

# *How To Be A Good And Faithful Servant*

Romans 1:1-17 (Part 1)

Series: Book of Romans (#01)

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## **Introduction To The Book**

This morning we begin a new series on the book of Romans. This book has and helps us understand much of the truth of our faith. John Calvin wrote, “If we have gained a true understanding of this [letter], we have an open door to all the most profound treasures of Scripture.”<sup>1</sup>

It is vital, and it is powerful. James Montgomery Boice wrote that approaching this letter is a formidable and exciting task because “a study of Romans will change us profoundly and unalterably”, and, “that is what it was meant to do...”<sup>2</sup> The message of this book has been instrumental in many people coming to understand God, themselves, the gospel and, as a result, place their faith in Christ.

Many have studied, taught and preached the book to great lengths. Some pastors have preached hundreds of sermons working through the book using it, as Donald Grey Barnhouse put it, to explore “Bible doctrines taking the epistle [or, letter] ... as a point of departure.” While that approach has great value, it is not the one we are using in this series—which may be a disappointment for some, and a relief for others.

Let’s begin getting an overall picture of Romans by noting some of the circumstances of the letter. Paul wrote this letter to the church at Rome in the year 57 or 58. To put that in perspective, review some milestones in his life of faith and ministry. God stopped Paul in his tracks more than twenty years before he wrote this letter while he was on his way to rout out and punish Christians in Damascus. God not only stopped him, but transformed him. He remained in Damascus learning and preaching. Then he went to Arabia for several years where God instructed him.

Paul returned to Damascus, and then went to Jerusalem where he was threatened, and so sent off to his home town of Tarsus for safety. Barnabas picked him up and brought him along to Antioch where they ministered for about two years. Paul and Barnabas were commissioned to go out from there to preach to others in the mid to late 40s. They returned to Antioch and then went to Jerusalem where they participated in the first church council.

Paul’s second and third missionary journeys bring us up to the year 57. This letter to the believers in Rome was written toward the close of that third journey as Paul prepared to go to meet them and then, he hoped, go on west to preach the gospel in Spain.

Now let’s move to the central message of this book. Paul did not write it in response to problems in the church as he did with some of his other letters. The letter is a summary of basic truths and implications of the gospel. Paul states his central message or theme in verses 16 and 17 of the first chapter.

“I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘But the righteous man shall live by faith.’”

His theme is the gospel—the good news of Christ Jesus. This theme helps us understand the flow, the content of the letter.

- Starting in 1:18 on through 3:20 is about the need of the gospel.
- From there through chapter 5 is about the saving work of the gospel.
- Chapters 6 through 8 are about the ongoing transforming work of the gospel.
- Chapters 9 through 11 are about Israel and the gospel.
- And chapters 12 through 15:13 are about some practical implications of the gospel.

Paul begins the letter in typical fashion by introducing himself. As he shares some things about himself he shows them and us something of what led him to be successful. *Success*. Our world tends to define and measure success with things we can easily see. Subjective, changing, temporary things. Sometimes we do the same thing in the church. A cartoon showed a man looking at a signboard outside a church. It read, “Our pastor has never been on television.” To that church this was a positive thing. Others might see it as not being successful.

Jesus has given us both Himself as an example and His teaching about what true success is. He gave some illustrations about the end times in Matthew 24-25. In the one about servants entrusted with some of their master’s money while he was gone, to those who used wisdom to be productive with it, the master said, “Well done, my good and faithful servant” (25:21,23 NLT). Being successful required wisdom and faithfulness to be productive for the master and his interests. It takes wisdom and faithfulness for us to be productive for God and His interests.

We want to be *good and faithful servants* of God. Paul’s introduction shows us something about how. He reveals two major areas here: First, what we *are*. Second, what we *do*. This morning we will consider the first, the basic identity of a good and faithful servant. Next Sunday we will look at the second, what we do as good and faithful servants.

