

Michael McGowan

Romans 1:1-17 – *Grounded: The Gospel*

Preached at Trinity CRC

January 10, 2021

Romans 1:1-17

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—<sup>2</sup> the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures<sup>3</sup> regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David,<sup>4</sup> and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.<sup>5</sup> Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name's sake.<sup>6</sup> And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

<sup>7</sup> To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>8</sup> First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world.<sup>9</sup> God, whom I serve in my spirit in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you<sup>10</sup> in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you.

<sup>11</sup> I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—<sup>12</sup> that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith.<sup>13</sup> I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles.

<sup>14</sup> I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish.<sup>15</sup> That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome.

<sup>16</sup> For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.<sup>17</sup> For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

I don't know how many of you are aware of this...

But I'm *not* Canadian...

I'm American.

Aside from the recent 2-0 shutout victory of the US over Canada in the World Juniors...

There hasn't been much to take pride in being American lately.

This past week hundreds (thousands?) of protestors gathered at the Capitol building in DC...

Where congress was gathered to count the Electoral College votes...

And confirm Joe Biden's election-win for presidency.

These protestors were able to break through police barricades...

And interrupt the congressional gathering.

There was violence, vandalism, and a total disregard for peace and order.

These protestors were responding to President Trump's call to fight and "stop the steal."

These were hundreds of Trump's faithful followers...

Obedying the orders of their leader to fight for the cause.

We may not like their actions...

But these are faithful servants of their leader...

Pledging allegiance to Trump and his cause.

Paul—

In the opening of his letter to the Romans—

Identifies himself as a "servant/slave" of Christ Jesus.

A slave in these times was someone completely devoted to their master.

The slave was there to obey...

No matter the command.

They were there to pledge allegiance to their leader and promote their cause.

This opening line of Paul's letter is filled with controversy:

Paul is saying that he is a slave of Christ Jesus...

Loyal to *this* Lord instead of the other one.

During the time of Paul's writing (1<sup>st</sup> century), Caesar ruled.

He was the top of the totem pole.

Considered to be among the gods.

“Caesar is lord,” was the common refrain heard throughout the empire.

Paul is writing this letter to Christians in Rome...

Those living in the capital of the Gentile world...

The home of Caesar.

There were those in Rome who considered themselves “slaves of Caesar...” (Doug Bratt)

Totally devoted to Caesar...

There to follow their leader...

Representing and promoting him with all of their lives.

For Christians living in Rome...

It must have been like living among masses of Trump supporters...

Those who were faithful to their leader:

Holding *Caesar* high;

Hanging onto *his* words;

Looking to *Caesar* for peace and to provide for them;

And following *his* commands no matter the cost.

Paul's opening words are already posing a question of allegiance:

“To whom are you devoted?”

Paul says, “I'm devoted to Christ...I am Christ's slave.”

“How about you?”

“Is Caesar your master?”

“Or is Jesus Lord?”

This is a question all of us must wrestle with today:

Who is our lord?

Who is in control of your life?

Where do I look for peace and provision in my life?

Whom am I following?

Some of us probably do look to the government—

Thinking that they are the end all-be all of what happens—

But I would argue that more times than not today...

We hold ourselves up as “lord.”

If allegiance is measured by where our loyalty lies...

Then we have to confess that we pledge allegiance to ourselves...

We are loyal to our own interests.

It's seen in the way we view truth today.

For many people...

There is not a higher truth.

There is not a standard by which all other truth is measured (absolute truth).

Truth is whatever I believe it is.

Truth is dependent on *my* thoughts, *my* experiences, and *my* feelings.

“I am the one in charge.”

“I am on the throne.”

“If this seems or feels good or right to me...”

“Then it is true and I will follow it.”

“I will follow me.”

We struggle to submit ourselves to something above us.

This may serve us well for a time—

Gives us freedom of choice...

Makes us feel like we're in control—

But it ultimately puts us on unstable ground...

Never sure of who we are or what we believe...

Because it's influenced by culture, changing feelings, and consequences of our actions...

We flip and flop never landing in a secure place.

Always questioning our worth and purpose...

It leaves us lost and empty...longing for something else.

When we make something or someone else lord and center of our lives—

Whether it's ourselves, our family, marriage, relationship, sports, job, comfort, success...

No matter what it is...

When we take even these good things and make them ultimate things—

We place it above Jesus Christ.

And for us—

People created to live for and live with Jesus Christ—

This becomes our undoing.

When Jesus Christ is not our lord and master—

The one we're wholly devoted to—

We work against the grain of what God is doing...

We're opposing the way God is making things right in us, and in this world.

Think about that question this week:

To what or to whom am I loyal?

What do I spend my time working toward?

What do I give energy worrying about?

Where is my ultimate allegiance?

The message that Paul is announcing to the Roman Christians—

To these people living in a society where Caesar is king...

And loyalty and devotion to him is assumed and expected—

Is that **Jesus is Lord**.

The gospel (good news) that Paul proclaims is that Jesus is Lord...

And through Jesus, God is acting to save his people...

Calling them into faithful obedience.

Let's break down the gospel as Paul presents it in these opening verses:

First, Jesus is Lord.

