?

Paul wrote to introduce himself to the church before visiting, to clarify any theological disputes between Jews and Gentiles, and to remind them of the gospel of God.

What's going on?

REMINDE

At the end of Romans 1, Paul laid out a scathing critique against all of humanity: Everyone has suppressed the truth about God, chosen to worship false idols, and now sins against God and one another. Now, Paul turns and specifically addresses religious people, who not only have no place to judge others, but who are themselves sinners before God.

TODAY WE'LL LEARN

- 1) We have no right to judge others, but God judges justly (Rom 2:1-11).
- 2) Hearing the gospel isn't enough; we must be transformed from the inside out (Rom 2:12-29).
- 3) God's faithfulness shines through our unfaithfulness (Rom 3:1-8).

Read

Read **Romans 2:1-3:8** aloud in your group.

II. Questions for Discussion

A. WHAT?

1) What does Paul repeatedly condemn in Romans 2:1-3? What's wrong with human judgment?

At the beginning of chapter 2, Paul turns his attention to Jews and criticizes them for being judgmental. This doesn't mean that they aren't supposed to "judge" (or discern) right from wrong—he already condemned people for "approving" of sinful practices in Romans 1:32. Instead, Paul condemns them for passing judgment on others while thinking they don't also deserve God's judgment. They are quick to judge others without seeing that they're also guilty of the exact same sins (Rom 1:16-32; Mt 7:3-5). In this way, "condemning others while excusing ourselves is what allows us to hang onto both our self-righteousness *and* our sin" (Keller, *Romans 1-7 for You*, 41).

2) What is God's kindness for (Rom 2:4)? How do we often respond (Rom 2:5)?

God's kindness is "meant to lead you to repentance" (Rom 2:4). In other words, God's kindness—His grace—isn't just to give us a blank check to go and sin as we please. At the same time, Paul is still speaking to the self-righteous religious person and reminding them that they also *need* to repent. Whether we struggle with rebellion (Rom 1:16-32) or self-righteous judgment (Rom 2:1-3), we all need repentance. Too often, however, we meet God's grace and mercy with a stubborn and hard heart (Rom 2:5). When God meets our sin with His love on the cross, and we don't respond with repentance, we store up wrath and bring *His* judgment upon ourselves.

3) Who is Paul talking about in Romans 2:12-13? Who has the law, and who doesn't? Who is justified before God?

In verse 12, Paul takes a step back and puts Jews and Gentiles on the same playing field. Gentiles ("all who have sinned without the law") and Jews ("all who have sinned under the law") will both be judged for their sin, whether they had been taught God's moral law or not. In today's terms, this is like saying there are people who grow up in a Christian home, and people who don't. Whether or not we have heard the gospel, we are still sinners against God, and all sin has consequences. Moreover, Paul wants to remind the Jews—the religious rule-followers—that simply *hearing* God's laws isn't enough. We must actually obey; we must be *doers* of the law.

4) What was special about the Jewish person's relationship with God (Rom 2:17-18)? What leads to "the name of God [being] blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you" (Rom 2:24)?

Jewish people were specifically called and set apart by God, not for anything they had done, but because God chose them and loved them (Deut 7:7-9). Second, they had been given the law through Moses (Ex 19-31), and they knew how God wanted them to act in their everyday lives. Third, building upon these previous two benefits, they enjoyed a special relationship with God. As a result, God's people knew His will for their lives and could even approve of what was right (a stark contrast to Rom 1:32) (Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 159-61). Because of their special relationship with God, Jewish people had a responsibility to treat others differently (Rom 2:19-20), but rather than living up to this high calling, they fell flat on their faces. Rather than being missionaries to the world, they took advantage of others and did not practice the very things they preached (Rom 2:21-22). In short, they were hypocrites, and their sin didn't just tarnish their relationship with God, but they also "dishonored" and "blasphemed" God's name publicly (Rom 2:23-24).

5) What surprising thing does Paul say about circumcision in Romans 2:25-29? Who is the one who actually performs the circumcision?

Since the days of Abraham, circumcision was a physical practice performed on male babies born into God's covenant people, Israel (see Gen 17:1-14). It involved literally cutting off a piece of skin (the foreskin) from an infant's penis, and it was an outward sign of God's promise to Abraham to give him a son. At the same time, circumcision was *also* a matter of the heart (Deut 10:16; 30:6). God didn't just care about outward signs of obedience, but He also cared about an obedient heart posture. However, by the first century, many Jews neglected the spiritual aspect of circumcision and focused only on the outward act. Speaking into this context, Paul reminds Jewish Christians about God's original intentions. Circumcision—the sign of God's covenant promises—was not just about cutting flesh, but it was "a matter of the heart" (Rom 2:29). After Christ, the *physical* aspect of circumcision has been replaced by baptism (Col 2:8-15), but Paul clarifies that the *spiritual* aspect remains for *all* believers. Instead of being circumcised by your parents, now, the Holy Spirit performs the act Himself (Rom 2:29).

It's What's on the Inside that Counts

Everyone loves an underdog story. The scrappy little guy with "lots of heart" who takes down the big bad guy. One of the most famous underdog stories comes from the Bible: the story of David and Goliath. But before David fought armies and became king, he was a humble shepherd boy and the youngest in his family.

King Saul was Israel's first king, but when he disobeyed God, God sent the prophet Samuel to anoint a new king for His people (1 Sam 16). God sent Samuel to a man named Jesse, who lived in Bethlehem and had eight sons. When Samuel saw Jesse's firstborn son, Eliab, he saw a tall, strong man who *looked* like a king. Samuel thought, "*Surely the Lord's anointed is before him.*" But God responded to Samuel and said, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees: Man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart" (1 Sam 16:6-7).

One by one, Samuel met all of David's older brothers, and while they might have looked the part of a king, none of them fit what God was looking for because God was looking at the heart. God chose David to be king not because he looked like a king, but because he had the character fit for a king. He was "a man after God's own heart," and that mattered far more than outward appearances (1 Sam 13:14; Acts 13:22).

Alternatively, for a more modern example, in the original *Captain America* movie, the US Army has to choose one soldier to take the "Super Soldier" serum. Whoever takes the serum will become bigger, faster, and stronger, but all of his other qualities will be magnified as well. While the Army General wants to choose Hodge, a man who "passed every test with flying colors...he's big, he's fast, he obeys orders. He's a soldier."

But the doctor conducting the experiment says, "I am looking for qualities beyond the physical," and insists that Hodge's bullying will only be exacerbated by the serum. Steve Rogers, on the other hand, is a minuscule 90 pounds, he's slow, and he can't keep up with the other soldiers physically. But he shows flashes of character, intelligence, and guts—all internal qualities that cannot be measured. When the time comes, the doctor chooses Rogers to become Captain America because he has the *internal* qualities that matter; he has a good heart.

In our own lives, it's tempting to think that God will only love us if we look like good, obedient Christians. Paul's Jewish audience thought that circumcision was enough to make them right with God. Today, we often think we need to have our lives put together in order for Him to use us. We think we need to do well in school, read our Bibles, and be the "good guy" or "good girl" in the eyes of others. But God isn't concerned with outward appearances; He looks at our heart. As the old saying goes, it's what's on the inside that really counts.

6) What does our unrighteousness (sin) highlight about God (Rom 3:3-5)? What does our unrighteousness bring about?

When we are faithless, He remains faithful. When we lie, He remains true. Our unrighteousness only highlights God's righteousness. At the same time, in His righteousness, our sin necessarily brings about God's judgment and wrath. God doesn't capriciously punish us to 'get us back'; his justice demands that unrighteousness be justly punished.

B. SO WHAT?**1) At the beginning of Romans 2, Paul turns to directly address Jews, who were God's chosen people. How does He accuse them of behaving in Romans 2:1-5 and 2:17-29? What do you think this looked like in the Roman church?**

At the end of Romans 1, Paul condemned all people for their sins against God, with a particular emphasis on idolatry. For a Jewish Christian, the tempting response would be one of self-righteousness and judgment toward Gentile sinners. But suddenly, at the beginning of Romans 2, Paul flips the script and speaks directly to the comfortable, hyper-religious Jewish persons and calls out their sins, too. In Romans 2, he accuses them of being judgmental (Rom 2:1-3), hypocritical (Rom 2:21-22), and people who take advantage of God's grace (Rom 2:4-5). In a church that was divided between Jewish and Gentile Christians, it would have been very tempting for Jewish believers to look down on their Gentile brothers and sisters and judge them for not adhering to the Mosaic law. It would have been easy for a Jewish believer to castigate a Gentile for a sinful past while thinking that he had always been right with God simply because of his heritage. Just like today, when we're overly concerned with our outward religiosity, we become too focused on the sins of others while overlooking our own faults. We become quick to judge and blind to our own sins. As Jesus said on the Sermon on the Mount:

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (Mt 7:3-5).

In this passage, Paul has the religious Jews in his sights and condemns their judgmental impulses.

2) If we cannot judge (Rom 2:1-3), who can? How does Paul describe God's judgment (Rom 2:4-11; 3:5-8)? What does it mean to "presume" on God's grace and kindness (Rom 2:4)?

No matter how morally "good" we may seem on the outside, we're all sinners. As a result, we have no right to judge others for their sinfulness (Rom 2:1). But in His infinite holiness, glory, and perfection, God alone can judge—and He judges "rightly" (Rom 2:2). He alone judges with justice. Even His wrath (a word that might give us pause) is the just response to sin against His holiness (Rom 2:5, 3:5-8). At the same time, while we may recognize that God alone can judge, we can still take His kindness, His mercy, and His grace for granted. Whether we think too little of our sins or too little of His unconditional love, we "presume" on His kindness when we respond to grace with a hardened, stubborn heart rather than with repentance. It's easy to live our lives as if God hasn't already delivered us from sin and death by Jesus' death on the cross, and it's easy to forget that we're called to live in a way that bears the fruit of a life transformed by the Spirit (Jn 15, Gal 5). The Gospel is supposed to transform the way we live (Rom 2:6-11), and our actions should reflect a changed heart. If we find ourselves in the same patterns of sin and idolatry (Rom

1:16-32) or living with a blind attitude of judgment (Rom 2:1-3), we're taking advantage of God's grace and taking Him for granted. As Paul warns, this has consequences: When we respond to His mercies with more ungodliness, we store up wrath for ourselves.

3) What does Paul say about non-believers in Romans 2:12-15? What does Paul mean by "hearers" and "doers" in Romans 2:13?

In these verses, Paul has a message for both Jews and Gentiles. If you're Jewish, meaning that you know the law of Moses, then you will be held to that standard—you will be judged by the law (Rom 2:13b). Even though Gentiles did not receive the law, they too will be judged (Rom 2:13a). How is this fair? In Romans 1, Paul argued that to *everyone*, "What can be known about God is plain to them" (Rom 1:19) and that God's "eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world" (Rom 1:20). Here, he says that even Gentiles *naturally* know the things of God's law. In other words, God's moral law is woven into the DNA of all humans. We all intrinsically know right from wrong and good from evil. Even though Gentiles were never given the law on stone tablets (the Ten Commandments), they know that there is an objective moral standard, a code, that all humans should live by.

In this way, merely possessing the law (like the Jews) is not enough. At the same time, not possessing the law (like the Gentiles) is not a get-out-of-jail-free card. All will be held accountable. As a result, simply hearing the Gospel—whether that means going to church, reading your Bible, or spending time in family devotionals—doesn't make you right with God. Those are all good things, but they don't make us right before Him. Hearing isn't enough; we must take what we hear and become *doers*. The message of the gospel must transform how we act, or else our hearing is for nothing. It's important to note that Paul is not suggesting that our works are needed for our salvation—we'll see more about how God saves us by grace alone in the next lesson—but he simply reminds us that genuine faith must bear fruit (see also James 2:14-26).

4) Why does Paul bring up circumcision in Romans 2:25-29? What does it mean to be "inwardly" Jewish or that "circumcision is a matter of the heart" (Rom 2:29)?

Today, circumcision doesn't mean much to us. But in Paul's day, this was a *hugely* important topic for the Jewish people. It was the physical sign of God's covenant with Abraham, and it was a major sticking point in the early church as people asked, *should Gentile converts to Christianity get circumcised?* Paul addresses this subject more in his letter to the Galatians, but here, Paul speaks again to the proud, judgmental, religious Jewish person. He's saying that no matter how outwardly religious someone may be, if their heart hasn't been truly affected by the gospel, then their piousness is worthless. God doesn't just want empty acts of obedience—He wants your heart. He wants His Spirit to penetrate our hardened, impenitent hearts and to give us new life from the inside out. Tim Keller says that "a circumcised heart is one spiritually melted and softened," and a heart that treasures God "out of love, because there is a sense of the presence, nearness, and goodness of God" (Keller, *Romans 1-7 for You*, 62). The old covenant was marked by an outward, physical cutting off of flesh. But in the new covenant, we are circumcised in Christ (Col 2:11), who was cut off in His death on the cross, and now the Spirit applies that inward, spiritual circumcision to us (Rom 2:29) so that we are seen as God's covenant children once again.

5) How does God respond to our sinfulness (Rom 3:1-8)? What does this tell us about God?

Our faithlessness acts as a foil to God's even more remarkable faithfulness. He simply will not be denied in His desire to save His people. God's purposes will not be stopped, and His character cannot be tarnished by our sin. Though we are unrighteous, His righteousness is unailing, *even in His judgment*. In fact, God's wrath is perfectly justified because justice demands that wrongs against His righteousness be made right. We can't have God's love

without also His judgment—the cross was simultaneously God's greatest act of love for us *and* the picture of His judgment upon our sins. In other words, His righteousness, love, and justice all go hand-in-hand.

C. NOW WHAT?

1) Paul criticizes the Jews for being both self-righteously judgmental (Rom 2:1-3) and horribly hypocritical (Rom 2:21-24). Which of these sins do you see more in your own life? How does God offer redemption for that sin in this passage?

One of the most well-known passages in Scripture is the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32). This may be another helpful way to visualize the two ways we treat God: proud self-righteousness and outright rebellion. Ask students whether they identify more with the younger or the older son.

2) As people in church, to one degree or another, we have likely heard the good news of the gospel. Are you more of a "hearer" only, or are you also a "doer"? How does the gospel call you to change the way you live?

3) While God does desire our obedience, He cares more about our hearts than our outward appearances. What is the faulty "circumcision" that you hope will earn you favor in God's eyes? On the other hand, what might it mean for the Spirit to circumcise your heart?

4) Do you ever take God's kindness for granted? How might this look in your life?

Main takeaway

Oftentimes, people who are the most outwardly religious are the quickest to judge the sins of others while ignoring the sins in their own life. Paul emphatically condemns this self-righteous judgment and reminds us that God cares more about the condition of our heart than our outward appearances.

III. Closing

REMEMBERING THE GOOD NEWS

Ironically, the good news this week is that even religious people are in need of a savior. We are in no place to judge because we are just as sinful as everyone else. At the same time, God offers us the salvation we need—not in our own self-righteous performance, but in a Savior who did live the perfect life on our behalf.

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Father God, we thank You that You save sinners. We pray that You would continue to reveal the sin in our own lives, and that we would be quicker to love than to judge one another. Create in us a new heart that longs for You and loves You with all that we are. In Jesus' name, amen.

Supporting Resources

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1) Are you often more critical of others than yourself? Is there someone in your life toward whom you are especially judgmental? Why do you think you're particularly hard on them?
- 2) Can you think of someone who doesn't just hear the gospel, but who lives differently because of it? What might it look like to be a "doer" and not just a "hearer" of the good news?
- 3) Are you often concerned with how other people think of you? Do you try to do things so that God will view you more favorably? What does it mean that God cares more about the posture of your heart than your outward religiosity?

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- 1) As a family, how do you talk about each other or people outside the family? Are you often judging or making fun of others?
- 2) As a family, are you hearers of the Word together? If not, what steps can you take to read God's Word together? If so, how can you become not just hearers, but also transformed doers together?
- 3) Spend some time together in prayer. What might it look like for God to "circumcise your heart"? Are you more concerned with outward appearances, or with your heart for God?

ROMANS 3:9-31

A Distressing Diagnosis and a Miracle Cure

Memory Verse

"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

—Romans 3:23-24

Real-life Problems

Hopeless without God—It's easy to glaze over the word "sin" as if it weren't really *that* big of a deal, or as if it were something that didn't separate us from God each and every day. Not just the sins we commit, or even those sinful patterns we can't seem to break, but the all-encompassing state of sin that soaks us to the core. It's not just that we do bad things; at our core, we are hopeless without God.

The Good News

While hearing that we are all sinners (Rom 3:23) may sound like decidedly *bad* news, the gospel actually starts with this diagnosis. The good news is so good *because* we are in such desperate need. But while we were still sinners—before we did anything to help ourselves—Christ died for us. By God's grace, Jesus' blood paid the price we owed for our sin.

I. Introduction

OPENING QUESTIONS

Idea #1: When is the last time you received some good news? What did you do when you heard it?

Idea #2: What is a "perfect game" in baseball? How often do they happen? Why are these so hard to accomplish?

Idea #3: When you need help for something, who is the first person you turn to? Why is that?

PRAY

Open your time together in prayer.

REHEARSING THE GOSPEL

What does gospel mean?

Good news

What's the good news?

Jesus died for my sins

Why did He die for your sins?

So that I can have abundant life in relationship with Him now and forever

What is grace?

God's love for undeserving sinners

REVIEW

1) Who wrote the book of Romans?

The apostle Paul wrote the book of Romans sometime around AD 57.

2) Who was the original audience of this book?

Paul wrote to the churches in Rome, which consisted of both Jewish and Gentile Christians.

3) Why was the book of Romans written?

Paul wrote to introduce himself to the church before visiting, to clarify any theological disputes between Jews and Gentiles, and to remind them of the gospel of God.

What's going on?

REMINDE

Last week, Paul rounded out his condemnation of humanity's sinfulness, this time specifically targeting the self-righteous and hypocritical religious people who were quick to pass judgment on others. We can read Romans 1:18-3:8 as a unit, where Paul builds his case that *all* humans, both Jew and Gentile, are sinners before God. Today, we reach the climactic crescendo, and we'll see Paul's devastating diagnosis of the human condition and the incredible promise of God.

TODAY WE'LL LEARN

- 1) Everyone is under sin (Rom 3:9-18).
- 2) No one can be justified by the law (Rom 3:19-21; 27-31).
- 3) We are justified by the grace of God through the blood of Christ (Rom 3:22-26).

Read

Read **Romans 3:9-31** aloud in your group.

II. Questions for Discussion

A. WHAT?

1) Are Jews in any better position than Gentiles? Whom does Paul address in Romans 3:9 and following?

Even though the Jews had the Mosaic law, they were no better off than Gentiles. Paul is clear: No one is righteous. All are under sin. As a result, even an outwardly pious Jew was a sinner, just like a pagan Gentile. For the rest of Romans 3, Paul is addressing all people, Jew and Gentile alike.

2) In Romans 3:10-18, Paul quotes several different Old Testament verses. How can we summarize Paul's assessment of humanity?

These Old Testament quotations (taken from the Psalms, Proverbs, and Isaiah) encapsulate the totality of mankind's status before God: sinful. No one is right with God (Rom 3:10) because everyone has turned away from Him (Rom 3:12). As a result, not only is our relationship with God broken, but our relationship with one another is contaminated as well. No one does good (Rom 3:12), and both our words (Rom 3:13-14) and our actions (Rom 3:15-17) are evil. Perhaps verse 20 sums it up best: There is no fear of God before us. It's not just that we commit sins against God and others, but at our very core, we are unrighteous sinners.

3) According to Romans 3:19-21, what purpose does the Mosaic law serve?

Many Jews lived as though the law itself saved them. Here, Paul insists that even the best obedience to the law cannot bring justification because everyone is unrighteous (Rom 3:10-18). Rather than bringing salvation, the law "brings knowledge of sin" (Rom 3:20) and helps us know what is right and what is wrong. In these verses, Paul uses legal language to paint the picture of a courtroom where God is the judge and every person—whether they understand the law or not—stands guilty before the judge. Lastly, while the law is not the way to righteousness or salvation, the law and the prophets (meaning the Old Testament) point us forward to the gospel and to the person of Christ.

Before and After

Have you ever seen those advertisements on TV where they show a "before" picture and an "after" picture? Whether they're trying to sell some new skincare product, hair-growth plan, or muscle-building routine, these pictures are often comical because of the drastic differences. In fact, sometimes the pictures look so different that we wonder whether they're even pictures of the same person at all!

In this chapter, Paul gives us a "before" and "after" snapshot of who we are. Apart from knowing Christ, we are hopeless, sinful, broken people. We're idolaters chained to sin, and no matter how hard we try, we keep falling short of our goals to honor God. Clearly, something needs to change.

But rather than a magical pill or foolproof new gadget to make us better, Paul gives an unusual solution—the blood of Christ Jesus. Religious works or moral behavior can't save us, but if we want to be right with God, we must simply believe in Jesus (Rom 3:22). He is our redemption (Rom 3:24), and His blood covers us and makes us right with God.

It's the ultimate transformation. Before, we were unrighteous sinners who turned away from God. Now, in Christ, we're given new life and a new identity: justified, redeemed, righteous. But the craziest part about this dramatic change isn't simply our new "look," but the fact that we did nothing to get it. It's all by the grace of God.

4) How does Paul describe humanity in Romans 3:23?

In this short but memorable summary verse, Paul simply declares that everyone is a sinner before God. The previous verse (Rom 3:22b) ended by saying "there is no distinction," reminding us again that there is no difference between the outwardly religious person and the secular atheist: Both are sinners before God. Because we have all sinned, we have also all fallen short of God's glory. In the words of commentator Douglas Moo, "Paul...is indicating that all people fail to exhibit that 'being-like-God' for which they were created...even Christians 'fall short' of that goal until they are transformed in the last day by God" (Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 227). In other words, in our sin, we fail to bear God's glorious image as we were created to do.

5) What is God's response to our sin (Rom 3:24)? Who does redemption come from? How is it received?

On the heels of this climactic and distressing summary of man's fallenness, Paul immediately reminds us of God's incredible plan to save sinners. Yes, all have sinned. But through redemption offered in Christ Jesus, God offers justification by His grace as a gift. A gift! Paul says in Romans 3:23 that we are all entirely undeserving, and then in verse 24, he reminds us that God lavishes on us His saving grace anyway. For our part, we do not control our justification in any way other than to receive it by faith (Rom 3:25). Salvation is entirely an active work of God and a passive work from us. We need only to believe.

6) Who can receive the promises of Romans 3:21-28? How are they received?

The remarkable promise of God's saving grace doesn't have any ethnic or religious distinctions; it's available to Jew and Gentile alike. But rather than receiving God's promises by the law or by works or by circumcision (Rom 3:27,30), we receive justification by faith (Rom 3:27-28, 30).

B. SO WHAT?**1) What does it mean to be "under sin" (Rom 3:9) and unrighteous (Rom 3:10)? While we might agree that nobody is perfect, are some people "better off" than others?**

One of Paul's main purposes in Romans 3 is to establish humankind's state of complete and total sinfulness. To be "under sin," as one commentator notes, is to be "helpless captives to its power" (Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 201; Rom 6:20). Paul isn't simply arguing that Jews and Gentiles alike are sinners committing sinful acts. Instead, all humans are chained and imprisoned by sin. Apart from Christ, humans are "not just sinners but helpless pawns under sin's power...the problem with people is not just that they commit sins; their problem is that they are enslaved to sin" (Moo, *Romans*, 201). As a result of our sinful state, no one is right before God (Rom 3:10b). For many of us, it may be tempting to look around at other people and think, *well, at least I'm not like that person* (see the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9-14). We're quick point out the obvious sins of others while ignoring our own transgressions, and it's tempting to compare ourselves to other people and think we're just not as bad. But here, Paul makes no distinction: No one is righteous. No one does good. Everyone is enslaved under sin's power. We can't "do the math" on our sins and compare them to those around us because our biggest issue isn't the sinful acts we commit, but our more fundamental enslavement to sin.

2) Why does Paul quote so many Old Testament passages? What is he saying about sin's effect on our lives? What does the law tell us about ourselves?

In these first few chapters of Romans, Paul has flipped back and forth between addressing his Jewish Christian audience, the Gentile Christian audience, and both at the same time. In these verses, Paul anticipates a potential Jewish counterargument that Jews were more righteous in God's eyes because they had the law of Moses. By

quoting widely from the Old Testament, he's reminding his Jewish audience in particular what the Old Testament says about *all* people. Sin's devastation is universal. It is total. No one is righteous before God.

The temptation for students in a youth group—especially for students who have grown up in the church—is to respond like the Jewish Christians in Rome. Just as they clung to the law of Moses for salvation, it's tempting for Christians to trust in their own religiosity (church attendance, Bible reading, moral uprightness, etc.) rather than in Christ alone. But Paul wants to make it clear that both the religious and the irreligious are hopeless apart from the grace of Jesus Christ.

3) Paul's letter to the church in Rome turns a corner in Romans 3:21 with the words "But now..." What changes in Romans 3:21-26? What does it mean to be justified? How do sinners receive righteousness and salvation?

So far, Paul has been laying out his case for the complete depravity of man. Like a doctor examining scans and charts, he looks at humanity and informs us of the worst: Without Christ, we are all slaves to sin. Both Jew and Gentile are sinful, and no one is right with God. But God has a plan, and His plan to make us right with Him is *completely* antithetical to how we (and every other religion) would think we have to get right with God. Rather than making us come to Him, He comes down to us. If we're not careful, we can miss some of the remarkable truths about salvation:

- To be justified (Rom 3:24, 28) is to be declared right with God. This comes from the same root word as "righteousness," and it often carried a legal connotation. Legally, we were sinners, but by the blood of Christ, our debt to God has been paid in full. In justification, our sin-stained ledger is wiped clean, but we are also given the spotless righteousness of Christ. In other words, not only are we perfectly forgiven forever, but Christ's perfect righteousness—"the righteousness of God"—is given to us as our own.
- We receive the righteousness of God *by faith in Jesus*. Not by our religious good deeds, but by faith in Jesus to save us. More specifically, we believe in His atoning death on the cross (Rom 3:25). Faith in Christ to save is about trusting that He will save you, not trusting that *your* trust in Him will save you. As a result, if we don't feel like our faith is all that strong at a given moment, we may worry about our salvation because we're trusting in our own faith rather than Jesus. For example, if I sit down in a chair, I am trusting that chair to hold me up. If the chair is sturdy, it will hold me up regardless of how confident I am in the chair. It is the strength of the *object* of my faith (the chair) that matters more than the strength of my faith. For Christians, the object of our faith is Jesus Christ, and even when our faith is weak, He is strong.
- Grace, by definition, is unmerited. It is unearned. But Paul doubles down and says that we are justified "by His grace *as a gift*" (Rom 3:24 ESV) or "justified *freely* by His grace" (Rom 3:24 NIV). It's easy to acknowledge that we are saved by faith and not by works, but then subconsciously treat faith as if it was a work or a condition for God's promises. In reality, our faith is the means through which God saves us. We receive "the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" by faith.
- In the first century, "redemption" (Rom 3:24) really referred to the "ransoming" of prisoners of war, slaves, and condemned criminals" (Moo, 229). This echoes Romans 3:23, which reminded us that we have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory. That is, apart from Christ, we were completely enslaved to sin and death. We were hopeless on our own.

4) How can a righteous and just God declare sinners to be righteous? Why is it important that God be both "just and the justifier" (Rom 3:26)?

Because God is perfect and holy and just, He cannot simply sweep sin under the rug and pretend it isn't there (Rom 3:26). All sin is against God (Ps 51:1-5), and the wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23). In His holiness, God is sinless and just; and yet, in His justice, God pours His wrath out over sin. As one commentator writes, "God's love and wrath meet in the atonement, and neither can be denied or compromised if the full meaning of that event is to be properly appreciated" (Moo, 231). So how can God preserve His perfect righteousness *and* forgive sinners at the same time? How can a just God justify sinners? We must have a perfect substitute bear our penalty in our place. In His mercy, God sent His Son to stand in our place and bear the punishment we deserve (Rom 3:24-25). His blood is the propitiation, the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and by it we are washed clean (1 Jn 1:7, 9; 2:2). To justify sinners, God didn't set aside His justice (He can't!), but instead He turned His justice and His wrath upon His Son, who bore it on our behalf.

5) Given Paul's comments about "the law" in these verses (particularly Rom 3:19-21 and Rom 3:31), what place does the law still have for Christians? How can we wrap our heads around Paul's teaching on the law?

Paul has been clear that the law cannot save (Rom 3:20). In fact, because no one can perfectly live by the law (i.e., the law of Moses), it actually does more to reveal our sin than to save us from it. But when we come to Romans 3:31, Paul surprises us: "Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law." This may remind us of Matthew 5:17, where Jesus declared that He came to "fulfill" the law rather than to abolish it. What do we make of Paul's and Jesus' views on the law? Two things:

- First, the law cannot save us from our sin. In fact, salvation has always been by faith through God's grace, and not by upholding the law (Rom 4; Gen 15).
- Second, the law still matters. But because we cannot keep it ourselves, someone else must do it on our behalf. Once again, we need a perfect substitute, and once again, Jesus steps into our place. Pastor Tim Keller writes, "The ultimate sacrifice of atonement, Christ, not only took His people's sin upon Himself; He also imputed His law-keeping—His righteousness—to them. When we put our faith in Christ, our sinfulness is given to Him...and Christ gives us His perfect obedience to God's law, and we live through it" (Keller, *Romans 1-7 for You*, 91). Or, as 2 Corinthians 5:21 states, "He [God the Father] made Him [Christ the Son] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." The law still matters; sinning and breaking the law still deserves God's wrath, but at the same time, we who believe in Christ are covered with His perfect righteousness.

