Paul, Apostle of Grace – Romans: A Study

Acknowledgement

This study draws on a number of books, and commentaries, but is particularly indebted to one in particular, Paul Achtemeier's *Romans,* a volume in the *Interpretation* commentary series published by John Knox Press. This is done in part because "Bud" Achtemeier was a professor of mine and because I appreciate his insights on Paul's letter to the church at Rome. It is also done in the hope that some of you may decide to look at this commentary for yourself. The *Interpretation* commentaries are excellent works written by noted scholars, but they are not as "technical" as some other commentaries. They are designed for preachers and teachers, and they are accessible by any who want to do some serious study of the Bible. Our church library contains a full set of these commentaries.

Studying the Bible in General and Romans in Particular

When people study the Bible, they come at this activity from a variety of angles. Some Christians are driven by the feeling that they need to "know the Bible better." Some are merely curious. Some are deeply religious and reverent about the texts of the Bible, whether they know them well or not, and Bible study has a strong devotional slant for them. Others are seeking the right "formula" for a good, spiritual life. The list goes on and on.

A person's reasons for studying the Bible will have an impact on what he or she gets out of that study, and so I want to make clear some of the assumptions I bring to this study of Romans. I understand the Bible to be the unique and authoritative witness to God's activity in the world. As such it can be referred to as the word of God, but only in a somewhat indirect manner. Since it is a witness to God's activity, a witness to Jesus the Living Word, it is not in and of itself the Word. The Scriptures become God's word to us through the work of the Spirit. The truth we seek in Scripture is not a static thing contained on the page. It is a living, dynamic thing that speaks to us in our particular situations.

Neither I nor anyone else can tell you exactly what the Scriptures are saying to you and to the Church at a given moment. Certainly there are many things that can be agreed upon, that seem always constant, but there is no nice and neat formula. There is no exact, precise meaning of the texts that can be settled on once and for all. God is still speaking through Scripture, and so we need to come to Bible study with a certain attentiveness to what God may yet say.

Presbyterians believe that the Bible is a source of revelation, that truths about God, humanity, and their relationship to one another is revealed there. Yet Presbyterians (as well as most other sorts of Christians) do not always agree on just what truths are contained in Scripture. Much fighting has taken place in the church over the years concerning just what the Bible really says about marriage, about gays and lesbians, about abortion, about divorce, about relationships to other religions, and so on.

Along with the difficulty of agreeing on the truth of Scripture itself, there is also the problem or reconciling truths from Scripture with truths from science, economics, and so on. Is it possible for scientific truth to coexist with biblical truth? Are these fundamentally different categories of knowing that have little to do with one another? Does one sort of truth trump the other?

I don't have definitive answers to all these questions, but I do have a suggestion for perhaps dealing with them. I would like to suggest a slightly different way of coming at truth as we study Scripture. I'd like to shift the focus from finding out exactly what the truth is to the question of

how we live by that truth. In other words, what difference does a bibilical truth make in the lives of our congregation and in our individual lives?

Answering these questions will require us to enter into a conversation with Scripture and with one another. Certainly that conversation will occur as this class meets, but the conversation is much larger than that. It has been going on for centuries. Many other voices join with us in this conversation, the voices of Paul, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and scholars and believers of the present day. In this "communion of the saints" we will seek to journey towards the truth, to shape our lives and the life of the church by truth. Viewed this way, Bible study becomes part of a spiritual quest. Truths are important more for how they shape our living than they are for any abstract claims to know that this or that fact is true.

Paul's letter to the church at Rome is well suited to studying in this manner. After all Paul is writing about how God's grace in Christ transforms and reshapes lives and history itself. He is interested more in how one lives according to God's grace, less in whether or not we define our terms correctly.

The fact that Romans is an occasional letter, written by Paul to a church he has never actually visited, produces its own issues and challenges. Because it is not narrative or story, we won't be troubled with issues of historical or scientific truth. However, the fact that it is letter and not history or story must not be forgotten if we are to get the full benefit of Paul's words. As a letter, it is not easily broken up into discreet chapters or divisions. Attempting to study one portion of the letter apart from another will often lead to a confused understanding of what Paul says.

Because of this, I'd like to suggest that you sit down and read through the entire letter as you begin this study. After all, it is a letter, meant to be read upon its receipt and it's not all that long. If you have not read much of Paul's writings before, you may have some difficulty with what he means, but go ahead and read it through. Hopefully Paul's meanings will become clearer as we study, and you can go back and read it through at different points in the study as you become more familiar with his manner and style, and with his terms and their meanings.

Which Bible?

A large number of different translations are available, and the class will benefit by hearing from a variety. However, not all Bibles are created equal. I use the NRSV and consider it the most accurate translation available. Its predecessor, the RSV, is also very good. Many other translations are less word for word but still quite good, including the NIV and the CEB. Both are somewhat easier to read than the NRSV, although they do not attempt to be as word for word. The NIV does have a clear, conservative slant. There are also several Bible paraphrases on the market. Eugene Peterson's *The Message* is popular in some circles. Paraphrases, however, have limited use in Bible studies because they often decide what a passage means as part of the paraphrasing process. A more traditional translation will allow you to see the multiple interpretive possibilities.

Session I
Introductory Matters

Readings for this session:
Romans 1:1-13

Paul's Worldview

It is important to understand something of how Paul viewed the world to make sense of his letter to the Romans. As a Jew, Paul has a Jewish understanding of the world and of history. For Paul, history was the arena of God's activity, and he understands the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in terms of what God is doing in history.

Paul understands Jesus within a framework of Jewish ***apocalyptic*** thinking. (The term "apocalyptic" comes from a Greek word meaning to reveal, and it is used to describe anything dealing with how God brings this age to a close and inaugurates a new one.) The Jewish apocalyptic view saw history consisting of two ages. The present age began with Adam and is characterized by sin and evil. God acts within this age, but the age itself is not redeemable and will ultimately be destroyed with the establishment of God's Kingdom. This will bring about a new age that is good and where creation is once again aligned with the purposes of God. The new age is sometimes referred to as the "Messianic Age."

In stark contrast to this Jewish view of the world was a popular view that grew out of Greek philosophy. This view is called "Gnosticism," and it does not share the Jewish historical view of the world. From a Gnostic standpoint, history is of no real importance. What matters are categories of reality, with the major division being between a good, spiritual realm and an evil, created realm, between spirit and flesh, if you will. From this Gnostic view, the human being exists partly in the fleshy created realm of matter, and partly in the spiritual realm. For a Gnostic, salvation has nothing to do with a change in history. It is instead about escaping from the created realm into the spiritual one. In fact, the term Gnostic comes from the Greek word for knowledge, referring to the secret knowledge one needed to acquire in order to escape the evil realm of flesh and matter.

In his writings, Paul often uses terms which sound Gnostic, but Paul rejects the idea that salvation occurs outside history, or that the created order is somehow outside God's plans for salvation and redemption.

Paul takes the standard Jewish apocalyptic notion of two ages and adds a transition period between them. Thus there is the old age that began with Adam and a new age to come that will be marked by the visible rule of God. But in between these two ages is a present age which began with the resurrection of Jesus and which will end at the return of Christ. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians, this present age is characterized by faith, hope and love. In this present age those in Christ are transformed, dying to the old age and their own selves, living new lives that eagerly await the coming of Christ. The Church, Christ's body in the world, discovers the forces of God's new age at work among them, helping them to bear witness to and align their lives with the coming age. This means that the present age bears marks of both old and new, and it is the period of history in which people align themselves for or against the age that is coming in Christ.