We see this come out in the titles Paul uses for Jesus.

He refers to him as *Christ* Jesus.

When we identify the Lord we usually say, Jesus Christ (as if it's his proper name).

Paul is intentional here in reversing the order, *Christ* Jesus.

“Christ” is a word that means the Anointed One, or Messiah.

It has strong overtones of royalty. (NT Wright)

The Messiah in the Bible is one who rules over all other earthly rulers (NT Wright)...

Over Sennacherib (Assyria), Nebuchadnezzar (Babylon), Caesar;

And over all other leaders in history:

Over Trump, Trudeau, Putin, Kim Jong-un, Merkel, Uhuru Kenyatta.

All earthly rulers are subject to this one...the Messiah.

In his opening statement Paul says, “I’m a slave of the Messiah, Jesus.”

Paul also calls Jesus the *Son of God*.

This is a statement not about Christ's divinity here...

But another statement of his lordship.

The title “son of god” was used of emperors.

Emperors were considered god-like...

Hence, they and their successors could be called son of god.

Paul again is claiming Jesus' rule over all...

Challenging the idea that Caesar is Lord.

And if you don't believe that this is God's Chosen One—

If you don't believe that this is the Messiah—

Here's proof: the resurrection.

This man was killed and raised from the dead...

Now he is Lord over all creation.

Jesus Christ our Lord.

That's the first part of the gospel message Paul presents.

For us it means that Jesus rules.

It means that Jesus is king, today.

There is no world ruler or power today—

Or that will come in the future—

That is able to match God's king, Jesus.

There may be opponents who put up a good fight for a time—

There may be other religions or spiritual movements...

That we give ourselves to thinking it's the way—

But, in the end, they are all conquered.

There is one king to whom we submit...

And that king is Jesus.

The promises that God has made to his people will be fulfilled...

Because he is powerful and in control, ruling this world.

The second part:

Through the Messiah, Jesus, *God is saving his people.*

“The gospel is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.”  
(1:16)

“In the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed.” (1:17)

This will get worked out more in the coming weeks...

But for now, we can say that God's Messiah came for a purpose:

Jesus Christ came to bring salvation...

To conquer sin, death, and all of God's enemies;

And he came to reveal God's righteousness.

God made his people a promise that he would be in a relationship with them—

That they would be able to access God and his blessings—

If they remained faithful to the covenant.

“I’ll keep the promise I made to you, now you keep the promise you made to me.”

But his people didn’t.

So the Messiah comes to fulfill the promise that the people were supposed to keep.

God was faithful to his promise, even though his people were not.

Jesus the Messiah comes down in the weakness of our flesh...

And he lives a perfect life as one of us.

His perfect life and his death are credited to us...

So that now we’re right before God.

The righteousness of God revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

Jesus is Lord, and through him, God is acting to save his people...

Now the last part of the gospel message:

Calling them to faithful obedience.

The task given to Paul by God is laid out in 1:5:

“To bring about the *obedience of faith* among all the Gentiles...” (NRSV)

What Paul is talking about here—

The “obedience of faith”—

Encompasses the whole Christian life...

From start to finish.

For those who do not recognize the lordship of Christ...

It means submitting to Jesus’ rule and sovereignty.

Paul’s task is to call all people to come under the lordship of Jesus.

It’s a call to surrender all other loyalties—

Whatever you’re putting before him—

To make this one first.

Trump supporters first had to acknowledge Trump’s rule over the land...

And submit to his leadership...

Many times it being demanded of them that they surrender previous allegiances.

The obedience of faith starts with confessing Jesus as Lord—

Acknowledging his rule—

But it goes beyond this.

We may not like the actions of the Trump supporters at the Capitol building...

But you must admit...

They were obedient to his call.

He tells them to march on the Capitol building...

And that's exactly what they do.

He tells them to contest the election...

And that's what they've been doing.

They have been holding Trump up as the one they listen to, follow, and promote for years now.

We may not like the message, method or result—

I don't like the message, method, or result—

But they are a strong image of faithfulness to their leader.

Obedience of faith is a lifelong commitment to Jesus (Douglas Moo).

It is a heart, soul, mind, and strength kind of thing...(Deut 6)

Where we love the Lord by following and serving him with our whole being.

Not only do we believe with our brains and hearts that he came into the world as king to die for our sins...

We also believe it with our bodies and emotions by fully relying on him—

Relying on his word—

Rather than on our own abilities and assurances. (Douglas Moo)

This is the gospel message that Paul presents in Romans...

That he will unpack in the other 15 chapters of the book:

Jesus is Lord, and through him God is acting to save his people, calling them into lives of faithful obedience.

Our aim then, is to live under Christ's rule.

Some people may not believe it—

They may question it and speak against it—

But it doesn't make it any less true.

The reality of our situation is that Jesus is Lord over all creation.

He comes to save us and reveal God's righteousness.

There is a God that loves us so much that he came down to live as one of us...

So that we could know light and life in him...

So that we could find meaning and purpose in life by ordering our life around him.

May we all know the grace and power of God's Spirit as we live with Jesus—

Our Lord and Savior—

At the center of our allegiance and lives.

Amen.