PAUL'S EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS

A Series of Lessons by
Dr. Arden C. Autry

Introductory Remarks to the Teachers

The only way to do a thorough study of Romans would be to focus exclusively on it while ignoring other New Testament books, and then just working our way through it with no deadline for finishing. It would be fun, but it would not be practical in our Sunday morning slot of time, when there is so much else that needs to be regularly studied.

Given the limitation of time, we have to be selective. We could just focus on a part of the book, like we sometimes do when studying other long books like Isaiah or Luke. But there's something to be said for considering the overview of Romans attempted in these lessons. There is a comprehensiveness of the explanation of the gospel that is found in no other single book. So the aim will be to get the main themes of Romans before the classes in a meaningful way.

The negative consequence of this choice is that each chapter of Romans will not receive all the attention it deserves. The positive consequence, I hope, is that people will have their grasp of the basic truth of the gospel strengthened, and that they will have an adequate sense of the development of Paul's presentation in Romans to enable and enrich their further reading and study of this book.

I have included nine lessons in this series. You may have classes in which that will come in very handy, when there are nine Sundays in a term and the class doesn't want to use the "ninth Sunday" for their own special purposes. In those terms when we have only eight Sundays, you will probably want to omit Lesson 9. The other most likely option would be to omit Lesson 7, not just because it is difficult but also because it may not be the most obviously relevant to the classes.

Lesson 7 covers chs. 9-11, which is powerful material and obviously very important to Paul. If we leave it out, we leave out a significant piece of how Paul understood God's plan and provision of salvation for the world. But again, what do you leave out, when you can't do everything? (Lesson 9, in comparison, raises issues which can easily be paralleled by controversies today.) Please use your own best judgment about which lesson to omit in a given class, just as you have to use discretion about which verses to discuss on any given Sunday when there are so many great things in this book.

The written lessons are far too long to try to cover everything when you teach. Please be selective in what you try to cover.

(Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version, except where otherwise noted.)

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LESSON 1
ROMANS 1-2
A POWERFUL GOSPEL TO MEET A PERVASIVE NEED

Introduction to Romans

The impact of the Book of Romans is difficult to exaggerate. Countless lives have been changed by the reading of these words, and only God could know how many times Christians have been strengthened by meditating on this message. To cite only a few outstanding examples, we could mention first St. Augustine, who was converted in 386 A.D. by reading just a short passage of this book (13:13-14). In 1515, Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk in the Roman Catholic Church, found the spiritual peace for which he had longed when the truth of Romans 1:16-17 finally sank into his heart. Luther described his experience: "I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise." Two years later the Protestant Reformation was ignited by the fire which had first burned in Luther's heart.

Speaking of "burning"—many Methodists know at least the gist of John Wesley's comment about how he felt his heart "strangely warmed" on May 24, 1738. This experience at Aldersgate Street is usually regarded as the most critical turning point in Wesley's life, the point from which he began to preach the gospel with such conviction and power that the Methodist movement burst into roaring flames of revival, which spread across England and carried into North America. But what was the cause of this 'ignition' in Wesley's heart that night in London?

Wesley tell us that he "went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for my salvation; and an assurance was given to me that he had taken *my* sins away, even *mine*; and saved me from the law of sin and death."

The New Testament scholar, F. F. Bruce, after reviewing some of the impact of Romans on key figures in church history, stated, "There is no saying what may happen when people begin to study the letter of Romans. . . . you have been warned!"[1] Why does Romans have such powerful effect? You could say that it is because it is the Word of God, and that would be true. But the explanation for its unique and pivotal importance in the history of Christianity would have to include the fact that Romans presents the heart of the gospel of salvation in a more thorough fashion than any other New Testament book. Our need for salvation, the provision made by God, and how to appropriate that provision are explained in penetrating and persuasive words.

Context and historical background

A good Bible dictionary or handbook can provide further information about the Roman church and Paul's apostolic ministry, but a few facts would be helpful to recall

before we begin our study of the text. Paul had devoted many years to evangelism and church planting in the eastern Mediterranean area, especially what would now be called Turkey and Greece. At the height of that ministry, he makes plans to go to Rome, where a church already exists (we do not know the names of the persons who began it). In writing this church which he did not plant and had never visited, Paul's plans for the future are made clear by the end of the letter: he desires to establish a base in Rome for further mission work to the west of Rome, in Spain (see 15:28). That does not mean he was going to abandon his home church of Antioch (in Syria), but only that the strong church in Rome would be a good place from which to launch still more pioneer efforts. A major part of Paul's motivation for this epistle, then, was to introduce himself and his message to this church in the capital of the Empire.

Writing from the city of Corinth, Paul tells the Roman Christians that he plans to come to them after he has first delivered an offering to the Jerusalem church from the various Gentile churches he has planted. From the book of Acts, we know that Paul did eventually arrive in Rome, although as a prisoner, for he was arrested on that trip to Jerusalem. His trip to Rome happened, but not in the manner he would have preferred!

Unlike Paul's letters to the churches which he himself had founded (or was instrumental in starting, through the ministry of others), Paul does not directly address issues of concern or danger in the Roman church. It may be, however, that he *indirectly* deals with an issue that may have arisen there. In chs. 14-15, Paul deals at length with the tensions which develop when people have different views about what is permissible for believers to do. In particular, he talks about rules of diet and observation of special days. It may be that the church in Rome, with its cosmopolitan mix of people from Jewish and various Gentile backgrounds, had experienced some of this tension. Paul does not say that, but he did have access to information about the church there, since he knew so many of them by name (see ch. 16). Also, since we know something about the history of Rome in the years preceding this letter, it is quite plausible that tensions between Jewish and Gentile Christians had arisen in that church.

We know from secular and biblical sources that the Emperor Claudius had expelled all Jewish people from the city of Rome in 49 A.D. (see Acts 18:2). All Jewish residents, whether they were believers in Jesus or not, had to leave and were not permitted to return until a later Emperor, the notorious Nero, allowed them to return in 54 A.D. Paul wrote Romans just a few years later (56-58 A.D., probably 57 A.D.). Those are the known facts. We can only speculate about the effect of this Jewish absence from the city and from the Roman church during the years 49-54. Did the Gentile part of the church continue to grow? Did the Gentile Christians in Rome find it uncomfortable when the Jewish Christians returned, with their inherited culture of special observations and dietary rules which the Gentiles felt no need to imitate? Had Paul heard about these racial-ethnic-cultural tensions in this important church? We are only asking speculative questions, and we should not build too much on speculation, but this would possibly explain why Paul wrote at such length on the issues addressed in Rom. 14-15 to a church he had never visited.

Context in the Book of Romans

The first two chapters lay the necessary foundation for understanding the rest of Romans. In the first chapter, after Paul's opening greetings (containing significant previews of some of the main issues of the book), Paul makes one of the most memorable statements ever about the gospel in vss. 16-17. We will look at those two verses closely. Then, in vss. 18 ff., Paul paints the picture of human lostness and self-destructive behavior which make us need salvation.

In chapter two, Paul continues to show the need for salvation, but here addressing the need of those who might be tempted to think they do not need grace because they have high standards of morality compared with other people. The description of our need for salvation will continue to its climax in ch. 3, which we will leave for the next lesson.

Romans 1:1-7—Address and Salutation

As he usually does, Paul first identifies himself as the author of this letter, describing himself as Christ's servant and as an apostle. But Paul's authority as an apostle will not be an issue in Romans as it is in some other letters (such as Galatians or Corinthians). Here the emphasis quickly moves to the cause for which Paul has been "set apart" as an apostle: "for the gospel of God" (vs. 1). God's gospel is really the main subject of Romans.

Notice briefly how Paul describes the gospel in these opening greetings:

1. it is God's gospel, i.e., it belongs to God, it is from God
2. it was previously promised in Scripture
   (the OT will be quoted extensively in Romans)
3. it is about God's Son, Jesus Christ our Lord
   a. who is a descendant of David "according to the flesh"
      (thus fulfilling messianic prophecies)
      ("flesh" here used in sense of humanity, not in a negative connotation)
   b. who was shown to be God's Son "with power" by the resurrection
      ("the spirit of holiness" is probably meant to be another way of saying "the Holy Spirit," who is usually connected with God's power at work in the resurrection; Rom. 8:11)
   c. who has given Paul grace and apostolic commission to preach the gospel and win the Gentiles to the "obedience of faith," i.e., the obedience needed *is* to believe

Romans 1:8-15—Paul and the Roman Church

It would be natural for any fired-up evangelist to want to preach in Rome, the capital city of the vast Roman Empire. If it was true that "all roads lead to Rome," it was also true that roads from Rome led to everywhere in the Empire and even beyond. Paul's desire to visit the Roman Christians would reflect many motives, of course. Not only did he want to go beyond Rome to Spain (hopefully with their assistance), but Paul also believed that he could minister to them (vs. 11). He hastens to add that he knows the spiritual benefit would be mutual (vs. 12).

From Paul's wording in vs. 13, we might reasonably draw the conclusion that the church in Rome is Gentile, at least in the majority. From the people mentioned in ch. 16,

however, it is evident that a considerable number of them are Jewish. We cannot know the precise percentages, but it certainly appears to be an ethnically mixed congregation.

Paul will take any audience he can get, not because he is a compulsive entertainer or talker, but because he considers himself "a debtor both to Greeks and barbarians." Why is he a debtor? Not because of what those people have done for him, but because God has given him this charge.

Note that when Paul says "Greek," we should understand it in the sense of "civilized." The Romans' official language was Latin, of course, but note that Paul wrote this letter in *Greek*, which may have been the daily language (or workplace language) for more of the people than Latin! When Paul says "barbarian" he means "everybody else," whether they are part of the Empire or not. Paul is ready to preach and teach the gospel to anybody, anywhere, including Rome.

Romans 1:16-17—Theme Statement

These two verses follow logically the readiness to preach already mentioned by Paul. (Note the connective word "for" at the beginning of vs. 16.) When Paul says "I am not ashamed," it could be just another way of saying "I'm ready." But it's more than readiness; it's eagerness. Paul is pleased, honored, happy to preach the gospel for the reason which he names in his very next words.

Unfortunately, some translations (including the New Revised Standard Version, which I am using regularly in this series) omit an important word here: "for" (or "because"). Paul actually says he is not ashamed of the gospel *because* it (the gospel) is the power of God unto salvation. Naturally one is not ashamed of power.

This is not Paul's power, of course; it is God's power. But Paul is a messenger assigned to tell all people how God has acted and is active to bring us salvation. That's how the gospel is power. The words themselves are not magic; the words themselves don't transform us. But the words of the gospel tell us about God and his provision for our deliverance. Being told about God's provision gives us an opportunity to respond with faith, with trust in the provision of God. Thus the gospel is said to be power for "everyone who has faith" (vs. 16).

The believing does not empower the gospel; it is powerful whether you believe it or not. Believing receives what God wants to give. Belief is a response to God, a response to what God has already done and already said. And the opportunity to respond with faith and receive God's salvation is equally open to all people—Jews and Greeks (here in the sense of everybody else, all the non-Jews).

It is to the Jew *first*, for God's plan of salvation for the whole world was a plan God had been working on for centuries, with Israel as his chosen instrument to set the stage. Salvation in Jesus came to the Jews and then through the Jews to all the rest of us (more about this in later lessons).

Verse 17 also begins (or should) with the word "for," in the sense of *because*. The connection here is that Paul is continuing to explain *how* or *why* the gospel is power for salvation to everyone who believes: because *in the gospel* "the righteousness of God is revealed." This is perhaps the key phrase for understanding the entire book of Romans. Certainly it was for Martin Luther.

For a long time Luther could not understand how a revelation of *God's* righteousness could be "good news" (= gospel), since God's holiness would show, by contrast, how unholy we humans are. But a careful study of the text of Romans (especially 3:21-26) brought a break-through from heaven into the troubled conscience of Martin Luther in 1515. The "righteousness of God" in this text means "righteousness *from* God," i.e., God's *gift* of righteousness to be received by faith. When a revelation of God's righteousness is understood to mean not only how righteous God is but also *how he makes us righteous*, then that revelation is good news, gospel, which has power to change our lives. (Note that "righteousness" and "justification" are two different ways to translate the same Greek word, δικαιοσύνη = *dikaiosyne*, pronounced "dik-eye-ah-SOO-nay.".)

The remaining words in vs. 17 are also very important. The words "through faith for faith" (NRSV) are perhaps better interpreted "by faith from first to last" (NIV), for that seems to be Paul's emphasis. The total response by humans to God's provision and God's power has to be characterized by trust, by faith through the whole process. An alternative interpretation, which the NRSV translation seems to support, is that God has acted in faithfulness which enables our faith (or faithfulness), thus "through faith for faith." Either interpretation makes good sense. Perhaps Paul meant both, but more critical are the next words.

Paul ends vs. 17 with a quotation from Habakkuk 2:4. Similar to most translations, the NRSV reads: "The one who is righteous will live by faith." The order of the Greek words written by Paul would be better reflected by the following: "The one who is righteous by faith will live." Do you see the difference in emphasis?

While it is certainly true that righteous people will live by faith, Paul's point in Romans is not so much *how to live* (by faith) as it is *how to be righteous*. He devotes much of the first part of his letter to showing us that there can be no other way to be right with God than by having faith in what God has done and said. Trusting in God is the only way to have righteousness. Then, when one is righteous (by faith), that person is assured of life, now in fellowship with God, and forever in the fullness of salvation. The one who is righteous by faith will live. Anyone who tries to be righteous in some other way will not live. That is what Romans is saying.

The outline of Romans included in this set of lessons (as adapted from C. E. B. Cranfield) shows that through the end of ch. 4, Paul is focused on "the just by faith" or "the righteous by faith" (note that "just" and "righteous" are interchangeable translations for the same Greek word, δικαιος = *dikaios*, "DEEK-eye-ahs"). Then, from 5:1 through the end of ch. 8, Paul comments on "shall live." His quotation of Hab. 2:4 in Rom. 1:17 is, if you will, his 'text' for his teaching. He comments first on one phrase, then on the next: 1) "the righteous by faith"; 2) "shall live."

Romans 1:18-32—God's Judgment Revealed

Once more notice a connecting "for" at the beginning of vs. 18. (Again, unfortunately, some translations choose to omit this word, but it is there in the Greek text and in the NRSV). There is a reason why God wants to reveal his gift of righteousness to us and, even more to the point, a reason why we need to receive that revelation of righteousness. The reason we need the revelation of God's righteousness is because there

is also already a revelation of God's wrath "against all ungodliness and wickedness." As Paul will go on to demonstrate, this takes in everyone—Jew as well as Gentile, relatively 'moral' persons as well as those they despise.

Note Paul does not say the wrath of God *will* be revealed. Certainly Paul believed in judgment in the future (2 Cor. 5:10), but that is not the point here. The point here is that we can already see God's judgment against the sinfulness of humanity. There is an evident, pervasive, and powerfully destructive problem affecting all human beings. That problem is sin and its horrible consequences. Before we can appreciate the revelation of God's righteousness (1:17), we must know something of the problem which it solves. From 1:18 all the way through to 3:20, Paul's job is to help us see how much we need what only God could do—what, in Christ, God has now done. (Paul will come back to explain the revelation of righteousness more in 3:21 ff.)

Paul says the ungodliness and wickedness of humans is a result of *suppressing* the truth about God. He does not say wickedness is the result of *lacking* the truth. Not everyone has had a chance to read or hear the Scriptures (either in Paul's time or ours), but everyone is responsible for the knowledge that *is* available to them. What knowledge is that?

Everyone, simply by observing the world around us and the sky above us, should be able to see something of God's "eternal power and divine nature" (vs. 20). We should be able to see from the creation itself that there is a Creator—greater in power than what he created, existing before he made it, and having a nature (divine) different from what he made. The Uncreated Creator is discernible (though invisible) through what he has created. Everyone should be able to see this.

The availability of that discernible knowledge is what renders humans everywhere "without excuse" (vs. 20). We might regard the kind of idolatry that worships images in the form of humans, birds, reptiles, and other animals (vs. 23) as a product of ignorance. In a sense it is, especially for individuals who have never known anything different. But in another sense, it is not the product of *ignorance* but of *rebellion*—willful suppression of the truth, not absence of the truth. This is important, for this is the root cause of all human problems.

Ignorance causes much suffering in the world, but it is not the most fundamental problem. If ignorance were the most fundamental problem, then adequate "salvation" could be achieved by adequate learning of new facts. We could save ourselves. But if rebellion (against the truth) is the most fundamental problem, then acquisition of knowledge will not be the cure. Acquisition of knowledge from the Bible (especially the gospel) will make salvation *possible*, but only because it makes *faith* in God possible (see Rom. 10:17). If someone hears or sees the truth and refuses to place their trust in God, the rebellion is continued. Trust in God, faith, means we have given up the rebellion against the truth of God. We recognize that we cannot save ourselves, but we trust in God's declared intention to save us. Knowledge is important, but *the will is the key*: human will saying 'yes' to God's will, instead of rebelliously insisting on our own will.

Rebellion against available knowledge of God is manifested in a variety of ways, as the rest of ch. 1 enumerates several. But the primary manifestation of this rebellion is in the refusal to *honor* God (as God, our Creator) and *give thanks* to him (as the source of

everything which makes life possible; vs. 21). This rebellious choice, made by our wills, has a destructive effect on our thinking. Again, not to be repetitious but because this is so important, the problem does not start in ignorance and then produce rebellion; it starts in rebellion and then produces "futile . . . thinking" (vs. 21).

To us (who know better) and to Paul and other Jews, the idolatry of the pagan Gentiles was utterly contemptible, clear evidence that the idolaters were not "wise" but "fools" (vs. 22). But do we today have our own ways of idolatry? Do we look to things or persons other than God for 'salvation' and for the meaning of our lives? Surely in our own society we often see the idolatry of power, pleasure, popularity, sex, money, youth, etc. If we look anywhere but to God for ultimate fulfillment and purpose, we are committing idolatry. And God lets us have the consequences of choices rebelliously made (vss. 24, 26, 28). The rebellious will brings a darkened understanding, foolish thinking, and then the degradation of our bodies. Every part of our humanity is affected and infected by the defection of our wills.

The degrading of the bodies of which Paul speaks in this passage is plainly homosexual behavior, although it need hardly be said that there are many ways of degrading or dishonoring our bodies. Out of all the things that could be said about this, perhaps the following points are most relevant for reading Romans.

Paul clearly regards homosexual activity as sinful (as does the entire Bible), but he is not saying homosexual behavior is necessarily more sinful than other sins. Rather his point is that a behavior which most people find unattractive and even repulsive has its root in a problem which all people share: the rebellious will, repressing the available truth about God. If we use this passage to condemn homosexual behavior, we are seeing only a part of the truth of the passage. Homosexual behavior is wrong, but it is a manifestation of the sinful root which affects us all.

This is further demonstrated by the listing of several more sinful behaviors, some of which you or I may never have been guilty of but some of which everyone has participated in, often with enthusiasm! Murder? Never! Strife or deceit? Well . . . . Notice that the breathtaking list of sinful attitudes and actions (vss. 29-31) tells us what is produced by a "debased mind" (vs. 28). What caused the debased mind? The same thing that caused homosexual behavior! Envious, insolent, haughty, or ruthless people may be manifesting a *different fruit* but it comes from the *same root*. That is why the next chapter begins with the word "therefore."

Romans 2—Knowing What's Right Doesn't Make You Righteous

Paul has already said that all humanity is "without excuse" (1:20). Now he aims those words directly at the person who is inclined to judge the behavior of others. "You have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things" (2:1). If we want to object that we are *not* doing the same things, then we have not read 1:29-31 carefully enough. Or perhaps we just need to read 2:1 more carefully.

If we presume to sit in judgment on others, we are repressing the knowledge of God just as much as someone committing the sins for which we condemn them. We are doing so *by judging* others. Paul is not saying it is wrong to recognize that someone else is doing something wrong. What is wrong is thinking there is nothing wrong with us!

To recognize that someone else's behavior might eventually incur the wrath of God should sober us to recognize the same about our own behavior. To recognize that someone else needs to be forgiven and transformed should make us grateful for forgiveness and receptive to God's transformation process. If God has been so good to you as to allow you to know the difference between right and wrong (in someone else), then you need to realize that God's kindness in this way is primarily meant to "lead you to repentance" (2:4).

Paul was clearly thinking of his own people, the Jews, in the last part of chapter two (vss. 17-29). But in the first half of the chapter he might be addressing anyone who assumes high moral standing because of their knowledge of right and wrong. Paul points out, as would any Jewish rabbi, that hearing the law (or being instructed in any system of morality) does not make you righteous; what is required is *doing* the law (vs. 13). *Knowing* what is right makes you responsible for *doing* what is right, more responsible than you would have been while in ignorance.

But of course, Paul has already said (in ch. 1) that everyone has some knowledge of God, even if not the clear commandments contained in the Law that God gave to Israel. Likewise, in ch. 2, Paul says Gentiles can have an awareness in their consciences of the difference between right and wrong. For this knowledge we are all responsible.

Paul does not say the conscience is always a reliable guide to what is right and wrong. He does not even address the issue here of whether a conscience can be in error in its judgments. That is not his point. His point is that everyone has the capacity to make distinctions between right and wrong. That capacity for making moral choices is what makes everyone accountable to God's judgment (vs. 15). (Realize, of course, that Paul and I are both talking about humans with normal mental functions and sufficient maturity to make responsible decisions.)

So everyone is accountable to God for how they handle the knowledge of right and wrong that is available to them. The status of one's knowledge is not a refuge—for either the uninstructed Gentile or the instructed Jew. The judgment is for what one *does* (2:6, 13), not what one *knows*. The problem again is not ignorance per se; if it were, then the knowledgeable person would have the distinct advantage. To the contrary, Paul concludes, having the instruction ("the law") and even the outward show of conformity to the law ("circumcision" in the case of Jews) will be no advantage at all if such persons are not in fact living up to the knowledge they have (vs. 25).

To go back to the opening thought of this chapter, if you have knowledge for assessing the behavior of others, then you bear witness to your accountability to answer to God for your own behavior. Paul was probably thinking of his fellow Jews at this point, to demonstrate to them that their possession of the Law should make them more aware of their need for God's grace in Jesus. (Paul will hammer this point home in ch. 3.) But we have to apply this to ourselves: we cannot take refuge in our supposedly superior knowledge of what is right and wrong.

We can always look around and find someone whose behavior we regard as worse than our own, and we can give ourselves false comfort in such comparisons. But God is not going to examine us to see how well we were able to analyze the sins of others; we will have to answer for our own behavior. In what will we trust under that scrutiny? That we *knew* better than others what is right and wrong? That we *did* better than most of the

people around us? But what if the standard is not how we compare with others at all? What if the standard is how well we did in comparison to what we knew? Will anyone be able to say, "I have consistently and completely lived up to the standards of right and wrong"? Does anyone do as well as they know to do?

Possible questions for discussion:
(Some questions taken from LessonMaker software by NavPress).

