

Romans: Vessels of Mercy Displaying God's Righteousness

Kenwood Baptist Church Spring Sermon Series

Pastor David Palmer

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TEXT: Romans 1:16-17; 9:22-24; 16:25-27



Good morning, Beloved. This Sunday we finish our spring series on God's Word to us in Romans. It's been a rich and wonderful time to sojourn together through this amazing text.

God's Word is written to us in the register of conversational speech, and I think it's important for us never to forget that. Romans has been impactful throughout church history. Martin Luther rediscovered the gospel in Romans 1. There are 825 full-length commentaries on Romans, maybe more than for any other document in the history of the world. Yet, this letter is not written to scholars. This letter is written to you. It is written to me, as a follower of Jesus, and it's written in a register of language that is meant for all of us to understand.

We saw last week that it was entrusted to a godly woman, a leader of a neighboring church, a woman named Phoebe. She brought it to a church that was probably a church of maybe 100 people. She read it, and she answered questions that people might have had. From there this text has been used of God. We believe as Christians that it was inspired by the Holy Spirit, and it has shaped the life of a countless number of people.

As we reprise the letter this morning, we are going to do something a little challenging. We are going to preach through the whole letter together in just one sitting. We obviously will not go through it verse by verse, but I do want to remind us of the whole thing.

As we start to reprise the whole, I want to ask the question: Why do we need God's Word to us in Romans? I want to submit three reasons as we get started.

First, we need God's Word to us in this breathtaking text, because **the gospel message about Christ is clearly explained** here. Many people have recognized that. We often think, "How do I share Christ with someone? How do I present the gospel?" A very helpful way to do that is just to remember the main four movements of the book of Romans. Sometimes people call this the "Romans Road." Paul did not call it that, but it's a way of understanding the movement of the gospel message. It's clearly explained.

The second reason we need God's Word to us in Romans is that **the product of the gospel message is clearly seen**. This is so important. The product of the gospel message is not just individual people going to heaven when they die. That's true, and we praise God for that. But the gospel message actually produces a community of people who are seen and recognized, people who love each other and are shared recipients of the gospel message and the mercy of God. They come from many different places and directions and are brought together in a recognizable assembly, which we call the church. That's what the gospel produces visibly in the world.

I like to tell people that when you see a local church, you see not just the church building but a church gathering. That is the best public evidence that Jesus died and rose again. That is better proof than any archaeological discovery. That is better proof than any logical argument. It's the gathered people that the gospel produces.

The third reason we need God's Word to us in Romans is that **the church's global mission to make disciples is clearly announced**. As Romans develops from the presentation of the gospel to the product of the gospel in the church, the real climax of Romans is to set at our feet the frontier mission that is yet unreached. We have looked at the map of Paul's own life and experience of traveling halfway around the Mediterranean world, the world that he knew, and praising God for the progress of the gospel from Jerusalem all the way to Illyricum. Yet, that's only halfway, and he longed for the recipients of this letter to say, "The gospel is true, we are part of the church that the gospel produces, and, as the church, we long to see churches in places where there are none."

These are three great reasons. How about three more—three more reasons why we need God's Word to us in Romans?

First, we need this text because we see in it that **the practice of mutual encouragement is clearly modeled**. How do we see this in the letter? We see this in the very fact of the letter. Paul writes to a group of Christians whom he has never visited but desires to see them and writes to them and shares encouragement in the opening section. He understands that by

being in relationship with one another our faith is strengthened together. We do this both by being together and by communicating with each other. Sometimes that is in writing.

Second is that **the goal of the Christian life is clearly described**. What does the Christian life have as its goal? We saw this in a stunning vista in Romans 8, the middle of the letter: The real goal of receiving God's mercy is that we would be steadily, persistently, and permanently changed over time into Christ-likeness. The goal of the Christian life is that you and I become remade into greater and greater conformity to Christ. Sin's power gets weaker and Christ-likeness grows. That's why being a Christian is so exciting. The old life starts to fade and new life takes hold.

Third is that **the content of Christian theology is clearly expressed**. God's Word to us in Romans has inspired so much theological reflection. All the great topics of systematic theology reference this letter because there is so much truth conveyed in Romans, sometimes in just a side comment. Romans reveals the great topics of Christian theology, of the doctrine of the Word of God: God is Creator, the person and work of Christ the Son, what it means to be filled with the Holy Spirit, the nature of the church, a vision of eschatology and new creation. All these topics emerge in this document.

