

TODAY IN THE **WORD**[™]

A ministry of Moody Bible Institute

BUILDING BLOCKS
of **FAITH**
A Study of Romans

FEBRUARY 2021

Being Religious Can't Save You

From the President of Moody Bible Institute

"Our self-measured goodness will not shield us from the judgement of God. We all need a Savior."



Many people today consider themselves somewhat religious. They may have been baptized as an infant, went to

a religious school as a child, or were married in a church. They have a Bible in their home or put out a manger scene at Christmas. We all like to believe we're basically good people. We stop to help an elderly woman cross the street, welcome a new neighbor, or give to the needy. Our culture affirms that way of thinking. As long as we're sincere and have some kind of faith, we hope we'll end up in the right place.

But the Word of God is very clear on the subject. God's standard is perfection, and not one of us measures up: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). No one will make it to the presence of God unless they're holy and perfect. Our self-measured goodness will not shield us from the judgement of God. We all need a Savior.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul was writing to people living in one of

the biggest cities of his time. Rome was home to the rich and the poor; the educated and the illiterate; the Jews and the Gentiles. Paul was writing about the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He was concerned that many of his Jewish readers believed their obedience to the law of Moses made them right with God.

To them, Paul writes that "Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin" (Rom. 3:9). Paul observed that those who considered themselves "good people" were often quick to "pass judgment on someone else" (Rom. 2:1). While we think we're pretty good when compared to others, Paul says we are the ones in need of God's forgiveness.

Isaiah 64:6 says that before God, "all our righteous acts are like filthy rags." We have done nothing to deserve forgiveness, but God's kindness leads us to make the U-turn of repentance. God says to us, "You can't make it on your own. So I've given you my Son, and only through His perfect sacrifice, you can be saved." In Romans 6:23, Paul declares this life-transforming message: "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The Power of the Gospel

by Dr. John Koessler

“The New Testament term translated gospel is a Greek word literally meaning ‘good news.’”

A saying often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi advises, “Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if necessary.” The problem is not only that Francis never said such a thing. This quote also misrepresents the gospel. Duane Litfin, president emeritus of Wheaton College, said, “It’s simply impossible to preach the gospel without words.”

The New Testament term translated *gospel* is a Greek word literally meaning “good news.” This gospel was the message Jesus commanded His disciples to preach (Mark 13:10). Paul used this same word in Romans to refer to the message about Jesus that he preached (Rom. 1:9). The gospel is a verbal message that reveals “the righteousness from God” (Rom. 1:17). It was something Paul passionately proclaimed (Col. 1:28).

However, there is more to the gospel than words. The reason Paul was not ashamed to proclaim the gospel was that “it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone

who believes” (Rom. 1:16). The gospel tells how God worked through Christ to make salvation possible. The heart of its message focuses on Christ’s death as the payment for our sin and His resurrection for our justification. “To preach the gospel in a penetrating way, then, you do not merely want to talk about an abstract concept of forgiveness and repentance,” Pastor and author Timothy Keller observes. “You want to show listeners Jesus Himself and all that He came to do for us.”

How does behavior fit into our proclamation of the gospel? Changed lives provide concrete evidence of the power of God displayed in the gospel. This life transformation offers proof that Jesus can truly save us from sin. The daily evidence of purity and reverence in the life of a Christian causes its message to reverberate in a way that cannot be silenced. What does this mean for us? Preach the gospel everywhere. And prove it with your life! ■

For Further Study

To learn more, read *The Heart of the Gospel: The Gospel’s History, Message, and Meaning* by Joe Thorn (Moody Publishers).

We hope these questions will help you consider (or discuss with others) what God is teaching you through this month's study of His Word. We've left a bit of room to write down your thoughts as well!

WEEK 1: Do you ever feel nervous about sharing the gospel with others? What makes you feel afraid?

WEEK 2: If it is not possible to be saved by keeping the law of Moses, why did God give us the law?

WEEK 3: What is wrong with a Christian saying, "It doesn't matter if I sin, it's all under grace anyway"?

WEEK 4: What does it mean to "offer your body as a living sacrifice"? Describe some ways you can be a living sacrifice to God.

Want more questions? Check out the Go Deeper section on our website or app!

TODAY IN THE WORD™

Building Blocks of Faith

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.—Romans 1:16

When I first began to follow Christ, I loved reading the Gospels. I wasn't nearly as enthusiastic about the epistles. Despite this, I decided to spend several months reading nothing but the book of Romans. My opinion changed. So did my life. This month we study Paul's letter to the believers in Rome. As you study this book, you will discover:

- The nature and importance of the gospel
- The difference between law and grace
- The secret to holy living

It is my prayer that God will use this book to transform your life as much as it has changed mine.

Your devotional writer,



John Koessler

John Koessler is Professor Emeritus at Moody Bible Institute and an award-winning author. His newest book is titled *Dangerous Virtues: How to Follow Jesus When Evil Masquerades as Good* (Moody 2020). John and his wife, Jane, enjoy living in a lakeside town in Michigan. ■

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The Heart of the Gospel

Read Romans 1:1–17

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.—Romans 1:16

When I was a boy, I tried to earn extra money selling newspapers door to door. I was not a success. My sales pitch went something like this: “You wouldn’t want to buy this paper, would you?” Some of us share the gospel the same way.

Today we begin a study of Paul’s letter to the Romans. Martin Luther called this book “the chief part of the New Testament and the very purest gospel.” Paul had two primary goals in writing. One was to introduce Phoebe and urge the church to aid her in her service to Christ (Rom. 16:1–2). The apostle’s larger purpose was to clarify his gospel in light of recent criticism from some who opposed him. He begins with greetings, a summary of his credentials, and a declaration of his confidence in the gospel. Paul was not ashamed of the gospel because it reveals a righteousness “that is by faith from first to last” (v. 17).

Paul will have much more to say both about the nature of the gospel and its implications for us. But here at the very beginning, we learn its fundamental truth. Righteousness comes from God as a gift to everyone who believes that Jesus Christ died and rose for them (v. 4). It is an unearned gift. We did nothing to receive it. This gift is offered to all, Jew and Gentile alike. Those who embrace the gospel message begin a new life that is lived by faith “from first to last.” Just as we never outlive our need for faith, we will never grow out of our need for the gospel.

► We may be nervous about sharing the gospel because we underestimate it. As we begin this study, ask God to grant you an understanding of the full message and power of the gospel. This study will help you understand its implications for your life!

Pray with Us

Dear God, some of us have heard the gospel so often that we have lost our wonder at your grace. Renew our perspective so we may find joy and confidence in the power of the gospel.

Sin's Downward Spiral

Read Romans 1:18–32

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven.—Romans 1:18

One of the most famous sermons preached by 18th-century pastor and theologian Jonathan Edwards was titled “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Edwards said that the sermon was “attended with many impressions upon the hearers.” Some, who felt convicted of their sin, cried out in fear. Others wept with joy over their salvation.

In today's world, we hardly hear about God's wrath. Yet Paul's words make it clear that such a thing is very real. Paul explains its basis and the form it takes. God's wrath is revealed because humanity suppresses what God has revealed about Himself. All people are accountable for this revelation because “God has made it plain to them” (v. 19). However, God does not express His wrath by flying into an emotional rage and showering the wicked with thunderbolts. Instead, He allows sinful humanity to go their way (v. 24). In other words, when sin

entered the world through Adam, it produced a downward spiral of disobedience and distortion of truth.

The Bible's language of divine wrath reminds us what it is like to be in an oppositional relationship with God. We all know how it feels to be the focus of someone's displeasure or to experience rejection. The emphasis is not on God's emotional state so much as it is on our position. Sin makes us God's enemies. He is opposed to us because we are opposed to Him. Unrighteousness always places us at cross purposes with God so that we cannot be in harmony with Him.

