

LESSON 5 at StudyRomans.org

Last week we started looking at some potential themes for the book of Romans, and there is a list of those themes on the Handout for Lesson 5. Our plan is to look at these potential themes now, but to not settle on any of them until we have studied the text. We may come up with a theme or two that is not even on our list!

The first two themes we looked at last week were (1) the theme of the nature of God, and (2) the theme of sin and salvation, which we could also have called the theme of the **gospel** or the theme of the good news. Sin, of course, is the bad news, and salvation is the good news!

3. Faith and Works

Romans has always been a favorite book of those who proclaim that we are saved by faith alone apart from works. And the book of James has always been their least favorite book — “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (James 2:24).

But we need to remember a point that we made earlier — before we can ever agree about the meaning of a verse in the Bible, we first need to agree about the meaning of the words in that verse.

Are we saved by faith alone apart from works? Well, what do we mean by “faith”? What do we mean by “works”? How was Paul using those terms? How was James using those terms? Were they using them the same way?

By “faith,” do we just mean belief? If so, then clearly the answer is no, we are not saved just by belief — the devils believe and tremble (James 2:19). If belief in God were the only requirement, then only fools would be lost!

But what if by “faith” we mean an active, living, working belief in God that relies only on God and that appeals only to God for cleansing, as opposed to a belief in myself that appeals to myself by relying on my own good works? If the former is what we mean by “faith,” then we might get a very different answer. Why? Because elsewhere that is precisely how the New Testament describes baptism.

1 Peter 3:21 (ESV) — Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body **but as an appeal to God** for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Titus 3:5 (ESV) — He saved us, **not because of works done by us** in righteousness, **but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration** and renewal of the Holy Spirit.

Another way to look at this issue of faith and works is to ask myself this question: can I **think** my way into Heaven? Is my salvation just a mental process? What is the question: what must I think? or what must I do? And what does Romans have to say about that?

We will look at these issues in depth during our study of this letter, but for now we can simply note that this topic of faith and works is a major theme in the book of Romans — from the very beginning to the very end of the letter.

In fact, there is an important phrase involving faith and works that appears both at the very beginning of Romans and the very end of Romans.

Romans 1:5 — Through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about **the obedience of faith** for the sake of his name among all the nations.

Romans 16:26 — But has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about **the obedience of faith**.

Obedience of faith? If my faith in God is just my belief in God, then where does this **obedience of faith** enter in? That is a very good question to ask the “belief only” crowd! And it is a question that Paul answers in this letter.

4. Faith and Law

In addition to the interaction between faith and **works** that we just looked at, there is another theme in Romans involving faith — the interaction between faith and **law**.

Faith and law are both central topics in the book of Romans. In fact, the word “law” is used more often in Romans than in any other New Testament book, and likewise the word “faith” is used more often in Romans than in any other New Testament book.

And, again, we need to define our terms. What do we mean by law? And is there more than one kind of law? As for that second question, Paul tells us that there are at least two kinds of law:

Romans 3:27 — Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. **By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith.**

There is a law of works, and there is a law of faith. But what is the law of works? What is the law of faith? How are those two laws related? And why are they called *laws*?

Just to give us an idea now of the sort of questions we will face when it comes to the use of the word “law” in Romans, let’s look at how that word is used in just one short passage from this letter, Romans 2:12-17. In those six verses, we see:

- People “without the **law**” (2:12).
- People “under the **law**” (2:12).
- People “judged by the **law**” (2:12).
- People who are “hearers of the **law**” (2:13).
- People who are “doers of the **law**” (2:13).
- People who “do not have the **law**” (2:14).
- People who are “a **law** to themselves” (2:14).
- “The **work** of the **law**” (2:15).
- People who “rely on the **law**” (2:17).

We find a lot of questions about the law from just those few verses!
And we will have many more questions from the rest of Romans.

5. Jews and Gentiles

We have already look a bit at this theme in our discussion of the unusual back-and-forth composition of the church in Rome due, in part, to the edict of Claudius and the tension that resulted from that changing composition.

I think we will see that much of Paul's letter is focused on that tension between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians in the church at Rome. While it is true that Paul had not personally seen that tension in Rome, Paul had personally seen such tension elsewhere, and he no doubt had heard about such problems in Rome.

And that tension may explain many of the issues that Paul will address in this letter.

- What were the Greeks like before they came to Christ? Paul will answer that question.
- What were the Jews like before they came to Christ? Paul will answer that question.
- Is there one plan of salvation for the Gentiles and a different plan of salvation for the Jews? Paul will answer that question.
- Do the Jews have any advantages over the Gentiles? Paul will answer that question.

