

Born to Win

Christian Origins #41 - Romans

by Ronald L. Dart

When you're reading someone else's mail, it's really easy to get confused. You don't know the players. You don't know the history of the arguments. You don't know the attitudes. Sometimes you don't know the story behind the punchline. You know how it is: In any close circle of friends, you develop a kind of shorthand in conversation. You have words, phrases—a jargon that enables you to say a lot of stuff with not very many words. Some very funny jokes persist among friends for *so long* that you only have to use the *punchline* and everyone around the table chuckles. Once in a while, somebody says, "What was the joke behind that? I'm not sure I remember that anymore." And someone will tell it, and you all laugh at it again like you hadn't even heard it before. That's friendship.

When we read the Apostle Paul's letters in the Bible, we're not only reading a letter written to someone else. It was written *2,000 years ago*, in another language, to another culture. Even in his own day, some people had trouble understanding Paul's letters, so it should be no surprise if we have *our* problems when we sit down and read Paul. While Paul was still around, Simon Peter wrote to some of his disciples concerning Paul's letters. He said,

2 Peter 3

AKJV

¹⁵ [...] even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given to him has written to you;

¹⁶ As also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest [*twist*], as they do also the other scriptures, to their own destruction.

So it seems Paul left room for misunderstandings even in his own time, and that shouldn't be surprising. I think, probably, the people to whom the letter *was written* understood it well enough. The problem was that any time a man like Paul wrote a letter, it was copied; and it was taken and read somewhere else; and then copies were made, and they were taken on down the road to somewhere else. And pretty soon people would read the letter and think, "What are they talking about here? I don't understand what he's saying here." And Peter suggests in his passage (this is Second Peter, chapter 3, you'll find this)...He suggests that it was because of an anti-Law attitude—a desire to do away with the Law that some people misunderstood and misapplied Paul's letters. But you know, in spite of everything, if you just relax and read Paul, the *core* of his message comes through loud and clear.

The late 50s (and I don't mean 1950s, I mean 50s) was a time of *ferment* in the early Christian church, and Paul wrote his three longest letters in a very short period of time right in the middle of this. In the last several programs, we've talked about First and Second Corinthians, which were written during a long stay in Ephesus. Now? Now Paul picks up things and journeys on to Corinth. And right in the same general time-frame while he is in Corinth, he writes a long and *fascinating* letter to the Christians in Rome. The letter, scholars tell us, was written about A.D. 57, and it's of special interest for a curious reason. The reason is that Paul had *never been* to Rome. Because of this, it's a more complete statement

of Paul's gospel than usual, and it's less *confusing* than usual for the *simplest* of reasons; and that is, these people hadn't heard Paul speak in person. He wasn't responding to a letter of theirs. He had intended to go there, he knew they had *thought* he was coming, and he had not been able to go. So he says, "I can't go right now. I'm going to write these people a letter, and lay out for them some of the things that I want them to know." And so consequently, he can't use his shorthand, he can't use the jargon, he can't tell the punchlines; he has to tell the whole story.

Now he wrote this, as I said, about A.D. 57, and while the other letters presume a degree of knowledge on the part of the reader, Paul doesn't do this here. There were at least five house churches in Rome at this time. We have no certain knowledge of how they were established. Chances are it was Jews returning to Rome from Jerusalem, who may have been baptized among the 3,000 that were baptized on that first Pentecost. However, these were not Jewish churches. They were primarily Gentiles in each of the churches; and there were probably about five of them, as I say, around Rome at this time. In these five churches, there was a mixture of Jews and Gentiles. It's remarkable, in fact, that Paul knew a lot of these people *by name*.

And so Paul sits down to write a letter to the Roman Christians, where no apostle had gone before. He greets the people he knows; and he says, say hello to all the people that meet with them in their house. He begins his letter to the Romans by saying,

Romans 1

AKJV

- ¹ Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God,
² (Which he had promised before by his prophets in the holy scriptures,)

It's interesting, you know: In the New Testament, there are two different words that are often translated "servant". One of them is the Greek word from which we get the word "deacon" [διάκονος, *diakonos*, G1249], which has to do with the idea of ministry and of service in a church. The other one is the one Paul uses here [δοῦλος, *doulos*, G1401]. It's the word for slave—bond slave, actually; not hired servant, but one who actually is *owned* by somebody. Quite a meaningful term, I should think, to the Roman Christians, where probably some of them actually *themselves* were slaves. The Apostle Paul introduces himself, "I am a *slave* of Jesus Christ. I am called to be an apostle."