1. How does a person become righteous? (1:17)

2. For what reasons do Christians sometimes feel ashamed of the gospel?

3. How do people attempt to find salvation outside of faith in Christ alone?

4. How do people today distinguish between right and wrong?

5. What is the primary problem people have in their relationship with God? (1:21)

6. When people deny God, what do they often put in His place? (1:21-23)

7. How do people today suppress the truth about God?

8. What examples can you list of how we worship created things rather than the Creator?

9. What keeps us from acknowledging and repenting of our sins? (2:4-5)

10. What is more important than physical circumcision? (2:29)

ENDNOTES

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[1] Augustine, Luther, Wesley, and Karl Barth are mentioned in particular. See F. F. Bruce, *Romans* in the *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, revised edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), pp. 56-58.

LESSON 2
ROMANS 3-4
SALVATION BY FAITH MEANS LETTING GOD SAVE YOU

Context in the Book of Romans

We saw in Lesson 1 that the grand theme of this epistle is the gospel of God, which is powerful to bring salvation to everyone who believes because the gospel reveals how God justifies the believer (1:16-17). After the brief but powerful statement of this theme, Paul turned his attention to the plight of humanity, pervasively affected by the rebellious suppression of the truth about God (1:18 ff.). Even morally trained persons (for the Jews, this meant being taught God's Law) cannot take refuge in what they know to be right, because the real issue is what we do, not what we know (ch. 2).

In chapter 3, Paul will continue this point to show that *no one* will be justified by works of the Law (3:20). Thus, *everyone* needs what God has graciously provided in Christ (3:21-26). Since salvation is by God's grace, received simply by trusting him, no one has any reason to boast in their performance. Paul will then give Abraham as the example of being justified by faith and not by works (ch. 4).

Romans 3:1-8—God's Faithfulness

In the midst of a long section on the pervasive human need for salvation (1:18—3:20), Paul pauses in the first few verses of ch. 3 to answer a possible objection: Is there no advantage in being one of those who have been instructed by God's Word? Is there no advantage in being a Jew? What Paul had just said at the end of ch. 2 might cause us to wonder about this, but Paul asserts strongly that there *is* an advantage.

The chief advantage is that one so instructed has been entrusted with the very words of God. This is particularly true of Israel historically, but it is also true of every individual who is taught the Bible. To have received the Word of God is a great blessing in itself, but it brings with it a responsibility to reflect that teaching with one's life.

So what if someone so instructed has not carried out that responsibility very well? What if the persons so *entrusted* have not proved themselves *trustworthy*? Does that mean God's Word cannot be trusted? Of course not! (vss. 3-4) If everyone else proves untrustworthy, God will still be faithful (trustworthy) and his words trustworthy (vs. 4).

In some ways, God's faithfulness appears all the more clearly in comparison with human faithlessness. Nevertheless, humans will still have to answer to God for their unfaithfulness (vss. 5-8; Paul seems to respond to slanderous reports about himself in vs. 8). So we come back to the main theme of this section: unfaithful Israel is just as much in need of grace as morally blind Gentiles.

Romans 3:9-20—All Are Under the Power of Sin

As you look over these verses, notice how often Paul uses words such as "no one," "all," "every," and "whole." He is obviously describing a variety of sinful attitudes, actions, and words, but the main point is that every person—Jew and Gentile—is guilty of sin and in need of grace. To make this point he quotes a remarkable string of Scriptures:

vss. 10-12 quote Psalm 14:1-3 (also Psa. 53:1-3);
vs. 13 quotes Psa. 5:9 (also Psa. 140:3);
vs. 14 quotes Psa. 10:7;
vss. 15-17 quote Isaiah 59:7-8;
vs. 18 quotes Psa. 36:1.

Who are these people who are described in such awful terms? Verse 19 is actually the punch line: "Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks *to those who are under the law . . . .*"

The "law" here means the Old Testament, including the Psalms and the prophets. Those who are "under the law" are those who claim the Scriptures are God's words to *them*. To *claim* it as God's word is to *admit* that it is God's word *to you*. If it is God's word *to* you, Paul argues, then it is God's word *about* you. God's word in these quoted passages describes the sinfulness of human beings in thought, word, and deed. You cannot use such passages merely to describe your enemies or others to whom you feel morally superior. If this is *God's* word *to you*, you have to admit it *applies to you*. (As someone else has said, if you hear God speaking, he's talking to you.)

The intended result of such Scriptures describing sin is "so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God." The intended result of God's word to us about sin is *not* so that we may critique our neighbors, but so that we may know God has identified and described *our* sins! As the song says, "It's me, it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer."

The concluding statement of this long section (1:18-3:20) is that *no one* will be justified by his or her performance of the law, for the end result of having the law turns out to be a revelation of our sin. Rather than making us *right*, our instruction in the law shows us how *wrong* we are! (Paul deals with this effect of the law at length in ch. 7.)

Romans 3:21-31—Righteousness Revealed in a Saving Act

Having thoroughly described the sinful state of humanity and having placed all humans beings in the same category of need, Paul is now ready to set forth the remedy. The next few verses (21-26) contain one of the strongest statements in Scripture about the effect of Jesus' death and how we receive the benefits of it. Individual phrases and words are worthy of notice.

"But now"—Something has happened, something has been done in answer to the human plight described in 1:18-3:20. *Now* stands in contrast to all that was possible and impossible before.

"apart from the law . . . attested by the law and prophets"—not based on performance of the law, but agreeing with what the law and the prophets say.

"the righteousness of God"—This phrase is used twice in vss. 21-22. First Paul says the righteousness of God has been made known (compare 1:17); then he says this righteousness of God is "through faith in Jesus Christ." The combination of the two things Paul says about God's righteousness provides the key for understanding that "the righteousness *of* God" in this context means "righteousness *from* God," in the sense of

"right-standing with God" as a gift from God. As pointed out in Lesson 1, this understanding was the key that opened up the gospel for Martin Luther, for now he saw that Paul was not merely speaking about "the righteousness of God" in the sense of how righteous God is but also in the sense of how God gives righteousness.

"through faith . . . for all who believe"—Again recall how this was prominent in the theme statement of 1:16-17.

"for *all* who believe" is logically connected with the next words "For [because] there is no distinction, since *all* have sinned . . ." (vss. 22-23). Paul's concern throughout chs. 1-4 is to show that there is no other way to receive or achieve righteousness.

"all have sinned and fall short of God's glory"—Part of this is often misquoted. Paul does not say that all have *fallen* short, but that all *fall* short of God's glory. All have *present* need for God's grace, no matter how long it has been since their last sin!

If you study Paul's use of "glory," you'll see that he often is referring to the fullness of redemption which we will not experience until we have the resurrection body. Until we have received the full manifestation of God's new creation, we will continue to "fall short of God's glory."

"justified by his grace as a gift"—The only effective remedy comes by God's provision, not by human achievement.

"through the redemption"—The gift may be 'free' but it did cost something. "Redemption" carries with it the picture of being bought back, or of having your impossible bill paid for you. If we ask to whom the debt was owed, the only supportable biblical answer is "God himself."

Sometimes popular theology and preaching has presented the devil as being paid off, as though he rightfully owned us until God bought us back! That notion, however, is impossible to support with clear biblical statements and is a misunderstanding of the picture given here. If we were in debt to anyone, surely it was God. (Compare the petition in the Lord's Prayer: "forgive us our debts" or "trespasses.") In Christ's death, God paid the debt we owed to him.

"whom God put forward" or "set forth"—Jesus' death is God's provision for us, not something we give to God but what he does for us.

"as a sacrifice of atonement"—This is perhaps the most debated term in the paragraph. Some translations use the word "expiation," meaning the wiping out of sins, or covering over of sins. Some use the word "propitiation," which has the sense of God's wrath against sin being averted or satisfied. Some theologians find the notion of God's wrath objectionable, but as long as we keep in mind what Paul emphasizes here—that *God* provided the answer, both for his righteous wrath and our sin problem—the word "propitiation" will not have the connotation of "bribing" God or "paying him off." Paul leaves us no room to imagine we could ever win or pay for God's salvation. Paul's clear

emphasis is that God did what we could not do for ourselves. He did it for the sake of his love for us and so that his purposes could be fulfilled in us.

However "sacrifice of atonement" is translated, the main point is that forgiveness is costly. If human behavior did not matter to God, he could simply ignore us. The fact that God was willing to provide such a sacrifice shows that human behavior (sinful or righteous) does matter to God. It also shows that God loves us enough to be willing to make this sacrifice, so that he can forgive us and change us without compromising his holy integrity (cf. John 3:16).

"by his blood"—i.e., by Jesus' death for us. Paul will explain the significance of Jesus' death more in chs. 5-6.

"effective through faith"—The provision is offered by God; humans have to receive it by placing their trust in God. Some translations follow the Greek word order more closely when they say, "through faith in his blood," i.e., through trusting in the effects of Jesus' death for us.

"to show his righteousness" (NRSV) or "to demonstrate his justice" (NIV)—Remember that the Greek work *dikaiosyne* (δικαιοσύνη) can be translated as either righteousness or justice. This is a good place to know that, for in this passage you see how God's provision of righteousness is not a compromise of his justice. When he demonstrates one, he shows the other.

God's gift of righteousness (right standing with him) does not compromise his justice or his holiness, because God deals with the reality of sin and its consequences. The debt does not go unpaid; it is fully paid by God himself.

The "sins previously committed" (vs. 25) had never been adequately dealt with. The extensive and complex sacrificial system of the OT had only been a temporary arrangement (provided by God's grace, to be sure) until the problem of sin could be definitively addressed. (You will recall that the book of Hebrews (chs. 9-10) makes quite an issue of comparing the relative adequacies of the old and new covenants and their respective sacrifices.)

"at the present time"—At the beginning and at the end of this important paragraph (vss. 21, 26) we find Paul emphasizing that the situation is different *now*.

"that he himself is *righteous* and that he *justifies*" or "that he is just and the one who justifies/ makes righteous"—God's justice has not been compromised but rather demonstrated by the way he has acted to make us just in his sight.

"faith in Jesus"—This is the needed *response* to what God has done. We do not win God's favor by believing, but we come to faith by recognizing that he has already acted in grace. Grace is God's initiative; faith is our response.

In view of the 'amazing grace' of God shown in his provision of salvation, human boasting about our good works or even boasting about our faith is excluded (vss. 27 ff.).

The "law of faith" means something like "the principle of how faith is effective." In the perspective of this chapter (and of the whole Bible) the "law of faith" means to receive God's gifts *as gifts* and not as payment for our behavior or even as something God owes us because of our believing. If God 'owes' it to us, it's not grace and it's not faith. Biblically understood, the "law of faith" compels us to praise God for his grace rather than to boast about our "faith power" or our good works.

Because salvation is by God's grace, and because it is available to anyone who believes, relationship with God is not limited to any racial group. There is only one God (the central belief of Judaism; Deut. 6:4), and he has chosen to make his love known to both circumcised and uncircumcised (vs. 30). *The* response needed to receive this provision is the same for everyone: the response of faith. Paul will proceed in the next chapter to illustrate the absolute necessity of faith, which renders circumcision (and all it represents) relatively unimportant and secondary.

Romans 4:1-25—Abraham: Example of Righteousness by Faith

In the first three chapters of Romans, Paul has established his major point that right standing with God (righteousness) is available only as God's provision, received by faith. Everyone—Jew and Gentile—needs this provision. But to underline this point (and perhaps to prevent any arguments to the contrary), Paul brings out the best example available: Abraham, the ancestor of Israel who was held in the highest esteem as the pattern of godliness.

The first application of the Abraham example is to say that even Abraham had nothing to boast about in God's sight (vs. 2; cf. 3:27). Why? Because his righteousness was "reckoned" (or "credited") to him because of his faith (vs. 3). Here Paul quotes directly from Genesis 15:6. Attention to that context is useful here.

In Gen. 15, God speaks to Abram, promising he would be the father of many descendants (vs. 5). Abram's response to this promise was to believe what God had said, "and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness" (vs. 6). This was not the first time God had spoken to Abram, nor was it the first time Abram had responded with faith (his journey of faith had begun years earlier in ch. 12). But Paul quotes Gen. 15:6 because this is where it is unequivocally stated that Abram is in right relationship with God *because of his faith* in God's promise.

The primary significance of this in Paul's argument is fully seen only when we get down to Rom. 4:10, where Paul asks about the timing of this pronouncement of Abraham's righteousness. Was he pronounced righteous *before* or *after* he received circumcision? The answer is easy for anyone who knows the story of Abraham, and Paul's argument is clinched. Abraham was pronounced righteous in God's eyes (because of his faith in God's promise) in Gen. 15; he did not receive circumcision until Gen. 17, at least 14 years later. When Abraham received circumcision, it was as a "sign" and "seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised" (vs. 11). That is, Abraham was not circumcised so that he could have a relationship with God, but because he already had one. He had a relationship with God because God had spoken to him, and Abraham had believed what God had said.

Here again it is useful to point out that God made the first move. God took the initiative to give a promise to Abraham; Abraham's faith was his response to God's

initiative. God did not give Abraham a promise because Abraham had been sitting around having some kind of non-specific 'faith' in God. No, Abraham's faith had a specific content—the revealed word of God.

The faith that brings justification is specific, it has content, and that content has been supplied by God. What God has said is believed. It is completely unbiblical and un-Christian to imagine that we can decide to have 'faith' and then fill that 'faith' with whatever content suits us. That, however, is what many people try to do, perhaps out of ignorance of what true faith is but perhaps also because we like to define for ourselves a supernatural dimension which serves our self-centeredness rather than challenging us to let God be the center of the universe and of our lives!

If we follow in the example of Abraham and place our trust in what God has done and what God has said he will do, then we are (biblically and spiritually speaking) "children of Abraham." Thus, God's promise to him is fulfilled as Abraham becomes "the ancestor of all who believe," whether or not they are circumcised (i.e., whether or not they are part of the culture and religious practices of the Jewish people). The *only* criterion is faith (biblically defined). Circumcision, food laws, and other special observances are demoted to secondary importance and cannot be made the basis of belonging to the people of God. (See also Gal. 3:6, 9, 29, where Paul makes a similar argument.)

Right in the middle of talking about Abraham, Paul inserts some words from David (Rom. 4:6-8, quoting Psa. 32:1-2). The key word to pick up here is "blessing." Notice that the "blessed" person is said to be the forgiven person, the person "against whom the Lord will not reckon sin." If the Lord *reckons* someone as righteous, then he does not reckon their sins against them. That is a blessing! Paul deftly works this into his example of Abraham by showing that Abraham had the blessing of being reckoned righteous before he had the covenant sign of circumcision given to him (vs. 9).

In the rest of ch. 4, Paul continues to show how we, as children of Abraham, are affected by the "law of faith" which he exemplified.

"inherit the world" (vs. 13)—This may refer to God's promise to Abram in Gen. 12:3 that all the families of the earth would be blessed through him and his descendants. Or perhaps Paul is thinking of other times when God spoke to Abraham, such as Gen. 18:18 or 22:18. In any case, the worldwide scope of the promises made to Abraham is now being fulfilled, says Paul, not through keeping the Law of Moses but through "the righteousness of faith."

If the fulfillment of God's promise depended on keeping the Law, then the promise has been nullified (vs. 14), because of the sad truth Paul has already proclaimed in 3:20—by works of the Law no one will be justified, i.e., no one will qualify to receive the promise. If the Law is allowed to determine the outcome, instead of the promise will come the wrath of God (4:15), for the Law reveals but does not cure the problem of sin.

But the promise can be fulfilled and is being fulfilled because it rests on grace, God's initiative without respect to the worthiness of the persons he calls (vs. 16). The only 'qualification' is to trust in the word of God who declares his intention. Paul extends

his Abraham example still further to show how the most unlikely thing God promised to Abraham had to be fulfilled by God's work and not by Abraham's.

When God promised to make Abram "the father of many nations" (vs. 17, quoting Gen. 17:5), and changed his name to Abraham to reflect that promise, Abraham was 99 years old and Sarai/Sarah was 90. They may have lived long lives in those days, but still they were both past the time when they could reasonably expect to bear children! (Recall that years earlier Abram and Sarai had tried to "help God out" with the Hagar arrangement—Gen. 16. That, however, was their plan, not God's.) So when Abraham believes God's repeated promise at age 99, he is, in a manner of speaking, believing in "God who gives life to the dead" (vs. 17), because both his and Sarah's bodies are "as good as dead" with regard to bearing children (vs. 19). If they are to bear a son, God will have to give new life to the dead womb of Sarah.

God did give new life to Abraham's and Sarah's bodies, and he gave them new life in the son who was born—Isaac (Gen. 21). So God proved he is the kind of God who can give life to the dead (cf. Heb. 11:11-12, 17-19). God also proved he knows what he's talking about when he "calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom. 4:17), which refers to God changing Abram's name to Abraham, meaning 'father of many nations' (Gen. 17:5). God's promise was contained in the new name, which described a reality that did not yet exist when God first called him "Abraham."

(There has been some unfortunate misuse of 4:17, perhaps fostered by the ambiguous wording of the KJV: "calleth those things which be not as though they were." That wording and the similar wording of the NIV are clear enough, however, for the careful reader to see that Paul is describing *God* with those words, not Abraham nor Abraham's faith. God is the one who can say, "Let there be light," and light appears. God is the one who can call Abram by a new name before the new name 'fits,' as a promise to make the name 'come true' by the power which only God has. God has the power to give life to the dead; God has the power to call into existence things that do not exist. What God calls into existence comes into existence *because he is God*. We can 'imitate' God in this respect only in the sense that we can believe and repeat promises he has already made. There is nothing in this passage to encourage us to believe or confess something into existence on our own initiative. Believing or confessing something won't make it true if it's not true. Believing and confessing what God has said is true will enable us to receive what God says he wants to give. Believing and confessing won't persuade God to do something he does not want to do.)

Paul concludes this chapter by showing how we follow the example of Abraham in the fact that we also believe in the kind of God "who gives life to the dead" (vs. 17). We "believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead" (vs. 24). Thus, Abraham's example of believing God and being reckoned righteous applies to us who believe in Jesus. We have the same kind of faith that Abraham did—justifying faith. We have the same kind of God, the same God, who gave new life to Abraham, Sarah, and (in a greater sense) to Jesus. We, too, are believing God for this new life (which will become the primary focus of chs. 5-8).

Verse 25 describes Jesus' death as being "for our trespasses." This has already been dealt with in 3:21-26 and will be touched on again several times, especially in ch. 6.

The last half of 4:25 says that Jesus was "raised for our justification." A lot of meaning is packed into those words.

For one thing, we would not know Jesus' death effectively paid the penalty for our sins if he had remained dead. If Jesus had not been raised, the verdict of his accusers would appear to stand: Jesus deserved to die as a blasphemer. But the resurrection was God's act which overturned the verdict of Jesus' human accusers. The cross has to be re-interpreted in light of the empty tomb. Jesus' death was not just punishment for a sinful man; it was God's provision for all sinners who would accept God's verdict on sin and on Jesus: (1) sin deserves death; and (2) Jesus is not a sinner but God's sinless agent to bear the penalty of sin and break its hold on us. We could know (1) from other Scriptures; we could know (2) only by Jesus' resurrection.

A second part of "raised for our justification" (4:25) will become clear only when we get into ch. 8. That is, how Jesus' *life* (as resurrected Lord, made present to us by the Holy Spirit) is necessary to transform our lives so that in fact we experience the effects of "justification." Until (and to the extent that) Jesus' life becomes real in us, we are still dealing with the effects of death (which is why our bodies have to be raised eventually; Rom. 8:10-11). We are saved by Jesus' death *and* by Jesus' victorious life. That is the essential meaning of 4:25.

Possible questions for discussion:
(Some questions taken from LessonMaker software by NavPress).

1. What danger results from defining our goodness in relative terms--such as comparing ourselves to notorious villains like Adolf Hitler?

2. What religious activities are we tempted to rely on as the basis of our justification before God?

3. How can Christianity be described as "good news" when it teaches that all people are guilty before God?

4. What is the cost or price of justification with God? (3:24)

5. How does providing Christ Jesus as a sacrifice demonstrate the justice of God? (3:25-26)

6. What was the purpose of circumcision in Abraham's life? (4:11)

7. What causes many people to think that works are more important than faith for pleasing God?

LESSON 3
ROMANS 5
A NEW HUMANITY

Context in the Book of Romans

This would be a good place to refer to the outline of Romans included in this set of lessons. We have now gone through section IV on the outline and are ready to start section V. This is a turning point in the epistle. Paul has finished the argument for righteousness being by faith, concluding that section with the example of Abraham. From 5:1 on through the end of ch. 8, Paul focuses on what kind of life the righteous have. (Remember the comments from Lesson 1 concerning Paul's use of Hab. 2:4 in Rom. 1:17. Paul first dealt with "the righteous by faith"; now he will deal with "shall live.")

Romans 5:1-11—Peace with God

When we see "therefore" we can usually expect some logical connection between what has just been said and what is about to be said. In this place "therefore" introduces a major new phase of Paul's presentation. He is about to start describing the new life we have in Christ. Notice that he says "*since* we are [or "have been"] justified by faith." Paul will not argue *for* justification by faith now; he will argue *from* justification by faith. "Therefore" introduces the implications of knowing that righteousness is God's gift, paid for by Christ's death, and received by faith.

"Therefore . . . we have peace with God"—We are no longer God's enemies, and we should not consider ourselves as God's enemies. If we have accepted what he has offered in Christ, we have righteousness and peace. Notice how Christ-centered this peace is. This peace is not produced by talking ourselves out of the fear of God or by discounting the seriousness of sin. Often we try to get peace of mind with cheap psychological tricks, but real peace with God is not cheap. It cost God the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross so that we could receive peace as a gift.

Through Christ also we have "access to this grace in which we stand" (vs. 2). For the grace, for the peace, for the access to God's presence, we come to Christ, for there is where we find it. And our *present* experience of God's grace in Jesus is the basis for our hopes for the *future*.

Paul says that we boast (or "rejoice") in "our hope of sharing the glory of God" (vs. 3). As mentioned in the previous lesson, "glory" is often (but not always) connected with the future in Paul's teaching. Here that is clearly the case, not only because of the word "hope" but also because Paul immediately begins to describe our present experience as something other than fully glorious (vss. 3-4).

We would not need hope if everything was already what it should be. Because we have hope, we can sometimes rejoice in spite of our troubles. But Paul goes further than that. He says that we rejoice "in our sufferings," not just in spite of them. This is not because we enjoy pain or trouble as such but rather "because we know" something (the NIV puts the proper interpretation on "knowing," which the NRSV leaves simply as "knowing"). We know that the suffering will produce "endurance," which in turn produces "character," which in turn builds up our hope. (Rom. 8:28 makes the same point

about the negative things we experience in this life being used by God to produce his positive results.)

From a merely psychological or developmental analysis of human experience, we know something of the truth of what Paul is saying. A person who has successfully endured hardship and emerged from it will not be so easily frightened by the next encounter with trouble. An inexperienced person might be more easily intimidated by the difficulties. But Paul's thought involves more than a psychological insight; he places our endurance of difficulties in the context of our experience of God's love and of the Holy Spirit (vs. 5).

Through the difficult times, we can still trust the love of God, for (as Paul says later) we have learned that nothing can "separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (8:39). There is really no way to *know* this apart from experiencing it in the rough realities of our individual struggles. (Just like confidence in knowing you know how to swim can be acquired only in the water!)