► Have you ever considered that the worst thing that could happen to you might be for God to let you have your way? C. S. Lewis observed, “There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’”

Pray with Us

Almighty God, we praise you for delivering us from slavery to our own desires. We ask that you sanctify our desires and align them to yours so we can sincerely pray, “Thy will be done.”

Moral Sinners

Read Romans 2:1–16

You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else.—Romans 2:1

After the Pharisees condemned Jesus for healing a blind man on the Sabbath, He told them, “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.” Some who heard Him say this replied, “What? Are we blind too?” Jesus answered, “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains” (John 9:39–41).

No sinner is as hard to reach as a moral sinner. That is the kind of person Paul has in mind in today’s passage. In particular, he takes aim at the pious Jew who believed that it was possible to become righteous by faithfully keeping the Old Testament law. They would have rightly condemned the kinds of behavior Paul described in the previous chapter. Their mistake was that they did not think that, because they obeyed the letter of the law, they were candidates for God’s judgment. When they

passed judgment on others, they condemned themselves (v. 1). The solution was not to ignore sin but to acknowledge the truth about themselves.

It is not just hypocrisy that Paul condemns in these verses but also the unrealistic view they have of themselves. They were right to agree with God’s standard. They were wrong to think they had met it. Those who possessed God’s law were not any more successful in their attempts to keep it than the Gentiles who dismissed God’s moral standard.

► The apostle describes the stark outcome in verse 12: “All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law.” Paul’s point is clear. Those who sin without the law will perish. Those who have the law will be judged by it and prove that they have fallen short of its standard.

Pray with Us

Today’s passage is a humbling reminder that our hope is not in our own righteousness, but in being joined with our righteous Savior. Father, thank you for sending your Son to fulfill the requirements of the law on our behalf.

Right on the Inside

Read Romans 2:17–29

*You, then, who teach others,
do you not teach yourself?—Romans 2:21*

In most television dramas, the conclusion to a courtroom scene is usually very dramatic. During a final cross-examination, the prosecuting attorney will successfully provoke the accused to break down and confess to the crime. But in real life that dramatic courtroom conclusion rarely happens, cases are often settled through plea bargaining, where lawyers broker a deal outside of the courtroom.

In today's passage, Paul continues to focus on those who think they can be made righteous by observing the law of Moses. He questions them with the force of a television prosecutor. The verses in today's reading describe the self-perception of those Paul has in view. They are Jews who "rely on the law," know and approve of God's will, and are convinced that they possess the truth (v. 17). They believed they were qualified to provide spiritual guidance to others.

The implied answers to Paul's questions show that they were guilty

of the very sins they condemned in others. Given the high view these moralists had of themselves, it seems unlikely that they would have agreed with Paul's assessment. That is why the apostle brings forward an irrefutable witness to testify against them: God Himself! In verse 24, he quotes the last part of Isaiah 52:5 from the Greek translation known as the Septuagint (a similar thought is expressed in Ezekiel 36:20–23). Paul's point is that even the biblical record shows that those who have the law do not necessarily obey the law. If anything, biblical history provides ample evidence that even those who affirm it prove themselves to be sinners, just like the rest.

► The question we should consider today is this: Who can claim to have a relationship with God? The answer? Only God can make someone a child of God. It is not a question of your parent's religion or your ethnicity, but a spiritual relationship between you and God, your "circumcision of the heart by the Spirit" (v. 29).

Pray with Us

We confess that we are powerless to save ourselves, whether through inherent righteousness, good works, or birthright. Lord, we are your children because you have adopted us, and we owe everything to you.

The Lesson of God's Law

Read Romans 3:1–20

Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law.—Romans 3:20

When I was in graduate school, one professor told us that he designed his tests so that nobody could get a 100 percent. Then, he told us not to worry because he graded on a curve. Some believe that God's law works the same way. They realize that they have not lived a life 100 percent free of sin, but they are hoping that God will at least consider them at the top of the pack.

Paul expected similar reasoning from those who read this letter. The obvious objection to his assertion that the rite of circumcision did not give the Jewish person a special status in God's eyes is stated in verse 1: "What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew?" Paul's answer is emphatic: "Much in every way!" (v. 2). The benefit was that they had received the clear revelation of God through His Word.

The second question in verse 3 is raised by Paul as part of his retort. The failure of those who received the oracles of God and did not heed them does not reflect poorly on God.

The fact that they are unfaithful or unbelieving does not mean that He is false. God and His Word are still true, no matter how people respond.

Paul's third question voices the false accusation some had made about his gospel. Since our unrighteousness is in sharp contrast to God's righteousness, doesn't God benefit from our sinfulness? Paul condemns this reasoning and clarifies his point with a long quote, which strings together several statements from the Psalms. In case his readers missed the point, Paul spells it out for them in verses 19–20. Those who wanted to be declared righteous by following the law of Moses missed its central point. God does not grade on a curve.

► We're learning many lessons (and important words) from Paul about the doctrine of faith. Start a list and note this lesson of the law: everyone fails. All of us! We are all sinners in need of a savior. Only God can make you righteous through Jesus Christ.

Pray with Us

All of us have failed your standards, God. Knowing this increases our humility, deepens our gratitude, and fills us with awe at your overwhelming mercy. Move us to tell others about your gift of compassion.

The Good and Bad News

Read Romans 3:21–31

This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.—Romans 3:22

When someone is going to deliver a difficult message, they'll sometimes ask you: *Which do you want first, the good news or the bad news?* The word *gospel* comes from a Greek word that means *good news*. It was a technical term for a message of victory. But first, Paul delivers what some might consider bad news.

Paul explains that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (v. 23). It makes no difference if you are Jewish or Gentile, devout or irreligious. We are all sinners and without excuse. There is more to this than merely recognizing that we are not God. Not only have we disobeyed God when Adam sinned, but with that act, humanity fundamentally changed. Sin affects every aspect of our human character. No part of our nature is left untouched by sin.

As bad as this news may be, the universality of sin opens the door for good news. Since all have sinned, we all may experience redemption by grace through Jesus Christ (v. 24). God can offer this gift

without compromising His standard of righteousness because “God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement” (v. 25).

Atonement is the same word used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to refer to *the mercy-seat*, the gold covering on the Ark of the Covenant, where the blood of the sin offering was sprinkled (Lev. 16:14). Such language indicates that Jesus’ death was a propitiation or sacrifice for sin. By sending Jesus to die on our behalf, the Father was able to offer the grace of forgiveness freely without compromising His standard. He was able to “be just” (righteous) and “the one who justifies” (vindicates or declares righteous) at the same time (v. 26).

► The bad news is that our sinfulness means we have no reason to boast before God. The good news is that we can receive righteousness through Jesus Christ. His sacrifice on our behalf does not set aside God’s law, it upholds it. Only Jesus can make you right with God.

Pray with Us

Dear God, only you can perfectly preserve justice within mercy. Teach us not to shy away from acknowledging our fallenness, for the more perfectly we grasp our hopeless state, the more we understand the greatness of your compassion.

Earning Righteousness

Read Romans 4:1–12

Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness. —Genesis 15:6

A popular children’s song goes:
 “Father Abraham had many sons /
 Many sons had Father Abraham. /
 I am one of them and so are you. /
 So let’s just praise the Lord!” Today’s reading explains why those who are in Christ can rightfully say that they are one of Abraham’s sons.

Paul calls Abraham “our forefather according to the flesh” (v. 1). Abraham, from whom the Jewish people trace their lineage, was believed to have obeyed the law before it was given. When Abraham entered into a covenant with God, he was told to circumcise, “every male among you” (Gen. 17:9–10). Yet Paul points out that this came after “Abraham’s faith was credited to him as righteousness” (Rom. 4:9). The order indicates that Abraham obtained righteousness by faith before action. Circumcision and obedience followed his faith. Paul’s opponents had it backward. They taught that righteous standing before God was attained by first being circumcised and keeping the law of Moses.