Now, the word "apostle" [ἀπόστολος, *apostolos*, Strong's G652] in the New Testament is also used in more than one sense. In the one way it is used, it has to do with the original Twelve, who were supposed to be witnesses of Christ's resurrection. And it's clear in the first chapter of Acts there were supposed to be 12 of them—not 11 and not 13—because of their particular job, their particular task. However, the word "apostle" is also used in a broader sense in the New Testament as one who is sent by another with a message, like an ambassador is sent. And consequently, along comes Paul—*called* by Jesus Christ, a *slave* of Jesus Christ, *commissioned* by Jesus Christ to carry a message to the Gentiles. And so Paul is an apostle, and he writes...

Romans 1

AKJV

- ³ Concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh;
⁴ And declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, [...]

How was he designated to be the Son of God with power?

Romans 1

AKJV

⁴ [...] by the resurrection from the dead:

⁵ By whom we have received grace [...]

And in Paul's case what he means by that is, "He let me off the hook for my crimes."

Romans 1

AKJV

⁵ By whom we have received grace and apostleship, for obedience to the faith among all nations, for his name:

⁶ Among whom are you also the called of Jesus Christ:

⁷ To all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.

There's one little thing I should mention, I think, about the word "saints" [ἅγιος, *hagios*, Strong's G40]. It comes from the same root as the word "holy" in the Greek. I don't know why exactly we get off into some things are "holy", some things are "saints"; but the same root is used for both things in the Greek. And it means "to set apart". And it could be used as if you had a row of 12 chairs, and you took one of them and set it apart on one side for someone else to sit in. You have in a sense made that chair holy—that is, set apart. But as the word is used in the New Testament, it generally means set apart *for God*. And in the New Testament also though, you find several categories of people who were around Jesus. You found "followers", you had "believers", you had "disciples"; but the problem with these people is that a lot of them had rather superficial interest. They were disciples in the sense they wanted to study his doctrine. They wanted to evaluate his doctrine and analyze all the things that Jesus said. They followed him because they wanted to see the things he did. They were excited by miracles and maybe they got a free meal once from Jesus. And so it goes that people had all their various reasons. They *believed* him in some cases, but that belief wasn't enough to cause them to actually *do* anything about it.

But there was a fourth category of people. These were people who were *committed* to Jesus, people *set apart* for Jesus; and these people we call "saints". And that's why Paul addresses these people in Rome in the way that he does. He said,

Romans 1

AKJV

⁸ First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world.

⁹ For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers;

¹⁰ Making request, if by any means now at length I might have a prosperous journey by the will of God to come to you.

This was a desire. He wanted *very much* to go beyond and to go to Rome; and he'd hoped to be able to jump off on that journey from Corinth even this time. But circumstances had prevented it, and he knew it was going to take some time. Romans 1, verse 11:

Romans 1

AKJV

¹¹ For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift, to the end you may be

established;

I think he means, you know, more firmly established, organized, and directed.

Romans 1

AKJV

¹² That is, that I may be comforted together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me.

In other words, it's not that "I want to come in there and tell you how to run things." It's a question of "I want to be there so that your faith and my faith will meld together and grow into something even greater, and we can *establish* something in Rome greater than what is there now."

Romans 1

KJ2000

¹³ Now I would not have you ignorant, brethren, that often I purposed to come unto you, (but was prevented thus far,) that I might have some fruit among you also, even as among other Gentiles.

Notice he is thinking "Gentile" at this point in writing to the Roman church.

Romans 1

AKJV

¹⁴ I am debtor both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians; both to the wise, and to the unwise. [*I have an obligation to everybody.*]

¹⁵ So, as much as in me is, I am ready to preach the gospel to you that are at Rome also.

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God to salvation to every one that believes; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.

¹⁷ For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.

I'm interested in the fact that Paul, in this paragraph, says, "I am not *ashamed* of the gospel of Jesus Christ." You know, it seems as though this spirit that is oftentimes in Christians who start off living their life in the world, and then often are embarrassed to speak about it in certain situations...there's nothing new about this. I gather that it was just the same way in the first century when Paul was doing his work, and so that he has to say to these people (and actually affirm himself), "I'm not ashamed of the gospel of Christ."

Now, he's going to then shift his gears at this point, saying that we have to understand this faith—that that gospel of salvation has been delivered to the Jew first, but also to the Greek; and the righteousness of God is revealed in it, for the wrath of God is *also* revealed.

I'm not sure what pulled Paul's trigger on this, because he becomes *very* strong very quickly in this letter. He starts off in Romans 1 and verse 18 and says,

Romans 1

NKJV

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,

Now, what's interesting about this is that... I can understand in a sense that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against ungodliness and unrighteousness. You know, all of us live in this world down here below, and we have all been ungodly and unrighteous from time to time; and the idea of the wrath of God is a little spooky to us. But Paul's saying a little more than that. He is saying the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against this ungodliness and unrighteousness of men *who suppress the truth*. That means that they know. That means they have enough information and they didn't want it, and they didn't want it out, and so they suppressed it. He says,

Romans 1

AKJV

¹⁹ Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God has showed it unto them.