- How were the Gentiles added to God's plan? Paul will answer that question.
- What should the Jews do when they have a disagreement with the Gentiles, and what should the Gentiles do when they have a disagreement with the Jews? Paul will answer those questions.

Much of Romans is focused, not on individual people, but on two groups of people — the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians.

But let's pause here and ask this question — when Paul talks about **sin and salvation** is Paul focused even there on those two **groups** of people or is Paul instead focused in that discussion on **individual** people?

What do we find in the text?

Romans 1:16 — “For 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**.”

Romans 2:9-11 — “There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the **Jew** first and also the **Greek**, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the **Jew** first and also the **Greek**. For God shows no partiality.”

Romans 3:9 — “What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both **Jews** and **Greeks**, are under sin.”

So, let me ask again — is Paul's discussion of sin and salvation in Romans directed to **individuals** or to **groups**?

As it turns out, that simple-sounding question is a huge controversy in modern commentaries on Romans. And, guess what? I want us to **ask** that question now but **not answer** that question until later as we work through the text.

And, finally, we again need to define our terms. What does Paul mean by the word “Jew”? Is there more than one meaning for that word in Romans, and, if so, how do we distinguish between them? Is there in fact some sense in which **all** Christians are **Jewish** Christians?

6. Israel in God’s Plan

Yes, Paul has something to say about both the Gentiles and the Jews, but it is only the Jews that get three entire chapters!

The three chapters of Romans 9-11 contain what may be Paul’s lengthiest discourse in the New Testament on any single topic — and that topic is the place of Israel in God’s plan of redemption.

Are those chapters hard to understand? Yes, they are. Will we be able to understand those chapters? Yes, we will — but it will take some very hard work!

And even after all of that, we will be left with another hard question — why did Paul include these difficult chapters? How, if at all, do they fit in with the rest of the letter? Is there an overarching theme that answers that question, or did Paul just change the subject when he got to Romans 9?

Looked at another way, we know that the place of Israel in God's plan is a theme of Romans 9-11, but is it also a theme of the rest of Romans? And, if so, how? Do we see that theme outside of Romans 9-11?

7. Christian Living

Romans has a reputation for being an academic book. Many people see Romans as just a deep scholarly treatise on various theological subjects. But Romans is much more than just that. How do we know that? One way we know that is because of Romans 12.

After working our way through all of the difficult material in Romans 1-8 and then through the even more difficult material in Romans 9-11, we might expect Romans 12 to tell us how to study for the final exam. But that is not what we find. Romans 12 tells us, not how to study for the final exam, but how to live as a Christian.

And, once again, we have that same question — did Paul just change the subject when he got to Romans 12? Or is there some theme that stitches all of this together?

Whether or not Paul changed the subject, the specific subject of Romans 12 is clear — Christian living. How are we to live? And although Romans 12 gives us a detailed answer to that question, Paul begins that chapter with a summary of that answer:

Romans 12:1-2 — I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be

transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

In those two verses we find the entirety of our life in Christ on this earth. That is what we must do — not just part of the time, but all of the time. That is what those two verses tell us. I am to present myself as a **living** sacrifice while I am doing just that — living! This chapter is all about our **life** in Christ. And my life in Christ is not just my life on Sunday. My life in Christ is my life all the time — or at least it should be.

In our study of Joel we said that Acts 2 may be the hinge or the hub of the Bible. Let's ask that same question, not about the entire Bible, but about this book of Romans. What is the **hub** of Romans? What is the **hinge** about which the book of Romans revolves? Many would point to Romans 8, and that very well may be the best answer, but I might point instead to these two opening verses in Romans 12.

And, yes, I think, when we get to Romans 12, we will see that there are some basic and common misunderstandings in the church about these two verses and about the Greek words found in these two verses. But, if we proceed carefully, I don't think we will have any problems understanding what Paul is telling us here in these verses, and I don't think what he is telling us in those two verses will come as a surprise to any of us.

There is a crucial term in Romans 12:2 that is central to this theme of Christian living — **transformation**. “Do not be conformed to this world, but be **transformed** by the renewal of your mind.” And, yes,

that is the only verse in Romans where we find that word — but we see the **concept** of transformation all throughout the book of Romans.

Romans 6:4 — We were **buried** therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in **newness of life**.

In that verse, we are transformed — we start out dead and we end up alive.

Romans 6:17-18 — But thanks be to God, that you who were once **slaves of sin** have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become **slaves of righteousness**.

In those verses, we are transformed — we start out a slave to sin and we end up a slave of righteousness. And we could give many other examples. Transformation is the key to Christian living — and both transformation and Christian living are central themes of Romans.

