

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 51

Romans – Part Four

Chapters 6-8

I. CONTEXT

The overall context of Romans is placed within the framework of a church likely facing internal questions over identity and the role/difference of Jew and Gentile in the assembly. Scripture indicates that the Jews would have started the church upon their return from the salvation experience in Jerusalem on Pentecost (Acts 2). Yet, we know from Acts 18:2 that a time came when Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome, including those that were Christians. By the time Paul writes Romans, the Jewish Christians had returned (references to Aquila and Priscilla in Romans 16).

Paul writes Romans in a way that explains the role of both Jew and Gentile in the church. As he writes, he leaves no doubt that any genetic/ancestral distinction between Jew and Gentile is irrelevant when it comes to the body of Christ and our relationship with God. Both Jew and Gentile are sinners, living under God's wrath as slaves to sin and sin's death grip. The Jews had the law while the Gentiles did not. It made no difference. Both lived unrighteous lives. Both were descendants of Adam, the father of both Jew and Gentile. Both were enslaved by the sin and death Adam brought into our world.

In a similar vein, both Jew and Gentile can live a new life in harmony and relationship to God in spite of sin. This new life is not made possible by "doing better" or "holy living." The new life is based on a righteousness that God gives to those who trust in the crucified and resurrected Jesus. This is Christ's own righteousness which God himself has imputed to us.

So, both Jew and Gentile share common problems: sin and death. But, they also share a common solution: faith in Jesus Christ, our redemption before God. There should be no distinction in the church between the two. Both stand before God only on the basis of Jesus' atoning sacrifice.

After sharing the common bond between Jew and Gentile as sinners and saved, Paul then turns to the issue of how we live *after* salvation. It should come as no surprise that mankind stands together here also. There is no distinction between Jew and Gentile.

II. THE TEXT (Romans 6-8)

In this section of Romans, Paul moves from the questions of how God has saved us into the area of what it means to live as a saved people. Paul probes many of the questions that not only would occur to the Roman Christians, but also to Christians of the ages, regardless of location or descent.

In the process, Paul asks a number of questions that he could “hear” some of his readers no doubt asking as they read and considered his letter. We will ask the same questions:

Question 1: So if we’re sinners saved by grace, can’t we sin even more so God can have even more grace? (6:1)

To this question Paul answers, μη γενοιτο (*me genoito*)! The New International Version translates Paul’s answer, “By no means!” Paul is using what we call an “idiom.” That means it is a common expression that is used beyond just its literal translation. In English, for example, we might refer to something as “Cool!” when we are not really speaking of its internal temperature! Paul’s expression was a common way of saying “no” with some emphasis. We might fairly translate it in our language as, not just, “no” but “No Way!”

Paul does not want his answer to that question lightly glossed over. He wants the readers to know that the question is preposterous. There is no way that the answer could be anything but an unequivocal no.

To illustrate his point, Paul references the baptism of Christians. Paul explains part of the significance of the ritual immersion.¹ The Romans need to understand that when they were immersed into water, they were immersing into the death of Christ. The rising out of the water was a rising out of the dead to a new life. Uniting with Christ in his death and resurrection shows us that our “old self” is gone replaced with a new man (6:1-10).

¹ Baptism comes from the Greek word *baptizo* (βαπτίζω) which means “immerse.” English has turned the Greek word into an English word, which through church tradition, has grown to reference the ritual that might include pouring and sprinkling of water.

Sin no longer masters us. We are not sin's slave to do its beck and call. Paul says we are to "count" ourselves dead to sin (6:11). The word translated "count" (translated in other versions as "reckon yourselves dead to sin") is λογισμος (*logismos*). The word is a rough equivalent to entering something into the balance of your checking account. It means you should assume and act as if it is a fact. You might say, in colloquial English, "Go to the bank on it!"

Paul makes the point that we are not to offer ourselves to sin, our old master, because we are new creations serving a new master. We are to offer ourselves to righteousness. (6:11-14).

Question 2: Should we go ahead and sin because we are not saved by works but live under grace?

Again Paul says, μη γενοιτω (*me genoito*)! No way! Paul takes his slave and master talk from before and reinforces it. When we subject ourselves and obey someone, we become his/her slave. To subject ourselves and choose to live as sinners means becoming slaves to sin, the very thing we have died to! That is patently foolish to Paul, as it should be to Christians. The whole blessing behind our salvation is escaping from sin and its death. Why would we want to live as if we never escaped? Sin never brought us any advantage. Righteousness brought us eternal life with God, the creator of the universe! Why would we ever choose slavery to sin? (6:15-23)

Paul then uses an illustration from the Jewish law that would be familiar to his Jewish readers as well as Gentiles who might be versed in the Old Testament (7:1). The law has authority that ends at death. So, for example, Paul points out that a wife is bound to her husband while he lives. But once her husband dies, the law no longer binds her to him. She is free to remarry without committing adultery.

In the same vein, we died to our old self, we died to sin, and we were set free from the bondage of that sin. We no longer belong to sin. We belong to Christ, our Redeemer! We are no longer controlled by the law, sin, and sin's nature in us. God and His Spirit control us! (7:1-6)

Question 3: If the Law and sin are so closely wrapped together, then does this mean that the Law itself is sinful? (7:7)

For a third time, μη γνοιτω (*me gnoito*)! No Way! It is the law that taught us that we were sinners! Without the law, we would still have been sinners with a sinful nature. It was the law that showed us we were sinners. If a thermometer (my example here, not Paul's!) shows us it is 100 degrees outside, then we know it is hot! The thermometer does not make it hot outside, it merely let's us know it is hot. In that manner, the law could never be sin. The law shows sin for what sin is.

