*<u>The Gospel to the Romans</u>*
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*Introduction*

We will begin our study of Romans with the theme of the book as a reference point to help us outline it. Then, with the theme and outline in mind, we can make some applications and set the stage for taking up Romans 8 next week.

1A. Theme

There are five main views of the theme of the book (cf. Moo, *Romans*, 27-30). They are: 1) Justification by faith, 2) Union with Christ, 3) The work of the Holy Spirit, 4) The union of Jew and Gentile, and 5) Christian duty. Each view, respectively, rests on the following chapters of the book: 1) 1-4, 2) 5-6, 3) 7-8, 4) 9-11, and 5) 12-16. What is wrong with all of these views? They speak of part of the story as if it were the whole story. Therefore, we need to think through the entire book to discover the theme of the whole story. To make this discovery, we first need a definition of a theme to help us gather our thoughts in this way on the book of Romans. Moo defines it to be a single topic that can stand as a heading for the whole book. He takes the theme to be the gospel, and for good reason as we shall see. In addition, a theme needs to do more than name a subject; it needs to state something about a subject. What we need is a descriptive theme statement.

In this light, consider the following provisional and brief statement: the theme of Romans is *the gospel of righteousness from God that sinners have by faith in the risen Lord Jesus Christ.* Just think of it: God gives you righteousness, and it becomes your own by faith in Christ. God gives me righteousness, and it becomes my very own righteousness, by faith in the Lord Jesus. It is not ours; it is God's. It is not our righteousness but God's righteousness, given to us-as our own-by faith in Jesus Christ. It is no wonder that Luther made this *the* theme of the book.

Let us see how this theme statement emerges from the text. Then we can unpack it as we go through the book. This will help us keep the big picture in view.

God set Paul apart for the gospel, for the good news *of God* (1.1, this is the briefest form of the theme). The broad and general phrase "of God" directs us to the gospel that is both "about" God (our sin brings out *His* righteousness, 3:5; *His* saving work in Christ demonstrates *His* justice, 3:26) and "from" God (by His command, 16:26; righteousness is from God, 1:17). Paul's gospel is God-centered (it is God's gospel that Paul and all believers may claim as their own, as "my" gospel, 16:25, that is "to all who believe," 3:22). The focal person in God's gospel is Jesus Christ (1:3, regarding his Son…descendent of David, Jesus Christ our risen Lord). It is the gospel promised in the prophets of the OT Scriptures (1:2; 16:25-27; as in the hymn, *Stricken, smitten and afflicted*: "tis the long expected prophet, David's son yet David's Lord, by His son God now has spoken, tis the true and faithful word").

In this gospel, there is a *core*, "*righteousness* from God" (His righteousness given to the unrighteous). The apostle introduces this justifying righteousness to explain how the gospel is the power of God for salvation to those who believe (cf. the connection of 1:17 to 1:16).

Sinners receive this righteousness by the obedience of faith (3:22, through faith; 3:21, apart from the law). This faith is the fruit of a divine call. If we keep the big picture in mind (1:17; 1:5-7), then we will distinguish between a general and an effectual call of God. The

apostolic word gives a *general call,* which is the context in which God extends an *effectual saving call.* In 1:5, we have Paul's statement of his own call to be an apostle; a call that is surely effectual for it is difficult to imagine the possibility of Paul refusing this summons from God. Next, in 1:6, 7, Paul summarizes the call of God that causes us to belong to Jesus Christ and to become saints. Further explanation of this call is in Rom. 8:29-30 (the foreloved are foreordained, *called*, justified, and glorified by the effectual working of God the Almighty Alpha and Omega). This is gospel, good news. Salvation is the work of God from beginning to end.

Therefore, the *theme* of Romans is difficult to narrow down. However, for short, we can describe the theme in one word as the gospel. It is God's gospel, the good news promised in the OT regarding Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who saves Jew and Gentile (1:16) by calling them to the obedience of faith (1:1-6), through which they receive righteousness (1:17).

This summarizes a righteousness that God gives to sinners because of the death and resurrection of Christ. Justification is by grace and through the obedience of faith. Moreover, this faith is the fruit of the effectual call of God, by Christ, through the word of the apostles that brings sinners out of bondage and into freedom.

Therefore, for short, the theme is the gospel of God regarding Christ, His death and resurrection, as the basis of justification by faith that has its source in His effectual call. These things are good news for us to proclaim in mission today, as they were in the apostolic mission of Paul's day.

Now, we can add many things parenthetically to our original theme statement to fill it out. Here is a fuller theme statement. *The theme of Romans is* the (God-centered) *gospel* (good news promised in the OT) of a righteousness from God (that is His and reflects His justice) that sinners (both Jews and Gentiles in need of righteousness and storing up wrath for the day of wrath) have (as their own; His is theirs) by faith (by trusting Christ, by entrusting themselves to Him with a faith that is itself the gift of God's effectual call) in the risen Lord Jesus Christ (whose resurrection presupposed His saving death and marked Him out as the Son of God).

