

WHAT IS THE GOSPEL? ROM.1:1-17

Pax Romana #1

◆**Intro:** Do you know what a gospel is? If you've been hanging around a Christian church for any length of time you might know it as a specific type of literature that tells the story of Jesus' life (there are four in the New Testament). But the term didn't start with the Christians, though it is still around because of them. The greek word is evangelion, or good (ev), message (angelos). Good tidings. Good news. In the Roman world where the Emperor was often considered a god, announcements of such events as the birth of an heir to the Emperor, or his coming of age, or his ascension to the throne, were all referred to as "evangelia", or in our term "gospels". When an army triumphed, which the Roman army did quite frequently, a messenger (angelos) was dispatched to go back and declare the victory. His declaration was an evangelion, a good news story, or glorious headlines! When the angels appeared to the shepherds at Jesus birth, they spread "good tidings of great joy", remember? The term is evangelion, or gospel. So a gospel is an announcement of good news. Glorious Headlines! A special bulletin!

◆Today we're embarking on a study of the Book of Romans, considered by many down through the ages as the pristine example of the Christian Glorious Headlines, or Gospel. Luther wrote,

◆"This epistle is the chief book of the New Testament, the purest gospel. It deserves not only to be known word for

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word by every Christian, but to be the subject of his meditation day by day..."

◆ Luther's flash of understanding that sparked the Reformation across all of Europe in 1517 came while studying Romans. John Wesley, the pioneer of the Methodist Church and revival in England of the 1700s, was converted while reading Luther's preface to his commentary on, you guessed it, Romans. Far earlier, the prolific and highly influential theologian of the Fifth Century, St. Augustine was converted while reading in Romans. So you get the picture, I think. In his letter to the first century Christians in Rome, Paul has written an exquisite summary of all of the Christian faith. In fact, our catechism follows the three major divisions of Paul's letter to the Romans (sin/salvation/service). Getting pumped?

◆ [I might say here that to preach through this book is somewhat intimidating. One of our elders was excited at my announcement and declared that a previous pastor he knew had preached on Romans for two years straight! The question arose as to how long I'd be doing it. Talk about pressure! On top of that, I have on my shelf a series of six volumes on the Book of Roman that Dr. Martin Lloyd Jones of the Westminster Chapel in London preached from 1955 until his retirement in 1968. That's thirteen years in Romans! If I start now, I'll be 69 before we're done! Now, while I feel bad that it took Dr. Jones so long to figure out Romans..., I

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am quite sure I am not wise enough to plumb the depths of a single letter that long! Therefore, I plan for us to cover it in 14 weeks. So you may now breathe a sigh of relief.]

◆ In this opening text of the letter, Paul gives us what we may consider a summary of what he will talk about in the rest of his letter. And again, it is the gospel, or the “gospel of God” as he puts it (v1). Not a headline announcement from Caesar, but one from a real God. Not good news from Rome, but one to Rome, from Heaven. And I would like to suggest that our investigation of what God says through Paul in this letter will help each of us become people of deep peace. Peace is in fact part of his greeting (v7) that he speaks over the Roman Christians. But more than that, the Gospel, Good News from God is essentially how you and I may be at peace with God eternally, and truly at peace in this life on the way there. This all comes through God’s Son Jesus. So I have chosen to call this series Pax Romana, Latin for “Roman Peace”, signifying the peace we can find through the message of Romans.

◆ Now those of you who are history buffs will know that, besides being a really cool title in a language most of us don’t know, the Pax Romana actually refers to a period in history of about 200 years, starting in 27BC with the inauguration of Caesar Augustus, and continuing to around 180 AD. It was a period of time when there was but one power in the then-known world; Rome. Augustus, Julius Caesar’s adopted son, rose in the

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struggle that followed Julius Caesar's assassination, to become the first Emperor of what had been the Roman Republic for 500 years, and thereby initiating the Roman Peace, referring to the comparative lack of war across the Roman Empire, which stretched from Britain to Iraq and Egypt. I want to suggest that there is indeed a real Pax Romana to be found in Paul's letter to the Romans, for that is what the letter is all about. The Roman Empire was to last almost 500 more years make a total of a millennium that Rome dominated the world. But Rome is gone. However Jesus, born under the Pax Romana, and his kingdom is still here! Lets dig in.

◆ Obviously the gospel is the central theme before us. Note Paul's reference to it in the first verse and then his four fold reference to it in vs8-16. What can we say about this Gospel?