Let's go for it and take a pass through the whole thing. The author Stephen King said that he spends months and years creating the first line of a book. He says an opening line should invite the reader to begin the story. It should say, "Listen, come in here; you want to know about this." I think that's a great insight. The opening sentence of Romans did take months and years, and Paul was fresh off teaching for 3000 hours when this letter was dictated. Let's recap the opening sentence quickly. Paul introduces himself as a servant of Christ in Romans 1:1:

"Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God..."

He is called a missionary, an apostle. His life is set apart for the gospel of God. Notice that very important addition to "the gospel." It's "the gospel of God." The gospel is not yours. It's not mine. The gospel is God's. It's God's announcement to the world, and the subject of the gospel, as we will see, is God's announcement about His Son. The gospel is not a means; it's not a tract; it's not a transaction. The gospel is a royal announcement of God the Father about His Son.

In Romans 1:2, we read that it's an announcement:

"...which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures..."

Christians need the Old Testament. There are 60 explicit quotations from the Old Testament in Romans and many more allusions, so we want to be clear that the gospel message does not come out of nowhere. The gospel is prepared and announced beforehand in the Scriptures. In

Romans 1:3, we read that the gospel is about the Son of God:

“...concerning His Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh...”

The Son of God is a descendant from King David, according to His human lineage. The world has to be reminded that the Savior of the world comes from Israel. Paul is unapologetic about that, and that was scandalous in his day. The Roman world thought that the Savior of the world came from Rome. But the gospel, God's gospel announcement, is that Savior of the world comes from Israel. At the same time, the Son of God is more than just a physical descendant of King David. He is in fact the Son of God, declared openly by virtue of His resurrection from the dead. He is Jesus Christ our Lord.

In Romans 1:5, Paul says that through Christ we receive two things:

“...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...”

I have been blessed to be a pastor for almost 25 years now. I love the body of Christ, and I often find that people are so excited about the first thing they receive from Christ: His grace and mercy. But we have to balance our joy in receiving that gift with the second gift. The second gift we receive from Christ is apostleship, the mission. We cannot be a faithful recipient of grace and then go home and live the rest of our lives. We receive forgiveness in order to be given the entrusted responsibility of the mission. What is the mission? It's *“to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of His name among all nations.”* That's the mission, and it's a big mission. That means our mission, which is God's mission, is to change the whole world through disciple-making—disciple-making of all nations.

This text challenges us early. In Romans 1:6, we read:

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

Is that the mission that you are on? Is that what you talk about? Is that what you strategize? Is that what you think is wrong with the world? Is what is wrong with the world that disciples are yet not made among all nations? That's what's wrong with the world for Paul.

We receive grace and mission, so Paul says in Romans 1:14:

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

I have grown to love the word “obligation.” It's an acquired taste. “Obligation” for the Christian is language that describes our sacred duty. That's what this means. It's what I am indebted to God to do. It is my covenant responsibility before God. It's a summarizing word for all the

positive obligations that are upon me as a follower of Jesus. It's not just the negatives: do not steal, do not kill, and do not commit adultery. Roughly half the Commandments of God are negative, and we need God to tell us, "Do not do that." But roughly half the Commandments are positive: love God with all your heart, go make disciples of all nations. That's the right kind of obligation we feel.

In Romans 1:15-16a, Paul says:

"So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. 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."

The cross for us is a symbol of glory. It's a symbol of honor. When we see the cross, we see salvation, redemption. There was a large cross at the men's retreat. As we were packing up getting ready to leave the retreat, I saw one of our members serving faithfully, and he picked up this big cross and put it on his shoulder. I could not see his face, but even from a distance, it surprisingly moved me, and I stood there and watched, thinking that's a little bit of what it must have looked like to carry the cross and the emotion that was felt when we see the cross.

In Paul's day, the image of a cross was a symbol of shame. Cicero said it was beneath the dignity of a Roman citizen to even use the word. But Paul says he is not embarrassed about that because the cross is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. In Romans 1:16b, we read:

"...for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."

How is that true? It's true because at the cross we see the righteousness of God revealed. In Romans 1:17, Paul says:

"For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'"

The cross displays God's righteousness and His glory.

How does that happen? In the rest of Romans 1, 2, and 3, we hear described the need of humanity for the righteousness of God because we are unrighteous. That's the first great conclusion to understanding the gospel message. It's a bit of bad news to prepare us for the good news. But the bad news is not so bad if it's the truth. Sometimes the truth that hurts actually helps. The truth of the gospel is that you and I are unrighteous. The truth of the gospel is that you and I do not deserve God's favor. The truth of the gospel is that we suppress the knowledge of God and get trapped in idolatry. We think we know what's best, and we go our

own way.

