The Power of the Gospel

The POWER *of the* GOSPEL

A Year in Romans

R.C. SPROUL

Ligonier Ministries

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Romans 1

PAUL, A BONDSERVANT OF JESUS CHRIST, *called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God which He promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead. Through Him we have received grace and apostleship for obedience to the faith among all nations for His name, among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ;*

To all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of His Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers, making request if, by some means, now at last I may find a way in the will of God to come to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift, so that you may be established—that is, that I may be encouraged together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me.

Now I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that I often planned to come to you (but was hindered until now), that I might have some fruit among you also, just as among the other Gentiles. I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise. So, as much as is in me, I am ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also

for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live by faith."

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.

Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due.

And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them.

WEEK 1

1

Paul: Bondservant

PAUL STARTS BY GIVING HIS NAME, but he then seeks to define who he understands himself to be. This self-identification is not just Paul's introspection or self-evaluation; the Holy Spirit superintends the Apostle's writing, which is how we know that this is a true and accurate description of the author of the epistle.

Paul identifies himself as **a bondservant of Jesus Christ** (v. 1a). I have never been satisfied with that English translation of this second phrase. Some translations have, "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ." *Bondservant* is an improvement, but I think the proper translation should read, "Paul, a slave of Jesus Christ." The Greek word that Paul uses here is *doulos*. A *doulos* was not a hired servant who could come and go as he pleased. A *doulos* was a person who had been purchased, and once purchased he became his master's possession.

This idea of the *doulos* in Scripture is always connected to another descriptive word, *kurios*.

In the New Testament, the title "lord" or *kurios* is used in three ways. There is a simple, common usage, where calling someone *kurios* is like addressing him as "sir," a polite form of address. The supreme use of *kurios* refers to the sovereign God, who rules all things. *Kurios*, "the name which is above every name" (Phil. 2:9), is the name given to Jesus, whom the Father calls the King of kings and the Lord of lords. There is yet a middle usage of the term *kurios* in the New Testament. It is used to describe a slave owner, which is an apt description of Jesus, and it is from this that Paul describes himself. He is not just a servant but a slave.

Paul, in addressing believers, said, "You are not your own. For you were bought at a price" (1 Cor. 6:19–20). We have been purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ (Acts 20:28). There is a paradox here: when the New Testament describes our condition by nature, as fallen people, it describes us as slaves to sin. There is also irony here: when Christ sets us free from slavery to the flesh, He calls us to the royal liberty of slavery to Him. That is why we call Him Master. We acknowledge that it is from Him that we get our marching orders. He is the Lord of our lives. We are not our own. We are not autonomous or independent. Unless people understand their relationship to Christ in these terms, they remain unconverted.

Application

Everyone born of the Spirit is set free from slavery to sin and belongs to a new master. We are now slaves of Jesus Christ, a service in which we find true freedom—the freedom to do what is good and holy. This liberating work of the Holy Spirit was not only for our first being set free from sin by the Lord. The Holy Spirit is at work in our daily obedience to Christ, our new master. Let us walk in humble reliance on the Spirit every day as faithful servants in our freedom from sin.

2

Sent and Separated

PAUL MAKES A SIGNIFICANT AFFIRMATION ABOUT himself and his mission: **called to be an apostle** (v. 1b). In the early chapters of Acts, the church gathered to elect a new Apostle, and it set forth the criteria for apostleship. The first criterion was having been a disciple of Jesus during His earthly ministry; the second was having been an eyewitness of the resurrection; and the third and most important

criterion was having been directly and immediately called by Jesus (Acts 1:20–26).

In the ancient world, an apostle was like an ambassador who spoke on behalf of the king. The ambassador's message carried with it the authority of the one who sent him. The word *apostolos* in Greek means simply "one who is sent." "He who hears you hears Me, he who rejects you rejects Me, and he who rejects Me rejects Him who sent Me" (Luke 10:16).

People often say, "I like to know what Jesus says; it is Paul I do not want to listen to." Almost all we know about Jesus is that which comes through Apostolic authority, so such remarks set Paul against Matthew, or Paul against John. That may not be done with impunity because all the Apostolic writings carry the delegated authority of Jesus Himself. That is what it means to be an Apostle. That is why the New Testament church is built on the foundation of the Apostles.

In the three criteria for apostleship, Paul fails the first two tests: he had not been a disciple of Jesus during Jesus' tenure on earth, nor had he been an eyewitness of the resurrection of Christ. That is why there were some in the early church who seriously challenged the Apostolic authority of Paul. The supreme qualification for Apostolic authority was a direct and immediate call by Jesus. I believe that is why, in the book of Acts, the account of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, where Christ called him to be His Apostle, is repeated three times. It is to remind the people that Paul is an authentic agent of revelation. He speaks with the authority of Jesus.

The next thing we learn about Paul is that he had been **separated to the gospel of God** (v. 1c). In Latin, *separated* means "segregated," set apart from the multitude to a specific, sacred, consecrated task. The phrase Paul uses involves a part of speech in the Greek language called the genitive, which indicates possession. He is not saying, "I have been commissioned to announce a message or good news about God." Rather, he is saying that the gospel that he has been separated

and called to proclaim is God's gospel. God is the Author and owner of it. Paul is simply the messenger whom God has called and set apart to proclaim to people a message that comes from God Himself.

Application
God used the Apostle Paul mightily, and he is a lesson of God's grace. Paul himself reminds us, "I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy" (1 Tim. 1:13). This was the Paul whom God had set apart. Just like Paul, we have been delivered from our former sins in Christ, and God calls us into His service for the advancement of the gospel.

3

The Promised Gospel

PAUL HAS BEEN SEPARATED FOR THE GOSPEL **which He promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures** (v. 2). Sometimes we make an artificial separation or distinction between the Old and New Testaments. We talk about the Old Testament as law and the New Testament as gospel, as if there were no law in the New Testament and no gospel in the Old Testament. Paul says at the very beginning that the gospel is not a novelty; it is the same gospel that was promised numerous times before.

The first time the gospel was promised in the Old Testament was in the context of a curse. As a result of the fall, God cursed Adam and Eve as well as the serpent. God said that the Seed of the woman would crush the serpent's head, and in the process the seed of the serpent would bruise the man's heel. Centuries before Christ was delivered to the cross, where He crushed the head of Satan while being bruised for our iniquities, the gospel of Christ was given in the promise of the

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