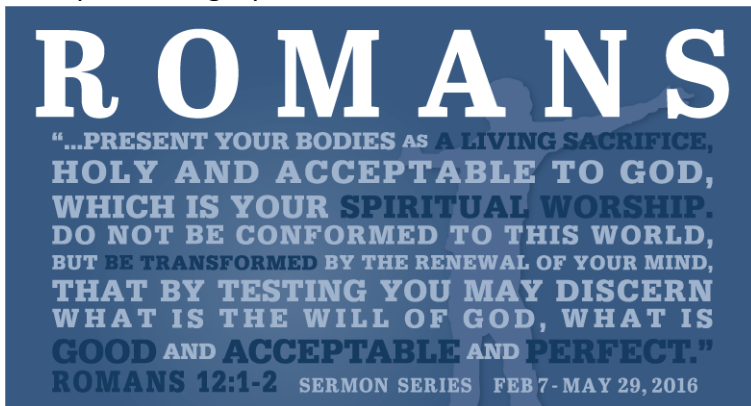


Transformed by the Gospel
Spring Sermon Series on Romans
Kenwood Baptist Church
Pastor David Palmer
February 7, 2016

TEXT: Romans 1:1-17

This morning we begin our spring series on the letter to the Romans, “Transformed by the Gospel.” The gospel is central to Romans. Paul sees himself as set apart for the Gospel. He is



eager to share the gospel. The gospel reveals God's righteousness, he writes. The Gospel offers forgiveness and the beginning of new life. The gospel fills us with the empowering Holy Spirit. The gospel transforms our life together in the church as God's renewed humanity. The gospel is very powerful. The gospel, in the end,

draws us into God's mission in the world.

Paul's letter to the Romans is written after he'd been serving Christ for 25 years, and when you have been doing something for 25 years, you understand it well; you know the ins and outs; you know the objections, the barriers. Paul's letter to the Romans is placed first in his letters in the New Testament, not because it's the greatest or the one he wrote first, but simply because it is the longest. It is his most complete statement of the Christian gospel. Paul's letter to Romans is written to a church that Paul did not start, a church that he had not met face-to-face, and so we share the unique position of being recipients of this letter by extension, and we share that same relationship of having never met this man face-to-face. Yet, he speaks to us through the divinely inspired Word, and we are changed, just as the original hearers are changed. The gospel that is presented to us in the letter of Romans is about transformation, and I am going to warn you that by the time we get to the end of Romans, this series will have been a complete and total failure if you are the same, if I'm the same.

The gospel comes to us, and it is God's agent of change and transformation, sometimes a transformation that we don't even want, and yet we find in the end that it is for our good. The sweeping narrative of Romans teaches us about this transforming power of the gospel. We hear in Romans first that humanity in God's image and likeness has become fallen and that this

world is in need of transformation. If you haven't noticed this yet, Romans 1, 2 and 3 will convince you that the world around us needs transformation, and that includes you and me.

We discover in Romans that the transformation is made possible: it is accomplished at the cross of Christ; it transforms us into a new family; and that we are changed, not by our own efforts. The good news of Romans is that we are changed by the gift of God's grace, and our lives begin anew in response to God's saving grace. We discover we have a new family. We discover that we have a new pattern of living. We discover that the way of life is the way of the cross, the way of resurrection, and we will celebrate this in Holy Week, late in March. After Easter, we will follow the transforming power of the gospel through to the end of Romans. The Holy Spirit comes into us, and we are changed. We are transformed when the Holy Spirit comes into our heart, into our life. All kinds of new things begin to happen. Some of them are unexpected things: we begin to have new desires, new affections, and new tears. We get new tears in Romans 9, and they are the tears of anguish for everyone that is close to you that doesn't know Christ yet and you long for. We don't feel that way without God's Holy Spirit. You get new anguish. You get new saving witness transformed into sacrificial service in Romans 12. We become transformed into loving obedience in Romans 13; transformed into a community that pursues peace and unity in Romans 14; and we arrive in Romans 15 as a community transformed into one voice glorifying God. In the end of Romans 16, this group of people is transformed into the church, the body of Christ—a diverse group of people that share one thing, that they been justified, saved by the power of the cross. Romans is Paul's most complete statement of the Christian gospel. It is a letter that has inspired and influenced Christian faith, theology, and preaching beyond our ability to measure. Romans has been used by God throughout history to transform some significant lives. Let me tell you about a couple of them.