So we rejoice in suffering, not because we like suffering but because we like what we are learning about God's love. This knowledge of God's love is not just an idea, an ideal, or an assumption—it is an *experience* of the presence of the Holy Spirit. His presence is a loving, assuring presence. And when the times get so dark it seems that even God has abandoned us, those are the times we need to remember the times when we felt that love. We especially need to remember God's love shown for us on the cross—how God wanted to love us and heal us so much that Jesus was willing to endure that feeling of abandonment himself. ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" shows how far God is willing to go to show us that we are never abandoned, no matter how much we feel that we are, and that the light will shine again, and even more brightly because of going through the darkest night with God. In the darkest moment, God himself takes on our pain and utters our cry of desolation, so that we may share in his shout of triumph.)

It is the greatness of God's love that Paul celebrates in vss. 6-8. "While we were weak" is precisely "the right time" for God to do for us what we could not do for ourselves, but why for "the ungodly"? We might be able to imagine that an exceptionally courageous, noble person might be willing to die for a righteous person. But for the ungodly? God's love goes beyond any comparison with merely human love. We all know that love is willing to make sacrifices for the sake of the beloved. But God's sacrificial love astonishes because it is directed toward those who have given God every reason not to love them. God hates sin, and by our sin we have repeatedly identified ourselves with what he hates. Could he still love us? The cross answers 'yes,' not a cheap 'yes' but one that should give us confidence that God's love is strong.

If God treats his "enemies" with that kind of love, what kind of treatment should we expect after we have given up our rebellion? Now that we "have been justified by his blood," we should expect to be saved from the future wrath (vs. 9). (Notice in vss. 9-10 how Paul speaks of being "saved" in the future. We evangelicals typically use "saved" to mean "became a Christian believer" or "converted." But the Bible can speak of being saved already, of being in the process of being saved, and of being saved in the future. That is because the Bible uses "saved" to refer not only to justification but also to

experiences of being delivered, or of being spared from some disaster—past, present, or future.)

If "the blood" of Jesus (i.e., his *death*) justified us, what will save us in the future? Jesus' *life* (vs. 10). The saving significance of Jesus' life was mentioned in 4:25 (in Lesson 2). Throughout chs. 5-8, this is emphasized by frequent repetition.

Paul has already said that we "boast" or "rejoice" in hope of the glory of God and in our sufferings because we know God is working to bring a good result (5:2-3). Now he says simply that we "boast" or "rejoice" in God through Jesus Christ, "through whom we have *now* received reconciliation" (vs. 11). Everything that's broken hasn't been fixed yet, and we still have to go through difficulties, some of them extreme, but the most important broken thing has been fixed—our relationship with God. Our reconciliation with God gives us strength to endure the present and to have hope for the future.

Romans 5:12-21—A New Heritage: Christ versus Adam

The last half of Romans 5 has perhaps been argued about as much as any part of this epistle. The arguments have concerned "original sin," i.e., the relationship between Adam's sin and the sinfulness of all other human beings (centering on the translation and meaning of vs. 12). The issue is important, but the arguments have often had the unfortunate effect of obscuring Paul's main intention here.

The main point of vss. 12-21, taken as a whole, can be stated simply: Our heritage from Adam is sin and death; our heritage from Christ is righteousness and life. (Recall that "will live" is the part of Hab. 2:4 being commented on throughout chs. 4-8.) That crucial contrast should not be lost amid questions of *how* we got that heritage from Adam—questions such as: Did Adam's sin make everyone *guilty* even before they were born? Is everyone born with guilt or only with inevitable *tendencies* to sin, thus incurring their own personal guilt? Are we all born innocent and then become guilty only by our own choices? Debates on these questions are old (Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox disagree strongly; Calvinists and Wesleyans disagree). Disagreement will probably not cease until Jesus comes back!

In contrast to asking how we got sin and death from Adam, it is far more important to ask how we get righteousness and life from Christ. That is why Paul spends so much space on that question, rather than the one about Adam. After all, it would seem *undebatable* that everyone needs what Jesus has to offer, no matter what the relationship is between our need and Adam's "original sin."

In fact, Paul's intention here is simply to use Adam as an illustration to show us how one man, Christ, can affect everyone. Paul gives us a *typology*, in which the *type* (Adam, vs. 14) is employed for the sake of helping us to see something important about the *antitype* (Christ, in this passage). In typologies the main interest should always be on the antitype, not the type. The type is there primarily to help us understand the antitype.

What makes a typology work is some significant point of correspondence between the earlier element—called a 'type'—and the later element—called the 'antitype.' The type and antitype do not have to be alike in every way; indeed the antitype is always greater than the type. But they may have many similarities (e.g., the writer of Hebrews uses several such typologies, involving Melchizedek and Christ, the new and old covenants, etc. Paul also uses the Adam-Christ typology in 1 Cor. 15:22, 45-49). The typology in

Romans 5 focuses on how Adam and Christ are *alike* in *affecting all other human beings* (e.g., vs. 18). You will notice, however, that Paul repeatedly observes how *different* the two are in what they have given us.

Paul has just celebrated our reconciliation with God through Christ (vs. 11). In vs. 12, he reminds us why we needed reconciliation. One man, Adam, had brought sin into the world (Gen. 3). Sin brought death, not just for Adam but "to all because all have sinned." (This last clause is the crux of the debate mentioned above. One problem was that St. Augustine misunderstood the Greek, which he did not know very well, and interpreted "because" as "in whom," thus arriving at the conclusion that *when* Adam sinned everybody sinned and thus everybody was born *guilty* of sin. This has had enormous repercussions in the history of Western Christianity, especially in the Roman Catholic and Reformed (Calvinist) traditions.)

Even in the case of human beings (after Adam) who did not have the Law of God to show them what sin was, death still ruled over them (vss. 13-14). Once the breach between God and humanity had been made by sin and death, death ruled over us, even if our consciences were innocent. Whether we knew it or not, we were affected by sin and doomed to die, because of a fundamental separation from God, the giver of life.

And surely "giver of life" is the right description of God in this context. See how often the word "gift" is used in vss. 15-21. Notice also how dramatically God's gracious gift is contrasted to the consequences of human sin. Repeatedly Paul says the gift is *not like* the trespass or the effect of the trespass. The trespass of Adam (vs. 15), compounded countless millions of times over by the sins of us all (vs. 19), *deserved* the consequences of death (vss. 15, 17), judgment (vs. 16), and condemnation (vs. 18). If God gave us what we earned, what would it be?

If "*one* trespass brought condemnation" (vs. 16), what should we expect "following *many* trespasses"? With a truly amazing grace, God in Christ gives us a free gift of life which overcomes all the deserved consequences of human sins. The "free gift following many trespasses" brought "justification" (vs. 16), which overcomes all the accumulated condemnation. Where "the trespass multiplied" and "sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (vs. 20). What Paul says in various and complicated ways in this passage can be graphically displayed in this simple form:

one transgression → judgment → condemnation → death

many transgressions → free gift → justification → life

"Grace" is the only possible explanation for the complete reversal of the cause-effect pattern we should have expected. If we see that God's grace has this kind of power, we can see why Paul is so confident of death's defeat in vs. 17. It is an observable fact that death has "exercised dominion" over all of Adam's children. If Adam could have that kind of effect, "much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ." Because of God's grace, life is *available* to all humans through Christ, just as death was made *inevitable* for all humans through Adam. (In ch. 6 we will see that the

free gift has to be appropriated; it is not automatically effective without belief, unlike our heritage from Adam.)

Just in passing, but to avert any confusion on this issue, I'll say a quick word about "many" (referring to people) in vss. 15-19. In this context, "many" does *not* mean "not everyone." Rather, "many" is being used in contrast to "one." In this passage "many" actually means the same thing as "everybody," as is clear from its use in "many died" (vs. 15). Notice that in vs. 18, Paul uses the word "all," referring first to Adam's effect and then to Christ's; then he switches back to "many" in vs. 19 in a parallel construction. Paul's use of "many" is almost certainly a reflection of the importance of Isaiah 53:11-12 for interpreting the impact of Jesus' death. You might also look at Mark 10:45 (and the parallel in Matthew 20:28), which echoes Isaiah's words. Jesus died for "many" in the sense that *one* died for *all* (see 2 Cor. 5:14; 1 John 2:2).

One other point of contrast between Adam and Christ should not be missed. Adam's deadly effect (in this passage) was through his *disobedience*; Christ's life-giving effect was through his *obedience*. (Paul stresses Christ's obedience also in Phil. 2:8, where he may be thinking of a comparison with Adam, although he does not explicitly say so.) You'll notice also that Paul keeps referring to Christ as "one man." That is appropriate since he is comparing Jesus with the first man, and he is comparing the impact on others by these two men. But it is also important that we see Christ's obedience here as *human* obedience (not forgetting, of course, that Jesus is fully divine and fully human).

The disastrous effect of *human disobedience* (by Adam and in us) is overcome by *human obedience* (by Christ and in us). *Our* obedience cannot overcome sin and death (ch. 7 will address this), but Christ's obedience has overcome sin and death for our sake. As Christ's obedience is our salvation and our reconciliation with God, we must allow Christ's obedience to lead us to life—eternal life (vs. 21) and the righteous living for which we were created in the beginning, before Adam took the wrong turn and got us all lost.

The result of Christ's obedience is not to make human behavior inconsequential but to enable human behavior to be as obedient as his, by the power which his obedience gives us to live by the Spirit instead of by sinful, "fleshly" desires (Rom. 8). Christ's obedience in ch. 5 is a reference to the once-for-all nature of Jesus' death, by which we are justified. How that obedience becomes a reality in our lives (sanctification) is the major subject of chs. 6-8.

Possible questions for discussion:
Some questions adapted from LessonMaker software from NavPress.

1. What good things can result from suffering? (5:3-5)

2. How is peace with God different from peace of mind?

3. How can suffering produce positive rather than negative results?

4. How are Jesus and Adam similar? (5:18-19) How is Jesus more powerful than Adam?

LESSON 4
ROMANS 6
WHEN DEATH MEANS LIFE

Context in the Book of Romans

In the first four chapters of Romans, Paul expounded the truth that righteousness is God's gift received by faith ("the just by faith," see Rom. 1:17). In chapter 5, he shifted his attention to the second part of the quotation of Hab. 2:4—"will live" (1:17). In ch. 5, the key contrast is between Adam's legacy of sin and death and Christ's gift of righteousness and life. In ch. 6, Paul will continue to describe the kind of life we have as those justified by faith. He will emphasize that the new life cannot be separated from righteousness. It will become clear that the "justification" we have by faith is meant to be more than a "not guilty" verdict at the final judgment; it is meant to bring a change in the way we live now. This change in living is what we call "sanctification."

Romans 6:1-11—Dead to Sin, Alive to God

When teaching this passage I like to start by asking: "When does death to sin occur?" Usually the most popular answer refers to a conversion experience. Some will also mention having to gain victory over certain sins at a later time or through a process of growth. Someone might mention that sin remains a possibility until physical death. All these answers are true as part of a comprehensive response to the question. Paul, however, will focus our attention in this chapter on the death to sin that occurred *for us* in Christ at the time of his crucifixion. That death to sin is foundational for all the other aspects involved in responding to the question.

Paul's opening question might strike us as odd unless we recall that he had just finished celebrating the fact that "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (5:20). Observing that an increase in grace *followed* an increase in sin might lead someone to the false conclusion that the increase in sin *caused* the increase in grace. Thus Paul poses the hypothetical question that such a person might ask: "Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?" (6:1)

Paul's strong response to this question ("By no means!" or "May it never be!") indicates the hypothetical suggestion is a perverse misinterpretation of the situation. Those who "died to sin" should not go on "living in it" (vs. 2). *Death* to sin does not result in *living* in sin!

Notice that Paul uses the past tense, "*died* to sin." When did this happen? In the sense of personally appropriating it, Paul connects death to sin with our Christian baptism. Since he is writing to Christians, he can make his point by asking the Roman believers (and us) to reflect on the significance of a public identification with Christ which has already occurred through baptism. What is the significance of Christian baptism?

To identify oneself as associated with Christ, as a Christian, means to identify oneself as joined with Christ in his death on the cross and in his resurrected life (vss. 3-11). Baptism says "Jesus' death was for me, and his life is for me." The key thing to note is that by our identification with Christ we are accepting an already-existing reality: there already exists an effective and available death-to-sin; there already exists an

effective and available life-to-God. These realities exist in Christ, and by our confession of Jesus as Savior and Lord (which we confess by an action in baptism, just as we confess it by words in prayer and worship), we say yes to these realities which existed before we acknowledged them. So when does death to sin occur? By Christian baptism, we confess that it has *already* occurred. We are *not causing* it to be true; we are acknowledging that it is true, that it has been true since Jesus died on the cross.

It is also true that the significance of Jesus' death has to be accepted personally for its effect to occur in our lives, but our acceptance does not empower his death to be effective. Our acceptance, rather, allows the already-existing effectiveness to work in our lives. So, a second answer to the question ('When does death to sin occur?') could rightly be said to be "conversion" or "being born again," but that personal appropriation of an already-existing reality is not the most basic foundation of the Christian's life. The truly unshakable foundation is what God has already done in Christ. From our conversion on, we build on the foundation of what God has done. His *deed*, not our *decision*, is the foundation. Our decision, important as it is, could not have happened without his deed. (A simple illustration: Does your decision to plug in the lamp create electric power?)

Notice that our union with Christ in his death is not an end in itself. It is the *necessary* means to another end: being united with Christ in his life. We were "buried with him by baptism into death, *so that* . . . we too might walk in newness of life" (vs. 4). The purpose is life, but the means is death. The purpose is life in right relationship with God, but that must mean death to sin. If sin separates us from God, there must be a death to the separation in order for the life-giving fellowship to happen. We cannot choose to share Jesus' life without sharing his death to sin.

That means, in other words, that I must see Jesus' death as *for me* but also as *my death*. (See also Gal. 2:19-20—"I have been crucified with Christ"; also 2 Cor. 5:14—"all died." In theological terms, Jesus died as both my substitute and as my representative.) Notice the past tense in vs. 6—my "old self *was* crucified with him." Jesus did for me what I could not do for myself, not so that I could *avoid* the death to sin but so that I could *endure* the death to sin and emerge into new life *with him*. In this way, his death *is* my death and his life *is* my life. This provision was made "once for all" (vs. 10) in the sense of "for all time."

Jesus was not, of course, dying for his own sins; he had none. But he had already taken on the reality of our humanity (in the incarnation); on the cross he took on the full burden and consequence of our sins—he died. Thus his death was "to sin" (vs. 10) in the sense of "with regard to sin" or "for sin."

Now the life Jesus lives, "he lives to God," i.e., "for God," for God's purposes, in God's presence. As the one who is fully divine *and* fully human, Jesus radically re-directed human living—loosing it from the hold of sin and freeing it to be directed toward God's purposes—"dead to sin and alive to God." The re-directing of human life away from sin's power and toward God's purposes was accomplished by Jesus Christ "once for all." In light of that finished work, we are told by Paul in vs. 11 to see ourselves also as "dead to sin and alive to God *in Christ Jesus*."

Jesus' life as my life is both a present and a future reality. The "newness of life" (vs. 4) is meant to be experienced now in freedom from slavery to sin (vs. 6). We are told to "consider" or "reckon" ourselves as "dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." This is how we need to think of ourselves. (The word translated "consider" or "reckon" is the same word used in 4:3 and elsewhere in connection with God reckoning Abraham to be righteous because of his faith.) Thinking of ourselves in this new way will lead to new ways of living, as the next section emphasizes.

6:12-23—Choice of Masters

Verse 12 begins to show us how to live out the truth of what Paul has said in vss. 1-11. In fact you could say that application begins in vs. 11 (where the NIV begins a new paragraph), because "consider" is actually a command, and you have to start seeing yourself differently before you can really start acting differently. But for our purposes here (and following the lead of most English versions), we have put vs. 11 with vss. 1-10, and let vs. 12 begin the second half of this chapter. And there is a logical consistency in that division, since the first eleven verses serve to provide the basis for the instructions given in the rest of the chapter. The word "therefore" at the beginning of vs. 12 shows that Paul intends what comes next to be the response to what he has just finished saying.

The logical relationship of vss. 12-23 to the previous section is vital to our understanding. Here we receive commands, imperatives, concerning our responsibility to say 'no' to sin and 'yes' to God. To understand such *imperatives* properly, however, we have to see them as responses to the *indicatives*, the statements of fact, in the first eleven verses of the chapter. The *decisions* we make regarding the imperatives (vss. 12-23) must be based on the truth of the *declarations* in vss. 1-11.

We will never be able to do the *imperatives* unless we draw our strength from the *indicatives*. We will never be able to keep the commands until we know what the provisions are and how to appropriate them. The difference between trying to produce what is required and appropriating what is provided—that is the difference between defeat and victory in Christian living. We need also to remember that vss. 12-23, if heeded, will not make vss. 1-11 true. But if vss. 1-11 are true and we let them apply to our lives—how we see ourselves and how we respond—then vss. 12-23 will be lived out in Christian growth in holiness. (Full discussion of how this happens will have to include the work of the Holy Spirit in ch. 8.)

vs. 12: "Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies"—Notice that this is not a statement of fact, nor is it a prediction of some automatic occurrence in the future. It is a command, an instruction, which calls for our obedient response. It is a *choice* for us to make and to follow through with action (based on the previous statements of fact concerning Christ's death and our acceptance of its significance).

From the fact that Christians have to be instructed on matters of behavior, and from the fact that we have to exercise choice and direct our actions according to those choices, we can draw this fairly obvious conclusion about the subject of "death to sin": it has to keep happening. So a third answer to our question ('When does death to sin occur?') begins to emerge. Death to sin happens in the choices we make frequently, perhaps daily, to follow God's ways.

Proper balance on this point depends on orienting those daily decisions to the once-for-all-time death of Jesus on the cross. Our daily choices will not make Jesus' death effective; rather his death can make our choices effective. The truth of the cross is not based on our choices; our choices are based on the truth of the cross.

The choices that are appropriate and possible because of the cross are to stop letting sin dominate and control our lives and, instead, to present our bodies to God to serve his righteous purposes (vss. 12-13). Even though our bodies are still mortal (still subject to physical death as a consequence of sin's effects—see Rom. 8:10), they are appropriate "instruments of righteousness" which should no longer be used as "instruments of wickedness." It is not appropriate for a Christian to allow any sin to have dominion over his or her life (vs. 14), since we have been freed from its hold by Jesus' death (vss. 6-7). (At this point, Paul also connects our freedom from sin's dominion with no longer being "under law but under grace" (vs. 14). Associating freedom from sin with freedom from the law raises questions which Paul addresses in ch. 7.)

Being delivered from sin's domination and being out from under the law could lead someone to think that sin is no longer a danger, that it doesn't really matter anymore. Paul raises that possibility in vs. 15, only to refute it with great emphasis (using the same pattern as in vss. 1-2.) It is true, of course, that a Christian's freedom from the dominion of sin does not mean she or he no longer has the option to sin. A Christian can still commit a sin out of weakness or even out of rebellion. But to commit sin still has consequences, as Paul points out in vs. 16, with irrefutable logic.

You are serving the one you obey. If you are serving sin, sin still has consequences, ultimately leading to death. Jesus' work on the cross was not to change the deadly nature of sin, but to break its hold on us. We do not have to sin, but we can. But if we do, sin still produces what it always has.

An illustration of this might be to imagine you're on a train headed toward Chicago. As a passenger, you don't have the power to stop the train or to change its destination. But if someone else, with the necessary authority, stopped the train, allowed you to get off, and handed you the keys to a waiting automobile and said, "Head back toward Tulsa," you would be free to do so. But you could get in the car and head in the same direction you had been going, toward Chicago. Going in that direction is still going toward Chicago. To get back to Tulsa, you have to head the car in the right direction. Being released from your imprisonment on the train has not changed the consequences of going in that direction; it has released you from *having* to go that way.

This is only an illustration, and it cannot do justice to all the dynamics of being a Christian indwelt by the Holy Spirit. But the point of the illustration, though simple, is quite important. Being set free from the dominion of sin has not changed the fact that sinful decisions and acts bring life-damaging consequences. Unless checked and changed, deliberately going against the will of God will bring death in some way, in some area of our lives, and possibly (though some do not believe this) ultimate separation from God. (Hebrews 6:4-6 and 2 Peter 2:20-21 are two passages which indicate that it is possible, if not easy, for a genuine believer in Christ to persist in disobedience to the point of irretrievable loss.)

Just as one's decision to accept the truth of the cross does not empower the cross to deliver, neither does one's decision to refuse the life-changing power of the cross dis-

empower the cross. But to refuse the power of the cross persistently is to court the disaster of losing the opportunity of allowing that power to save us (and only God could say when this point might be reached for any individual).

If we need to be warned that sinful choices bring negative consequences (even for believers in Christ), we also need to be encouraged that godly choices bring positive consequences. Sin leads to death, but obedience leads to righteousness (vs. 16). Paul gives thanks to God that the believers in Rome had in fact been following the path of obedience to God. He says they had become "slaves of righteousness" (vs. 18), although he immediately apologizes for using a term which seems a bit inappropriate.

We are not "slaves" of righteousness in the sense that we have no choice but to obey God's will. Sometimes we almost wish we (or others) did not have the choice to disobey, but we do. God's plan from the beginning of creation was for human beings to exercise responsible choice in obeying him. If our obedience became automatic whenever we became Christians, we would perhaps escape many of the struggles we have with ourselves and with others, but we would not be the creatures God created us to be; we would be machines.

Paul's point in using the term "slaves of righteousness" is to make the contrast stark and vivid. Once we were "slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity"; now we should serve "righteousness," resulting in "sanctification" (vs. 19). Once we were "slaves of sin," with no necessary care for righteousness (vs. 20). But now, "freed from sin" we have a genuine choice to serve righteousness. But what if we choose not to serve righteousness? Then, by default, we will be serving sin, for there is no third alternative. If you act like sin's servant, then you are *de facto* a servant of sin, not by necessity imposed on you but by your choice.

Thus, although it seems somewhat strange, even to Paul, to speak of being a "slave to righteousness," such an expression makes clear exactly what the alternatives are: serve righteousness and grow in sanctification (vs. 22) or serve sin and move toward death (vs. 21). Serve sin and get the "wages" it pays—death; or serve God and receive not earned wages but "the free gift of God," which is "eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (vs. 23).

Possible questions for discussion:
Some questions adapted from LessonMaker software from NavPress.

1. What does baptism symbolize about our relationship to Christ? (6:2-4)

2. What are the symptoms of a person in slavery to sin?

3. How does sin dominate a person's life? (6:16-18)

4. What causes a person to be a slave to sin?

5. What are the benefits and pleasures of righteous living?

6. In what ways is our relationship to God not like slavery?

LESSON 5
ROMANS 7:1-8:13
WHERE THERE'S A WILL THERE'S A WAY

Context in the Book of Romans

Since the beginning of ch. 5, Paul has been expounding "will live" (from Hab. 2:4, quoted in Rom. 1:17, "the righteous by faith will live"). In ch. 5, the main point was that the new life is a gift from God in Christ, which overcomes Adam's legacy of sin and death. In ch. 6, the main point was that the new life is to be aimed toward sanctification. To continue in a lifestyle of sin is inconsistent and incompatible with the new life because sin brings death, not life.