Keeping this historical view of God's work in the world will help make sense of what Paul is saying. He is explaining his understanding of the faith, his personal doctrine of Christianity, but the letter is not primarily a doctrinal argument. Rather Paul fits his new life in Christ into the flow of apocalyptic history. And so he is concerned with Adam, Abraham, Moses, and other

historical figures. He is very concerned about the place of the Jews and the significance of their rejecting Jesus. This makes perfect sense because of the prominent role played by the Jews in God's activity in history. Paul cannot explain his doctrine apart from Judaism because of his historical understanding of what God is doing in the world.

Some of you may have already noted that a Gnostic worldview didn't disappear in ancient times. The notion of human life containing a spirit/flesh dichotomy, with a move away from flesh toward the spiritual realm seen as good, remains part of much popular religious thought. Over the years, the Church has repeatedly repudiated the Gnostic view of things, but its appeal remains strong. This view makes it easy to divorce faith from life in the world, and even from life within the Church. Perhaps in this study of Paul, we can more firmly connect our lives of faith to the movement of history and to God's continuing activity in history to bring the coming new age.

Outline of Romans (from Paul Achtemeier, *Romans,* pp.24-26)

I.	God's Lordship and the Problem of the Past: Grace and Wrath	1:1-4:22
	A. Introduction and Opening Remarks	1:1-13
	B. The Gospel and God's Wrath	1:14-3:20
	1. Universal Sin and Its Consequences	1:14-2:16
	a. Creatures' Reaction to Creation: Idolatry	1:14-23
	b. Creator's Reaction to Idolatry: Permissiveness	1:24-32
	c. No One Is Excluded from Judgment	2:1-16
	2. The Jews Are Included, Despite the Law	2:17-3:8
	a. The Law and the Disadvantage of the Jews	2:17-29
	b. The Law and the Advantage of the Jews	3:1-8
	3. Conclusion: Universal Sin	3:9-20
	C. The Gospel and God's Grace	3:21-4:22
	1. Christ and Answer to Universal Sin: Universal Faith	3:21-30
	2. Abraham and Intimations of Faith	3:31-4:22
	a. Law and Faith	3:31:4:12
	b. Promise and Faith	4:13-22
II.	God's Lordship and the Problem of the Present: Grace and Law	4:23-8:39
	A. Sin and Grace: Adam and Christ	4:23-5:21
	1. Present Grace and Reconciliation	4:23:5-11
	2. Adam and Christ: Disobedience and Obedience	5:12-21
	B. Sin, Grace, and Law	6:1-7:25
	1. Sin and Grace (Baptism)	6:1-14
	2. Law and Grace (Enslavement, God and Bad)	6:15-7:6
	a. Grace, Sin, and Bondage	6:15-23
	b. Law, Grace, and Bondage	7:1-6
	3. Law and Sin (From the Perspective of Grace)	7:7-25
	C. The Spirit and the Surety of Grace	8:1-39
	1. The Spirit and Flesh	8:1-17
	a. Flesh and Spirit: Law and Life	8:1-11
	b. God's Spirit and God's Family	8:12-17
	2. The Spirit and the Future	8:18-30
	3. The Spirit and Christian Assurance	8:31-39

III. God's Lordship and the Problem of the Future:
Israel and God's Gracious Plan 9:1-11:36
A. God's Grace and Israel's Rejection 9:1-29
1. God's Word and God's People 9:1-13
2. God's Grace and God's People 9:14-29
B. Grace, Faith, and the Purpose of the Law 9:30-10:21
1. Law and Faith 9:30-10:13
2. Proclamation and Faith 10:14-21
C. Israel and Her Future with God 11:1-36
1. Israel and God's Plan 11:1-12
2. The Olive Tree: The History of Grace 11:13-24
3. God's Plan Is Grace for All 11:25-36
IV. God's Lordship and the Problems of Daily Living:
Grace and the Structures of Life 12:1-16:27
A. Grace and the Community 12:1-21
1. The Structuring Power of Grace 12:1-2
2. Grace and the Christian Community 12:3-13
3. Grace and the Secular Community 12:14-21
B. Grace and the State 13:1-7
C. Grace and the Neighbor: Love in Action 13:8-14
1. The Neighbor and the Actuality of Love 13:8-10
2. The Neighbor and the Dawning Day 13:11-14
D. Grace and the Unity of Faith: The Weak and the Strong 14:1-15:13
1. Unity and the Problem of Self-righteousness 14:1-12
2. Unity and the Priority of Responsibilities over Rights 14:13-23
3. Unity and the Servanthood of Christ 15:1-13
E. Grace and Paul's Apostolic Plan 15:14-33
F. Greetings and Summation 16:1-27

Some Introductory Questions

Paul seems to understand salvation as an integral part of history's flow, rejecting Gnostic notions of salvation as escape from fleshy imprisonment. How do you understand salvation? How is it related to the flow of history?

In the opening of his letter, Paul adapts the conventional letter writing style of the day which identified the sender, sent greetings, and offered a prayer for the reader. Paul's expansion of this formula can give us some insights into his thinking. It's worth noting that Paul identifies only himself as the letter writer. In all the other undisputed letters of Paul, he names others who are with him, but here he mentions no one else. **Why might Paul have wanted this letter to come only from him, with no association to his fellow workers and missionaries often mentioned in the openings of other letters?**

Notice that in the first seven verses, the section identifying sender and receiver, Paul goes into some detail about who Jesus is, how he fits into history, and Paul's own ministry that has sprung from the Christ event. **Based just on these verses, what do you think might be some of the themes Paul will explore in the letter?**

Session II
The Wrath of God

Readings for this Session:
Romans 1:14-3:20

Important Terms

Gospel - This word literally means "good news." In Christian use it took on the meaning of a particular piece of good news, namely what God had done in Jesus. For Paul, the term is a kind of shorthand for the message of God's grace in Christ which he is called to proclaim.

Gentiles/Greeks - These words can be used almost interchangeably. Both describe anyone who is not Jewish. This distinction between Jews and all others is critical to Paul's thinking, for the Christ event has opened up grace and faith to all, regardless of their race or ethnicity.

Idolatry - Idolatry is the practice of substituting something other than God for God. While biblical examples often speak of actual images, Paul certainly knows that many idols are not actual statues. In fact, Paul will refer to the example of Adam, who seeks to be his own lord, substituting himself for God. This is surely the most popular idol of all.

Law/Torah - It's important to remember that when Paul speaks of "law" he is rarely referring to laws in general but to the law given to Israel by God. This includes the 10 commandments along with the entire legal code that was incumbent on all devout Jews.

Righteousness/Justice - Righteousness is an extremely important term for Paul, but it can be a difficult concept to grasp. One problem arises from the fact that the same Greek word is variously translated "righteousness" and "justice." The same holds true for other grammatical forms of the word such as "to make righteous" and "to justify."

The word has legal connotations. A just decision is a fair one, and so a righteous God might be seen as a God who fairly judges humanity. To be justified or made righteous would then be to be declared in the right, spared by the court. However, Paul seems to use the words in a non-legal sense. For Paul, God's righteousness sometimes seems a synonym for God's faithfulness, particularly to God's covenantal promises. To the degree this is the case, God's righteousness in Romans is speaking of God's honoring promises to humanity in spite of humanity's sin. Righteousness is a quality that is always working to restore relationship, and as humans are made righteous in Christ, they become more able to live in right relationship with God and with others.

Exploring the Readings

Paul is not telling the Romans a story; he is making a case for his understanding of the gospel. As a result, he employs a logical argument where one point is built on another and so on. Paul often strings long series of clauses together to make a point. This makes for sentences that go on and on and on. Translators usually break up the sentences to make them easier for people to read. Unfortunately that can sometimes obscure the line of Paul's thought. For example, 1:14-21 is one long string of subordinate clauses. Many Bibles indicate a break after vv. 15 and 17, indicating new sections. Yet vv. 14-21 are one long thought.

