

"The Fifth Gospel"
Sermon Series on *The Fifth Gospel* #1
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First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC
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(Rm. 1:1-7)

Introduction.

Last week I read that at the beginning of the pandemic there was a joke that began to circulate around the internet. It went like this. Thirty days has September, April, June, and November. All the rest have thirty-one, except March which has about eight thousand!¹ It sure seemed that way, didn't it, with stores, restaurants, gyms, and movie theaters all closed, and parents and students having to pivot to on-line learning? It has been a long slog through 2020. And aren't you glad we were able to turn the page on the calendar last week?

But not everything was bad last year. I read where one writer suggested that 2020 was a kind of like a Global Sabbath. We all slowed down. Life wasn't as frenetic. Traffic hasn't been a problem. And families reconnected. I heard stories from various ones of you that your family ate more meals together last year than you did in the previous 10 years combined. And sales of books, the old-fashioned, hard copy kind, actually increased. What's the best book you read during the pandemic? I would probably have to say it was James K.A. Smith's book *On the Road with Saint Augustine*.

In Smith's book I learned that in late August 386 AD, at the age of 31, Augustine and his best friend Alypius were in Milan, Italy, where he was teaching rhetoric. While outdoors in a garden, he heard a child singing a song, the words of which were, "Pick it up and read it, pick it up and read it." At first, he thought the song was related to some kind of children's game, but he couldn't remember ever having heard such a song before.

Then it dawned on him that this was actually a nudge from God to open up the Scriptures and read them. He found a Bible, picked it up, opened it, and he read the first passage he came to. It was in the book of Romans where it says, "*Not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual excess and lust, not in quarreling and jealousy. Rather, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the desires of the flesh*" (Rm. 13:13-14).

Reading this passage, Augustine felt as if he was reading the story of his own life, and his heart was flooded with the light of God. Up to this point, Augustine had been living the kind of life depicted in the first part of this passage, and he felt that God was calling him to make a change. He completely turned from his life of sin, and he was baptized during the Easter Vigil on April 24, 387. His friend Alypius and his son Adeodatus were also baptized with him at the same time.

One of my favorite NT scholars, Dale Bruner, refers to the Book of Romans as the Fifth Gospel, and he says this letter from the pen of Paul is a compliment to the four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The reason Dale calls Romans the Fifth Gospel is because in the book of Romans he sees one of the clearest articulations of the gospel of Jesus Christ ever explained and the implications it has for daily living. For the next couple of months leading up to Lent, we're going to study the book of Romans – the Fifth Gospel. Let's get started.

Background. Before we actually delve into the first few verses of Romans 1, I want for us to take a brief look at some of the background material to the book so we can read it in context. Here we're

going to employ a "who done it?" approach to the material by asking the questions who, what, when, where and why?

1. Who wrote the book of Romans? Romans was written by the apostle Paul, who was born Saul of Tarsus. You may remember that Paul was a tentmaker by trade and a Pharisee by training. He apparently didn't know Jesus during Christ's earthly life, but he became a follower of Jesus while on the road to Damascus on his way to persecute Christians who had fled to that city. Paul is considered the greatest missionary apostle who ever lived, and he wrote nearly half of the books of the NT, including the book of Romans.

2. What is the book of Romans? The book is actually an epistle, or a letter. (Once a S.S. teacher asked his class if they knew what an epistle was, and after a long silence, one student reluctantly raised her hand and said, "Is an epistle the wife of an apostle?") An epistle is a letter, and Paul wrote this letter, this epistle, to the believers in Rome. In it he lays out a comprehensive explanation of the great truths of salvation which he supports and illuminates by quoting Scripture from the OT.

3. When was the book written? Most scholars agree that this letter was written while Paul lived in the city of Corinth in Greece during his third missionary journey either in 56 or 57 AD. He was making plans for a fourth journey, to Spain, and he planned to stop in Rome on the way there.

4. Where was the destination of the letter? The letter was sent to the believers in Rome. Next to nothing is known about the circumstances surrounding the beginning of the church in that great city, which was the capital of the Roman Empire. We don't know for sure how it began. Some have suggested that because there were those from Rome who were present in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, they took the gospel back with them to the capital of the Empire and began a church. Others suggest that Priscilla and Aquilla, who met up with Paul in Acts 18, were from the city of Rome, and perhaps they were the ones who actually started the church. We don't know for sure. What we do know is that by the fifth decade of the first century AD, Christianity had a strong foothold in the capital of the Roman Empire.