Especially in the last half of ch. 6, the importance of our daily choices was emphasized. In ch. 7, however, we uncover a problem with human choice: our will is inadequate to the task. This inadequacy is so powerfully described that if we stop with ch. 7, we will be left with a seemingly hopeless assessment of our situation. We can deal *honestly* yet *hopefully* with the *problem* described in ch. 7 only if we continue to read into ch. 8 to see God's *provision*.

If we take ch. 7 alone we will probably feel a great despair in our inability to do what Paul has already told us to do in ch. 6. If we skip ch. 7 and jump over into ch. 8, we will not fully appreciate what God does for us through the work of the Holy Spirit. Thus, for this lesson, we will look at chs. 7 and 8 (at least the first part) together. We will come back to ch. 8 in the next lesson to deal more adequately with some of its great themes.

Romans 7:1-6—Death Frees from Law's Jurisdiction

The first six verses of this chapter continue to build on a central idea of ch. 6—we have died with Christ and been raised to new life. An implication of this death is that we have been freed from the law that previously had jurisdiction over us. For an illustration of the law's jurisdiction coming to an end through death, Paul uses the law pertaining to marriage.

As an illustration, every detail of the analogy cannot be pressed. For instance, in the illustration the woman who *survived* was freed from the law by the death of her husband; in Paul's application, those freed from the law are those who have been crucified with Christ. Also, although he does not say so explicitly, Paul seems to portray our previous 'marital status' as being 'married' to the law. When we died *with Christ*, we died *to the law* (vs. 4). The main point, however, is clear: death ends the law's jurisdiction. By identification with Christ's death (in baptism, 6:4), and by being joined to him in his resurrected life, we are freed from obligation to the law; we are free to be 'married' to Christ ("belong to," 7:4). We are not being disloyal to God's law (which would be spiritual 'adultery'); our obligation to it has ended with our death (and new life) in Christ.

The 'old marriage' to the law is over; the 'new marriage' to Christ has begun. But from this declaration confusion about the nature of the law might arise, especially if you have previously held the Law of Moses in the highest esteem (as Paul had, as a trained Jewish rabbi). The "fruit for death" produced in our previous life was the work of "our sinful passions, *aroused by the law*" (vs. 5). In contrast, now that we have been

"discharged from the law" (vs. 6), we can "bear fruit for God" (vs. 4). How can it be that God's law is so closely connected with the deadly effects of sin, so closely that *death to the law* and *death to sin* are one and the same death? How is it that "the old written code" (of the law) enslaved us, in contrast to the freedom of "the new life of the Spirit"?

We cannot feel the urgency of this question the way Paul did. Perhaps you can appreciate the revolution that had happened in Paul's thinking if you go through all his epistles and count the number of times he says "in Christ" or "in him" or "through Christ" or other words to that effect. After you see how central Jesus Christ was to all his preaching, teaching, and his own relationship with God, realize then that the place now occupied by Christ was once occupied by the Torah, the law. Before his conversion, Saul of Tarsus was *Torah-centered*; after his conversion, he was *Christ-centered*. We who have never been Torah-centered the way he was will not feel strongly about the issue that occupies Paul's intense interest in the next section: What is this strange relationship between God's law and human sin? (In contrast, because of our time's interest in psychology, we will identify quite easily with Paul's description of inner turmoil.)

Romans 7:7-25—Clarification about the Law's Negative Effect

If death to sin is also death to the law, can we equate sin with the law? Should we say "that the law is sin?" (vs. 7) "By no means!" Paul responds, again using the pattern of 6:1-2, 15. The law of God cannot possibly be *identified as sin*, for the law of God serves to *identify sin*.

The example Paul uses is the command not to covet (vs. 7). Perhaps he could have used another commandment just as easily, but this particular law is especially appropriate for the discussion that follows because Paul addresses the internal conflict which the law identifies but cannot cure. Of all the 10 commandments, perhaps the tenth ("You shall not covet," Exod. 20:17) most clearly addresses the attitude of the heart, and not just external actions. In fact, nothing seems to come quite so 'naturally' to us as coveting (when do children learn the word "mine"?). Precisely what comes 'naturally' to us has the greatest need for an outside, objective standard of evaluation by which to determine its rightness or wrongness. (This is part of the error of many in our society, and in the church—to think that because something seems natural to us it must be okay with God, maybe even his purposeful will. The truth is that we need to be told what is right by something other than our feelings.)

Paul has already answered his question (Is the law sin?) by saying, "No, because the law shows me what sin is." But the relationship between sin and the law is still a matter of great concern, so he proceeds to examine it further. Not only did the law *identify* sin, it *intensified* sin. Sin took advantage of the law's presence to grow even bigger.

Still using the 10th commandment to illustrate, Paul says that "sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness" (vs. 8). It's almost as if an X-ray, which identified the broken bone, also made the break worse! The law has acted like an X-ray to reveal the hidden problem (coveting), but the revelation has caused the coveting to increase! The sin was already there but unrecognized. While unrecognized, it still produced death ultimately, but its hiddenness kept it from doing its worst work, which is to alienate the human conscience from God (cf. 5:13). That's what

Paul means by saying, "Apart from the law sin lies dead. . . . but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died" (7:8-10).

[The effect Paul describes—sin sprang to life and I died—can perhaps be understood by remembering how we first became aware of the difference between right and wrong. We probably first recognized we had a conscience when we had a bad one! For most people, if not all, the awakening of the conscience has followed the pattern established by Adam and Eve—we felt guilty or ashamed for something we had done.]

What an ironic and tragic reversal of expectations! The commandment that "promised life" is heavily implicated in bringing me death (vs. 10). Was it the law that killed me? No, at least not in the sense that we could call the law a murderer. But it could be called the murder weapon, "for sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me" (vs. 11). The law did not deceive or kill; sin did and used the law to do it. Thus Paul can answer his question (Is the law sin?) with emphasis: "The law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good" (vs. 12). The law itself is not evil, but it reveals evil's presence and shows just how evil sin is—evil and powerful enough to use the holy, just, and good commandment to deceive and kill me (vss. 12-13).

Here is the problem which the law uncovers, and which Paul will continue to explore throughout the rest of this chapter: *Instruction in righteousness does not empower us to be righteous.* Rather, instruction in righteousness reveals how unrighteous we are. This is the reason Paul could say, as he did in 3:20, "by works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin" (NASB).

There is an essential incompatibility problem between human beings and the law of God. Paul puts it this way in 7:14—"the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh [fleshly], sold into slavery under sin." At this point some interpreters feel Paul must be describing his life before conversion to Christ, since he had just in the previous chapter declared that we were now free from slavery to sin (see 6:20). Other interpreters, however, are just as persuaded that the struggle Paul describes in 7:7-25 is the struggle of someone who has been born again but not fully submitted to God's Spirit. For centuries, scholars have debated whether 7:7-25 describes Paul's life as a Christian or his life before meeting Christ, or whether "I" in these verses is meant to refer to Paul himself or just to people in general. These are interesting questions, but we always need to be careful to compare our questions and issues with the ones the scriptural writers are addressing.

First of all, it should be noted that Paul's purpose in ch. 7 is not to describe human nature, whether of a Christian, a Jew, or a pagan. Paul is more concerned to defend the law of God against a possible allegation that it is the root of human problems. Ultimately Paul's purpose is to identify "another law" as the root of our problem—"the law of sin that dwells in my members" (vs. 23). The psychological insights we find in Paul's words are probably of greater interest to us than they were to Paul; conversely, we are not as interested in defending the Mosaic Law as he was.

It is often a mistake to let ourselves be trapped in an 'either-or' debate in theological matters, when 'both-and' may turn out to be answer (e.g., *either* Paul is describing an unregenerate person *or* someone who has been born again). Who can deny that true Christians at times experience the kind of frustrations described in Rom. 7:7-25?

It is also true that pious Jews and even moral people of no particular religion at all are as capable of doing good as the man Paul describes here. I suggest that Paul is not trying to describe either a Christian or a non-christian, nor is he trying to describe a 'carnal' Christian as opposed to a 'sanctified Christian.' Rather he is describing the situation of anyone—Christian or otherwise—who depends on the law of God to deal with the problem of sin. Anyone who does that will find that the law of God uncovers "another law" within, stronger because it is entrenched in our very being—the law of indwelling sin. And the whole point is that it's going to take more than instruction in the law of God to deal effectively with the law of sin and death (see Rom. 8:3).

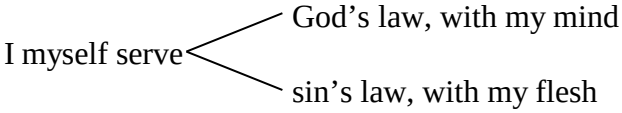
You can see the key to the difference between the perspective of the man described in ch. 7 and the perspective of ch. 8 by making fairly simple observations: How many times does Paul use "I" or "me" or "in me" in 7:14-24? How many times in the same verses does he refer to "in Christ"? Now look at ch. 8, which immediately begins to focus on life "in Christ," and "in the Spirit," on life "according to the Spirit," and having "Christ in you." In various expressions and phrases, the focus in ch. 8 is constantly on life *in Christ*, while the focus in the last part of ch. 7 is on the hopeless struggle *in me*.

The focus of 7:7-25 is on the interaction between and among *sin*, God's *law*, and "*me*." Paul mentions Christ again only in vs. 25, in answer to the despairing question, "Who will rescue me?" Even then, he pauses in the last part of 7:25 to summarize the situation he has described in vss. 14-23: "with my mind" I can choose to serve the law of God, "but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin."

The turmoil within is the intolerable situation of having "I" on both sides of the conflict. The emphasis of the Greek text in vs. 25 could be expressed by saying it this way:

"*I myself*" serve God's law
(with my mind I know that I should);
"*I myself*" serve sin's law
(with my flesh, which refuses to be controlled by my mind).

More simply, that last sentence of ch. 7 could be diagrammed:



The horrifying discovery made possible by the law of God is the existence of "another law . . . the law of sin that dwells in my members" (vs. 23). "I" am indwelt by a law that will kill me. The law of God can show me the existence of that murderous law of sin, but the law of sin is so strong that it even uses God's good law to destroy me.

The conflict and the horror cannot be blunted by telling ourselves something like the following: "Well, it's not the real me that does the sin, it's sin dwelling in me that's responsible" (vss. 17 and 20, taken by themselves without due attention to the total context, can sound like that). Such a false refuge completely misses the point of Paul's

description. The precise point is that the law of God reveals the 'real me' to be indwelt by the law of sin. It *is* the 'real me' that wants to do right; it *is* the 'real me' that cannot do it—that is, if by 'real me' is meant 'me apart from life in Christ.'

Yet another way of putting this might be helpful. The human will has become hopelessly infected by the desires of the flesh, which often run contrary to our best interests, when understood in our better moments of sanity. This infected will cannot cure itself by the exercise of willpower. The will can desire to be delivered from this bondage (indeed *must* desire it, in order to accept deliverance when it's offered), but the infected will is incapable of self-deliverance. Logically and theologically, this is because the root of the problem to begin with was rebellion, disobedient self-will (Romans 1:21).

If self-will is the problem, further exercise of self-will cannot be the solution. This is a key part of how indwelling sin uses the law to deceive and kill us (7:12). The law of God tells me what to do; self-will says "okay, I'll do it," oblivious to the real problem until experience reveals it: Self-will (by definition and nature) cannot submit to God's law (8:7). When it boasts that it can, and tries to prove it, it only shows how blind it is to its own fatal corruption.

Only when this corruption of the human will is revealed can the true solution be fully appreciated, for we seem to be determined to save ourselves until we become convinced that we cannot do it. As the truth of Romans 7 becomes real to us (which for most Christians, I believe, is a realization that continues to grow after our conversion, even though it may have begun before our conversion), the truth of Romans 8 becomes more precious to us.

Romans 8:1-13—God's Indwelling Spirit Overcomes Indwelling Sin

Immediately when we enter ch. 8 we encounter a completely different tone. The contrasts between the two chapters are several:

chapter 7	***chapter 8***
in me, condemnation	in Christ, no condemnation
law of sin and death	law of the Spirit of life
indwelling sin	indwelling Spirit
me + God's law = death	me + God's Spirit = life
(God's law abused by sin)	(sin's law defeated by God's Spirit)
"I can't win"	"I can't lose" (in Christ) [better: "we can't lose"]
"Wretched man that I am!"	"Abba! Father!"
"Who will deliver me	"Who shall separate us
from this deadly trap?"	from God's love?"
hopeless conflict within	hope-filled confidence in God
trying (failing) to be good	celebrating God's goodness
victory of sin over me	victory of Christ over sin in me
frustration	fulfillment

"No condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" is a complete reversal of the seemingly inescapable condemnation in ch. 7. The difference is profound, but let us not be blinded to what persists into ch. 8—the conflict with sin. Sin's deadly nature has not

been changed—if you live by the flesh you will die (8:6, 13). What has changed is not the nature of sin, nor our vulnerability. The change is from reliance on human will to reliance on divine indwelling. This does not mean human will has become unimportant, but it does mean its limitation has been exposed. Now by an act of our human will, we can acknowledge this truth about our wills and receive the salvation offered in God's will, the salvation which our wills could not achieve.

Another thing that has not changed is God's will for us to do his will. God has not decided that human will and human behavior no longer matter. Rather, God has acted decisively to enable human behavior to be transformed. This is made clear by careful attention to the wording of the first four verses of ch. 8:

vss. 1-2—There is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus, *for* [because] the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus sets us free from the law of sin and death. Paul does *not* say, "There is no condemnation because human behavior no longer matters." The law of sin within, described in ch. 7, has had its hold on us broken. If we sin now, we cannot say that it is because no deliverance is available. Within us (in our own strength) there is still not the power to say no to sin, but in Christ there is.

The overcoming of one 'law' by another can be helpfully illustrated by the way the law of gravity is overcome by the laws of aerodynamics. The laws of aerodynamics have to do with how different wind speeds over and under the wings of an airplane give it 'lift.' The air pressure on the bottom of the wing is relatively greater than the pressure on the top of the wing (because of the shape of the wings and the airspeed). When humans learned how to harness this 'law,' we became 'free,' in a relative sense, from the law of gravity. The law of gravity was not revoked; it was overcome. (This would likewise be illustrated by the thrust of the rockets sending a satellite into space.)

What happens when the law of aerodynamics is no longer being applied? Say, for example, the engines die and airspeed starts to drop. What will the law of gravity have to say about this situation? This scenario could illustrate the fact that our freedom from the law of sin and death is completely dependent on continual reliance on the law of the Spirit of life *in Christ Jesus*. If we start to rely on ourselves instead of on Christ and the Holy Spirit, we find that the law of sin and death will still pull us down, eventually to death if not reversed. The law of the Spirit of life is *in* Christ Jesus.

vss. 3-4—Paul continues the explanation of *why* there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus, and *how* it is that the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set us free from the law of sin and death. All of this new, wonderful reality is *because of what God has done*. Note how vs. 3 begins with "for" (in the sense of "because"). "For God has done what the law . . . could not do." What was it the law could not do? That's what ch. 7 was about! The law of God, though spiritual, could not make me spiritual (7:14). Why? Because it takes the Spirit, not just spiritual things, to make me spiritual.

The law of God could not do what only God himself can do. This, in fact, is the weakness of the flesh which kept the law from securing my salvation. The weakness of the flesh is fatal in the absence of God, but in the presence of God the mortal weakness of the flesh is overcome (8:10-11).

What the law could not do, God has done, through two decisive acts: 1) sending Christ; 2) sending the Holy Spirit. In Christ, God dealt decisively with sin "in the flesh," through the offering of Christ on the cross (cf. 6:10). This act of God was not to excuse sin but to condemn "sin in the flesh" in a definitive way. (Refer back to 3:21-26.) Again observing carefully the grammar, we see that the condemning of sin in the flesh was not an end in itself. There was a goal to achieve beyond the punishing of sin: "*so that* the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (vs. 4).

Jesus' death freed us from bondage to the law of sin and death so that we could live by a different law—the law of the Spirit of life. According to the law of sin which indwelt us (ch. 7), we could not keep the righteous requirements of the law, even if we agreed with it and wanted to obey. According to the law of the Spirit of life, we can fulfill God's will. In bondage to the law of sin, all we could look forward to was death; in fact we were already dead (8:6; cf. Eph. 2:1). According to the law of the Spirit of life, we receive life and peace (8:6).

What does it mean to live according to the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus? It means to be "in the Spirit," to have God's "Spirit in you," to have "Christ in you," to "belong to him" (vss. 9-10). All these expressions refer to the same essential reality, which is to locate one's focus for living on Jesus Christ—the crucified and risen Lord, whose death *and* life are both necessary for my life to be free from sin's dominion.

Jesus' death and life effectively transform me by the presence and ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, to live according to the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus means to *experience* that life now and *expect* the fullness of that life in the future. It will take the future to experience the fullness of that life, since at present I still live with a body subject to death because of sin. Even though that situation still persists with our mortal bodies, it cannot persist indefinitely. The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus demands that even the mortal body cannot ultimately evade the life-giving work of the Spirit (vss. 10-11).

Since we now know that what is in "the flesh" (human living for self-purposes and by self-power, apart from the presence and purposes of God) produces death, and since we know that life, peace, and freedom from condemnation are to be found in Christ, how should we direct our living? We should recognize that we owe "the flesh" nothing (vs. 12), because investing in it brings death (vs. 13). On the other hand, life is found by putting aside the sinful deeds of the body.

The last half of vs. 13 provides the crucial balance needed for victorious Christian living (victorious in the sense that really counts—the victory over sin and death): "if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live." Note first that it must be "*by the Spirit*"; the power relied on must be God's. The futility of trying to live morally by human power has been well described in ch. 7. We have to rely on the presence of God's Holy Spirit.

But note that the responsibility is still ours: "*you* put to death." We are only fooling ourselves if we leave the cleanup work to God and give it no attention, or apply no discipline or efforts toward maturing in our obedience. God will not do for us what he asks us to do. But what he asks us to do, we can only do "in Christ," by the power of the Holy Spirit.

You cannot do God's will without his help, because it is *not God's will* for you to do God's will *without him*. It *is* his will for you to do his will in his presence. The reasons for this go all the way back to the creation of human beings to begin with. God created us first of all not to work for him in his absence but to have fellowship with him. In that fellowship we can do his will, and that includes good works (Eph. 2:10). Outside of that fellowship, works we try to do (supposedly for him) may do someone some good, but they will not achieve the desire of God's heart toward us as his children, nor will they bring us the joy God wants us to have from being partners with him.

Summary

We have tried to cover a lot here, but it is absolutely vital not to take these chapters in isolation from one another. When chs. 6-8 are seen together, we understand that in the gospel of Jesus Christ righteousness is not compromised but made truly possible.

The daily human decisions required in ch. 6 are not rendered meaningless by ch. 7, but are shown to be in need of the power described in ch. 8. The power described in ch. 8 does not make the human decisions unnecessary but meaningful. Your will is necessary but not adequate. Its inadequacy on its own does not make it unnecessary.

If many Christians live Romans 7 more than Romans 8, it is because they are trying to get through on God's *instructions* and don't know how to depend on God's *indwelling*. We need both.

Possible questions for discussion:
Some questions adapted from LessonMaker software from NavPress.

1. What changes a person's relationship to the Law? (7:4-6)

2. What role should God's written law play in a Christian's life?

3. How can the Spirit help us please God in a way that following the Law couldn't?

4. How does awareness of the Law produce death in a person? (7:13)

5. How can knowing that God has achieved the ultimate victory over sin affect your prayers, thoughts, and attitudes?

LESSON 6
ROMANS 8
THE HOLY SPIRIT LEADS

Context in the Book of Romans

The new life in Christ has been the main subject since 5:1. Chapter 6 exhorted us to live out this reality through daily obedience to God rather than sin. Chapters 7 and 8 taken together (as in the previous lesson) show us that the Christian life as God intended is not possible without constant reliance on the presence and power of God's own Spirit, since the human will by itself is incapable of doing what God wants. It is not God's will for you to do his will apart from his presence. This lesson will focus more on the various blessings that come with the presence of the Holy Spirit.

In many respects, this chapter provides the most comprehensive teaching on the work of the Holy Spirit in the entire Bible. Other passages provide information and instruction not given in Rom. 8 (for example, the discussion of various miraculous manifestations in 1 Cor. 12 and 14), but no chapter gives a more thorough exposition of the most basic work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's most basic work is not the miraculous and spectacular manifestations of power and wisdom, important as those are. The most basic work of the Holy Spirit is to enable our relationship with God and to make us aware of that relationship. Awareness of relationship with God is most basic because it is both the goal of and the context for experiencing all the other works of the Spirit, including the spectacular and obviously miraculous.

The title of this lesson is "The Holy Spirit Leads," which can serve as a useful way to summarize the several aspects of the Spirit's ministry described by Paul in this chapter. The Holy Spirit leads us—

1. to follow God's ways, in the fight against sin
2. to call God our Father, and to live in that reality
3. to place our ultimate hopes in God's completion of what he has already begun in us
4. to pray, at depths beyond our ability to articulate in human speech
5. to have unshakeable confidence in God's commitment to us, as revealed in Christ

Romans 8:1-13—God's Indwelling Spirit Overcomes Indwelling Sin

This passage was discussed in the previous lesson, where we focused on how the Holy Spirit enables us to overcome sin in ways the law could not do. That is only part of the Spirit's ministry, however. To say that it is "only part" is not to diminish the significance of it, for truly the Spirit's power to deliver us from the grip of sin is nothing less than the power to deliver us from death—spiritual death now and physical death ultimately. See especially vss. 6, 10, 11, as discussed in last week's lesson.

In connection with this, some further comment is needed with regard to the translation of vs. 10. In the NRSV, it reads: "But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness." Comparing this with other translations, however, you will find some differences with regard to "the Spirit"

(Greek: *pneuma*). Some read "the spirit" (NASB); some have "your spirit" (NIV), or "your spirits" (RSV). The KJV agrees with the NRSV and the ESV: "the Spirit."

The difference among the translations concerns whether the reference is to God's Spirit or to the human spirit. Just from the wording in the Greek text it could be translated either "the Spirit" or "the spirit." Either translation makes sense in the context, which makes it more difficult to decide which reading is correct (in the sense of what Paul intended to say; both are correct in the sense of saying something true). [A similar difficulty confronts translators in other places in the NT, e.g., Rom. 7:6; 8:13; Gal. 3:5; 5:17.] Since either translation would be "true," the difference might seem inconsequential, but there are important reasons, in my view, to insist that Paul was referring to God"s Holy Spirit here and not to the human spirit.

First, Paul does *not* say that "the spirit is *alive*" (adjective) but "the Spirit is *life*" (noun). The attractive contrast with "the body is dead" has influenced some translators toward "the spirit is alive," but that is to miss the point. The Holy Spirit *is life* for us even while still in these mortal bodies (vs. 10), and he is our assurance of future life in a transformed body (vs. 11). Both now and forever, we look to the Holy Spirit to give us life, to be our life; we do not look to our flesh, to our own abilities to make, take, or produce life. Not even our renewed human spirits can give life to our bodies to make them immortal. Only "the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life" can do that (wording from the Nicene Creed). When we have our new bodies, it will be God's gift, by his Spirit, not our production (by our spirits).