C. NOW WHAT?

1) Paul makes some big claims about humanity in this chapter, including "all...are under sin" (Rom 3:9), and "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). How does this make you feel? Where have you seen the effects of your own sin (or the sin of others) in your life?

2) Why do you need the gospel? Why is it significant that we are not merely sinners, but that we are "under sin" (Rom 3:9)?

3) Other than Christ, what are you tempted to trust in for your self-worth or even salvation? What might it look like to trust in Christ alone?

Main takeaway

In Romans 3—one of the most incredible chapters in all of Scripture—Paul outlines God's plan of salvation. Though we are *all* sinners and fall short of the glory of God, we are justified—declared righteous before God—by the sacrificial blood of Jesus. We receive this amazing gift of grace not by our obedience to the law, but by faith alone.

III. Closing

REMEMBERING THE GOOD NEWS

While hearing that we are all sinners (Rom 3:23) may sound like decidedly *bad* news, the gospel actually starts with this diagnosis. The good news is so good *because* we are in such desperate need. But while we were still sinners—before we did anything to help ourselves—Christ died for us. By God's grace, Jesus' blood paid the price we owed for our sin.

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Father God, we're humbled before You today. We pray that You would continue to make our sinfulness known to us, but that You would also remind us of Your grace poured out for us on the cross. Thank You for saving sinners like us no matter the cost to You. In Jesus' name, amen.

Supporting Resources

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1) How do you understand the sin in your own life? Not just the sins you commit, but the sinful heart within you? How does that make you feel? Bring these feelings before God in prayer, and don't be afraid to repent and ask for forgiveness.
- 2) Are you more of a rebel or a rule follower? If you're a rebel, why do you need the gospel? If you're a rule-follower, why do you need the gospel?
- 3) If you met someone who had never heard the gospel before, how could you summarize Romans 3 to them? What would you say?

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- 1) As a family, what are some of the ways your personal sins affect one another? Parents, how do you sin against your children? Kids, how do you sin against your parents? Spend some time in honest conversation with one another, repenting of your own wrongs and asking for forgiveness.
- 2) Why do you need the gospel? Share with one another why you need the good news of redemption in your own life.
- 3) Where do you look for salvation other than in Christ alone? Parents, in what ways might you be steering your kids to find their worth and value in things (such as success in school, sports, or social life) other than Jesus?

ROMANS 4:1-25

Walking in the Footsteps of Faith

Memory Verse

"For what does the Scripture say?
'Abraham believed God, and it was
counted to him as righteousness.'"

—Romans 4:3

Real-life Problems

Moralism—In every other world religion, humans are told they have to act a certain way to be right with their god(s). As a result, religion is about rule-following and trying to live morally. Even in Christianity, we face the temptation to work our way to God and earn His love by our actions. This way of living, known as moralism or legalism, puts our trust in ourselves rather than trusting in God's grace to save.

The Good News

Romans 4 outlines two aspects of God's grace. First, God doesn't count our sins against us (vv. 7-8). Second, He not only forgives our sins, but He actually declares or counts us as righteous (vv. 3-5). This isn't because of anything we do, but because of His grace poured out for us at the cross (v. 25).

I. Introduction

OPENING QUESTIONS

Idea #1: What's something that you are proud of accomplishing?

Idea #2: Have you ever owed a debt of any kind to anyone? Has anyone ever owed you? How did you "settle" your account?

Idea #3: Who is someone you look up to? Whether it's a family member, mentor, older friend, or even someone famous—why do you look up to that person?

PRAY

Open your time together in prayer.

REHEARSING THE GOSPEL

What does gospel mean?

Good news

What's the good news?

Jesus died for my sins

Why did He die for your sins?

So that I can have abundant life in relationship with Him now and forever

What is grace?

God's love for undeserving sinners

REVIEW

1) Who wrote the book of Romans?

The apostle Paul wrote the book of Romans sometime around AD 57.

2) Who was the original audience of this book?

Paul wrote to the churches in Rome, which consisted of both Jewish and Gentile Christians.

3) Why was the book of Romans written?

Paul wrote to introduce himself to the church before visiting, to clarify any theological disputes between Jews and Gentiles, and to remind them of the gospel of God.

What's going on?

REMIND

In the previous lesson, Paul brought his introductory remarks to a climax. He summarized mankind's default state of sin (Rom 3:23), but he also gave us great hope: God graciously justifies and redeems sinners by the blood of Christ as a gift (Rom 3:24). For both the Jew and Gentile, Christ came to save sinners not by their works, but by faith. Today, Paul takes us back in time to show that this has been God's plan all along.

TODAY WE'LL LEARN

- 1) God has *always* justified His people by faith alone (Rom 4:1-8).
- 2) The place of works and the law in salvation (Rom 4:9-15).
- 3) Abraham modeled how to walk by faith (Rom 4:16-25).

Read

Read **Romans 4:1-25** aloud in your group.

II. Questions for Discussion

A. WHAT?

1) Which two Jewish figures does Paul reference to support his argument about justification by faith?

Throughout Romans 4, Paul looks back at Abraham, the father of Israel and arguably the most important figure in Jewish history. In Romans 4:6-8, however, Paul also references King David, another hero of the faith and a man after God's own heart (1 Sam 13:14). Though these are Old Testament characters, Paul reminds us that justification has always been by faith.

2) What is "counted" to Abraham in Romans 4:3, and why? What isn't "counted" to us in verse 8?

Quoting directly from Genesis 15:6, Paul says that Abram "believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness" (v. 3). Abraham was not saved by works (v. 2), but by trusting in God for salvation. At the same time, not only is Christ's "righteousness" counted as our own, but our own sins are no longer counted against us (v. 8). By grace, God not only chooses not to count our sin against us, but He also chooses to count us as righteous.

3) According to Romans 4:10-11, which came first, circumcision or faith?

Here, Paul summarizes parts of Abraham's life story (told in Genesis 12-23) and focuses on two events in particular: God's covenant ceremony with Abraham (then Abram) in Genesis 15, and God's renewal of the covenant and gift of the sign of circumcision in Genesis 17. To summarize Paul's argument, he's saying, in a way, "remember, Genesis 15 came before Genesis 17." That is, faith precedes the work of circumcision.

4) What did God promise Abraham? How did God's promise come to Abraham (Rom 4:13)?

In Genesis 12, God promised Abraham, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing...in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:2-3). Later, in Genesis 15:5-22 and Genesis 17:4-8, God renewed that promise, specifically declaring that He would give Abraham a son, despite Abraham's old age. In Romans 4:13, Paul references this "promise," which Abraham received by faith rather than through the law (see also Galatians 3). Rather than depending upon our unworthy works, God's promise "may rest on grace and be guaranteed to [Abraham's] offspring" (Rom 4:16). If salvation depended upon us, we would all fail and fall short (Rom 3:23). But in God's good providence, His grace guarantees justification for sinners.

5) How does Paul describe Abraham's response to the promise (Romans 4:18-21)? What would have made it hard for Abraham to trust God?

To put it simply, Abraham believed that God would fulfill his promise. Despite Abraham's and Sarah's old age, despite Abraham's failings (see Gen 12 and 16), and despite the 25 years it took for God to fulfill His promise, Abraham "did not weaken in faith" (Rom 4:19), and "no unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God" (v. 20). In fact, Paul even says that Abraham was "fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised" (v. 21), even though what God promised seemed impossible (vv. 17,19).

6) In Romans 4:23-25, Paul transitions and applies Abraham's story to ours. What does he call us to believe in?

Abraham's faith wasn't just for him, but it was also a model for us. Abraham believed that God could do the impossible—bring a son to an elderly and barren couple—and his faith was counted as righteousness. For Christians looking back at Abraham's example, we have an even clearer picture of God's ability to bring life from death: Jesus Christ. But rather than trusting that God can make us the father of many nations, "It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our

justification" (vv. 24-25). In other words, we can't simply believe that a god exists; we must believe in God the Father who sent His One and only Son to die on the cross for our behalf so that we could be justified and made righteous before Him.

B. SO WHAT?

1) What does it mean to be "counted" or "credited" righteous? How does Paul explain the significance of this in Romans 4:4-5?

To be "counted" or "credited" something is to be given a new status. This doesn't mean that believing in God is itself righteousness that merits God's favor, nor does it suggest that faith made Abraham live more righteously. Instead, it means that God "treated Abraham as *though* he was living a righteous life" (Keller, *Romans 1-7 for You*, 96). Put differently, the "counting" of Abraham's faith means "to account to him a righteousness that does not inherently belong to him" (Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 262). Because Abraham did nothing to earn this righteousness, he had nothing to boast about. Likewise, for us today, the imputed (given) righteousness that we receive from Christ is a "gift" and not "wages" that we have earned (v. 4). As a result, we have nothing to boast about except Christ alone.

Unimaginable Riches

Ask your students: What would you do if you won the lottery? How would you react?

To put it mildly, you would be pretty excited! But what if you won the lottery without buying a single lottery ticket? What if someone else won the lottery and then gave you every single penny? One day, just woke up and your bank account was completely full. Better yet, no matter how much money you spent or money you earned, you always had a perfectly full bank account.

While not a perfect analogy, we can think of being "counted" as righteous similarly to waking up one day with a completely and perfectly full spiritual bank account. We did *nothing* to earn our righteousness in the first place, because God gives Christ's perfect righteousness to us as a gift (v.4; c.f. 3:24). It's completely undeserved!

Moreover, when we are counted as righteous, we can't turn around and lose our righteousness. There are no bad monetary investments that can bankrupt our righteousness. We didn't work hard and save up our entire lives to earn a comfortable yet fragile retirement; God gave His righteousness freely as a gift and counted it to us as our own. And even when our actions do not line up with our faith and we live in sin (v.5a), God still justifies sinners by faith and credits the faithful as righteous.

2) What does David tell us about our sins in Romans 4:6-8? What does this mean about us and our sin? How does it connect to being "counted" righteous" by faith (Rom 4:3)?

Just as Abraham reminded us that God counts us as righteous when we believe, Paul reminds us that King David also believed in a righteousness that did not come from the law. For Jewish listeners, Abraham and David were two of the most important figures in Israel's history, so mentioning their names carried significant weight. Quoting from Psalm 32:1-2, David argues that our sins are "forgiven" and "covered" (v. 1). More importantly, however, David argues that our forgiveness is not a result of our good works, but because God counts no iniquity against us (v. 2). Just as justification was a gift of grace counted to undeserving sinners, forgiveness is also an act of God that doesn't result from our works, but from His grace.

Loki's Judgment

In the pilot episode of the Disney series *Loki*, the main character (Loki, the "god of mischief") gets captured by a secret group of "Time-Keepers" who want to hold him accountable for all of his mischief. As a prisoner, he passes through a series of checkpoints before standing before a judge who will determine his fate.

Along the way, Loki finds himself in a tiny room with no escape. A huge stack of paper piles up on the table in front of him, and Loki is clearly confused. The guard simply instructs, "Please sign to verify this is everything you've ever said." When Loki asks a bewildered, "What!?" a printer prints that word onto a new piece of paper which is then added to the pile. Loki has no choice but to sign, thereby taking responsibility for everything he has ever said.

Like Loki, one day, we will have to give an account for everything we've ever said (and done). We will appear before the judge and give an account for ourselves (2 Cor 5:10; Rom 14:10-13). While we may not have a literal stack of paper listing everything we've said and done, all of our words and deeds will be laid out before God. But rather than making us sign on the dotted line to bear responsibility for all of the good and bad that we have done, God does something unexpected.

When we trust that He is able to justify us by grace, He takes our stack of paper—accounting for everything we've ever done—and places it upon Jesus' shoulders at the cross. He no longer counts our sins against us. At the same time, God takes the spotless record of Jesus and places it in front of us as if it were our own. He credits Christ's righteousness as ours, and He sees us as He sees His Son, even though we did nothing to deserve it. As a result, two things are true: First, we will all face judgment for all the things we have ever done. At the same time, when we put our faith in Christ, our record is wiped clean *and* replaced with His perfect life. Forgiveness and justification are both by faith alone.

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=B42TukLzPXy>

3) Why is it important that faith preceded circumcision? How does Paul treat circumcision and the law with regard to salvation?

Returning back to the life of Abraham, Paul reminds us that Genesis 15 preceded Genesis 17. Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness, long before Abraham obeyed God with the covenant sign of circumcision. This reminder serves a few purposes: First, in Romans 4:9-10, Paul addresses the hypothetical objection that someone might raise about whether this righteousness is available only to Jews (who were circumcised) or also to Gentiles (who were uncircumcised). Because faith preceded circumcision for Abraham, Paul argues that justification by faith is available to anyone, regardless of circumcision status. Following Genesis 17:11, Paul argues that circumcision was a "sign" and "seal" of God's covenant with Abraham. Put another way, circumcision "confirms [Abraham's] righteous status, a status that was his by virtue of faith" (Moo, *Romans*, 269). On its own, circumcision cannot be the means for salvation since it merely signified or authenticated God's earlier work in Abraham. Second, more broadly, because circumcision was often used as a substitute for outward works of the law, Paul is doubling down on his argument that justification is by faith alone. Whether or not someone was (or is) circumcised has no impact on their salvation, because justification is by faith and not by works.

4) What does it mean that Abraham "believed" God (Rom 4:3)? How does Paul expand on this in Romans 4:16-22? What does this teach us about faith today?

1. First, we must notice that Abraham did not simply believe *in* God. Acknowledging that a god exists is a part of faith, but that is not saving faith (see Rom 1:17-32).
2. Second, we should not think of faith as a work in and of itself. We don't earn our way to righteousness by believing in God to the best of our ability. Instead, faith is *receiving* God's promise with open, empty hands, and trusting that He is able to do what He has promised.

3. Third, rather than simply believing in God, Romans 4:21 tells us that Abraham was "fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised." Faith is specific. We're not just believing in God, and we're not trusting in the strength of our belief, but we're trusting in the power and faithfulness of God. Abraham believed that God would deliver on His promises, and this is the faith that was counted to him as righteousness.
4. Fourth, Abraham wasn't a fool, and he knew that at 100 years old, a pregnancy with a barren wife appeared highly unlikely (v. 19). But he also trusted that God would deliver on His promises, no matter how improbable they appeared or how discouraged he may have felt. Abraham wasn't perfect, and he faltered and trusted in himself more than God at times (Gen 16). Overall, however, Abraham remained focused and trusted in God's promises. Even if the odds were stacked against him, and some days he probably felt like God's answer would never come, he trusted in God's promise more than his own feelings or the situation before him.
5. Fifth, faith is an act of worship. When we believe that God is who He says He is, and is able to deliver on the promises He makes, we can't help but give glory to God (Rom 4:20). Faith remembers who God is, and meditates on His glory and power and past deeds. Abraham trusted that God "gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom 4:17), effectively remembering that God is the all-powerful creator of the universe who is capable of more than we could ever imagine. Not only can we look back and remember all God did in creation or in the life of Abraham, but we can also place our trust in the God who sent His only Son to earth to live and die and rise from the grave to make us right with Him. He's powerful over sin and death, and there are no lengths to which He won't go to draw us close to Him.
6. Finally, Abraham's faith grew stronger and stronger over time (Rom 4:20). As mentioned above, Abraham's faith wasn't perfect, and his confidence wavered at times, but He continually reminded himself of who God is and of His covenant promises. Even when it was difficult for Abraham to believe, faith means "living as if these promises [of God] are true" (Keller, *Romans 1-7 for You*, 105). Abraham may have had moments of weakness, but his failings only strengthened his trust in God.

5) What does the end of Romans 4 remind us about God? How is Abraham's faith in God connected to our faith in Christ today?

At the end of verse 17, Paul describes the remarkable character of Abraham's faith. He believed in a God "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (v. 17b). In other words, our God is the creator of the universe and the creator of life itself. For Abraham, that meant He could trust that God could create new life (a son), even through the nearly dead bodies of Abraham and Sarah. But in verse 23, Paul connects Abraham's faith to our own—just as Abraham believed that God could bring new life from a barren womb, as Christians, we believe that Jesus Christ "was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (v. 25).

As a result, our justification rests in the promise of God, rather than in our own religious performance. We have no reason to boast in God's gift of grace, but we also don't have to be afraid of our own sin (Rom 4:6-8). For Christians, "the promise of inheriting the earth—of enjoying eternal life in a renewed world—is of grace, and it relies on God's promise-keeping power, not our performance" (Keller, *Romans 1-7 For You*, 107). Even when Abraham felt hopeless, Paul reminds us that "in hope he believed against hope" (v. 18). When we have nothing to fall back on except God's promises, we can rest secure knowing that He will deliver on His promises.

C. NOW WHAT?

- 1) If you were to die tonight, what would happen? If you stood before God, and He asked you, "Why should I let you into my heaven," how would you respond? (Question from D. James Kennedy and Tim Keller, *Romans 1-7 For You*, 98-99).**
- 2) Knowing that even Abraham, along with all of God's people after him, were justified by faith and not by works of the law, how does that change your view of the Old Testament?**
- 3) How is Abraham's faith a model for yours? Is it ever hard for you to "believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom 4:24)? What are some of the things that challenge your faith?**
- 4) As descendants of Abraham, we are called to "walk in the footsteps of the faith," according to Romans 4:12. Later, Romans 4:18 goes a step further and begins, "In hope [Abraham] believed against hope..." Can you think of a time when you obeyed God out of faith, even when it was hard?**

Main takeaway

Through all of time, God has had one plan of salvation for His people: He justifies by faith. Our hope is not in our good works, or even in faith plus some good works of our own, but our hope is in Christ alone (Rom 4:25). Just as God delivered on unbelievable promises to Abraham, He wants to fulfill His incredible promise to us—though we are sinners, Christ lived, died, and rose again so that we might be counted as righteous and right with God.

III. Closing

REMEMBERING THE GOOD NEWS

Romans 4 outlines two aspects of God's grace: First, God doesn't count our sins against us (vv. 7-8). Second, He not only forgives our sins, but He actually declares or counts us as righteous (vv. 3-5). This isn't because of anything we do, but because of His grace poured out for us at the cross (v. 25).

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Father God, we know that You are the God who delivers on His promises. We thank You today for the promise that we are justified with You by faith and not by our own actions. We ask that You would strengthen our trust in You rather than in ourselves, and that we would rest securely on Christ's love poured out for us on the cross. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Supporting Resources

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1) If you were to die tonight and stand before the judgment seat of God, what would happen? If He asked you, "Why should I let you into heaven?" what would your response be? Based on your initial reaction, are you placing your hope in yourself, or in the cross of Christ?
- 2) Paul writes that "in hope, [Abraham] believed against hope" (Rom 4:18a). While this may sound confusing, Paul means that, when everything looked completely hopeless, Abraham still trusted in God's promises. When everything around you seems to be going wrong, do you turn to God as your source of hope? If not, in whom or what do you trust?
- 3) Read Mark 9:21-24. What do you notice about the father's cry in verse 24? Do you resonate with his plea that "I believe; help my unbelief"? How can you pray this as a prayer before God today?
- 4) Do you ever worry that you might lose your status before God if you disobey? Or perhaps that you have already messed up so badly that there's no way God will accept you anymore? How does Paul's teaching about justification by faith speak to both of those fears?

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- 1) If we truly believe that we are justified by faith and not by works, what does that change about how we live our lives today? Spend some time in conversation as a family talking through the ramifications of Romans 4.
- 2) Romans 4 focuses on the promise of God that justification comes by faith. As adults, what other promise (or promises) of God have sustained you and given you hope throughout the years? How have you seen God deliver on His promises?
- 3) As parents, don't be afraid to be honest and vulnerable about your own doubts. Have you ever struggled to believe in God or His promises? What made it hard for you to trust Him? What has changed since then?

ROMANS 5:1-11

While We Were Still Sinners

Memory Verse

"But God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

—Romans 5:8

Real-life Problems

Apart from Christ—Whether we realize it or not, we're all part of a cosmic war that rages, and we are either allies or enemies with God. There is no in between. If we are in Christ, we are justified, adopted, and at peace with God. But apart from Christ, we are enemies with God, incapable of finding peace or hope in our present life or for eternity.

The Good News

While being God's enemy can sound abstract or intimidating, Paul reminds us in Romans 5 that we find justification through faith in Christ (v. 1). Because of this legal justification, we can now find peace (v. 1), hope (v. 2), and reconciliation (v. 11) with God, who loves us so much He sought us even when we were His enemies.

I. Introduction

OPENING QUESTIONS

Idea #1: Have you ever had a fight with a sibling or a friend? What was it like when you were mad at each other? How did you move past the issue and become friends again?

Idea #2: Has anyone ever helped you out with something (such as your homework or finding friends or batting practice) when you didn't deserve their help? What was it like to be helped?

Idea #3: Have you ever played a large team game like capture the flag, paintball, or even a video game with a team competition or battle? How did you treat the people on your team? How did you treat your opponents?

PRAY

Open your time together in prayer.

REHEARSING THE GOSPEL

What does gospel mean?

Good news

What's the good news?

Jesus died for my sins

Why did He die for your sins?

So that I can have abundant life in relationship with Him now and forever

What is grace?

God's love for undeserving sinners

REVIEW

1) Who wrote the book of Romans?

The apostle Paul wrote the book of Romans sometime around AD 57.

2) Who was the original audience of this book?

Paul wrote to the churches in Rome, which consisted of both Jewish and Gentile Christians.

3) Why was the book of Romans written?

Paul wrote to introduce himself to the church before visiting, to clarify any theological disputes between Jews and Gentiles, and to remind them of the gospel of God.

What's going on?

REMINDE

In Romans 4, Paul looked back in time to the life of Abraham as a case study to support his teaching of justification by faith. Since the beginning, God has saved His people by faith rather than by works, and it is the same for us today. Building from this foundation, Paul begins to look forward to the Christian life "since we have been justified by faith..." (Rom 5:1).

TODAY WE'LL LEARN

- 1) The Christian life flows out of our justification (Rom 5:1,8-9).
- 2) Apart from Christ, we are enemies with God (Rom 5:6-7, 10-11).
- 3) In Christ, we find peace and hope with God (Rom 5:1-5).

Read

Read **Romans 5:1-11** aloud in your group.

II. Questions for Discussion

A. WHAT?

1) What is the foundation that Paul builds from in Romans 5:1? What has already happened for the believer?

Paul opens this chapter by clearly connecting it to his previous argument. By opening with the words, "Therefore, since we have been justified," Paul hammers home the idea that our justification is the foundation upon which these other promises of God are built. When we put our faith in Christ to save us, we are justified (legally declared righteous), and because we are justified, we can now find hope and peace with God.

2) What does it mean to be an enemy? What does it mean to be at peace, and where does that peace come from?

Both explicitly in Romans 5:10 and implicitly throughout these verses, Paul argues that apart from Christ, we are enemies with God. Our relationship isn't just broken, but there is actual *hostility* between us and God. Not only have we made Him our enemy by our rebellion against Him, but He is also hostile toward us in our sin (Rom 5:1:18-32; 3:9-23). This isn't because He's spiteful or vindictive, but because He is just! He is so holy and perfect and good that He cannot tolerate any kind of sin. In other words, God's hostility is His just response to our sin. On the other hand, when Paul says that we have "peace" with God, he doesn't simply mean that we have an inner feeling of peace about our relationship with God (though that will likely come). Instead, he's speaking about that relationship itself—either we are at peace with God, or we are His enemies (Rom 5:10). Either we are at war with Him, or we are reconciled (Rom 5:10-11). Whether we like to admit it or not, that is the state of all men apart from Christ (see Rom 1:16-32), and there is only one place we can find peace: through our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom 5:1).

3) What are some of the words Paul uses to describe life before we know Christ (Rom 5:6-10)?

Apart from Christ, Paul's assessment of mankind is bleak. We are weak (v. 6), ungodly (v. 6), sinners (v. 8), and enemies (v. 10). We deserve God's wrath (v. 9), and we are in desperate need of peace and reconciliation.

4) According to Romans 5:8, how does God demonstrate His love for us? What is especially remarkable about God's love?

When God saw the broken and hopeless plight of humanity, He didn't turn up His nose in disdain, but He instead looked upon us with so much love that He sent His only Son to die on our behalf (Jn 3:16). He paid the ultimate price. As Paul mentions in Romans 5:7, someone *might* lay down their life for a good person (or even a friend or family member). But we were God's enemy. We were weak, helpless, and hopeless sinners, and yet He came to meet us, suffer for us, and save us anyway.

5) What are some of the present-day promises that result from justification in Romans 5:1-5? What are some of the eternal promises resulting from justification in Romans 5:6-11?

In these passages, Paul speaks of present and future blessings as a result of our justification. This section is bracketed by the assurance of peace (v. 1) or reconciliation (v. 11) with God. That means we're no longer hostile enemies with God, but are beloved children (see Rom 8:12-16). Second, we have "access," not simply to God, but to "grace in which we stand" (v. 2). In other words, we can live in a state characterized by God's grace, both here on earth and in heaven. Third, because of our justification, we find that we can rejoice, both "in the hope of the glory of God," and even "in our sufferings" (vv. 2-3). Further, we have the promise of hope, even in our sufferings, for trials lead to endurance, endurance to character, and character to hope. As Christians, we can rest assured that God is

always at work, even when we least expect it. Even on our darkest days, we can "look through" the pain and gaze upon the promises and work of God (Keller, *Romans 1-7 for You*, 112). In Romans 5:6-11, Paul looks back at God's remarkable love for us (v. 8). All in all, Paul argues that peace, joy, and hope are all fruits of justification available to anyone who believes in Christ.

B. SO WHAT?

1) "Peace" and "hope" are Biblical terms that we use a lot without always defining them well. How does Paul use them in this passage?

According to Paul, peace and hope are two of the promised realities of the Christian life. Though we once were God's enemies, by faith in Christ, we now stand in grace and live at peace with God. There is no more hostility between us, but God is for us (Rom 8:31). On an eternal scale, peace with God also points forward to our future heavenly home, where we will enjoy God's perfect presence and peace for all eternity. As Romans 5:9-11 indicates, we are not merely justified in the legal sense before God (i.e., declared innocent), but we are also reconciled, indicating a *repaired relationship* with God. Once again, our reconciliation is a present reality, but also one that we will enjoy fully on the day of judgment (v. 10).

Second, in light of Christ's past justifying work on the cross, we have a hope for the present and future as well. In our sufferings today, we can confidently trust in God's plan for our lives, and we can hold onto our hope in the glory of God. Notably, Paul suggests that we rejoice because God actually shares His glory with us; in heaven, our glorification (or our "God-like-ness") will be completed. (Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 302)

Hope in the Face of Suffering

One of the major themes of this passage is the Christian virtue of hope. Not only do Christians have hope through the trials of this life, but we can also hope in our eternal future with God in heaven. What does Christian hope feel like? Christian philosopher Peter Kreeft writes:

"Now suppose both death and hell were utterly defeated. Suppose the fight was fixed. Suppose God took you on a crystal ball trip into your future and you saw with indubitable certainty that despite everything—your sin, your smallness, your stupidity—you could have free for the asking your whole crazy heart's deepest desire: heaven, eternal joy. Would you not return fearless and singing? *What can earth do to you, if you are guaranteed heaven? To fear the worst earthly loss would be like a millionaire fearing the loss of a penny—less, a scratch on a penny.*" (Kreeft, *Heaven, the Heart's Deepest Longing*, 82).

If you had a million dollars, losing a penny would be nothing. In Christ, we have an inheritance awaiting us in heaven that we can't even begin to imagine, but so often we live our lives with our eyes looking down at our problems in front of us rather than fixed on Christ in heaven. Ask your students: what would it look like to truly live like you are guaranteed heaven?

2) How does justification change our lives here and now, particularly with regard to suffering? Why is it important that justification by faith is our foundation when we face trials?

Not only does our new legal status give us a new peace with God and hope in His glory, but it also gives us a new attitude on suffering—one of rejoicing. Paul acknowledges that the peace-filled, hopeful life of a Christian will inevitably include suffering, but because Christ has already secured our future, we don't have to despair. In fact,

not only do our promised blessings outweigh our current trials, but our struggles themselves are opportunities to rejoice. In Romans 5:2b-3a, Paul offers two drastically different motivations for Christians to be joyful: in the hope of the glory of God, and also in our afflictions. For the Christian, suffering is not a sign that God has abandoned us, but rather, it's an opportunity to rejoice and grow as a believer. As Paul points out, suffering leads to perseverance, perseverance builds character, and character produces hope. Put another way, every trial we endure produces godly fruit within us. As commentator Thomas R. Schreiner notes, "the hard realities of everyday life conspire to make believers more godly and Christlike" (Schreiner, *Romans*, 250).

3) What does Romans 5:6-10 tell us about ourselves? What do these verses tell us about God and His plan to save us?

Paul pulls no punches when describing the human condition apart from Christ. Like a judge delivering a "guilty" verdict, Paul declares that we were weak, ungodly, sinners, and enemies of God. John Newton sums it up in his famous hymn "Amazing Grace" by simply saying "I once was lost, but now I'm found." We bring absolutely nothing to God except our neediness and utter hopelessness. Before we could do anything to move toward God, He took the initiative and sent His Son to die in our place. And unlike every other religion, Christ didn't come to save the righteous, but to save sinners like you and me. In Ephesians 3:14-19, Paul prays that believers would "have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." Here in Romans 5:8, Paul says we get a glimpse of God's great love: While we were still weak, hopeless, and needy sinners, Christ died for us.