Martin Luther, the German reformer in the 16th century, was a monk. He was a 'good guy' by most people's criteria, and yet Luther, though he was a monk, though he had committed himself to God, looked into the chambers of his heart and found that he was a sinful man. He labored to find right standing in God's eyes, and he labored through Romans 1. God met him in Romans 1 and really altered the course of human history in this encounter. Luther writes:

"I labored diligently and anxiously as to how to understand Paul's word 'the righteousness of God.' The expression 'the righteousness of God' blocked the way, because I took it to mean that righteousness whereby God is righteous and deals righteously in punishing the unrighteous. Although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner therefore I did not love a righteous and

angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him.”

You can be very religious and hate God. You can be very lost and going your own way and disregard God, as well. And Luther said, “Then, something happened.” He found it in Romans 1:

“Then I grasped that the righteousness of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us by faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise ... I broke through.”

He rediscovered the gospel in Romans 1:17: a righteousness of God that is given to us as a gift. Luther said: “The gates of Paradise opened for me here,” launching the Reformation. Luther's *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* is very powerful, an indirect witness of the transforming power of the gospel.

John Wesley, on May 24, 1738, decided to go to a Christian meeting. Don't despise small



Christian meetings. Sometimes God likes to do huge things in small meetings so He gets all the glory. Wesley went somewhat unwillingly to a meeting on Aldersgate Street in London, and at this meeting someone was reading Luther's preface to Romans. In the preface to Romans, he was describing the transformation that God works in our hearts through faith in Christ. John Wesley writes:

“About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an

assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”

John Wesley was born again just by hearing Luther's preface to Romans read. John Wesley then came to the United States, traveled by horseback, planted hundreds of churches, and preached the gospel to tens of thousands of people in this country.

This letter to the Romans is a powerful document, and I want us, right from the beginning, to set our expectations that God will work on us and change us, though not just for change's sake. Romans is not about novelty, but it's about a real recovery of who we are and who were made to be. Romans is Paul's most significant letter for so many reasons. It reflects the mature pattern of his preaching. Romans has shaped the outline of how many present the Gospel today. It presents a full picture of Paul's ministry vision, and it has experienced responses to common objections to the cross. Romans displays Paul's pastoral approach to secondary issues.

We have much to learn here: be vigilant about things of primary importance, and in things of secondary or tertiary importance, be generous with one another, and strive for unity in the end. Paul displays a vision of the diverse worshiping church as the people of God. Paul's letter was written to a people whom he had not personally met, and it is a letter written at a key juncture in his ministry life. He is on his way to Jerusalem to bring an offering from the nations at the feast of Pentecost, and he is looking to the very edges of the earth that he knows in mission.

The letter to the Romans is really an invitation for the recipients to join him in that mission. The letter of Romans is about being transformed by the gospel: to see a world in need of transformation, transformation accomplished at the cross; a new community of faith transformed into a renewed humanity; a renewed humanity drawn into and compelled forward by joining God's mission in the world. Is Romans a theological treatise? Yes. Is it a letter of introduction? Yes. Is it a clear statement of the Christian gospel? Yes. Is it in the end a missionary support letter? Yes. If we hear it rightly, the greatest change that I'm hoping for at Kenwood Baptist Church is that we will have the response the original recipients were really invited to in the end, and that is that when we see the gospel clearly, and you see the transformation that is offered, you embrace that vision, and you join in. The response that Paul desired from the original recipients was that they would recognize the gospel, love it, seek it in their own lives, and then join in God's mission of extending the gospel to all peoples. That is really the goal. These purposes overlap, and it is one of those test questions that you love to get when you think: "It could be this; it could be this; it could be this; it could be this;" and at the end you see that wonderful selection: "Letter E: all of the above." It is a theological treatise; it is a missionary support letter; it is all of these things. So, let's look together at how Paul begins this greatest of his letters.