Second, Paul does not mention the human spirit in this chapter until vs. 16: "the Spirit bearing witness with our spirit." Paul's emphasis throughout this passage is on *the significance of the Holy Spirit's presence* in our lives. It is not on the significance of a difference in our spirits (as humans), although surely we (and Paul) could talk about such things. Neither is Paul particularly concerned here with a contrast between the aliveness of our spirits versus the deadness of our bodies, although that is true in important ways. The point is the difference *God's Spirit* makes in our lives, now and forever.

Indeed, Paul is quite blunt in saying that the presence or absence of "the Spirit of Christ" determines whether a person does or does not "belong to him" (vs. 9). It is not possible to be a Christian without God's Holy Spirit. We cannot make the most basic confession of belief in Christ without the work of the Holy Spirit enabling us (1 Cor. 12:3; cf. Rom. 10:9-10). One might be able intellectually to affirm the claims of Christian teaching, but one cannot *be* in Christ, cannot *be* a Christian without the Holy Spirit, because God's will for us is to be in the kind of fellowship with him which only the presence and testimony of the Holy Spirit can give.

Saying all that does not negate the fact that many genuine Christians (in whom God's Spirit is present) nevertheless need to experience a greater dimension of the Spirit's power ("gifts") or more of the Spirit's effects through the "fruit of the Spirit." Many experience a gradual growth of sensitivity and openness to the manifestations of the Spirit; others experience a dramatic increase in the work of the Spirit through being "filled with the Spirit" or "baptized in the Spirit" (terms used variously by Christians today; we'll not try to sort that out in this lesson, since Paul does not deal directly with such experiences in this chapter). All of us, regardless of past experiences, need to be open continually to more of the work of the Holy Spirit. The important point for this

lesson is that, according to Paul (vs. 9), all of us who belong to Christ have received the Spirit, who can be called the Spirit of life (vs. 2), the Spirit of Christ (vs. 9), the Spirit of God (vss. 9, 14), the Spirit of adoption or sonship (vs. 15), the Holy Spirit (9:1), or even the Spirit of Jesus (Acts 16:6-7). The same Holy Spirit is referred to by all these names or descriptions; he is the same Holy Spirit who gives us our personal relationship with Jesus as Lord and God as our Father. Without this Spirit, we do not have the life God wants to give and, quite naturally, cannot live the Christian life.

I do not wish to belabor the point unnecessarily, but it is important because salvation ultimately (in every aspect of our being) is not *based on* being a different kind of human (i.e., new spirit, new mind, new body, etc.). Being a different kind of human is a *product of salvation* (including justification, sanctification, and future glorification). The *cause* for the present continuation and future consummation of salvation is not some *thing* in *me* (or some aspect of my being, such as a regenerated spirit). The cause, rather, is the will, the work, the love, the grace of *God personally present*, through the finished work of the cross and resurrection and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit.

[All of these comments could equally be made about the translation of *pneuma* in vs. 13, but as far as I know all the major English translations rightly see there a reference to the Holy Spirit, and thus translate as "Spirit." And surely it is by the *Spirit's* power and not our *spirit's* power that we put to death the sinful deeds of the body.]

Romans 8:14-17—God's Spirit Tells Us That We Are God's Children

Verse 14 begins with the word "for" or "because." Therefore it should be read as a continuation of the thought in vs. 13, where we are told that life is the outcome of putting "to death the deeds of the body" by the power of the Holy Spirit dwelling within us. When this connection between vss. 13 and 14 is recognized, we see that being "led by the Spirit" is another way of describing what we do when we put to death the sinful selfishness of the flesh. The Spirit leads us to say 'yes' to God and 'no' to sin. That's the way children of God live, empowered and led by God's Holy Spirit. The only alternative to being led by the Spirit is to be led by the flesh, which leads to death. In the end, it's "led by the Spirit" or "dead" by the flesh.

We need to point out that being "led by the Spirit" is the privilege (actually the necessity) of every child of God. It is not some esoteric experience reserved for the spiritual elite. Being "led by the Spirit" is how you can live as a Christian. You might compare the only other text in which Paul uses this expression, Galatians 5:18, which is also in a context of being empowered to say 'no' to sin and 'yes' to God, resulting in the "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22-23).

God's Spirit gives us the freedom to be what God wanted us to be when he first created humanity. The Spirit does not produce slavery but awareness of sonship ("spirit of adoption"). The obedience which the Spirit enables is not the obedience of a slave (without choice, without joy, without personal interest in the outcome). It is the obedience of sons and daughters—those cared for and loved by the Father, those who are committed to the best interests of the Father, just as he is to theirs. Likewise, the cry "Abba! Father!" is not an expression we mechanically repeat by following instructions in the Bible or the examples of other people. We cry "Abba!" because deep inside we know God as our Father.

It is often pointed out that Jesus was the first to address God in prayer as "Abba," a personal term of intimate, familial trust. (See Mark 14:36; Gal. 4:6. God had been spoken of as Israel's father, but not thus addressed in prayer by individuals.) We are not merely imitating Jesus' style of prayer, however. We are *entering into his relationship with the Father*. That is part of what it means to be "in Christ": we can pray to the Father with the same kind of trust that Jesus demonstrated while here on earth.

The intimacy of the connection with God is emphasized in these verses. How could it be more intimate than God's "*Spirit* bearing witness with our *spirit"* concerning our relationship? (vs. 16) And not only are we "heirs of God," we are "joint heirs with Christ" (vs. 17). To be Christ's joint heir means to share in what is his, in all that the Father wants to give Christ!

Notice there is a condition attached to this inheritance: "if." To share in Christ's glory, we have to be willing to share in his suffering (vs. 17). This was true in ch. 6, with regard to being identified with Christ in both his cross and his resurrection. In this context, Paul will expand on the future glory and on the present suffering endured while waiting for that glory.

Romans 8:18-25—The Holy Spirit Inspires Real Hope

Paul had earlier connected our experience of the Holy Spirit with the hope we have in the midst of sufferings (5:3-5). What kind of suffering does he mean in 8:18? He does not limit it, in this context, to persecution or other external pressures, although he specifies these things later in the chapter (vss. 35-39). In this context he includes the inner groaning of personal struggles (vs. 23) but also the 'cosmic' groaning of "the whole creation" (vs. 22). He means here *all* "the sufferings of this present time," which all put together "are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us" (vs. 18; cf. 2 Cor. 4:17).

Included in the sufferings would be the pain and difficulties of putting the sinful deeds of the body to death (vs. 13), for sometimes it is truly hard to say 'no' to our selfish desires. The sufferings also include the common frustrations we encounter because of mortal weakness and vulnerability (vs. 23) and the pervasive corruption of the environment (vss. 19-21). Our present circumstances are not what they should be, and thus we need hope.

You'll notice Paul uses the word "hope" several times in these verses (20, 24, 25). Hope in the Bible does not mean wishing for something to be true; rather it means confident expectation. The hope of all creation is for the promised freedom from corruption—not a wish or a preference or a tragic longing, but a confident expectation (vss. 20-21). The positive expectation is illustrated by the image of "groaning in labor pains" (vs. 22). Certainly the labor pains of a woman are real pain, but the pain is directed toward a purpose, expecting a result which will render the pain worthwhile.

Along with the "groaning" of creation (a somewhat poetic way of referring to the disruptions and disharmonies in creation as it presently exists), "we ourselves . . . groan inwardly" (vs. 23). Here the groaning is more literal, for we often do groan or sigh or even cry out with pain, longing for a better reality.

Specifically we long for "adoption," the fullness of sonship to be manifested in our beings. The fullness of all God wants to give us as his children must include "the redemption of our bodies" (vs. 23). The presence of the Holy Spirit in us *now* is the "first fruits" of the *future* completion of our salvation through the transformation of our mortal bodies. Recall that in vs. 15 we read that we already have the Spirit of "adoption." We already know we *are* God's children (vs. 16), but we also know that we still need a resurrection or a transformation of this mortal body, dead because of sin (vs. 10). Only then will we be entirely delivered from the power of death and corruption in every aspect of our being. (See also 1 John 3:2-3.)

Thus hope is a vital element of our salvation. True, we are saved by grace, through faith, but we are also saved "in hope" (vs. 24). Our salvation includes waiting for something we don't yet have, which we don't yet see. We are confident of it, but not yet in possession of it. Because biblical hope is confident expectation based on the faithfulness of God—already established by his presence in our lives by the Holy Spirit—we can "wait for it with patience" or perseverance (vs. 25). We can endure and not give up, because we are confident of the ultimate outcome.

Our confidence about the ultimate outcome is not based on mere theory or "leap-in-the-dark faith" but is actually a function of our present Christian experience. Because we already are God's children, we see ourselves as "heirs" with something to look forward to (vs. 17). The Holy Spirit who gives us life now can be trusted to give us life forever (vss. 10-11). In fact our present experience of the Holy Spirit is called "first fruits," evoking the image of a 'harvest' which has already begun. (With this image you might want to compare 2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; and Eph. 1:13-14, in which our present experience of the Spirit is referred to with the word "first installment" or "pledge" or "guarantee," or some similar word.) This relationship between present experience of the Holy Spirit and confidence for the future reflects a truth seen throughout the Bible and found in every individual's life: *our experience shapes our expectations*. The better we know God in this life, the less our fears about meeting him eventually! (See also 1 John 2:28; 3:17.)

Romans 8:26-30—The Holy Spirit Intercedes and Leads in Prayer

The experience of the Holy Spirit for each Christian believer should include 'tuning in' to the Spirit's leadership in our times of prayer. I do not mean by this that we don't need to pray until we feel the Spirit's urging. Prayer needs to be a regular part of our lives. We should no more dare to venture out into the workday without praying than we would if we had not brushed our teeth and combed our hair. Rather, what I mean by 'tuning in' is to be listening as well as speaking to God, to be open to allow the Spirit to re-direct our prayers, to deal with our motives perhaps, to clarify his direction for our lives as well as for our praying.

We need this assistance of the Spirit, for "we do not know how to pray" (vs. 26; literally "what to pray"). We need to be instructed by the Spirit while we are praying; it should not be considered a 'one-way' communication, where we 'place our order' with God. When we learn to listen to the Spirit in prayer, we learn something quite profound: God was praying before we started!

It sounds strange to say God is praying, so let me explain a bit. What we discover, as we 'tune in' to God's Spirit as we pray, is that the Holy Spirit was already expressing the Heavenly Father's desires. As we begin to enter into the Holy Spirit's prayer, we find God's longing for the full restoration of humanity; we learn God's heart for healing—for ourselves and for others. This is the very Spirit of God interceding "for the saints according to the will of God" (vs. 27). The Spirit does this infinitely better than we can because he already knows, fully, what God the Father wants. (Note also that the "mind of the Spirit" in vs. 26 is the same expression used in vs. 6. The Holy Spirit's prayers bring "life and peace.")

The Holy Spirit expresses the desire of God at such depths that often it cannot be put into human language (vs. 26). The desire of God is then expressed with "sighs" or "groans" (NIV) which are "too deep for words." The same word used earlier for our groaning (vs. 23) and for creation's groaning (vs. 22) is used here for the prayer of God's Spirit. The desire for our complete healing and restoration does not start with our pain but with God's love! He wanted to heal us before we knew we needed it. When we started wanting God's deliverance, we were just 'catching on.'

[From what Paul says in 1 Cor. 12 and 14, we could safely say that intercessory prayer by the Spirit includes 'speaking in tongues' as the Holy Spirit enables. From what Paul says in Rom. 8:26, however, we cannot limit such Spirit-led intercession to speaking in tongues. Here it is literally "unspoken" or "unspeakable," "unutterable" or "wordless": ἀλάλητος = *alalētos*, "ah-LA-lay-toss."]

Many people know and quote Rom. 8:28, especially during difficult times. But notice the connection with vss. 26-27, and also with vss. 29-30.

The "good" in vs. 28 is what the Spirit is praying for in vss. 26-27. And what is the Spirit praying for? The details at a given moment may be beyond our comprehension or our ability to speak (vs. 26), but the ultimate goal has been articulated by Paul, under the inspiration of the same Holy Spirit: that we "be conformed to the image" of Jesus (vs. 29). The whole process which God has ordained—calling, justifying, glorifying—is directed toward that purpose.

That God has "predestined" those he "foreknew" is something Christians will probably still be debating until Jesus returns. My own preference is to stay out of the either/or categories in which this question has been argued for centuries by Methodists (and others) against Calvinists. Asking whether this or that individual has been predestined is at best speculation about the mind of God, and not practically helpful. When faced with a decision, we do not ask, "I wonder what I am predestined to do?" Rather, we ask, "What should I do?" That is, we ask about our responsibility, not about our predestined, pre-programmed reaction.

There is a way to think about God's predestining that is very helpful—even for Methodists who weren't predestined to be Calvinists! The predestination of which Paul speaks in this context is really what could be called a 'predestined destination.' Those "who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (vs. 28) are called to become like Christ. This is God's plan, the God-given destiny of everyone in Christ, and God will use every detail of your life experience to bring this about. Even the evil things

(which God does not send, but which his redeeming grace overpowers) will eventually be worked into the pattern in such a way that the whole will fulfill his glorious purposes.

To say that this is the predestined destination is to say that God will not stop until this is accomplished. He will not settle for something less, for some half measure of redemption in which only parts of your being reflect his glory and other parts are beyond redemption. Not with God! Even death has been conquered in Jesus!

The only way God's ultimate purpose for your existence can be thwarted is for it to be refused by the one thing God refuses to destroy: your will. God refuses to destroy it because he created you to have a will. He will not destroy his creation to save it, for that would not be salvation but destruction. God will allow you to destroy yourself, if you insist on your rebellious will instead of using your will to accept his. But God's desire in giving you a will is that you may desire and choose what he desires and chooses for you. (See 2 Pet. 2:20-22; 3:9.)

So the predestining of God does not invalidate your will and your responsibility to choose. It simply but powerfully says that God knows exactly what he wants to do with your unique existence as a person, and he is abundantly capable of achieving what he wants. He is not going to change his mind about what he wants for you. His will is not the problem; our will is the problem. God's will is the assurance, the provision, the promise that what God has done for us in Jesus will not fail to accomplish God's purposes completely and eternally. Our confidence is not self-confidence that we can attain the glory God wants for us; our confidence is in God's revealed will. We have only to go with God, and we know where we are going. We have a predestined destination.

Romans 8:31-39—The Believer's Assurance

The confidence of having a predestined destination is what Paul celebrates for the rest of this great chapter. God is not our enemy, even though we have been his enemies (5:10). God is "for us" (8:31), and no power is greater than God. (That's why you can't get rid of your responsibility to make choices. God, in his sovereignty, has given you a free will. Whether you like it or not, you can't get rid of it!)

Paul asks rhetorically about several categories of negative possibilities. Can any accuser turn God against us? God has already precluded that possibility. Knowing we were sinners, God, the Supreme Judge, has already given us Christ's death and resurrection as pardon and deliverance from our bondage (vss. 31-33). The Judge has already declared his disposition in our case. We know with certainty that this is his disposition toward us because God has raised Christ from the dead (Paul has already explained the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection in chs. 3, 5, and 6, and in 8:3).

Jesus' presence at God's right hand provides our best assurance. Just by being there he "intercedes" (vs. 34) in the sense that he 'makes the case' for our salvation. Jesus is not pleading with the Father to be more merciful than he already wants to be. Rather, the exalted Jesus represents the surety of God's saving purposes for our sake. Indeed, the intercession of Jesus at God's right hand should be connected with the continual intercession of the Holy Spirit which we experience in prayer (vss. 26-27; see also 1 John 2:1; Heb. 7:25; Isa. 53:12). The intercession of Jesus and the Holy Spirit is not to change the mind of the Father but to express the mind of the Father. (Just as God

does not love the people of the world because Jesus came, but Jesus came because God already loved the people.)

Paul continues with still more rhetorical questions about anything that might happen to us (vs. 35). Can tribulation, persecution, distress, physical hunger, or even being killed separate us from God's love in Christ? Even if we appear to be, in the hands of evil men, as helpless "as sheep to be slaughtered" (vs. 36, quoting Psa. 44:22), in reality "we are more than conquerors" (vs. 37). Not death itself, or anything that could happen to us in life, no supernatural beings, nothing now or in the future—nothing, anywhere you look, high or low, has the power to defeat God's love for us, as revealed in Jesus. It is interesting to note that ch. 8 ends with the same emphasis with which it began—"in Christ Jesus." In Jesus, there is "no condemnation," but there is great confidence in God's love.

It has been observed that Paul does not ask, Can sin separate us from God? The answer to that, in an ultimate sense, would have to be 'yes, it can,' but the answer needs to be qualified carefully. The whole point of God's being "for us" is that God is so much "for us" that he has done something decisive about sin, delivering us from its power when we were unable to free ourselves, and even before you and I asked him to do it.

Is God so much "for us" that he ignores sin? No, he is "for us" more than that. To allow sin to infect our being indefinitely would be less loving than God is. God is so much "for us" that he is determined to rid us of its infection. God is against sin, not only because it represents an affront to his holiness (although that is true) but also because it hurts what he loves. And God loves those hurt by sin so much that he sent Christ to die and rise for us, and he sent the Spirit to indwell and transform us. Would God stop at anything to deliver us from that which would destroy us?

A friend of mine, Dr. Bob Stamps, said in my hearing many years ago, "God is not so much against us because of our sins, as he is for us against our sins." Questions about God's disposition toward sin and toward those affected by sin have been settled by the whole counsel of God in Scripture, but most vividly and most decisively by Jesus' death and resurrection. The only question remaining concerns our disposition toward sin and toward God. God is against our sins; God is for us. Are we against our sins? Are we for God?

Possible questions for discussion:
Some questions adapted from LessonMaker software from NavPress.

1. What are some of the sufferings a Christian can experience?

2. What frustrations do Christians feel as they wait for Christ to return?

3. How does the Spirit help us in our weakness? (8:26)

4. What do we learn about God's love for us when we realize that the Holy Spirit helps us even when we cannot pray?

5. How can God produce good results out of bad situations?

6. What is God's intention and plan for each Christian?

7. Why should we feel confident that God is not against us or condemning us? (8:31-34)

LESSON 7
ROMANS 9-11
WHAT ABOUT ISRAEL?

For Paul the questions posed by Israel's unbelief in Jesus as the Messiah are so important that he spends three chapters of Romans discussing it (chs. 9-11). Because this material is some of the most challenging in all of Romans, we cannot hope to explain it fully in the time we have in Sunday School. But through an overview of the main issues, perhaps we can understand why Paul devotes so much attention to this topic.

Context in the Book of Romans

Paul has completed his extended teaching on "the righteous by faith shall live." We could skip chs. 9-11 and go directly to ch. 12 to find exhortations about how to respond to the gospel so thoroughly proclaimed in chs. 1-8. A thorough study of Romans, however, cannot ignore chs. 9-11, for they are essential to a comprehensive understanding of the gospel, which is for "the Jew first, and also the Greek" (Rom. 1:16), and to which "the law and prophets" give witness (Rom. 3:21).

A valid question about context could be raised: Why did Paul choose this place in his letter to insert a protracted discussion of Israel? Perhaps the celebration of the believer's confidence in God's purposes (Rom. 8:31-39) prompted Paul to deal with a possible doubt about the sureness of those purposes. After all, had not God declared his choice of Israel? Why then is Israel apparently missing out on the fulfillment of God's purposes in Jesus? Does Israel's unbelief contradict the steadfastness of God's purposes?

In chs. 9-11, Paul seems to be answering questions like these, which for Paul involved intense personal feelings as well as theological challenges. Before he starts the 'practical' exhortations of chs. 12-15, he has to deal with the question: Why doesn't Israel believe the gospel? Paul's complex answer contains the following key elements:

1. Israel's hardened heart is part of ***God's sovereign plan***
   for their role in the history of salvation (9:1-29).
2. Israel's hardness of heart results from their own ***human choices*** (9:30-10:21).
3. Israel's hardness of heart toward the gospel is
   a. ***partial*** (not all Jews included, 11:1-10);
   b. ***temporary*** (Paul foresees a positive end, 11:11-32);
   c. ***purposeful*** (for the salvation of Gentiles, 11:11-32).

[Special note to the teacher: One class session cannot begin to cover all these chapters, even in a rapid overview. But I would urge you, in any attempt to teach on this section, to include some statement of the three points above. I have included a suggested overhead transparency of these three points (at the end of this lesson) to make this easier for you. Even if only one point can be developed, that one point needs to be seen as one of these. Serious distortion can develop, for example, when people focus only on God's sovereignty and neglect the role of human choice. Frequently the section on God's sovereignty is avoided completely by non-Calvinists—like most of us! When God's sovereignty, human choice, and the temporary, purposeful aspects of Israel's unbelief are

put together, it makes a more coherent picture. Even then, we end up concluding, as Paul did, that the plan of God goes beyond our comprehension!]

Romans 9:1-29—God's Sovereignty and Israel's Unbelief

After a strong expression of grief over Israel's unbelief and a short reference to Israel's great privileges as the focal point of God's revelation and work of salvation (vss. 1-5), Paul moves in vs. 6 to the major issue for ch. 9. What is happening with Israel is *not* a failure of the word or purposes of God (and, thus, not an undermining of the believer's confidence in Rom. 8). Paul proceeds to show from several key OT figures that God's purpose has often involved his sovereign choice in ways humans would not have predicted.

A point of great importance is made in vss. 6-13: Simply *being a physical descendant of Abraham has never meant automatic inclusion as part of God's true people on earth.* "It is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants" (vs. 8).

Ishmael was Abraham's son before Isaac was, but *God's choice* was that the son given through Sarah (by God's promise) would be heir to the blessing already promised to Abraham (vss. 7-9, citing Gen. 21:7 and 18:10). Paul mentions neither Hagar nor Ishmael by name, but the account in Genesis (to which Paul refers) features not only the miraculous fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham but the firmness with which God insisted on doing things his own way. God did not arbitrarily send Ishmael to hell (as far as we know from Gen. 21:13, 18, 22, he was blessed by God in significant ways); but God did not let him be the heir of the blessings promised to Abraham, despite the plea of Abraham! (see Gen. 17:18)

The second example (vss. 10-13) is even more distasteful to our egalitarian ideals. At least in the case of Ishmael and Isaac we could say that one of them had 'the wrong mother.' Jacob and Esau not only had the same father and mother (Isaac and Rebecca); they were twins. Moreover, Esau was regarded as the "elder," in the sense of having first emerged from his mother's womb (Gen. 25:23-26). If anyone should have been given the advantage by reason of birth, it was Esau.

Yet, "even before they had been born or had done anything good or bad" to deserve what eventually came to them, God had spoken: "The elder shall serve the younger" (vs. 12, citing Gen. 25:23). Knowing the rest of the story of Jacob and Esau, we might consider Esau completely undeserving of his birthright and maybe even his father's blessing (Gen. 25:29-34; 27:1-40). But Jacob's behavior in obtaining both the birthright and the blessing was reprehensible, to say the least.

In the history of Jacob and Esau, human beings made choices and received the consequences of those choices. But Paul's point in Rom. 9 is that *God's choice preceded those human choices.* God had already decreed (or predicted, if you please) that Esau would serve Jacob. In the sense that Esau's choices played into Jacob's advantage, Esau did in fact serve Jacob.