At the end of Romans 3, the gospel bursts out before us with the announcement that God has set His Son forward as an atoning sacrifice and that the sin of the world is laid upon Him. God in His righteousness judges sin and also offers righteousness for all who believe in the saving work of the Son. That almost seems like it's the end of the letter, but it's actually just the beginning movement.

The consequences of believing start to unfold for us in the second movement of the letter. In Romans 4 we discover that we are part of a new and ancient family that God started with Abraham, who is the example of an unrighteous pagan who is declared righteous by faith. In Romans 5 we discover that, through justification by faith, we belong to Christ who is like a new Adam. In Romans 6 we learn that, in belonging to God in Christ and having received the forgiveness that comes to us through the gospel, we are changed by the Holy Spirit, who starts to work in us and change us. We are no longer slaves to our old lives. There is a powerful force creating new life in us with new appetites and new desires. That's the power of the Holy Spirit.

In chapter 8 we see that, with the power of the Holy Spirit to remake us, we are sons and daughters of God. We receive the Spirit of adoption through the infilling of the Holy Spirit. We do not live the Christian life alone. Have you ever tried to do that? Have you ever tried to supply your own power source for following Christ? It doesn't last. But once we are cleansed and forgiven, we are filled with the Holy Spirit. The good news of the gospel is that the Holy Spirit moves in us, and we find ourselves with desires that we did not have before. Things that used to seem so attractive and appealing and satisfying that we went to them for comfort are things we now lose interest in. The Holy Spirit starts to work in our lives and confirm our adoption. That is God's power in our lives. At the end of Romans 8, we see that God is actively at work causing all things to work together for our good. He is working in and with the power of the Holy Spirit to conform us to Christ-likeness, and nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. That seems like it must be the ending, but that's just the second movement.

The third movement of the letter starts in Romans 9 and describes for us that the powerful lives we have belong to Christ as vessels of mercy. We see in this third great section the initial soundings of the call to mission. It's a mission that reaches into all nations. At the heart of Romans 9 is where the controlling image of our series—"Vessels of Mercy"—is found. This is not at all parenthetical to the letter but is central to it. In Romans 9:22-24, Paul asked the question:

"What if God, desiring to show His wrath and to make known His power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known

the riches of His glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—even us whom He has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?”

It's a daring question. What if it's really the case, Paul invites us to consider, that God was patient with vessels of wrath that were about to be destroyed? The patience of God creates space and time for a critical turn of events. God is patient like a parent is patient, like a teacher is patient. He is waiting so that destruction may be averted. How is destruction averted? Destruction is averted as God displays on vessels of mercy His power and His grace.

This image of a vessel that is changed from a vessel about to be destroyed to a vessel that contains God's mercy emerges from Jeremiah 18. There are many words and passages in Romans that come from Jeremiah, and this is one of the clearest and most powerful. In Jeremiah 18, God told Jeremiah to go to the potter's house. In Jeremiah 18:3, we read that Jeremiah went:

“So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel.”

Continuing in Jeremiah 18:4, Jeremiah saw that the vessel was spoiled:

“And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do.”

Some of you know all too acutely what it's like to feel that your life is being ruined. Sometimes it gets ruined by things that happen to us from the outside, and sometimes it gets ruined by decisions we make from the inside. As Jeremiah was watching, the vessel was ruined, and the potter did something that only the potter can do. The potter re-made the vessel in Jeremiah 18:4. As Jeremiah stood in that potter's house, watching him working at the wheel, he saw vessels about to be ruined and thrown out. But suddenly the master potter takes them and re-makes them right before his eyes. It's like the resurrection from the dead of the pottery. Then God interprets this sign act and says in Jeremiah 18:6:

“‘O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done?’ declares the LORD. ‘Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel.’”

In Jeremiah 18:7-8, He continues:

“If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it.”

If your life looks ruined right now, and it looks like it's about to fall off the table and smash and be thrown out, I have good news: God who is revealed in the Bible is not just the Creator; He is the Redeemer, and He is the re-fashioner of human lives. That's why we need this picture

before us: that the clay in the potter's hand can be remade.

What is the key? The key to the re-making in Jeremiah is repentance, the turning. We highlighted the definition of repentance. It's a fancy word that means "turn around" in Hebrew. It means "change your mind" in Greek. Repentance is defined in the Westminster Shorter Catechism:

Question 87: "What is repentance unto life?"

"Answer: Repentance unto life is a saving grace, by which a sinner, being truly aware of his sinfulness, understands the mercy of God in Christ, grieves for and hates his sins, and turns from them to God, fully intending and striving for a new obedience."