Although this seems to cover the full scope of things in the book of Romans, one broad perspective is lacking. We note that Paul grounds the NT gospel in ancient times in the gospel of the OT, but we fail to note how far back Paul reaches to put his gospel on the surest footing possible. He reaches in thought back before time to the eternal purpose of God that underlies His covenant dealings with sinners in the OT and the promise there of the new covenant that we now have in the NT. In 8.28, Paul relates God's purpose to all things (a purpose therefore prior to all things) and to His eternal saving love ("all things work together for good…according to his purpose" and these things work for good "to those called according to his purpose"). Thus, Paul explains that behind all the things that transpire in history is the purpose of God that has it roots in the love of God for those He calls, a purpose that has conformity to Christ as its great goal (8.29).

How then do we put this broad and packed perspective into the theme statement? Because God's eternal purpose underlies the reference both to all things and to effectual calling, we need either to place it in the theme statement more than once, or we need to somehow position it in a way that it is foundational to everything else. If we follow the first suggestion, then we will locate God's purpose in relation to the old covenant promises as a stage in the realization of His eternal covenant purposes, and we will place it in relation to effectual calling in association with, and driving, the idea of predestination. If we follow the second suggestion, then we will locate it in relation to the gospel:

> The theme of Romans is the God-centered gospel that brings to realization His eternal covenant purpose, it is the good news (promised in the OT) of a righteousness from God (that is His and reflects His justice) that sinners (both Jews and Gentiles in need of righteousness and storing up wrath for the day of wrath) have (as their own; His is theirs) by faith (by trusting Christ, by entrusting themselves to Him with a faith that is itself the gift of God's effectual call) in the risen Lord Jesus Christ (whose resurrection presupposed His saving death and marked Him out as the Son of God).

2A. Outline

What shape, then, does Romans take on in its treatment of the gospel? Shape is the pattern or outline of the book. Sometimes shape refers to the argument of a book. We want to get a glimpse of the inner structure as to how the various parts interface or fit together. When we see the inner structure, we see the shape of the book. Attention to the shape will help us see the contours in the flow of thought of the book as a whole. The benefit of grasping the theme in outline form is that it helps us decide what wavelength we should be on at specific places in the book so we can hear the message fully and correctly. We need to approach Romans in this way because the argument is complicated, which is just a promise of richness.

It is not hard to mark off large sections of Romans. The introduction is 1:1-17 where we have the greeting (Paul, v. 1; to the Romans, v. 7; grace and peace, v. 7), thanksgiving and longing to see them (vs. 8-13), and the theme (vs. 14-17) with a definite break in thought at v.18. The conclusion is all of chapter 16, as evident in light of 15:33. The middle of the book can be broken down into three large sections regarding the gospel: its need (1-3, minus the introduction), its provision (4-11), and its duty (12-15).

3A. Applications

1) We should not deny the seriousness of our sin or the judgment to come but face it squarely. If I had denied the seriousness of the inflammation of my left eye, I could have lost vision in that eye. I needed to listen to the physician, accept what he said of my condition, and submit myself to his remedy. Jesus is the great physician. We need to accept what he says of our true condition as sinners bound for His wrath (which we store up for ourselves). And we need to submit ourselves to His remedy, we need to submit to Christ crucified and raised from the dead, and we need to believe in our hearts and confess with our mouths that Jesus is the risen Lord (Rom. 2:5; 10:9-10).

2) Expanding on the first point, we should not question the justice of God in choosing some and calling them to faith and justification while passing over others (Rom. 9:14-15). Remember, those who perish deserve to perish, they deserve nothing else. Those that the Holy Spirit calls to faith and justification do not deserve this extraordinary blessing. Facing the depth of sin squarely in relation to election and reprobation has been a constant refrain in reformed theology. Calvin expounding on Augustine says the following:

> What hast thou that hast not received? (I Cor 4.7) – from whom, unless from Him who distinguishes you from others in not giving to them what He gave to you? He [Augustine] goes on: Faith therefore from beginning to end is the gift of God; and that this gift is given to some and not to others, no one can at all doubt, unless he wish to contest the most manifest testimonies of Scripture. But why it is not given to all ought not to disturb the believer, for he believes that all came under most just condemnation by the sin of one; and why God delivers one man and not another are matters constituting His inscrutable

judgments and His uninvestigable ways. (Italics mine, Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. by Reid, 1997, pp. 63-64).

3) Therefore, these truths should humble us, fill us with gratitude, and drive us to our knees, even on our faces, before the Lord in reverence and awe. Consider the doxology of the book (11:33-36).

4) Then when we get up on our feet again, we ought to live our praise. I beseech you brethren, by the mercies of God, to present yourselves as living sacrifices holy and acceptable to God (Rom. 12:1). Why should we call this a reasonable service? Because it is all due to His loving purpose and nothing can separate us from His love (Rom. 8:28-39). So live the practical duties of chapters 12-15.

Summary Exhortation

Because of the gospel of God regarding His Son, the risen Lord Jesus who gives the gift of righteousness through faith, which is also His gift, then with deep humility, abundant gratitude, and crescendos of praise, stand tall and live your life on the face of this earth for Jesus Christ your Savior. Live by the power of the Holy Spirit and unto the praise and glory of God the Father, both now and forevermore, Amen!