In the NRSV, verses 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, and 21 all begin with the word "for." (V. 20 begins with "for" as well, but the translators have seen fit to leave it out.) All of these "fors" carry the sense of "because." Paul Achtemeier suggests that it is helpful to insert a "why?" question prior to each "for." For example, between v. 16 and 17 we might parenthetically insert the question, "Why am I not ashamed of the gospel?" which v. 17 then answers.

Paul's letter to the Romans, unlike his other letters, seems to be a concerted effort to lay out his understanding of the gospel for people who do not really know him well. A centerpiece of this gospel is that our relationship to God is restored by virtue of God's grace and faithfulness, not because any effort on our part. Since Paul is so focused on grace, it may seem a bit surprising that he begins his argument with a long section on God's wrath.

For Paul, grace and wrath are closely related. They speak of God's faithfulness to promises made to both Israel and humanity. Grace cannot be understood apart from wrath, and so Paul begins his treatise on grace with a history lesson on wrath.

God's wrath comes about because of a disturbing act by humans; they have turned away from their Creator and given themselves instead to others. It's important to realize that Paul assumes that all humans must have something as their lord. That is part of our creaturely nature. (As the line from an old Bob Dylan song says, "You gotta serve somebody. It may be the devil, or it may be the Lord, but you gotta serve somebody.") By serving other lords, humanity denies God as its Creator, and so merits God's wrath.

In 1:14-32, Paul describes both the human wickedness that denies God as Lord, and the way in which God's wrath plays itself out. **Read this section very carefully, paying close attention to what God does in vv. 24-32 as a result of human idolatry. What does the wrath of God look like according to Paul? What does it lead to?**

What are some of the current forms of idolatry which are most popular? According to Paul, how does God deal with such idolatry?

What might God's wrath look like in our world?

Paul is rightly called the apostle of grace. He says that we are not brought into right relationship with God by our efforts but by grace. This focus on God's grace sometimes leads to the notion that Paul thinks it doesn't matter what we do. **Reading chapter 2, does it seem that Paul thinks our actions do not matter? Why or why not?**

Based on what Paul says about the importance of doing, do you think it is possible to live a Christian life without living in certain ways, bearing certain responsibilities, etc?

Beginning at 2:17, Paul brings up the status of Jews in particular for the first time, including the issue of circumcision, the sign of the covenant between God and the Jews. For Paul, no discussion about the state of humanity could omit the Jews. After all they have been made covenantal promises by God and were, as Paul says, "entrusted with the oracles of God." Yet despite the advantages of being a Jew, Paul paints them as no better off than humanity in general. **Why is this so? Why has their covenant not left them better off?**

Could Paul's reasoning be applied to Christians as well? How so?

In chapter 3, Paul's gospel bursts forth into his discussion of wrath despite the sorry state of both Gentiles and Jews. **What it this good news, and why do you think it appears in this section explicitly dealing with the Jews' relationship to God?**

Once Paul speaks of God's faithfulness which remains in spite of human unfaithfulness, he moves quickly to brush aside two possible objections to his line of thinking. Essentially, Paul is rebutting an argument still made, that if human evil and unfaithfulness leads to the realization of God's faithfulness and grace, then is that evil such a bad thing? If good comes out of our evil, then should we be held accountable for it? Paul rejects this sort of thinking out of hand. No slick argument will remove the wrath of God. Evil is evil and deserves God's condemnation.

Paul now returns to the state of humanity in general. 3:9-20 essentially concludes and sums up the status of all humanity, Jew and Gentile. (Paul quotes Scripture in vv. 10-18, drawing primarily from the Psalms.) **What is Paul's judgment of humanity?**

What do you think Paul means by his statement in 3:9, "…that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin?

At the conclusion of this section in v. 20, Paul raises a rather ominous note that will be developed more later. He seems to hint at some basic flaw in the law itself. **What is this problem with the law?**

Session III
Faith, Christ, and Abraham

Readings for this session:
Romans 3:21-4:22; Genesis 12:1-3, 15:1-7

Important Terms

Abraham - In Genesis, Abraham is part of the new thing God does to reconcile with rebellious humanity. In Jewish thought, Abraham had taken on mythic proportions by Paul's day. The rabbis taught that Abraham had kept the Torah completely, even before Torah was given. As such, the rabbis taught that he was justified by works. The choice of Abraham as the one prefiguring the new covenant in Christ is a bold one, as he will now claim that Abraham's relationship to God is based, not on works, but on the righteousness of faith which in Jesus is now available to all people.

Faith - This word is crucial for understanding Paul. It is often understood to mean "belief," and this is one possible translation of the Greek word. Paul's use of the word, however, usually means something closer to trust. For Paul, righteousness comes about, not because someone believes in Jesus, but because they trust in God through him.

It is also worth noting that there are two equally possible translations of a key phrase of Paul. In 3:22, Paul speaks of "…the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ." This could also be translated "…through the faith of Jesus Christ." The difference in meaning is significant. The second reading has gained support among many scholars in recent years.

Justification by Faith - (see note on "righteousness in Session II) As Paul explains how God overcomes the problem of human rebellion, the theme of "justification by faith" becomes important. While "justify" is a legal term and carries some legal connotations, Paul emphasizes the restoration of right relationship with God. Faith in Christ/faith of Christ is the way God reaches out and brings wayward humanity back into the fold.

Grace - Grace is what makes new relationship with God possible. Grace is the freely given, unmerited gift of God and is rooted in the character of God. The term originally meant favor or kindly attitude toward, but Paul develops a distinctly Christian use of the word where it describes the undeserved favor and love God shows humanity despite humanity's perpetual rebellion against God.

Exploring the readings

It is extremely important to keep in mind what Paul has said in 1:14-3:20 as Paul raises this wonderful new possibility of righteousness through faith. This whole discussion makes no sense apart from the awful picture painted in the opening discussion of human rebellion and God's wrath. It is also important to remember how crucial idolatry is to that opening discussion. For Paul, the central problem for both Gentile and Jew is in trusting things other than God. Both Jew and Gentile turn to gods more to their liking that the one true God. At some level, self-idolatry is at work here. Even those Jews who diligently seek to observe the Law end up trusting in their possession of that Law and their own effort rather than trusting in God alone.

Paul understands that as creatures, humans must have some lord over them. Their natural lord would be their Creator, but they have rejected God as Lord, and have chosen other things. God's wrath at this idolatry is expressed by letting the humans have their own way, a permissiveness on God's part that allows humans to sink into an abyss of their own creation. If

you have ever read *The Lord of the Flies,* you see the sort of picture Paul paints of the human predicament. God has simply allowed them to go their own way with disastrous consequences.

"But now…" Paul has the historical, Jewish apocalyptic worldview in mind as he writes. The dire picture he paints in 1:16-3:20 belongs to the old age, but now… **This question is perhaps too obvious, but what is it that marks the shift from the old age to "now?" What is it that moves us from then to now?**

Paul says that now God's righteousness has been revealed in Christ. This righteousness is not something totally unknown. It was "…attested by the law and the prophets." **Based on 3:21-26, what exactly do you think the righteousness of God is?**

The universality of sin, which Paul so clearly delineates in his opening discussion of God's wrath, sets the stage for the universality of the new thing God has done in Christ. This universality removes any possibility of boasting, and it is critical for Paul's notion of all being one in Christ. **Reading 3:21-30, what is it about this new thing in Christ that puts everyone on the same footing?**

In chapter 4, Paul turns to the figure of Abraham to buttress the argument he is making. Again we can see the historical perspective of Paul's thought. What is happening now is not entirely discontinuous with the past. God's righteousness has been at work throughout history and is especially apparent in God's dealings with Israel. Any notion that Paul simply turns his back on Judaism will find little support in his letter to the Romans.