◆ **1. The Gospel is a declaration, not a regulation.** Much of the time when we modern Christians think of evangelism, or of gospel, we think in terms of telling people how they should clean up their act. We think that to witness is to get other people to choose our lifestyle, and to stop some of theirs, like coming to church instead of going to bars. Or singing in a praise team instead of shooting up drugs. Some times we think that sharing our faith with people at work is to basically tell them where they are wrong, how they should really dress, or that they will wind up in hell if they do not shape up. To be sure, those elements have their place, but they are not the start of the Gospel. And if

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you start with them in your witnessing you will very quickly create offense and obstacles. There is a better way. The Gospel is first God's declaration of victory to the world. It's glorious news. By sending his Son, Jesus into the world to die for the sins we ought to die for, and by raising him back to life (this is all in v3-4 btw) God has declared victory over sin! That's where we start with gospel! The first part of evangelism is to let people know that relief has been sent. The war is over. Peace is available. A cure has been found. Hope is possible. God himself has made forgiveness of sin, shame, guilt all available! There is an answer to the longing and the fears in all of us. Hurray!

◆ Tell me something. When you tell your children why the family is going to church on Sunday, or why they must accompany you there, or why you are not going to participate in some activity that keeps your Sunday from being a day of spiritual refreshment – do you tell them that it's because it's what God demands or do you tell them it's because God is the greatest thing for their heart to love? When you get home from worship and talk with your kids about it, do you ask them whether the preacher pleased them or not, whether they liked what he said, or agree with the song choices? Or do you ask them where in the service they felt God speaking to them, or where they felt his love, if at all? Every week churches all over the planet meet and

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remember that there is a victor, a God, a forgiver, a hope and as we pay attention to him we find peace again.

◆Or don't you really believe that? _ If church is only a thing you do, your missing it, friend.

◆**2. The Gospel is an invitation, not a invasion.** It is an invitation to a life of peace with God, and peace among men. Now there are certainly ways in which God does indeed invade this world, thankfully, but what I mean to say is, the Gospel of God is a call into a new life/country, not an oppressive occupation of an enemy who makes you do things you otherwise wouldn't. The good news of Christ is not that the Christians have a better way of life than, say, the Muslims. It is that the Christian God has done for us what the Muslim God will never do: forgive sin, while also punishing it in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

◆You see, in the first century every religion's goal was about how to have peace with the gods, which ever ones you worshiped or called upon. That always meant you had to do the right thing, the right number of times, etc. But that is not the Gospel. The Gospel is Jesus did the right things, always, AND took your punishment. Now you may be a citizen of the empire freely, through faith alone! What hope!

◆(read together) "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith.'" Romans 1:17, NIV.

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◆ You aren't and cannot be righteous on your own. But God will give it to you! In fact, he is calling you, beaconing you to it. Take a look at Paul's description of his identity in the opening of his letter. He calls himself literally a "slave" of Jesus (v1), but this is a happy slavery, or belonging. He says he is "called" to be an "apostle" (sent one). Ie. It wasn't his idea. God came after him, and God sent him out to do the same. He says he is "set apart" for the gospel. Ie. as in the army, he is assigned to a duty and that his duty is to tell people God is the emperor, and he invites you to live under his good government (gospel). He says that the Romans are also "called" (v6), to belong to Jesus. He says they are "loved" by God and "called"(invited?) to be "saints". Can you believe it? God wants to make people saints. This doesn't mean God wants them to do miracles and accept prayers of people, or to establish mission outposts in the deserts of Africa. That is not what makes you a saint. A saint is anyone who belongs to Jesus (v6). Everyone who believes (v16).

◆ B. What does this mean? God wants you. God is coming to you even today and inviting you to live in the peace of his empire, free. God, the mind behind the snow crystals, and the designer of calculus -wants, calls you to belong to him. To come to him. To know him. Do you hear what I'm saying?

◆ **3. The Gospel is news but it is not new.** By this I mean that the good news of Jesus is not a new way of dealing with people that God made up after his old methods didn't seem to work.

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No, the grace freely given to sinners who could never earn it or even want it on their own was God's plan from the beginning.

◆ Verse 2 says God made his promise of Gospel *beforehand*.

◆ He says the same thing in a letter to Titus.

◆ "Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ for the faith of God's elect and the knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness-- a faith and knowledge resting on the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time," Titus 1:1, 2, NIV.

