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The Gospel According to Paul Romans 1:1-7

Our family had a wonderful summer adventure that was entirely new to us. We spent seven nights on a boat in Southeast Alaska.

We cruised many miles, fished for halibut and silvers and pulled up 100 crabs in one day. (We only kept six!) We motored among beautiful blue glacial icefall, licked an iceberg, heard the sounds of whales spouting and watched as a mama Orca and her baby knifed through the waters.

Best of all, we were completely unplugged. No wifi, no nothing. We played vicious games of Cribbage and Pinochle (for the Tooneses, Pinochle is a blood sport!)...lounged around the table after magnificent meals of the fish we had caught and sat in the bow of the boat for hours as we cruised, talking, praying, reading...just being together. Rachel said she thought this vacation might have been the best one yet...which is saying a lot.

I remember earlier years when it seemed like every vacation, I returned to crisis. Now I return, slip into worship and delight in how smoothly things are running. So thank you church...thank you dear pastors and team...for making it possible for us to get good rest.

One of the things that continued unabated was your generosity. We completed our Beyond These Walls campaign in June. But now comes the hard work of paying our pledges to eliminate \$5 million of debt so that we can love our community as never before. I am excited to show you a slightly larger version of a principle payment we recently sent to the bank. It was a check for—(drum roll please—\$500,000! One-tenth of the way there. And in fact, more has already come in. Thank you for your faithfulness; I'll bring this check out again soon when we cross the \$ 1 million mark!

Okay, today we launch into an exciting—and somewhat daunting—sermon series on Paul's greatest letter—Romans. In the New Testament, all of the letters are arranged by length. Romans is the longest so it is the first. But it OUGHT to be first for another reason; it is the most important letter Paul ever wrote. It is his most carefully constructed theological treatise and it covers some very important and sometimes confusing principles about what it means to be a Christian.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul wrote, "I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food..." Well...Romans is a big piece of ribeye. And, beloved, you are ready. But it will require effort on your part. I can't drip this into your mouths with an eyedropper. I need you to sharpen your teeth and be ready to chew on some chunks of well-cooked flesh...and

I realize that for you vegetarians, that is a disgusting metaphor. Sorry about that. Talk to Paul!

This letter has had a greater impact on the history of the Christian Church than any other. Have you heard of Augustine from the fourth century? It was a reading in Romans that converted him from a life of lust and debauchery into that of one of the greatest of our Church Fathers.

More than a 1000 years later, a German monk who, ironically, belonged to an Augustinian order, struggled to earn God's favor. He wrote, "If ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery, it was I." His name? Martin Luther. But Luther felt trapped in spiritual bondage until his eyes were opened to the truth of the gospel found in Romans 1:17...which we study next week.

John Calvin wrote that understanding Romans was the key to understanding the rest of scripture. (And if you want to study Luther and Calvin where they lived, join me in June for our Reformation study tour to Germany and Switzerland.)

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was transformed by the study of Romans. Karl Barth, the most important 20th-century theologians, was transformed by the study of Romans.

I want you to know, I'm pouring myself into the preparation for this series including reading six commentaries; I'm taking this very seriously...and I hope you will, too. Will you? This could be as transformational as you allow it to be. Pick up one of these journals. Read the text daily, memorize key verses. And I urge all LifeGroups to set aside whatever you are studying and join with the rest of your church in this magnificent journey through Paul's *magnum opus*. This will be fun! And scary!

Today we dip our toe into Roman waters by reading just the introduction...in fact, I want to focus on just the first line. Listen to the opening of Paul's masterpiece.

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, 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, 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, To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

What's the first thing you notice about this salutation...especially compared to Paul's other letters? It is LONG! Those first seven verses I just recited to you...in the Greek, that is ONE sentence of 90 words. So why was Paul so chatty? Because...they didn't know him! Unlike the other churches to whom Paul wrote letters, he didn't plant the church in Rome.

Acts 2 tells us that there were residents of Rome in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came down, Peter preached his great sermon and 3000 were baptized. Maybe some of them returned and planted a church. Another tradition says that Peter planted the church in Rome. Whatever, it wasn't Paul! And not only did he not PLANT the church in Rome, he had never visited it.