Abraham is a crucial figure for Paul, both because he sees in him a model for justification by faith and because of the promises in Genesis 12 that all humanity will find blessing through him. Abraham also helps Paul begin to explore the relationship of faith and Law. (Circumcision is symbolic of being under the Law in this passage along with many other writings of Paul.)

In this section on Abraham, Paul employs a literary device we've already seen in chapter three where questions are raised and then answered by Paul. This was apparently a common Hellenistic practice reflecting a Socratic method employed in the classroom. As the teacher made points, the students raise questions which allow the teacher's point to be further clarified. Some have assumed that Paul uses this method to address imagined opponents to his view, but it seems more likely that he is trying to anticipate the sorts of questions an audience of eager believers would ask and then provide the answer.

As Paul employs this device, he addresses the issue of boasting raised in 3:27. **Why is it that Abraham has nothing to boast about before God?**

In 3:31, Paul states explicitly that the faith that justifies us does not overthrow the law. In fact, it upholds it. This raises the question of just how faith and law work together. **Read 3:31-4:12. Remembering that circumcision is emblematic of following the law, how does Paul relate faith and law?**

Paul understands Abraham not only as prefiguring faith in Christ, but also as an example of faith for Christians. We are called to imitate Abraham in his faithful walk with God. **Drawing on Abraham's example, how are we as Christians called to relate to the law? Where does obedience fit into the Christian life?**

In 4:16, Paul writes that our restored relationship with God "…depends on faith in order that the promise may rest on grace…" For Paul, faith is possible only because of God's grace. Only because God chooses to reach out to sinful humanity, seen first in the covenant with Abraham and now in Christ, is relationship with God possible at all. With Abraham, God opens the way for restored relationship through faith. Now through Christ, God opens the way for restored relationship to all through faith. **Why do you think God takes such an action to begin with? If we have rebelled against God, why not simply let us reap the consequences?**

If we have no room to boast, if all rests on the grace of God, if relationship with God is based solely on God's mercy and not any merit or value of our own, what sort of self-assessment does that demand? What about our religious activity?

Paul says that restored relationship with God comes about only by faith, that is, by trusting in the lordship of God. In Jesus, God shows that nothing will prevent God from being faithful, and God creates a way for us to be reconciled. **How have you experienced the graciousness of God that reaches out to rebellious humanity?**

What does it mean to you to be justified by faith in Jesus (or perhaps "of Jesus"), by trust in him?

Session IV
Sin, Grace, and Law

Readings for this session:
Romans 4:23-7:25; Genesis 3; Matthew 4:1-11

Important Terms

Adam - When Paul speaks of Adam, he is of course referring to the man in the second creation account of Genesis. Adam metaphorically represents all human idolatry. His attempt to "be like God" leads to broken relationship with God. For Paul, Adam's rebellion against God represents a permanent breach between humanity and God. All share in the rebellion of Adam. All seek to be their own god and therefore reject the lordship of the one true God.

Sanctification - To sanctify means to make holy. Holiness is an attribute of God but not of humans. According to Paul, when we exchange slavery to sin for slavery to God in Christ, we receive sanctification. Presbyterian doctrine speaks of sanctification as a process, with the Christian becoming more and more holy as he or she grows in faith.

Sin - The issue of sin has been in Romans nearly from the beginning, but as we move further along in Paul's letter, it is important to recognize his particular understanding of sin. To many, sin is primarily about moral failings. Sin is something we do. Presumably then, there was a time before we started sinning. Perhaps if we had tried a little harder we could have held it off.

Paul, on the other hand, understands sin in much more ontological terms. Sin isn't things we do so much as it is a power that can enslave us and even alter the world around us. There is no time in our lives when it does not do its work within us, and therefore no time before we became sinners.

Exploring the Readings

The opening verses of chapter 5 are well known to many Christians, though in my experience not necessarily all that well understood. Paul Achtemeier insists that understanding the coherent logic of these verses is helped immensely by including 4:23-25 with the first 11 verses of chapter 5. That inclusion, he says, produces a carefully structure literary and logical progression. He sums up the logic of Paul's argument as follows:

> Now that we have been set right with God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (v. 25) and hence are at peace with God through that same Jesus Christ (v. 1), we may, in addition to having peace, have confidence in our hope for the future (v. 2). But more, our present status in God's grace is such that we can even maintain that confidence in the face of adverse reality (cf. Abraham's "hoping against hope" in 4:18!). Indeed, God's grace is so powerful that even things that work against such confidence and hope only serve to strengthen it, since those who know God's grace also know that such adversity brings out patience (v. 3) and that such patience shows we can meet the test of adversity and meeting the test simply reinforces our hope (v. 4). The reason such hope is able to meet the test of adversity lies in the fact that the hope is grounded in God's love with which he has filled our lives, a love that comes to us through his Holy Spirit (v. 5). In its turn, that love given to us through the Holy Spirit is made possible by Christ's death for sinners (v. 6). Imagine, dying for sinners! It is unusual enough to die for someone who is good (v. 7). Yet it is precisely Christ's death for sinners which is the proof of God's love (v. 8).

> Since that is the case, we have nothing more to fear from future judgment (v. 9). If Christ's death means God made peace with us even though we were his enemies, surely Christ's resurrection means that God will save us now that we are his friends (v. 10)! It is just that friendship, that love, that reconciliation which we have because of Christ, that is the basis for the confidence we have in God (v. 11). (*Romans,* p. 91)

Romans 5 contains familiar verses about suffering producing endurance and endurance producing character and so on. These verses have even found there way into the secular world as a kind of proverbial saying. **Does Paul mean for his words in 5:3-5 to apply to life in general? If not, when and how are they applicable?**

Paul says that those reconciled to God in Christ were formerly enemies with God. The same sentiments are echoed in a question from the Heidelberg Catechism. Speaking of God's law it says, "Q. 5. Can I keep all this perfectly? A. No, for by nature I am prone to hate God and my neighbor." **Have you ever thought of yourself as God's enemy? In what ways might we still be described as enemies of God?**

It has been said that the ideas Paul expounds on in these verses are perhaps the best theological justification for the practice of infant baptism. **In what way do you see these verses fitting well with that practice?**

In 5:12-21, Paul attempts to explain just how it is that Christ's death has somehow produced reconciliation between God and rebellious humanity. To do so he contrasts two individuals, Adam and Jesus, as the pioneers of two very different possibilities for humanity. It is not necessary to view Adam as a historical person for Paul's reasoning to hold up. Paul views all humans as sharing in the sin of Adam. For him the universal existence of death confirms the universal problem of sin. All are indeed children of Adam, in the grip of sin and death, unable to do anything to save themselves.

Enter Jesus, who charts another possible course for humanity. The bondage to sin represented by Adam may be broken by the grace of God given in Jesus. Paul speaks of Jesus' "act of righteousness" and his "obedience" as the way that God's grace is revealed. **Exactly what is Jesus' obedience and act of righteousness? How is Jesus fundamentally different from Adam? (Certainly one is obedient and the other not, but there is more to it than this. Consider the question in terms of the primal problem of idolatry.)**

In 5:20-21 we again hear of a problem with the law which Paul will address further in just a bit. For now, he is interested to contrast the power of sin with the power of grace. **What does Paul say about the relative power of sin and grace? Why do you think Paul feels the way he does?**

As he has done before, in 6:1 Paul raises a potential question or objection to what he has just said, one very similar to that raised in 3:8. If more sin means more grace, why not sin more to produce even more grace? We know Paul won't buy this, but his answer is quite different from the one he gives in 3:8. Rather than condemning the questioner, Paul raises the entirely new issue of being dead to sin in baptism. **Read 6:1-14. What does Paul seem to mean by dying to sin?**

Paying close attention to the tense of the verbs in 6:5, what does Paul seem to say about the current status of those who are baptized? What about the future status?

