

There are a lot of things to be excited about at the beginning of a new year: new opportunities, fresh starts, new priorities, new people, new places. But I have to tell you, the thing I think I'm most excited about as we jump into 2024 is the fact that, on Sunday mornings, we are going to be journeying through the book of Romans as a church. Now, in case you're not sure why that excites me, let me explain. I'll begin by acknowledging that there is not any part of the Bible that is any more or less true than any other part of the Bible. There is not any part of the Bible that is more or less inspired than any other part. There is not any part of the Bible that is any more or less the word of God than any other part. I totally affirm the words of 2 Timothy 3:16, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness..." That being said, there are

some parts of the Bible, some books of the Bible, that more clearly and directly and comprehensively communicate the core doctrines and central themes of Scripture in an explicit way. Of all the books of the Bible, OT and NT, Romans is, I think, the one that accomplishes that most plainly and effectively. And I'm not the only one who thinks that. The great reformer, Martin Luther, said, "This epistle [Romans] is really the chief part of the NT, and is truly the purest gospel. It is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but also that he should occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul. We can never read it or ponder over it too much; for the more we deal with it, the more precious it becomes and the better it tastes." The 16th Century theologian and pastor John Calvin said of Romans, "When one understands this Epistle, he has a

passage opened to him to the understanding of the whole of Scripture.” 20th Century British theologian J.I. Packer said, “All roads in the Bible lead to Romans, and all views afforded by the Bible are seen most clearly from Romans, and when the message of Romans gets into a person’s heart there is no telling what may happen.” And John Piper, one of my favorite preachers and authors, said Romans is “the most important theological, Christian work ever written.” So that kind of gets my heart and my mind and my soul stirred up to dive into a book like that.

Now, when you’re dealing with written works, it always helps to understand **who wrote it**. In fact, in some cases, it is absolutely critical to a full understanding and appreciation of the work. For instance, while you might be stirred and motivated by the 1963 “ Letter from a

Birmingham Jail,” it brings a fuller and deeper meaning to know who Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was and what he had done and what he had said and why he was in that jail cell to write that letter. It makes the words come alive to know who wrote them and why. Same thing with the hymn, “It Is Well With My Soul.” The words and melody are moving enough on their own, but to know that the man who wrote, “When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll, whatever my lot Thou has taught me to say, ‘It is well, it is well with my soul,’” wrote those words after his daughters had drowned when their ship went down in the north Atlantic, it gives those lyrics a lot more weight. Again, knowing who wrote it and why enhances our appreciation of the work. Well we find the same reality when it comes to the book of Romans. Knowing the

identity and intent of the author really helps us dig deeper into its message.

Now if you were writing a letter to a group of people, most of whom you had never met, living in a place you had never visited, how would you introduce yourself? What elements of your identity would you deem most important for them to know? What would you identify as the most fundamental part of you, assuming you really wanted them to know, not just your name, but WHO you are? When it comes to the book of Romans, we find the answer to that question in the very first verse. Today, we sign our name at the end of a letter, but in ancient writings, they would begin the letter with the name of the sender. So if you haven't done it already, I would invite you this morning to take a Bible and turn with me to Romans 1:1 as we discover, not

just the name of the man who wrote this letter to the church at Rome, but WHO he was, how he wanted to be regarded. So let's read together this morning just this one verse, Romans 1:1 [READ].

What do we see? He begins with **his name: Paul**. No last name. Just Paul. Which was ok, because his audience – the people the letter was written to – knew exactly who he was just by that single name. Kind of like Cher or Prince or Bono. They knew that Paul was a Jew who had been born in the city of Tarsus, in modern day Turkey. And by birth, he was a Roman citizen. But he had been raised in Jerusalem and educated under the Jewish rabbi, Gamaliel, a leading authority in the Jewish legal council and a man held in high esteem by all Israel. Paul was part of the religious sect known as the Pharisees, and as a

Pharisee he was an expert in the interpretation and practice of the law. Pharisees were super passionate and strict about the pursuit of righteous living. And that passion, that zeal, led Paul to persecute those Jews who he felt had blasphemed the law and abandoned Judaism by following Jesus. He was a leader in the movement to arrest and torture early Christians. And on one of his campaigns to arrest Christians in the city of Damascus, as he was on the road, he has an encounter with Jesus, the Risen Christ. Jesus appears to him in this blinding radiant vision that knocks him to the ground and strikes him blind. But in that moment, God also calls Paul to believe in Him and commissions him as a missionary to go and spread the message of Jesus to the world. You can find the account in Acts 9 and again in Acts 22 and Acts 26. So Paul was a new man, a changed man, inwardly