Well, now I know we all know that *the Jews* knew who God was. The Jews had the Scriptures. They knew God. God was in their history. But that's not what he's talking about. He's talking about the Gentile philosophers as well, because in verse 20 he says,

Romans 1

AKJV

²⁰ For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and deity; so that they are without excuse:

Do you realize what Paul is saying? He's saying a Gentile who never saw a Bible in his life is "without excuse", because in the creation of the world *everything that needs to be known* is there. Now, I know that you may want to argue with that statement right off the bat, because there is much in the Bible that you'd think, "Well, how in the world would a person ever figure that out?" Well, Paul's talking about the basics. He's talking about fundamental things that Men ought to know, and ought to know better. It's hard, for example, to find a society anywhere in the world that does not recognize that adultery is a sin—that doesn't realize that adultery and that sexual sins of this type are destructive to their society. Oftentimes, they have various taboos and things having to do with it to sort of *control* divorce, remarriage, and these things, because there's a recognition in Man of the enormous amount of *damage* that is done in civilization and in culture by adultery. C. S. Lewis, in his remarkable book *Mere Christianity*, argues that God has actually written into Man's mind an awareness of a difference between right and wrong. He makes his case very strongly, and I think he's right. And from the creation of the world, in all the things that we see, we see design, we see the evidence of the designer's hand; and in the process of studying it, looking at it, and thinking about it, we can come to understand an *enormous* amount about God. And God says we're without excuse. And then in verse 21, he makes this interesting statement:

Romans 1

AKJV

²¹ Because, when they knew God, [...]

There was a time in this person's life, in this philosopher's life, in these men's lives, when they were aware of God. They were aware that God *was*, that there *was* a creator, that he *did* make all these things; that he had a design, a purpose, and he was working out a plan. And when they knew that...

Romans 1

AKJV

²¹ [...] they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

²² Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools,

²³ And changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things.

You know, it's as though Paul is saying that there was a time when mankind knew God; and when they knew him, they did not glorify him as God, but rather turned instead and made themselves images of birds and four-footed things, and fell down and worshiped these things, and said these things are God. Why would they do that? Well, because these things made no demands on them. They made no particular requirements of them. They had no special expectations. And in fact, if you're going to create your own God, you might as well create your own set of expectations that God has for you—your own set of laws, your own set of rules, and all these things, right? So they did this. They created their own religions; and they turned away from God; and made him into an image like corruptible man, or birds, or beasts, or creeping things.

Romans 1

KJ2000

²⁴ Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonor their own bodies between themselves:

Well, of course. The whole idea behind having another God besides the *true* God is because the *real* God gets in the way of the things that you want to do. And down inside of each of us there are lusts, there are desires; and these desires can be applied in many ways, but God says you've got to put restrictions on yourself. You can't just have sex with any woman you come across. You should be married, and you should be faithful to your spouse, and you shouldn't take another man's wife. Fornication is harmful to a society; *many* things are, he says. And as a result of your lusts and your desires, you go out and create for yourselves gods that will allow you to do these things. Very meaningful in Paul's day, because probably not very far from wherever the letter was read, there was a temple that you could go in and hire a temple prostitute, and have sex in there *as a religious act*. So, since they decided that they would be their own law...

Romans 1

KJ2000

²⁴ [...] God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonor their own bodies between themselves:

²⁵ Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshiped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

²⁶ For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature:

²⁷ And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is shameful, and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was fitting.

Now, I have to admit that what Paul is saying here is not politically correct; because what he is saying here is that there is a "natural" sex, which implies that there is an *unnatural* sex; and what Paul is saying here very carefully, very clearly, is that homosexual behavior *is unnatural*. Take exception with Paul, please. Don't write me any nasty letters. All I'm doing is reading to you out of the Book of Romans. This is what Paul says. And he says that this type of behavior involves what he calls "vile affections". Now, if you don't want to be a Christian, if you don't want to believe Paul, and you want to live your own lifestyle, then do so. You can consider Paul as a curmudgeon, as just an old hyper-conservative who is looking at things the old way; and you can just dismiss Paul, pay no attention to

him at all. But if you're going to say that you're a Christian, that you follow the teachings of Christ, if you follow the teachings of the New Testament, if you're going to say that you walk in the way that the Bible would lead you, you've got to deal with this; because the Apostle Paul makes it very clear that he sees homosexual *behavior*—not necessarily inclinations, because we all have sinful *inclinations*, but homosexual *behavior*—as a sin. What did he base that on? Well, in Leviticus chapter 20 there is a *whole set* of sexual sins, unnatural acts, which God says are not allowed. Beginning in verse 10, for example,

Leviticus 20

AKJV

¹⁰ And the man that commits adultery with another man's wife, even he that commits adultery with his neighbor's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.

Bad news. Adultery is bad.

