

## “Love’s Servant”

*Psalm 14; Romans 1:1-7*

September 11, 2022

This morning I begin a sermon series that, with some exceptions no doubt, will carry us through the fall and into the Advent season. I am always a bit loathe to start something so long but, in this case, I feel as though it is warranted given the subject matter. I’ll be preaching my way through Paul’s letter to the Romans. Romans is a lengthy letter, well over 22 pages and 7,100 words long and it was written by Paul to a church he’d yet to meet. Paul writes this letter as the means to solicit support for his upcoming missionary journey to Spain, he says so in 15:24 writing, *“I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while.”* Why dedicate this much time to one letter, you may be asking. Well, Romans is a bit of a canon within the canon, for lack of better words. Romans occupies a unique space in the New Testament. Coming right after Acts, it’s the first work of Paul’s recorded in the New Testament. In it, Paul gives a thorough accounting of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for his yet-to-be-met brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul is thorough and detailed in his work through of the Gospel. And it’s for that reason that I’ve chosen to dedicate so much time to this particular letter. By way of a mission statement, Paul tells us the purpose and power of this particular letter in Romans 1:16– *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”* Paul looks at the Gospel message and sees not just a collection of words, a series of truth, Paul instead sees power. The power of God unto salvation to be specific and it propels him through 16 chapters of this letter. It is so thorough and complete accounting of the Gospel, that many have remarked on its fulsomeness and ability to convey Jesus to people. Samuel Coleridge, speaking for many, said, “I think that the Epistle to the Romans is the most profound work in existence.” And John Knox said that it is “unquestionably the most important theological work ever written.”

I have a personal history with this letter. I can remember getting into seminary and thinking, I’ve just got to understand Romans before I head off to Duke. So, I sat down with a commentary and a Bible and began a journey that continues to this day every time I open up the letter and read it, either for sermon preparation or personal spiritual devotion. I will tell you that my thoughts on Romans have changed and deepened through the years. Those initial readings were very limited in their understandings. Romans is a book that requires multiple, ongoing readings, I believe, and that’s one of the reasons I’ll be preaching it, with the hopeful expectation that many of you will join me on this study and read the book for yourself again and again.

I was fortunate enough to take an entire class on the letter in seminary, a class that drove me nuts, to be honest about it. In that particular class, the professor had some pretty radical beliefs about Romans’ meaning and, as such, he discounted many of the traditional interpretations. Long story short, it wasn’t a very good class, more confusing than anything, oftentimes the hallmark of quote-unquote scholars’ classes. Sometimes scholars are too busy trying to make their own points instead of focusing on what’s really important or what’s actually being said. We have a way of doing that more than ever before, I’m afraid – making things all about us. One of the words I’m hearing a lot these days with respect to people, is “Brand.” You’ve got to protect the brand. Meaning that you yourself are so special that you’ve got to make it about you so that others can appreciate your brilliance. Your brand. For goodness sakes.

Which is precisely what Paul is trying to prevent, I’m convinced, in these first early verses of Romans. Even though in letter writing convention, the first part of a letter at the period was all about the author of the letter, somehow Paul manages to make it more about what God is doing in and through him than he makes it merely about identifying himself as the letter’s author. Paul in Romans desperately wants to introduce you to the God who Paul knows has very plainly operated in and throughout the course of his life. Paul looks at the entirety of his life and sees the handiwork of God’s plans and purposes. But first, he must introduce himself. You see, to the Roman church, Paul was a stranger. He even points that out that he’s yet to make it to Rome. But that Paul has plans to journey to Rome on his way to Spain is quite the occurrence for this once-faithful Jew. In fact, Paul wasn’t just a faithful Jew, he was a bit of a super-Jew by circumstance and training. Paul writes this about himself in Philippians 3, writing *“though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the*

*church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”* Prior to his conversion, Paul was a member of the Pharisees and was a persecutor of the church. How do we know that, he tells us and we read in Acts that Paul was there, present at the stoning of Stephen, the very first deacon.