Paul begins by announcing himself, introducing himself, as a servant or slave of Christ Jesus. He says: "I am called to be an apostle; I am grafted in; I am compelled into Christ's service. He is my master, and I am called to be His emissary. He has set me apart for the gospel of God. My life has been set apart, out of the ordinary, reserved, consecrated in service for the gospel of God." The gospel is announced at the very beginning, and notice the change that has happened, for Paul himself, in this opening verse. To be set apart for the gospel of God makes Christ your Master. It also makes you His emissary in the world. Paul explains the gospel of God in the next few lines. He says: "The gospel of God is God's good news. It belongs to Him. It is His possession. It issues forth from Him." The gospel is not something radically new. This is important for us. Paul says immediately that the gospel flows out of God's will and purpose, revealed from the very beginning. Paul sounds a note of continuity between the Old Testament and the New. He says in Romans 1:2 that the gospel is that which:

“. . .He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures.”

The gospel is fundamentally about this Son, Jesus Christ. The gospel is God's good news for the world about Jesus. Paul tells us in Romans 1:3-4 that the gospel is:

“ . . . concerning His Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by His resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

He is the son of David, as Matthew 1:1 declares. Jesus is also the reigning Son of God in power, and he is evidenced to be so by the Spirit, by His resurrection from the dead. The gospel is about Jesus Christ our Lord, and the gospel that we hear about, that concerns Jesus, is about what He has done and has certain effects. This is a place where we really need to check our theological safety bar, because these things are powerful. Fasten your seatbelt on these things, because, if the gospel comes in to you, you could stop at Romans 1:4 and say: “Oh, that's great, good news, personal benefit, love it, God's purpose coming to fruition, wonderful! But, you see in Romans 1:5-6, that something happens if the gospel lands into your life and mine. We see that God's good news about His Son Jesus Christ is that He is:

“ . . . 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, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.”

Grace is a distinctly Christian word. It is a major word in Romans; it is a major word in the New Testament. It is one of the great treasures of the Christian church. You cannot find *grace* in any other place on the planet than through the proclamation of the gospel. *Grace* is the forgiveness that God gives you, that you do not deserve, and that I do not deserve. If we deserve it, it is no longer *grace*. *Grace* is a word that no one uses in this way at this time in the first century except in the New Testament: *grace*, forgiveness, favor with God. How do I obtain that? Paul says in this opening sentence that we receive *grace* through Christ. Not only do we receive *grace*, mercy, and forgiveness, we also receive mission and purpose for our lives. Isn't it great that Romans 1:5 says that you don't have to flounder anymore? Eric Metaxas says that after he graduated from Yale University, he floundered for a while. As he tells the story, he says:

“I floundered for a while, and then I drifted. Then I drifted, and I floundered, which is more difficult to do than it sounds.”

He ended up living back with his parents, which he says he doesn't recommend. Many of us are drifting and floundering, going our own way, and yet the gospel comes in to us, and it's a place to receive *grace*, forgiveness, and a purpose for living. We receive a mission. We receive forgiveness and apostleship and mission, and that mission is breathtaking in scope. The mission that we receive in the gospel of God is to bring about the obedience of faith among all nations for the sake of God's name, for the sake of God's glory. The mission is for the sake of God's name in all the earth. *Grace* and apostleship, forgiveness and mission. This is a transformative

event to bring the nations of the world, including you and me, into a place of obedience to God, an obedience that flows out from faith to the praise of God's glory. This breathtaking scope of mission Paul then centers down and says: "Guess what? You also are included in this." We hear this this morning at Kenwood as well.

There are several "yous" in the next verses. Paul says: "**You** also are called to belong to Christ. Grace to you. I thank God for all of **you**." In Romans 1:9, he says:

*"For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of His Son, that without ceasing I mention **you** always in my prayers. . ."*

In Romans 1:10, he says:

*". . . asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to **you**."*

He says in Romans 1:13:

*"I want **you** to know, brothers, that I have often intended to come to **you** (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among **you** as well as among the rest of the Gentiles."*

Though he has not met the Romans, he longs to see them that the gospel might be fruitful among them. We this morning at Kenwood stand in the same position.