What are we talking about when we talk about repentance? That's Jesus' opening word of His preaching: Repent and believe the gospel. That's what repentance is in Scripture. It's seeing that your life is a wreck, hating your sin, then turning to God and seeing in Christ the mercy of God.

This scene in Jeremiah 18 supplies the imagery in Romans 9. Paul asked us to consider this: "What if it's really the case that God, the Master Potter, is remaking the lives of everyone who repents, even us whom He has called, not from the Jews only but also from among the nations?" The gospel changes us as we are filled with the Holy Spirit. It changes us as we realize that God's global mission is vast and broad. In Romans 9, 10, and 11, we see that the third movement of Romans is pulling us forward to embrace the reality that God's mercy is remaking the whole world.

In the last section, the fourth movement of Romans is living this out together in mission as the church. In Romans 12 we were summoned by the mercy of God to offer our lives as living sacrifices. This was a passage that I had loved before, and I grew to love even more this spring. Somehow, I had missed the fact that the first living sacrifice is Jesus Himself. Sacrifices are slain, but there is One who comes back to life. As you and I respond to the mercy of God in Christ, we offer ourselves as people who have in one sense already died and risen again. We walk in new life. We use our gifts.

In Romans 13 we love one another. We are not here to destroy society but to remake it by the grace of God. In Romans 14, we heard that we cannot let secondary things divide us. What a tragedy it is when Christians ignore or downplay the unity that exists in us as believers in Jesus who died and rose again. We get all worked up about our favorite English Bible translation. That makes no sense. Paul would not have understood that. We must keep the main thing as the main thing. What is the main thing for people who have received the gospel (the message of

the righteousness of God), are filled with the Holy Spirit to live in newness of life, and are brought together as the church, the recognizable presence of God in the world? The main thing is to go and make disciples of all nations and plant churches where there are none.

We saw that the climax of the letter in Romans 15 was the great celebration of what God has done in all the world by bringing us together as a people united in praise. The end of chapter 15 sits at our feet with the question: Will you support in a dedicated sacrificial way the gospel's going to people who have not received it? Sometimes we think that all that is being asked for is money. That's not true at all. Whether the gospel goes to the ends of the world is not dependent only on funding. Jesus said, *"Pray that the Lord of the harvest would send forth workers into the fields."* This has been one of my hidden prayers of this series: God use this letter in our hearing to speak to each of us, to give us a burden that comes from the Holy Spirit that we did not have before, and that the Holy Spirit will move our hearts so that we feel, "I am being asked to go to people and places who have not named Christ as Savior." That has happened here. It has happened multiple times here, and I think it's one of the works of Christ of which I am the proudest. I am praying that you would hear it. It does not always mean that you have to travel to another part of the world.

There was a wave of refugee immigration into Greece. In a small evangelical Greek church, suddenly from one Sunday to the next, over 100 people showed up who did not speak Greek at all and were not reached. During prayer at the end the service, there was a woman in the church who heard the Holy Spirit say, "I want you to learn that language, and then I want you to translate the services live for them." And she did. She did not have to go anywhere, but she had to stay and serve in the mission where she was asked to serve by the Lord.

In Romans 16, we had a roll call of the church. What a great list of names and a compelling passage. These are like the footnotes to the letter. We become good with names as believers: "I see you, I know you, and we are in this together."

The final breath of the letter is an outburst of praise. There are several of these doxologies interspersed in the letter. You cannot think about what God has done in Christ for very long without bursting out in praise. There is a bursting out of praise in Romans 1:25: *"the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen."* There is a bursting out of praise in Romans 8. And there is a bursting out of praise at the end of Romans 11:

"For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory forever. Amen."

The last outburst of praise is in Romans 16:25-27:

“Now to Him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.”

This is praise to Him—that is, God—who is able to strengthen you, to make you and make me strong. How does that happen? God makes us strong and resilient, gives us perseverance and a kind of faithful service that does not quit easily. God gives us this kind of strength, according to “my gospel” (the gospel he is setting before them) and the preaching of Jesus. The heralding of Jesus is the content of the gospel. God strengthens us as we hear Christ preached, as our understanding of the gospel grows, as we realize with greater clarity and depth and conviction that this message is an apocalypse of the mystery of God's will. God's will for the world has just been put on display. God had kept this in preparation and plan, and now it is disclosed. It has been brought to light, and it is being made known to all nations. This is what's really happening in the world, and this is God's command to bring the good news of His Son to all the world. That good news brings about this phrase that emerges for the first time in Romans: *“the obedience of faith.”* It was there in Romans 1, and it's there in Romans 16.