Paul cites Psalm 32, where David speaks of the blessedness of forgiveness (vv. 7–8). These two examples are connected by the use of the word “count” in Psalm 32:2. Together, Abraham and David show the two sides of God’s action toward believers in justification. The Father counts our sin as forgiven and considers us to be righteous *because* of Jesus’ death and resurrection. The cross is the only payment that satisfies the debt of sin. Christ’s righteousness is the only righteousness that God will accept. Still today, many people believe they must complete a checklist in order to earn God’s approval. They try to become good enough for God. Paul reminds us that our journey begins with the simple act of faith.

► Today’s word is “righteousness.” Have you followed Abraham’s example by trusting God to make you righteous through Jesus Christ? Take the next step by sharing that decision with your pastor or another believer today! They will be happy to welcome you into the family of God.

Pray with Us

Sometimes we live as if we can be righteous by checking off a list of good works. But our rules do nothing to save us, Father. You have given us your Son Jesus, and we joyfully lay claim to His righteousness.

The Promise of Faith

Read Romans 4:13–25

The promise comes by faith.—Romans 4:16

David Macaulay has authored a popular series of books for children (and loved by many adults) that describe *The Way Things Work*. Using colorful and precisely detailed illustrations, he explains the inner workings of things we encounter every day, such as computers or light or sound waves.

In Romans 4, Paul explains the way justification works. Using Abraham as his model, the apostle shows us that righteousness cannot come through the law. If Abraham's inheritance had been based on how perfectly he followed the law, it would have rendered God's promise "worthless" (v. 14). Instead, God determined to justify Abraham by faith so that righteousness would be a gift instead of an earned wage. An additional reason for linking righteousness to faith was that the law is unable to produce what it demands. Instead of making us righteous, "the law brings wrath" (v. 15). The best the law can do is to reveal the standard and show that we have violated it.

Attempts to be justified through the law only heighten our separation from God because they prove that we have fallen short. The law highlights our inability or weakness. Abraham exemplified this weakness when he believed God's promise to make him "a father of nations" because his body "was as good as dead" (v. 19). Abraham showed his faith by believing that God could do what he could not do for himself.

Abraham's blessing was not meant for him alone. The promise is for us as well. God will count as righteous all who believe that Jesus was "delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification" (v. 25). That is indeed good news!

► Let this truth about justification soak in! God has done for you what you could never do for yourself! Have you believed God's promise to forgive your sins and credit Christ's righteousness to your account? If you would like to talk to someone about this, call (800) DL MOODY.

Pray with Us

As we meditate on your gift of justification, help us grasp the magnitude of your grace. May we embrace the knowledge that we are utterly dependent on you for every good and perfect thing.

The Chain of Grace

Read Romans 5:1–11

We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.—Romans 5:1

In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Lucy Pevensie opens the door of a wardrobe and discovers that it is a gateway to the dreamlike land of Narnia. As she pushes past heavy fur winter coats, she steps out of the wardrobe and into a winter wonderland. In Romans 5, the apostle Paul shows us how faith can be a doorway. Faith does not lead to a fantasy land but to our real standing before God that Paul calls grace.

Faith produces a chain of experiences that show how God's grace transforms those who have trusted in Christ. First, faith makes peace with God possible (v. 1). By His sacrifice, Jesus removed the enmity that was created by our inability to obey God's law (Eph. 2:15). Second, our new standing is one of grace because in it God bestows His favor on us as a gift. Grace enables us to "boast in the hope of the glory of God" (Rom. 5:2). Although we have fallen

short of God's glory, God's grace assures us that we will be fully restored. Christ's righteousness gives us the confidence to face God in His glory and guarantees that we will one day reflect that glory.

Through grace God transforms suffering into a laboratory where we learn perseverance. He uses this perseverance to transform our character. Our transformed character, in turn, gives us reason to hope because it offers concrete evidence of Christ at work in us. God further validates this hope by pouring out His love through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. We not only know God but we also experience His love! This is the chain of grace.

► Grace changes everything. God's grace in the present gives us a reason to hope for the future. If the shed blood of Christ has already given you a righteous standing before God, you can be confident that you will escape God's wrath.

Pray with Us

Father, not only are we undeserving of your peace and grace, but we can never repay you for your mercy. We can only rejoice and offer our lives in your service, asking for the privilege to participate in your work on earth.

The Power of One

Read Romans 5:12–21

*Through the obedience of the one man
the many will be made righteous.—Romans 5:19*

In the days before digital pictures, photographic negatives were common. A negative is an image where the light areas are reversed to appear dark, and the dark areas now become light. It creates a mirror of the photograph but is also its opposite.

Today's reading describes the relationship between Jesus and Adam. It may be helpful to think about it like a photographic negative. When Paul calls Adam a "pattern of the one to come" (v. 14), he implies that we can better understand Jesus by looking to Adam. Because Adam was humanity's representative, when he sinned, all sinned (v. 12). Sin and death passed on to the human race through Adam. Through the sin of one, all became sinners. Likewise, through the obedience of one (Jesus), we can all be declared righteous.

But Jesus' obedience and death did much more than merely match Adam's original sin. Jesus' sacrifice surpassed what was needed. In

this case the gift was not like the trespass: "For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!" (v. 15). If God intended to offer righteousness as a gift through Jesus Christ, why did He give the law? Paul tells us in verse 20: "The law was brought in so that the trespass might increase." God used the law to shine a light on human sin and to clearly show us our need for grace. Paul depicts the law as an assistant to grace, revealing our guilt and need for a righteousness that is apart from the law (Rom. 3:21).

► If you're taking notes on our study of Romans, add the terms "law" and "grace" to your definition list. The law reveals our guilt and our need for righteousness (Rom. 3:21). Grace is seen in God's gift of righteousness, freely offered to you through Jesus Christ.

Pray with Us

Thank you, God, for the righteousness you have given us in your Son! We ask that you continue to conform us to your will, so that in our words and deeds we may grow more and more like you.

Escaping Sin's Control

Read Romans 6:1–23

Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.—Romans 6:11

Juneteenth commemorates the day that Union General Gordon Granger announced to former slaves in Galveston, Texas, that the Civil War had ended, and they were free. The announcement came two and a half years after Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This was life-changing good news; those who had once been slaves were now free!

In today's text, Paul delivers good news: the believer's emancipation from slavery to sin. Paul begins with a practical question: Does our sin magnify God's grace? The thought that a Christian would ignore sin was unthinkable to the apostle. Continuing to let sin reign means we do not fully understand our freedom in Christ (vv. 3–4). The believer's union with Christ is key to overcoming sin. Christ's death and resurrection fundamentally change the believer's relationship to sin. Although we are still capable of sinning, we are no longer enslaved by it (v. 6). Sin no longer holds power over us.

Overcoming sin begins with an act of faith by which we “count” ourselves dead to sin and alive to God. Our sinful nature may try to reassert its former dominance, but we do not have to let it rule us (vv. 11–12). In a sense, every act of sin is a denial of our true identity in Christ. Sin is a kind of amnesia.

Paul strengthens his theological argument with a practical question based on personal experience: “When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death!” (vv. 20–21). Sin entered human experience in the Garden of Eden with a false promise. It continues to entice us with boasts that it cannot fulfill.

► Do you want a practical strategy for dealing with temptation? When you are tempted, slow down and think about your prior experience with sin. When has it ever been your friend? Why should this time be any different?