Why is Paul so eager to proclaim the gospel to all people? Why does he care that this letter is read by the churches in Rome and the great joy that we have of hearing it this spring at Kenwood? He says in Romans 1:14:

"I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish."

Obligation is a word that has fallen slightly out of disfavor. A couple of generations ago, duty was a great thing: What's my duty? Tell me my duty so I can do it." The Homebuilder generation responds to the call of duty with affection. When postmodern people hear 'call of duty,' some of them think of a videogame, and many of them just panic: "What! I'm supposed to do something? Are you really saying I can't live for myself? I'm in total panic!" Paul says he has an obligation. Literally, he says, "I have a debt." This is the same term that Jesus uses in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." The Bible describes our relationship to God with a variety of terms. One of those terms is a *debt*, that is what we owe. Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer uses the word *sin*. These two words each have a very clear picture. Let me illustrate it in this way, maybe it is culturally appropriate. Imagine Peyton Manning this afternoon. He is ready to put the stamp on the end of a glorious career—the game-winning touchdown. Super Bowl 50 is coming to an end , and he's got the ball. He's got a

guy breaking open in the end zone. Here it is, and he's ready. He's already imagining the speech he is going to give, and he gets carried away in his thoughts. He just holds onto the ball, and the defense collapses around him and he is sacked. The receiver comes back to the huddle, tears flowing down his face: "That could have been me. I could have been on the Jumbotron. Why didn't you throw it? Why didn't you throw it?" That's a debt, an obligation. It is not doing something that you should do. The word *sin* in Scriptures is the opposite of that: same scenario; ready to win; stamp on the career; a guy breaks wide open in the end zone; Payton Manning gets carried away imagining the Jumbotron scene; and he gets so amped up by that moment that he throws it and it goes straight between the goalposts. That's sin. That's missing it, and the guy comes back, tears on his face: "That could have been me in the Jumbotron. How tall do you think I am!" An obligation **is not doing** what you should do; sin **is doing** what you shouldn't have done. Paul says: "I have an obligation." Notice the scale of this obligation. He says: "I'm obligated to Greeks and barbarians; wise and foolish." Whatever criteria you might use to exclude those who deserve a hearing of the gospel, Paul will have none of it. He says: "I am obligated to those who perceive themselves as high members of culture." The Greeks divide up the world into two groups: Greeks and everyone who wishes they were Greeks. The people who wish they were Greeks, they call barbarians, which is the Greek term for blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, because that's what their language sounds like. My mother-in-law said to me once, with all seriousness: "Why would I need to learn a foreign language? I mean, has there been anything worth reading or thinking or saying that hasn't been said by a Greek?" Paul says: "I am obligated to the high level of culture and to those who seem to have none. Paul says: "I am obligated to people who are extremely intelligent." Francis Collins, Director of the Human Genome Project, has become a Christian. Looking at the works of God in the DNA strand, he found it overwhelmingly persuasive that there was a Creator designer. He is an intelligent man.

I don't know about you, but I've met a few idiots along the way, and I put myself in that category at certain stages. But, guess what? Isn't it great that idiots get to hear the gospel too? Sometimes God holds back the outcome of our stupidity and then gives us a hearing. There is no level of culture that excludes you from the gospel, no level of education that excludes you from a hearing, Paul says in Romans 1:15-16:

"I am eager to preach the gospel to you . . . 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."

Paul says he is not ashamed, not embarrassed, of the gospel. The Roman rhetorician and orator Cicero said that even to use the word *cross* was beneath the dignity of a Roman citizen. It was so shameful, so humiliating. But, Paul says: "I am not embarrassed about the gospel." Why? Because the gospel is the power of God. This good news for all the world is God's power to

transform us. It is the power of God for salvation, and this salvation, as we will see, is a very broad term. It is not just a transaction. It is salvation viewed very broadly that involves both justification and sanctification, total transformation of the cosmos, and this is available for all who believe, Jews and Gentiles. Paul says the gospel is God's transforming power, because, as he says in Romans 1:17, in the gospel:

“. . . the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’”

We see the righteousness of God displayed in the gospel. We apprehend it by faith, and it leads to faith.