So...unlike other letters, he can't just say, "Hey guys, this is Paul, your founding pastor. I have some things you need to deal with." No...he has to present his credentials up front: "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God..." In other words, Paul was Slave, Sent and Set apart.

First, Slave. "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus." In the Greek, it is *doulos*. *Doulos* should be translated "slave;" "servant" is just a way of softening a very offensive word: slave. The last few months especially, "slavery" has been much on our minds, hasn't it? Confederate statues are being pulled down, buildings are being renamed, monuments are being covered. Wherever you stand on these actions, I'm sure we agree that they are a reminder of the darkest blot on our national soul: the travesty of slavery. People kidnapped from their own land, shipped across the sea and sold into bondage.

Slavery was a brutal reality in the Roman Empire. Of the 500,000 population in 1st century Rome, approximately 200,000 of them were slaves; non-persons. For Paul to identify himself out of the chute as a *doulos* was an odd way to gain a hearing among a crowd that didn't know him, particularly since Paul was a Roman citizen, a coveted status in that culture. But that's where he starts. Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus.

And he goes on: "...called to be an apostle." Apostle is a churchy word that means "sent one" or "ambassador." A person specifically chosen, commissioned and sent on behalf of a government. Paul was on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians when King Jesus struck him down. He called him to be his follower and...to be his ambassador...his apostle. To go into the world with a very subversive message: Neither Nero nor any other Roman emperor was a divine son of God, as they claimed to be. It was the crucified and resurrected Jesus who was the one and only Son of God... who alone deserved allegiance and worship and obedience. Paul was an apostle for King Jesus.

Slave...sent...and set apart. Paul continues: "...set apart for the gospel of God." This is fascinating. Those words "set apart"...that is actually a Greek word *-aphorismenos*—from which we get another word quite familiar to readers of the gospels. A word that represented the religious enemies of Jesus. *Aphorismenos*... do you hear a familiar word hiding in there? Pharisee. The word "Pharisees" means literally the "separated ones." The Pharisees were Jesus' staunchest enemies and the object of his harshest sermons. They were self-righteous and judgmental and considered anyone, including other Jews, that didn't live according to their scrupulous religious rules, to be spiritually unworthy and inadequate.

But they weren't always that way. The Pharisees were formed 200 years earlier during a time of occupation by another enemy. Many of the Jews, including their leaders, were selling out to the occupiers, compromising what they believed in order to retain power and

influence. The Pharisees decided they were going to live their religion faithfully; they were NOT going to compromise to get along with their occupiers. They would separate themselves from the culture in order to live as obedient followers of Yahweh.

In other words, originally the Pharisees...the “separated ones” ...were formed for a good reason; they wanted to live holy lives in a culture of compromise. BUT what started with good intentions grew into a movement full of self-righteous hypocrites who looked down their nose at everyone and... killed Jesus.

Now...do you remember what religious group Paul belonged to? YES! HE was a Pharisee. Paul was one of the “separated ones” who tried to destroy Christianity in its infancy. But now, he tells the Romans, he is a different kind of Pharisee. He is “separated” for the gospel of God...he has been set apart for the purpose of proclaiming Jesus to the world.

Think about the contrast between “apostle” and “Pharisee.” An apostle is called and commissioned to move right INTO the world...into a broken and antagonistic and immoral culture...with the transforming news of the gospel. On the other hand, Paul was ALSO called to be “set apart;” to be “separated” into a life of holiness and obedience so that his message would be congruent with his life. His walk would match his talk. As John put it, Paul was to be IN the world...but not OF the world. Challenging, right? Well...it’s about to get MORE challenging.