5. Why was the letter written? As I have mentioned, Paul was on his third missionary journey, and he planned to make a fourth trip to Spain. His strategy was to establish a base of operation, as he had done previously in other cities, from which he could launch his missionary outreach. And Paul wanted to build a relationship with the church in Rome for this purpose. Since he had never met the believers there, in this letter he wrote the content of the gospel he had been preaching for nearly 20 years. And you and I are the ones who benefit, in that we are able to read their mail, so to speak, and learn about the marvelous truths of the gospel which Paul explains in this great book of the Bible.

Having said all this by way of introduction, I would like for us to consider what these verses have to say about: 1) the servant of Christ; 2) the gospel of Christ; 3) the blessings of Christ; and 4) the saints of Christ.

I. The Servant of Christ.

Paul begins his letter to the Romans by introducing himself as "*a servant of Christ, called as an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God*" (v.1). The word that is translated "servant" is the Greek word *doulos*. It also means "slave." A *doulos* was a person who was completely at his master's disposal, listening for his master's commands.

At the time of Paul, the well-oiled economy of the Roman Empire depended on slave labor. But this was different from the kind of chattel slavery based on race we had here in America in the history of our country. Still, in the Roman Empire a slave served at the will of his master. Now, there was a law that no freeborn person, like Paul, could be enslaved against that person's will. However, a person could literally sell him- or her-self into slavery as an indentured servant for economic reasons, like if they were in debt.

In the case of Paul, even though he was a Roman citizen and enjoyed all the freedoms afforded to a free person, he considered himself a spiritual slave to Christ, and he sought to do his master's bidding. That was his goal in life. Do you think of yourself as a servant, a slave, of Christ spiritually, or do you think that God should do your bidding? Are there times when you try to twist God's arm to make Him your servant and ask Him to do what you want Him to do? How might God want you to reorient your thinking about all this in the coming year?

II. The Gospel of Christ.

Paul goes on to write in vv. 2-4, *"the gospel [God] promised beforehand through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding His Son, who as to His human nature was a descendent of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by His resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord."*

In these verses the apostle makes it clear that this gospel had not just appeared out of the blue from nowhere. Rather, it had been promised beforehand long ago by the prophets in the OT Scriptures. And Jesus fulfilled over 300 prophecies in the OT concerning the coming of the Messiah. A simple reading of the birth narratives of the gospel writers in Matthew and Luke reveals an insistence by the authors that the reader understand these things happened so that what was written in the OT might be fulfilled.

Paul says Jesus is the unique Son of God and Savior of the world. He wasn't just a great teacher, or leader, or healer. He was declared with power to be the Son of God by His resurrection from the dead, and through that miracle He proved to be Christ the Lord. This passage agrees with the Nicene Creed when it says that Jesus was fully human and fully divine, begotten by God, but born of a woman as well.

Paul says that this gospel was **promised** beforehand by the prophets. That means that the good news of Jesus Christ was not only predicted beforehand; it was also guaranteed. It was promised. What God says He will do.

III. The Blessings of Christ.

There are three blessings of Christ that are mentioned in vv. 5,6. See if you can find them. *"Through Him and for His sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith. And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ."*

A. The first blessing that is mentioned is grace. *"Through Him and for His sake, we received grace...."* Grace exemplifies God's love. It's a gift that is given absolutely free. It is unearned and undeserved. That's what Jesus did in dying on the cross for us. God didn't give us the punishment our sin deserved. Instead, He loved us so much that He allowed His Son to die in our place, pay our penalty, suffer our death, and bear our sin. That's grace.

B. The second blessing that is mentioned is a calling. *"...we received grace and apostleship to call people..."* The apostle Paul, and you and I, have been called to share Jesus Christ with a lost and broken world that needs some good news very badly. And we have the privilege of joining the Lord in His redemptive work of justice and the restoration of all things in the world. The Lord doesn't need us to accomplish His work, but He allows us the great privilege of sharing in it.

C. The third blessing that is mentioned is that we belong to Christ. Paul writes in v. 6, *"And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ."* Are you lonely today? Do you struggle with not having a place to belong? Do you feel that you're unconnected? Then the good news is for you. In Jesus Christ you can have a home with God, and a heavenly Father who loves, and you can also have brothers and sisters in Christ in the spiritual family of God. One of the greatest feelings in the world is to belong. You can experience that in Christ today.