In addition, the descendants of the twins were implicated in the divine choice. Jacob's descendants became the nation of Israel. Esau's descendants became the nation of Edom. Israel inherited the promises made to Abraham, including that of being a blessing to all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:1-3). Edom played a role in the history

of Israel, mostly as antagonist. Why? Because of human choices? Of course, but that is not the point here. There was a prior divine choice: "I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau" (vs. 13, citing Malachi 1:2-3, written hundreds of years after the lifetime of Jacob, but describing the enmity and the difference in God's treatment between two nations which originally sprang from twin brothers). ["Hated" could be understood in the comparative sense of "not loved as much." Cf. Luke 14:26.]

The examples of Isaac/Ishmael and Jacob/Esau serve as biblical evidence for Paul's opening statement in this section (vs. 6): "not all Israelites truly belong to Israel." A literal translation is "not all who are of Israel are Israel." You don't get to be part of God's people simply by being born into the right family—not now, not ever. God has always exercised freedom of choice. In the context of Rom. 9-11, that means, if *God has chosen to use Israel's unbelief* at this point in salvation history, he is free to do so and no one can contradict.

We might want to argue the point. Paul anticipates our possible objection: "Is there injustice on God's part?" (vs. 14) Is God unfair? Emphatically rejecting that possibility, Paul cites another passage that shows why God cannot be charged with injustice for showing mercy to one and not to another.

In vs. 15, Paul quotes Exod. 33:19: "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy." God said this to Moses in an interesting context, just after Moses had successfully interceded with God not to destroy Israel after the sin of the golden calf. The LORD told Moses that he had found favor in his sight, "and I know you by name" (Exod. 33:17). Moses, no doubt encouraged by this word, asked for one more thing—to see God's glory (vs. 18). The LORD agreed to reveal his "goodness" and to proclaim his name, "The LORD," in Moses' presence, but he told Moses that he could not see his face (vss. 19-20). That's the setting for the statement which Paul quotes in Rom. 9:15.

In effect God said to Moses: "I have answered your prayer for mercy on Israel. I will grant your request for a greater revelation of myself, though not completely. Yet I want you to know, Moses, that I do all this *because I want to do it*." Whether for Israel, Moses, or anyone else, God's mercy is decided by God's choice, not human coercion, manipulation, or persuasion. (Cf. Amos 7:1-9.)

God is never coerced, not even by the faith and commitment of someone like Moses. If God could be coerced to do the intercessor's bidding, Paul would have tried to work out an exchange with God—forfeiting his own salvation for Israel's sake (Rom. 9:3)! But that is not how it works. Paul can pray for God to show mercy to Israel, but if and when God does so, it will be because God chooses it. That does not mean the human intercessor is meaningless, but it does mean God always does what he *chooses* to do.

Another side of this is perhaps even more difficult for us to accept: God can harden the human heart as part of his overall plan. That's what God did with Pharaoh (Rom. 9:17, quoting Exod. 9:16). God announced to Moses that he would do this. It's true that Exod. 8:15 and 32 mention Pharaoh's hardening of his own heart; he did have some choice in the matter. But the far greater emphasis is on God's part in the process. Exodus 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:20, 27; 11:10; and 14:4, 17 all say that God hardened Pharaoh's heart.

Why did God do this? The quotation from Exodus tells us: "for the purpose of showing my power in you [Pharaoh], so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth"

(vs. 17). Pharaoh's persistent refusal to release Israel led to more opportunities for God to show his greatness *to* Israel and, *through* Israel's history in Scripture, "in all the earth." God hardened Pharaoh's heart as part of the plan to make himself known as the one true God for everyone, including you and me. God hardened Pharaoh's heart as part of a bigger plan *to show mercy* to countless millions, as Exodus became a crucial part of the revelation of God—as the only true God, Lord over creation and mighty to save.

What can you say about God using the hardness of Pharaoh's heart (which God claimed to cause as much as or more than Pharaoh) to help *you* get to know his power and his salvation? Many things, perhaps, but one of them should be "thank you," not to Pharaoh but to God! The real point in Romans, of course, is not about Pharaoh but about Israel. If God has hardened their heart (although not in a way that dissolves human responsibility, see ch. 10), he did so to further his merciful plan to offer salvation to the whole world. Many things, again, we might say about this, or ask about this, but one thing we have to say as recipients of that mercy is "thank you."

To deal with this text fairly, we need to remember that Paul is wrestling with the real question of how Israel's unbelief could be part of God's larger purpose. As he discusses God's sovereignty in the matter, questions about predestination come up. But Paul is not trying to explain predestination in an abstract sense, or even as a point of doctrine. He is trying to understand why his fellow Jews don't believe in Jesus. God's sovereignty is part of the answer.

Nor is Paul asking why this or that *individual* is not a believer. He is dealing with the *nation* of Israel as a whole. Of course it's true that the nation is a collection of individuals, and perhaps Paul would say the same thing about individuals he knows. Nevertheless, to take his statements about the nation and apply them to individuals we know is to go beyond Paul's intention here. That is what the theological tradition of Calvinism has done, I believe, in using Romans 9 to teach that God has sovereignly chosen who will and who will not be a true Christian.

Even when Paul uses individuals from history as examples, he does not say this or that individual was appointed to be 'saved' or 'condemned to hell.' In every instance the issue at stake was the individual's role in the unfolding history of God's plan of salvation while that individual was alive here on earth.

One's participation in God's plan "depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy" (vs. 16). If God chooses not to show mercy to an individual, how can God be faulted? If mercy is mercy, it is owed to no one. If a person has a right to demand mercy, it is not mercy. If God has mercy on one and hardens another, who can accuse God of being unjust for giving one person mercy which was not deserved and giving another what was deserved?

If God has blessed your neighbor, he does not owe you equal treatment. If God ended your life in the next second, you would still be obligated to him for having given you life at all. How strange, yet how common, it is for us to take mercy for granted, to the point that we regard it as our right, what is owed to us.

Incidentally, the biblical principle that "God is no respecter of persons" means that God is not impressed with anyone's social, economic, or political status. Humans tend to give deferential treatment to the rich or powerful; God does not. "God is no

respecter of persons" does not mean that if God answered someone else's prayer for a specific thing he must now do the same for you. What God has done for someone else can be an encouragement to your faith that God *can* do the same for you, but neither the precedent of God's blessing on someone else nor your faith for the same blessing can have any coercive effect on God. When God blesses you, it is not because he wants to treat you as someone else's equal. He blesses you because he wants to bless you. Wouldn't you really prefer to have a gift that someone wants to give you rather than one that must be given in order to avoid unfairness?

Verses 19-29 can be summarized briefly. Being made by God and owing our very existence to God, we humans cannot accuse him of having made us wrong. If God has made an individual or a nation to serve his purpose in a particular way, he has that right. Far from being unfair in his dealings with rebellious people, God has actually shown great patience in allowing their continued existence while they serve his purpose of showing mercy to others (vss. 22-23).

This merciful purpose carries out God's promise in Hosea that those who were not God's people would become his people (vss. 25-26, citing Hos. 2:23; 1:10). Paul applies this promise to the inclusion of Gentiles in the people of God. In the original context of Hosea, the promise had to do with restoring wayward Israel. In either application, the principle is the same: God's people are not those who deserve that status more than others; God's people are those who have received his mercy and love.

Then in vss. 27-29, concluding this section on God's sovereignty, Paul quotes Isaiah's prophecies that there would be only a small remnant of Israel compared with the previous size. If that has happened in Paul's day, it is not the first time. It has never been a guarantee of salvation to be born into Israel—not in Isaiah's day, not in Paul's, not in ours.

Romans 9:30-10:21—Israel's Responsibility for Unbelief

Having made the point that God's word has not failed (9:6), but that somehow Israel's unbelief serves God's sovereign purpose, Paul moves on to describe the other side of the issue: human responsibility. From 9:30 on through ch. 10, Israel's own responsibility for its plight will be described.

Why has Israel not succeeded in the attempt to attain righteousness? "Because they did not strive for it on the basis of faith, but as if it were based on works" (9:32). This wrong approach causes stumbling over "the stumbling stone," which is Christ (9:33; see also 1 Pet. 2:8, which uses this same passage from Isa. 8:14-15).

Israel has "zeal for God, but it is not enlightened" (10:2). Their ignorance concerning "the righteousness that comes from God" could be innocent ignorance, but the fact that "they have not *submitted* to God's righteousness" brings a connotation of willful choice (vss. 3, 4). That connotation becomes explicit later (vss. 18-21).

Romans 10:4 is another key verse in this section. Christ as "the end of the law" has been taken in two different ways. One interpretation says that Christ has *ended* the law as a means of righteousness, replacing it with faith. This interpretation has a significant element of truth, but it runs somewhat against the grain of Jesus' own words about the law in Matt. 5:17: "I have not come to abolish but to fulfill." A better

interpretation, held by most early church fathers, is that "end" in Rom. 10:4 means "*goal*" or "*fulfillment*." The meaning would not be that Jesus did away with the law, but that he achieved and provided what the law pointed toward but could not provide (recall 3:20-21, and the discussion of chs. 7-8, especially 8:4). In other words, "a zeal for God" that is "enlightened" would lead one to submit to God's righteousness in Christ. The only true righteousness must be *submitted* to, for humans cannot "*establish* their own" (vs. 3). The wrong approach to righteousness causes one to stumble over Christ, rather than finding him to be a refuge (9:33).

How we submit to God's righteousness in Christ is described in 10:8-13. We submit by believing (trusting) and confessing Christ. We believe "that God raised him from the dead," and we confess that "Jesus is Lord" (vs. 9). Whether we mention confessing or believing first is not important (you'll notice that Paul reverses the order in vss. 9-10). It's more important to see how these two go together.

Confessing Jesus as "Lord" makes no sense if he's dead. That's what Saul of Tarsus thought of Jesus until he met him on the road to Damascus. When you really know he's alive, the confession of his identity as Lord comes rather easily. (See John 20:28. Eventually everyone will confess Jesus' Lordship, but not to their salvation—Phil. 2:11.) Believing Jesus has been raised from the dead, confessing him to be the Lord, and trusting him for salvation go together inseparably.

Believing, confessing, trusting—these constitute submission to God's gift of righteousness in Christ. In contrast to this submission, Paul says the attempt to attain "the righteousness that comes from the law" requires a person to perform it (vs. 5, describing an approach which Paul has already said, repeatedly, is incapable of producing righteousness). "The righteousness that comes from faith," however, does not demand heroic action from the human who needs righteousness—climbing up to heaven, or crawling down "into the abyss" of death (vss. 6-7). No, Christ has already come down from heaven and has already risen from the dead. We don't have to cross those barriers; he has crossed them for us—by his incarnation, death, and resurrection. What *we* have to do is acknowledge what *he* has done for us. We have to *submit* to this provision of righteousness; we have to *believe* in its truth and power for our salvation; we have to *confess* that Jesus is the Lord and risen Savior.

These verses are wonderful and wonderfully useful to help people know how to be sure of salvation. Especially vs. 9 can serve as an anchor of assurance. But for our purposes in studying this larger section of Romans, we must not lose sight of the context. Paul is still discussing the question of why Israel does not believe the gospel.

If all you have to do to be saved is to "call on . . . the name of the Lord" (vss. 12-13, from Joel 2:32; see also Acts 2:21), then why hasn't Israel called on him? Well, you have to believe in him before you will call on him (vs. 14). And you have to hear about him in order to believe on him. And to hear about him, someone has to be sent to you to proclaim the message (vss. 14-15). "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ [about Christ or from Christ]" (vs. 17).

So, where did the sequence break down in Israel's case? Did they not hear? (vs. 18) Was faith impossible for them? Sadly Paul has to say that Israel has indeed heard. If the message is going "out to all the earth" (Psa. 19:4), where did it start? Israel! They have heard; they cannot excuse themselves for not believing by claiming they have not

heard it. (Remember Paul was talking about the situation in his day; the situation for an individual Jew today could be very different.)

As the message goes out to all the earth, those "who are not a nation" (i.e., the Gentile people of the world, vs. 19, citing Deut. 32:21) are coming to faith and receiving the blessings of salvation, which unbelieving Israel is missing. If Gentiles can understand it, Israel cannot claim the gospel is incomprehensible. Paul seems to want to find an excuse for his kinsmen, but there is none: they have *heard*, they certainly *could have understood* the message, but they have been "disobedient and contrary" (vs. 21, from Isa. 65:2).

Although there is no excuse, there may still be hope. As God is being "found by those who did not seek me [i.e., the Gentiles]" (vs. 20, quoting Isa. 65:1), the hope is that Israel will be moved to sufficient jealousy by the Gentiles' blessing to prompt Israel's repentance and renewal (vs. 19). Supported by the OT texts he uses here and in the next chapter, Paul makes that hope a major theme in Romans 11.

To sum up ch. 10, Paul has come down heavily on Israel's responsibility for refusing to believe and submit to available truth, just as heavily as ch. 9 emphasized God's sovereignty. Paul does not try to resolve the intellectual question of how divine sovereignty and human responsibility can be coordinated. In ch. 11, however, he does point toward a different kind of resolution: the ultimate significance and outcome of Israel's unbelief.

Romans 11:1-10—A Remnant of Israel Believes

To speak of Israel's hardened heart against the gospel is generally correct, if we mean by "Israel" the majority of the ethnic group. But it is not to speak precisely, because there is a significant remnant of Israel who do confess Jesus as Lord. Paul himself is one of that number, as were all the first disciples and apostles. Thus, Israel's unbelief is *partial*, not involving all of Israel.

Paul could have cited the concept of "the remnant" from many places in the OT. He chose to cite just one example, Elijah. Perhaps Paul had at some time felt as Elijah did when he said, "I alone am left" (vs. 3, from 1 Kings 19:10). But just as God had a faithful remnant within Israel in Elijah's day, so there is a remnant now (vss. 4-5).

This faithful remnant, including Paul, cannot claim superiority over the majority, since the remnant has been "chosen by grace" and not "on the basis of works" (vss. 5-6). This remnant is "the elect," while "the rest were hardened" and remain in unbelief (vs. 7).

"The elect" simply means "chosen" (vs. 7; cf. John 15:16—"You did not choose me but I chose you"). Human responsibility to make choices is not negated by recognizing that God's choice precedes the human one. If God's grace has not taken the initiative, the human has nothing to which to *respond*. That is what human *responsibility* is about, responding. One who has responded to grace with belief has recognized that God has a claim on his or her life. Belonging to "the elect" is not something to boast about as though we deserve it; it is something for which to praise God, to boast in the Lord.

Concerning those who are hardened, Paul quotes Isa. 29:10 and Psa. 69:22-23, in Rom. 11:8-10. The quote from Isaiah is especially clear in identifying God's role in

making Israel spiritually insensitive. This is both a re-affirmation of the emphasis in ch. 9 (God's sovereignty) and a consequence of the human choices emphasized in ch. 10.

Romans 11:11-32—Israel's Unbelief and Gentile Salvation

The opening verse of this important section contains within it two concepts which are central to Paul's whole discussion of Israel's hardened heart. The first is that Israel's present condition is not beyond recovery. In fact, Paul indicates the present condition is temporary, and he foresees salvation coming to Israel at the end of this time. The second is that the present condition of Israel serves the purpose of God's salvation for the Gentiles. Not only is Israel's hardened unbelief *partial* (vss. 1-10); it is *temporary* and *purposeful*. These two aspects are inseparable in vss. 11-32.

Israel has stumbled but has not been obliterated. Rather, their stumbling has produced the opportunity for Gentiles to be saved, which will, in turn, "make Israel jealous" (vs. 11). That is part of Paul's motivation to pursue his evangelistic ministry to the Gentiles with great fervor: the more Gentiles he can bring in, the greater the opportunity "to make my own people jealous, and thus save some of them" (vs. 14). Paul sees the influx of Gentile believers as a sign of hope for Israel's eventual turn away from their unbelief.

If Israel turns and begins to believe the gospel of Jesus, will that be bad for the Gentiles who now profit from Israel's unbelief? No, quite the contrary. If Israel's stumbling in unbelief has meant "riches for Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean" an even greater blessing for all (vs. 12)! "Their rejection" has been for the purpose of "reconciliation" for the rest of the world; "their acceptance" will be "life from the dead," a miracle from God (vs. 15).

Clearly Paul is suggesting that Israel, now dead in unbelief, can receive new life at some point in the future. His illustrations in vs. 16 further indicate this. "The part of the dough offered as first fruits" (alluding to Num. 15:18-21) could refer to the remnant which does believe; their faith could spread to the unbelievers in Israel. Or it could refer to the beginnings of Israel, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; if unbelieving Israel is re-oriented toward the true heritage of their fathers, they will believe.

The second illustration in vs. 16 is less ambiguous. The holy "root" would certainly be the patriarchs who gave Israel a great spiritual legacy, which now is being missed because of Israel's unbelief. But since the root is holy, there remains hope for the "branches" to be holy also, through reclaiming the legacy of the root. Paul takes this second illustration and expands it significantly. Indeed, the olive tree analogy of vss. 17-24 is the centerpiece of this chapter.

The olive tree represents the people of God, with the faithful patriarchs serving as the root (see vs. 28; cf. Jere. 11:16-17). Believing Gentiles have to be grafted in because we are not naturally children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Once grafted in, we receive the full benefit of being part of the tree (vs. 17). For the inclusion of the Gentiles as part of God's people, this analogy speaks the same truth that Paul expounds in Eph. 2:11-22—Gentiles were once outsiders; now we are included. But here in Romans an additional point is being made: the inclusion of the Gentile believer as "a wild olive shoot" comes at the price of some of the natural "branches" being "broken off."

Gentile believers should regard this fact with awe (although it's not more awesome than God's gift of his own Son). Did "natural branches" of Israel *have* to be broken off for us to be included? Whether or not it *had* to happen that way, it *has*, and we are the beneficiaries of the rich root through which God has blessed us. As beneficiaries of God's grace we should realize that we have no cause to boast about ourselves in comparison to Israel (vs. 18).

God's kindness toward us has come along with his severity toward the branches broken off (vs. 22). The fact that God would act so severely toward "natural branches" should prompt our reverence and gratitude toward God for his kindness. If God has already shown a readiness to remove "natural branches" because of unbelief (vs. 20), certainly Gentiles as "wild branches," grafted in "contrary to nature" (vs. 24), should realize the importance of continuing in faith (vs. 20). "Otherwise" we "also will be cut off" (vs. 22, which seems to contradict the 'once saved, always saved' theology).

For us Gentiles, the means of becoming and remaining as branches is belief, trusting in the kindness of God through Jesus. The same is also true for Jewish people; by believing they can be grafted back into the tree (vs. 24). Paul seems to believe that this will eventually happen, for he says that "a hardening has come upon part of Israel, *until* the full number of the Gentiles has come in" (vs. 25). When will that be? How many Gentiles is that? No one can say *when* or *how many*, but that is the *way* it will happen, according to Paul, for he says, "And *so* [thus, in this way] all Israel will be saved" (vs. 26).

Some interpreters have taken "Israel" in vs. 26 to mean 'spiritual Israel,' including all believers of all time, whether Jewish or Gentile—taking "Israel" as a synonym for "the church." But since "Israel" has meant ethnic Israel throughout this long discussion, it is almost certain that's what "Israel" means in vs. 26. Paul is thinking of a future conversion of Israel, the people who are now broken off as branches. He does not speculate about how that will happen, except for the expectation that the Gentiles' blessings will move Israel to jealousy (10:19; 11:11, 14).

Possibly "all Israel" (vs. 26) means all who are *true* Israel (cf. 9:6; also Gal. 6:16, where "the Israel of God" could likewise mean the faithful remnant of 'true Israel' or 'spiritual Israel,' the church). If Paul means to equate "all Israel" with the faithful remnant, however, it's hard to see what these three chapters have been about. There already is a believing remnant (11:5). If only the believing remnant is Israel, why speak about "the rest" who are "hardened" as "Israel" (11:7)?

Despite the different views promoted by various scholars, it still seems most appropriate to the context of chs. 9-11 to understand "all Israel" in 11:26 as ethnic Israel. Paul is predicting, therefore, a conversion of Israel from unbelief to faith in Jesus, and re-inclusion in the people of God (commonly referred to in the NT as "the church"). This would not have to mean every individual Jew alive at the time (just as all Jews are not included in the hardening at the present time). Nor would it mean all the Israelites who have ever lived, for Paul has already made it plain that faith is a condition of inclusion in "the olive tree." He has also made it abundantly clear that it has never been sufficient for salvation simply to be born into the right family.

That Paul is expecting some future conversion of Israel is also indicated rather clearly by vss. 26-32. Salvation is prophesied for "Jacob" (=Israel) in Isa. 59:20-21

(partially quoted in Rom. 11:26-27). At present, unbelieving Israelites are "enemies of God" for the sake of God's purpose of saving Gentiles through the gospel: Israel's rejection of Christ led to his saving death for the world; Israel's refusal of the apostles' preaching led to the diffusion of the gospel into other nations. At the same time, the people of Israel are still "beloved, for the sake of their ancestors" and the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (vs. 28).

God has not and will not revoke his choice of Israel to be a people uniquely called to witness to the whole world concerning the reality of God, his faithfulness, and his holiness (vs. 29). But if Israel is still, in some sense, God's specially called people, it appears that God's purpose is being served right now by "their disobedience," as part of God's plan to show "mercy" to Gentiles who "were once disobedient" (vs. 30).

Paul hopes that the mercy now being shown to Gentiles will eventually lead to Israel's fresh reception of mercy (vs. 31). When? How? Who can say? What is clear is this: everyone, Jew or Gentile, needs to be a recipient of God's mercy (vs. 32). Israel's historic advantages and privileges as recipients of God's revelation (3:1-2; 9:4-5) have been put into sobering perspective by their present condition. The most spiritually privileged people (historically) need God's mercy just as much as the Gentile world.

Seen in this perspective, no one has a claim on God, for everyone has fallen into "disobedience." Everyone needs mercy, and God's purpose in the entire history of salvation is to "be merciful to all" (vs. 32). That's as far as Paul can take this discussion, for that is 'the bottom line.' The history of Israel, their present spiritual plight, and their future hope for God's mercy—all this reflects in large scale what is true for every individual: "all have sinned," but "all who believe" can be "justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:22-23).

Romans 11:33-36—God's Unsearchable Ways

In response to all that has been said, Paul praises "the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God"—the depth which goes beyond Paul's (and our) ability to understand. Paul quotes from Isa. 40:13 and Job 35:7 to remind us that God's plans are beyond our capacity to fathom and that God's purposes take precedence over our own. No one can give God advice that will improve on his wisdom. No one can give him anything which was not his before it was ours (because he gave it to us). Everything—our very existence, and the existence of Israel—is "from him and through him and to him" (vs. 33). Everything, willingly or unwillingly, will eventually serve his purpose (the significance of "to him"). And the glory will be God's forever.

A Final Word to Gentile Christians

Let's be sure Paul's cautionary words to Gentile believers are not missed:

"do not boast" over the broken-off branches (vs. 18);
remember that the root supports you (vs. 18);
do not be proud, "but stand in awe" (vs. 20);
"perhaps he will not spare you" (vs. 21);
"provided you continue in his kindness" (vs. 22);
"otherwise you also will be cut off" (vs. 22);
do "not claim to be wiser than you are" (vs. 25).