Slave...sent...set apart...that wasn’t just Paul’s calling. That is OUR calling, too, isn’t it? Everyone who claims to be a follower of Jesus should be all three of these things, shouldn’t we. We are, first of all, his slaves. I love what Pastor Larry said this summer about that awful bumper sticker: “God is my co-pilot.” What a load of rubbish! What that really says is, “I’m in control of my life; my hands are on the wheel. If something catastrophic happens...THEN and only then will I turn control of my life over to God. But until then...I’m the captain of my fate!” A lot of us live that way, though, don’t we? Our life, our control, our money, our time, our decisions. We seldom relinquish control to the Lord in the daily things of our lives. When we need God, we will call on him... but, meantime, he can stay put over there... out of the way.

It doesn’t work that way. There is no such thing as having Jesus as savior but reserving the Lordship of our lives for ourselves. It is all...or nothing. That’s what Paul means later when he speaks of the “obedience of faith.” The ONLY terms under which we can experience the salvation and transformation of Jesus is surrender, utter surrender. He is pilot; we aren’t even the co-pilot! We are passengers! He is the Master, we are the slave. He is a GOOD Master...but he IS the Master. IS he in your life? Is Jesus your master?

We are slaves. WE are also sent. We may not be a “big A” apostle like Paul and the other eleven, but we are certainly “little a” apostles; ambassadors for Jesus, sent into a broken world with the good news. At the same time, we ALSO are set apart. Not in an arrogant way that looks down our nose...but in a way that says, “Even as I move into this world as an ambassador of the gospel, I will live in a way that honors Christ. I will not compromise. My life will be an example. My actions will match my words. No one will be able to point at me and say, “What a phony...he says one thing and does another.”

This is OUR identity. We are slaves of Jesus...we belong utterly and wholly to him; he may do with us as he pleases. And we are sent ones...apostles... FOR Jesus. Called to bring the message of his love into a broken and often antagonistic world. AND we are also set apart...called to live holy lives...not holier-than-thou, not judgmental, not superior...but consistent with the name of Christ we proclaim. It is a daunting task.

I will confess this feels particularly daunting to me right now. You see, Cyndi and I did one more thing this summer: we bought a house in the harbor. We had dreamed of this for a long time...but we had surrendered the dream. Houses are too expensive, too big and we were content in our flat. AND we had a Beyond These Walls pledge to pay. But the Lord led us to the proverbial worst house in a nice neighborhood ...a 1967 split-level that hasn't been touched in 50 years... and we grabbed it. But the next morning, I literally woke up from a nightmare and said to Cyndi, "What have we done? We are going to live in a neighborhood. I've never LIVED in a neighborhood. I don't even know how to do that." And Cyndi replied, "Well, you've been preaching about 'Beyond these Walls' for months. Now it's time to put your money where your mouth is. This is OUR "beyond these walls" moment."

And I can already tell it will be challenging. I am unsettled by how many people living around us already know who I am. I feel like I'm in a fish bowl! And I already know there are some who do not believe as we do; for whom my conservative religious convictions will be viewed with suspicion. So I am now faced with the challenge of how to love my neighbors...in some cases, very different neighbors...in the way that Jesus would love them. How can I serve them and care for them in such a way that I will be a good ambassador for my Master ... while still living in a way that honors my deepest convictions? How do I live as slave... and sentand set apart?

I have a phone app that talks to me when I drive. It says, "You have a call from John Smith. Answer or ignore?" The other day, Cyndi was riding with me and accidentally dialed my number. My phone said, "You have a call from Cyndi Toone. Answer or ignore?" Cyndi didn't like that. She wanted my phone to say, "You have a call from your sweetheart." So she changed her name in my phone to "Your Sweetheart"...and then dialed to see if it worked. "You have a call from Your...answer or ignore." So she edited her name to be Your_Sweetheart and dialed again. "You have a call from your-underscore-sweetheart." So she typed in "yoursweetheart" with no spaces, dialed again, and it said, finally, "You have a call from Your Sweetheart; answer or ignore."

Three times the word "called" appears in these opening verses. Paul has been called to be an apostle but later, we discover that WE have been called to belong to Jesus Christ and called to be saints. I believe the book of Romans is like the Holy Spirit saying to us, "You have a call from Your Sweetheart...the God who loves you and has a purpose for you. Answer...or ignore." I pray that our journey together through the book of Romans will be a chance for us to say, "Answer...absolutely...answer!"