Leviticus 20

AKJV

¹¹ And the man that lies with his father's wife has uncovered his father's nakedness: both of them shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be on them.

Note the equation, to “uncover the nakedness of” is “to lie with”, which are euphemisms for “having sex with”.

Leviticus 20

AKJV

¹² And if a man lie with his daughter in law, [...]

Oh, that's *awful* Well, apparently it's happened.

Leviticus 20

AKJV

¹² And if a man lie with his daughter in law, both of them shall surely be put to death: they have worked confusion; their blood shall be on them.

¹³ If a man also lie with mankind, as he lies with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be on them.

This is all in Leviticus 20. And it's a *whole long line* of people you're not allowed to have sex with, and one of them is a person of the same gender. Now, this is in the Law of God. It's in Paul's *prime* epistle—the Epistle to the Romans—that Christians *shouldn't be doing these things*. So again, if you want to ignore that—if this is not a religious matter with you, but simply a cultural matter—then you're free to make your own choice. You're free to adopt whatever lifestyle you choose. But if you're going to look at the Bible, if the Bible is going to be your guide, you're going to have to deal with this.

Now, I know, I understand, it's not a simple matter to deal with this; because a lot of people who are homosexual in orientation say they really don't want to be that way, and they find themselves with a *real struggle*, as Christians, trying to escape the gay lifestyle. I know it's hard. But, with God's grace, it's got to be possible, for God would never lay upon us a requirement he was not willing to help us meet.

It's a sad commentary on human nature—not just in Paul's day, but it's just as true today. And Paul said,

Romans 1

AKJV

²⁸ And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, [...]

Well, you know, you can understand, I guess, *why* people are that way; because God comes along and tells you not every urge you get is going to pay off—not every sexual urge, not every urge to own or possess. I mean, you’ve got to understand this, folks, that if you don’t honor somebody else’s property, he’s not going to honor yours; and society is going to go into total chaos. But there’s something inside of us that doesn’t want to be told that. And whenever we decide we’re not going to retain God—who is the one who made us, who is the one who then has given us an instruction book and said, “Now look, folks, this is the way the *human being works*. I made it. I designed it. I put a brain inside of your head. I gave it an operating system. I made it to work in a certain way. I also made you so that you can figure out in a lot of ways what is right and what is wrong. And where you can’t figure it out, I’ve *told* you. I’ve given you a light for your feet, a lamp for your path, so you won’t stumble over things and fall down and hurt yourself [Psalm 119:105]. I call that ‘the Law’. And here it is. It’s not designed to put handcuffs on you. It’s not designed to put shackles around your legs. It’s designed to teach you the difference between right and wrong.”

Okay, that makes sense. But those old urges down inside of us are such that we don’t want to hear that sometimes. So here’s the consequences. Paul says,

Romans 1

AKJV

²⁸ And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, [...]

Yeah. You know, once you start lying—it’s evident; the Bible teaches this and it’s evident in experience as well—your judgment goes in the toilet. You’re not going to think straight. You’re going to have a hard time remembering what you told your friends so you can tell them the same thing next time. It is going to wreck your reputation; but worse, it’s going to ruin your judgment. To turn away from God, and to turn away from the knowledge, and begin to *deny* things that you *really know* are true is going to screw up your mind. “They’re going to do those things which aren’t good for them...”

Romans 1

AKJV

²⁹ Being filled with all unrighteousness, fornication, [...]

You know, “fornication” is a good, old, all-purpose, catch-all word. It has to do with every manner of sexual sin that there could be. It has to do with harlotry. It has to do with playing the harlot. It doesn’t have to do purely with homosexual sin. It has to do with *heterosexual* sin, with sex with anybody you’re not supposed to be having sex with. In our society, we seem to think that you can have sex with *anybody* as long as nobody’s complaining about it. That seems to be the idea. Well, if you give up on God, and you go into the kind of society we go into with that, there isn’t any end to it. After fornication comes...

Romans 1

AKJV

²⁹ [...] wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, [...]

Oh yeah, people start killing one another. A culture of death begins to pervade your society.

Romans 1

AKJV

²⁹ [...] debate, deceit, malignity; whisperers,

Telling stories about people behind their back.

Romans 1

AKJV

³⁰ Backbiters, haters of God, spiteful, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents,

³¹ Without understanding, covenant breakers, [...]

“Forget the contract, it’s just a piece of paper.”

Romans 1

AKJV

³¹ [...] without natural affection, [...]

And there *is* natural affection.

Romans 1

AKJV

³¹ [...] implacable, unmerciful:

And here’s the worst part:

Romans 1

AKJV

³² Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them.

What a bunch of losers. But we’re not going to be losers, are we? We’ll talk about what you can do to make a difference next time. Until then, this is Ronald Dart.

Transcript of a *Born to Win*
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