IV. The Saints of Christ.

Finally, in v. 7 Paul concludes his salutation by writing, *"To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ."* Usually when we think of saints, we think of people like St. Francis of Assisi, St. Teresa of Avila, and someone today like Mother Teresa. They are people who have lived such holy lives that they appear to be untainted by sin in contrast to the rest of us mortals. However, the word that is translated "saint" is the Greek word *hagioi*, and it simply means to be "set apart," "consecrated," and "holy." It's a word that is used in the Bible to describe all the people of God, all believers, and not just the most pious of the followers of Christ. You and I who name the Name of Jesus are called saints of God. Does that blow your mind?

How is it that we are saints? After all, none of us feel very saintly most of the time. There are two senses in which the follower of Jesus Christ is a saint. **First, we are made "saints" by the work of Christ.** Because of Jesus' death on the cross on our behalf, our sins have been forgiven, we have been clothed with the righteousness of Christ, and we now stand before God holy in His sight. This is the redemptive work of Jesus on our behalf. You're a saint not because of anything you've done but because you have been made holy by the blood of Jesus. If you know Jesus, every sin you have ever committed – past, present and future – has been wiped away, and when God the Father looks at you, He sees the righteousness of Christ completely covering you.

But there is also a **second** sense in which we are saints, in that as followers of Jesus **we're now called to live like saints**, not perfectly but sincerely. Elsewhere Paul puts it this way: *"...conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Phil. 1:27). "...live a life worthy of the Lord [that] you may please Him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God" (Col. 1:10). And, "As a prisoner of the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received" (Eph. 4:1).* Paul tells us that we are supposed to live out our calling in a manner worthy of the Name of Christ.

When I was growing up, my family would travel to see my father's parents back in his hometown of Picayune, MS, every summer. Picayune is a small town 50 miles northeast of New Orleans, and I have such fond memories of visiting that place – swimming at the YMCA, going to one of the two movie theaters in town, and, best of all, getting snow cones at the Little League baseball field near my grandparents' home. I was either coming or going from that snow cone stand!

It was truly special whenever my brothers and I would go to Picayune, because my dad's story was one of rags to riches. He was the small-town boy who grew up in poverty but made it rich in the big city of Atlanta where he was a real estate developer. And whenever we would walk around town and meet people who knew my dad – at the Y, at Grady Thigpen's hardware store, or wherever, they would all say, "Oh, you're Roy Barnes' son? It's good to meet you. He's quite a man."

My dad was an important person in Picayune, and there the name "Barnes" meant something special. Well, you can bet that I was on my best behavior whenever we went to Picayune, because I didn't want to do anything to discredit the family name. I walked in a manner worthy of the name "Barnes," and I held my head up high.

You and I bear the name of Jesus. We belong to Him, and our calling is to live a life worthy of the family Name. That's what it means to live like a saint.

Conclusion/Application.

At the beginning of my message I talked about Dale Bruner, the NT scholar who calls the book of Romans the Fifth Gospel. When Dale and his wife retired from teaching at Whitworth University, they moved to Pasadena, California, where they now live just four miles from the wonderful library at Fuller Theological Seminary. Dale says it is a one-hour brisk walk. Most weekdays he takes this hour walk to the library and goes upstairs to a small seven-foot-square cubicle on the top floor at the far end of the library, and there he says he revels in the privilege of having eight uninterrupted hours in which to study

the gospel of Jesus Christ in the book of Romans. (He has been working on a commentary on this book of the Bible.)

Exactly midway on this daily one-hour walk to the library he goes through the campus of Cal Tech. And as he passes by the windowed rooms there, full of scientific instruments, papers, and laboratories, he thinks to himself, "Someday, someone here in these buildings will discover something like a cure for cancer and many other marvelous gifts to humanity." And then he thinks to himself, "Dale, you have the privilege today, just a half-hour away, of studying the single most important, transformational, and healing subject *ever*: The Gospel of the Great Invisible God's historical coming to earth in the person, words, and works of God's Eternal Son, the Lord Jesus Christ himself. So be grateful, Dale!"² And he is

You and I should be grateful, too, that we have the privilege of studying the book of Romans these next couple of months even as Covid-19 lingers on into the early part of the New Year. God has given us the best news the world has ever known in the gospel of Jesus Christ, despite the adversity we face these days, and it has the ability to change your life, just like it did Augustine over 1600 years ago, and also change the world. Thanks be to God!

¹ Taken from Philip Yancey, "The Longest Year: Reflections on 2020," <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/the-longest-year/>.

² Taken from Eerdman's Blog, <http://eerdword.com/2012/01/30/the-adventure-of-gospel-interpretation-how-i-became-a-gospel-interpreter-part-1-by-f-dale-bruner/>. Accessed on January 2, 2021.