## **The Servant’s Basic Identity.**

Look at the first words, “Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus.” Some of the first readers in Rome may have been startled, they may have blinked, looked twice, or stuttered at this. It is estimated that there were about six million slaves in the Roman Empire at that time. Many of them did basic hard labor. Others were skilled—teachers, doctors, jewellers, craftsmen, managers. But regardless of their skills and kind of work, slaves were slaves. They were property. They did not have status, and certainly no independence.

So here the great apostle Paul, the veteran missionary and statesman of the church, the foremost scholar and theologian, introduces himself to believers at the very center of the empire as a bond-servant, a slave of Christ Jesus. Think about what this meant to Paul. He was born in the wealthy city of Tarsus, and into a wealthy family. He was born a free man and, beyond that,

a full Roman citizen. Citizenship was not a right that came to all born in the city of Rome, let alone throughout the empire. Those who were fortunate to have been born with or granted citizenship were broken down in to a number of classes with differing rights and privileges.

Paul's father was a leader, a devout Pharisee. Far from being a slave, Paul and his family were upper class. Paul had the best education including studying under Gamaliel, the greatest rabbi of the day. In time Paul became a Pharisee and even a member of the Sanhedrin, the top council of the Jews. He earned a great reputation for his analytical mind and also for eagerly and systematically persecuting the church.

But that changed when he met Jesus on that trip to Damascus. He went from being proud, self-made, self-righteous, from being a free Roman citizen, a leader of his own people, to being a humble bond-servant, a slave of Christ Jesus. He knew Christ transformed him not only for eternity but for every moment of every day, in every facet of his being. He explains this to some extent in a letter he wrote a few years later to the church at Philippi.

“Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men.” (Philippians 2:5-7)

Paul was successful, he was a good and faithful servant because he thought of himself, he lived his life as a bond-servant of Christ Jesus.

Now let's think about what being a bond-servant or slave of Christ Jesus means to us. Thankfully, we do not have slavery in Canada. As a result, we may not have an up-close, accurate and vivid picture of what it means to be a slave.

Schools and youth groups have had a *Slave Day* from time to time. The young people auction or sell their services to raise money for a project. At the end of the day, of course, everything goes back to normal. Our concept of being bond-servants of Christ Jesus can be like that. We go to church, serve Him in performing some ministry or duty on Sundays or at other times of the week, and then go back to *normal*.

What is *normal* for a believer, for every person who has been saved by Christ? Jesus once described it like this,

“If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it.”  
(Luke 9:23-24)

James Irwin was an astronaut on a crew that walked on the moon. He has talked about the thrill that came from leaving earth and seeing it shrink in size, about watching *earthrise*, and what a privilege all of that was. He also thought about the reality of some people considering him a superstar or celebrity. He said,

“As I was returning to earth, I realized that I was a servant—not a celebrity. So I am here as God’s servant on planet Earth to share what I have experienced that others might know the glory of God.”

Being *successful*, being a *good and faithful servant* means being humble, humbling our selves as Christ’s servants.

The second part of who we are if we are in fact *good and faithful servants*, is being a messenger of God. We continue in verse 1 as Paul says he was “called as an apostle.” The word *apostle* in its basic sense refers to one who is sent with a commission by someone in authority. A messenger. This word was used in a technical sense in the New Testament referring to the twelve apostles, the eleven disciples and Matthias who replaced Judas. (cf. Acts 1:15-26). Christ “called”, added Paul to this group. These men were, Ephesians 2:20 tells us, the foundation of the church, “Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone.” This was part of Paul’s special mission from God.

But the word was also used in other ways in the New Testament.

- Hebrews 3:1 refers to Jesus as “the Apostle and High Priest of our confession.”
- Here in Romans, in chapter 16, Paul tells the church to greet Andronicus and Junias “who are outstanding among the apostles” (7).
- Barnabas is included in Acts 14 (4, 14), as is James the half-brother of Jesus in Galatians 1 & 2 (1:19; 2:9; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:7).
- Then there are several places where the word is translated in its basic sense as messenger (cf. 2 Corinthians 8:23; Philippians 2:25).