As Paul continues to reflect on our new status in Christ, he raises the specter of two alternate forms of slavery. Notice that Paul clearly thinks we must be slaves to something (in more modern terms perhaps "in service to"). **Describe your understanding of being a slave to sin and of being a slave to righteousness.**

Paul continues the same line of thought as he uses the example of a widow being freed from the law against adultery by the death of her husband. Here Paul uses the Gnostic dichotomies of flesh and Spirit, but he does not use them in the way the Gnostics do. Rather than describing different parts of our human nature, Paul uses the terms to describe two different possibilities for our lives. The contrast of flesh and Spirit is the same as the contrast between written code and Spirit in 7:6. This raises the issue of the law once more which Paul now addresses directly. **Beginning with 7:7, Paul attempts to explain how the law can be good and still the instrument of sin. What is the problem with the law according to Paul?**

7:14-25 has been interpreted in wildly different ways over the years. One view holds that this is Paul's statement about his experience before conversion. The obvious difficulty with this is that in other places, Paul speaks of how confident he was in his life as a Pharisee. Thus others hold that these verses describe the continuing struggle with sin that goes on even for the Christian. The problem with this perspective is it seems to violate much of what is said in chapter 6 and also in chapter 8. Therefore, a third view is that Paul is here speaking of the pre-Christian experience, but from a Christian perspective. In other words, 7:14-25 is a continuing development of 7:7-13, describing the power that sin has over us even when the law shows us the way we should go. **Which view (or perhaps some other) do you find most compelling?**

In your own life, can you speak of a time when sin had more power over you? How have you experienced the dying to sin Paul speaks of?

Session V
Grace and the Spirit

Readings for this session:
Romans 8:1-39; Ezekiel 11:19-20, 36:25-27; 2 Corinthians 5:17

Important Terms

Abba - This is the Aramaic word for father. It is often said that the term is a child's familiar term for father, akin to Daddy, but that seems not to be the case. It may well be a slightly less formal term, but it was used by adults addressing their father as well as by children. Traditional Jewish liturgies often use the term for God, but it appears in the New Testament only three times, two of which are in Paul's letters.

Body - This word occurs several times in chapter 8, and along with the use of flesh and spirit, may give the impression that Paul thinks of bodily existence as bad and some sort of spiritual existence good. Nothing could be further from the truth. Paul cannot imagine life without some sort of body. Without it the person cannot relate to others and to the world, and Paul assumes that any future existence will be a bodily one.

Exploring the Readings

Up until 4:23, Paul had been primarily concerned with the problems of the past. He then turns to the new possibility that has arrived in Christ, but only at chapter 8 does he move fully to what life looks like in the present for believers. After describing the power of sin in chapter 7, he turns to the shape of a life for which sin has been decisively broken. As before, flesh and spirit represent the two alternatives, one a life under the law which is captive to sin, the other a life in Christ in which one is freed from sin's power. The mark of this new life is the Spirit. Those who have died to sin have a new life that is animated by the Spirit. It is not yet a resurrection life. That will come in the new age. For now, our lives are lived in Christ through the Spirit.
Considering what Paul says in chapter 8 and in 2 Corinthians, what does life in the Spirit mean for you? What is your experience of this new life of which Paul speaks?

Read the passages from Ezekiel, passages that Paul may have in mind as he writes. Do you think there is a corporate dimension to life in the Spirit?

What do you think is the significance of being able to call God Abba! Father!?

The contrast between chapters 7 and 8 is tremendous. Chapter 7 spoke of the overwhelming power of sin, able to turn the law into an instrument of sin and death. Chapter 8 is celebratory, joyfully proclaiming the new life in Christ, the presence of the Spirit, the knowledge that we are now adopted as God's children, fellow heirs with Christ. Yet that does not mean Paul expects this new life to be all roses.

To be a child of God in a world that rebels against God will surely put us at odds with the world. In 8:17, Paul says that being joint heirs with Christ goes hand in hand with sharing in his sufferings. Clearly Paul thinks that our new life in Christ will earn us some enmity from the world. **What form does that enmity take in our day? Do you experience it, and if so, how?**

8:18-30 should not be read in isolation from 8:17. Paul is not talking simply about garden variety suffering here. He is explaining why we should be more than willing to join with Christ in suffering at the hands of the world. Paul is perfectly willing to suffer because the presence of the Spirit assures him both that the power of sin has been broken and that the whole of creation will be restored. Paul understands that the creation itself has been impacted by the power of sin. For Paul, the power of sin goes far beyond simply distorting the human creature. Creation, though an innocent bystander, has been caught up in human sin. As God says to Adam in the garden, "Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you." (Genesis 3:17-18)

Perhaps it is a bit much for modern minds to imagine God cursing the earth because of human sin. **Yet if we look at the world around us, what evidence can we see that human sinfulness does indeed curse the earth?**

Paul speaks of a yet to come redemption of creation and of our bodies. Remember, Paul thinks of salvation in historical, apocalyptic terms. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus brings an old age to a close, defeating the powers of that age. His resurrection and the gift of the Spirit are clear signs of an age to come, but that age has not yet arrived. And so now, we live in a kind of transition zone in which we must wait, but we wait with hope. **What is it that allows the Christian to have a hope that waits with patience?**

If we think of prayer as communication with God, how does the Spirit's role in prayer contribute to Christian hope?

Why is it that the Spirit must teach us how to pray? What is wrong with our prayer life minus the Spirit?

In 8:28-30, Paul raises the issue of predestination. It's important for our purposes not to saddle Paul's thinking with all the later doctrinal innovations and disputes surrounding this term. We need to instead explore what Paul means when he uses the term. It is worth noting that Paul raises the idea of predestination within a discussion of Christian hope. There is nothing in Paul's words that directly addresses a "Who gets saved, who doesn't?" question. Rather Paul is explaining why he is confident about the future. **How might predestination be considered a ground for hope?**

"What then are we to say about these things" seems to refer not just the verses immediately preceding the question, but also to the whole of chapter 8. 8:31-39 is the soaring conclusion to Paul's description of the life those in Christ now experience.

It is worth noting that deciding which of Paul's sentences are questions and which are statements is not an exact science. The Greek of Paul's day was written without any marks of punctuation, and so translators must use other cues to decide where questions are or aren't. For example, the NRSV translates 8:33-37 as follows:

> Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. [34]Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. [35]Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? [36]As it

is written, “For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.” [37]No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

I personally prefer a slightly different translation, which makes all the passage a series of questions answered with the “No” of v. 37 as follows:

Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? Will it be the God who justifies? [34]Who is to condemn? Will it be Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us? [35]Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? [36]As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.” [37]No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

Regardless of the translation, Paul’s point remains clear. Assured of God’s love by the Spirit, nothing frightens Paul. All powers are piddling next to God, and God has chosen to reconcile us to Godself. Verses 38-39 express Paul’s complete confidence in God’s love in Christ. **Considering what Paul says at the close of chapter 8, what do you make of the rather popular notion that suffering is a sign of God’s displeasure or absence?**

How do you experience hope and confidence in the face of difficulty or suffering?

Session VI
What about Israel?

Readings for this session:
Romans 9:1-10:21; Matthew 3:7-10

Exploring the Readings

It is extremely important in the next two sessions to keep in mind the issues Paul is actually addressing. His concern is with Israel, the chosen people. He is not discussing the fate of particular individuals, Jewish or otherwise. As we interpret these verses, we need to honor Paul's purposes and not force him to address a different issue of interest to us.

The problem of the Jews' rejection of their own Messiah is a big one for Paul. This is not simply because Paul is Jewish and has an emotional connection to his kinfolk, though certainly that is true. There is also the issue of the reliability of God's promises. Paul has been clear that the new life in faith through Christ is a fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham. If the descendants of Abraham are left out of this fulfillment, have God's promises failed?