Pray with Us

We are free from sin's domination, yet so often we still choose sin over righteousness. Lord, please help us to turn to you when we are tempted. Cultivate in us a craving for holiness.

Death and the Law

Read Romans 7:1–14

So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.—Romans 7:12

According to voting records, John Cenkner cast ballots in the California elections of 2004, 2005, 2006, 2008, and 2010. The only problem was that he died in 2003. For obvious reasons, the dead can't vote! In Romans 7, Paul uses the concept of death to help us understand our complicated relationship with God's law.

Just as the believer's union with Christ in His death changes our relationship to our sinful nature, it also alters our relationship to God's law. Using the analogy of a married woman whose husband dies, Paul points out that those who are united with Christ in His death have "died to the law" (v. 4). This was necessary because of the way our sinful nature interacts with the law. Instead of preventing sin, God's law actually aroused it (v. 5).

Does this mean that the law itself is responsible for sin? Paul's answer in verse 7 is very emphatic: "Certainly not!" Paul uses the example

of coveting. For a rebellious child, when the law tells him not to covet, it stirs up all of his covetous instincts (vv. 7, 8).

God's law is holy, and its commandments are "holy, righteous and good" (v. 12). The problem with the law resides within us. Sin makes it impossible for us to measure up to God's standard. And this very good thing can actually stir up wrong desires in us. Paul personifies sin, saying that it used what was good to bring about his death (v. 10). In this way, the commandment shows that sin is "utterly sinful" (v. 13). Sin shows its destructive power by taking the law that was designed for life and using it as an instrument of death.

► We slip into sin because we do not take our capacity to sin seriously enough. We overestimate our ability, thinking we can obey God's law in our own strength. Not only do we fall short, but our sinful nature craves the very desires God's law prohibits.

Pray with Us

Father, help us not to shy away from acknowledging our fallen natures. Recognizing our sin drives us to hold fast to you. You have defeated death and sin, and we draw on your strength to choose righteousness.

The Other Law

Read Romans 7:15–35

*Although I want to do good,
evil is right there with me.—Romans 7:21*

Many who struggle with addictions have found help by joining a twelve-step program. Developed by Alcoholics Anonymous, the twelve steps begin by having participants admit that they are powerless over their addiction and that their lives have become unmanageable. The key to healing lies in recognizing that we are not in control.

If we want to overcome sin, we must come to a similar realization. We must admit that despite our desire to do good, “good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature” (v. 18). Even when we agree with God’s law and want to obey, we discover that there is “another law at work” (v. 23). This is “the law of sin at work within me” (v. 23). The impulses of our sinful nature create an insurmountable problem for those who hope to be made righteous based on their own efforts. It is not enough to affirm God’s moral standard and intend to obey His

commands. Despite our agreement with God and even our sincere desire to do what is right, we will find that the law of sin will always work against us.

Does this passage create a feeling of desperation within you? While this is Paul’s intent, he does not leave us without hope. If all we can do is rely upon our own effort, we might as well end with Paul’s cry in verse 24: “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?” Instead, Paul ends with a prayer of thanks in verse 25 pointing to the solution: “Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

► If it weren’t for the grace of God, the best we could hope for is to be servants of God in mind but slaves to sin in practice. Like an addict, we receive God’s help when we admit that we are helpless. Hand your life over to Jesus Christ today!

Pray with Us

We are helpless against sin, Almighty God. We take shelter in your power, trusting that you are always sanctifying us, even when we can’t perceive your hand at work.

Written on Our Heart

Read Romans 8:1–13

The law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.—Romans 8:2

The problem of humanity’s inability to keep God’s law was not a New Testament problem. The Old Testament recognized it as well. In Jeremiah 31:33, the Lord delivers this promise: “This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,’ declares the LORD. ‘I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.’”

In today’s reading, we discover how God has written His law on the human heart through the Holy Spirit. Paul describes this ministry of the Spirit as a different kind of law. It is “the law of the Spirit who gives life” (v. 2). When the Spirit governs our thoughts, we experience “life and peace” (v. 6). The Spirit, who indwells all those who belong to Christ, is the counter force that enables us to resist the impulses of the sinful nature—“the law of sin and death” (v. 2)—and

empowers us to obey all that Christ has commanded.

However, the language Paul uses in these verses makes it clear that our obedience is not automatic. While the Holy Spirit indwells believers, He does not take possession of us the way demonic spirits do in the Gospels (see Mark 8). In verses 5–8, the apostle describes the two different ways open to the Christian. If we follow the impulses of the sinful nature (or “flesh”), we “cannot please God” (v. 8). How much better to “live in accordance with the Spirit” (v. 5), a life that will look markedly different (v. 6).

► We have a job to do! With the power given to us by the Spirit, we are to “put to death the misdeeds of the body” (v. 13). There is an element of decision in this. The freedom we experience in Christ is not freedom from temptation but the freedom to obey.

Pray with Us

We take comfort in the Holy Spirit’s indwelling, and we thank you, Father, for the freedom the Spirit gives us to obey you. We may be harassed by temptation, but we need not be conquered.

Questions & Answers

by Dr. Rosalie de Rosset, Professor of Communications and Literature

Q Why doesn't God cure my anxiety and depression?

A I can't help sighing when I read this question. I have often wondered the same thing. In Psalm 77:1–3, the Psalmist writes, "When I was in distress, I sought the Lord; at night I stretched out untiring hands, and I would not be comforted. I remembered you, God, and I groaned; I meditated, and my spirit grew faint." Here the psalmist expresses an honest and vivid lament.

Some of the great saints of the faith struggled with depression. John Bunyan, who wrote *Pilgrim's Progress*, also wrote a spiritual autobiography called *Grace Abounding* that expresses his agony over never feeling quite secure in his faith, though he was a staunch believer. Augustine, one of the church fathers, was given to anger and severe depression. Charles Spurgeon struggled with chronic depression because of overwork, illness, politics, and other limitations. He wrote, "I could say with Job, 'My soul chooseth strangling rather than life.' I could readily enough have laid violent hands upon myself to escape from my misery of spirit." He even told his students about his depression so they would understand when they too were afflicted.

The hard reality is that we do not escape the maladies of this life. We are caught in a fallen world. Christianity is not the quick fix it is often mistakenly presented as being. We are, however, given Christ, whose death and resurrection guarantees us the hope of eternal life where all things become new. And because He came to earth as a man, He understands us and offers His presence in the midst of our sorrow. In the words of the Psalmist again, "I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord" (Ps. 27:13–14).

Q How can we use God's gift of language in a redemptive way? Given everything happening, it seems there is no civil or respectful discourse. Do we need to speak softly and carry a big stick, because truthful voices are being silenced?

A Years ago, I saw a movie in which a priest went to the roof of the church, ripped open a feather pillow, and let the wind blow the feathers in every possible direction. "That," he said, "is gossip." I know your question isn't about gossip specifically, but this story illustrates the unexpected power of our words.

“As humans, we won’t always be right or wise, but we can look to Christ’s example of grace and truth, of wisdom and integrity when we speak or when we are silent.”

In an age of social media, we see little discretion used, and sometimes it is hard to practice it ourselves. In fact, the temptation to talk carelessly or casually abounds in this technological age. Few people practice restraint or that great virtue of prudence. We’ve entered a new era of name-calling and disrespect, and we’ve adopted a list of excuses for our verbal barbs. The combination of disrespect and viral posts has drained discourse and disagreement of their nobility and has reduced our conversations to the lowest common denominator.