It's when you see that the gospel produces changed lives. That's how we would say it. The gospel produces lives that look different and not just different for the sake of difference. It's a difference in lives that causes them to look increasingly more like Christ. That's the goal. If we start to think about that, we realize that the world filled with people who know and delight and act like the Lord takes us back to the very beginning. That was the original commission to humanity. That's what God is doing in the gospel, and so we hear the delight in God in the end as the only wise God: *“To Him be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ. Amen.”* That's the ending. What a breathtaking portion of God's Word.

I said at the beginning that I wanted to mention three reasons why we need Romans, and I am coming back to it. We need God's Word to us in Romans because **the gospel message is clearly explained**. We are unrighteous. God has justified us by faith, filled us with the Spirit to live together in the church and to extend the mission. That's the message. As deep as the gospel message is, you can respond to it in faith after hearing it the first time: I'm unrighteous, God forgives my sin through the death and resurrection of Christ, He fills me with the Holy Spirit and gives me an appetite to live for Him. If you have never said, “I need that,” you can say that right now. The gospel message is clearly explained.

We need Romans because **the product of the gospel is clearly seen**, as it produces communities. The product is seen in our life together, and if the gospel is producing life together, that means we have to be people who love this work, but not in an arrogant way. Rather, if this group of believers is where God has called you to be, then be here and love the work of Christ here. Support it, encourage it, cultivate it, participate in it, and protect it from distraction; protect it from getting off track.

We need Romans because it announces that **the church's global mission is to make disciples**. If that's clearly announced here, then we have to ask not just whether we believe that, but where specifically are we participating in that. Who am I discipling? If you have never been discipled, then ask, seek that out. Discipleship is a participation in the mission. Where am I participating in the mission itself, whether that's a short-term mission trip or being called to an unreached people group. There are two very different but fertile fishing holes in the Kingdom of God. Bill Glass loves to say that the best fishing holes in the world are prisons. There are so many decisions made for Christ there. Another great fishing hole is in the children's ministry, because most people come to faith when they are young. It is so good to serve there, to invest, and to see the gospel take root and hold in young lives. I love watching the gospel grow in young hearts where the clay is still wet. When we preach the gospel to an adult, we often find that adults are like overdeveloped cities. There is so much in there, and we have to knock some buildings down. It's dusty and dirty, and we can get hurt, but it's rewarding to clear out a section and build something new.

What about the three bonus reasons for needing God's Word in Romans? If this letter models mutual encouragement, then that should characterize our lives. I am not great at this, but I admire it deeply, that is, the power of a handwritten note. Receiving a handwritten note really stops me. It's different from getting a text saying, "Hey thanks." That's nice, too, but does not have the same impact. An email with a short paragraph is nice, and it's easily executable, but a letter is actually a handwritten document. It comes out of the heart when we encourage one another in that way. Whether it's verbal or in writing, we should practice this mutual encouragement in our faith.

Romans clearly describes the goal of the Christian life as Christ-likeness. We seek and celebrate that together.

Finally, in Romans the content of Christian theology is clearly expressed. C.S. Lewis famously said that he found that his walk with Jesus was more stimulated by reading a book of theology than a devotional book. Some may think, "That's just C.S. Lewis; it does not apply to me," but it does. This is the same guy who wrote *The Chronicles of Narnia*, which are awesome, and *The*

Space Trilogy. Lewis said that in the introduction to a short book written by Athanasius of Alexandria called *On the Incarnation*. This book is less than 100 pages. It's a classic. It's a work of theology. Athanasius was instrumental in crafting the Nicene Creed and standing for the truth of the gospel in his generation. You might think you cannot read Athanasius, but you can. Athanasius' *On the Incarnation* is a very accessible short book, and C.S. Lewis said, "This book stirred my love for Jesus more than a short devotional book."

I want to challenge you at the end here. If this one-hour long letter has changed so many hearts and minds, then make it part of your habit to read a devotional work, but then read a more robust kind of theological work. If you need some recommendations, I cannot tell you how happy I would be to get that email. Ask any of the pastors or elders. Ask what theological book really stirred your love for Jesus. I think you would get some great answers.

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, praise the Lord. Praise the Lord for this portion of God's Word to us. My prayer is that we would live it out and be marked and known in the world as vessels of mercy for the living God.

Let's pray.

Father, we thank You for this morning. We thank You for this letter. We thank You for the triumph of Your mercy in the world. We give You our praise and thanks.

In the matchless and mighty Name of Jesus our Savior, Amen.