In 9:4-5, Paul expands greatly on the "advantages" of the Jews from what he has stated in 3:1-2. If anything, this impressive list of adoption, glory, covenants, the law, and so on heightens the sense that something has gone terribly wrong in Israel rejectinf God's righteousness expressed in Jesus. Yet Paul immediately asserts in v. 6 that the word of God has not failed. **Why does Paul feel this is the case?**

Paul's words in 9:6-13 emphasize that Israel has always been the product of God's gracious choosing, not of mere biology or of human effort. But of course this statement raises the issue of whether or not God is capricious, or worse, unjust. The answer to this question in v. 15 is interesting for what is missing. Given the preceding example of loving Jacob and hating Esau, we might expect a similar sort of balance or symmetry, but it is not there. Instead the parallel verses speak of God's mercy and God's compassion. This lack of symmetry will continue in the verses that follow and bears noticing.

In verse 19 Paul continues his discussion with an imagined questioner who wonders if this isn't still somehow unfair. The answer Paul gives is not at all unlike the answer Job receives from the whirlwind in Job 38:1-40:2. "But who indeed are you, a human being, to argue with God?" **What is your initial reaction to such a response?**

Why do you think many people find these verses somewhat offensive?

Is the difficulty we have with answers like this one in 9:20 as sign of a continued tendency toward idolatry, an unwillingness to trust God's judgments over our own?

In what sense might it be good news that God is the potter who will do whatever God will with the clay?

Beginning at 9:30, Paul begins to delve into Israel's lack of faith. The context for this discussion is what has just been said. In mercy, God has expanded the Chosen people well beyond the confines of Israel. Following the example of Abraham, all who trust in God through Christ are now part of the Covenant people. This fulfills the original intent of Abraham and Israel's being chosen in the first place.

Interestingly, it has proven much more difficult for Israel, despite her long experience of God's gracious choice, despite all the advantages enumerated in 9:4-5, to embrace God's expansion of the Chosen people in Jesus. Strangely enough, this did not come about as the result of any irreligiousness on Israel's part. Paul says explicitly in 10:2 that they have a zeal for God. Their possession of the law and God's covenant has produced an extremely religious people who are very serious about their relationship with God. Yet their very religiousness seems to have become a problem. **Keeping in mind the problem of idolatry which Paul says is fundamentally the root of broken relationship with God (see 1:18-32), how is it that being religious ends up being a problem for Israel? (In some ways this problem parallels the problem of the law being used by sin.)**

Paul speaks of the religiousness of Israel in 9:31 when he says that the Israel did strive for righteousness (right relationship with God) "that is based on the law." He sees this at the root of their "stumbling." (The Greek word is the basis of our word "scandalize." There's a sense in which Israel has been scandalized by what God has done in Christ.) Whenever the subject of the law not giving righteousness comes up, there has been a tendency over the years to think Paul is talking about the near impossibility of keeping every little rule and regulation in the huge Jewish law code. But that seems not to be Paul's concern at all. **If the problem of striving for righteous based on the law has nothing to do with the difficulty of keeping this law, why does the law end up being such a stumbling block for Israel?**

In light of your answers to the two previous questions, how might "religiousness" still pose a problem with regards to a restored relationship with God based on trusting in God's righteousness and grace?

In 10:5ff Paul quotes first from Leviticus 18:5 and then employs a paraphrase of Deuteronomy 30:12-14. Paul here gives us something known as "midrash," a typical form of rabbinic interpretation which Jesus himself employs in some gospel accounts. (Your Bible's version of Dt. 30:12-14 will likely look very different from Paul's quote, but there are known texts that come very close to Paul's words.) In Paul's midrash, these "words of Moses" which originally spoke of the law itself, now speak of the law as it is embodied and fulfilled in Jesus. By this midrash the books of Moses now proclaim the same gospel Paul proclaims. Trusting God's righteousness in Jesus brings people into relationship with God (saves them) whether they are Jew or Gentile.

Paul speaks of this new relationship coming about through actions of heart and lips. Paul's words have sometimes been taken to mean that faith is a simple matter of believing in Jesus and saying so, but that doesn't do justice to the words Paul uses here. The word translated "believe" in 10:9 and 10:10 comes from the same root word that is translated faith in other places. As noted earlier in this study, this word means much more than "believe." It is about trust. Perhaps these verses might be better understood if the phrase "believe in your

heart" was translated "trust with all your heart." **With this in mind, what does it mean to believe/trust with your heart and confess with your lips? How do you understand this working itself out in your life?**

Notice in 10:9 that there is a very specific content to the confession and belief/trust Paul is speaking about. You must confess that he is Lord (with all the implications that implies). And you don't simply believe in Jesus but trust that "God raised him from the dead." **Why do you think Paul focuses on trusting that God raised Jesus? Why is this so important to him?**

In 10:14ff. Paul speaks of the compulsion on him to proclaim the gospel. Notice the premium he puts on hearing. Paul comes from "the people of the book," and he finds Christ boldly proclaimed in the Hebrew Scriptures, yet he says that faith comes through what is heard. Yet not all have welcomed the gospel he has to proclaim. That, after all, is the issue Paul is wrestling with, the Jewish rejection of Jesus. **Given all this, what might Paul think about the responsibility of the hearer? What responsibilities are upon us as listeners to Christian proclamation? Is there such a thing as Christian listening?**

Session VII
Israel's Inclusion

Readings for this session:
Romans 11:1-36

Important Terms

Elijah - Elijah was a famous prophet from the northern kingdom of Israel around 860 BC. (The kingdom David had built split following Solomon's death. Israel was in the north with Samaria as its capital and Judah in the south with Jerusalem as its capital.) This was a time of great syncretism in Israel when the worship of other god's mixed with worship of Yahweh. Paul mentions the time when Elijah had defeated the prophets of Baal in a public competition, but then had to flee in fear because of death threats by Queen Jezebel. In his depression, he complains to God that there are no faithful people left. (See 1 Kings 18-19)

Elect - Paul uses the term "elect" to describe those who have been chosen by God. Later Christian thinkers would develop a Doctrine of Election which is the fancy name for predestination. Predestination has been and is understood in a number of different ways. Clearly Paul does speak of God choosing to harden the hearts of some; however, it doesn't seem that Paul can ever be made to speak of election for damnation. In Paul, election always serves the end of redemption.

Harden - Paul speaks of some Jews being "hardened" and of a "hardening" coming upon part of Israel. Paul means a hardening of the heart. For Paul the heart is the seat of emotions, will, etc. Though he doesn't actually say it, the assumption is that God hardened their hearts. The same thing happened to Pharaoh in the Exodus story, something Paul mentions in 9:17.

Remnant - This term is used a number of times in the Old Testament to speak of God's remaining faithful to faithless Israel. The idea is that when Israel turns her back on God, God nonetheless preserves a small number so that the covenant promises will not fail, even though the covenant people have failed. Paul picks up this theme (its only New Testament use) in his discussion of how God will deal with Israel. Incidentally, you occasionally hear people refer to some group as a "righteous remnant" reflecting this biblical idea.

Exploring the Readings

In our readings for today, Paul will essentially conclude his argument with the final inclusion of the Jews. Paul has begun by putting Jew and Gentile on the same footing in terms of judgment, of all being under the power of sin. Now he will end with all being included in God's redemption in Christ. It is important to keep in mind that Paul is wrestling with the fate of Israel and Gentiles as a people. Much that Paul says cannot easily be applied to notions of personal salvation. Paul is looking at how God's grace works in history.

Paul continues from the disobedience of Israel discussed in chapter 10, where Israel has heard the gospel proclaimed but nonetheless turned from it. This raises the question with which Paul opens chapter 11. "I ask, then, has God rejected his people?" Paul gives a resounding "By no means!" and then goes on to remind his readers that he is an Israelite.
How does Paul's Jewish-ness show that God has not rejected Israel?