For Christ followers, restraint based on biblical principle is appropriate, a restraint that never resorts to the cowardice of silence when words are necessary, but helps choose our words carefully and with conviction. Christ spoke loudly against wrongdoing when He cleared the temple and had stern words for the money changers (Matt. 21:12–17). At other times He remained silent or almost silent, such as when He was brought before Pilate (Matt. 27:14) or when asked to publicly condemn the woman caught in adultery (John 8). He saved His words of condemnation for hypocritical religious leaders who were making the grace of God unattainable and leading people astray or for those with power who treated

others with disdain or condescension. His responses were always right and wise whether He spoke up or said nothing. As humans, we won’t always be right or wise, but we can look to Christ’s example of grace and truth, of wisdom and integrity when we speak or when we are silent.

Q Can I commit a sin in my dreams?

A I suspect many people have wondered about this. The short answer is that you cannot commit a sin in your dreams because sin involves personal choice; sin is an act of the will. In sleep, your subconscious is working on your mind, processing the things you’ve seen, heard, or are anxious about. Dreams are not reality. That being said, dreams can be instructive; they can alert us to thought patterns that inhabit our conscious or subconscious mind. You may be able, as one person put it, to “see your sinfulness through your dreams.” They may also point to things you need to stop looking at or watching or to places and even people you need to avoid. Foundationally, we must stay close to God in prayer. “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you” (James 4:7–8). ■

God Is for Us!

Read Romans 8:14–39

If God is for us, who can be against us?—Romans 8:31

A famous saying goes, “God plus you is a majority.” It implies that God is on our side and will help us conquer our opposition. As Christians, we know that God is with us. But because those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God, the real question should not be whether God is with us, but whether He is *for* us.

The presence of the Holy Spirit answers this question. The Spirit’s indwelling presence is proof that God has accepted us in Christ. The Spirit “testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children” (v. 16). The Spirit also “intercedes for us through wordless groans” (v. 26). Paul says we have been groaning since creation (v. 22), longing for our future hope in Christ!

This groaning does not seem to be a conversation that we participate in or can even hear. It is the Spirit addressing the Father directly on our behalf. The outcome of these prayers

is guaranteed because the Father “knows the mind of the Spirit,” and the Spirit’s requests are “in accordance with the will of God” (v. 27).

When difficulties arise in our lives, we don’t need to worry about whether God’s attitude has changed toward us. Whatever the circumstance, “God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (v. 28). God’s purpose for us is that we should be “conformed to the image of his Son” (v. 29). The worst that can happen cannot separate us from God’s love or His good plan for our lives. Through Christ, we are “more than conquerors” (v. 37).

► God is not an ally but a sovereign who not only rules over us but over all of the circumstances that affect us. Read verses 38 and 39 aloud! Whatever your situation might be today, remember that God is for you, and He is always in control!

Pray with Us

Dear God, we celebrate your perfect unity—Father, Son, and Spirit! You are of one mind and purpose, and you have the authority to accomplish your will. There is no room for despair before your unity, power, and goodness.

God's Stumbling Block

Read Romans 9:1–33

It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy.—Romans 9:16

At some point, every parent has heard their child say, “I can do it all by myself.” The determination to do something for ourselves is a necessary stage in our development. But in the spiritual realm, that attitude can be a problem. Those who opposed Paul’s gospel of grace wanted to replace it with a gospel where salvation depended on human effort. They also objected to Paul’s assertion that God had accepted Gentiles through Christ without requiring them to observe the law of Moses.

This message of grace was a stumbling block to Jews who could not understand how God could accept Gentiles who did not observe the law of Moses over those who had followed it for generations. Paul’s answer was twofold. First, he pointed out that God’s word to Israel had not failed (v. 6). The rejection of Jesus as their Messiah was evidence that “not all who are descended from Israel are Israel” (v. 6). God does not accept

us based on our religious heritage or family lineage. Ultimately, we can trace our acceptance by God back to God Himself. We belong to Him because He has shown us mercy (v. 14).

Paul compares us to a lump of clay talking back to the potter and telling him what he should do (vv. 19–21). He makes it clear that God is the ultimate source of salvation and its primary actor. Those who try to save themselves inevitably stumble over God’s acceptance by faith of those “who did not pursue righteousness” (v. 30). The only way to be saved is to turn from your own efforts and rely on Jesus Christ.

► Are you tired of trying to “do it all by yourself?” There is only one path to righteousness. It is the way of mercy shown to us in Jesus Christ. Cease from your own efforts and put your faith in Jesus. The one who believes in Him will never be put to shame (v. 33).

Pray with Us

Heavenly Father, we surrender our futile efforts to save ourselves. We remember Jesus’ declaration that He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life—the only path to you! We place our faith in Christ, our Rock and our Salvation.

The End of the Law

Read Romans 10:1–21

Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.—Romans 10:14

When I began attending church in the 1970s, most people wore “Sunday clothes” to the worship service. Men wore suit jackets and neckties, and women wore dresses. Today most people dress much more casually for church. Changes like this can be hard for some to accept, especially when traditions become an integral part of our church culture. Imagine what it was like for the Jewish people whose lives had been shaped by the Mosaic law for generations to hear Paul say that Gentiles could be saved without the law!

The underlying question of much of the book of Romans is “What happened to the law?” In a way, Paul’s answer is, “Nothing.” God gave the law, but He never intended the law to be a way of earning salvation. Those who hoped to establish their righteous standing before God by keeping the law of Moses misunderstood its message. They were zealous for God but “not based on knowledge”

(v. 2). Instead of submitting to God’s righteousness, they attempted to establish their own merit (v. 3).

Jesus Christ was the “culmination” of the law (v. 4). The Greek word that the NIV renders *culmination* can mean *end* or *goal*. The goal of the law was to show our need for the gift of righteousness that comes through Christ. No matter how hard we may try, we cannot perfectly follow God’s Law. For those who understand this, Christ’s righteousness is the end of all attempts to earn God’s favor through human effort. This is why the gospel is not a method but a message of salvation. Those who hear and believe are saved (vv. 13–15).

► Many people feel they are not good enough to come to God. They try to clean up their lives or change their behavior before they reach out to Him. Today’s text shows the opposite. No one can measure up, and God invites you to come to Him just as you are. The gospel is for you!

Pray with Us

Lord Jesus, even when we succeed in deceiving ourselves, you see what is in our hearts. You offer us your forgiveness and unconditional love despite knowing everything about us. Help us to embrace your grace!

God's Plan for Israel

Read Romans 11:1–24

Did God reject his people?—Romans 11:1

When I was a young Christian, I wore a button with the letters PBPGINFWMY on it. The letters stood for the phrase, “Please be patient; God is not finished with me yet.” Paul’s message in this section of Romans is slightly different, more like: “Please be patient; God is not finished with Israel yet.”

Everything that Paul has said in chapters 9–11 is meant to answer the question Paul voices in verse 1: “Did God reject his people?” The apostle’s answer is an emphatic *No!* The fact that God will accept Gentiles by faith in Christ does not mean that He is done with Israel. Paul’s conversion was proof that God had not rejected His people. The apostle testifies that he is an Israelite and a descendant of Abraham from the tribe of Benjamin (v. 1).

Just as the Lord had reserved those for Himself who refused to bow the knee to Baal in Elijah’s day, there was “a remnant chosen by grace” (v. 5). The faithfulness of those who

refused to worship idols in Elijah’s day was evidence of God’s grace. God did not choose them because they were faithful or “based on works”; they were able to be faithful because of God. It is God who is the author of salvation (vv. 5–6).

Although many Israelites rejected Jesus as their Messiah, Paul did not lose hope. He saw God’s acceptance of the Gentiles by grace as part of a larger strategy to save Israel (v. 14). We can draw two important lessons from God’s mysterious plan for Israel. First, Gentile believers have no grounds for feeling superior. God is not finished with His people Israel! Second, there is always hope for those who seem to have no interest in Christ.