Paul's example is coveting. Paul might not have realized what it was to covet, as far as it being sin, if the law had not told Paul, "Do not covet!" Once Paul had the law telling him so about coveting, Paul saw his coveting as sin every time it occurred. In fact, much like telling someone not to think of a pink elephant causes one to immediately think of one, sin took the command not to covet and produced even more coveting in Paul's heart.

That is the way with sin. Sin does not lead to holiness or life. Sin leads to condemnation and death. The law itself is holy and good. It is the sin that is the problem! The law showed sin to be utterly sinful! (7:7-13)

So if I'm not a slave to sin, then why do I sin?

Paul then enters a discussion that has some scholars debating whether it applies to Paul pre-conversion or at the time Paul was actually writing. The verb tense and context lead most to believe Paul is writing this next section as a description of Paul's pending life issues at the time of writing. Paul doesn't specifically ask the question, but answers it nonetheless: So if I'm not a slave to sin, then why can't I stop sinning?

Paul writes that he does the very things he doesn't want to do. Paul also fails to do the very things he wants to do! Paul has the desire to do good, but the inability to pull it off! It is a war going on inside Paul and his mind/body. Paul readily admits this struggle. He goes even further and admits the deep frustration that constantly badgers Paul over his sinfulness. Paul wants to know where there is rescue for this abominable wretch he perceives himself to be.

Paul's rescue, like all other aspects of Paul's life, is found in the cross of Christ! Paul thanks God through the Lord Jesus for his life. Indeed, Paul stills lives in this body with the sinful nature, even though he knows that the sinful nature is dead and destined for the dust heap! Holiness and righteousness is the living Paul with a future in Jesus Christ (7:14-25).

That Paul has the fight with his old sinful nature makes it even more significant that he is not condemned before God! For those in Christ Jesus, there is no condemnation. God's Spirit has set us free from the law of sin and death. The law could never give us that freedom. We could never overcome sin and gain righteousness by following the law. We got an eternal victory when eternal God came in the likeness of sinful man, lived righteously under the law never sinning, fully meeting the righteous requirements of the Law, and still dying the curse that belonged to us (8:1-4).

So, as saved believing children of God, our lives no longer dwell or live off sin and death. We have God's Spirit in us. Even though we live still in this fallen body which itself will die as part of sin's curse, we have within the body a spirit that will share in a resurrected body, just as our Savior experienced resurrection.

This is the same Spirit that moves us closer to God as we continue our lives on earth. This Spirit is not deficient. It is not lesser than the sinful nature. It is not afraid of sin and sin's control. This Spirit moves us to cry to God as our *abba* father, our personal dear and intimate father. That also means that we are God's children, and as God's children, we are his heirs. We have a share not only in his sufferings, but also in his glory (8:5-17).

As Paul considers the issue of our sharing in the sufferings of Christ, Paul makes a point of talking about sin's effects not only on mankind, but also on the world as well. Paul explains that our world, creation itself, suffers the consequences of sin. The world is fallen. It is not the Eden God created. It has thorns and thistles; it has decay. Creation groans under the weight of sin's curse, but not forever! Paul likens the groaning to the pains of childbirth. Paul writes that we (just like creation) long for the redemption that will come when God finishes his work making things aright. There will come a day when not only our spirits are restored, but our bodies as well (8:18-25).

Until that day, we have the Spirit helping us live through our weakness. The Spirit helps with interceding words before God that we can't express ourselves. God knows our hearts and minds. God obviously knows his own heart and mind, and this is our God at work in us to see us to the day of glory. God is working toward our good. In all things, Paul writes, God "works for the good of those who love him, who are called according to his purpose" (8:28).

As an explanation, Paul adds a statement that has found itself a discussion point among those who debate the Biblical teaching concerning predestination and human choice. Paul writes:

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. (8:29-30)

Without getting bogged down in the arguments of predestination interplaying with human choice, we must first take the time to get the thrust of Paul's point. Paul is not engaging in the predestination debate. Paul is affirming that the believers who were receiving this letter, like all believers, are not chosen by God to salvation and then abandoned. The God who cares enough about us to die for us and bring us into relationship, is not about to then abandon us! Rather, he gives us a certain destiny. He will himself work to see that we share in the glory of eternity.

That is why Paul writes the reassuring follow-up words, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (8:31) The issue almost seems ridiculous once Paul phrases it. Indeed, if God is fighting for us, if the Creator is on our side, if Jehovah is our champion, then who is strong enough to beat him? Once God has declared us righteous and justified, who has the authority to challenge him and change his decree? Not just "who?" but also "what?" Paul is not satisfied just to say that no one can bring a charge against us because the truth goes beyond that. There is absolutely no circumstance and no being (earthly or celestial, angelic or demonic) that could ever separate us from God's love for us. Whatever life deals us, whatever this fallen world or fallen mankind brings to bear against us, we always have the assurance that God loves us and is at work to see us through this world victorious! (8:31-39)

III. POINTS FOR HOME

1. Follow God; abandon sin.
2. The saved still struggle with sin.
3. Bank on God's forgiveness.
4. God holds your future in love.