So, what about us? No one today is an apostle in the *technical sense*. But every believer is an apostle in the general, broad sense of the term. Jesus has commissioned and empowered us. His marching orders are,

“So, as you go on your way make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20, personal translation).

Then there are Paul’s words in Ephesians 4:7, “to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift.” Christ has commissioned us, He is with us and gives us grace, the ability to be His messengers.

So, we are *not* saved to sit; we *are* saved and sent; we *are* saved to serve. To truly be successful, to be a good and faithful servant, we must be God’s messengers in our time and place. This must be an essential part of who we are.

Finally, part of our identity as God’s good and faithful servants is being people who are set apart for the gospel. Paul concludes verse 1 by telling us he was “set apart for the gospel of God.” God set Paul apart *from* family and social position; from self-made standards and

missions; from trying to please God by what he did. God set Paul apart to the gospel of Christ, to the message, the truth that Christ Jesus, God the Son died for our sins, was buried and rose again; that He lives and will return; that He forgives the sin and gives His own life to all who place their trust in Him.

Paul did not reject this separation, nor did he segregate it to certain times and places. He embraced it. This was indispensable to his *success*, to being a *good and faithful servant*. When Paul came to Christ, God told Ananias who He sent to minister to Paul,

“he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake.” (Acts 9:15-16).

Later when Paul and Barnabas were at Antioch,

“While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’” (Acts 13:2)

But even more basic, Paul recognized that this being set apart was part of God’s call before he was born. He wrote in Galatians 1:15, that “God... had set [him] apart even from [his] mother’s womb and called [him] through His grace...” His being set apart for the gospel on the Damascus road was an evidence and a confirmation of God’s setting him apart before time began.

What about us? Are you set apart for the gospel? Some say, “That’s for pastors and missionaries—we recognize God’s call on them and set them apart for the gospel!” But it is not just for them. It is not just for people in what we call full time ministry. Part of the identity and passion of every Christian should be to be and live set apart for the gospel because God has set us apart as part of His call of us before time began to be His people, His servants, His messengers of the gospel. Yes, part of the identity and passion of every person who truly is a success, who truly is a good and faithful servant is being set apart for the gospel.

As you look back over the last week do you see hard evidence that yes, you have been living as one who is set apart for the gospel? Has the good news of Christ Jesus been central to your plans, to how you have related to family, friends, coworkers and people you have met?

## **Conclusion.**

Being a good and faithful servant begins with what we are, our identity. As we begin this formidable and exciting adventure through Romans, ask yourself, “Who am I, really?”

- “Am I really a bond-servant of Christ Jesus?”
- “Am I really a messenger of God?”
- “Am I really set apart for the gospel?”

Remember, this has nothing to do with your age, vocation or abilities. It has everything to do with your character, availability and commitment to God.

It was a happy day. A family was celebrating a birthday, and doing it in grand style. It was Mom's birthday, and her husband and kids told her to sit, rest and enjoy the party. When it came to the time for presents, they told her to sit in her favorite chair in the living room. One by one, the father and two older children came in from the kitchen bearing their gifts on a tray, solemnly presenting them to her as if she were the queen.

The youngest child had been pretty well left out of the process of choosing gifts. But as she watched her Dad, brother and sister, she began to think. When the others thought the gift-giving was over, she appeared from the kitchen carrying a tray — an empty tray. Approaching her mother as formally and solemnly as she could, she placed the empty tray on the floor in front of her Mom. After a moment of suspense, with a big smile, she stepped onto the tray and shouted, "Mommy, I give you *ME!*"

That's what God wants and, yes, what He requires of us to be His good and faithful servants. Consider that. Respond to God in these next moments. If you have become sidetracked and *stepped off the tray*, confess that to God. Give yourself, all that you are and have, all you ever hope to be, all your ambitions, hopes and plans to Him.

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *The Epistles To The Romans And To The Thessalonians*, trans. Ross Mackenzie (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1960), 5.

<sup>2</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Romans, Volume 1, Justification by Faith, Romans 1-4* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1991), 9.

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