► Today, take time to ask God in prayer for the salvation of someone you know who has rejected Christ. And, as you pray for your friends and family members to come to a saving knowledge of Jesus, also pray for the salvation of Israel.

Pray with Us

You are a God of mercy and you delight in saving sinners. We pray for the redemption of the people in our lives who have rejected you. We pray also that your people, Israel, would turn back to you.

The Mystery of Grace

Read Romans 11:25–36

*Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counselor?—Romans 11:34*

There are many ways we can share the gospel. Some people like to use an outline, a Scripture map, or even a helpful diagram. But evangelism cannot be reduced to a methodology. Paul calls God’s way of drawing people to Himself a “mystery” (v. 25). In Scripture, the word *mystery* does not mean something inexplicable or hard to fathom. Instead, it refers to that which we cannot know apart from divine revelation.

Israel has experienced “a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in” (v. 25). We are not surprised that some have rejected Christ. Sin is enough to explain such a response. What troubles many is the implication of God’s involvement in this “hardening.” In verses 7–10 Paul cites Deuteronomy 29:4 and Isaiah 29:10 which speak of God’s judicial hardening of Israel. Yet it is important to note that God’s ultimate purpose in this act of judgment was redemptive. The hardening of Israel

meant mercy for the Gentiles. This experience of grace, in turn, was meant to make the Gentiles agents of grace toward Israel (vv. 28–31). Paul summarizes God’s gracious intent: “For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all” (v. 32).

Although we’ve said that the Greek word translated *mystery* refers to that which was hidden but now revealed, Paul’s closing doxology in this chapter also shows that there is plenty of mystery in God’s plan of salvation (vv. 33–36). We do not have to understand how divine sovereignty and human responsibility are compatible in order to know that God is merciful.

► We know enough about God’s mind to confidently offer the hope of the gospel to anyone who will listen. God has made it plain by sending His Son to die for sinners. The message of the gospel is one of grace and salvation. This is true for Jew and Gentile alike.

Pray with Us

Father, sometimes we struggle to accept things that are beyond our comprehension. Teach us to be at peace with our incomplete understanding. We trust in your omniscience and goodness.

A Living Sacrifice

Read Romans 12:1–8

Do not conform to the pattern of this world. —Romans 12:2

In her poem entitled “A Christmas Carol,” 19th-century author Christina Rossetti wrote: “What can I give Him, \ Poor as I am? \ If I were a shepherd \ I would bring a lamb, \ If I were a Wise Man \ I would do my part, — \ Yet what I can I give Him, \ Give my heart.”

How are those without the law supposed to worship God? What kind of sacrifices should they offer? Paul’s message that Gentiles did not need to adhere to the law of Moses to be accepted by God raised a practical question. This would also have been important for Gentiles who were familiar with the sacrifices of idol worship. In verse 1, Paul describes a different kind of offering that pleases God. We are not just to offer Him our heart but our whole body.

The apostle explains what this looks like in verse 2. We offer our bodies as living sacrifices when we are transformed by the truth of God’s

Word. The word “therefore” links this offering to all that Paul has said in the previous chapters. Our sacrifice is a response to the grace we have received. It is not an attempt to earn or even measure up to our salvation. Although we offer ourselves to God, Paul explains that we serve one another as the body of Christ. Like the human body, where each part serves an important function and contributes to the overall wellbeing of the whole, believers should each employ their individual gifts in order to build up one another (vv. 4–8).

► Do you know what your spiritual gift might be? Understanding the way God has gifted you can help you serve the body of Christ, for “each member belongs to all the others” (v. 5). If you don’t know, begin by answering these questions: What do I enjoy doing for others? Is there some form of ministry that appeals to me?

Pray with Us

Lord, please reveal to us the gifts you have given us to serve you. Grant us opportunities to use our strengths in ministry—and give us grace in our areas of weakness. All the glory is yours!

How to Overcome Evil

Read Romans 12:9–21

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.—Romans 12:21

A popular quote attributed to the 19th-century statesman and philosopher Edmund Burke goes, “All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.” One of the problems with this statement is its vagueness. What exactly are we supposed to do to triumph over evil?

Paul’s prescription for how to triumph over evil is much more specific. It begins not with action but attitude. Whatever we do to defeat evil must be motivated by sincere love. Our actions must also spring from the right moral base. We cannot use evil to defeat evil but must learn to hate what is evil and cling to what is good (v. 9). The fight against evil must be carried out with patience and sensitivity. We wage this battle on two fronts. We do good to those who share our faith. We do the same to those who oppose and persecute us (vv. 10–14).

In this time of outrage and paybacks, we should resist the

urge to repay evil with a similar treatment. Paul’s message is indeed countercultural. He quotes Proverbs 25:21–22 in verse 20 to underscore the urgency of leaving revenge up to God. By doing good to those who are evil, we are treating them as God has treated us. We, who were once His enemies, were won over by His kindness to us in Christ Jesus. The command to “live at peace with everyone” in verse 18 has an important qualifier: “If it is possible . . .” It is not always possible to live at peace with others, because we can’t control the response of others. But with God’s help we can control ourselves.

► Are you in conflict with someone? How can you repay their treatment with “good” today? An important place to start is to bring them before God in prayer. Ask Him to go before you in the situation, helping you to “live at peace.”

Pray with Us

We ask for your blessing on those who have wronged us, Lord. Show us practical ways to honor them, repaying them with good. Change our hearts toward the difficult people in our lives so we can truly love them.

Christians and Government

Read Romans 13:1–7

There is no authority except that which God has established.—Romans 13:1

In addition to the health threat it presented, the COVID-19 crisis created political tensions for many churches when some states ordered them not to meet for worship. Some complied with government regulations while others saw the order as an infringement on their religious freedom. This type of tension was familiar to the apostle Paul who addresses the subject in Romans 13. In an idolatrous culture where religion and politics were mixed, his command of Romans 12:18 to live at peace with everyone must have seemed challenging.

The apostle's directive is simple. All believers must be subject to the governing authorities (v. 1). God's purpose for human government was to act as a servant of the common good and punish wrongdoing (v. 4). Elsewhere, Scripture qualifies this obligation. Obedience to God takes priority over obedience to earthly rulers (Acts 5:29). However, as a citizen of the Roman Empire, Paul certainly knew that the laws

and actions of civil authorities were not always righteous. Pilate executed Jesus for political reasons (Matt. 27:22–24). Roman officials mistreated Paul (Acts 16:37).

Despite the imperfections of governing rulers, believers were instructed to pay taxes (v. 6). More than this, Christians are required to treat those in authority with respect even when they disagree with their policies and practices. As Paul puts it in verse 7: "Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor." Paul modeled this obedience in his own ministry. Whether jailed or free, he treated those in authority with respect while claiming the rights and privileges that were his as a Roman citizen (Acts 22:25; 23:5).

► Disagreement with government policy does not free us from our obligation to pay taxes or obey laws. Civil disobedience is only warranted if it's required by God or we are ordered to do what is forbidden by God.

Pray with Us

Dear God, it is so easy for us to confuse politics with theology. Teach us to interpret politics through your Word, and not the other way around. Help us to honor those you have put in authority over us.

Our Debt of Love

Read Romans 13:8–14

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another. —Romans 13:8

“Oh, to grace, how great a debtor. / Daily I’m constrained to be!” begins the third stanza of the hymn, “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing.” As recipients of God’s amazing grace, we are in His debt! What do we owe? We must love God with all our heart, soul, and mind. And love our neighbor as ourselves (Matt. 22:37–40).

Today’s passage transitions from our obligation to pay taxes to the debt of love we owe to our neighbor. We are to love God and love our neighbor. Paul views love as the underlying motive behind the law. The commandments that forbid adultery, theft, murder, covetousness, and “whatever other command there may be” are protective. They limit our personal freedom or desires so we will do no harm either to ourselves or to others (v. 10). Obeying the law is an act of love.