So, something had happened to Paul and it changed his life. That something was an encounter with Jesus Christ that is recorded for us in Acts 9 – *“But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’ And he said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And He said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.’ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So, they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.”*

At a certain point, Saul’s life is turned upside down by the power of God. One day, he’s faithfully persecuting the church on behalf of the Jews, the next day, he’s blinded by the Lord in preparation for a change. Saul’s conversion to Paul sets in motion part of God’s plan for the spreading of the Gospel. Charged with presenting the Gospel to the Gentiles, St. Paul is responsible for the evangelization of the Ancient Near East. It is his efforts that see huge swaths of the Ancient Near East converted. But it’s important to note, Paul never once puts the real emphasis on his work on himself. Instead, it’s always about God. Hear now the beginning verses of Romans 1 – *“Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning His Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by His resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of His name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”*

As I’ve mentioned before, in the ancient world, there was a “formula” for writing letters, if you will. Letters in this period were highly stylized so that the intent of the letter could be determined by the way it was written. But prior to any of these rhetorical forms, there was the introduction of the author. This was the way by which the hearers of the letter would know exactly who was speaking to them. This was especially important with encyclical letters like this. An encyclical letter is just one that is going to be read to multiple groups of people. Remember, back then, there was no other way to get announcements out than a good encyclical letter.

And Paul, right out of the gate, wants everyone to know something. Paul, he writes, a servant. And the word’s been cleaned up there a little bit. The word in the Greek is *Doulos*. *Doulos* is a Greek word in the Bible that has only one true historical option for accurate translation into English, which is slave. It literally means to be owned by someone for a lifetime. This word is found at least 127 times in 119 verses in the New Testament scriptures. It is used in the context of human slavery, which, sadly, was very common throughout the ancient Roman Empire for hundreds of years.

Think just for a moment about hearing this letter read for the first time. There you were in Rome, a Christian, and here is a letter from an important man and in the opening lines of the letter, he describes himself as a slave, technically a bond servant. What is a bond servant? Well, a bond servant was someone who had literally sold their freedom away. During the time of Jesus and the first-century church, as much as one third of the Roman population were slaves, and another third had been slaves earlier in life. It was common for freeborn men and women to work side-by-side with slaves as street sweepers, dockworkers, doctors, teachers, and business managers. Convicted criminals became bondservants of the state and usually died working in the mines or on galleys. But Paul isn’t dying, not through his service he isn’t. But what he is doing is signaling that he no longer considers his own life to be his own life. Rather, he looks at it through the lens of debt and seems something magnificent. He sees the Gospel. The reason that Paul is so boastful about his status as slave is that Paul knows what he’s been bought from and by whom. Paul very clearly tells us the penalty for sin is death, eternal death to be specific about it. And yet, Paul isn’t frightened by death, he tells us as much in Philippians writing, *“To die is gain, to live is Christ.”*

There's good news for us as well. The heart and soul of the Gospel is the belief that God has acted to save, well, sinners. To be specific, God in Christ died in order that you and I might live. That's the news Paul embraces as he calls himself slave. You see, Paul understood that this salvific death of Jesus Christ changes everything. No longer are we creatures of darkness doomed to hell. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors. Paul understood that he's been bought. Purchased by the precious, spilled blood of Jesus Christ on Calvary. God's own Son, taken, stripped, beaten and crucified. He hung on that cross for six long hours feeling His life slip away one drip of blood at a time. According to First Peter, "*He himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed.*" By His wounds, Paul had been healed and, in that enteral healing, Paul saw himself as bought. Paid for at a price. It's for that reason, Paul calls himself slave rather proudly.

But he goes on from there, doesn't he? Paul tells us he is called to be an apostle. Calling makes the entirety of life about God. In the Bible, this sense of calling is especially important. God calls Abram at the beginning of Genesis 11 telling him to travel to a foreign land. In time, God calls Moses and Elijah, Peter and Paul and countless untold others into His service. But this emphasis of Paul's follows on the heels of his calling himself a bondservant and that makes sense. Even though Paul is introducing himself, as per the terms of the letter writing standards of the time, he is doing it in a way that doesn't put emphasis on him, but rather upon God.

Now, what is an apostle, many might ask. Apostolos is the word in Greek and it means "the one who is sent out." Apostle generally has two meanings in the Christian church. The first is a name for the inner circle of Jesus Christ's as He did ministry over 2000 years ago in Judea. The second, a more general term, can be used for messengers or envoys of Jesus Christ in the modern day. It should be noted that, within our particular faith tradition, we use Apostles almost exclusively to refer to the first 12 or so followers of Jesus Christ who are named as such in our canonical New Testaments.

Paul is a bondservant, called to be an apostle and set apart for the Gospel of God. This word, set apart, is also the word used for sanctification. Things are "set apart" for usage by God and thus made Holy. In a way Paul is saying that the entirety of his life is wrapped up in God's plans and purposes.

God is the most important word in this epistle. Romans is a book about God. No topic is treated with anything like the frequency of God. Everything Paul touches in this letter he relates to God. In our concern to understand what the apostle is saying about righteousness, justification, and the like we ought not to overlook his tremendous concentration on God. There is nothing like it elsewhere.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.