transformed by the grace and the calling of God. And I'll go ahead and address this, in case you've ever wondered. You may know that the book of Acts refers to him as both Saul and Paul. Now some people mistakenly believe that he was Saul before he came to know Jesus and Paul after his conversion, but that's not the case. His conversion takes place in Acts 9 and he's called Saul all the way until Acts 13. In reality, Saul was his Jewish name – his casual, common, familiar name among other Jews – and Paul was most likely his Roman name – his official, legal name as a citizen of the Empire. So what Jesus changed was not his name, but his heart and his mission. And Paul embraces that new identity and calling. He spends the rest of his life on three missionary journeys, and the book of Romans is written at the end of the third one, near the end of his life, probably about 7 years before he's executed by the

Roman Emperor Nero. So that's his name and a brief synopsis of his story.

But WHO was Paul? How did he regard himself and how did he want others to see him? Well here he gives three identifiers that emphasize three different qualities of the man and his ministry. First, he sees himself as a servant of Christ Jesus. The word servant there is the Greek word "doulos" which can also be translated slave. He is a slave of Christ. And that designation reveals in Paul a deep, **gospel humility**. You see, a servant, a slave, is one who belongs to their lord, their master. The life of a servant is a life of total submission, complete subservience. The slave is solely committed to his master, serving at the pleasure and disposal of his lord, willing to do whatever he is told. And just so you don't misunderstand and think that this

kind of servanthood is like U.S. chattel slavery throughout the south in the 18th and 19th Centuries, what Paul describes here is not motivated by cruelty or compulsion, but earnest devotion and loving allegiance and loyalty.

Paul has given himself entirely to Jesus and belongs wholly to Him in love and affection and commitment. He does not belong to himself any longer. He is a servant of Christ Jesus in the best possible meaning of that word.

The Roman audience certainly would have understood what that word meant, since a large percentage of the population of Rome was made up of slaves and former slaves. So they knew what slavery was. They understood what it meant to belong to someone. They knew what it means to be entirely loyal to one's lord. But those in the church who had come from a Jewish background also

understood that the term “servant of the Lord” was used throughout the OT to refer to men like Abraham and Moses and Joshua and David and the prophets. It wasn’t shameful or demeaning to belong to the Lord. It was an honor. Paul regarded it as a humbling privilege to belong to Christ Jesus, the One who was the fulfillment of all the promises of God and the hope of all those who had gone before him. Paul wants his readers to know the gospel humility that comes with being a servant of Christ.

Second, Paul identifies himself as one called to be an apostle. And this designation communicates a powerful **gospel authority**. You see, just as Paul didn’t belong to himself, he also didn’t represent himself. He had been called, summoned by God to a position, to a role or office. This wasn’t something Paul sought. It wasn’t something

that he asked for or forced his way into. Paul didn't choose it for himself. He was divinely summoned, called by God Himself, drawn into God's plan and purpose. He starts off his letter to the Galatians by saying, "Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead..." The Lord called him. And what did the Lord call him to be? An apostle. One who is sent. One who is commissioned. One who is dispatched as an envoy, an authorized delegate, an ambassador. Paul is an appointed messenger of God. He's been given a task, to represent God, specifically to the Gentiles, to the world outside Israel. And that designation, that office of apostle, carries with it a profound authority to speak on behalf of the one who sent you, the one whom you represent. There were times in his ministry that people dismissed Paul and his message and

his ministry because they assumed he was speaking on his own authority. But time and time again, Paul defends his apostleship, not because he feels personally disrespected, but because he speaks and writes and preaches and teaches under and with the authority of Christ Himself. The words he writes under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit – the words that we're reading this morning, the words we're going to be reading for the next several months in the book of Romans – are the very word and very words of God. And because they are God's words, they are authoritative. They have the same weight as if Jesus stood in front of us visibly and physically and said them Himself. Paul wants his readers to know that he speaks with gospel authority as an apostle of Christ.

And third, Paul designates himself as one set apart for the gospel of God. So he's not just someone with the humility of a servant, one who belongs to Christ. He's not just someone with the authority of an apostle, one commissioned as a messenger of Jesus. He's someone characterized **by the centrality** of a specific message. Just as Paul does not belong to himself. Just as he does not represent himself, he likewise does not proclaim his own message. He has been set apart, separated for a particular task and purpose, to declare a message from God and about God. Before his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, he had been a Pharisee, which means "separated one." He had been separated for an to a righteousness that comes from obedience to the law. But now, Paul is separated for the sake of the gospel. All other priorities, all other messages, all other affections, all other

attachments, all other commitments are all laid aside. He now has one single priority, one central message: the gospel.