As Paul ponders Israel's situation, he recalls another time when it appeared that God had rejected Israel. In 1 Kings 19, the prophet Elijah looks around at the sorry state of things, where seemingly all have turned their backs on God and gone after false gods. Elijah reaches the natural conclusion that Israel's apostasy has left her abandoned and rejected by God. Yet God tells Elijah of a remnant. **Why does Paul think God keeps a remnant?**

What does this reveal about God's nature?

In 11:7-10, Paul speaks of Israel not obtaining what she sought. The remnant has, but the rest have not, and this is because God has hardened the hearts of the rest. Naturally this raises real questions about the fairness of God. If God has provided a way for rebellious humanity to enjoy restored relationship with God, but has made it so some cannot avail themselves of this grace, just what sort of God is this? This question of God's fairness is at the heart of the question Paul asks in v. 11. "So I ask, have they stumbled so as to fall?"

Paul is asking if Israel's hard hearts, hearts made that way by God, indeed cause Israel to turn from God so as not to be saved. In other words, does their rejection of Jesus condemn them? **Why is it that Paul answers, "By no means!"?**

How does what Paul says in vv. 11-12 undermine a doctrine of "double predestination," the idea that God chooses some for salvation and some for damnation?

In 11:13-24, Paul uses the analogy of an olive tree to speak of God's grace that includes Jew and Gentile alike. It's worth remembering yet again that Paul is thinking historically here. What is described is what has happened and what will happen. As Creator, God is the master gardener who does as God sees fit with the garden. In grace, God has planted Israel, a special olive tree in the garden, a tree to which the Gentiles are now grafted. In the image some branches (those who reject Christ) are broken off and the Gentiles are now grafted on in their place. This inclusion is the result of God's grace alone, but Paul is aware how easy it is to feel proud about receiving this grace. Israel did so as the chosen people of God, and the Gentile Christians could make the same sort of mistake.

Many times over the past two millennia, Christians have discriminated against and persecuted the Jews, and anti-Semitism has been in the news a lot lately Anti-Semitism requires some notion of superiority or of us being right and them being wrong. **In his olive tree analogy, what does Paul have to say that speaks to the issue of anti-Semitism?**

What does he say about Christian arrogance?

In 11:25, Paul says he wants the readers "to understand this mystery." The word mystery has a meaning somewhat different from the modern use of the word. Mystery in Paul's day had to do with secret knowledge that was gained when one became part of some sect or lodge or secret organization. Once one joined and became an initiate (the Greek word for this is *mystes*) then one would be given what they needed to understand.

Paul is doing this for his readers. He is giving them secret information that cannot be logically deduced or arrived at from observing the world. It is an apostle's job to proclaim this mystery about the hardening that has come over Israel. **What exactly is this "mysterious" information about Israel's hardening? What is the purpose and final outcome of God's action?**

In the beginning of the letter to the Romans, Paul works hard to show that all humanity, both Jew and Gentile, are in the same sorry state. They are under the power of sin. As chapter 11 comes to a close, Paul comes full circle, joining Jew and Gentile together again. Paul Achtemeier argues that 11:25-36 may indeed be the grand summation of Paul's entire argument from chapter one until this point. (The portion of the letter that follows will turn to how what God has done impacts the ethical life of the believer in the present.) **Look carefully at 11:25-32. How would you paraphrase the conclusion of Paul's argument? What is his closing summation?**

Although he doesn't speak of it specifically here, the crucifixion is central to Paul's understanding of God's grace and mercy. **Drawing especially on the terms Paul uses in 11:25-32, words like disobedience and mercy, how is the cross a defining example of what Paul describes in these verses?**

No doubt Paul is aware that 11:28-32 leaves the reader's head spinning a bit. It likely left Paul's head spinning as well. Aware that further explanation may not really help much, Paul simply loses himself in praise and sings of the glory of God. At the core of this doxology is the "inscrutability of God." **In what way might this inscrutability, this fact that God is not at all like us, be a source of hope and comfort for Paul and for us?**

Session VIII
The Christian Life: Fruits of the Gospel

Readings for this session:
Romans 12:1-13:14

Important terms

Love - Paul will speak of love often in this reading, but when Paul speaks, he has a much more precise word at his disposal than we do in English. There are several Greek words which are translated "love" in English. There is *eros* love, the love of passion. There is *phileos* love which describes platonic, familial love (i.e. Philadelphia, city of brotherly love). Then there is *agapē* love, the love Paul speaks of in these verses. *Agapē* could speak of a parent's love for a child, but in Christian literature it took on the meaning of the love seen especially in Christ. It also describes the same sort of love that believers show to one another, and even to their enemies. It focuses much more on how one acts than how one feels. *Agapē* love isn't sentimental but tangibly demonstrates grace toward the other. (The King James Bible translated *agapē* as "charity.)

Exploring the Readings

In chapters 1-11, Paul has laid out his understanding of what God has done and is doing in Christ. Chapter 11 concludes Paul's theological argument, his attempt to explain what he believes, what he thinks is the core of the gospel. Yet theology does not exist in a vacuum. One's theology informs how one lives. You might say that one's ethics grow out of his or her understanding of how the world works. Therefore Christian ethics proceed directly from Christian theology. (In seminaries and divinity schools, theology and ethics are usually part of the same department.)

In the preceding eleven chapters, we followed Paul's basically historical argument. He has moved from a past where sin ran rampant with God's wrath experienced in the giving over of humanity to the clutches of sin to a present where Christ breaks the power of sin for those who are in Christ by the Holy Spirit to a future where God's grace will complete its work, reclaiming Israel and showing mercy to all, Gentile and Jew. Now comes the "so what" of it all. What does Paul's understanding of the gospel say about how the Christian is to live? It is to this question that Paul now turns.

"I appeal to you ***therefore*** (emphasis mine)," Paul begins in 12:1. This "therefore" applies to all that Paul has said up until now. Because of the power of sin being broken in our lives and because of the future for which we wait with a hopeful certainty born of the Spirit, the Christian is to live in peculiar and distinctive ways. 12:1-2 state this in the broadest of strokes. Much of the next four chapters will explore and explain what this means in the context of everyday living.

Thus 12:1-2 are very important for understanding what follows. Paul begins by urging believers to present their bodies as "living sacrifice(s)," but before we explore what this means, we need to make sure we understand what Paul means by the "therefore" of verse 1. You might say that Christian ethics are grounded on this "therefore." **With that in mind, what is the basis of Christian ethics? From what does it spring? (In a sense, your answer is your understanding of Paul's gospel.)**

When Paul speaks of presenting one's body as a sacrifice, he speaks to people well acquainted with the practice of animal sacrifice. In a sense, he draws a contrast between the practice of offering God dead animals and offering yourself. **What are the implications of this? How does what Paul ask for look radically different from the religious practice Paul's first readers knew?**

How might we draw a similar contrast in our day? What might be the practices that roughly equate to the sacrifices of Paul's day? How is Paul appealing to us to live in ways that are radically different from typical religious practice?

Paul says that presenting our "bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God" is our "spiritual worship." Some translations may say something else here such as "reasonable worship." The word translated "spiritual" is not a word derived from the word for spirit. Instead, the Greek word here is λογικοσ (*logikos*). The similarity with our word logic is obvious, and indeed, this is the literal meaning of the word. This word is rare in the New Testament, used only twice. (The other use is 1Peter 2:2.)