4) What does it mean that we have been justified and reconciled to God (Rom 5:9-10)? How are each of these accomplished?

As we have already seen in Romans, justification is a legal term. It is a declaration of righteousness, an "acquittal pronounced over the sinner who believes in Christ" (Moo, *Romans*, 310). Justification is a one-time event that declares us innocent before the judge, and was accomplished "by His blood" (Rom 5:9). On the other hand, reconciliation is primarily relational, indicating that "we, who were formerly enemies, are now God's friends" (Schreiner, *Romans*, 263). Reconciliation emphasizes God's personal relationship with each individual believer. Together, justification and reconciliation outline God's work to draw us back into a right and loving relationship with Him, and both are accomplished by the work of Christ on the cross.

5) What distinction does Paul make in Romans 5:10? What does it mean to "be saved by His life"?

While Paul's wording in Romans 5:10 is not entirely clear, most commentators believe that Paul is speaking of Christ's death and resurrection. In Christ's death, our debt was paid, and we were both justified before God and reconciled to Him. Christ did more than die for sinners—He also rose again from the grave, and it is by Christ's new life (v. 10b) that we will be saved in the day of judgment. Not only are we given new life by Christ's resurrection, but looking ahead to Romans 8:33-34, we see that Christ is actively interceding and praying for Christians while we walk the earth (Schreiner, *Romans*, 264).

C. NOW WHAT?

- 1) If you are a Christian, did you know that you were an enemy of God before you knew Christ? What does it mean that you are now reconciled and at peace with Him?**
- 2) If you aren't a believer, what is Paul's message to you? What warning does he give? What is the hope he offers?**
- 3) In Romans 5:3, Paul says that "we rejoice in our sufferings." If you've ever suffered before, how does that statement make you feel? How, according to Paul, is this even possible?**
- 4) What does it mean to hope in God? How might hope sustain you during the ups and downs of life?**

Main takeaway

Apart from Christ, we are at war with God—we are weak, hopeless, and enemies with our creator. But rather than waiting for us to come to Him, Christ came to us and died for us while we were still sinners so that we might be declared righteous and enjoy intimate relationship with God. In Christ, we have unshakeable hope both in this world, even in the midst of troubles, and in our eternal future with Christ in heaven.

III. Closing

REMEMBERING THE GOOD NEWS

While being God's enemy can sound abstract or intimidating, Paul reminds us in Romans 5 that we find justification through faith in Christ (v. 1). Because of this legal justification, we can now find peace (v. 1), hope (v. 2), and reconciliation (v. 11) with God, who loves us so much He sought us even when we were His enemies.

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Father God, Your love knows no bounds. While we were still Your enemies, You sought us and sent Your Son to die for us. Help us to hope in Your promises, to rest in Your presence, and rejoice in the hope of Your glory even in the midst of our sufferings. In the name of Jesus we pray, amen.

Supporting Resources

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1) In Romans 5:2, Paul says that by faith, we "stand" in the grace of God. What are some ways this practically affects your life today? What are you hopeful for?
- 2) Take a moment to think about a difficult moment or period of your life, either past or present. How did that suffering affect you? Did it produce endurance? Did it change how you handled your fears? Has it changed how you view God or how you anticipate future trials?
- 3) What would it look like for you to "rejoice in God" (Rom 5:11)? How is it possible to rejoice in your sufferings?

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- 1) What has changed about your life now that you know you are justified? What does it look like to live out of this truth?
- 2) Parents, spend some time talking about a difficult season in your life. What made it hard? How did God sustain you in that time? What did your joy or hope look like during that trial? How has it affected you to this day?
- 3) How does this passage reveal God's heart for us? To what lengths has He gone to reconcile us to Him?

ROMANS 5:12-21

A Tale of Two Adams

Memory Verse

"For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ."

—Romans 5:17

Real-life Problems

Our sin nature—We're all born sinful. No one has to teach us how to sin because it comes so naturally for each of us. No matter who we are, we all commit sins daily because at our core, apart from Christ, we are completely sinful.

The Good News

In this passage, Paul not only explains where our inherent state of sin comes from, but he also gives us the promise of redemption and restoration through Jesus. Just as Adam's disobedience brought sin and death into the world for all of us, when we receive the abundance of God's grace through Jesus, we find life, justification, and righteousness that we do not deserve.

I. Introduction

OPENING QUESTIONS

Idea #1: What is the best gift you've ever gotten? Why was it so great?

Idea #2: Have you ever had to babysit young kids or take care of a younger sibling? Do they always obey perfectly, or do kids misbehave sometimes? Why might that be? Who taught them to act out?

Idea #3: Do you know the name of your oldest ancestor? Or a distant relative who lived before you? What does it mean to be a descendant of someone?

PRAY

Open your time together in prayer.

REHEARSING THE GOSPEL

What does gospel mean?

Good news

What's the good news?

Jesus died for my sins

Why did He die for your sins?

So that I can have abundant life in relationship with Him now and forever

What is grace?

God's love for undeserving sinners

REVIEW

1) Who wrote the book of Romans?

The apostle Paul wrote the book of Romans sometime around AD 57.

2) Who was the original audience of this book?

Paul wrote to the churches in Rome, which consisted of both Jewish and Gentile Christians.

3) Why was the book of Romans written?

Paul wrote to introduce himself to the church before visiting, to clarify any theological disputes between Jews and Gentiles, and to remind them of the gospel of God.

What's going on?

REMIND

In our last lesson, we looked at Paul's wonderful reminder that justification brings peace with God and hope for both our present life on earth and eternal life in heaven. We didn't do anything to make ourselves right with God, but while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Today, we will step back with Paul and examine (in big-picture terms) the tale of two Adams: the first Adam, through whom sin and death entered the world, and the second Adam—Jesus Christ—through whom justification, righteousness, and life comes for those who believe.

TODAY WE'LL LEARN

- 1) Sin and death entered the world through the first Adam (Rom 5:12-14).
- 2) The greater gift of grace came through the greater Adam (Rom 5:15-17).
- 3) The inheritance for those belonging to each Adam (Rom 5:18-21).

Read

Read **Romans 5:12-21** aloud in your group.

II. Questions for Discussion

A. WHAT?

1) Who is Paul talking about in Romans 5:2? How did sin enter the world? How did death enter the world?

Though he doesn't mention Adam (Genesis 1-5) by name until Romans 5:14, beginning in verse 12, Paul looks back to Adam (and Eve) in the Garden of Eden. Genesis 3 records "the fall"—the single event in which Adam and Eve sinned against God and brought sin into the world. As a consequence of that sin, death (both physical and spiritual) also entered the world and now affects all of creation.

2) What happened to people who lived before the law of Moses? Did they sin? Did they die?

The phrase "sin is not counted where there is no law" in Romans 5:13b may sound confusing, but when we examine verses 12-14 as a whole, we see that every person who lived after Adam sinned against God. Even though the people who lived between Adam and Moses did not have specific laws from God—and therefore did not understand sin in the same way as the Israelites did after they received the Mosaic law—they still sinned (v. 12b). Moreover, "death reigned" during this period, reminding us that even though the people between Adam and Moses did not have the same explicit instructions as Adam, they still sinned and died, for the wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23).

3) What words are repeated in Romans 5:15-17? What two ideas are being compared?

Initially, these verses may seem repetitive as Paul contrasts the "free gift" from the "trespass." Over and over again, he sets the trespass (or sin or transgression) of Adam beside the free gift of Christ's grace to highlight their differences.

4) What is the "free gift" according to verse 17?

In these verses, we see several of the promises attached to the "free gift," such as justification (v. 16) and life through Christ (v. 17). However, even more plainly, we see that the free gift itself is "righteousness" given to us by the grace of God through the perfect life of Jesus.

B. SO WHAT?

1) What does Paul mean by "all sinned" in Romans 5:12?

In one sense, this phrase is relatively straightforward: After Adam, every single human being has committed sins against God. Young and old, we have all sinned. But we shouldn't just stop there. As descendants of Adam, we didn't just inherit his sinfulness (v. 19), but because Adam serves as our representative head for all humanity, we actually sinned "in and with" Adam (Moo, *Romans*, 327; Keller, *Romans 1-7 for You*, 124-29). To use a theological term, many theologians call this "federal headship," because Adam represents or stands in our place (Keller, 126). (As we will see in a moment, the notion of headship is actually very good news, because the second Adam, Jesus Christ, died as our representative and bore the penalty we deserved). So when Paul writes that "all sinned," we can conclude two things: first, every human being has committed personal sins (see also Rom 3:23). Second, while sin and death entered the world through Adam's sin, as our representative head, he stands in our place, so his sin becomes corporate in nature. We are born sinners, and because of our sin, we are destined to die.

2) In Romans 5:13, Paul says, "sin is not counted where there is no law." What does this mean?

Tough Topic

UNIVERSALISM

In this passage, Paul uses words like "all" and "many" somewhat interchangeably, but he doesn't always have the same meaning in mind. Initially, in Romans 5:12, the use of "all sinned" is straightforward: Adam and every single human after him has sinned. The "all" is universal in scope. Later, in verse 15a, Paul writes, "if *many* died through the one man's trespass," and this first use once again appears universal, for through Adam's sin, death entered the world, and every single human after him has died. We can say the same for the "all" in verse 18a and the "many" in verse 19a. Both "all" and "many" refer to the universal condemnation of every single person. However, in verses 15b, 18b, and 19b, we see the same words used in a slightly different way. On face value, if we read the "all" and "many" in these verses to mean every single human being, we are led to universalism, the idea that every single person is saved by Jesus. While this may be an appealing first impression—after all, the ideas of eternal hell and punishment often make us uncomfortable—it is not a consistent reading of Paul or the entire Bible (2 Thess 1:8-9; Rom 2:1-3:20). Sin, death, and condemnation are universal, but justification by the free gift is not.

Not only is a doctrine of hell and judgment Biblical, but when we look closely Romans 5:17, we see that Paul limits the blessings of God's grace to "those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness." Elsewhere in Romans, Paul clearly limits salvation to "everyone who believes" (Rom 1:16) and "for all who believe" (Rom 3:22). All are sinners (Rom 3:23), but we are "justified by faith" alone (Rom 3:28). In other words, the free gift (and its benefits) must be received by faith, and because not everyone will believe, not everyone will be saved. To go one step further, however, we shouldn't think of this gift as merely an offer extended universally that some people accept and others reject. Instead, as Douglas Moo writes, "Paul wants to show, not how Christ has made *available* righteousness and life for all, but how Christ has secured the benefits of that righteousness for all who belong to him" (Moo, *Romans*, 343). Moreover, when we examine the letter broadly, the words "all" and "many" don't always mean every single person, but are often limited in their application (see Romans 8:32, 12:17-18, and 16:19). As a result, we can understand the words "all" and "many" to have two different purposes in these verses. First, every human being who followed Adam is captive to sin, condemnation, and death. This is universal. But the life and justification found in the free gift of Christ is only for those who receive it by faith. Not everyone will receive the free gift, so not everyone will be justified. As a result, we can be assured that all who are in Christ will be justified.

Here, Paul is both elaborating on verse 12 and anticipating a counterargument that some people might raise. When he said that "all sinned," that includes the people who lived between Adam and Moses (such as Noah, Abraham, Jacob, and others). Because they did not know the law, their sin is different from Adam's (who had explicit instructions from God in Gen 2:16-17), and as a result, they are less responsible for their sins. At the same time, as Paul taught in Romans 2:14-15, even those who do not have the written law are still guilty of sin, and they will be judged accordingly. All in all, this means that the people who lived between Adam and Moses still sinned and still died as a result (v. 14), but their responsibility for their sin was slightly different from those who have the law. As we see in verse 20, knowledge of the law increases or intensifies our guilt for sin.

Day of the Redeemer

In seminary, I had to take at least three semesters of Hebrew and three semesters of Greek. For me, Hebrew was significantly more challenging, and our professor gave us weekly quizzes that progressively got harder. One day, we got to class and he had written a phrase in Hebrew on the board that none of us could translate. Eventually, he told us that that day was "The Day of the Redeemer." He presented us with an unusual offer: Either we could each take our quizzes individually and receive whatever grade we deserved to get, or we could choose a "redeemer" to take the quiz on behalf of the entire class.

In other words, if we all agreed to the deal, we could elect one person to be our representative. He would stand in our place and take the quiz for us. For many of us, this was a relief—someone better at Hebrew would take the quiz instead of me, and I would get his grade! For a few students, however, this was a more difficult choice. They thought they could make a good grade without any help, and they weren't sure if they wanted to risk putting their grade in someone else's hands.

Ultimately, we decided to nominate a "redeemer," and while the rest of us were outside eating snacks for twenty minutes, my friend aced the quiz! A perfect score for everyone. While this analogy isn't a perfect illustration of the representation or "headship" we find in Adam and Christ, the concept is similar. One person acts as a stand-in, a representative, or a head for everyone else. Whatever that person does is counted as our own. In Adam, we find sin, condemnation, and death. In Christ, we find justification, righteousness, and life.

3) Compare and contrast the "trespass" and the "free gift" described in Romans 5:15-20. What are some similarities and differences? What are the results and ramifications of each? How are these blessings or curses applied to us?

When Paul says that Adam is a "type" of the one to come—Jesus—he means that Adam's life "corresponds to Jesus Christ in terms of the effect of his actions upon the rest of humanity" (Schreiner, *Romans*, 279-80). In other words, Adam's life points ahead to an even greater one who will succeed where Adam failed. As a result, some people call Jesus the "second Adam," and in verses 15-17, Paul compares their respective legacies. Through the one trespass of Adam, sin and death entered the world. But after innumerable trespasses by humans, Christ came into the world and freely offered the gift of grace. In the chart below, we see some of the different benefits and consequences from each Adam:

Adam's Trespass	The Free Gift of Christ
Physical death for all	Abounding grace and life
Judgment and condemnation	Justification
Death reigns	We reign in life
Many are made sinners	Many are made righteous
Sin increased	Grace abounds all the more
Inherited from Adam	Freely given by the grace of God
We actively participate in sin	We receive by faith

All in all, Paul's main goal is to place these two ideas side-by-side and highlight the superiority of the free gift of righteousness. The free gift not only reverses some of the consequences of Adam's trespass, but God's grace

abounds and triumphs over the effects of the trespass. In fact, Romans 5:20b can be literally translated, "where sin increased, grace super-increased" (Moo, *Romans*, 349). Though Adam's trespass had catastrophic consequences for all of creation, the free gift from God reverses and triumphs over sin and death for all who receive it.

4) What does Romans 5:18-19 tell us about Christ's life on earth? Why does His obedience matter for us?

Together, the "one act of righteousness" (v. 18) and the "one man's obedience" (v. 19) could refer either to Jesus' life as a whole, or specifically to His sacrificial death on the cross. Either way, we know that Jesus lived a life of perfect obedience to the very end, and this is a crucial aspect of His time on earth. When we focus exclusively on Jesus' death and resurrection (which are very good things!), we can miss out on the importance of His active and perfect obedience in life. Adam could have lived an obedient life, but he sinned and brought death into the world for all creation. Jesus did not just pay the price of our disobedience (death), but He also lived the perfect life that Adam did not—and that we could not—live. In this way, we don't just receive a blank slate of forgiveness for our sins, but we actually receive His righteousness! When God looks at us, He doesn't just see people whose sins are paid for, but He sees people who have lived perfect, righteous, holy lives. Because of Christ's death and resurrection, we are no longer legally guilty. And because of His perfect obedience, we are made morally righteous.

5) What does it mean that 'sin reigns' or that after Jesus, 'grace reigns'?

Looking around at the world today, it's not hard to understand that sin pervades every aspect of our world. On a global scale, death, disasters, and disease afflict all people. More personally, we've all been wounded by a friend, wronged by a parent, and swamped by the sins of others. Even in our own lives, all of us have been quick-tempered, selfish, proud, and idolatrous. No one and nothing is exempt from sin's power. And yet, at the end of Romans 5, Paul tells us we have hope. Though we may see, experience, and even commit sin each day, when Jesus Christ lived, died, and rose again, something fundamentally shifted in the universe. Adam's trespass did not have the last word, but now, grace super-abounds and reigns "through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (v. 21) (Keller, *Romans 1-7 for You*, 134). After the first Adam, sin was in control. But now, for "those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness," we live under the rule of grace rather than sin. We have hope in this life and the next to enjoy life with Jesus Christ our Lord.

C. NOW WHAT?

1) Does it seem fair (or unfair) that you are represented by a sinful Adam? Does it seem fair (or unfair) that you are represented by a sinless Jesus? Overall, what was your initial reaction to this passage?

2) How are you affected by Adam's sin? How are you affected by Christ's righteousness? What would it look like to "receive the abundance of grace" (Romans 5:17) and live as an heir of Christ?

3) Have you ever wondered how Jesus' death on the cross can really be applied to so many people? How does this passage address that question?

4) How would you describe God's grace? How does this passage change how you understand God's love for you?

Main takeaway

Sin and death entered the world through the disobedient trespass of the first man, Adam. After Adam, every human being has been born into sin and has committed sins worthy of death. But by the grace of God, the free gift of righteousness is offered to all who believe through the life, death, and resurrection of the second, greater Adam: Jesus Christ.

III. Closing

REMEMBERING THE GOOD NEWS

In this passage, Paul not only explains where our inherent state of sin comes from, but he also gives us the promise of redemption and restoration through Jesus. Just as Adam's disobedience brought sin and death into the world for all of us, when we receive the abundance of God's grace through Jesus, we find life, justification, and righteousness that we do not deserve.

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Father God, thank You for not leaving us powerless and chained to sin forever, but instead sending Your Son to live the life we could not live and die the death we deserved. We pray that You would help us to receive the free gift of righteousness and live as sons and daughters who are justified, forgiven, and made righteous by Christ. In His holy name we pray, amen.

Supporting Resources

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1) If you were in Adam's shoes in the Garden of Eden, what would have happened? What does it mean for your life that you have sinned "in and with" Adam and have inherited his sin?
- 2) How does Adam's sin affect you today? What is an area where you see sin in your life? Spend some time in prayer asking God to help you repent of that sin. At the same time, how does Christ's righteousness give you hope?
- 3) What might it look like for you to live as someone who has received the free gift of righteousness? How would you treat God? How would you treat others?

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- 1) The Bible uses the language of representatives and headship to apply to families as well (Eph 5:22-6:4). What does it mean to belong to a family? If the father is the "head" of the family, what does that mean? How does that connect to Adam and Jesus being representative "heads"?
- 2) Spend some time talking with one another about the best gifts you have ever given and received. What was it like to give or receive those gifts? What are some of the ways God blesses us with the free gift of grace?
- 3) What promises are attached to the free gift of grace? How might those change how you treat one another as a family?

ROMANS 6:1-23

Union with Christ in Death and in Life

Memory Verse

"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

—Romans 6:23

Real-life Problems

Taking grace for granted—

Sometimes, it is tempting to live with a "blank check" mentality. When we know that God saves us by grace and not by our good works, our sinful response can be to take advantage of grace. We think, *If God will never stop loving me, and He will forgive me of any sin, why does it matter how I live?* We live as though we have a blank check or free rein to do whatever we want, so we live by our own rules. We don't think sin is a very big deal, and we take God's grace for granted.

The Good News

Not only do we underestimate the evil of sin, but we also underestimate the riches of God's grace. Jesus did not just die for us so that we could go to heaven, but He went to the cross also to set us free from sin in this life. In Christ, we have new life and new freedom here on earth today.

I. Introduction

OPENING QUESTIONS

Idea #1: If someone gave you \$1 million, how would your life change? What would be some of the first things you do?

Idea #2: Do your parents have any rules for you and your siblings? What are they? Why do you think they have those rules in place?

Idea #3: What is the dirtiest you have ever been? How did you get clean again? What did it feel like when you were finally clean?

PRAY

Open your time together in prayer.

REHEARSING THE GOSPEL

What does gospel mean?

Good news

What's the good news?

Jesus died for my sins

Why did He die for your sins?

So that I can have abundant life in relationship with Him now and forever

What is grace?

God's love for undeserving sinners

REVIEW

1) Who wrote the book of Romans?

The apostle Paul wrote the book of Romans sometime around AD 57.

2) Who was the original audience of this book?

Paul wrote to the churches in Rome, which consisted of both Jewish and Gentile Christians.

3) Why was the book of Romans written?

Paul wrote to introduce himself to the church before visiting, to clarify any theological disputes between Jews and Gentiles, and to remind them of the gospel of God.

What's going on?

REMINDE

In our last lesson, we talked about two different Adams. Through the sin of the first Adam, sin and death entered the world for all of creation and all of us. But the newer and better second Adam—Jesus Christ—came and lived the perfect life that neither Adam nor we could live. Through Jesus, justification, righteousness, and life abound for those who believe.

TODAY WE'LL LEARN

- 1) In Christ, we have died to sin and been raised to life (Rom 6:1-11).
- 2) In Christ, we are instruments for righteousness (Rom 6:12-14).
- 3) In Christ, we are freed from the slavery and penalty of sin (Rom 6:15-23).

Read

Read **Romans 6:1-23** aloud in your group.

II. Questions for Discussion

A. WHAT?

1) According to Romans 6:2-4, what is our relationship to sin like when we follow Jesus?

Paul says that we have *died* to sin because we have been baptized into the death of Jesus (v. 2). Just as Jesus conquered sin with His death and resurrection, we, too, have died to sin and have new life in Christ (v. 4).

2) What was crucified with Christ (v. 6)? As a result, what changes for the Christian (vv. 6-11)?

Our "old self" was crucified with Christ. This isn't just a sinful *part* of us, but it is our whole self before we followed Jesus (Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 373-4). Though we are still sinners, in Christ, we are new creations; the old has gone, the new has come (2 Cor 5:17). We are no longer captive to our sinful desires and passions, but God has put a renewed heart in us and set us free from sin. Moreover, not only are we "dead to sin," but we are also "alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom 6:11). By the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we, too, experience death to sin and resurrection to new life.

Harry Potter's Sacrifice

Throughout the book *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Harry Potter and his friends hunt down "horcruxes" to weaken the evil villain Voldemort so that he could finally be defeated. After many twists and turns, Harry learns that he, too, is a horcrux—part of Voldemort lives in him because Voldemort tried to kill Harry when he was a baby. In other words, to defeat Voldemort, Harry must die. The piece of Voldemort inside of Harry must be killed so that Voldemort can be killed once and for all.

While this is not a perfect analogy to understand our sinful nature, it gives us an idea of the severity of our sin and why we need to *die* to our sin. Just as the part of Voldemort within Harry had to die, the sin within us must be put to death. When that happens, we, like Harry, are raised to new life and freed from the dominion of that controlling sin. On our own, we cannot conquer the sin within us; our "old self" will direct us as we live in bondage to sin. By faith, however, we are united to Jesus in His death and resurrection, and we die to sin and find new life in Christ.

To be clear, our sin nature isn't merely one part of us—it was our entire selves before we knew Jesus, and it is Jesus who actually accomplishes this death and resurrection on our behalf. Still, Harry's willing sacrifice helps us see that the sin inside us must be put to death so that we can have new life in Christ.

3) As Christians, how should we present ourselves to God (vv. 12-14)? What is an instrument?

Paul encourages us to present ourselves as "instruments of righteousness" to God. This doesn't mean that we present ourselves perfect and complete before God, but that we come to Him prepared to let Him use us and shape us for His good purposes. We are instruments (or tools) in His hands so that He can work through us—rather than our trying to use God to satisfy our own desires.

4) What analogy does Paul use to describe our relationship to sin and righteousness in verses 15-20?

We are all slaves to something. Apart from Christ, we are "slaves to sin," meaning we obey sin and are imprisoned by it. The only alternative is to be a slave to obedience (v. 16), righteousness (v. 18), or God (v. 22). In other words, none of us is in control; we are either enslaved to sin, or we are serving God.

5) What are the "wages" for any sin (v. 23)? What, in contrast, is the "free gift of God"?

The consequence, or the "wages," of sin is death. All sin merits death. No matter how "big" or how "small," all sin has one appropriate destiny: death. On the other hand, while sin earns or deserves death, God offers the *free gift* of eternal life in Christ Jesus. Death is the due reward of sin; eternal life is the free gift of God.

B. SO WHAT?

1) Can you rephrase Paul's questions in verses 1 and 15? Why might he pose these questions in the first place?

How does Paul respond?

While these verses don't ask the exact same question, they are asking something very similar. At the end of Romans 5, Paul says that "grace abounded all the more" (v. 20), and he anticipates a logical objection: *If my sins lead to the abundance of God's grace, then can I continue to sin so that God's grace can keep abounding? If I am saved by grace and not by works, can I keep on sinning?* Similarly, verse 15 asks: *If I am no longer under the law (v. 14), do I have to obey the rules of the law at all?* (See Keller, *Romans 1-7 for You*, 149). Together, both questions anticipate a logical objection that someone might present to Paul: If we are saved by grace, does that mean I can act however I want? Are the Ten Commandments (and other biblical teachings) now obsolete? Paul's answer in both cases is an unequivocal "by no means!" (v. 2). Instead, "the gospel gives us a new and different incentive for godly living than we had when we were under the law as a system of salvation" (Keller, 149). We don't obey to make ourselves right with God—Jesus has already justified us—instead, our obedience is rooted in love and gratitude for what God has already accomplished on our behalf. Living under grace means living out of God's acceptance rather than trying to earn it.

2) What does it mean to be united with Jesus? Why did we need to die to sin?

When we believe in Jesus, we are not only justified by faith, but we are also *united* with the second Adam (Christ) and find new life in Him (Rom 5:1-21). Here in Romans 6, Paul amplifies the ramifications of our union with Christ even more. While baptism is not the literal way that we are united to Christ, Paul brings it up (vv. 3-4) because baptism points to the spiritual reality of union with Christ in His death and in His new life. Apart from Christ, our old self leads us into sin (v. 6), we are under the dominion of sin (v. 9), and we are enslaved to sin (v. 16). In other words, "sin reigns" (v. 12) for every human, and God had to step in and take drastic measures. The wages of sin is death (v. 23), and we had to die to sin to be set free from its power. Sin still has power, but we are no longer *ruled* by sin (see Col 1:13).

3) What are the ramifications of new life with Christ and of being freed from slavery to sin? How does that affect how we live? Does this mean that a true Christian never sins or even wants to sin?

Not only does union with Christ mean that we have died to sin with Him, but now, we are new creations who enjoy new resurrection life with Him. To "consider" ourselves "dead to sin and alive to God" (v. 11) means to realize, accept, and enjoy the grace of God. It means to live changed lives, not for God's acceptance but *from* God's acceptance. Because we have died to sin, sin no longer has control or power over us, and therefore we must live like it! As we'll see in Romans 7, Paul acknowledges that sin remains a reality in our lives, but here Paul earnestly calls believers to live out of their new identity in Christ. When we begin to grasp the lengths that God went to to deliver us from the dominion of sin—sending His own Son to die on our behalf—we can't help but respond with love and gratitude. As a result, we can present ourselves to God as instruments of righteousness (v. 13), not because we ourselves are perfectly righteous, but because we are united to Christ and His righteousness, and we are ready to be used by God for His good purposes. We are not captive to sin or to the law, but we have a renewed desire to humbly obey God's

call in our lives. Being dead to sin, we now have newness of life with Christ (vv. 4, 8) in this world, and we also have the promise of resurrection life in heaven with Christ forever.

4) What is Paul's overall attitude toward sin in this passage? How would you describe the relationship between our sin, our union with Christ, and our righteousness?

Paul pulls no punches when addressing the severity of sin. All sin leads to death, and therefore we cannot treat sin lightly. Apart from Christ, we are enslaved to and ruled by sin. We are completely helpless and unable to escape its clutches. By faith, when we are united with Christ, we, too, die to sin and now walk in new life with Him (vv. 4, 8). We are set free from our bondage of slavery to sin, and instead can willfully and joyfully submit to God and to obedience. Being a slave to righteousness does not suggest that we must live a perfect or legalistic life, but it reminds us that we serve God and not our sinful desires.

C. NOW WHAT?

1) Have you ever asked yourself a question similar to what Paul asks in verse 1? When did you ask this question? What answer were you looking for?

Oftentimes, we question whether we *really* need to obey God because we *want* to live according to our own desires. In this way, we take advantage of His grace and live as though we were still under the dominion of sin rather than alive to God in Christ Jesus.

2) What might it look like to present yourself to God as an "instrument of righteousness" (v. 13)? Better yet, what might life look like as a "slave of righteousness" (v. 18)?

3) How would you describe your attitude toward your own sin? What is the good—and the bad—news Paul tells us about our sin in this passage?

Sin is far more severe than we often realize, but God's grace more than compensates for it! Though all sin deserves death, God responds in grace with the *free gift* of eternal life. We don't have to earn it; we simply receive what He has given us.

4) As a child or a sibling or a student, what would it look like for you to live "under grace" rather than "under the law" (v. 14)?

When Paul says we are no longer "under the law," he essentially means "we no longer have to try to earn our salvation by doing good works." Under grace, we are still slaves of obedience to God, but we're living as beloved and accepted children of God, not as enemies trying to earn our way back to God. How would this truth affect your everyday life?

Main takeaway

The consequences of sin are far more serious than we imagine, but God's abundant and free gift of eternal life in Christ Jesus is even greater. By faith, we are united with Jesus in both His death and resurrection, meaning we have died to sin and now enjoy new life with Christ on earth and in heaven.