8. Unity

When it comes to Paul's other letters, we know that **unity** is often a central theme. For example:

1 Corinthians 1:10 (ESV) — I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, **that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.**

Ephesians 4:1-6 (ESV) — I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit — just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call — one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

And so it should not surprise us when we find that same theme of unity in the book of Romans. But what might be surprising is that if I were forced to choose only one of these 10 potential themes as being **THE THEME** of Romans, I might choose this one — unity. Why?

We talked earlier about when and where Romans was written, and we determined that it was written in Corinth around AD 56 or 57. Some might have wondered why we spent so much time on those questions. How does knowing the when and the where of Romans help us in our study of this letter? Well, here is one place where that information will definitely help us — explaining why “unity” is a theme in this letter.

What had just happened to Paul before he wrote Romans? Paul had just lived through all of the turmoil that we read about in First and Second Corinthians. Both of those letters were likely written before and within a year or two of when Paul wrote Romans.

And what was the central problem of the church in Corinth? I think it is the problem that Paul started off with in his first letter to them — the problem of division.

1 Corinthians 1:10-13 (ESV) — I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you **agree** and that there be **no divisions** among you, but that you be **united** in the **same mind** and the **same judgment**. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is **quarreling** among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." Is Christ **divided**? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

It seems that the Christians in Corinth were badly divided. And, then, after all of that, let's suppose that Paul hears a report about similar divisions in the church in Rome. What sort of report, you ask?

- Let's suppose that Paul heard that the Roman Christians were meeting in widely separated congregations, and that they did not have at all the same mind and the same judgment.
- Let's suppose that Paul heard that there were even separate Jewish congregations and Gentile congregations.
- Let's suppose that Paul heard about quarrels among them over customs and special days.
- Let's suppose that Paul heard that the Jews wanted the Gentiles to follow the law, and that the Gentiles were browbeating the Jews about their Jewish customs as they returned to the city following their expulsion and were claiming to be more spiritual than the Jews?

How do we think Paul would have responded to all of that? What do we think Paul would have told the Roman Christians about unity in

this letter? What do we think Paul would have said to keep the Romans from going down the same road as the Corinthians?

- Would Paul have reminded them that the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes? He did just that in Romans 1:16.
- Would Paul have told them that God shows no partiality? He did just that in Romans 2:11.
- Would Paul have told them that there is no distinction with regard to our need for that gospel? He did just that in Romans 3:22.
- Would Paul have reminded them that in our baptism we are each united with Christ in a death like his and in a resurrection like his? He did just that in Romans 6:5.
- Would Paul have told them that there is no distinction between Jew and Greek? He did just that in Romans 10:12.
- Would Paul have described them all as a single tree being nourished by God? He did just that in Romans 11:17.
- Would Paul have reminded them that they are all one body in Christ? He did just that in Romans 12:5.
- Would Paul have told them to live in harmony with each another? He did just that in Romans 12:16.
- Would Paul have told them not to quarrel over opinions? He did just that in Romans 14:1.

- Would Paul have told them to pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding? He did just that in Romans 14:19.
- Would Paul have told them to welcome each other as Christ had welcomed them? He did just that in Romans 15:7.
- Would Paul have warned them to watch out for those who cause divisions? He did just that in Romans 16:17.

And so, is **unity** a central theme in the book of Romans? I think it most certainly is! We just saw 12 examples of that theme from the beginning of the letter to the end of the letter.

And I think we know **why** unity was such a concern at this time for the Apostle Paul — he had just personally witnessed the problems of division in the church at Corinth, and he wanted Rome to avoid those same problems.

And so why the big focus on salvation and sin at the beginning of the book? Was it to show them that they all stood in the same position without distinction? That they were all sinners, and that they all needed Christ? That they were unified both by sin and by the gospel?

And why then the big focus on the role of the Jews in the plan of God? Was it to show that, despite that special role, there was now no longer any distinction between Jew and Gentile in the body of Christ?

And why then talk about Christian living at the end of the letter? Was it to show them how to live in harmony with each other in the body of Christ?

In short — can we conclude that this theme of unity ties the entire letter together from beginning to end? As tempting as it is, let's not make that conclusion now, but let's keep that possibility in mind as we work through the text.

9. Righteousness & Justification

We just said that the theme of unity might be a theme that could tie all of the parts of Romans together. Another possible theme to play that role is the theme of **righteousness**. And there is no doubt that righteousness is a key word in this letter — various forms of the word **righteousness** occur 47 times in Romans.

Later, when we look at the structure of the book of Romans, we will see that every section in the letter can be framed in terms of righteousness.