That word “gospel” means good news, a good message, happy tidings. In Jewish history you see it in the prophets who declared freedom from enemies, from captivity, from oppression. You see it in Isaiah 52 [READ ISAIAH 52:7-10]. You see it again in Isaiah 61 [READ ISAIAH 61:1-2]. But the Romans would also have understood it in political terms. The Imperial authorities would have declared the good news, the gospel, of an Emperor’s birth or coronation or military victory or decree. The message was to be received and celebrated throughout the Empire as the fulfillment of hope for peace and prosperity.

But of course, in Christian doctrine, the gospel is not about freedom from human enemies and military oppression and physical captivity. It's the message of spiritual freedom from spiritual enemies and spiritual oppression and spiritual captivity to sin and death. The gospel of Christ is better than the good tidings proclaimed by the prophets to OT Israel. Likewise the gospel of Jesus is not about the accomplishments of men, even great men. It's the message of the coming of the King of kings, what He has done through His life, His death, and His resurrection. The gospel of Christ is better than the good tidings heralded by the Roman Empire. Paul has been set apart, not just to the message of good news, but the best news.

The message of Romans is the **message of the gospel**.

It is that the righteous God saves sinners – justifying them,

sanctifying them, unifying them, and glorifying them through faith alone in Christ alone. The God of the universe, who is right and just and good, rescues those who have sinned against Him and are deserving of death. He redeems rebels who have defied Him and earned His righteous wrath. He saves them by declaring them right in His sight – taking away their sin and guilt and replacing it with perfect righteousness – by working in them to progressively make them more like Jesus – in their actions, in their thoughts, in their words, in their attitudes, in their motives, in their affections – and by ultimately perfecting their bodies and minds, hearts and souls, in sinless glory, to live with Him forever. And He does all this by His grace through sinners placing their hope and trust in the person and work of Jesus alone – His perfect, sinless life; His sacrificial, atoning death in the place of

sinners; and His glorious, life-giving resurrection – abandoning any confidence in themselves and their own goodness, and casting themselves on the mercy of God. That’s the gospel. That’s the message that transformed Paul and made Him a servant of Christ Jesus. It’s where his gospel humility found it’s source. It’s the message through which He was called to be an apostle. It’s where his gospel authority originated. And it’s the message that set him apart and with which he was entrusted. It’s where his gospel centrality was rooted.

So what does Paul’s identity mean for believers, for the church? Well, first, it means that we can trust the words we’re going to read as we walk together through Romans. These are words written humbly by a servant of Christ Jesus, written authoritatively by a called apostle, written

singularly by a man set apart for the gospel. But on a more practical level, it shows that we are, in a sense, to be like Paul. While we certainly haven't had the exact same experience with God that Abraham or Moses or David or Paul had, we should still regard ourselves as servants of Christ Jesus. We should have a gospel humility that acknowledges that we belong to Him, we are devoted to Him, and we live to serve at His pleasure out of earnest devotion and loving allegiance. Your life is not your own, your body is not your own, your time is not your own, your money is not your own, your possessions are not your own, your abilities and talents are not your own, your family is not your own, your future is not your own. We do not belong to ourselves; we are His. Second, while we are not apostles in the technical sense – we have not physically seen the Risen Christ or been personally,

verbally commissioned by Him – we are still sent out as ambassadors of Christ. 2 Corinthians 5:20, “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” To the extent that we declare the word of God, we speak with authority. We don’t have to muffle or apologize for the truth of Scripture. We don’t speak presumptively or carelessly, but we can speak authoritatively when we declare the whole counsel of God. God’s word says... The Bible says... We can say that with authority. We are sent, we are dispatched to do that very thing: to represent Jesus in the world and declare His message boldly. And last, while we are not set apart in precisely the way Paul was – I don’t know that any of you have been singled out and knocked to the ground by Jesus as He asks why you’re persecuting Him – if you are

a follower of Jesus, you have been set apart for the sake of the gospel. The gospel should be central to who you are and what you do. It should be an unmistakable, unavoidable priority in your life. We should see ourselves as set apart to believe the gospel, to obey the gospel, and to declare the gospel. If you're here and you've never trusted in Jesus, it's the message you're called to believe. Today. If you have trusted in Jesus, it's the message you are called to continue believing, the message that should shape your life, and the message you carry with you everywhere you go. Our prayer, as we journey together through the book of Romans, should be that we might say with Paul, "I am a servant of Christ Jesus, I am summoned and sent by Him, and I am set apart for the sake of His good news." Gospel humility, gospel authority, and gospel centrality.