III. Closing

REMEMBERING THE GOOD NEWS

Not only do we underestimate the evil of sin, but we also underestimate the riches of God's grace. Jesus did not just die for us so that we could go to heaven, but He went to the cross to set us free from sin in this life, too. In Christ, we have new life and new freedom here on earth today.

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Father God, we confess to You that we drastically underestimate our sin and the cost of that sin each and every day. Help us to better understand our sin within us, as well as the freedom and new life we have in Christ. Thank You for freeing us from bondage and slavery to sin, and for the free gift of eternal life with You in heaven. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

Supporting Resources

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1) How do you usually think about the sin in your life? Are there things that seem small that you have come to accept as just a part of "who you are"? How does God view sin? Take some time to reflect and confess sin in your life to God, and ask Him to open your eyes to its reality in your life.
- 2) Does it always feel like you are "dead to sin" and "alive to God"? Why or why not? How does this passage help you understand the sin in your life?
- 3) Do you ever feel enslaved to a particular sin? Have you ever felt stuck in a habit or pattern of sin? What might it look like to be a "slave to righteousness" who lives "under grace"? Is there someone in your life whom you could ask to help you as you battle this particular sin pattern?

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- 1) As parents looking back, how did your life change when your "old self" was crucified and you found new life in Christ? What changed for you? What struggles remained? What encouragement would you offer to your children?
- 2) How do you talk about sin as a family? Do you tend to overreact or underreact to your own sins? To the sins of your family members? How can this passage help you think about sin as an individual and as a family?
- 3) Spend some time talking about the analogy of being enslaved to sin. What does it mean to be enslaved to sin? What would it look like to be a slave to God instead?

ROMANS 7:1-25

Seeking Sanctification; Stuck in Sin

Memory Verse

"For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out."

—Romans 7:18

Real-life Problems

Breaking free from sin—Often, sin feels like an impossible pattern or habit to break. We know what we should do, but we still find ourselves doing the very things we know we shouldn't. In our hearts, we even desire to do what is right, but we can't seem to shake the sin that weighs us down. For Christians young and old, breaking free from sin is a lifelong struggle that forces us to face our failures each day.

The Good News

If you ever feel like you're struggling in your sin alone, the apostle Paul invites you to see the ongoing war within his own heart. Like Paul, we are "wretched" (Rom 7:24), unable to do what is right on our own. But not all hope is lost; by the perfect life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we have hope not in ourselves, but in the one who already paid our debts.

I. Introduction

OPENING QUESTIONS

Idea #1: Can you think of a time when you got into trouble for being mean to your siblings or friends? When you got caught, how did you respond? Is it easier to blame someone else or take responsibility?

Idea #2: Have you ever known what was the *right* thing to do, but ended up doing what you knew was *wrong* anyway? Why did you act the way you did?

Idea #3: What is your favorite food? Your favorite after-school activity? What happens if you eat too much of that food or do too much of a good thing?

PRAY

Open your time together in prayer.

REHEARSING THE GOSPEL

What does gospel mean?

Good news

What's the good news?

Jesus died for my sins

Why did He die for your sins?

So that I can have abundant life in relationship with Him now and forever

What is grace?

God's love for undeserving sinners

REVIEW

1) Who wrote the book of Romans?

The apostle Paul wrote the book of Romans sometime around AD 57.

2) Who was the original audience of this book?

Paul wrote to the churches in Rome, which consisted of both Jewish and Gentile Christians.

3) Why was the book of Romans written?

Paul wrote to introduce himself to the church before visiting, to clarify any theological disputes between Jews and Gentiles, and to remind them of the gospel of God.

What's going on?

REMIND

In Romans 6, Paul emphasizes that through our union with Christ, Christians have been set free from slavery to sin and have actually *died* to sin so that we may have new life in Christ. As a result, we can offer ourselves to God as instruments for righteousness that He may use for His glory. And yet, even though we have been set free from the dominion of sin, as Paul describes in Romans 7, the Christian life is often a "war" between our sinful and godly desires.

TODAY WE'LL LEARN

- 1) Christians are released from the law through our union with Christ (Rom 7:1-6).
- 2) Sin corrupted the good law, which reveals our sin (Rom 7:7-14).
- 3) Even as followers of Jesus, we are continually at war with sin (Rom 7:15-25).

Read

Read **Romans 7:1-25** aloud in your group.

Tough Topic

WHO IS PAUL TALKING ABOUT?

When we read it at face value, Romans 7:14-25 is an admittedly confusing passage. It's hard enough to simply read the passage aloud, much less understand what he's saying! To make things even more challenging, dating all the way back to the early church, theologians have disagreed over the exact meaning of the passage, all revolving around one question: who is the "I" struggling with sin? There are three main camps:

1. *A non-believer*: Some argue that a justified Christian could not speak about sin in these terms. They believe that this can only be the experience of a non-believer (or someone before they converted). In their estimation, the man sounds too imprisoned and defeated by sin to be a Christian, and he seems governed by the flesh, which is often used to describe unbelievers (Rom 7:5). Moreover, they argue that if this person were a Christian, the Holy Spirit should be mentioned as an aide in this struggle, and that the Mosaic law would no longer be so binding over the man. Some believe that Paul is speaking autobiographically about his experience before he followed Jesus.
2. *A new Christian*: While this is the smallest camp, it is worth mentioning that some scholars believe this passage describes the experience of a young, immature Christian (or a recent convert). This person desires to do what is right, but still falls back into the same patterns of sin. As a believer matures, this constant, overwhelming struggle should fade into the background.
3. *An ordinary Christian*: This final camp argues that Paul is describing his present, everyday reality as a Christian. He has been saved by grace through faith, and his name is written in the book of life, and yet he continues to struggle with sin in his daily life. This argument draws from the shift in verb tenses from past (vv. 7-13) to present (vv. 24-25), suggesting that Paul is talking about his present reality. Similarly, sin, which was "killing" him (vv. 8-13), is now something that he struggles against. This, too, indicates a change in situation between verses 8-13 and verses 14-25. Moreover, this person possesses two important marks of a Christian: He "delights in the law of God" (v. 23), and he acknowledges his fallenness (v. 18). As a result, Romans 7:14-25 describes the ongoing process of sanctification and the everyday struggles with sin of all Christians. This is the view that the writer of this curriculum takes.

Because this is such a challenging passage, it may be helpful to have these three main positions in mind before discussing with students. While the third position has been the most popular since the Reformation, prominent theologians continue to view it differently. Additionally, even if people can disagree about the exact meaning of Romans 7:14-25, Douglas Moo (who takes the first view), reminds us that Paul's *main* point in Romans 7 is clear across all three positions: "Paul's essential teaching about the inability of the law to rescue sinful people from spiritual bondage is the same," regardless of whether someone is a believer or not (Moo, *Romans*, 443).

II. Questions for Discussion

A. WHAT?

1) Who is Paul speaking directly to in this chapter?

Paul singles out "those who know the law" (v. 1), which indicates Jewish Christians. These Jewish converts wanted to reimpose the Mosaic law on all Christians (including Gentile believers), and Paul needed to address them directly and clarify the Christian's new relationship with the law.

2) According to verse 4, how have we died to the law? To whom do we belong, and for what purpose?

We have died to the law "through the body of Christ." By our union with Christ, we are united to His perfect life (through which He perfectly fulfilled the law) as well as His sacrificial death (by which He paid the debt for sin we owed). Neither sin nor the law has control over us anymore. Instead, we belong to Jesus (who has been raised from the dead) for a specific purpose: to bear fruit for God.

3) Which words does Paul use to describe the law (vv. 7-14)? How does he describe sin?

Perhaps surprisingly, Paul speaks of the law in positive terms. He says that the law is not sin (v. 7), that it promised life (v. 10), and that it is holy (v. 12). Even though Paul understands that the law cannot bring salvation, he wants to clarify that God's law is good (v. 13). It is sin that "seized an opportunity" to corrupt the law (vv. 8, 11), and it is sin that brings deception and death (v. 11).

4) In verses 15-23, Paul paints a messy picture of the Christian life. What does Paul want to do? What does he do instead? What analogy does he use to describe this experience in verse 23?

Paul has a *desire* to do what is right and good, but he does not have the *ability* to do it on his own (v. 18). He doesn't do what he wants, but instead does the evil things he hates (vv. 15, 19). In other words, he wants to obey God and live righteously, but he simply can't stop sinning. Sin is always crouching behind every good intention (v. 21), and as a result, Paul acknowledges he is "waging war" within himself (v. 23).

B. SO WHAT?

1) How would you summarize verses 1-6? What analogy does Paul use to illustrate our relationship with the law?

Because of our union with Christ (Romans 6), we have "died to the law" (Rom 7:4) and are therefore "released from the law" (v. 6). Using the analogy of marriage, if a woman's husband dies, she is no longer bound by marriage to him, but she can freely marry another. Through Christ, we, too, have died to the law, and now we "belong to another"—Jesus Christ, who bought our freedom. We are no longer bound or married to the law, but now, we are married to Christ.

2) According to verses 7-14, what good purpose does the law serve? How has sin corrupted the law? What particular sin convicted Paul (vv. 12-13)? Why would the sin of covetousness be challenging for him?

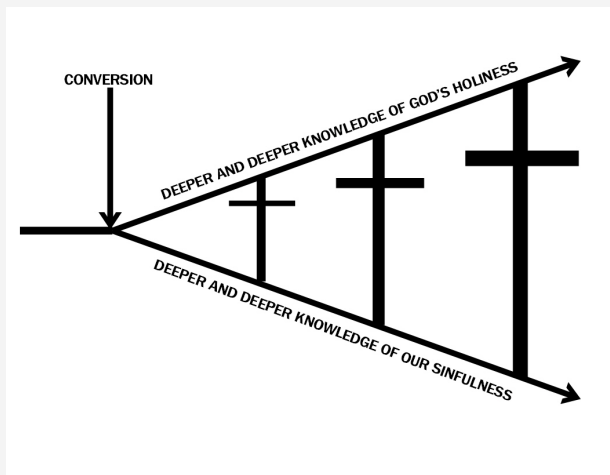
In these verses, Paul is careful not to disparage the law itself. Sin *corrupted* or *perverted* the law, which was good and holy on its own (vv. 12-13). Because we inherited Adam's sin (Rom 5:12-21), we could not perfectly follow the law, and because we could not perfectly follow the law, the law could not bring us salvation. All the same, one of the

primary and enduring purposes of the law is to help us identify sin (vv. 7, 13). Though people are still responsible for their sin when they do not know the law, when we do know right from wrong, we have a greater responsibility to abide by the law, and we face greater judgment for breaking it (Rom 2:12-15; 3:19). So while the law continues to help us recognize our sin, we also know that sin has crept in and distorted how we relate to the law. Pastor Tim Keller writes, "Since the essence of sin is the desire to play God—to have no infringements on our sovereignty—every law will stir sin up in its original force and power" (Keller, *Romans 1-7 for You*, 164).

Before he knew Jesus, Paul was a Pharisee, one of the public religious leaders of his day. In Ephesians 3:3-6, Paul sums up his former life by essentially saying, "I was *really good* at following the commandments of the law." He could avoid lying, stealing, adultery, and idolatry, and he could look like someone who abided by the Ten Commandments (Ex 20; Deut 5). But that Tenth Commandment—you shall not covet—was different from the others. Coveting isn't an outward, observable action, but an attitude of the heart. In other words, Paul realized that he was putting on a flawless religious performance on the outside, but on the inside, his heart was rotten. Outwardly, he lived the model life, but that only masked his sinful heart.

The Cross Diagram

Show the below diagram to your students. What do we understand better as we grow as Christians? What do they notice about the crosses as time goes on? What would it look like if you became more aware of your holiness, but not of your sinfulness? What would happen if the cross remained the same size the entire way?



3) Can you restate what Paul is saying in Romans 7:15-23? What does his personal testimony imply about how all Christians will face sin? What warnings and encouragements does he offer?

This brain-twisting passage has sparked debate from theologians for literally thousands of years (for more detail, see "Tough Topics" below). While we may never fully decipher Paul's exact intentions, many believe Paul is speaking autobiographically about his own experience as a converted Christian (see Keller, 167-72). As a follower of Jesus, Paul describes his internal war with sin, as he desires to do what is good, turn away from evil, and delight in God's law. At the same time, while he wants to follow Jesus, he still finds himself stumbling, caught in sin, and at war with himself. No matter what he does, sin is always crouching at the door.

For Christians, Paul's testimony can be both a warning and an encouragement. If one of the greatest Christians to ever walk the earth felt this way, then we must be careful not to be blind to our own sins. Though we may feel our own sin more acutely at certain times, if we lose sight of our sinfulness and need for Jesus, we're probably not looking hard enough. Moreover, we must be careful to not stop fighting sin. The process of sanctification—the lifelong journey along which God makes us look more and more like Christ—is a painful path full of highs and lows. It is an interactive journey with the Holy Spirit during which we must fight and resist the sin within us.

At the same time, it is a great comfort. If Paul struggled so much with sin, that lifts a weighty burden off the shoulders of every other Christian! When you are embroiled in an internal struggle with sin, take heart! You are no "worse" a Christian than your brother or sister beside you, but rather you're walking and growing like every other Christian before you. Finally, there is *nothing* you can do to lose your justification—the once-for-all legal declaration that you are righteous before God. Sanctification is a winding and difficult journey, but justification is final.

4) In our previous lesson, we looked at Romans 6, in which Paul said that we are "dead to sin" and no longer enslaved to sin (see Rom 6:6-8, 11, 17-18, 22). Here in Romans 7, however, Paul sounds less optimistic. Has he changed his mind? How can these seemingly contradictory passages all be true?

In many ways, this is the most important question for students to wrestle with in this lesson. What does it mean that we have died to sin, and yet continue to struggle with it in our everyday lives? When reading this passage, Martin Luther famously said that the Christian is "at the same time justified and a sinner." In this way, the eternal realities of Romans 6 are true: By our union with Christ, we have been freed from the dominion of sin and death. We are no longer slaves to sin but slaves to God. Christ paid the penalty of death that our sin deserved, and we have been justified forever by His grace. And yet, while all of that is true, Romans 7:14-25 describes the everyday, ordinary experience for a Christian. Until Christ returns or we die and go to heaven, we will never fully escape the clutches of sin in our earthly bodies. Sin has been defeated, but like a wounded animal, it is still dangerous and is putting up a last-gasp fight. Sin can still feel overwhelming, and we may feel trapped in the heat of the moment, but our hope is not in ourselves—it is in Jesus Christ, who has already defeated sin forever (v. 25).

5) How do the final two verses of the chapter offer a helpful summary of the "war" that Paul describes?

Though Paul may sound defeated, by acknowledging his sinful heart and his inability to save himself, he's really stepping out of his own way and opening himself to the one who can deliver him from sin: Jesus Christ our Lord. Our war with sin will continue as long as we live on earth, but we are not without hope, and we are not left to our own devices. Admitting our wretchedness is not just something we do once when we convert, but something we repeatedly recognize over the course of a lifetime. Other religions teach that proper living means that you become more moral and less sinful over the course of your lifetime. Christianity, on the other hand, reveals that as we grow and mature in Christ—often through our painful struggles with sin—we actually become *more* aware of our sinfulness, not less aware. The more we grow as a Christian, the more we see our own sin, our need for Jesus, and His unwavering love for us.

C. NOW WHAT?

- 1) If we are no longer "married" to the law, but instead "married" to Christ, how does that change our motivation to obey?
- 2) Have you ever experienced feelings similar to what Paul describes in verses 14–23? Do you ever desire to do what is right, but find yourself repeating the same sins?
- 3) Where is God working in your life to reveal your own sin?
- 4) What hope do you find in this passage?

Main takeaway

As God works within us to make us more like Jesus, our sinful nature will put up a good fight. While we will never fully escape our sinful nature in this life, recognizing our own helplessness and need is actually the first step to being delivered from sin through Jesus. As we see our desperate need more and more, his grace tastes all the sweeter.

III. Closing

REMEMBERING THE GOOD NEWS

If you ever feel like you're struggling alone in your sin, the apostle Paul invites you to see the ongoing war within his own heart. Like Paul, we are "wretched" (v. 24), unable to do what is right on our own. But not all hope is lost; by the perfect life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we have hope not in ourselves, but in the one who already paid our debts.

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Father God, we are far more sinful than we will ever know, and You are far holier than we can dare imagine. We pray that You would open our eyes to the reality of our own sin so that we might better understand our need for Your grace, and we ask that You would sanctify us in the midst of our sin. Help us to live out of our justification as beloved sons and daughters. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

Supporting Resources

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1) Like Paul, do you ever feel stuck in sin? Do you ever want to do what is right but consistently do what you know is wrong? How do the promises of justification and sanctification fit into your own experience as a Christian?
- 2) Take some time to reflect on the cross diagram. Are you generally more aware of your own sinfulness, or more aware of God's holiness? What would it look like to have a proper balance of both?
- 3) With humility and vulnerability, the apostle Paul admitted his ongoing struggle with sin, even as a devoted Christian. What sin(s) do you regularly struggle with? Take some time to write down at least one thing that you are wrestling with right now. With whom could you share this struggle?

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- 1) Parents, share about a time when you felt a strong inner conflict or war within. What was it like to struggle with sin? What was it like to get through that challenge?
- 2) How does this passage affect how we should treat one another as members of the family? How might knowing that we all constantly struggle with sin change how we treat each other?
- 3) How can you love and support one another in your own struggles with sin? Is your family a safe place to confess your inner warfare? What would it look like to walk beside one another as Christians who are growing in the midst of their own sin?

ROMANS 8:1-17

The Holy Spirit Changes Everything

Memory Verse

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

—Romans 8:1

Real-life Problems

Living for this world—It is often tempting, easy, and convenient to live "according to the flesh." We set our hearts and minds on things of this world—success, popularity, relationships, money, and more—rather than on the things of the Spirit. In other words, we live for this world rather than the next.

The Good News

Though we are still sinners, in Christ Jesus, we face no condemnation from God! The Holy Spirit lives in us, transforming our hearts, and renews us, and gives us a new identity—sons and daughters of God.

I. Introduction

OPENING QUESTIONS

Idea #1: If you could assume a completely new identity, who would you be? What would this new you be like?

Idea #2: What is your favorite part of being a member of your family?

Idea #3: What does it mean to be a son or a daughter? What privileges do children have that other people can't enjoy?

PRAY

Open your time together in prayer.

REHEARSING THE GOSPEL

What does gospel mean?

Good news

What's the good news?

Jesus died for my sins

Why did He die for your sins?

So that I can have abundant life in relationship with Him now and forever

What is grace?

God's love for undeserving sinners

REVIEW

1) Who wrote the book of Romans?

The apostle Paul wrote the book of Romans sometime around AD 57.

2) Who was the original audience of this book?

Paul wrote to the churches in Rome, which consisted of both Jewish and Gentile Christians.

3) Why was the book of Romans written?

Paul wrote to introduce himself to the church before visiting, to clarify any theological disputes between Jews and Gentiles, and to remind them of the gospel of God.

What's going on?

REMIND

In Romans 7, Paul painted an honest, realistic picture of the Christian life that involves ups and downs as we struggle against sin. But Romans 8 turns the page and offers the best possible news—there is *no condemnation* for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:1). In many ways, chapter 8 is the pinnacle of Romans, adorned with incredible promises, and they all draw from the work of the Holy Spirit.

TODAY WE'LL LEARN

- 1) By the Holy Spirit, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:1-4).
- 2) By the Holy Spirit, Christians have transformed hearts and new lives (Rom 8:5-13).
- 3) By the Holy Spirit, Christians receive adoption into God's family (Rom 8:14-17).

Read

Read **Romans 8:1-17** aloud in your group.

II. Questions for Discussion

A. WHAT?

1) From what are Christians set free (Rom 8:1-2)? How does God set us free (vv. 3-4)?

First, in Christ Jesus, there is no condemnation. Though Christians are still sinners (Rom 7:14-25), God has freely justified us by the death of His Son (Rom 3:23-25). The "therefore now" doubly emphasizes Paul's transition from the end of Romans 7 (the believer's ongoing struggle with sin) to the glorious promises of Romans 8. Yes, a Christian will continue to battle sin in this life, but through Christ, there is no condemnation. We have been liberated, set free from sin and death, and now Paul invites us to live into our freedom. Because we could not free ourselves, God accomplishes our justification by sending His Son as a sin offering to perfectly fulfill the righteous requirements of the law (v. 4). By the power of the Holy Spirit, we are united to Christ, and *His* perfect righteousness becomes our own. Jesus lived and died *to make us holy*, which further encourages and empowers us to pursue holiness in our everyday lives.

2) In verses 5-8, what two ways of living does Paul contrast? What are some characteristics of living by the flesh? By the Spirit?

Paul compares living "according to the flesh" and living "according to the Spirit." Those who live by the flesh have their minds on "things of the flesh" (things of this world), and therefore their hearts and minds are hostile to God. Life according to the flesh doesn't submit to God's law, and therefore leads to death. To live by the Spirit, however, is "life and peace" (v. 6). It is the antithesis of living by the flesh, as the Spirit of God within us transforms our hearts and minds so that we meditate on the things of the Spirit rather than things of this world.

3) What promise does the Spirit bring in verse 11?

Just as the Holy Spirit raised Jesus from the dead, if the Holy Spirit dwells in us, He will also give us new life. In the present, our mortal bodies have a renewed sense of life, and in the future, we have assurance that our glorified, resurrected bodies will enjoy eternal life with God forever.

4) What new identity do we receive by the Spirit in verses 14-17?

By the Spirit, we are adopted as sons and daughters of God. Not only are we now children in His family, but with Christ, we are heirs of the kingdom of God.

B. SO WHAT?

1) In verse 1, Paul says that in Christ, there is "no condemnation." Thinking back to Romans 7, why is that such a remarkable promise? What difference would it make if Christians could fall back into condemnation?

In Romans 7:14-25, Paul shared some of his ongoing struggles with sin. For every Christian, daily war against our own sin is the story of our lives, and the process of sanctification is a path littered with failure. As a result, the declaration of "no condemnation" comes not from our own ability to earn it, but from Jesus' righteous life and sacrificial death in our place. No matter how often we fail, for those of us who are in Christ Jesus, there is no condemnation. Period. Our justification is complete, and nothing can change that. If we could fall back into condemnation, our lives would be a dramatic pendulum swinging between pride and self-righteousness on one side and fear and despair on the other. In any particular moment, we might feel as though we were "good enough," but we'd know it could slip away any second. So while we might feel proud when we were obedient, in the other

moments when we felt the Romans 7 struggle with sin, we would have no hope to cling to. By the grace of God, our status of condemned or not is not up to us! He has already declared us not condemned, freed from the power of sin and death forever.

2) Compare and contrast living "according to the flesh" and walking "according of the Spirit" (vv. 5-8). What might each of these look like for students in the 21st Century? Are these the only two paths available?

In these verses, Paul makes implicit and explicit comparisons between the two ways we can live: by the flesh or by the Spirit. There is no in-between; either we walk by the Spirit, or we do not. First, we see that these two ways of living "set their minds" on opposing things: the flesh or the Spirit. If our minds are on the flesh—things like success, good grades, popularity, achievements in sports, and praise from our peers—then they cannot be on the things of the Spirit. If our thoughts, desires, priorities, and plans are all centered around things of this world, we're living according to the flesh. These are not inherently bad things, but when we are more consumed by our grades or our social media presence than with God, then we've set our minds on things of the flesh. Whether we realize it or not, the things we set our minds on are the very things that define and shape who we become. Not only do the flesh and Spirit have different mindsets, but they also have different ends. One leads to death; the other, to peace and life. One is obedient; the other, rebellious. Life in the Spirit is pleasing to God, while life by the flesh cannot please God.

3) What is different about someone who has the Spirit of God in them? What are some of the gifts or promises of a Spirit-filled life in verses 5-17?

Though we often overlook the person and work of the Holy Spirit, Paul mentions the Spirit of God a whopping 15 times in these first 17 verses. More than anything, the Spirit brings glorious promises and assurance to the believer and unites us with Christ. In these verses, we find four primary gifts promised by the Holy Spirit:

1. The Holy Spirit transforms our mindset (vv. 5-8). On our own, we can only set our minds on things of the flesh, which lead to rebellion from God, hostility with God, and death apart from God. By the indwelling Spirit, however, we can set our minds on things of the Spirit, which transforms how we relate to God and one another. This new mindset is one of life and peace rather than death and hostility.
2. The Holy Spirit gives us new life (vv. 9-11). When Paul uses the phrase, "Spirit of Christ," he suggests that "through the Spirit we experience something of Jesus' disposition—his kindness, His gentle care, His love in our lives" (Hughes, *Romans: Righteousness from Heaven*, 114). At the same time, not only does the Spirit begin to make us more Christ-like today, but the Spirit also promises resurrection life for us in eternity. The Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is the same Spirit that lives in each of us. In other words, the Holy Spirit gives us "a sense of new life now and the assurance of eternal life in the resurrection" (Hughes, 114-115).
3. The Holy Spirit imparts to us a new way of living (vv. 12-13). Though we have been set free from the Mosaic law (Rom 7:1-6), our justification is not a blank check to live and do as we please. Instead, rather than working *for* God's approval, we work *from* God's approval. He loves us unconditionally, and now He calls us to live according to the Spirit rather than by the flesh. As we saw in Romans 7:14-25, the daily Christian life is often a battle between these two ways of living. When we are filled with the Spirit, we are both obligated and empowered to live by the Spirit.
4. The Holy Spirit gives us a new identity (vv. 14-17). We have a new title and a new family: We are sons and daughters of God. Like Jesus, the Son of God, we now have the most intimate and personal relationship with God imaginable. The creator of the universe looks at us not as rebellious sinners but as dearly beloved children, and as a result, we can draw near to Him just as we draw near to our earthly parents. As one commentator puts it, "Jesus,

through the Spirit, has given us His own special name for God, and it has become our natural cry to a loving Father" (Hughes, 116). Does it get any better than that?

What God the Father Really Means

One day, a little girl—maybe 4 or 5 years old—was playing in the yard when she looked over and saw her big sister hanging up her dad's clothes on the clothesline. Eager to help and full of child-like innocence, she immediately ran to the laundry basket to help out. She spotted her dad's nice white dress shirt—the one he wore to work all the time—and knew that was the one she wanted to hang.

But when she got to the clothesline, she realized she couldn't quite reach the line, and she couldn't risk trying to throw it over the top in case it fell. Instead, she looked around. She was determined. She loved her dad so much, and she just wanted to help him out. Over in the corner of the yard, she spotted a wheelbarrow with long arms, a perfect place to hang a shirt.

All day long, she waited for her dad to get home, ready to show off how much she loved him. When her dad got home, she rushed out to greet him, shouting "Daddy! Daddy!" and dragged him over to the wheelbarrow to see the shirt. Surely it's dry by now. She's beaming.

What she didn't realize was that the handles of the wheelbarrow were covered in rust. So when her dad bent down to pick the shirt up, he lifted a dry shirt with huge orange streaks all over the front. His favorite shirt—ruined.

Pause and ask, *How do you think most fathers would respond? How do you think God would respond as our Father?*

Maybe we expect swift, harsh anger. God is just, and therefore He would want to fix the wrong that had been done. Or maybe we would expect a scene where God would smile, let the anger pass, and give us a hug. Maybe He'd tell us it was all okay, toss the ruined shirt aside, and walk us back inside. After all, He loves us more than the shirt!

But what if we underestimate the love of God as our Father? What if we expect too little of Him? In God, we don't have a Father who is quick to cast us aside in anger, or to chastise us for our stupidity. Nor is He one to merely overlook our honest mistakes. We have a Father in heaven who would not only forgive us and love us and cherish our love for Him, but also pick up the shirt, put it on, and wear it to work the next day. He'd wear the now-striped shirt with joy, and He would *beam* as He got to tell people how much His little girl loved Him. *That's* the love of the Father.

4) What does it mean to be adopted? How does adoption and inheritance change the way Christians relate to God?

In our sin, we were completely separated from a holy God. In a word, we were *orphans*. In His lavish grace, however, God not only justifies us and declares us innocent (Rom 3:23-24), but He also goes one step further and adopts us into His family. We once were slaves to sin (Rom 6:17) and enemies of God (Rom 5:10), but now, through the Holy Spirit, we are adopted into God's family. We belong to Him.

As children of God, we're not only full of the Spirit, but we also discover a few accompanying gifts. First, as legally adopted children, we enjoy the benefits that natural-born children enjoy—we are heirs of God with Jesus. This is why Paul uses the language of "sonship," for only sons could be heirs in the ancient world. Part of the beauty of God's adoption, however, is that He adopts both men and women, sons and daughters, and calls them *both* heirs. In Luke 12, Jesus told His disciples, "fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Lk 12:32). God delights in giving us the kingdom of heaven. Second, as children, we have newfound access to God. While on earth, Jesus called God "Father" in nearly every prayer, and now we have the same privilege. Like Jesus, we have access to the intimate, unique name for God that resembles the cry of a child: *Abba*,

Father. God is no longer distant, but near and dear. He knows us, and He wants us to know Him. Finally, we see that we are children (rather than slaves), and therefore, we do not have to live in fear. As sons and daughters, our standing with God is secure. With the loving gaze of a parent on their newborn baby, so your heavenly Father smiles on you.

C. NOW WHAT?

1) Do you ever forget that you are no longer condemned? Do you ever live like you can fall in and out of God's favor? What would it look like to live as though you were not condemned?