Having noted these warnings and exhortations directed toward Gentile Christians, we might detect a motive for Paul's inclusion of these three chapters in Romans. Perhaps there was some failure among Gentile Christians (in Rome or elsewhere) to speak of or treat Israel with appropriate respect. We know from history that this failure has been chronic and often catastrophic. Far from making Israel jealous of our blessings, we have too often confirmed the worst prejudices and fears of Jewish people about Christianity.

At the same time, I must say Paul would categorically reject the thinking of some modern Christians that the Jewish people do not need to believe in Jesus as the Messiah. Paul warns Gentiles not to adopt a wrong attitude toward Jewish people, but his own attitude was that his fellow Jews needed to be grafted back into the tree from which they had been broken. Paul saw Israel's non-acceptance of Jesus as Messiah as an alienation from their true heritage. He also believed they could be re-instated into the tree by coming to faith in Jesus.

Absolutely nothing in Romans 9-11 (or in the rest of Paul's letters, or in all the NT) would support the notion that God will eventually save Israel apart from Jesus, or that God has two separate-but-equal covenant peoples. Paul's imagery in this chapter focuses on *one* olive tree, in which Gentile believers and the believing Jewish remnant share faith in Jesus, and into which unbelieving Israel can be re-grafted by coming to faith. Paul's words in Eph. 2:11-22 make it impossible to enlist Paul's support for 'dual covenants' (in the sense that Israel's covenant can be ultimately adequate without Jesus' fulfillment of the law's requirements and his defeat of sin and death).

Christians should respect all other people. We owe a special debt of gratitude and respect to historic Israel (not blind support for all Israeli policies today). We should respect sincere observers of the Jewish faith. They are living in more light from God than most people in the world. Yet to say they do not need the light of Christ as long as they walk in the light of the Torah is a contradiction of all that Paul has said about his beloved people.

Furthermore, it contradicts the words of Jesus himself: "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). He did not say, "I am the light of all the people in the world except for Israelites who find the Torah adequate to their spiritual needs." *In Christian relations with people of the Jewish religion, the challenge for us is to be appropriately respectful but also faithful to our Lord Jesus.*

"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Rom. 10:13). For Paul and for all who would be faithful Christians, "Jesus is Lord" (10:9), and in him we trust for our salvation. Our confession is not that Jesus is Lord for all who confess him as

Lord; we confess that he *is* Lord, and that all will acknowledge that truth eventually (Phil. 2:11).

We do not *make* Jesus Lord; he *is* Lord, quite apart from what we say about him. Nor do we say that Jesus is Lord for Gentile believers only. Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah of Israel, the promised son of David, who is also the Savior of the world. He is not the Lord of everyone but Israel, nor is the gospel for everyone but the Jews. The gospel is "to the Jew first" (1:16). Jesus is "the Deliverer" who "will banish ungodliness from Jacob" (11:26).

In our well-intended attempts to show appropriate regard for the natural children of Abraham, and even in the guilt-tinged embarrassment we feel for the way Jews have been treated by Christians (or those who claimed to be), the last thing we should do is to keep silent about Israel's one true hope for the mercy of God. If God's mercy is offered in Jesus, we who have received that mercy cannot show that mercy by withholding our witness from the one people most used by God to bring that mercy to the whole world.

Possible questions for discussion:
(Some questions taken from LessonMaker software by NavPress).

1. How did Paul explain the difference between Jews who believe and Jews who do not believe? (9:6-8)

2. What determines how God bestows favor on people? (9:16)

3. What kept Israel from obtaining righteousness? (9:31-32)

4. What positive trait did Paul recognize in the Israelites? (10:2)

5. What had the Israelites done instead of submitting to God's righteousness? (10:3-4)

6. What were the simple instructions Paul gave regarding personal salvation? (10:9-10)

7. What caused God's remnant of people to survive? (11:5)

8. How have Gentiles been helped by the Jews' rejection of God's salvation plan? (11:11-12)

9. Why do we need to be careful not to boast that God has reached out to us? (11:18)

10. How will "all Israel" be saved?

11. What does God owe? (11:35)

Excursus on Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility

Paul's discussion of Israel's unbelief has highlighted both divine sovereignty and human responsibility. He has not discussed these things in the abstract, nor has he tried to reconcile the two. Like the rest of the Bible, Paul has simply acknowledged the reality of both. At the risk of going further on this topic than we need to for the sake of adequate response to Rom. 9-11, let me add a few thoughts of my own, which will tend to be a bit more abstract than Paul's but hopefully faithful to the overall biblical witness.

Some people feel far more comfortable talking about human responsibility toward the gospel than talking about God's sovereignty; others have the reverse preference. A lot depends on one's prior religious training, but possibly also on other factors, including personal experience and temperament.

A subtle but real temptation for some Christians is to think that we somehow deserve our status—maybe not with respect to God's mercy but in comparison to other people who are more rebellious or careless than we are, or perhaps just less intelligent (as though God selectively shows mercy to the best prospects!). We like to emphasize our personal decision to believe, and perhaps end up slighting the significance of God's grace which made our choice even possible (what John Wesley called "prevenient" grace.)

Other Christians, by training or by personal experience, see how much they owe to God's mercy and perhaps are unwilling to give themselves much if any credit at all for becoming a believer. Some Christians have such high regard for the sovereignty of God's choices that they end up making human choices sound unreal or inconsequential.

It may be hard to know how divine sovereignty and human responsibility fit together, but a fairly obvious fact is that both are taught in Scripture, from first to last. God is sovereign over the universe, yet I am responsible for my attitudes and actions. If I am not responsible, how can God hold me accountable? And clearly God does hold humans accountable, for the Bible teaches that God will judge all people.

Perhaps we cannot solve the philosophical and theological problem of how to mesh divine sovereignty with human responsibility, but we had better be faithful to Scripture's clear testimony to the reality of both. And we had better not use either to negate the other. We should not let our understanding of the importance of human choices crowd out the facts that God always has the first move, that grace always precedes faith, and that God always deserves all the glory for our salvation. Nor should we allow an emphasis on divine sovereignty to crowd out the necessity of human decision and follow-through, the significance of human faithfulness (by depending on God's faithfulness), and the fact that those who perish spiritually cannot blame God for their self-destructive rebellion. The reality of God's sovereignty does not relieve me of responsibility; nor does the reality of human responsibility lessen the sovereignty of God.

The truths of divine sovereignty and human responsibility have to be kept intact in matters relating to salvation but also in other issues. For example, when we pray for God to heal someone of sickness or injury, we are doing what Scripture tells us to do. Prayer and faith are our God-given responsibilities. The exercise of our responsibility to pray and believe does not, however, replace God's sovereignty. When he heals, he gets the credit—not only for the power but also for the will to heal.

On the other hand, we shirk our responsibilities if we say, “If God wants to heal them, he can,” and then fail to do our part. Of course God can heal them without our prayer, but what about our responsibility to pray? As Rev. Terry Tekyl said, when preaching here some years ago, fatalism is not faith. Faith in a sovereign God should motivate us to pray—patiently and persistently—for that is our responsibility.

One question I like to use in discussions of divine sovereignty and human responsibility/free will is this: If God, in his sovereignty, gave me free will, I could not turn it down, could I? That’s meant to be funny, but it also makes a serious point: we are accountable to a sovereign God for our choices and actions, and we cannot evade that accountability because he is sovereign.

WHY DOES ISRAEL NOT BELIEVE THE GOSPEL?
(Romans 9-11)

1. God's sovereign plan (9:1-29)

2. Human choices (9:30-10:21)

3. Israel's present unbelief is

a. partial (11:1-10)

b. temporary (11:11-32)

c. purposeful (11:11-32)

LESSON 8
ROMANS 12-13
RESPONDING TO GRACE AND RESPONDING WITH GRACE

Context in the Book of Romans

At the end of ch. 11, Paul praised the greatness of God's wisdom and generosity and declared that everything belongs to God. The first verses of ch. 12 describe the appropriate response to such truths. In view of the whole book of Romans, however, the context needed for hearing 12:1-2 (and the rest of chs. 12-15) must be the entirety of chs. 1-11. According to his usual practice, Paul has dealt with the theological base first; now he deals with the practical responses we need to give. "Therefore" in 12:1 really builds on the foundation of everything Paul has said thus far, especially about "the mercies of God" in the gracious provision of salvation by faith in Jesus.

We should not presume to heed the exhortations of chs. 12-15 as though obedience to these instructions could win our acceptance from God. That would be to imagine we could save ourselves. Rather, *God* has acted to save us by his decisive action in Christ and by his gift of the Holy Spirit. Because of what God has done, we can do what we are instructed to do, not because this will save us but because God has already saved us, and this is the appropriate response.

Romans 12:1-2—Presentation and Transformation

These two verses are packed with meaning and really serve as the introduction to all the exhortations in the last few chapters of Romans.

Paul makes his exhortation "by the mercies of God," but our response is also "by the mercies of God"—those specific acts of God's grace which allow us to know God as our generous Savior as well as our Creator. It is by the mercies of God that we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to offer ourselves, in every aspect of our being, to God. By the mercies of God, he makes what we offer to him "a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable."

By "bodies" Paul means our existence here in this world and our actual behavior. We could say "self" and mean what Paul meant by "body," except for a recurrent but erroneous tendency to separate our 'real selves' from our bodies. What you do with your body is what *you* do. The 'real you' is not uninvolved or unaffected. It is interesting that Paul mentions the obedient offering of the body before he mentions the renewal of the mind.

The presentation of the body as a living sacrifice is called "spiritual worship" (NRSV). You can also find this translated as "reasonable service" (KJV) and "spiritual service of worship" (NASB). The word translated as "worship" can be rendered "service," but it is service with a distinctively spiritual or religious connotation. This is the kind of service rendered by a priest or someone else working in a temple or other religious setting (cf. 1 Pet. 2:9).

The word translated "spiritual" or "reasonable" is even more interesting. The Greek word is *logikos* (λόγικος), which is derived from the more familiar word *logos* (λόγος), which commonly means "word." But since *logos* can also refer to "reason" or "the power of reason," *logikos* can be translated "reasonable," in the sense that this is the

kind of worship a being with reason can offer to God. That is why some translators prefer "spiritual" in this passage, because Paul is referring to that aspect of our humanness which is distinctly different from animals. ("Logical" is also a legitimate translation of *logikos*, but it doesn't carry the same weight in English and would not be appropriate for this context.)

There is a connection with the common meaning of *logos*, in that *logikos* beings have the capacity to receive and respond to the *logos*. Human beings, created in God's image (through *the* Logos who became incarnate in Christ) have the capacity to receive God's word (*logos*), think about it (because we are *logikos* by creation), and make reasoned or rational responses to what we have heard. This capacity of humans to hear God's word and make rational responses is something that makes us different from rocks, plants, and animals, which (as far as we know) do everything they do simply because they are made that way. Humans have the moral capacity to *decide* what to do.

Paul says what we do with our bodies should be guided by *reasoned response* to the mercies of God. This goes against two opposite tendencies in our day. One is the tendency to regard our bodies as ideally subject to no control but that of hormones or impulses (although consistent application of that belief would reduce society to utter chaos). Some even try to give 'spiritual' justification to their violation of divinely given instructions for sexual behavior by saying "God made me this way," or "It feels right." Dogs may not be morally accountable for their instinctive sexual behavior, but humans are. Humans are meant to be *logikos*. That doesn't mean we don't have instincts, but it does mean we are not meant to be controlled by them. We have instincts, but we make choices.

Another, very different tendency is also opposed by Paul's teaching of a *reasoned response*. Some Christians (and people of other religions) tend to disparage the mind (which Paul mentions in vs. 2). Some dismiss with contempt those who want to make reasonable inquiries or perhaps raise logical objections to something being taught as 'spiritual truth.' Some 'spiritual leaders' have been heard to say words like these: "Check your brain at the door," or "Don't ask questions; just receive!"

At the very least, with due allowances for the good intentions of those who say such things, we have to say that they are confusing 'rationalism'with the use of 'reason.' *Rationalism* is the proud human attempt to use human reason (unaided by revealed truth) as the measure of all things. The use of *reason*, on the other hand, is commanded and commended as part of the response of our whole being to the mercies of God (see also Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:37—"all your mind"). To say that human reason has no place in our response to God is to deny that he made us in his image, and to ignore what God tells us is "holy and acceptable" to him. Mindless submission is not God's will. (Ironically, those who tell you not to use your reason always have their reasons for doing so.)

"Do not be conformed" (vs. 2) could well be translated "stop being conformed." The implication (from the grammatical construction) is that we all have been subjected to the shaping influences of our environment, especially the attitudes and behavior of those around us. We have to be deliberate (i.e., we have to choose) in refusing to be shaped by those influences which are not according to God's will. If we are unaware of the influences, it does not mean we are unaffected by them.

The only way not to be conformed to this world is to be "transformed [continually] by the renewing of your minds." (As someone said, it is not by the *removal* of your minds!) Only by learning to think in new ways can we "discern [or "prove," NASB] what is the will of God." Of course, the person responding with obedience to these two verses has already discerned something of the will of God. Paul is saying that response to what we already know about God's will enables growth in understanding his will and in being able to grow in following that will (cf. 2 Cor. 3:18). Also, knowing God's will intellectually needs to be followed up by knowing it from experience.

Possibly you have heard people speak about three different levels of God's will from this verse—the good, the acceptable, and the perfect. Actually that is a fairly serious misreading. Paul describes *the will* (singular) of God as "good and acceptable and perfect." He means that it is inherently good—noble and morally "good" (since it is God's)—but also that it is good for us. God's will for our lives is "acceptable" in the same sense as in vs. 1; this is what God accepts. As our minds are renewed, we also grow in finding his will to be acceptable to us.

Finally, God's will is "perfect" or "complete" in several respects. First, God's will is perfect because it expresses the desires of God, who is holy and untainted with the flaws that often mar our best human intentions. God's will is perfect also because he alone has complete knowledge of what is good for us, good for every aspect of our being, what will bring complete fulfillment. We *think* we know what will be fulfilling; God *knows*. Recall that Paul has already told us what the will of God will look like when the work has been completed: we will be like Jesus in all our ways of responding to the Father and to one another (Rom. 8:29).

Romans 12:3-8—Individual Contributions to the Fellowship

Verses 1-2 relate directly to our *individual*, personal responsiveness to God. But the Christian's relationship with God is not meant to be *individualistic*. Our relationship to God puts us into relationship with other believers in the body of Christ.

Paul's exhortation here is prefaced by the words "by the grace given to me" (vs. 3). This is significant because Paul proceeds to teach that every believer is given grace to contribute to the life and ministry of the whole church (vs. 6). Not everyone will do the same thing, because not everyone should. A variety of contributions illustrate this (and the listing here is not exhaustive, just as it is not in 1 Cor. 12 or Eph. 4).

The contribution from each Christian should be in accordance with "the measure of faith that God has assigned" and not from inflated opinions about our talents or abilities (vs. 3). In this context, addressed to all Christians, "faith" is not a matter of trusting God for salvation, but trusting God to work through you in a specific way. One who is called to teach, for example, should obey that call because of faith that God will use your natural abilities but also that God will work through you beyond your natural abilities by his Spirit. (The natural *abilities* are his gifts, too, but our *availability* to God's Spirit and our dependence on him to do what we cannot do clearly call for a faith response.)

Notice that "grace" is explicitly connected with the variety of gifts given (vs. 6). At least implicitly, "faith" is also connected with the exercise of each gift. Although

directly mentioned only with prophecy (vs. 6), its connection with all the ways of contributing to the body of Christ is established by Paul's admonition in vs. 3.

Romans 12:9-21—Various Exhortations

The rest of this chapter contains a collection of exhortations, many of which are paralleled by statements of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (cf. vs. 14 and Matt. 5:44) and also by Proverbs. These verses do not require much comment, but they are worth much contemplation.

For thinking about these verses, one suggestion (which I got from Greg Boyd) is to read them as *descriptions* of how God actually thinks and acts, and then read them as *instructions* for us to follow God's way of dealing with people. For example, God associates with "the lowly" (vs. 16). And doesn't God give food even to his enemies (vs. 20)? And doesn't God fight evil with good (vs. 21)? [There is also a striking similarity between Paul's and Peter's teaching when it comes to this 'strategy' of doing good to overcome evil. See 1 Peter 2:12, 15, 23; and especially 3:9-17.]

One expression here might require comment: "heap burning coals on their heads" (vs. 20, quoting Prov. 25:21-22). Does Paul mean that doing good things for your enemies is the way to make them really suffer? That seems to go against the tone of the passage, although we could make sense of the idea that our good deeds make our ill treatment even less deserved and thus add to the enemy's guilt (which God will eventually punish).

More likely, Paul has in mind the same effect apparently referred to in Proverbs 25:21-22. In ancient Egypt a person who wanted or was required to show public repentance would carry a container of ashes on his head to express humility. The idea of the proverb and of Paul seems to be that by doing good to those who mistreat us we might motivate them to repent of their evil thoughts and deeds toward us.

There is no guarantee, of course, that such a strategy will turn an enemy into a friend, but it holds more promise of doing so than vengeance would. And even if the heart of the enemy does not change toward us, our own heart will stay right with God. If we resort to evil in our fight against evil, then evil has conquered us. We need always to remember that our warfare is against evil itself, not against people who do evil (recall Eph. 6:12). Evil attempts to overcome evil actions only increase the sum total of evil in the world. Evil will be defeated by goodness or not at all.

Romans 13:1-7—Attitude toward the Secular Government

These verses naturally follow the exhortations in ch. 12. Paul urges us to treat with generosity even those who might be considered our enemies. When confronted or attacked by evil, our response should be to do good. Likewise human government as such must not be seen as the Christian's enemy, even though specific human governments and people within government have often opposed Christianity in various ways.

It is helpful to remember the kind of government Paul would be thinking about when he wrote to the church located in the seat of government for the entire Roman Empire. Nero was the emperor at the time. Nero later became something of a monster and instigated Roman persecution of the Christian church (in 64 A.D. Christianity became officially illegal). But when Paul wrote Romans (56-58 A.D.), Nero had not yet

taken that turn. Indeed, after Paul's arrest in Jerusalem (Acts 21), he appealed his case to Nero (Acts 25:11). This happened after the writing of Romans but before Nero became the enemy of the church. After 64 A.D., Paul would certainly not have appealed to Nero for protection. An interesting question would be how differently he might have written this passage after that time. Certainly the Book of Revelation (written in the 90s A.D.) speaks of the Roman Empire and its emperor (Domitian) in a very negative light, in contrast to what Paul says here in Romans.

Paul says everyone should submit to human governmental authority because *God* established or ordained it. Notice that "God" is mentioned six times in these seven verses. To resist the government, then, is to resist God, not humans who are governing. Taken by themselves, these first two verses would rule out any attempt ever to change the government or to resist it by revolution or by civil disobedience. Taken by themselves, however, these two verses do not consider the question of what to do when the human government asks or commands us to do something contrary to God's will.

Paul's explanation for why we should obey the human authorities emphasizes God's ordaining of government, but he also speaks of the purpose which God intends government to serve. Human government is intended to make human life better by promoting good (vs. 3—"you will receive its approval") and by limiting and punishing evil (vs. 4—"servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer"). Since promoting good and fighting evil with good are things Christians are supposed to do (remember 12:21), Christians should see themselves and civil government as meant to serve the same purpose (at least in this regard). The intended, God-given purpose of government is good, and Christians should be eager to promote that purpose.

In other words, if we follow the instructions from the end of ch. 12, we should not have to regard the government as our enemy. If we are intent on doing what is right (13:4), we should not expect conflict with the government. Keeping a good conscience before God is really a better motivation for obeying the government than is the fear of getting caught and punished for breaking a human law (13:5). For example, how many people would have to buy radar detectors for their cars if we obeyed the speed laws because of conscience before God? If governmental authority is meant to promote good, and we are intent on doing good, we should see why we ought to be subject to the government. The question that inevitably arises (although Paul does not ask it here) is what Christians should do when the government does not promote good but instead promotes evil.

In such cases, we will have to be guided by the principle expressed in Matt. 22:21 and Acts 5:29 (see discussion below). We will also have to be guided by conscience to a certain extent, since Christians do not always agree on whether cooperation with government policy is consistent with faithfulness to Christ. For example, some Christians feel that killing is wrong, even in a legally declared war. Others disagree. In another example, some Christians feel abortion is so wrong that they are justified in disobeying the government in trying to prevent it. Others, also opposed to abortion, feel that disobedience to the law is not justified.

Christians have often found themselves in difficult situations such as these. Corrie Ten Boom and others disobeyed the German authorities in their attempt to rescue Jews

from the Nazis during World War II. Most of us would agree with that action (from our comfortable distance), but other Christians of the time did not take the same stance. We cannot be sure it was because they were cowards or because they were not really spiritual. In some cases, the individual has to do what she or he thinks is right in the sight of God, without being sure it is the right thing for everyone.

vss. 6-7

For government to do its job it must have resources. That, alas, means taxes. No one likes taxes, but we would not like our planet without government either. No order of any kind except 'the law of the jungle'? That is the unacceptable alternative to taxes, since government is impossible without the support (willing or unwilling) of those who are governed.

Since Christians as well as other citizens benefit from the ordering of society made possible by government, Christians should pay taxes to finance the government's activities. Society's wellbeing has value in itself and is advantageous to us as Christians and as citizens. We owe a debt, then, to the society which makes our lives possible and/or better than they would be without the institutions, protections, and ordering of life provided by government. Christians should always try to pay the debts we owe. This principle is expressed in vs. 7 but also becomes the leading thought in the following paragraph (vs. 8).

Further Thoughts on the Significance of Romans 13:1-7

The relationship between religion and civil government has been one of the most important topics of thought and discussion in the history of western civilization. Often it has even been the cause of war and other acts of violence, not just in the West but all over the world. No one could doubt this passage has great relevance in our own country, where many of the moral and spiritual challenges we face have some point of interaction with civil government on its various levels—federal, state, and local—and in its various branches—legislative, judiciary, and executive.

Under the old covenant of Israel, the relationship between religion and civil government was different from what it is today between the church and the various governments of the world. Under the old covenant, the people of God were supposed to be united politically and religiously. The *nation* of Israel *was* the *people of God* (at least theoretically if not always faithfully). With the coming of Christ and the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles, the situation changed radically. The people of God can no longer be equated with a single nation or ethnic group. Even though to begin with all Christians were part of the Roman Empire, the new covenant was not between God and the Empire. Far from it! The government and the population of the Empire as a whole were pagan, and from 64 A.D. until 312 A.D. Christianity was officially illegal.

When Christ came he proclaimed the kingdom of God as having arrived on the scene (although we still look to the future for its full manifestation). Those who have put their trust in Jesus have become part of that kingdom. What does loyalty to a new and different kingdom do to our relationship to earthly kingdoms or nations? The eternal kingdom of God has a claim on our lives; what now can be the claim of the temporal, earthly kingdoms? This question inevitably comes up wherever the gospel of God's

kingdom is preached. Romans 13:1-7 is one of the most important NT passages dealing with the issues raised by our coexistence in more than one kingdom. Other key passages include Matthew 22:15-22 (especially vs. 21), Acts 5:29, and 1 Peter 2:13-17.