Paul puts this section in context. He has not drifted into a random tangent about morality in this passage, but is still addressing those who

were troubled by his message about a righteousness from God that is “apart from the law” (Rom. 3:21). The righteousness of the gospel does not come through obeying the law, but it agrees with it. Those who, through the Spirit, fulfill their “continuing debt to love one another” are fulfilling the righteousness of the law.

Paul mentions an additional motive in verse 12, where he notes that the night is almost over and “the day is almost here.” This acknowledges the darkness of the present age and is a veiled reference to the return of Christ. Christ’s kingdom is called a “kingdom of light” (Col. 1:12). Its citizens are called “children of light” (Eph. 5:8).

► Are you longing for the light? By treating others with love, you are resisting the darkness of the present age and bearing witness to the coming of Christ’s kingdom. This love is shown both by what you do and what you do not do. How will you show God’s love today?

Pray with Us

When the world speaks of love, it does not know the depth and power of yours. Lord, give us your love for others so that all who interact with us get a taste of you.

Acceptable Differences

Read Romans 14:1–12

Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters.—Romans 14:1

My father was a fan of Dixieland jazz. If I complained about it, he usually responded with the Latin phrase: *De gustibus non est disputandum*, which means, “In matters of taste, there can be no disputes.” While one person has a great love of jazz, another might only listen to classical music. It all depends on their personal taste.

The differences mentioned in today’s reading weren’t merely questions of good or bad taste. They were matters of conscience. Paul addresses specific debates having to do with food. While one person’s faith allowed them to eat everything, another would eat only vegetables (v. 2). Others disputed about the observance of sacred days (v. 5). We don’t know the exact nature of these differences except to say that they were issues of faith and food. In Corinth there were differences about whether Christians should eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 8:4). Some in the Galatian churches disagreed about the observance of sacred days.

As long as these differences did not compromise the gospel, Paul counseled toleration (Rom. 14:3).

However, Paul does point out that this did not mean that every difference of opinion was merely a matter of personal taste. Some in Corinth had crossed the line by exercising their liberty in a way that caused others to violate their conscience (1 Cor. 8:9–11). Those in Galatia had probably adopted the Jewish calendar and were requiring Gentiles to observe it. Paul viewed this as a form of bondage to the law (Gal. 4:9–10). Again, it returns to acting in love, valuing others above our own personal choice.

► How does loving our neighbor influence our tastes and preferences? If we love others, we must consider how our actions affect them. We should not look contemptuously on those who differ from us when it is a matter of personal conscience. The law of love may even require us to limit our personal freedom as an act of love (1 Cor. 8:13).

Pray with Us

Lord, how do we rejoice in the freedom you have given us while remaining considerate of others? Fill us with sacrificial love for our fellow believers and help us build up the body of Christ.

Working for Peace

Read Romans 14:13–23

Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.—Romans 14:19

Cartoons often depict our conscience as a tiny angel standing on one shoulder, telling you to do good, and a miniature devil standing on the other, urging you to do the opposite. This cartoon image is right in one respect. The voice of our conscience can often feel like a whisper or a tug.

What is more, in verses 13–23, Paul shows that the conscience of some people may react sensitively to things that others find acceptable. He refers to these choices, and the effect they have on others, as a “stumbling block or obstacle” (v. 13). What should we do if our conscience has reservations? Or what if someone else believes our practice is wrong? The loving and biblical response, in either case, is sensitivity. For the person whose conscience is sensitive, the best course of action is to refrain from that action (v. 14). On the other hand, the one whose conscience is free needs to take care “not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a

brother or sister” (v. 13). When you make a choice to limit your freedom in order to help another, your actions are “pleasing to God” (v. 18).

It is important to note that Paul is not talking about matters where Scripture has given a clear command or principle. He also doesn’t mean that the tastes of others should automatically dictate our own. When you have a choice to make that is not clearly dictated or regulated by Scripture and is not affecting those around you, you are free to keep matters “between yourself and God” (v. 22).

► Our actions won’t always be guided by a comprehensive list of dos and don’ts. But whatever we do, Paul urges us to consider the peace and building up of our brothers and sisters in Christ. What are some choices you make which might differ from those of other believers? What is your responsibility toward those who disagree with you?

Pray with Us

Search our hearts, Father. Show us any areas where we are not obeying you and redirect us when our consciences falter. Prepare us to surrender our freedoms for the sake of others.

The Spirit of Unity

Read Romans 15:1–13

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.—Romans 15:7

The church today is divided over many things. Race and politics, in particular, have become a flashpoint in recent days. But there are also many other, less volatile matters over which we disagree. We may have different preferences in the style of the church building, length of service, or musical instruments. Knowing how prone we are to division, it is no accident that the Bible says we need to make an effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3).

Today's passage teaches the hard lesson that the burden for maintaining this peace is not equally shared: "We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves" (v. 1). In this context, the weak are those whose conscience does not allow them the same freedom as the strong.

Paul's command may seem hard to accept because it feels like an infringement on our individual rights.

And . . . it is (v. 2)! But when God expects this of us, He is treating us no differently than He did His own Son who humbled Himself for us.

Paul did not say these things lightly. He understood the challenge and prayed that God would enable the believers in Rome to have "the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had" (v. 5). This attitude was: "Christ did not please himself" (v. 3). Paul focused on the root of their division by showing that Jesus came as a servant to both Jews and Gentiles (vv. 7–12).

► Sometimes we make allowances for our differences but still view others with contempt. We tolerate others without truly accepting them. Such treatment is not true acceptance. Remember that Christ has not treated us this way. How should you treat those people with whom you differ? Accept one another as Christ has accepted you.

Pray with Us

Forgive us for our contempt of others and teach us to respect all members of the body of Christ, even those whom we don't understand. Draw us ever closer to you, Lord.

Joining the Struggle

Read Romans 15:14–33

Join me in my struggle by praying to God for me.—Romans 15:30

Missionaries often refer to those who support their work as “ministry partners.” They aren’t trying to flatter donors so they will send more money. They know that their ministry depends on the prayers and finances of others. The book of Romans is both an explanation of Christian doctrine and a prayer letter soliciting support for Paul’s ministry.

In the second half of chapter 15, Paul reminds the church why he has written “quite boldly on some points” (v. 15). It was not because he had a low view of the church’s understanding or its level of spiritual maturity. Paul elaborated on things they already knew, speaking frankly with these brothers and sisters in Christ because he cared for them. He also wanted the church to recognize his credentials so they would understand his calling as a minister of Jesus Christ. The apostle viewed his ministry as the “priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering

acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit” (v. 16).

In verses 17–22 Paul shared his vision for his future ministry but also explained his failure to visit Rome thus far. The church was established in Rome, and Paul’s strategy was to concentrate on those areas “where Christ was not known” (v. 20). He planned to go to Spain and stop off at Rome along the way. But before this he intended to travel to Jerusalem to carry a financial contribution from the Gentile churches for the poor believers there (vv. 26–27). Paul did eventually come to Rome, but in chains (Acts 28:14–31). In 2 Timothy 4:6, the apostle seemed to anticipate his approaching martyrdom when he wrote of his “departure” and of being “poured out like a drink offering.”

► How do you support the ministry of others? Spend a few minutes praying for your church’s leaders and the missionaries you support. Ask God to grant them the courage of Paul.

Pray with Us

Lord, thank you for granting each of us opportunities to participate in ministry. Strengthen and encourage those who go on the mission field and bless those who provide prayer and financial support.