2) What might it look like for a student your age to live according to the flesh? What might it look like to live according to the Spirit? How does the Holy Spirit's presence in your life change the way you can approach each day?

3) How does this chapter help you better understand the Holy Spirit? Which of these gifts of the Spirit is the most meaningful for you?

4) Why is it significant that you can call God your Father? How does that affect the way you can relate to Him?

Main takeaway

The Holy Spirit changes everything. When the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in you, you are forever transformed. By the Spirit, you are given a new outlook, a new mindset, a new life, and best of all, a new identity: beloved child of God.

III. Closing

REMEMBERING THE GOOD NEWS

Though we are still sinners, in Christ Jesus, we face no condemnation from God! The Holy Spirit lives in us, transforming our hearts and renewing us, and gives us a new identity—sons and daughters of God.

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Father God, we thank You and praise You for the privilege that it is to call you Father. Thank You for sending Your Son to bear our condemnation for us so that You could fill us with Your Spirit and make us new. Today we pray that we would live out of our new identity as beloved sons and daughters who face no condemnation in Christ Jesus. In His name we pray, amen.

Supporting Resources

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1) Imagine you are in a courtroom, and you hear the judge's sentence: "There is no condemnation!" How would that make you feel? Is it more difficult for you to accept that you are guilty to begin with, or that God has declared you innocent despite your guilt?
- 2) How would you summarize what it means to live "according to the flesh" and "according to the Spirit"? What do each of these look like in your own life?
- 3) How does your relationship with your earthly dad affect how you view God as your heavenly Father? What positive attributes has your dad shown you about God? In what ways has your dad fallen short of God's fatherhood?

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- 1) What is it like to live knowing that you are not condemned? Do you ever forget this amazing promise?
- 2) In what ways is your family a small (and imperfect) picture of God's bigger family? What are things you do well? What are things you can do better?
- 3) As a family, talk about ways that God has treated each of you as His son or daughter. In return, what does it look like for you to treat Him as your Father?

ROMANS 8:18–30

The Now and the Not Yet

Memory Verse

"And those whom He predestined He also called, and those whom He called He also justified, and those whom He justified He also glorified."

—Romans 8:30

Real-life Problems

The trials of life—Before His death, Jesus left His disciples with an ominous warning: "In this world, you will have tribulation" (Jn 16:33). Like many of the other early Christians, Paul's everyday life was defined by constant suffering. While Christians in the West are not persecuted in the same ways today, the Christian life—even for students—is still full of pain and suffering, and it is easy to wonder where God is and why He lets us walk into such heartache.

The Good News

Though we are told to expect suffering in this life, we are also promised a future glory that is unfathomably greater than the struggles we face today. God's promise of redemption gives Christians hope in this life and the next, and we can trust that God has a good purpose for every valley we walk through.

I. Introduction

OPENING QUESTIONS

Idea #1: What is your favorite "comeback" story from a movie, book, or real life? What made the story so epic? How do you think the hero felt at their lowest moment on the journey?

Idea #2: If you could choose one dream to come true when you grow up, what would it be and why?

Idea #3: Kelly Clarkson sang a hit song entitled, "Stronger," which includes the famous line from the chorus, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." Have you ever heard this before? Do you think it is true? Is this good advice to give someone?

PRAY

Open your time together in prayer.

REHEARSING THE GOSPEL

What does gospel mean?

Good news

What's the good news?

Jesus died for my sins

Why did He die for your sins?

So that I can have abundant life in relationship with Him now and forever

What is grace?

God's love for undeserving sinners

REVIEW

1) Who wrote the book of Romans?

The apostle Paul wrote the book of Romans sometime around AD 57.

2) Who was the original audience of this book?

Paul wrote to the churches in Rome, which consisted of both Jewish and Gentile Christians.

3) Why was the book of Romans written?

Paul wrote to introduce himself to the church before visiting, to clarify any theological disputes between Jews and Gentiles, and to remind them of the gospel of God.

What's going on?

REMIND

In the beginning of Romans 8, Paul describes the life-altering work of the Holy Spirit. Despite our sin, by the life and death of Jesus, Christians face no condemnation before God. Moreover, the Holy Spirit works to change the hearts, lives, and identities of believers so that we are no longer orphans but now sons and daughters of God. In this lesson, we will explore some of the ramifications of our new identity, even in the midst of a broken world.

TODAY WE'LL LEARN

- 1) In the face of trouble, you have even greater reason to hope (Rom 8:18-15).
- 2) The Holy Spirit intercedes for you, strengthens you, and sustains you (Rom 8:26-27).

Read

Read **Romans 8:18-30** aloud in your group.

II. Questions for Discussion

A. WHAT?

1) How does Paul talk about suffering in verse 18? Where does this hope come from?

In Romans 8:17, Paul cautioned that Christ's brothers and sisters would suffer with Him. In verse 18, Paul acknowledges that the suffering he faces in this world is hard, but it cannot compare to the inheritance (v. 17) and the glory that await us in heaven. While not ignoring the hardship in his own life, Paul's heart is set on heaven, and he knows that nothing in this life can even begin to compare to the joys and freedoms that we will one day experience.

2) What analogy does Paul use to describe the present state of creation (vv. 19-24)?

Paul describes the current plight of creation to the pains of childbirth. Right now, creation "groans" with birth pains, but the end result will be even more beautiful and glorious than imagined. When we look around at the broken and dying world around us, we should not be surprised; we are in the pains of childbirth. As one commentator jokes, "None of us have a picture of our wives in labor" (Hughes, *Romans*, 120). Childbirth is excruciating and agonizing, but the moment after birth is ecstasy and bliss. Even in the midst of our messy world, we have hope because God is making all things new, and His plans will exceed our wildest dreams. Death will become new life, and pain will become rejoicing as God redeems creation.

3) What are some of the ways the Holy Spirit acts in our lives (vv. 26-27)?

In two specific ways, the Holy Spirit supports and works in us. First, the Holy Spirit "helps us in our weakness" (v. 26). God isn't like a football coach sitting in the press box, calling down plays (or commands) from above! His Spirit fills us and strengthens us in our weakest moments. Just as God became incarnate in the person of Jesus—literally rolling up his sleeves and entering into our messy world—God still enters the nitty gritty of our world through His Spirit. We are never left to our own devices, but the Holy Spirit draws near and helps bear our burdens, especially at our weakest moments. Second, the Holy Spirit "intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" (v. 27). When we are at the end of our rope and don't know what (or how) to pray, the Spirit intercedes for us. As Douglas Moo writes, the Holy Spirit is our "intercessor 'in the heart'...who effectively prays to the Father on our behalf throughout the difficulties and uncertainties of our lives here on earth" (Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 527).

4) In verses 29-30, Paul lists a "chain reaction" for the Christian life. Who does the acting here? What is the end goal for believers?

Throughout these remarkable verses, God is always the one acting, and we are the ones who are acted upon. In verse 29, Paul says that God first foreknew, then predestined, then conformed certain people into the image of His Son. In other words, before the history of the world, God set us apart to make us look more and more like Jesus. Then, in verse 30, Paul continues the chain. In our own lives, God has called us, and those whom He calls to Himself He always justifies, and those He justifies He always glorifies. As English poet and priest John Donne wrote, in our glorification, "I shall be so like God, as that the devil himself shall not know me from God, so farre as to finde any more place to fasten a temptation upon me, than upon God; not to conceive any more hope of my falling from that kingdome, than of God's being driven out of it." In other words, everything in our lives is God's way of preparing us for future glory.

B. SO WHAT?

1) In one word, how would you describe Paul's tone in this passage? Why can Paul have such a hopeful outlook?

Paul is full of hope! Even though he has suffered greatly in his life (see 2 Cor 11:16-33), Paul's hope remains steadfast. He's realistic but hopeful because his mind is set on heavenly things (Rom 8:5; Col 3:1-3). To paraphrase, he lives with a heavenly mindset because his heart is set on heaven. No matter what life throws at him, his hope is in God's promise of future joys and glories that will make the sufferings of this life fade like a distant memory.

2) How does the metaphor of childbirth play out (vv. 19-24)? How does Paul connect our present suffering with our adoption (vv. 14-17)? How does that affect how we can view our present troubles and our future?

As children of God and siblings of Jesus, we should expect to "share" in Christ's sufferings (v. 17). As a result, Paul points to childbirth to illustrate how the painful effects of the fall—which we experience each day—will one day give way to new life and new joys. Just as a mother endures nearly unbearable pain to bring her children into the world, so, too, all of creation is currently in the midst of excruciating labor pains. The groanings that define our present suffering will one day give way to new life, glory, and joy that will be far greater than we could ever imagine. Because he trusts in God's future promises, Paul understands that the pain of this life is not the final chapter of the story. Just as a mother is not doomed to endure the agonies of childbirth forever, we are not destined to endure the sufferings of this world forever. Instead, we can wait with patience and hope (v. 24) for the freedom and glorification that awaits us (v. 21).

3) How do verses 26-27 offer encouragement for us in our lowest moments? What does it mean that the Spirit "intercedes" or that the Father "searches hearts"?

Just as the Holy Spirit "helps us in our weaknesses" (v. 26), when we don't know what or how to pray, the Holy Spirit steps in, intercedes on our behalf, and prays for us. When we lose someone close to us, fail miserably, feel completely alone, battle deep depression, and much more, it often feels like we just can't find the words to pray (see Ps 69:1-3). In the moments when we need God the most but don't even know where to begin, the Holy Spirit within us (Rom 8:9-11) groans and prays to the Father on our behalf. As one commentator notes, "The Holy Spirit does not give armchair advice. He rolls up his sleeves and helps us bear our weaknesses. That is real help" (Hughes, *Romans*, 122). Similarly, the Father is not distant or removed from our pain, but He also "searches hearts" and knows exactly what is on our minds. God does not leave us to groan alone; He actively meets us in the pain of childbirth and sustains us through the pain.

4) In your own words, how would you restate verse 28? What does this verse *not* mean?

Though one of the most well-known passages in Scripture, Romans 8:28 is also one of the most misunderstood and misapplied verses. It does not mean that life will always work out well for us. And it does not mean that when life gets hard, we should just grin and bear it because things will eventually turn around. Instead, Paul reminds Christians (those who love God) of an incredible promise: God is actively working all things together for good. There are no accidents, but God is at work in all things. And He has a good and perfect plan. This doesn't mean that the sufferings in life (vv. 17-26) are any less painful, but it is a hopeful reminder that our sufferings aren't endless. Behind everything that happens to us—the good and the bad, the easy and the hard, the joys and the heartbreaks—God is at work for our good.

The Chain

If you have a chain (or a picture of one), ask the students, "How might this chain break?"

Coaches often say, "a team is only as strong as its weakest link." Using the analogy of a chain with many links welded together, what they really mean is, "the team can only go so far as its weakest player."

Theologians have often referred to Romans 8:29-30 as the "golden chain," with several linked promises laid out for believers. Paul structures these promises in such a way that we can clearly see the connections in a logical order: God foreknows His people, predestines them, calls them, justifies them, and glorifies them (which includes conforming them into the image of His Son).

Questions we might naturally ask include: "Does everyone God predestines receive glorification? Does everyone He calls receive glorification?" And the list goes on. In other words, is it possible for one of the links of this chain to break?

God's promise in this passage is a resounding NO! Everyone in whom He begins a good work will be brought to completion (Phil 1:6). Everyone whom God foreknew will be glorified with Him in heaven one day. In other words, this "golden chain" is unbreakable, and nothing can tear God's people from Himself.

5) In verses 29-30, Paul lists several promises and future realities for believers. What do each of these terms—"conformed to the image of His Son," "predestined," "called," "justified," "glorified"—mean?

God's vision for humanity is nothing short of glorious. God's "good" purpose (v. 28) for His people is that each and every one of His children would be conformed into the image of His Son. In other words, one day, we will each look like Jesus. When God uses all things for our good, this is the good that He has in mind. Before the beginning of time, God "foreknew" His people and "predestined" them—He set them apart as His own. When we examine these "links of the chain" more clearly, we see that this chain is unbreakable. When God begins a good work in someone, He will bring it to completion. We see that those whom God predestined, He also called—meaning He effectually draws us into a relationship with Himself. As we have seen in Romans 1-4, those whom He called, He justified—He declares righteous the sinful. Finally, the chain must be completed, and those whom He justified must also be glorified—perfectly sanctified, perfected, and conformed to the image of the Son. From our perspective, glorification is a future promise, but Paul uses the past tense verb ("he also glorified") that he used throughout verses 29-30. In other words, from God's perspective, our glorification is already guaranteed. Though we do not enjoy it fully yet, the war has already been won. As Christians, we live in this tension between the "now" and the "not yet," where we may enjoy the "firstfruits" (v. 23) of God's blessings by the Spirit, but we eagerly await the fulfillment of God's great promises.

C. NOW WHAT?

1) How can a Christian today live with the same heavenly mindset as Paul's in the face of suffering? Where do you see hope in this passage?

2) What might it be like for you to not know what to pray? What comfort does it bring, knowing that the Holy Spirit intercedes for you (vv. 26-27)?

3) Have you ever heard Romans 8:28 used to comfort someone who was hurting? How might these words be helpful? How could this verse be misused?

4) What is God's end goal for your life? How does knowing the final outcome affect how you live today?

Main takeaway

Even in the most difficult seasons of our lives, God is working toward very good purposes for us. Christians are promised suffering in this world, but we are also promised blessings upon blessings that will make the birth pains of this life fade like a distant memory. In all things, God is working to conform us to the glorious image of His Son, Jesus Christ.

III. Closing

REMEMBERING THE GOOD NEWS

Though we are promised suffering in this life, we are also promised a future glory that is unfathomably greater than the struggles we face today. God's promise of redemption gives Christians hope in this life and the next, and we can trust that God has a good purpose for every valley we walk through.

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Father God, even when we don't have the words to pray, Your Spirit fills us and intercedes for us. Thank You for the promises in this passage, and we pray that they would penetrate our hearts and become more and more real to us as You make us look more and more like Jesus. In His name we pray, amen.

Supporting Resources

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1) Have you ever endured a season of suffering? Are you in a hard period of life right now? How does this passage—and Paul's own suffering—give you hope for the future, even in the midst of painful things you've experienced?
- 2) If you have a friend who is hurting, how might this passage equip you to comfort them? What comfort does Paul offer fellow sufferers in these verses?
- 3) How does it make you feel knowing that God chose you to be His before the foundations of the earth? When you read His plans for you—to glorify you and conform you into the perfect image of Jesus—how does that sound? Spend some time in prayer talking to God about the plans He has laid out for you.

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- 1) Parents, share a time when you walked through sadness or suffering. What hope does this passage (or others in Scripture) promise? How did God provide for you in the midst of your hardship? Can you see the ways He used that trial for your good?
- 2) What does it mean to live in both the "now" and the "not yet" of God's promises? What is one way that can be a challenge? What is one way that gives you hope?
- 3) Gather as a family, and have each member share about something that is difficult for them right now. Invite one another into your sufferings, and pray for one another. How can you better support one another when you are struggling?

ROMANS 8:31-39

The Boundless Love of God

Memory Verse

"For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

—Romans 8:38-39

Real-life Problems

Doubting God's love—When life gets tough, it's easy to doubt God's love for us. On the other hand, sometimes we're tempted to think that we can do something that will make God stop loving us. Either way, at different times and for different reasons, we can doubt whether or not God truly loves us.

The Good News

No matter what happens around us, and no matter what we do, there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God. No one can condemn us because God has justified us, and Christ Himself is beside the Father, interceding on our behalf. God already loves us fully and perfectly, and there is nothing that can change that.

I. Introduction

OPENING QUESTIONS

Idea #1: Can you think of a movie or a story where one character does something crazy for someone else out of love?

Idea #2: What is your favorite rivalry (from sports, a story, or real life)? Describe what it is like for both parties involved.

Idea #3: Describe a time when you felt particularly loved by your parents.

PRAY

Open your time together in prayer.

REHEARSING THE GOSPEL

What does gospel mean?

Good news

What's the good news?

Jesus died for my sins

Why did He die for your sins?

So that I can have abundant life in relationship with Him now and forever

What is grace?

God's love for undeserving sinners

REVIEW

1) Who wrote the book of Romans?

The apostle Paul wrote the book of Romans sometime around AD 57.

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3) Why was the book of Romans written?

Paul wrote to introduce himself to the church before visiting, to clarify any theological disputes between Jews and Gentiles, and to remind them of the gospel of God.

What's going on?

REMIND

Last week, we saw that God has a good plan and purpose for our lives, even in the moments of our worst suffering. Moreover, we walked through the unbreakable "chain" of the Christian life: God has predestined, called, justified, glorified His children. Today, we'll pick up where we left off as we look at God's inseparable and incomparable love.

TODAY WE'LL LEARN

- 1) God is for you (Rom 8:31-32).
- 2) No one can condemn you (Rom 8:33-34).
- 3) Nothing can separate you from God's love (Rom 8:35-39).

Read

Read **Romans 8:31-39** aloud in your group.

II. Questions for Discussion

A. WHAT?

1) What are some of the questions Paul asks in verses 31-35?

Paul asks several rhetorical questions, including: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" "How will [God] not also with him graciously give us all things?" "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect?" "Who is to condemn?" "Who can separate us from the love of Christ?"

2) According to verse 34, what is Jesus doing now?

Jesus, who was raised from the dead, now sits at the right hand of the Father and intercedes (pleads our cause) for us (see also Heb 1:3).

3) Who or what can separate us from the love of Christ (vv. 35, 38-39)?

Trick question! Nothing—not in this world nor the next—can separate us from God's love.

The Love of a Mama Bird

In the late 1980s, there was a forest fire in Yellowstone National Park. Legend has it that when park rangers were walking through the woods after the fire, they came across a petrified bird with her wings spread out at the base of a tree. Curious, one of the park rangers poked at the majestic bird with a stick, and when he touched the bird, it crumbled into ash.

At the same time, several little baby chicks scurried out from beneath their dead mother's wings! Rather than flying to her own safety, the mother had stayed and protected her chicks by spreading her wings over them through the blistering inferno. Though the flames scorched her body, she refused to give up on her baby chicks. She loved her babies so much that she valued their salvation over her own life.

In many ways, God's love for us is similar. Christ spread His arms at the cross and bore the heat of God's punishment that we deserved. Though the pain was excruciating and ultimately killed Him, Jesus' love for us remained steadfast. *Nothing* can separate us from the love of God.

4) What does Paul call Christians in verse 37?

Through Jesus, who loved us enough to sacrifice His own life, we are more than conquerors. We share in His victory over sin and death (see Jn 16:33). In the literal translation from Greek, this phrase says that in Christ, we are "super conquerors."

B. SO WHAT?

1) Why does Paul ask so many questions in verses 31-35? What are "these things" that Paul uses as proof that God is for us (v. 31)?

All the incredible promises of Romans 8 can be rolled up into "these things" that Paul treats as a building block to prove God's love: no more condemnation (v. 1), the indwelling Spirit (v. 11), the promise of adoption (vv. 14-17), the promise of deliverance from suffering (vv. 18-23), the promise of the Spirit's help and intercession (vv. 26-27), and the promises of predestination, calling, justification, and glorification (vv. 29-30). In essence, Paul stacks up these promises from God and now says, "Look! See how much God loves you!" By asking questions, Paul anticipates

potential counterarguments and preemptively shoots them down. If the God of the universe is on our side, who can possibly stand against us? And what is the greatest proof of God's love? He's already shown He won't hold anything back by sending His own Son to die. If He would do that for us, what *wouldn't* He do for us?

2) Why does it matter that God is the one who justifies us? How is this connected to God's inseparable love?

If our justification were up to our own efforts, then we would be rightly terrified that we could lose it. But thanks be to God, our justification is not in our own hands, but in His. In fact, our justification has already been sealed by the pierced person of Christ, who died on the cross in our place. God has already declared you righteous if you are in Christ Jesus, and therefore no one can bring charges or condemnation against you. Commentator R. Kent Hughes writes, "If charges are brought against us, we need not fear, for the charges are silenced by the upraised, pierced hands of our intercessor. If we are to be condemned, it will have to be over Christ's dead and resurrected body, which is actually the basis of our salvation!" (Hughes, *Romans*, 127). In other words, no one can condemn you because Jesus has taken your place; any charges they bring upon you they really bring against Him, and He already paid their price. God Himself has justified you with a justification that cannot be undone. Just as Paul assures us of the certainty of our justification, so also he assures us of the certainty of God's love.

3) What does it mean that Jesus intercedes for us? If you are already justified, why do you need His intercession?

As we saw last week in verse 26 ("the Spirit himself intercedes for us"), the triune God is eternally on our side. Throughout the New Testament, we see other examples that the Son intercedes for us (Heb 7:25; 1 Jn 2:1), and together we see a picture of a God who is deeply *for us*. No one can condemn us because even Jesus, who died in our place, continues to advocate for us. Christ didn't reluctantly die on the cross for your sins, but He continues to love and pray for you even in the midst of your sin and rebellion! Even when we do not pray, Christ is praying for us. As John Bunyan put it, we should look to the cross to understand our justification, but when we look for comfort, we should look to Jesus seated on the throne in heaven, where He constantly lives to intercede on our behalf. Our once-for-all justification is complete, but Christ's ongoing intercession preserves us in the midst of the trials and tribulations of our everyday lives. Anglican bishop JC Ryle summarizes this beautifully:

"The special intercession of the Lord Jesus is one grand secret of the believer's safety. He is daily watched, and thought for, and provided for with unfailing care, by one whose eye never slumbers and never sleeps. Jesus is 'able to save them to the uttermost who come unto God by Him, because He ever liveth to make intercession for them' (Heb 7:25).

"They never perish, but He never ceases to pray for them, and His prayer must prevail. They stand and persevere to the end, not because of their own strength and goodness, but because Jesus intercedes for them. When Judas fell, never to rise again, while Peter fell, but repented, and was restored, the reason of the difference lay under those words of Christ to Peter, 'I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not'" (Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospel of John*, chapter 17).

4) What is the point of verse 36? How do we still know God loves us?

Here, Paul quotes from Psalm 44:22 to illustrate that suffering and hardship are nothing new for God's people. As a result, the existence of suffering and hardship in our lives cannot mean that God has stopped loving us. In fact, the troubles Paul lists in verse 35 are all things that he has personally experienced (2 Cor 11:16-33), and yet they are no cause to doubt God's love. What God has already done for us—sending His Son to die for us so that we would be justified—proves God's love, even when the world closes in around us.

5) What is Paul's main argument in verses 35, 38-39? Why does this matter for Christians?

Paul wants Christians to face the trials and tribulations with assurance, not fear. Just as we are saved by God's grace, we are sustained in this life by God's grace and His relentless, never-ending love. No matter what goes on in life around us, no matter how far we may *feel* we are from God, and no matter how badly we might mess up, there is nothing in the universe that can separate us from God's love. God doesn't love us because we are lovable, but because He chooses to love us, and nothing can change that. Though the world may be against us, if our God is for us, then who can stand against us?

C. NOW WHAT?**1) How does Jesus' ongoing intercession for you affect how you view God? How does it affect how you view the good and the bad things that happen in your life?**

Robert Murray M'Cheyne once said, "If I could hear Christ praying for me in the next room, I would not fear a million enemies. Yet distance makes no difference. He is praying for me." Do you live like Jesus is praying for you right now? If not, why not?

2) What are some things (either that happen to you or that you do) that can cause you to doubt God's love for you? When is this promise difficult to believe? How do these verses encourage you in those moments?**3) What would it look like to live with such an assurance of God's love? How might the promise—"If God is for us, who can be against us?"—apply to the things you face in everyday life (such as at school, with your friends, with dating, on a team, or with your family)?**

Main takeaway

No matter what happens in the world around us, how far we might feel we are from God, or how badly we might mess up, there is absolutely nothing in this universe that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. We are no longer condemned, but we are justified, and Jesus Himself continues to pray for us, for nothing can separate us from His love.

III. Closing

REMEMBERING THE GOOD NEWS

No matter what happens around us, and no matter what we do, there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God. No one can condemn us because God has justified us, and Christ Himself is beside the Father, interceding on our behalf. God already loves us fully and perfectly, and there is nothing that can change that.

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Father God, we pray that the gravity and beauty of Your love for us would not only sound good in our heads, but that it would change our hearts. Just as You love Your Son, we are fully known and loved and secure in You. Help us to rest and find our home in You. In the name of Jesus we pray, amen.

Supporting Resources

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1) Do you believe that God is for you? Do you live like He is forever on your side? What would it look like to live with the confidence that nothing can take His love away from you?
- 2) When are you tempted to doubt God's love for you? When do you *feel* like you may have fallen out of favor with Him? Reread Romans 8:31-39. What hope and assurance does Paul offer you?
- 3) What stands "against" you right now?

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- 1) How does God's love compare to human love? What are similarities between how God loves and how parents love their kids? What might be different?
- 2) Have you ever doubted God's love? What led you to doubt? What helped you learn to trust God again?
- 3) What would it look like to live with the confidence that *nothing* you do can change how much God loves you? How would that change your life?

ROMANS 9:1-29

Have God's Promises Failed?

Memory Verse

"So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy."

—Romans 9:16

Real-life Problems

When life gets hard—It's one thing to know in your head that God loves you unconditionally. The promises of Romans 8 are incredible! But when reality sets in and everyday life gets hard, it's easy for us to feel like God is cold, distant, and uncaring. Has He forgotten us? Has He forgotten His promises? When we don't understand how He is working in the world, we tend to doubt His goodness—or His existence.

The Good News

No matter what goes on in the world around us, God's promises never fail. Like Israel, we may misinterpret what God promises, but His love is unfailing, and His promises are secure. While we often don't understand why God works the way He does, we can find great freedom knowing that He is in control, not us.

I. Introduction

OPENING QUESTIONS

Idea #1: What's your favorite movie or story with a twist ending? What made it so surprising?

Idea #2: Has someone ever broken a promise to you? How did that make you feel?

Idea #3: What's something unfair that has happened to you? Why wasn't it fair?

PRAY

Open your time together in prayer.

REHEARSING THE GOSPEL

What does gospel mean?

Good news

What's the good news?

Jesus died for my sins

Why did He die for your sins?

So that I can have abundant life in relationship with Him now and forever

What is grace?

God's love for undeserving sinners

REVIEW

1) Who wrote the book of Romans?

The apostle Paul wrote the book of Romans sometime around AD 57.

2) Who was the original audience of this book?

Paul wrote to the churches in Rome, which consisted of both Jewish and Gentile Christians.

3) Why was the book of Romans written?

Paul wrote to introduce himself to the church before visiting, to clarify any theological disputes between Jews and Gentiles, and to remind them of the gospel of God.

What's going on?

REMINDE

At the end of Romans 8, we zoomed in on just a few incredible verses that reminded us of the relentless love of God. Romans 8 was filled with all kinds of amazing promises, but now Paul anticipates a counterargument: Can we really trust God's promises? In our lesson today, Paul will answer this question by looking back in history and at God's character. Though we often don't understand how God works, we know we can trust His promises.

TODAY WE'LL LEARN

- 1) What about Israel (Rom 9:1-13)?
- 2) Is God unjust (Rom 9:14-23)?
- 3) God's surprising plan (Rom 9:24-29).

Read

Read **Romans 9:1-29** aloud in your group.

II. Questions for Discussion

A. WHAT?

1) How would you describe Paul's emotions at the beginning of this chapter? Why is he so distraught?

Paul begins the chapter by saying he has "great sorrow and unceasing anguish in his heart" (v. 2). He sounds like someone with a broken heart because so many Israelites have rejected Jesus, their promised Messiah. Though they were God's chosen people, and they had long waited for the Messiah, so many Jews ignored—or worse—rejected Him when He walked on earth among them. Paul cared so much that he was willing to forfeit his own place in heaven for the sake of the Jewish people who had turned away from God.

2) What promises were given to the Israelites (vv. 4-5)?

We often think that ancient Israel could only relate to God by the law of Moses or the Ten Commandments, but Paul reminds his Jewish audience (and us) that God has always cared deeply about His people. In verses 4-5, Paul describes several promises laid out for the Israelites: adoption (Ex 4:22), the glory of God (Ex 29:42-45), the covenants (Gen 12, 15; Ex 24; 2 Sam 23), the law (Deut 4), worship in the temple (Heb 9:1-5), the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), and many more promises from God. In other words, they had no shortage of love from God.

3) What Old Testament stories does Paul point to in verses 6-12?

Paul looks back to the patriarchs and to the miraculous birth of Isaac. Though Abraham and Sarah were old and barren, God gave them a son (Isaac), as He had promised. Though Abraham previously fathered another son (Ishmael) through another woman, Ishmael was not a child of the promise, like Isaac. Similarly, though Isaac fathered twin sons through his wife Rebekah, God promised before they were born that the younger (Jacob) would be greater than the older (Esau). Once again, Paul emphasizes that physical descent isn't as important as spiritual descent and God's promises.

4) What do verses 14-20 tell us about God? What words does Paul use to describe Him?

If we could sum up these verses in a short sentence, we could say God is just because He is merciful. Paul repeatedly emphasizes God's mercy and compassion in these verses, but He also illustrates that God is higher and holier than humanity. He is the creator, and therefore His ways and His thoughts and His plans are infinitely greater than ours (Is 55:8-9). We shouldn't expect to understand God's ways, but Paul emphasizes that salvation is *entirely* in God's control. It's not up to human efforts, but God's mercy.

5) What analogy does Paul use to describe our relationship to God in verse 21?

Paul compares God to a potter and humanity to pieces of clay that the potter shapes into vessels.