How does this opening statement in Romans apply to us this morning as we begin this epic series? There 800 full-length commentaries on this letter. Nothing in the Bible has been studied or written about more. Let me apply this opening line to us this morning in three ways.

Number one: ***Do not underestimate the transformative power of the gospel in your life.*** Whatever you think of the gospel, don't think about it as a transaction. I don't want you to think about it as an abstract idea or theory or good message or a word that we use. I want you to think of the gospel as God's transformative power, His awesome, breathtaking remaking of your life and mine and the whole world as is Paul's vision. Do not underestimate the transformative power of God's good news in Christ.

Number two: ***I pray for us to have a holy dissatisfaction.*** You may think that is a strange application. I want us at Kenwood this spring to become dissatisfied, not the kind of dissatisfaction that comes from seeing a creative marketing plan that stirs affections for something that really is diminishing value. It's a desire for change, to become dissatisfied. I don't want contentment with where we are with Christ, but to desire transformation, not to fear it, seeking gospel change and yielding to it. Change is extraordinary, and it's wonderful when it's the right kind of change. Change is wonderful when a muddy, polluted river is renewed, isn't it? Change is wonderful when a dilapidated house is repaired with volunteer labor and then given away to a family in need. Isn't that change wonderful? Change is wonderful when a life that is out of control becomes a life in control. Change is wonderful when vain ambition is replaced with zeal for God.

Number three: ***Let us together allow God's gospel to get ahold of us and draw us into mission.*** That is really the ultimate aim of Paul's letter, to see the world in need of transformation, to discover that transformation has been accomplished at the cross, and transformation flows out in active discipleship that leads to global mission.

J.I. Packer said: "When the message of Romans gets into a person's heart, there's no telling what can happen." I am reminded of Jesus' parable in Matthew 20:1-7 when He said:

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour (9:00 AM) he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour (12 noon) and the ninth hour (3:00 PM), he did the same. And about the eleventh hour (5:00 PM) he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?'"

For some of us, the clock of our lives is in the morning. For some of us, the sun has already come up, it's noon. Some of us are already living in the afternoon of our lives. Some of us are checking the clock and saying: "Looks like it's about the 11th hour." Jesus is going to come to us in this series and say: "Don't stand here idle. You, too, go work in My vineyard." Jesus says that is what the Kingdom of God is like: the transforming power of the gospel.

I want to end with telling you about just one life connected with our church, a life that has been transformed by the gospel in a very specific way. Scot and Cherie Stober from our church came to know Christ, felt His call to serve Him. Christ called them into the vineyard in the morning time of their lives, or maybe close to noon, they might say. Christ gave them a very specific assignment. He said: "There's a people group in Papua New Guinea who have no access in the language of their heart to God's good news. One of those languages, the Mato language, has several hundred people who speak it. God called them to spend their entire adult lives to translate the Word of God into their language. When they first finished the Gospel of Mark, the whole village came out dressed in their finery. They came out to the shores wearing their most ornate garments as a boat came down the river to them with the Word of the living God in their language, and they celebrated and feasted. Scott just shared with me a couple of weeks ago that they just finished Romans and the New Testament is coming out. But, here's the good news: the gospel of God is going out in mission. That is really where Romans takes us. I would like to read to you the Mato translation of this opening statement reversed back into English. I find this so moving—good news, even for the Mato people. This is how Scott rendered it. He says: "I am Pol. I am a person of Christo Jesus' work. Urana, the Mato name for God (which he had to invent because they didn't have a word for the living God) called me to become an apostle and chose me to speak forth the good message that comes from Him. In the writings, God's mouth, people wrote down in His straight talk that the good message happened. That good message speaks about His Child. On His human side, He was of King David's family. On His

side of God, God showed powerfully that He was His own Son when He raised Him up again from death. He is Yesu Christo, our Toxoranamata, our Lord (also a word he had to invent because they didn't have it. Can you imagine not having words for God and Lord?) It was He, it was Yesu Christo whose livers snapped apart for us and chose us to become apostles, that we might call people from every non-Yuda group to lift up His name and follow His talk. I pray that God our Father and the Lord Jesu Christo, that His livers would snap apart for you and that in Him you would have peace.”

God's good news for the world is still reaching the islands that Paul says were waiting for him.

Amen.