◆ There never was a time when people were able to earn God's attention. It was always freely begun in His heart, not ours. From creation in the Garden of Eden, through the life of the Hebrew nation, the establishment of ritual sacrifices, –all of it always pointed to the same solution. Paul is telling us that if we understand the Gospel of Jesus in the New Testament, then will will understand everything in the Old Testament. Jesus said this too.

◆ "He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."" – "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me." Luke 24:44; John 5:46, NIV.

◆ The truth about finding peace with God and man has always been the same. It is the one truth and it "leads to godliness" wherein we find peace.

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◆**4. The Gospel is a person, not a precept.** All other religions are about precepts, laws, commands, requirements. “Do this, and you will live.” Central to the Christian faith is the person of Jesus. The Christian headlines is not that if you do all the right things, blessings will happen to you. Or if you do all the wrong things, God will abandon you. Or if you recite the right prayers, the devils will leave you alone. Or if you share with people in need you are “good with God”. But none of these is necessarily so or our hope, because (as Paul will hammer home in chapter 3) nobody, but nobody can do enough right. And everybody but everybody does way too much wrong to ever rebalance a scale.

◆I filled a fellow’s gas tank the other day. He said thanks, and that he should really get back to church someday. Everyone tells a pastor that when they are getting help. “I’ll be in church Sunday. And I’ll pay you back.” Why do they say that? Have we as Christians merely gotten the culture to think that being in Church on a Sunday is what our religion is about? Why don’t people who are getting help say, “You know, I really should get to know Jesus.” Maybe it’s because people in the church don’t either. Do your kids love Jesus? Have you ever talked about this? Listen, if someone isn’t in love with Jesus, she or he won’t want to go to a worship service. Don’t expect it. Don’t hope for it. People who *are* in love with Jesus rearrange their schedules and lives to worship him, seek him. Otherwise no. Now

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there are folks who show up who aren't seeking God. They have other reasons, but the real focus of the Christian church is a person who loves us and whom we love back.

◆ So I told this fellow, "Fred (not his name), everyone says that ("I'll pay you back. I'll be in church."), and nobody ever does. But that's not why I'm helping you. I'm not trying to get you to come to my church. I'm helping you because I love Jesus, and he loves me, and provides for me. So I'm just doing what he does. I'm giving you gas because Jesus loves you. That's it."

◆ So let me ask you, if the Gospel is about the person Jesus, what are you doing in your life to seek Jesus? If you want help or ideas, we're all about that around here. But you can spend your whole life in this church and still not seek Jesus in any given day of your life.

◆ B. The Gospel is about a person. Now Paul says more about that person in v3-4. He points out his nature, descendant of King David, and descendant of the Holy Spirit. We talked all about why both Jesus divine nature and his fully human nature are so central to our faith –we talked all about this during Advent last month so if you want to understand that check out our website where you can read or listen to past messages. Lets move on.

◆ **5. The Gospel is not about works, but it is not without works.** That is to say, you and I don't get God's love, attention

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and blessing in our lives by doing good things. First off, nothing we do, not the nicest act of kindness, is truly a good thing on a spiritual level because we don't do them for truly godly reasons. And it isn't what our hands or knees are doing, but what our hearts are doing that pleases Heaven. This is a central theme in Romans and all of Christianity. That said, don't jump to the conclusion that it doesn't matter how you behave, or what you do. Chapter 6 will address this in detail. Doing good things does not make you right with God, but good things are still right and of God. Keeping God's directions does not, never did, make up for the times you didn't. In other words, doing right is not a condition of salvation any human can meet. But doing right is a consequence of salvation that God grows in every true believer. The Gospel spells it out that we are saved by faith in Jesus' good works alone. As the reformers like Luther were want to say, "We are saved by faith alone, but not by faith that is alone." When we give our hearts to God, we will naturally start to want the things he wants and do the things he does.

◆ Verse 5 tells us "obedience comes *from* faith". Verse 17 says "righteousness is *from* God" and "by faith." (cf Titus 1:2)

◆ **Conclusion:** Time to sum it up. What is the best news people can hear in any empire? Where does real peace come from? What is the Gospel? There is a God, and he came to our world, and he died a human death so we could live a heavenly life, by

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forgiveness through his blood. Tell your friends/kids to come to him, believe on him, seek him, learn his word. He alone is the Prince of Peace. The Pax Romana.