B. SO WHAT?

1) In verse 6, Paul says, "It is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel." What does this mean? Why does he say this in the first place? How does he defend his statement?

Following the remarkable promises of Romans 8, someone might have objected to Paul and asked, "but what about all the promises God made to Israel? How did they miss their long-promised Messiah?" If the Israelites could miss

out on God's promises, then why should anyone trust Him? Paul's rebuttal is both harsh and historical. Going back to the patriarchs and the births of Isaac, Jacob, and Esau, Paul tells us that it's more important to be a spiritual descendant of Abraham than a physical one. In other words, not everyone who was a biological member of Israel was truly a member of God's chosen people. Paul uses two proof texts: First, though both Ishmael and Isaac were biological children of Abraham, only Isaac was a child of the promise. God chose Isaac. Second, he points to the birth of Esau and Jacob. Though they were twins, both born from Isaac and Rebekah, God chose Jacob. Before either son had ever done anything good or bad, God chose Jacob. Theologians call this the doctrine of election, "which teaches that before the world was created God chose those who would receive salvation" (Hughes, *Romans*, 131). On a bigger picture scale, God's chosen people were not chosen because they deserved it or because of where they were born, but simply because God chose them. Therefore, God's promises to the true Israel have never failed.

2) Can you restate verses 14–18 in your own words? How did God use Pharaoh? What does this tell us about God's justice compared with our sense of justice?

Paul anticipates that someone might hear the doctrine of election and question God's justice. Is it fair for God to choose some people for salvation and not choose others? Is God an unfair God? Absolutely not! God's ways and plans are infinitely higher than our ways. If we believe God is perfect in His goodness, knowledge, and love, we can trust that His choices are perfect as well. Because He is God, He doesn't have to answer to anyone. In Exodus 33, Moses spoke to God and asked forgiveness on behalf of Israel after they committed idolatry by worshiping the golden calf. God's response, which Paul quotes in verse 15, shows that God's mercy and compassion are His to give freely; no one can earn or deserve them. On the other hand, just as God can show mercy to whomever He wills, He can also harden hearts—and it's always for His good purposes (v. 17). Here in Romans 9, Paul emphasizes that God hardened Pharaoh's heart, but the book of Exodus reveals that Pharaoh also hardened his own heart (Ex 8:15,19, 32). As Pastor Tim Keller explains, "When God hardens someone, he doesn't create the hardness; he simply allows a person to go his or her own way. God hardens those he wants to harden. And all those whom he hardens want to be hardened" (Keller, *Romans 8–16 for You*, 66; see also Rom 1:24). It can be hard for us to grasp the concept of God sovereignly choosing whether He will show mercy or not, but Paul wants to clarify that what appears like unfairness from our perspective is actually perfectly just from God. Everyone deserves condemnation; no one deserves God's mercy. In His perfect wisdom, God chooses some to be merciful toward (and soften their hearts) and some to pass over (and harden their hearts). In both cases, however, God is perfectly just.

Robbing a Bank

Pastor D. James Kennedy offers a helpful illustration in his book, *Truths that Transform*. He invites us to imagine a scenario in which five people decide to rob a bank. As their friend, when I hear about it, I beg them not to do it, but none of them will listen. Their hearts are set on robbing the bank. As they head out the door, I grab one of my friends and wrestle him to the ground. He fights back, but I'm able to physically restrain him long enough so that he misses the robbery. Meanwhile, my other four friends went to the bank, killed the guard, took hostages, and stole thousands of dollars before being caught, arrested, and sentenced to jail. The man that I tackled (who missed the robbery) walks free. So who is at fault for the crimes committed? Can the man who missed the robbery honestly say that he is a free man because of the goodness of his own heart? No! He is only free because he was restrained by me. This is the human condition: "Those who go to hell have no one to blame but themselves. Those who go to heaven have no one to praise but Jesus Christ," our friend who restrains us (adapted from Kennedy, *Truths that Transform*, 39–40).

3) What does Paul mean by his potter and clay analogy in verse 21?

Paul continues to break down arguments against God's fairness with a reminder that God is the Creator and we are the created. Just as the potter has ownership, sovereignty, and freedom over the clay, so God has absolute and rightful authority over all creation. Imagine a piece of pottery talking back to a skillful artist! That's what it is like when we talk back to God (v. 20).

4) Why does Paul quote prophecies from Hosea and Isaiah (Rom 9:25-29)? What does this mean for both Jews and Gentiles?

Returning to his train of thought at the beginning of the chapter (salvation for the Jews), Paul quotes several Old Testament prophecies to remind Israel that God has always made and kept surprising promises. Just as the Israelites often received but rarely deserved God's blessing, so God will extend His blessing to new people who do not deserve it—the Gentiles. Though they were not His chosen people, God will now call them His beloved sons and daughters (vv. 25-26). At the same time, Paul reminds his Jewish audience that just because Israel was God's chosen people, in the midst of their disobedience, God often only showed mercy to a remnant. In other words, God's saving grace has always been His to freely give to both Jews and Gentiles alike.

C. NOW WHAT?**1) Why is it significant for you today that God's promises didn't fail Israel? What hope and warning does this passage offer?****2) Why do some people love and know God, while others do not? What role do we play in this? What role does God play?****3) Do you ever want to tell God what to do? Do you ever question why He works the way He does? How does the analogy of the potter and the clay help you?****4) How might you respond if God loves and blesses someone you don't think deserves His love?*****Main takeaway***

Though God will often answer His promises in ways that surprise us, He is perfectly faithful and just in everything that He does. He is the potter, and we are the clay; salvation is entirely in His hands.

III. Closing

REMEMBERING THE GOOD NEWS

No matter what goes on in the world around us, God's promises never fail. Like Israel, we may misinterpret what God promises, but His love is unending, and His promises are secure. While we often don't understand why God works the way He does, we can find great freedom knowing that He is in control, not us.

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Father God, we thank You that You are the potter and we the clay. Help us to repent for trying to tell You what to do, and to trust that You are faithful to Your promises. Lord, we thank You that You have shown mercy and grace to us even we didn't deserve it. In the name of Jesus we pray, amen.

Supporting Resources

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1) How has God been faithful in your life? Where do you feel like God has abandoned you?
- 2) Do you believe that your salvation and standing before God are a result of anything you do? How does God speak about God's election in this passage?
- 3) What does it mean to be clay and for God to be the potter? Do you act like clay? Do you try to be the potter?

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- 1) Parents, share with your kids a time when God has been faithful. How did He deliver on His promises in your life?
- 2) What does it mean to be saved by grace? Spend some time talking about this as a family. What can you do to add to your salvation?
- 3) When are times when you want to tell God what to do? Why is it good news that we are clay and not the potter?

ROMANS 9:30-10:21

Hearing and Believing

Memory Verse

"Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."

—Romans 10:9

Real-life Problems

Distracted by the world—It's one thing to hear truths about God; it's another to believe them and live in light of those truths. Like ancient Israel, when we grow up in church, we hear a lot about God, but we're constantly pulled away from Him and distracted by the things of this world. As a result, we often live as though we don't know God at all.

The Good News

God knows that we are fallen and forgetful. He knows things can go in one ear and out the other. But God doesn't judge us based on our performance; He asks us to trust Him, to take Him at His Word, and to believe that Jesus has already died and been raised on our behalf. We have already been justified and made right! Now, we can live in that freedom.

I. Introduction

OPENING QUESTIONS

Idea #1: What does it mean for something to go "in one ear and out the other"? Has this ever happened to you?

Idea #2: Who is your favorite athlete? Why are they your favorite? Is it their performance? Their competitiveness? Their style?

Idea #3: When is the first time you can remember someone telling you about Jesus? Have you ever told someone else about Jesus? What was that like?

PRAY

Open your time together in prayer.

REHEARSING THE GOSPEL

What does gospel mean?

Good news

What's the good news?

Jesus died for my sins

Why did He die for your sins?

So that I can have abundant life in relationship with Him now and forever

What is grace?

God's love for undeserving sinners

REVIEW

1) Who wrote the book of Romans?

The apostle Paul wrote the book of Romans sometime around AD 57.

2) Who was the original audience of this book?

Paul wrote to the churches in Rome, which consisted of both Jewish and Gentile Christians.

3) Why was the book of Romans written?

Paul wrote to introduce himself to the church before visiting, to clarify any theological disputes between Jews and Gentiles, and to remind them of the gospel of God.

What's going on?

REMIND

In the first part of Romans 9, Paul walked through the challenging doctrine of election, and we saw how God's promises to Israel have never failed, despite their unbelief. God is the potter, and we are the clay, and as a result, salvation is entirely in His hands, not ours. This week, Paul builds on his discussion about Israel and emphasizes that not only must we hear truths about God, but we must also believe Him.

TODAY WE'LL LEARN

- 1) The difference between righteousness by the law and righteousness by faith (Rom 9:30-10:8).
- 2) The importance of hearing, believing, and confessing that Jesus is Lord (Rom 10:9-17).
- 3) The dangers of hearing and not believing (Rom 10:18-21).

Read

Read **Romans 9:30-10:21** aloud in your group.

II. Questions for Discussion

A. WHAT?

1) Why, according to Romans 9:32, didn't Israel achieve righteousness? What did the Jews do instead, according to Romans 10:3?

Paul says they didn't achieve righteousness because righteousness can't be achieved! It can only be *received* by faith. Instead of receiving righteousness from God by faith, the Jews tried to use the law (given by God) as their own form of righteousness that they could earn. They were zealous for God (v. 2), but they refused to submit to Him (v. 3), and therefore they turned away from Him.

2) Looking at verse 4, what did Jesus end? For whom did He end it?

Jesus "is the end of law for righteousness." In other words, because Jesus lived the perfect, sinless life that we never could, and He perfectly fulfilled the law, Jesus has ended the law as a way for us to be made right with God. More specifically, Christ ended the law as a means of righteousness for everyone who believes in Him. Either we hitch our hopes to Christ and His righteousness, or we trust in ourselves.

3) What does verse 9 require, and what does it promise? What do Christians believe?

Very simply, Paul says that those who confess and believe will be saved. More specifically, those who confess *Jesus is Lord* and believe that *Jesus rose from the grave* will be saved.

4) Where does faith come from (v. 17)?

Faith comes from hearing the word of God preached. We must hear about God from pastors and parents and evangelists before we even know to believe.

NOTE: There is a distinction here between faith and knowledge, between believing and knowing. Romans 1:20 makes it clear that all people know certain things about God, namely that he exist and is powerful. However, Paul says that in the context of an indictment of nonbelievers. Paul's effectively saying, "Even though they might say and definitely act like God doesn't exist, they know somewhere deep down that He does, they're just suppressing that truth in unrighteousness." So, these nonbelievers have a knowledge of God in some sense, but they don't have faith in him. They know he exists somewhere in their heart of hearts, but they don't have faith in or trust him. By the time we get to Romans 10:17, Paul is talking about belief or faith in God beyond just pure knowledge. He's saying that individuals don't come to faith unless they hear the word of God, the Gospel, preached to them (or unless they read it - nevertheless, in either situation they are encountering God's explicit, biblical word in some way).

5) What image describes God's posture in verse 21?

God is open-handed toward His rebellious people. Though Israel knew more about God than any other people did, they disobeyed and rebelled against Him. All the while, He held out His hands to them and beckoned for them to return to His loving embrace.

B. SO WHAT?

1) What is the difference between righteousness by faith and righteousness by works? Why is works-righteousness so dangerous? What does that tell us about God?

Righteousness by works is trying to earn or prove your righteousness to God. Righteousness by works is essentially being hyper-religious (v. 2) and trying to live a good enough life so that God owes it to you—thinking that you can earn your way to God. To use church terms, it conflates our sanctification with our justification and assumes that our salvation and standing with God depend upon how good we are. As people growing up in church, we can be a lot like the Israelites! We can know a lot about God, we can even be really passionate about obeying Him, and yet we can still miss the point entirely! We can outwardly appear very religious, all while rejecting God! On the other hand, righteousness by faith is receiving Christ's righteousness as your own. It humbly recognizes that we can't earn our way to God, but instead openly receive Christ's righteousness as a free gift of grace. Whether someone is new to Christianity or has grown up in church, righteousness by faith is free and available to all! If we treat God like a disapproving boss or teacher or coach, we think we can do things to earn or lose His favor. We're in a constant struggle within ourselves to do good—or else. But God doesn't operate like that! He has already sent His Son to live the perfect life on our behalf *and* die the death we deserved. We are freed from sin, and Christ has given us His perfect righteousness. When we receive this by faith, we can rest assured that God looks at us like He looks at His own Son: as spotless!

2) What does it mean to "confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord" and "believe in your heart" (v. 9)? Why are these the things that God asks of us?

To confess that Jesus is Lord means to affirm that Jesus is fully God. To proclaim that Jesus shares the name and nature of the one true God. Second, Christians must believe in their hearts that God raised Jesus from the dead. Typically, what we say comes from what we believe: "For out of the abundance of the mouth the heart speaks" (Mt 12:34). Together, we are confessing and believing in the person of Christ (He is Lord) and in the work of Christ (that He rose from the dead). It's not that this is a scientific formula or that these are magic words to say aloud or even that believing becomes a "work" in and of itself; instead, God invites us to stop trusting in ourselves and to trust in Him. No one who has ever trusted God has regretted it (v. 11), and *anyone* is invited to call upon Him (vv. 12-13)!

An Atheist on Evangelism

Penn Jillette—a slight-of-hand performer and half of the "Penn and Teller" magic duo—has talked publicly about his atheism on several occasions. However, while he doesn't believe in God, Penn tells a short story about the respect he has for Christians who openly share their faith. At school, on the team, with our friends, and even with complete strangers, talking about our faith with non-Christians is often a daunting task. It's easy to have self-doubt, wonder what the other person will think, or be afraid of making it awkward. But to paraphrase Penn, *if you believe that there is a heaven and a hell, how much do you have to hate someone to not tell them about Jesus?*

After watching the 5-minute video, spend some time talking with your students about evangelism (and Paul's words in verses 14-15). What is challenging about sharing your faith with others?

Video link here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6md638smQd8>

3) Is it possible to believe in Jesus without first hearing about Him? Where do people usually hear about Jesus?

In verse 14, Paul takes a step back. Before people can believe in Jesus, they must first hear about Him! This happens most clearly through preaching, but it also applies to all Christians sharing their faith with other people. No matter how old you are, how popular you are, or how eloquent you are, you have the opportunity to share the good news with other people! This is a beautiful calling (v. 16). Though not everyone will preach, God calls all of us to love our neighbors wherever we are, and that includes sharing the gospel with them.

4) What do the prophecies in verses 18–21 tell us about Israel? What do they tell us about God?

Over and over and over, Israel disobeyed and rebelled against God. In verses 19–20, Paul illustrates that God can draw to Himself people who hardly know anything about Him and who don't even seek Him. But the Jews—who knew a lot about God and included many people zealously seeking Him through their own good deeds—still rebelled. God specifically held out His hands to the Jewish people, and they repeatedly ran in the other direction. The Gentiles, who weren't even looking for God, repented and believed. To His people today, God still holds out His hands and urges us to come into His arms. He earnestly desires that we believe and confess that Jesus is Lord. No matter what we do, He isn't going anywhere, but if we turn away, we will be held responsible.

Tough Topic

Though students may not make the connection at first, one of the main arguments of Romans 9 is that God sovereignly chooses (elects) those who are saved. When we get to Romans 10, however, Paul approaches the topic of human responsibility in our salvation (v. 10:9). Is Paul contradicting himself? Not at all; he's showing us two sides of the same coin. Rather than an "either/or" scenario, where salvation is either dependent upon God or humans, the Bible presents a "both/and" picture: God is completely sovereign over all of human history, *and* humans are responsible for their actions. First of all, by our own actions, we all deserve death (Rom 3:23; 6:23). Like Israel, we try to justify ourselves and earn our righteousness before God (Rom 9:30–10:3). In other words, by our own hand, we all merit our own condemnation; everyone who goes to hell deserves to be there. At the same time, God's election is completely on His terms! He is not beholden to anyone or any else's standards. No one can be saved apart from God. Our believing and confessing is not the way that we are saved, but our natural response to God's saving grace in our lives. One way to think about this is to ask, "Who killed Voldemort at the end of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*?" Obviously, the answer is Harry Potter. And yet, Harry was merely a character in a story written by someone else: JK Rowling. While no one would ever say that JK Rowling killed Voldemort, Rowling has publicly apologized for "killing off" certain characters (such as Professor Lupin) because on some level, she is ultimately responsible for the fate of each character. Anyone who reads the book (or watches the movie) would say that Harry killed Voldemort—after all, they have a duel to the death. But we also know that Harry was simply doing what was foreordained for him by Rowling.

C. NOW WHAT?

- 1) Do you ever find yourself attempting to earn your own righteousness? What might this look like in your life?
- 2) Have you confessed and believed that Jesus is Lord and that He was raised from the dead? If so, do you now live as someone who is already saved, or are you still trying to earn God's approval? If not, and you are hearing about God today, what would it look like for you to believe and confess?
- 3) How might verses 14-17 apply in your life right now? What would it look like to tell someone else about Jesus? What would you tell them?
- 4) How might verses 18-21 be both a warning and a comfort to Christians today?

Main takeaway

Rather than working our way to being right with God, in Christ, God offers us a perfect righteousness that we simply receive. Rather than demanding perfect performance, God asks us to believe in Him and confess that Jesus is Lord.

III. Closing

REMEMBERING THE GOOD NEWS

God knows that we are fallen and forgetful. He knows things can go in one ear and out the other. But God doesn't look at us or judge us based on our performance; He asks us to trust Him, to take Him at His Word, and to believe that Jesus has already died and been raised on our behalf. We have already been justified and made right! Now, we can live in that freedom.

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Father God, even when we forget who You are, and we forget who we are, You remain the same. You lovingly hold out Your hands with open arms and invite us to come and to receive our righteousness from Jesus, rather than trying to earn it ourselves. Lord, we believe; help our unbelief. In Jesus' name, amen.

Supporting Resources

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1) What are ways that you try to earn God's favor with your actions? What would it look like to receive righteousness instead of trying to achieve it?
- 2) Have you ever shared your faith with anyone? Has anyone ever talked to you about Jesus out of the blue? If you're really honest with yourself, what hinders you from telling your friends (or complete strangers) about Jesus?
- 3) Have you confessed and believed that Jesus is Lord and that He was raised from the dead? If not, what would that look like in your life? If you have, how has this changed how you live your life?

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- 1) Parents, what was it like to confess and believe in Jesus for the first time? Spend some time sharing part of your testimony with your family.
- 2) As a family, what are opportunities you might have to tell other people about Jesus? How can you do this individually and as a family?
- 3) How does the distinction of receiving righteousness (rather than achieving it) affect your day-to-day life? At work? At home? In leisure?

ROMANS 11:1–36

The Kindness, Severity, and Wisdom of God

Memory Verse

"Oh, the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgements and how inscrutable His ways!"

—Romans 11:33

Real-life Problems

Loving those who are different—

Ethnic, racial, and religious differences can pose significant challenges to our faith and our relationships. While the ancient church was divided by ethnic and cultural differences, many of us today are close with Christians (and non-Christians) who look, think, and live very differently than we do. Learning to love people—even Christians—across these dividing lines stretches our comfort zones and challenges our faith.

The Good News

Though we will often disagree with people inside and outside the church, Paul reminds us that we are *all* sinners deserving judgment. No one is exempt. At the same time, God freely gives grace to all who believe. There will always be challenges to Christian unity, but Christ's work on the cross transcended ethnic and cultural boundaries so that we can love one another in the midst of our differences.

I. Introduction

OPENING QUESTIONS

Idea #1: Who is your favorite teacher or coach you've ever had? Why did you enjoy learning from them? Why did you trust them?

Idea #2: Have your parents ever had to punish you for something? Have they ever rewarded you for doing something good? Share about one or both of these experiences.

Idea #3: Would you rather be able to see into the future to know major events in your life (such as college, marriage, death), or would you rather live the normal way and be surprised at those major events? Why?

PRAY

Open your time together in prayer.

REHEARSING THE GOSPEL

What does gospel mean?

Good news

What's the good news?

Jesus died for my sins

Why did He die for your sins?

So that I can have abundant life in relationship with Him now and forever

What is grace?

God's love for undeserving sinners

REVIEW

1) Who wrote the book of Romans?

The apostle Paul wrote the book of Romans sometime around AD 57.

2) Who was the original audience of this book?

Paul wrote to the churches in Rome, which consisted of both Jewish and Gentile Christians.

3) Why was the book of Romans written?

Paul wrote to introduce himself to the church before visiting, to clarify any theological disputes between Jews and Gentiles, and to remind them of the gospel of God.

What's going on?

REMINDE

In Romans 10, Paul emphasized that God has not failed Israel, but that Israel turned away from God by pursuing a righteousness by works. On the other hand, Paul called for people to hear, believe, and confess the good news that Jesus is Lord. Today, Paul continues his conversation about the nation of Israel and outlines God's master plan for salvation of Jew and Gentile alike.

TODAY WE'LL LEARN

- 1) God hasn't rejected Israel (Rom 11:1-10).
- 2) God has revealed His plans for the Gentiles (Rom 11:11-24).
- 3) God isn't done with Israel yet (Rom 11:25-32).
- 4) God alone is worthy of praise (Rom 11:33-36).

Read

Read **Romans 11:1-36** aloud in your group.

II. Questions for Discussion

A. WHAT?

1) According to verses 5-6, how does God choose His people?

God chooses people by grace, not on the merit of works. Nothing we do—good or bad—can change our status in His eyes.

2) What image does Paul invoke in verses 17-18?

Paul uses an olive tree as a metaphor. Though this sounds a little strange to us, it would have been a very familiar sight for people in the Mediterranean world. Paul says that Israel was like the branches of an olive tree; because they were unfaithful, unfruitful, and sought works-righteousness, God broke off those branches while keeping the faithful Israelite branches on the tree (i.e., those who accepted Jesus as Lord). At the same time, God also took a "wild olive shoot"—the Gentiles—and grafted them into the living tree. Now, the Gentiles were a part of God's olive tree (i.e., His chosen people). They received the blessings and "nourishing" of God's promises as His people while the unfaithful branches (unbelieving Jews) were cut off from the tree. It was actually a common practice to take a wild olive shoot and graft it into a cultivated tree; this process could reinvigorate the whole tree while also making the wild olive shoot more fruitful (Keller, *Romans 8-16 for You*, 93).

The Unsafe Lion

At the beginning of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the four Pevensies (Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy) find themselves wandering around a magical winter wonderland—Narnia. Soon, however, after meeting fauns, talking animals, and a mysterious witch, the children realize that something is wrong. Despite the danger, the animals have placed their hope in Aslan, the great lion who is king of all the beasts. As the story unfolds, the children inquire about Aslan, and Susan asks if Aslan is safe. After all, he is a lion!

"Who said anything about safe?" came the answer. "Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the king, I tell you." (146).

In other words, Aslan isn't a tame lion, but he is a good one. Later on, when Aslan finally appears to many of the animals, Lewis writes, "the beavers and the children didn't know what to do or say when they saw him. People who have not been in Narnia sometimes think that a thing cannot be good and terrible at the same time...for when they tried to look at Aslan's face they just caught a glimpse of the golden mane and the great, royal, solemn, overwhelming eyes; and then they found they couldn't look at him and went all trembly" (168-69).

Aslan was the most beautiful and terrifying thing the children had ever seen. Everyone who saw him understood the tenderness and tenacity that he was capable of. In fact, throughout *The Chronicles of Narnia*, we see this theme repeated over and over: Aslan's affection for his people and his wrath toward his enemies. Or, to use Paul's language, "the kindness and the severity of God" (v. 22).

What does it mean to serve an "unsafe," but very good, god?

Lewis, C.S. *The Chronicles of Narnia*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.

3) According to verse 20, why were the Jews broken off and the Gentiles grafted in? What two things does this reveal about God (v. 22)?

The Jews were broken off because they didn't believe that Jesus was the Messiah. On the other hand, the Gentiles stand fast—not by their works, but by their faith. The miracle of God bringing salvation to the Gentiles illustrates God's kindness and His severity.

4) Who is the "deliverer" found in the prophecy in verses 26-27? What does the prophecy tell us about Him?

Quoting from Isaiah and Jeremiah, Paul argues that Jesus is the deliverer who will save the Israelites from their sins. Even though they rejected Him once, Paul is saying that Israel will be saved through Jesus. There is no salvation apart from Him, for He alone can take away sins.

5) What are some of the characteristics about God emphasized in verses 33-36?

Paul ends with a beautiful doxology praising God for who He is. He praises the depths and riches of God's wisdom and knowledge, which far surpass human understanding. No one can give anything to God that He doesn't already have, for He is the creator of all things, and everything exists from Him, through Him, and to Him. To God be the glory!

B. SO WHAT?

1) What are some of the reasons Paul gives to prove that God hasn't abandoned Israel (vv. 1-10)?

First of all, Paul says that God hasn't rejected Israel because there are many Jews (like himself) who do believe! The Twelve disciples were Jewish, as were all the first Christians, so God can't have rejected Israel entirely. Second, he reminds the audience that God "foreknew" His chosen people. In Romans 8:29-30—"the unbreakable chain"—Paul wrote that "those whom He foreknew He also predestined...and those whom He predestined He also called, and those whom He called He also justified, and those whom He justified He also glorified." In other words, if God foreknows His people, they are in good hands. Third, he points to the story of Elijah; when Elijah felt like he was the *only* person following God in the entire nation of Israel, God promised him that there was a remnant—7,000 strong—who were faithful. Even when things look bleakest, God has a faithful remnant. Finally, Paul applies that logic to the present and says that there is still an elect remnant, chosen by grace. Though some have been hardened, God has chosen some by grace. (For more, see Keller, 85-87).

2) In your own words, how would you summarize verses 11-14? What does he mean by "riches for the world" and making Israel jealous?

The Jews "stumbled" and rejected Jesus, but God used their failure as a launchpad to bring salvation to the Gentiles. At the same time, now that the Gentiles have been welcomed into the fold as God's people, many Israelites might become jealous to the point of accepting the gospel themselves! When the Jews rejected Christ, this inadvertently was a blessing for the rest of the (Gentile) world, for now they had the opportunity to hear and believe the gospel. At the same time, Paul hopes that Jews who initially rejected Jesus will see the fruits of Gentile faith and come to believe in Him themselves. Commentator John Stott writes that "in this way the blessing ricochets from Israel to the Gentiles, from the Gentiles back to Israel, and from Israel to the Gentiles again" (Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 294).

3) Why does Paul speak directly to the Gentiles starting in verse 13?

The Roman church consisted of both Jewish and Gentile believers. When addressing the delicate issue of ethnic and religious differences, Paul wanted to speak to the Gentiles directly and urge them to proceed with love and

humility for their Jewish brothers and sisters. Jewish opponents are simultaneously "enemies" (because they have rejected Christ) but also "beloved" because they are descended from Abraham.

4) If the Gentiles are already saved by grace, why does Paul tell them to "fear" in verse 20? How is Paul's teaching both a comfort and a warning?

Here, Paul isn't saying that they should "fear" falling out of God's favor or losing their salvation, but he is urging them to be humble by reminding them that they are only there by God's grace. In fact, he goes so far as to say that the Gentiles were grafted in *because* the Jews rejected the gospel and didn't believe. Speaking to Gentile believers, Paul has a dire warning: Don't treat the gospel like the Jews did! They knew a lot about God, but when He walked in the flesh among them, they didn't believe. Though they were God's chosen people, they repeatedly turned against Him. At the same time, this passage is a comfort because Paul points to the "kindness" of God toward those who believe. To continue in God's kindness means that, by God's grace, we seek to live like and for Jesus, rather than follow our own desires. We cannot lose our salvation or fall out of God's favor, but Paul is saying that the way we live our lives will help reveal the status of our hearts.

5) In the closing verses of the chapter, Paul bursts out in worship toward God. What are some of the things we learn about worship just by reading Paul's words?

Here, Paul worships God as he admits he doesn't fully understand God's plans or why God works the ways that He does. In other words, not only can we worship God when we don't understand *why* things are the way they are, but we *should* worship God when we're at a loss for words! After all, a god who works beyond our comprehension is infinitely more majestic than a god who makes complete sense to us. Similarly, Paul uses Scripture, quoting Isaiah 40:13 and Job 41:11, to worship God. The Bible is not only the Word of God, but it even gives us the words to sing God's praises. Third, Paul's desire to praise God springs from a recognition of who God is and what He has done in the world. Reflecting on what God has done—not just in our own lives, but across the universe—is certainly cause for praise.

Tough Topic

In this chapter, Paul makes a lot of statements about Jews and Gentiles, which can feel foreign to us today. Most of us fall into the camp of Gentiles, though you may find some students (or leaders) who are of Jewish descent. Either way, this passage is applicable to all students today, even if it is hard to understand. Moreover, in verses 23–32, Paul assures us that God still has plans for the Jewish people, even though they have rejected Him. This passage has sparked debates among theologians for centuries, and perhaps the one thing we can be sure of is that no one is completely sure what Paul is talking about. What is clear, however, is that God "has the power to graft them in again" (v. 23), and that God hasn't given up on the Jewish people. As Christians, we should continue to share the gospel with our Jewish friends! Salvation is always by grace through faith, and God's plan to draw Jews back to Himself (either slowly or rapidly) means that they must hear and believe the gospel.

C. NOW WHAT?

1) Read verse 6 again; do you live a performance-driven spiritual life? What does it look like to live as though salvation depends upon your works? What does it look like to live as though salvation depends upon God's grace?