And there is another key word in Romans that is closely related to the word “righteousness” — and that is the word “justification.” We see both words together in Romans 2:13.

Romans 2:13 — For it is not the hearers of the law who are **righteous** before God, but the doers of the law who will be **justified**.

The word “justification” in all of its various forms occurs almost as many times in the book of Romans as it does in the entirety of the rest of the New Testament.

Romans 2:13, the verse we just read, confirms that justification and righteousness are closely related, but are they synonyms? What is

justification? How can we be justified? What is righteousness? Can we be righteous before God? Paul will tell us in this letter that “none is righteous, no, not one.” Is that a permanent condition, or can we become righteous. If so, how?

We will let Paul answer those questions as we work through the text.

10. The Weak and the Strong

As we said earlier, Romans is different from Paul’s other letters because it spends less time on the specific problems in the Roman church for the obvious reason that Paul had never visited the Roman church.

But, as we have also already said, Paul does deal with one big problem that he had apparently been told about — the tension between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians in Rome. And one way that problem was manifesting itself was in disputes between the weak and the strong, as we will see in Romans 14-15.

And once again, we will need to define our terms. Who were the weak? Who were the strong? And what made them weak? And what made them strong? And why did Paul use those terms — weak and strong — instead of just naming names? Is Paul talking to the Jews and the Gentiles here when he is talking to the weak and the strong?

Those are all great questions, and I’m sure we will spend a lot of time on them when we get to Romans 14! But for now, all we need to know is that this interaction between the weak and the strong is certainly a theme in those two chapters — and we may discover that this inter-

action between the weak and the strong is a theme in other chapters of Romans as well.

And that concludes our look at these 10 potential themes of Romans.

But our big question remains — do any of these themes run throughout the entire book and serve to tie all of the sections of the letter together? Does the theme of unity do that? Does the theme of righteousness do that? Any others?

In short, if we had to come up with a Section Heading that applies to the entire letter to the Romans, what would we choose? Let's keep that question in mind as we work through the text.

(14) Are there any textual issues about Romans?

To begin, what do I mean by a “textual issue”?

A “textual issue” about the Bible is an issue about how the English text in our modern versions of the Bible compares with the Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek text in the early manuscripts of the Bible.

For example, one big textual issue about Romans is whether Romans 16 was originally a part of this letter or instead was tacked onto the letter later by someone else.

But before we look at that question, let's consider another related question: What is the favorite tool in the toolbox of liberal Biblical scholars?

I think that question is pretty easy to answer — I think the favorite tool of the liberal is a sharp pair of scissors! They love to slice up the word of God, tossing away part of it and rearranging the rest of it. We all know not to **run** with scissors, but I don't think we all know not to **study** with scissors!

Here is how the liberal approach to the Bible usually goes. They read a book of the Bible and decide that they would not have written it that way at all. They don't like its organization. They don't understand why this chapter or that chapter was even included. They think that this chapter or that chapter would make a lot more sense if it were attached to some other book.

And so what do they do? They rearrange things so that it fits with how they would have written the book. And, yes, they sometimes point to various ancient manuscripts — but I think that most often they use those manuscripts the same way that a drunkard uses a light post — not for illumination, but for support!

Yes, that sounds a bit harsh — but I think some harshness is called for when people start using their scissors to slice up the word of God!

And, so, with that background, let's look now at our earlier question about Romans 16. Some commentators do not think that Romans 16 was originally a part of this letter. Why do they say that?

- One reason they say that is the question we mentioned earlier — how did Paul know all of the people he greets in Romans 16 if he had never been to Rome?

- And, as for Priscilla and Aquila being greeted in Romans 16:3, we know that they also travelled to Ephesus (Acts 18:18-19), and so maybe the last chapter of Romans should really have been the last chapter of Ephesians.
- And in Romans 16:5, Paul greets “Epaenetus, who was the first convert to Christ **in Asia**.” Doesn’t that description sound more like a greeting directed to someone in Ephesus than a greeting directed to someone in Rome?
- And why did Paul warn the Romans against false teachers in Romans 16:17 if he had never been in Rome to witness such teachers? Doesn’t that warning at the end of Romans come a bit out of left field in this letter?
- And, finally, there are a few ancient manuscripts of Romans that lack the final chapter. Doesn’t that fact alone prove that Romans 16 must have been tacked on later?

So, should we just say “case closed”? Should we pass out the scissors so we can all make the appropriate corrections to our Bibles? No. We should leave our scissors right where they are — which is also what we should do with Romans 16 — leave it right where it is! **None of those arguments has any merit.** And next week we will see why that is so.