Many Hands

Read Romans 16:1–26

Watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way.—Romans 16:17

When I was a pastor, our church hosted Vacation Bible School every summer. Planning began months before the event with the same announcement every year: “Many hands make light work.” Paul would have liked this announcement because he was not a lone ranger in his ministry. One reason for his effectiveness was that he relied on the help of many hands.

Paul ends this significant letter with the introduction of Phoebe (vv. 1–2), a host of personal greetings, and a closing benediction. One striking feature of this chapter is the number of people that Paul knew in a church he had not yet visited. One reason was the church’s location. Rome was the most important city in Paul’s day. It is not surprising that it would attract many believers. But the number of people in Paul’s list also shows how important relationships were to the success of his ministry.

The apostle does more than simply list the names of those he greets. In the majority of instances, he

adds a personal note. He describes the worthy attributes of Phoebe who has been a significant help and support (v. 2). Priscilla and Aquila had risked their lives for Paul (v. 3). Epenetus was Paul’s first convert in Asia (v. 5). Mary worked “very hard” for the believers in Rome (v. 6). Andronicus and Junia are praised as “outstanding” (v. 7). Ampliatus was Paul’s “dear friend” (v. 8). Urbanus was his co-worker and Stachys, his dear friend (v. 9). He praises Apelles for his fidelity to Christ (v. 10). He greets so many more, it reads like a reunion! He finishes with a beautiful doxology—words of praise to God whose strong hand works through the many hands that make Paul’s ministry possible (vv. 25–27).

► As we conclude Paul’s letter to the Romans, consider who you would thank for contributing to your Christian life. Make a brief list of individuals who have played a significant role in your journey. Use that list to pray for them and perhaps, one by one, you can send them a note of thanks.

Pray with Us

Father, thank you for the people who have pushed us closer to you. As we remember them each by name, we ask you to bless them and continue to use them. May we also be powerful instruments in your hands.

Look What God Is Doing Through You!

by Jamie Janosz

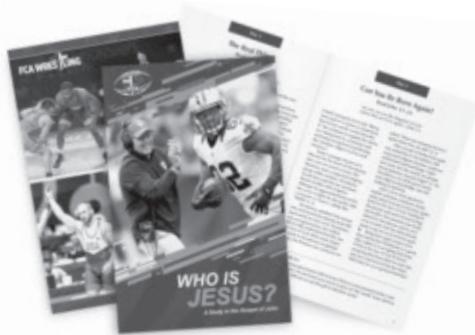
Did you know there are thousands of other believers joining you every day as you open God's Word? With the release of our new app, *Today in the Word's* readership is growing, and we are excited to share some more good news about the way God is working through this Bible study ministry.

Your gifts to *Today in the Word* make an eternal difference. They don't just help support the devotional readings you enjoy, they help bring the life-changing truth of God's Word to new readers every day!

Reaching Student Athletes

Through a new partnership with Fellowship of Christian Athletes, *Today in the Word* is reaching wrestlers, football players, and their coaches with God's Word. This past year we produced two special edition Gospel of John devotional studies that FCA distributes to coaches and players.

Each issue features testimonies from well known athletes who are also devoted Christ followers. They share their love for the game and their love for God and His Word. The football issue featured interviews with Indiana University head football coach Tom Allen and NFL quarterback Benjamin Watson. "We not only have to speak the gospel but to live it as well," Watson says.



Each issue includes a 30-day study of the Gospel of John, player testimonies, and discussion questions tailored toward the student athletes. Coach Allen, who says, "My faith shapes both who I am and how I coach," was excited to distribute copies of this special issue of *Today in the Word* to his team. Please pray with us that God's Word will go forward in a powerful way to these student athletes, reaching many for Jesus.

Changing Lives for Christ

Thank you for your letters that tell us how God is using these Bible studies in your lives. Be encouraged that God is on the move. His Word is *always* effective! Isaiah writes that God's Word "will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isa. 55:11).

“The Word of God encourages me to keep the faith and to trust in God deeply regardless of the outcome.”

—Rita, *Today in the Word* reader

You helped Rita find peace after a miscarriage:

“Thank you so much for extending God’s grace to me through *Today in the Word’s* devotional. My story began during the stay-at-home mandate. I had gone through a miscarriage, and the timing was terrible with the pandemic and all. But God’s Word through this devotional really resonated in my heart. It gave me a chance to process what I was going through, a chance to grieve, and a chance to grow in my walk with God.”

“Being able to spend more time with God in His Word has helped me to have peace in this whole process. The Word of God encourages me to keep the faith and to trust in God deeply regardless of the outcome; because no matter what path God places me on, it will lead to Him and that in and of itself is glorious!”

You helped Evelyn center a new relationship in Christ:

“I am so grateful to receive *Today in the Word*. I met a wonderful Christian man in March 2020 during the pandemic. And we started reading and studying the Bible together and it has been such a blessing to connect with God’s Word. We are growing spiritually as well as growing closer together.

Praise God! Thank you for the good reading material.”

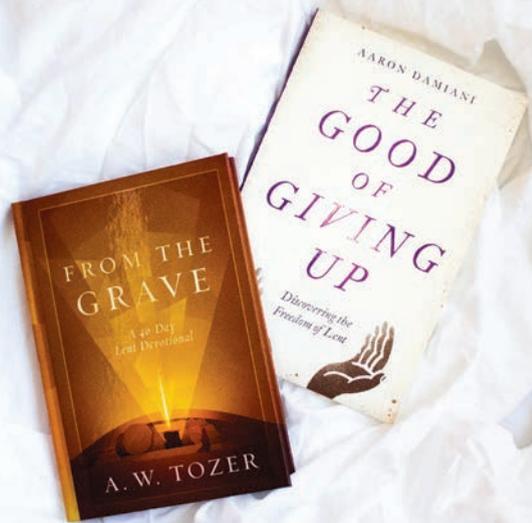
You helped inspire John to shepherd the church:

“As a pastor, I appreciate *Today in the Word* for a number of reasons. The devotional material is pithy and relevant. When appropriate I forward an article to congregants for their edification. I save each issue to a *Today In the Word* folder for future reference. On several occasions, I have quoted from an article in one of my sermons citing *Today in the Word* as the source. *Today in the Word* helps me remain fresh in my application of God’s Word and in my use of illustrations in my preaching, teaching, and counseling.”

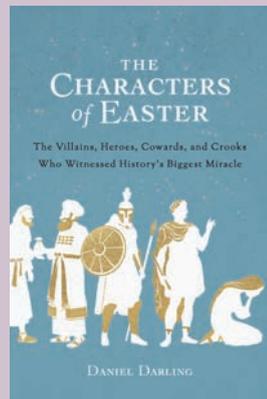
You helped Kristy face a difficult surgery:

“I have battled breast cancer this past year. Early on, I asked God to speak to me. He gave me Joshua 1:9 that same night in my dream. I had many more Joshua encounters along my journey. It has been a gift from God. These surprise ‘Joshua moments’ included the July *Today in the Word* study on Joshua. It started on July 1, the same day as my second surgery. I know that I am not alone, for the Lord my God is always with me.” ■

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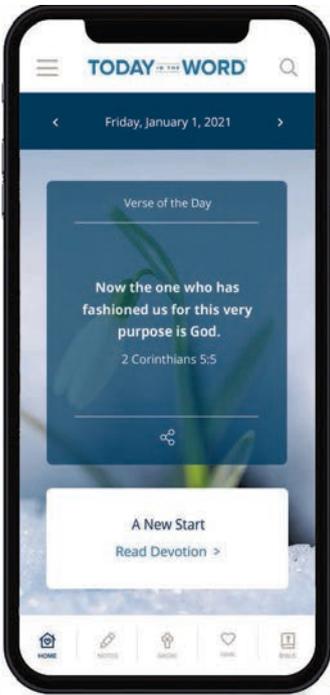
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ROMANS 1:16

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