In Matthew 22:15-22, Jesus is asked a 'trick question' by his opponents. If he said "Don't pay taxes to Caesar," they could accuse him of rebellion. If he endorsed Caesar's right to take money from the Jews, Jesus' opponents could use that to turn the crowds against him. By pointing out Caesar's image on the coin, Jesus made the point that Caesar (and the Roman government) were already established in the region, and that the people had accepted it—at least to the degree that they used Rome's money and participated in the economic order provided by the Romans. Thus Jesus gave this answer: "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's" (vs. 21). This answer is widely quoted in disputes about the conflicting claims of church and state. The principle is much easier to declare than it is to apply in some cases.

In Acts 5:29, Peter, speaking for the other apostles, has to object to the orders given to them by human authorities. The Sanhedrin was the legal authority in Jerusalem, but their authority did not include the right (as Peter saw it) to forbid the preaching of the gospel and making known what God had done in raising Jesus from the dead. "We must obey God rather than any human authority." Peter is not taking a lawless stance. He is not defying the Sanhedrin and its authority in every matter. Rather, he is submitting to a higher authority, an authority over both Peter and the Sanhedrin.

In 1 Peter 2:13-17, Peter's words are similar in tone to Paul's in Romans. First Peter was written about 64 A.D., about the time Christianity was becoming or had become an 'outlaw' religion in the Roman Empire. Peter says that, although we live as aliens in this world in one sense, we nevertheless continue to be responsible citizens of the countries in which we live. This can be particularly difficult when the nation is opposed to Christianity, as it was in Peter's day, but that makes it all the more important for Christians to know what our responsibilities are. When the responsibilities are in conflict, we sometimes have to render to God what Caesar asks for (cf. Matt. 22:21). At this point Rome was not yet trying to force people to deny Christ and claim Caesar as Lord (which was happening by the time Revelation was written). Therefore Peter is able to commend submission to the political authorities without qualifying his exhortation.

Notice again the Christian strategy of doing good in order to combat the accusations of those opposed to Christianity (1 Peter 2:15). Because we are God's people, we are not the slaves of governments, but our freedom is freedom to serve God, not freedom to do as we please regardless of God's will or the effects on others (vs. 16; cf. Gal. 5:13).

Questions Raised by the NT Teaching on Human Government

Clearly the New Testament teaches responsible Christian obedience to and support of civil government. *Responsible* obedience is not blind obedience—regardless of what the rulers say—but informed obedience. We should know why we obey and support the

government. It is not because human government has absolute authority, and certainly not because the right decisions are always made. But human government has delegated authority from God to promote God's will for human society—promoting good and repressing evil.

Although Jesus, Paul, and Peter gave their teachings in a society governed very differently from ours, the principle still applies. In fact, we could ask whether the Christian in a democracy has even more responsibility than one in Paul's day. In Paul's day, Christians, individually or collectively, could do little or nothing to change the government's policies or actions. Our greater opportunities bring more responsibilities, don't they? Can we be content with merely obeying the law as long as it doesn't hinder our being Christians? What if we can help change a law that harms someone else?

Another question, more difficult to answer, is whether Christians can participate in efforts (especially armed, violent efforts) to change a government. Christianity had a lot to do with changes in Eastern Europe (i.e., the fall of communism, especially in Poland and some other countries), but without promoting violence. Yet there are still places where the government is radically opposed to Christianity and to other values which make human life better. Should Christians, for example, support an armed overthrow of the North Korean government? A similar question, with more historical distance, concerns the Christian involvement in the American Revolution, fought against a government not remotely as bad as totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. The famous Christian theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer participated in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Was he right to do so?

Romans 13:8-10—The Debt of Love

From the instruction to pay what we owe to the government, Paul goes on to a broader application of the principle: "Owe no one anything" (vs. 8). This does not mean all borrowing is immoral, but it does mean a debtor is morally obligated to pay his debts. And in general an attitude is encouraged here which is spelled out in other places in Scripture—we should seek to be dependent on no one else to take care of our basic needs (e.g., 1 Thess. 4:11-12).

One debt which we should be 'paying on' constantly but which we can never 'pay off' is the obligation "to love one another." This debt is not incurred simply with those who have loved us first; this is the debt we owe to everyone because of what God has done for us (recall Rom. 1:14; also 1 John 4:10-11, 19). Fulfilling the obligation to love one another will also fulfill the law.

Paul recites some of the Ten Commandments that we would never break if we love our neighbor with unselfish, godly love. These commandments have to do with our relationships with other people. Jesus' more complete summary of "all the law and the prophets" as "love the Lord your God" and "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37-40) also cites Lev. 19:18, as Paul does here.

Romans 13:11-14—The Eschatological Motivation for Obedience

More than one motive is at work in our obedience to God. Certainly love, of sufficient maturity, would motivate us to obey God at all times. But even the most

mature Christian can profit from being reminded of the importance and the shortness of the time we have.

None of us knows how much longer history will last (see Matt. 24:36), but we all know that our lives are finite. We know that it's later than it's ever been before. We know that we are closer today than we were yesterday to the end of our lives on earth and standing before Christ, the judge of all people (John 5:22, 27; 2 Cor. 5:10; 1 John 4:17). Remembering this on occasion is healthy; it helps us focus on what is finally important.

For keeping our focus, Paul uses the analogy of being awake (as also in 1 Thess. 5:6 and Eph. 5:14). Our lives should be characterized by the "light" of personal integrity (vss. 12-13). Even though we live in a time pervaded by "the works of darkness" (Rom. 13:12), we know this time is already in the process of passing away and "the day is near" (cf. 1 John 2:8). Our way of life should be appropriate to "the day" that is on the way, rather than to the darkness that is on the way out.

Of course, such a lifestyle is at odds with the pervasive values and currents of the present world. That means conflict. But "the armor of light" is our protection, which is to say we need no other protection than our faithfulness to God's kingdom and our personal integrity. The darkness cannot overcome the light (John 1:5). We can only be defeated by darkness if we are untrue to the light, that is, if we compromise with the darkness or take refuge in it. (Passages for comparison on "the armor of light" include Eph. 5:8-20; 1 Thess. 5:1-8; Isa. 59:17; and, of course, Eph. 6:10-18.)

The last verse in this chapter summarizes what we need to do quite succinctly: "put on the Lord Jesus Christ." This is the positive thing we are to do in contrast to the negative things we are told to avoid in vs. 13. Indeed, only by doing this positive can we really defeat those negatives. Jesus himself is the provision we need for true and lasting life, although our "flesh" might try to dictate otherwise.

Romans 13:13-14 was the key passage in St. Augustine's conversion to Christ, as mentioned in Lesson 1. Augustine wanted to embrace Christianity with one part of his being, but he felt he could not leave behind the kind of life he had lived for many years, which included a mistress. This passage was used by the Holy Spirit to show him the way out of his bondage—not by trying to change himself first but by throwing himself on the grace of God in Christ. That's a good example for all of us in any struggles we have with temptations or habits that seem to overpower us: the priority for us needs to be all-out pursuit of our relationship with Christ. The stronger our 'yes' to him, the stronger will be our 'no' to sin.

For the imagery of "putting on" or "clothing" ourselves with Christ, see also Gal. 3:27 and Eph. 4:24. For another passage which emphasizes the importance of the positives which need to fill our lives if we are to defeat the negatives, you might note Gal. 5:16-25. The exhortation to "live by the Spirit . . . and . . . not gratify the desires of the flesh" (vs. 16) introduces the contrast between "the works of the flesh" and "the fruit of the Spirit." The fruit of the Spirit is the only thing that can displace the works of the flesh.

[Another passage contains a serious warning against the vulnerability of persons who rid themselves of destructive negative influences but who fail to welcome or promote the growth of the positives which can be produced only by our submission to Christ and the Holy Spirit—Luke 11:24-26.]

Possible questions for discussion:
(Some questions taken from LessonMaker software by NavPress).

1. How should the mind of a Christian be changed? (12:2)

2. What kind of activities will promote this change of mind? What kind will hinder?

3. What right does God have to ask us for a full-life commitment to Him?

4. What makes offering our bodies as living sacrifices an act of worship?

5. To what worldly life-styles or values do we typically conform?

6. What is the purpose of showing kindness to an enemy? (12:20)

7. How does doing good to an enemy overcome evil?

8. How is the establishment of any government related to God? (13:1)

9. What should a Christian do to maintain a good relationship with the government? (13:3-4)

10. Under what circumstances should Christians disobey the clear commands of government authorities?

11. How would you live if you knew the world would end in six months? How would you live if you knew your influence would continue for the next 600 years?

12. In what practical ways can a person clothe himself or herself with Jesus Christ instead of pursuing evil desires?

LESSON 9
ROMANS 14:1-15:7
ACCEPT ONE ANOTHER

Context and historical background

Romans 14 and the first few verses of ch. 15 address at some length how Christians should treat one another when they have differing viewpoints on debatable issues. Paul mentions some specific issues about which Christians at that time had honest disagreements. Things about which Roman Christians might have disagreed may not be the same questions about which we differ today, but the general principles Paul teaches are still pertinent.

In essence the instructions given here are nothing more than elaboration on the key principle expressed in 13:9-10. If we love one another, we will want to do no harm to one another. Since disagreements are inevitable, given the limits of human understanding, we need to stay united by our love even when our opinions on some issues would tend to divide us.

Perhaps Paul knew these issues had been the source of contention in the church at Rome. He knew a lot of people there even though he had never been to the city (see ch. 16). Possibly he mentions these exhortations in ch. 14 only because he knows from experience that Christians can have very different opinions on some practices. It might be especially important to remember that the church at Rome had a mix of Christians with a Jewish background and a considerable number (perhaps a majority) of Gentile Christians, who would not have been trained in the traditions of Jewish religious practices.

Just a few years before Paul wrote Romans, all Jewish residents of Rome had been ordered by the emperor, Claudius, to leave the city (see Acts 18:2). This occurred in 49 A.D. and would have included both Christian Jews and non-christian Jews, since at the time the Roman Empire did not recognize Christianity as a separate religion. For a few years, between 49 and 54 A.D. (when the Jews were permitted to return to the city), the church at Rome would have been entirely Gentile. By the time Paul wrote his letter to them, the church in Rome would have again been a mixture. Whether the conditions of 49-54 A.D. had contributed to tensions about the matters discussed in this chapter is only a matter of speculation, but it is plausible to assume that the absence of Jewish believers might have made some difference in the way Gentile believers behaved. Likely they exercised more freedom in their lifestyles than would have been comfortable for the Jewish Christians.

Paul addresses most of his instructions to those he calls “strong” in faith, exhorting them with regard to their treatment of the “weak.” But he also has words of exhortation to the “weak” concerning their attitudes toward the “strong.” It is very important to know exactly what Paul means by “strong” and “weak” faith in this context, since the terms do not mean what we might assume from other contexts.

“Faith” *in this context* refers to the perceived freedom to participate in and enjoy the benefits of God’s good creation. Those who are “strong in faith” *in this context* are *not* those who have faith for great miracles; rather, the “strong” are those who understand their freedom in the grace of God to participate in some things which the “weak” do not

feel free to indulge in. The strength or weakness under discussion in this chapter has to do with freedom of the individual conscience.

With that in mind, another important word of clarification is needed. The debatable issues of which Paul speaks in this chapter are *not* questions about basic moral issues as taught by the moral code of the Old Testament or the words of Jesus. Paul is *not* saying that some have freedom of conscience to commit adultery, steal, or lie. Rather he is dealing with more ambiguous issues which some feel are important to their faithfulness as Christians but which others just as honestly feel are not important.

Notice that Paul, because he understands God's grace and justification by faith, identifies with those he describes as "strong" (14:14; 15:1), those who know their freedom from the legalistic restrictions of food laws, observances of certain days, and so forth. You will notice also that his greatest concern is that nothing be done which might genuinely harm the "weak." To both sides Paul's instructions can be summed up in the admonition, "Accept one another, as Christ has accepted you" (see 15:7, NIV).

Romans 14:1-4—Welcome One Another with Respect

Paul begins this section with the word "welcome" (NRSV) or "accept" (NIV). Obviously the command is addressed to the "strong," that they should accept the "weak." From vs. 2, we can see what Paul means by "weak" in the context of this chapter. The "weak" person feels that he or she cannot participate in something which the "strong" person knows is perfectly acceptable in the sight of God. The specific issue Paul mentions in vs. 2 involves what one feels free to eat. The "weak" one eats only vegetables, presumably out of concern that to eat meat would somehow defile the person.

The Jewish religion never opposed the eating of meat (as long as it was "kosher"), so it may be that this particular scruple held by the "weak" person comes from another source, perhaps another religious background or philosophical influence. On the other hand, it may be that some avoided eating meat because they could not be sure they would be getting kosher meat. Either way, Paul indicates that this scruple is an unnecessary restriction on the Christian's freedom, for he ascribes this behavior to the "weak in faith." (Paul discusses the related issue of meat offered to idols in 1 Cor. 8:1-13.)

Rather than criticize the weak person's timidity, Paul speaks first (vs. 3) to the person who might regard the restriction against meat as foolish and narrow-minded. "Those who eat [i.e., the "strong"] must not despise those who abstain." Perhaps from personal experience as someone who appreciates and enjoys his freedom from restrictive food laws, Paul knows the temptation for the "strong" is to be contemptuous of the "weak," who continue to observe 'silly rules.'

Immediately Paul adds a word (still in vs. 3) to "those who abstain" (i.e., the "weak") that they should not "pass judgment on those who eat," thus exercising more freedom. If "God has welcomed them," how can you condemn or exclude them from Christian fellowship because of their participation in something that is morally neutral? The food law may seem important to you, but is it really central to salvation? If God is the master of both the weak and the strong servant, both should trust God to enable his servants to stand (vs. 4). Our confidence as Christians should be based on neither the careful observations of the weak nor the freedom of the strong. God can enable both to stand. Don't feel like everyone has to be like you!

In brief, then, Paul says to the strong: "Don't hold the weaker brother or sister in contempt." To the weak, he says: "Don't judge." (He reinforces this instruction by his rhetorical questions in vs. 10.)

Romans 14:5-12—Individual Conscience and Responsibility toward God

In vs. 5 Paul introduces another debatable issue: should certain days be observed as sacred? We can well imagine there might be a difference of opinion on this between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Jewish Christians might have been insisting that observance of the Jewish Sabbath (Saturday) should be continued; Gentile Christians might have put emphasis on Sunday as the day Jesus was raised. Since Paul does not specifically mention the Sabbath, he may be thinking of other days regarded as holy, such as Passover or the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). Whatever holy days might be in dispute, Paul's principle for dealing with the question is quite remarkable: "Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind" (vs. 5, NIV).

The principle of living by one's own conscience in these disputable matters is what Paul emphasizes in vss. 5-12. Again, Paul is *not* saying you can let your conscience be your guide in matters where the Word of God is clear, such as in matters of basic morality. The debatable issues in which individual conscience should be allowed this kind of freedom are issues having to do with ritual observances or participation in activities about which honest and faithful Christians have genuine differences of opinion. Paul applies this freedom of conscience to the observation of special days and to the eating or abstaining from certain foods (vs. 6).

Whatever one's opinion about these and other disputable matters, the conscience of the individual should be respected. This freedom of conscience is, however, limited in two very important ways. The first limitation is mentioned in vss. 7-8. "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves" may sound initially like Paul is saying to think about how our actions may affect others, but actually Paul doesn't discuss that (second) limitation on our conscience until vss. 13 and following. The fact that no one lives or dies to himself is first of all used to remind us that we have to answer to God.

The living and dying we do is "to the Lord" (vs. 8). We belong to God, not ourselves. Our freedom as Christians is not to do as we please, but to please God (compare 2 Cor. 5:10, 14-15). Since Christ has shared the human experience of living and dying and now lives again as glorious Lord, he is the judge of all human beings, whether alive or dead (vs. 9). Therefore, the individual's freedom of conscience is a recognition that everyone has to answer to God for how we use our time here on earth, for we belong to him by creation and by redemption. No one else can answer for you; you have responsibility for your own actions. You cannot take responsibility (ultimately) for what anyone else does; that person will have to answer to God. The individual conscience is sacred, not so much because everyone has the *right* to make up her or his mind, but because everyone has the *responsibility* to answer to God. You cannot simply let others decide for you on some things.

The other side of this same limitation of the freedom of conscience is the recognition that since *everyone* has to face the judge individually, everyone should leave the judging in the hands of the One who is the rightful judge. Notice the emphasis on the words *all*, *every*, and *each* in vss. 10-12. Also notice in those same verses that God is the judge. Thus the questions of vs. 10 remind us that either to judge or to despise one another for these differences of opinion is out of line.

Romans 14:13-23—Consideration for the Community and Responsibility for Others

The first limitation on the freedom of the individual conscience is the recognition that we belong to God and are responsible to give an account to him. The second limitation on our freedom is the recognition that what we do affects other people. The *individual conscience* must be seen within the context of the *interdependent community*. Thus, after reiterating the exhortation not to judge one another, Paul now adds this instruction: "Resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another" (vs. 13).

From vs. 14 it is clear that Paul agrees with the opinion of those he calls "strong in faith" (see 15:1) and not with the opinion of the "weak." He personally regards no food as unclean, an opinion which can appeal to the teaching of Jesus himself for its authority (see Mark 7:14-19; also 1 Tim. 4:3-5). Nevertheless, because he knows the importance of the individual conscience (previous section of ch. 14), Paul knows that someone who regards certain foods as unclean must respect his or her conscience. To indulge in food or anything else against one's conscience is to risk defiling the conscience—not because the food or activity is inherently defiling but because the conscience is defiled by violating it. The conscience, in other words, may be holding someone to an unnecessary standard, but that does not mean the conscience can be safely ignored.

The sensitivity of the conscience and the importance of respecting it are important considerations for each person in making decisions. I must be careful not to violate my own conscience. But I need to consider also how my actions might influence someone else. If my brother's conscience is defiled by my action, Paul says I am guilty of not "walking [acting] in love" (vs. 15). Paul consistently makes love for other Christians more important than any individual's exercise of freedom. (See 1 Cor. 8:7-13; 10:23-33; Gal. 5:13-15.) When I realize that Christ died for the other person just as much as for me, it is easier to sacrifice some of my freedom for the benefit of the other person. If Christ died for you and for me, I surely don't want to destroy you by something as superficial as my freedom to eat, or by some other equally superficial and temporal freedom (vs. 15).

What for me is a good thing, something I freely and innocently enjoy, can in this way become an evil thing (vs. 16)—not because it has an evil effect on me but because it has an evil effect on someone else. How could my action defile someone else's conscience? Perhaps by encouraging them to follow me in an activity which they are not really sure is okay for them. Perhaps by doing something which causes them to think that I am not really a Christian. Their disillusionment might cause serious discouragement to them, and hinder their sincere efforts to be faithful.

We cannot, practically speaking, let our behavior be dictated by the standards of every other Christian in the world (there are too many differences, even contradictions on some matters of dress and of decorum at worship). But we can be sensitive to the effect

of our behavior on those people whose lives are most affected by our own. We should also recognize that there is a difference between someone not liking my behavior and someone being hurt by my behavior. Always we should seek to use our Christian freedom carefully, with due consideration of the effects on other people.

After all, the essence of Christianity is not how free I am to do this or that thing which other people (perhaps bound by 'religious traditions') do not feel free to do. The "kingdom of God is not [a matter of] food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (vs. 17). Making righteousness, peace, and joy my priorities might mean sacrificing some of my freedom. But making these my priorities is the way truly to serve Christ, please God, and try to benefit other people in a way they can accept (vs. 18).

We have to put serving Christ and pleasing God first, before seeking the approval of people, just as Paul does here. But if Christ gives us freedom either to do or not do something, we can exercise our freedom just as much by refraining as by indulging in the activity. And the benefit or detriment to others should take precedence over our own enjoyment of the activity, if indeed it is a matter in which we have genuine freedom of conscience.

In vs. 19, Paul again exhorts us to seek peace and "mutual upbuilding" of one another. Think of what is good for others. Don't tear down or "destroy" (vs. 20) what God is trying to build up (the other person). Food is not important enough to be worth the destruction or stumbling of my brother or sister.

In the last verse of this section (vs. 21), Paul again mentions meat but now mentions also the drinking of wine as something which one should forego if it causes another to stumble. Jews would not have taught complete abstinence from wine (although the Old Testament strongly condemns drunkenness); so this is another scruple which someone in the church perhaps had imported from another religion or philosophy. It's also a good example of the kind of thing on which Christians today often disagree in our own culture.

Most evangelical churches in our country look with disfavor on the use of alcoholic beverages. Some churches and individual Christians do not agree with this stand. And in other countries, especially in Europe, the standard is very different from that of most American evangelical circles. This appears to be one of those 'debatable questions' in which an individual conscience must be respected. But it is also an issue in which the effect our example has on others should be seriously considered.

Verse 22 tells us that just because we have the freedom to do something, it does not necessarily follow that we should do it. We can keep our knowledge of our freedom to ourselves, and should do so if the open exercise of that freedom would harm someone else. Careless exercise of our freedom to participate in something of which our consciences "approve" could actually bring condemnation on us. This verse, in other words, says that we should not violate the conscience of another person if we can avoid doing so. Something we enjoy might be good in one context and wrong in another simply because of its effect on others. The wisest course, however, would be to live by the same standard at all times so that we need not worry about who might see us.

Verse 23 returns to the topic of needing to respect our own conscience. If we eat a certain food or do something else that violates our conscience, Paul says it is not "faith" which motivates us. And if our participation in the activity is not based on faith, then we

are sinning against our conscience. That is what he means by saying that "whatever does not proceed from faith is sin." Remember that "faith" throughout this chapter has referred to the perceived freedom to participate in and enjoy the benefits of God's good creation. If one does not have faith (in this sense) but participates in the activity while believing it is wrong in God's sight, the conscience is grieved and one may feel guilty before God, even though other Christians do not feel guilt over the same activity.

Romans 15:1-7—Christ as our Example

Paul concludes his exhortation in this section by once again directing attention mostly to those who would consider themselves "strong." If anyone has the strength to 'go the extra mile' in accommodating the needs of others, it should be the "strong." We can show our strength and our mature Christian freedom by refraining from doing something just as much as by doing something. Our freedom is freedom to do what is right—not just for ourselves but also for others. That is what Christ did.

Christ freely chose (and chooses) to endure our weaknesses and failings, not for his own pleasure but for our salvation (vs. 3). He is our example of loving, considerate action toward one another. And just as he has welcomed and accepted all our Christian brothers and sisters as well as us, we must accept one another and seek to build up one another to the praise of God (vs. 7).

Possible questions for discussion:
(Some questions taken from LessonMaker software by NavPress).

1. What reasons did Paul give for not judging people on disputable matters? (14:1-12)

2. When should a Christian defer to another Christian's beliefs? (14:15-16)

3. By what standards should a person accept others? (15:7)

4. What life-style rules and issues do Christians argue about today?

5. What practice would you be willing to give up if it proved to be a bad influence on others?

6. When Scripture is not explicit on an issue, how should a person decide what is right and wrong?

7. What are some areas of life that we should examine carefully for practices that cause others to sin?

8. How would you distinguish between an activity that is merely permissible and one that is clearly immoral?

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