2) How does this chapter affect how you view non-believers? Do you have any Jewish friends in your life? How does this passage apply to them?

3) Is it harder for you to believe in the kindness or the severity of God? Which do you think you've experienced more of in your life?

4) What does worship look and sound like in the Christian life? How can it extend beyond a Sunday morning church service?

Main takeaway

Though God chose a remnant for himself, most of the Jews rejected Jesus, which opened the door for Gentiles to hear the gospel message and put their faith in Jesus. Though God isn't done with Israel yet, He has brought the nations into the fold and opened the door to salvation for all who believe. Glory be to God!

III. Closing

REMEMBERING THE GOOD NEWS

Though we will often disagree with people inside and outside the church, Paul reminds us that we are *all* sinners deserving judgment. No one is exempt. At the same time, God freely gives grace to all who believe. There will always be challenges to Christian unity, but Christ's work on the cross transcended ethnic and cultural boundaries so that we can love one another in the midst of our differences.

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Father God, as Gentiles, we thank You that You have brought us into the fold and called us to Yourself. Lord, we pray that we would not take for granted Your saving grace, and we ask that You continue to reveal Yourself to the world and soften the hearts of those who do not believe. In the name of Jesus we believe and pray, amen.

Supporting Resources

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1) Do you live a performance-driven life? Whether it's school, sports, Christianity, or something else, where do you find yourself performing for approval or acceptance?
- 2) How have you experienced God's kindness? Have you experienced His severity? Which of these are you more likely to remember in everyday life?
- 3) In the middle of his letter, Paul stops in his tracks and worships God. Take a minute to step back and think: Do you believe God is worthy of praise? Why? Spend some time telling Him!

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- 1) Is your family driven more by behavior or grace? What might this look like if your interactions were grace-saturated?
- 2) Who are non-Christians with whom you regularly interact? How have Paul's writings in Romans 9-11 shed light on how we can love and care for them?
- 3) What would it look like for you as a family to worship God together? What are attributes of God that you think are worthy of praise? Spend some time glorifying God together!

ROMANS 12:1-21

Living Sacrifices

Memory Verse

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God."

—Romans 12:1

Real-life Problems

Conformed to the world—The world around us shapes us in more ways than we realize. The things we see online, do with our friends, and hear from others actively conform us to the ways of the world. As Christians, we know that we are called to live differently, but it's easy to get sucked in and shaped by what's around us without even realizing it.

The Good News

Jesus doesn't ask anything of us that He isn't willing to do Himself. In fact, He already gave His life for us on the cross, and when we keep God's miraculous mercies in mind, our natural response is to give our lives back to Him. God calls us to a high standard of living, but our obedience is driven by God's love for us (and our love for Him), not by trying to earn His approval.

I. Introduction

OPENING QUESTIONS

Idea #1: What are some of the characteristics of your best friend? Why do those traits matter to you?

Idea #2: What position do you play in your favorite sport? Why is it important for different people to be good at different positions? Alternatively, what instrument do you play in the band or what role do you usually fill during a group project?

Idea #3: What is your favorite "sacrifice" moment in a movie or a book? Why was that scene so memorable?

PRAY

Open your time together in prayer.

REHEARSING THE GOSPEL

What does gospel mean?

Good news

What's the good news?

Jesus died for my sins

Why did He die for your sins?

So that I can have abundant life in relationship with Him now and forever

What is grace?

God's love for undeserving sinners

REVIEW

1) Who wrote the book of Romans?

The apostle Paul wrote the book of Romans sometime around AD 57.

2) Who was the original audience of this book?

Paul wrote to the churches in Rome, which consisted of both Jewish and Gentile Christians.

3) Why was the book of Romans written?

Paul wrote to introduce himself to the church before visiting, to clarify any theological disputes between Jews and Gentiles, and to remind them of the gospel of God.

What's going on?

REMIND

Over the past few chapters, Paul has talked about salvation in big-picture terms as he addressed the question of Israel's salvation. This week, he pivots to the present and answers the implicit question of, "Now what?"

TODAY WE'LL LEARN

- 1) Present your whole life to God (Rom 12:1-2).
- 2) Receive the gifts God has given you (Rom 12:3-8).
- 3) The look of a living sacrifice (Rom 12:9-21).

Read

Read **Romans 12:1-21** aloud in your group.

II. Questions for Discussion

A. WHAT?

1) How does Paul tell Christians to live in verses 1-2?

Paul calls Christians to "present your bodies as a living sacrifice" to God. Rather than being shaped and changed by the world, Paul urges Christians to be transformed from the inside out by the Holy Spirit. In other words, he calls us to holy living and spiritual growth.

2) What analogy does Paul use in verses 4-8?

He compares the church to a human body. Oftentimes, the church is called "the body of Christ" because of analogies like this, where Paul calls the different "members" (or body parts) to work together. Although a hand and a foot serve different purposes, they are equally important to the body's function as a whole.

3) What does Paul say is a gift in verse 3? What other gifts does he mention in verses 6-8?

In verse 3, Paul calls faith itself a gift from God! We can't even believe in God without His help. Then, he lists several more gifts from God: prophecy, teaching, service, encouragement, generosity, leadership, and mercy.

4) What are some of the instructions Paul gives in verses 9-21? What is different about the people in verses 9-13 and 14-21?

Paul offers a long list of encouragements and instructions for Christian living. While it's easy for us to view this as simply a checklist of dos and don'ts, Paul's purpose is to emphasize the high calling of Christian living and illustrate what it can look like to present our entire lives as a sacrifice to God. For the first half of this section, Paul is speaking predominantly about how we treat our Christian brothers and sisters; for the second half, he addresses how we should treat our enemies.

B. SO WHAT?

1) What, according to verse 1, is the motivation for Christian obedience? Why does Paul begin with the word, "Therefore..."? How is this different from other motivations for obedience?

Paul begins Chapter 12 with a "therefore" to indicate that everything he has said so far—most importantly, that we are justified by grace through faith—is the foundation for what comes next. To put it differently, Romans 1-11 outlines the fundamental truths for the Christian and reminds us of God's unfailing love for sinners. At the end of these 11 chapters of rich theology, Paul breaks out into a doxology praising God (Rom 11:33-36), and now in Romans 12, he transitions from the indicative (what is true) to the imperative (how we live in response). Because of God's great love for you, *now* you can go and live accordingly. Our obedience is rooted in God's love for us, and it is inspired by memories of "the mercies of God" (v. 1). Following Jesus in our daily lives requires obedience, but we are not driven by fear or a need for approval or to be better than others around us. Instead, we can rest in the security of God's promises. We obey *from* God's acceptance, not *for* God's acceptance.

2) What does it mean to "present your body as a living sacrifice"? What is the difference between being "conformed by the world" and "transformed by the renewal of your mind"?

Harkening back to Old Testament sacrificial language, Paul describes the Christian life in surprising terms. In one sense, Jesus was our sacrificial lamb in that He bore our sins on the cross, and that the debt of sin has been fully

paid by Jesus. So what does he mean? Paul tells us that our body—everything we are—is to be offered to God. Our life is not our own (1 Cor 6:19–20), so we are called to a life of obedience, holiness, and worship. It is a total commitment to Christ. This will require us to do things we don't want to do, and to submit ourselves to God's will (see also Lk 9:23–24).

Connected to this instruction to offer our lives to God, Paul calls us to be *transformed*, not *conformed*. In Paul's eyes, we are either being shaped and changed and made to look more like the world around us, or shaped and changed by God's will. The only other time Paul uses the word for "transform" is in 2 Corinthians 3:18: "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being *transformed* into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." (NOTE: the same word is also used to describe Jesus' transfiguration in Matthew 17 and Mark 9!) In other words, Paul calls the Christian to an inner transformation at the hands of the Holy Spirit rather than outward conformity to the world (see Keller, *Romans 8–16 For You*, 106). By the Holy Spirit, we are made to look more and more like Christ, rather than the world around us (Rom 8:29).

When I Survey The Wondrous Cross

The famous hymn writer Isaac Watts wrote an old hymn titled, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." The first and last stanzas go like this:

*When I survey the wondrous cross
on which the Prince of glory died,
my richest gain I count but loss,
and pour contempt on all my pride.*

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were a present far too small.
Love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all.*

In many ways, the first stanza echoes Romans 12:1a, for when we look back on what God has done for us in Christ, *therefore*, we can look forward and live differently. Our obedience and devotion to God are always rooted in what He has already accomplished for us. Meanwhile, the second stanza carries shades of Romans 12:1b, because God's "love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all." When Paul calls us to be living sacrifices, God is calling us to give ourselves totally over to Him. He held nothing back; neither can we.

3) What does it mean that God has assigned a "measure of faith" to people? Does this mean that God gives certain people more faith?

After calling people to humility and proper self-awareness in verse 3a, Paul says that we should think with "sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned" (v. 3b). On the surface, we might think that Paul is saying some people have more faith than others, and therefore some people have better judgment than others. While it is admittedly a confusing phrase, most scholars believe Paul is really referring to the "standard" of faith, not a quantitative amount. In other words, we should think of ourselves in light of the saving faith in Jesus that God has given us. As one commentator writes, "Paul is not asking the believer to estimate himself according to changing subjective feelings, but to estimate himself according to his relationship with Christ" (Hughes, *Romans*, 163). In this way, we won't think too highly or too lowly of ourselves or others, but we can have a firm confidence of our worth in Christ.

4) Which instruction in verses 9-21 is most surprising to you? What does it mean to "rejoice with those who rejoice" and "weep with those who weep" (v. 15)?

Answers may vary here, but Paul offers numerous imperatives in each verse that may strike students differently. Paul's words in verse 15 are somewhat popular today, but he is calling Christians to be empathetic with one another. Good friends are people you can share the highs *and* the lows with. When other people are happy or hurting, our first reaction should not be to understand or fix them, but to love them where they are. The love of a Christian is *active*, and it isn't afraid to enter into the hard or messy emotions.

5) What is Paul's primary purpose in this chapter? How does he call Christians to treat one another? How should we treat people outside the church?

Building off the theological foundation laid in Romans 1-11 (which laid out our justification by grace), Paul wants to encourage and exhort Christians to live a changed life. Because of what God has already done for you, we can live an obedient and radically different life than the world around us. Practically, Paul addresses two arenas in which this plays out: inside and outside the church. Within the church, he calls us to love and work in harmony with fellow believers. Outside the church, we are to bless those who persecute us and try to live peaceably with all, including our enemies.

C. NOW WHAT?

- 1) If someone asked you, "What does the Christian life look like?" what would you say? How do verses 1-2 offer a helpful summary for you?**
- 2) What is something God has gifted you with? How have you (or could you) work alongside other Christians with this gift?**
- 3) What does conformity to the world look like? What outside influences are shaping you the most?**
- 4) Where have you seen people emulating the love of Christ in the ways Paul describes in verses 9-21? Who is someone you've seen model this well?**

Main takeaway

Because God has already done incredible things for us—we are justified by the blood of Jesus spilled for us—we can now live differently as followers of Jesus. Rather than living for ourselves, we can offer our bodies to God as living sacrifices, and by extension, learn to love one another with our words and deeds.

III. Closing

REMEMBERING THE GOOD NEWS

Jesus doesn't ask anything of us that He isn't willing to do Himself. In fact, He already gave His life for us on the cross, and when we keep God's miraculous mercies in mind, our natural response is to give our lives back to Him. God calls us to a high standard of living, but our obedience is driven by God's love for us (and our love for Him), not by our trying to earn His approval.

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Father God, we thank You for what You have already accomplished for us. We pray that the sacrifice of Jesus would always be in our minds and lead us to offer ourselves as living sacrifices completely committed to You. Protect us from conformity to this world, and instead transform us by the power of Your Spirit. As Christ loves us, help us to love one another here today. In Jesus' holy name, amen.

Supporting Resources

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1) How would your life be different if you offered yourself as a "living sacrifice" to God? In what ways are you being conformed to the world around you? Spend some time in prayer, talking with God about what is conforming you to the world.
- 2) Which of Paul's instructions in verses 9-21 is hardest for you? What are some situations in which you find this challenging?
- 3) Have you ever rejoiced with someone rejoicing or wept with someone weeping? What did that look like? Has anyone ever done those things for you? How did that feel?

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- 1) How can you, individually and as a family, present yourselves to God as living sacrifices?
- 2) What are some ways technology, friends, school, or work are conforming you to the world? Spend some time in open conversation as a family. What would it look like to be transformed by the Spirit instead?
- 3) Taking turns, share which instructions in verses 9-21 you do well as a family and which ones you struggle with. Take time to listen to one another and learn how you can love each other well.

ROMANS 13:1-14

Earthly Citizens with a Heavenly Calling

Memory Verse

"But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."

—Romans 13:14

Real-life Problems

Resisting authority—Most of us don't like being told what to do. From a young age, our natural tendency is to buck against authority, whether it's our parents, teachers, or coaches. As we get older, this applies to governmental authorities, as well; we'd much rather decide for ourselves how fast to drive, how much to pay in taxes, and what laws we want to follow.

The Good News

Jesus doesn't just tell us to "be better" and leave us on our own. When we find imperatives for how to live the Christian life in Scripture, they are always rooted in what Christ has already done for us (our justification), and what He is still doing in us (our sanctification). God doesn't hang us out to dry, but invites us to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" and clothe ourselves with His power and His righteousness (Rom 13:14). Moreover, when He calls us to submit to earthly authorities, we are reminded that Jesus Himself did this, even though it cost Him everything. In other words, Jesus "walked the walk" when it came to obeying earthly leaders!

I. Introduction

OPENING QUESTIONS

Idea #1: Think about a time someone in authority (a coach or a parent, for example) told you to do something you didn't want to do? What happened?

Idea #2: What is the "Golden Rule"? Based on your experience, do you think this works as a standard of living?

Idea #3: What is your favorite shirt or outfit? Why do you like to wear it so much?

PRAY

Open your time together in prayer.

REHEARSING THE GOSPEL

What does gospel mean?

Good news

What's the good news?

Jesus died for my sins

Why did He die for your sins?

So that I can have abundant life in relationship with Him now and forever

What is grace?

God's love for undeserving sinners

REVIEW

1) Who wrote the book of Romans?

The apostle Paul wrote the book of Romans sometime around AD 57.

2) Who was the original audience of this book?

Paul wrote to the churches in Rome, which consisted of both Jewish and Gentile Christians.

3) Why was the book of Romans written?

Paul wrote to introduce himself to the church before visiting, to clarify any theological disputes between Jews and Gentiles, and to remind them of the gospel of God.

What's going on?

REMIND

In Romans 12, Paul transitioned from the indicative (what God has done for us) to the imperative (how we are called to live as Christians). He laid out several commands regarding how we should treat our friends and enemies, but most importantly, he called Christians to offer their bodies as living sacrifices, wholly committed to God. Today, Paul continues this practical instruction for Christian living and zooms out to address in big-picture terms how we should interact with the government and other people in our society.

TODAY WE'LL LEARN

- 1) Submit to earthly authorities (Rom 13:1-7).
- 2) Obey the law of love (Rom 13:8-10).
- 3) Put on Christ (Rom 13:11-14).

Read

Read **Romans 13:1-14** aloud in your group.

II. Questions for Discussion

A. WHAT?

1) Who or what should Christians submit to, according to verses 1-2?

Paul calls Christians to submit to governing authorities. For Christians in America, that means submission to local, state, and federal authorities.

2) What does Paul call the governing authorities in verse 4? What is God's purpose for earthly governments?

He says that a ruler is "God's servant for your good." God's purposes for earthly governments are to serve God and serve people—they are for our good.

3) What instructions does Paul give in verses 8-10? Where do these come from?

Paul directly quotes from the Ten Commandments here (specifically, commandments 6, 7, 8, and 10) and reaffirms that they apply to the Christian's life. Above all, the entire law—including prohibitions against adultery, murder, stealing, coveting—can all be summed up in one sentence: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt 22:39; Mk 12:31).

4) What does Paul tell Christians to "put on" in verses 12-14?

Paul instructs Christians to "put on the armor of light" and to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ."

B. SO WHAT?

1) Why does Paul say that Christians should submit to earthly governments? If God is in control of governments, why are so many leaders so terrible? Given how messy politics is, how do we know Paul isn't just being overly idealistic?

First of all, Paul says that earthly government has been "instituted by God" (v. 1). Though we often have trouble understanding why certain leaders are in place, God has "appointed" those authorities for a purpose (v. 2). Even with bad governments and evil leaders, God's hand is at work (see Dan 4:17 and Rom 9:17) to bring about His good purposes. To think about it from another angle, just because sinful humans corrupt and misuse governmental authority, that does not make the institution of human government bad; in fact, Paul is telling us the exact opposite. God created human government for our good, and according to Paul, Christians should submit to earthly authorities because that is part of submitting to God's will. If you do what is right, Paul reasons in [verse 3](#), you have no reason to fear the government. Moreover, [verse 7](#) is a direct reference to a specific teaching of Jesus from Matthew 22: "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" (Mt 22:15-22). In other words, paying taxes to the government is the right thing to do. Just as Jesus was willing to submit to Roman authorities and pay taxes, Paul tells us that we, too, are called to submit to the earthly authorities over us.

In our politically charged climate, Paul's teaching here can sound like wishful thinking. However, throughout history, evil dictators have been in charge of nations and empires, and horrible atrocities have been committed by government. When we begin to think that governmental leaders today don't often look like "God's servants for your good" (v. 4), we should be grateful for the religious freedoms we enjoy today. After all, Paul wrote in the context of a pagan Roman empire that regularly oppressed and killed Christians. Paul himself was arrested at least twice by the Romans! So when Paul writes that Christians should submit, he has the worst kinds of governments in mind, not

ones that are easy to submit to! Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Paul knew *exactly* how much he was challenging the Roman Christians, and his words remain a challenge for us today.

2) What do verses 1-7 tell us about God's designs for government? When might it be appropriate for Christians not to submit to authorities?

God designed governments to be submissive to Him and for our good (v. 4). Governments are supposed to be the keepers of justice, protecting those who do good and punishing those who do evil (i.e., "bearing the sword," v. 4). At the same time, we must be careful to discern what Paul does and does not say. First, he doesn't give explicit directions for *how* to submit to government authorities at all times, nor does he say what to do when the government acts in unjust or immoral ways. He doesn't tell us that democracy is the best form of government or how to behave in the midst of political upheaval. While he does call Christians to submit, he isn't demanding blind, unwavering loyalty to the state, either. As mentioned above, God's design for governments was to serve both God and people; just as a government should support those who do what is good (v. 3), by extension, they should never require doing what is wrong (see Keller, *Romans 8-16 For You*, 133). Another commentator summarizes that "a Christian must disobey his government when it asks him to 1) violate a commandment of God, 2) commit an immoral or unethical act, or 3) go against Christian conscience (a conscience that is informed by Scripture and is in submission to the Spirit of God)" (Hughes, *Romans*, 179). With this in mind, Paul still told Christians in Rome to submit to an oppressive regime. Just because we don't like our authorities or because they ask us to do something we don't want to do, those alone are not grounds for us to disobey.

3) How are verses 8-10 connected to verses 1-7 (in which Paul talks about submitting to the state)? Why does Paul quote from the Ten Commandments in verse 9?

On the surface, this may seem like an abrupt jump from a conversation about the government to talking about neighborly love. But the language of "owing" in both verse 7 and verse 8 indicates that Paul wants to connect these two ideas. Just as our faith influences how we submit to governmental authorities, following Jesus changes how we interact with the world around us (see also Rom 12:9-21). The only debt we ought to owe one another is the debt of love, because love is what God's law has always required. In one sense, this is a debt that we should always "pay" one another, but it is also a debt we can never pay in full—we can never love one another too much! In citing some of the Ten Commandments, Paul is highlighting examples of what it looks like to fulfill the law of loving one's neighbor. Loving your neighbor as yourself is not an abstract idea, but a concrete practice.

4) What justification does Paul give in verse 11 for loving one another? How does that affect how Christians go about life?

In verse 11, Paul zooms out even more and reminds Christians to keep things in perspective. He's saying, "*Hey, remember who you really belong to. Remember the big picture. Go and love your neighbor before it's too late!*" When Paul says that the "hour has come," he means that we are in what the Bible calls the "last days" (Acts 2:17; 2 Tim 3:1; Heb 1:2). This doesn't mean that Paul was predicting Jesus would come immediately, but it meant that Jesus could come at any moment. As Christians, we must live as though Jesus might come back at any second! Paul calls for a sense of urgency in how we love and treat one another.

5) What does it mean to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 14)?

Paul encourages Christians to put on Christ each day just as they put on on clothes each morning. Just as we don't go anywhere without our clothes, we don't go anywhere without Christ. He can't just be one sectioned-off part of our lives, but He should influence each and every thing we do. We should make Him such a part of your everyday lives that it would be strange not to call upon Him in everything we do. But unlike our clothes, putting on Christ isn't

merely an external exercise. It changes the posture of our hearts and allows Jesus to work through us as we strive to love those around us and even submit to our authorities. 1 John 4:19 says, "We love because He first loved us," and this is a fundamental truth for the Christian life. Without Christ in us, we're unable to love those around us. Ultimately, the way we treat others is based on His love for us—not on our own efforts to simply be more loving. To put on Christ is to let Christ transform us each day from the inside out.

What are you wearing?

The clothes we wear often say a lot about who we are and what we do. For example, if you dress up in your nicest clothes, what might you be doing? How would what you wear affect your behavior? On the other hand, if you put on a jersey—maybe a baseball or soccer uniform—what are you getting ready to do? What do your clothes say about you then? What would happen if you wore your soccer uniform to prom—or your prom clothes to the soccer game?

According to Paul, the Christian life involves putting on Christ anew each morning. Doing so reminds us to whom we belong and for what purposes we were created.

When Paul tells us to put on the Lord Jesus Christ, what does that say about who we are? What does it say about what we do?

C. NOW WHAT?

1) Which authority in your life is hardest for you to submit to? Why? What might submission look like in middle school or high school?

NOTE: For some students, the question of governmental authorities has likely not crossed their minds. For these students, it may be more helpful to talk about parents, teachers, coaches, etc. For students who are old enough to drive, however, this is likely more applicable.

2) When might it be wisest not to submit to an authority? How might you discern whether submission is warranted or not?

3) What would it look like to live with the heavenly urgency Paul describes in verse 11? How might that affect your friendships?

4) What is one concrete way that you can put on Christ today?

Answers may vary, but in the context of verses 12-14, Paul contrasts which "clothes" (or "armor") Christians should put on and what they should not. In one sense, he's saying "put on your battle armor," for the Christian life is a war (see Eph 6:10-18), and at the same time, abstain from sexual immorality, arguing, and jealousy. We are either putting on the clothes of the flesh or the clothes of Christ. To clothe ourselves with Christ, we must spend time with Him in His Word and in prayer so that we know what He looks like: love, compassion, tenderness, humility, and so on. But even more than putting on Christlike behavior, putting on Christ Himself is putting on protective armor (see also 1 Jn 5:18). We do this by praying that He will protect us from the sin within and that He will guard us from the sin around us.

Main takeaway

Just as Christians are to submit themselves to God, so, too, are we called to submit ourselves to the earthly authorities God places over us. We are called to love the people around us, but this isn't all on our shoulders alone; instead, we are invited to clothe ourselves with Christ so that His love, humility, and righteousness overflow from us to our neighbors.

III. Closing

REMEMBERING THE GOOD NEWS

Jesus doesn't just tell us to "be better" and leave us on our own. When we find imperatives for how to live the Christian life in Scripture, they are always rooted in what Christ has already done for us (our justification), and what He is still doing in us (our sanctification). God doesn't hang us out to dry; instead, He invites us to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" and clothe ourselves with His power and His righteousness (v. 14). Moreover, when He calls us to submit to earthly authorities, we are reminded that Jesus Himself did this, even though it cost Him everything. In other words, Jesus "walked the walk" when it came to obeying earthly leaders!

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Father God, we thank You that You have put authorities in our lives, and we pray that You would bless those leaders—even the ones we struggle to agree with. Lord, we pray that You would grant us humble hearts and help us to keep a proper perspective—that we are ultimately citizens of heaven, and yet we are called to love the people in our lives each day. May we put on Christ and be marked by His love. In Jesus' name, amen.

Supporting Resources

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1) To which authority figures in your life do you struggle to submit? Why is this a challenge for you? Spend some time in prayer asking God for wisdom, humility, and a loving heart.
- 2) Who is someone you love really well? Who is someone you want to love better? How does this passage give you a sense of urgency in these relationships?
- 3) Can you think of someone who regularly "puts on" Christ? Why do you think that? What would that look like in your life?

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- 1) Parents, think of a time when you struggled to submit to an authority. Why was this such a struggle for you?
- 2) How do you handle disagreements in your family? How does this passage speak to the responsibilities of both parents (in authority) and kids (in obedience)? Spend some time being honest with each other!
- 3) How would putting on Christ change the way you interact as a family? What are positive changes that might bring about?

ROMANS 14:1-23

Unity Amid Diversity

Memory Verse

"Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God."

—Romans 14:10

Real-life Problems

Judging others—If we're honest with ourselves, most of us will admit that we are *really* good at judging other people. Especially when people disagree with us, our first instinct is usually to judge and feel superior, even if they are a brother or sister in Christ. In fact, we're so good at judging others that we constantly judge people we don't even know, often without realizing it!

The Good News

Though unity and diversity may seem like polar opposites, God intentionally chooses people from different backgrounds and calls them His own. In Christ, we have a unity that triumphs over any disagreements that we might have between us because God has already chosen and accepted and called us to Himself. Our identity lies in Him, not what we think about minor issues.

I. Introduction

OPENING QUESTIONS

Idea #1: Have you ever gotten into an argument with your friends? What did you disagree about? How was it resolved?

Idea #2: What is one thing you and your friends love to do together? Why do you enjoy it so much?

Idea #3: Have you ever been left out of something by your friends? How did that make you feel?

PRAY

Open your time together in prayer.

REHEARSING THE GOSPEL

What does gospel mean?

Good news

What's the good news?

Jesus died for my sins

Why did He die for your sins?

So that I can have abundant life in relationship with Him now and forever

What is grace?

God's love for undeserving sinners

REVIEW

1) Who wrote the book of Romans?

The apostle Paul wrote the book of Romans sometime around AD 57.

2) Who was the original audience of this book?

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3) Why was the book of Romans written?

Paul wrote to introduce himself to the church before visiting, to clarify any theological disputes between Jews and Gentiles, and to remind them of the gospel of God.

What's going on?

REMIND

In Romans 13, Paul continues to describe the Christian life and what it looks like to love your neighbor. Part of that involves submitting to the government, and part of that involves loving the people we interact with on a daily basis. In Romans 14, Paul transitions to address an issue in the church: While they did not disagree over matters of salvation, some Roman Christians thought that eating meat was a sin (v. 2), while others understood that what they ate didn't matter (v. 3). What's more, there were disputes about the Sabbath day (v. 5). All in all, diverse opinions over small issues threatened the church in Rome.

TODAY WE'LL LEARN

- 1) Don't let small issues tear the church apart (Rom 14:1-6).
- 2) Ultimately, Christians belong to Christ (Rom 14:7-12).
- 3) Do not judge or tempt one another (Rom 14:13-23).

Read

Read **Romans 14:1-23** aloud in your group.

II. Questions for Discussion

A. WHAT?

1) What causes disagreements in the church in verses 1-4? What other issue divides the church (vv. 5-6)?

First, there is a disagreement over food laws. Some Christians believed they could eat any food (because they didn't have to obey the Jewish food laws anymore), and this caused them to "despise" the Christians who would only eat vegetables (because they didn't want to risk eating meat that violated the Jewish food laws). Secondly, there was some disagreement about which days should be observed as holy. This most likely referred to the Sabbath day, but also could have included other Jewish holy days and feasts. Once again, a dispute about something small—whether food or when to worship—was causing a major rift within the congregation.

2) According to verses 7-8, where does a Christian's identity rest? How does Paul warn Christians in verses 10-12?

Christians do not live for (or "to") themselves, but we first and foremost live for Christ. *We belong to Him* (v. 8), and ultimately, we are accountable to Him (vv. 10-12). Paul reminds us that we are not God (to ourselves or to others), and thank goodness for that! When we stand before the judge, we know that His judgment is impartial and perfect, unlike our sinful and self-righteous judgments we cast each day, for which we will have to give an account.

3) What does Paul condemn in verse 13?

Paul explicitly tells Christians not to judge one another, but he also tells them not to "put a stumbling block" down that might make other believers fall into sin.

4) What identifies the kingdom of God (v. 17)?

Rather than minor rules about eating or drinking, the kingdom of God is about righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Paul is calling Christians to keep the main thing the main thing!

5) How does Paul define sin in verse 23?

The NIV translation says it simply when it reads, "everything that does not come from faith is sin." When we do something that goes against our conscience, we are likely living in sin.

B. SO WHAT?

1) How would you summarize the divisions in the church over food and the Sabbath? What are the two camps, and what advice does Paul have for the strong? For the weak?

Paul describes a group of "strong" Christians who understand that because of Jesus' work on the cross, no foods are unclean anymore. On the other hand, there is a group of "weak" Christians who don't eat meat because they are afraid of violating Old Testament food laws. Both groups understand salvation by grace, but the "weaker" Christians don't fully trust that they are free from the Mosaic law. They want to obey God properly, but they take a misguided approach. Though he calls everyone away from judging one another (v. 13), he specifically calls the strong not to "despise" the weak or cause them to stumble by forcing them to act against their consciences (vv. 2,14). To the weak, he specifically says not to judge the strong.

2) How does Paul put things in perspective in verses 7-12? How does this affect our tendency to judge one another?

Paul steps back and reminds Christians to whom we belong (Christ) and where we are headed (heaven). Though we have been justified by Christ's sacrifice on the cross for our sins, we will still stand before God and give account for the things we have done, said, and thought. (Notice that we give account for ourselves, not others!) More than anything, Paul is calling Christians to remember that we are not God, and therefore we have no right to judge others. By extension, he's implicitly saying that if these brothers and sisters you disagree with have already received a sentence of "no condemnation" (Rom 5:1) from God, then what right do we have to judge them? Twice in verse 10, Paul uses the word "brother" to remind us that these people we disagree with over the minutiae are the same people we will spend eternity with.

Mean Girls

The movie *Mean Girls* (rated PG-13) is a wild ride through the halls of high school. Above all the different cliques, friend groups, and social hierarchies, one group of girls reigns supreme: the Plastics, an exclusive group reserved for the coolest girls on campus. Almost immediately, the new girl in town (Cady, played by Lindsay Lohan) finds herself thrust into the confusing web of high school social politics, and she quickly realizes that she's caught between old and new friendships.

In one scene early in the movie (link below), Cady is being educated on the "rules" of being a Plastic. Throughout the scene, she's not only told what she can and can't say, do, and wear, but she also begins to see just how shallow and judgmental the Plastics are toward the rest of the school. It is a cringe-worthy, comical, and frighteningly relatable scene.

While judging others is not always this overt, in our hearts we sometimes act like we're members of the Plastics. We criticize, judge, and shame those around us for all kinds of reasons, but like the Plastics, we're blind to our own faults.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hEWsqLKIEr4>

3) What does Paul mean in verse 14? What does this tell us about navigating tricky issues?

At first glance, v. 14 is a bit of a brain-twister. On the topic of food laws and feast days, Paul essentially says that they are issues of conscience. Though Paul agrees with the "strong" that there are no more unclean foods, he urges the strong not to make the "weak" sin by making them eat something they think is unclean. On the other hand, he's calling the "weak" not to judge the "strong" for their position, either. In other words, he's calling both sides to accept each other despite their disagreements, to find unity in the midst of diversity. If you (like Paul) are convinced that there are no unclean foods, then you do not sin to eat something "unclean." If, however, you believe that some foods are unclean, and you eat them, then you are acting sinfully. He reinforces this in verse 23: "Whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin." On issues of conscience, there may be a "right" and a "wrong" answer, but what matters more is acting out of faith.

4) How does Paul call the Christian to love his or her brothers and sisters in the midst of disagreements? Where do Christians find unity despite our disagreements?

Paul calls stronger brothers not to show disdain toward their weaker brothers, or to force them to live against their conscience (and thereby cause them to sin). Likewise, no one should judge their brother over minor disagreements. Like God's kingdom (v. 17), Paul wants us to keep the main thing the main thing, rather than tear ourselves apart over minor things. Christians find unity not just in the idea that we all believe (some) similar things about God, but that God has chosen us. He has called a diverse people to Himself and has called us all His children.

Disunity in the church is nothing new, but it is one of the final things Jesus prayed about (John 17), and we are reminded that our identity lies first and foremost in Christ and His love for us, not in the minor things we believe.

C. NOW WHAT?

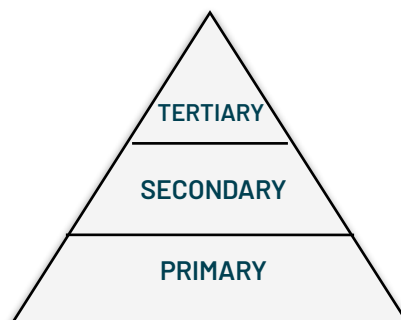
1) Are you more likely to start a disagreement with someone, or are you more likely to avoid conflict at all costs? How can both of these be strengths and weaknesses?

2) What are some minor things today that Christians disagree about? How have you seen these play out in your church or family?

There are plenty of options to choose from, but students may need some help to get the ball rolling. Throughout the history of the church, some of the most common areas of minor, conscience-level disagreements are: music, clothing, alcohol, and even dancing! Today, some common issues include the TV shows we watch, Bible translations we use, social media use, political affiliations, and (as a result of Covid-19) wearing masks. For some people, there is nothing controversial about these at all, but for others, they can feel like a *major* issue.

3) When do you think an issue moves from a minor issue of conscience (like food or holy days) and become something worth fighting over? What are some things Christians shouldn't compromise about?

The church in Rome was *not* fighting over issues of salvation (unlike the churches in Galatia). They knew they were saved by grace through faith, but they were confused about how to live the Christian life as a result of their justification. Like the church in Rome, how do we know what is worth fighting over and what isn't? In the triangle image below, we see three sections that can help us visualize what level of importance something might be. The Primary section is the biggest section in the triangle, and it's also the foundation of the entire triangle. In this section we find the most fundamental and important truths in Christian doctrine: The Trinity, the gospel, the authority of the Bible, and things of that nature. (NOTE: this section is the biggest because the issues are the most important, but there are actually very few things that fall into this category.) The line between secondary and tertiary issues is a little blurry, but these are issues of progressively less importance to our salvation. Issues of secondary importance might be the form of baptism or women's ordination, while issues of tertiary importance might be proper clothing to wear or what is acceptable to watch on TV. There are *far* more issues of tertiary importance than there are of primary importance, but this part of the triangle is smallest because it is the least significant. When we compromise on issues of primary importance, we lose the heart of the gospel message, and that must not happen. Disagreeing about secondary issues, however, can lead to compromise or peaceful disagreement. When it comes to tertiary issues, disagreements are expected, but there is ultimately little at stake. To make a long story short, keep the main thing the main thing!



4) When you disagree with someone, how does Paul offer you both a challenge and a hope in this passage?

Main takeaway

Put most simply, Paul wants Christians to keep their eyes on the prize. Rather than judging and quarreling over minor disagreements, Christians ought to remember that their shared identity lies in Christ. While there are things worth fighting over, there are also plenty of disagreements that are not worth tearing down a church!

III. Closing

REMEMBERING THE GOOD NEWS

Though unity and diversity may seem like polar opposites, God intentionally chooses people from different backgrounds and calls them His own. In Christ, we have a unity that triumphs over any disagreements that we might have between us because God has already chosen and accepted and called us to Himself. Our identity lies in Him, not in what we think about minor issues.

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Father God, we pray that You would show us the ways in which we are too quick to judge one another. Help us to have humble hearts that lead with grace rather than superiority, and help us to remember that our identity lies first and foremost in You. Help us keep the main thing the main thing. In the name of Jesus we pray, amen.

Supporting Resources

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1) Do you struggle with judging others? What are some things you are quick to judge people over? Whom do you find yourself judging the most?
- 2) How do you know whether something is an issue of primary importance or something that is not really worth fighting over? Can you think of an example where this has come up in your life?
- 3) Have you ever been in a situation in which you were asked to do something you *knew* was wrong? How did you respond? What does Paul have to say about going against your conscience in this passage?

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- 1) As a family, are you quick to judge one another? Do the kids feel judged by you, and vice versa? What are ways you can have a grace-filled household?
- 2) Parents, peel back the curtain a little: What is something you and your husband/wife disagree about that you have had to work through? How did you navigate that conflict?
- 3) What are issues you see dividing Christians today? Do you think these are issues worth splitting over, or things of minor importance?

ROMANS 15:1-33

The Micro and Macro Missions of the Church

Memory Verse

"We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.

—Romans 15:1-2

Real-life Problems

Self-centeredness—No matter who we are, we're all really good at being selfish. No one had to teach us how to cry or to want what we didn't have or to get angry when things didn't go our way, but because of the sin we are born into, we're always focused on our self-interest. This affects our entire life, but it especially impacts how we treat others, whether they are inside or outside the church.

The Good News

Though we are selfish creatures, we were created by a perfectly selfless God. Throughout our passage for this lesson, Paul points to Christ's selflessness—to the way He humbled Himself and suffered in *our* best interest, not His. Jesus bore the curse we deserved so that He could save and sanctify selfish sinners.

I. Introduction

OPENING QUESTIONS

Idea #1: Have you ever heard the phrase, "You gotta look out for No. 1"? What do you think this means?

Idea #2: Have you ever served someone who wasn't a member of your family? What did that look like?

Idea #3: Have you ever relied on someone else to serve you something? What did that experience feel like?

PRAY

Open your time together in prayer.

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Paul wrote to the churches in Rome, which consisted of both Jewish and Gentile Christians.

3) Why was the book of Romans written?

Paul wrote to introduce himself to the church before visiting, to clarify any theological disputes between Jews and Gentiles, and to remind them of the gospel of God.

What's going on?

REMIND

In Romans 14, Paul explores specific issues that were dividing the church in Rome. Rather than letting minor squabbles over food and festivals wreak havoc in the church, Paul calls Christians to unity—not judgment. Today, he continues the theme of "strong" and "weak" but calls all Christians to selflessness both inside and outside the church.

TODAY WE'LL LEARN

- 1) Live for one another as Christ lived for you (Rom 15:1-13).
- 2) Live for one another as Paul lived for the Gentiles (Rom 15:14-21).
- 3) Live for one another to the ends of the earth (Rom 15:22-33).

Read

Read **Romans 15:1-33** aloud in your group.

II. Questions for Discussion

A. WHAT?

1) What is the obligation for the "strong" in verse 1? What is everyone called to in verse 2?

Paul says that the "strong" in their faith must bear with the "failings" of the weak. In the Greek, "failings" is literally "weaknesses," so Paul urges Christians to be patient with one another and support those whose faith is weaker. In verse 2, Paul calls *everyone* to please their neighbor, essentially echoing Jesus' call to love your neighbor as yourself. In this context, the definition of "neighbor" is broader than just brothers and sisters in Christ, as it encompasses all people.

2) What do we learn about God in verses 3-9? How is Jesus described?

In these verses, we see implicit and explicit statements about God. He is the "God of endurance and encouragement" (v. 5) who is worthy of our praise (v. 6). Speaking about Christ specifically, we see that Jesus was selfless and that He suffered on our behalf (v. 3). He welcomed us (v. 7), and though He was in heaven with the Father, He became a servant so that He could save both Jews and Gentiles (vv. 8-9).

Carrying Your Rival

In the 2016 ACC Women's Cross Country Championship race, a runner named Madeline Adams fell down right before crossing the finish line. Her legs had given out, and she couldn't finish the race. Amazingly, when a rival runner from a different school saw Adams fall, rather than finishing the race and securing a better finish, she stopped and tried to help carry Adams across. As she struggled to pick up Adams, a second runner, also from another team, came on the other side and the two carried her the final 50 yards across the finish line.

In the heat of competition, Evie Tate (Clemson) and Rachel Pease (Louisville) were going to finish the championship race and potentially record a good time for their team. However, when they saw a girl who couldn't finish on her own—even though she went to another school—they stopped to literally carry her across the finish line. Though "bearing with the weaknesses" of the weak may not always look this dramatic, Tate and Pease demonstrated what it looks like to live to please your neighbor and live for her good. Rather than running right by and doing better themselves, they stopped, sacrificed their own score, and carried her to the end.

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PjBS2AjM7o>

3) According to verses 14-16, why did Paul write to the Romans?

Though Paul had never met the Christians in Rome, he wrote "boldly" to them to encourage them in their faith (v. 14; also, Rom 16), remind them of theological truths (v. 15; also, Rom 1-11), and help them understand how to live as Christians (Rom 12-15).

4) To which people does Paul want to preach the gospel (vv. 19-21)?

Paul wants to preach the gospel to people who have never heard the good news before. As an apostle called to minister to the Gentiles, his ambition is to preach Christ where no one else has gone.

5) Where does Paul hope to go next (vv. 23-28)?

Long term, Paul wants to take the gospel to Spain, which in many ways was the edge of the known world. In the short term, Paul was going first to Jerusalem (bringing financial aid), and then he hoped to travel to Rome on his way to Spain.

B. SO WHAT?**1) How would you summarize Paul's instruction in verses 1-2? What justifications does he give for this command (vv. 3-9)?**

Most simply, Paul tells Christians to live selflessly. Living to "please" others doesn't mean people-pleasing in the negative sense, but to live for other people rather than yourself. As Paul says in Philippians 2:3-4, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others." While the call to selflessness is a good ethical command, Paul takes things one step farther and addresses the Christian motivation for this kind of living. First, verses 3-4 essentially tell us that the Son of God became human so *that* He could do the single most selfless thing possible: die for the sins of His rebellious people. In other words, Paul is saying, "live for other people, bear with one another, and build each other up, all because we share a Savior who already did all that and more for you." Second, in verse 6, Paul looks ahead to God's endgame for believers: unified, glorious worship of the Father. We are called away from selfish living because God's purpose is for us to share eternity with Him and other believers in perfect, sinless harmony. That is where we are headed one day, but God wants us to begin to experience that on earth. Third, we are reminded once again of Jesus' example. Just as Jesus welcomed you—not because you were lovely or worthy or fun to hang out with—you should in turn welcome others (v. 7). Finally, in verses 8-9, Paul points to Jesus' selfless suffering for Jews and Gentiles alike. If Jesus came not to be served but to serve (Mt 20:28), who are we to think we are better than Jesus?

2) What does verse 4 tell us about Scripture? Why do you think Paul quotes so much Scripture in verses 9-12?

After quoting from Psalm 69:9 in verse 3, Paul goes on a brief tangent in verse 4 as if he were reminded of something he had meant to say earlier. Referring back to the Old Testament ("what was written in former days"), Paul assures us that it was written for an everlasting purpose: for our instruction, encouragement, endurance, and hope. At the same time, Paul is also illuminating the point that *all* of Scripture is pointing to Jesus. In verses 9-12, Paul quotes from Deuteronomy, Psalms, and Isaiah as a comprehensive assurance that the Law, the poetry, and the prophets—the entire Old Testament—still apply for Christians today, and they are all about Jesus.

3) Read verse 13 together. What kind of people does God want His church to be? How does He empower us toward this unity? What purpose does God have for Christian harmony (vv. 5-6, 13)?

God is the God of hope, and He wants His people to be *abundantly* hopeful people. In the original Greek, the two uses of "you" in verse 13 are both plural: "May the God of hope fill *you all*...by the power of the Holy Spirit *you all* may abound in hope." By the power of the Holy Spirit, God wants to bestow joy and peace and faith not only to individuals but also to all of His people collectively. He wants to fill people to the point that they literally overflow with hope.

4) How are Paul's life and ministry an example of Christian selflessness? What is his main purpose in his ministry?

Oftentimes in his letters, Paul (perhaps surprisingly) instructs Christians to imitate him as he imitates Christ (1 Cor 4:6, 11:1; 1 Thess 1:6). He's not being self-centered when he says this, for his focus is on "what *Christ* has accomplished through me" as Paul takes the gospel to the Gentiles (v.18). Paul was well-educated, respected, and even a Roman citizen (which was rare for a Jewish person), and yet he gave up all of his status and worldly successes to be a minister of Christ Jesus and to do the priestly service of preaching the gospel. He was beaten, arrested, and mocked countless times before ultimately being executed, but for Paul, nothing mattered more than helping bring the Gentiles to faith. Paul didn't just want to preach the gospel, but he also wanted to preach it where no one had ever preached it before. He wanted to be on the front lines of mission work, doing the hardest labor for people who had never heard the good news before.

5) What do verses 23-28 tell us about Christian missions?

Paul lays out a lot of his philosophy regarding missions here in Romans 15, and while we should (like Paul) seek for all people to hear about and know Christ, that doesn't necessarily have to be the driving ambition for all missions. In fact, verses 23-28 give us a better glimpse into Paul's missiology. First, he was focused on cities; Jerusalem, Rome, Corinth, and the others were all major cities. Paul wanted to plant churches in city centers and let those churches serve as the launchpads for others to reach more rural areas. Again, not everyone shares this same calling, but this was generally how Paul operated. Second, while we know that Paul's primary concern was to proclaim the name of Jesus to the Gentiles, he was also concerned with the physical needs of people, as evidenced by the financial contributions in verses 25-26. Perhaps the greatest missionary and church planter of all time paused his missionary work for the sake of providing for the poor. In fact, helping the poor isn't just something that is kind to do, but something that Christians "owe" to one another (v. 27). Even if we never meet people halfway across the globe (or even just across town), Christians ought to care for the spiritual and material well-being of others just as we will share in their spiritual and material blessings (v. 27).

C. NOW WHAT?**1) What are some practical ways that you can live selflessly as a student, teammate, and son/daughter? What challenges do you face that make this difficult?****2) In this chapter, Paul points to both Jesus and himself as examples of living selflessly for others. Who is someone you've seen exemplify this same selflessness? How so?****3) In his book *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness*, Tim Keller says that "the essence of gospel-humility is not thinking more of myself or thinking less of myself, it is thinking of myself less." Are you prone to thinking too much or too little of yourself, and how does that affect how you treat others? How does this help you understand Paul's call to selfless living?****4) Have you ever done missional work locally or abroad? What was that experience like? What have you learned from Paul about sharing the gospel with others?**

Main takeaway

The Christian life is not just about you and Jesus, for the Christian life demands that we be outward-facing and selfless, just as Christ was for us. We are called to demonstrate selflessness, love, and harmony among believers, the people we interact with daily. Regarding the people we don't know, we are called to help share the gospel and care for their needs.

III. Closing

REMEMBERING THE GOOD NEWS

Though we are selfish creatures, we were created by a perfectly selfless God. Throughout our passage, Paul points to Christ's selflessness as He humbled Himself and suffered in *our* best interest, not His. Jesus bore the curse we deserved so that He could save and sanctify selfish sinners.

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Father God, we confess to You today that we go about our daily lives looking for our self-interest over the needs of others. Forgive us of our selfishness, Father, and by the power of Your Spirit, help us to live selfless, outward-facing lives to the people close to us, and toward people we've never met before. In the name of Jesus we pray, amen.

Supporting Resources

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1) What is one way that you find yourself being selfish toward others? What might selflessness look like in this area?
- 2) Take a minute to read Isaiah 53. How does this help put Jesus' suffering and servitude in context? How does that affect your ability to serve other people?
- 3) When is the last time you truly served someone at your own expense? What was that like? In what ways can you serve other people in the midst of your busy schedule?

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- 1) What is one way you are selfish toward the other members of your family? Spend some time sharing and repenting with one another. What can you do differently?
- 2) As a family, what is something you can do to serve other people? Talk about how you allocate your money, time, and other resources. What causes or people would you like to serve?
- 3) God's purpose for His people is to "with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 6). What has God done in your life that makes you want to give Him glory?

ROMANS 16:1-27

The Final Word

Memory Verse

"Greet one another with a holy kiss.
All the churches of Christ greet
you."

—Romans 16:16

Real-life Problems

Lack of encouragement—Whether because of divisions or forgetfulness, one thing many Christians are bad at is sharing words of encouragement. It's easy to go about our daily lives and never take a minute to step back and encourage our brothers and sisters in Christ. We're far more likely to criticize or judge someone rather than building them up with a kind word.

The Good News

In our passage from Romans, Paul exemplifies what it looks like to pause and build one another up with encouragement. In fact, this is a major theme throughout Romans. God wants us to know theological truths (such as our justification by His grace) so that we can live with the confidence and hope that spills over into every aspect of our lives.

I. Introduction

OPENING QUESTIONS

Idea #1: Have you ever been caught in the middle of a (physical or verbal) fight before? How did the situation resolve itself?

Idea #2: When is the last time you wrote someone a thank-you note? What was it for? What was that experience like?

Idea #3: If you had to describe your best friend in one sentence, what would you say?

PRAY

Open your time together in prayer.

REHEARSING THE GOSPEL

What does gospel mean?

Good news

What's the good news?

Jesus died for my sins

Why did He die for your sins?

So that I can have abundant life in relationship with Him now and forever

What is grace?

God's love for undeserving sinners

REVIEW

1) Who wrote the book of Romans?

The apostle Paul wrote the book of Romans sometime around AD 57.

2) Who was the original audience of this book?

Paul wrote to the churches in Rome, which consisted of both Jewish and Gentile Christians.

3) Why was the book of Romans written?

Paul wrote to introduce himself to the church before visiting, to clarify any theological disputes between Jews and Gentiles, and to remind them of the gospel of God.

What's going on?

REMIND

After 15 chapters of theological truths (Rom 1-11) and instructions for Christian living (Rom 12-15), Paul turns in this final chapter to greet the saints in Rome and offer some closing words of wisdom. His concern toward the end of the letter has been for Christian unity and selflessness, and this thread continues in Romans 16, both implicitly (as he celebrates and commends several brothers and sisters by name) and explicitly (as he exhorts them to beware of divisive people).

TODAY WE'LL LEARN

- 1) Paul's final greetings to the church in Rome (Rom 16:1-16).
- 2) Paul's final instruction to the church in Rome (Rom 16:17-24).
- 3) Paul's final praise to the Lord God Almighty (Rom 16:25-27).

Read

Read **Romans 16:1-27** aloud in your group.

II. Questions for Discussion

A. WHAT?

1) What does Paul tell us about Phoebe in verses 1-2?

We learn that Phoebe is a "servant of the church at Cenchreae," which is right outside of Corinth. As a "patron of many," including Paul, she was likely a wealthy woman who supported churches and missionaries like Paul. Both in the local church and across the Mediterranean world, she had been a faithful servant and was respected in churches across Greece.

2) Paul greets twenty-six people in verses 3-16. What are some of the details you notice about them?

Though not exhaustive, Paul lists a diverse group of people in the Roman church! Just as Phoebe was a prominent woman in the church, Paul specifically lists nine more women who faithfully serve the church in Rome. Second, we see some of the ethnic diversity as there are both Jews (vv. 3,7,11) and Gentiles in the congregation (probably everyone else). Third, there is significant economic and social diversity within the church. Commentator John Stott notes that several of the names listed were common names for slaves, while others on the list likely enjoyed significant social status. Aristobolus (v. 10), for example, was likely the grandson of King Herod the Great and a friend of Emperor Claudius! Similarly, Narcissus (v. 11) was also a friend and advisor of Claudius (Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 401-2). All in all, though not a comprehensive list of the entire church, this gives us a small glimpse into the diversity of the congregation. As an interesting aside, many scholars believe that the "Rufus" mentioned in verse 13 is the same Rufus mentioned in Mark 15:21. Why is this so significant? In his crucifixion account, Mark tells us that a man named Simon of Cyrene, "the father of Alexander and Rufus," was forced to carry the cross for Jesus. Twenty or 30 years later, Mark wrote his Gospel account to the church in Rome, where Rufus was now living. We don't know what happened to Simon of Cyrene, but it seems likely that Rufus either witnessed the crucifixion himself and was converted, or his father was so moved by the story that he and his sons came to faith. Either way, this same Rufus was an important figure in the Roman church (see Hughes, *Romans*)!

3) What is Paul's final warning to Roman Christians in verse 17? How does he hope they will act (v. 19)?

Here, Paul specifically warns about the people who cause divisions and stir up trouble with false teachings. Paul's hope for the church is not a complete withdrawal from the culture, but for wisdom and discernment: "to be wise as to what is good, and innocent as to what is evil" (v.19).

4) How does Paul close the letter (vv. 25-27)?

Paul finishes with a beautiful doxology to God. Thus far, he has spoken to Jewish and Gentile believers, but in his final words, he turns to give God praise.

B. SO WHAT?

1) What do we learn about the church in Rome from Paul's final greetings?

Perhaps more than anything, we see a picture of unity and diversity in the church. Though he had never been to Rome, this is the longest greeting in any of Paul's letters, and he takes special care to encourage and applaud the faith of many people he has never even met! In the Roman church, we see that women and men worked side-by-

side for the cause of the gospel. Likewise, some of the poorest and richest members of society also served and worshiped together. We also see that there were really several different "house churches" where small congregations (that were probably roughly the size of families) would meet together and worship.

2) Why does Paul offer such an extended greeting? What might be his goal at the end of the letter?

It's easy for us to skip over sections of Scripture like this, but if we slow down, we can find little nuggets about the relationships and intricacies of the early church. After calling them to pursue unity in the midst of their differences, Paul likely wanted to encourage several of the leaders all at once and remind them of the unity they already have because of the gospel. At the end of a long letter full of heavy-hitting doctrine and challenging imperatives, Paul wanted to step back and encourage the Roman Christians to keep fighting the good fight. Normally, we think of Paul as this great theologian and missionary who wrote a lot of the New Testament, but in this chapter, he shows a more personal, pastoral side of his ministry. He truly had a heart for God and for God's people.

3) How does Paul's warning in verses 17-19 echo concerns he has shared in past chapters? How can we identify divisive people? How does he offer encouragement and hope in verses 19-20?

Earlier, especially in Chapters 12-15, Paul urged unity despite their differences; now, he cautions the church to avoid the *people* who cause divisions and teach false doctrines. Specifically, Paul tells Christians to watch out for and withdraw from people who cause divisions and peddle doctrines contrary to the gospel they received. By extension, he warns that we can identify these people by whom they live for: self or Christ. No matter how gifted or smart someone may seem, if they preach a gospel contrary to what Paul has laid out in the letter, they should be avoided. At the same time, while he wants to warn against these divisive people, Paul also has good news: Good will triumph over evil. More specifically, Christ will trample over Satan, echoing the promise made to Adam and Eve after they sinned in the garden (Gen 3:15). Paul rejoices in the obedience of the Romans, as well as in Christ's victory over the forces of evil.

4) Why does Paul close the letter with a doxology in verses 25-27? What do these verses tell us about God?

Between verses 20 and 25, Paul almost takes a deep breath and gets his final formalities out of the way before launching into a beautiful declaration of praise. He can't help but sing God's praises. At the end of such a long letter, Paul wants to leave his audience encouraged and ready to praise God. Just as he began the letter speaking about God's power (Rom 1:16), Paul closes by speaking once more about how God is "able to" (literally "powerful to") strengthen and preserve His people. God isn't merely able to *save* us, but He also promises to *strengthen* or establish us in our everyday lives. The gospel that Paul proclaims is summed up by the phrase "the preaching of Jesus Christ." As he wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:3, "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures." This is the message that was foretold in the prophets (v. 26) and is now being made known to the world. This gospel message is able to save, and God alone, its author, is worthy of praise.

Spurgeon's Strength In Suffering

How does God strengthen and sustain you? Our first reaction might be to think of God answering prayers for help, health, wisdom, courage, and so on. But the great preacher Charles Spurgeon had a slightly different perspective. For most of his life, Spurgeon's physical and mental health were a trainwreck. Physically, he suffered from smallpox, gout, rheumatism, and kidney failure. Mentally, he battled with depression for most of his adult life after an accident led to seven deaths early in his preaching career. For many years, he was completely bedridden with unbearable physical pain.

Amazingly, however, Spurgeon saw these trials as a gift of grace and strength from God, not an opportunity to doubt. On his lifelong sicknesses, he wrote:

"I daresay the greatest earthly blessing that God can give to any of us is health, with the exception of sickness. If some men whom I know of could only be favored with a month of rheumatism, it would, by God's grace, mellow them marvelously."

Later, when speaking about suffering more broadly, he concluded:

"Glory be to God for the furnace, the hammer and the file. Heaven shall be all the fuller of bliss because we have been filled with anguish here below; and earth shall be better tilled because of our training in the school of adversity."

How is God strengthening you in surprising ways? How might He be using hardships to harden your faith and dependence upon Him?

C. NOW WHAT?

1) Have you ever been encouraged by a Christian brother or sister? What was it like to receive their affirmation? Have you ever been in a position to encourage someone else?

2) What does the diversity of the church in Rome tell you about God's designs for His church? Why might it be a blessing to have people from different social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds in one church? Have you seen this play out in your church?

3) Are you someone who is constantly picking fights and arguments? Do you know people who regularly cause divisions? What's it like to spend time with them? How does that threaten God's church?

4) What is one way you can encourage someone today? What is one way you can give God the glory He deserves today?

Main takeaway

Even in the midst of diversity, God has great plans for His unified church. In his closing words, Paul wants to simultaneously encourage the Roman Christians *and* move them into a spirit of praising God for who He is.

III. Closing

REMEMBERING THE GOOD NEWS

In our passage, Paul exemplifies what it looks like to pause and build one another up with encouragement. In fact, this is a major theme throughout Romans. God wants us to know theological truths (such as our justification by His grace) so that we can live with the confidence and hope that spills over into every aspect of our lives.

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Father God, we thank You for the people You have put in our lives who model faithfulness and service. We pray for unity in Your church, even in the midst of diversity. Finally God, we thank You that You alone are worthy of praise! You have saved us and You will strengthen and sustain us by Your Spirit as we seek to follow You. In the holy name of Jesus we pray, amen.

Supporting Resources

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1) Are you someone who often looks for ways to encourage others? How does Paul's example give you a blueprint for what that could look like? What is one way you can encourage someone today?
- 2) "Diversity" is a word that gets a lot of attention these days, but how was it a blessing for the Roman church? How was it a challenge? Have you seen that play out in your own experience today?
- 3) Who is someone who has played an important role in your faith journey? What would you say to them if you could encourage them? What is preventing you from telling them today?

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- 1) What are divisive issues that regularly pop up in your family? What are ways you can work to love and encourage one another?
- 2) What have you learned through your study of Romans? What has stuck out to you the most?
- 3) How does the doxology at the end affect your view of God? What is something you want to praise Him for today? Spend some time as a family giving glory to God!