The word is difficult to translate accurately into English. For us, logical and spiritual may seem to be very different sorts of things, but for ancient Greeks, there is a strong connection. Logic was about something's true nature, its true reality. Philosophically, to do what is logical is to conform to one's truest and deepest nature, in a religious sense, to live as one is created to do. **In what ways is presenting ourselves as living sacrifices our true and reasonable worship? What makes it true?**

In order to truly worship God, Paul insists that we cannot be conformed to this world. Literally he speaks of not conforming to this age or eon. Instead we are to be transformed, more literally, "transfigured." The word translated "transformed" is used of Jesus' transfiguration and is the basis of our English word "metamorphosis." As with living sacrifices vs. animal sacrifices, a strong contrast is being drawn between being formed and shaped by the current age or culture vs. being changed into something very different. **As we read Paul in our own context, what does it mean to be shaped or formed by the current age or culture? What are the shaping influences of our culture that Paul wants us to avoid?**

The renewal of our minds or understanding is not something we can do to ourselves. This is important to remember. Paul is not simply issuing new requirements to replace the old requirements of the Law. This renewal comes from outside us. Only this will allow us to "discern" or test what is the will of God, what we ought to do. It is important to be clear on this before we move on to the particular ethical admonitions that Paul will give in what follows. **What is it that allows us to determine what God wants and to live as God wants? (The answer reaches back into the heart of Paul's gospel.)**

In the verses and chapters that follow, Paul examines Christian ethics in particular areas of life. 12:3-13 deals mostly with life in the church. Remember, Paul is not giving new law but rather giving examples of how the life shaped and structured by grace looks. **Drawing on these verses, how does the congregation where you worship embody God's grace or work contrary to it?**

The grace that revolutionizes life with God, and with fellow Christians, also changes our life with the rest of the world, the subject Paul takes up in 12:14. **Read 12:14-21. Describe some examples of how these verses might be acted out by you in our current culture.**

What would be a concise label or description capturing the essence of a Christian's relationship to the rest of the world?

Paul's understanding of the world does not neatly separate things into religious/good and secular/evil. Government is a good example. Paul doesn't permit the Christian simply to dismiss life in society, withdrawing from the world. Even secular government is the arena of God's activity. **Reading 13:1-7, do you think Paul would ever approve of defying the authorities? If so, under what conditions and why?**

In 13:8-10, Paul speaks of *agapē* love being the cornerstone of Christian life, embodying all God's commandments. **How is it that Paul, having declared the futility of the law, can now implore the Christian to love and thus fulfill the law?**

Chapter 13 closes with a nod to God's coming future, something Paul sees motivating the Christian life he has been describing. **In what ways is Christian living, including the call to love, shaped by the future revealed in Christ? Is it necessary to have God's coming future in view to live thoroughly Christian lives?**

Session IX
The Christian Life: Grace and Unity

Readings for this session:
Romans 14:1-15:13; 1 Corinthians 3:8-15

Important Terms

Judgment - Paul often uses this term to speak of judgment before God, but not always in the way we might think. We usually think of judgment as related to salvation, but Paul often speaks of the judgment of Christians. Clearly salvation is not what Paul intends, but some sort of accountability even for those who are in Christ. Exactly what the results of this judgment are not crystal clear, but when Paul says all will be judged by God in 14:10, he is referring to fellow Christians, all of whom are in Christ. Paul speaks directly to this issue in 1 Corinthians 3:8-15.

Exploring the Readings

In these verses Paul looks directly at the community of faith. He raises some of the issues that must have divided the typical Gentile church and addresses them. (Depending on what he knows about the Roman church, he may be addressing particular concerns there.) Specifically we hear about dietary restrictions and about Sabbath keeping. This does not necessarily suggest that the discussion is about Jewish versus Gentile Christians. While Sabbath keeping and certain dietary limits were part of Jewish culture, Gentile Christians may have wrestled with these issues on their own. For example, most meat in the Roman world was in some way connected to pagan sacrifice. Meat came from butcher shops that were generally outlets for selling animals sacrificed to some god. Sometimes animals were burned, but often they were slaughtered, butchered, and then sold with the proceeds helping to support the local temple.

All this meant that any meat one bought for a Friday night cookout had almost always been sacrificed to Jupiter or Artemis or some other pagan deity. Naturally some Christians took this as offensive, connecting them as it did with rank idolatry. Therefore some apparently swore off meat eating as a way of honoring God and avoiding any connection, even indirect, with the worship of another deity.

So too Sabbath keeping could become practice in Gentile communities. The Gentile churches took the Old Testament as their scripture. Therefore it's hardly surprising that some of these Gentile Christians adopted Sabbath keeping. The same practice was often legally required in our own country until recently, not because we were Jewish Christians but because we picked up the practice from the Old Testament, though we moved it to Sunday.

These issues of Sabbath keeping and abstaining from meat figure into Paul's designation of some who are "weak." However it is likely that the notion of weak and strong Christians is not restricted to these issues. They are simply prominent examples among many that might divide the faithful into weak and strong. For us to make sense of what Paul is saying, we need to be clear just what he means by weak vs. strong. **What is your understanding of a weak Christian and a strong Christian? Is one better than the other? Why or why not?**

Paul recognizes that the issue of weak vs. strong Christians can raise real problems for the life of the church. Simply put, the problem is one of disparaging fellow Christians because of self-righteousness about how one lives out their faith. Paul is clear that both weak and strong Christians can practice a divisive self-righteousness. **What does Paul say the self-righteousness of a strong Christian look like? What about the self-righteousness of a weak Christian?**

What are some ways that this self-righteousness shows itself in our day? Give examples of self-righteousness of the weak and of the strong.

Paul says that being self-righteous requires the judging of fellow Christians, something Paul finds abhorrent. Notice that Paul never says that weak Christians are bad Christians. **Why is it that he does not consider his own strong brand of the faith better than those weak Christians?**

In addressing this issue, Paul reminds his readers that they will all stand in judgment before God. **If, as Paul certainly seems to believe, all who are in Christ are promised to share in his glory, what is this judgment Paul is talking about?**

In many places in his writings, Paul speaks of being freed from the Law. He also speaks of being free in general. He celebrates this freedom he has found in Christ. Yet in 14:13ff Paul speaks of not exercising that freedom. In fact, Paul actually speaks of a compulsion to restrict his own freedom. Paul has been freed in Christ from any notion that eating a particular food will somehow injure his relationship with God, yet he argues for restraining that freedom. **Why does Paul not exercise his freedom and insist that other Christians should follow his example?**

It seems that Paul is not truly "free," at least not in the way we tend to use the word. What is it that has now enslaved Paul, requiring him to act in certain ways?

What might be some modern equivalents of following Paul's example and restricting our own freedom?

The New Interpreter's Study Bible says about 15:7, "This verse captures the spirit of Paul's argument in 14:1-15:13. *Welcome* (Gk. *paralambanō*) means genuine acceptance as Christ accepted us. Prejudice is a scandal to the gospel (1 Cor 11-20-22), but acceptance of believers of differing persuasions glorifies God." **What does it mean to say that "welcoming" lies at the heart of the Christian life?**

How do we in the modern church model this "welcoming" that Paul recommends?

In what ways do we fail to be a welcoming church?

Paul's words on welcoming others leads to one last statement that the gospel unites both Gentile and Jew, and assertion attested to by quotes from at least 4 different Old Testament texts. Following this, Paul ends the main body of his letter with a benediction in 15:13. The remainder of the letter will be more personal, speaking of Paul's ministry, his future plans, and offering greetings to people he knows in Rome. Since 15:13 marks the end of the letter's main thrust, this seems the appropriate place to sum up what Paul has said. **How would you summarize Paul's letter? What are the main points he has made to the Christians in Rome?**

Session X
Closing Personal Remarks

Readings for this session:
Romans 15:14-16:27

Exploring the Readings

In 15:14, Paul begins drawing his letter to a close by including some autobiographical information about himself and his future plans. There is more here than personal information, however. In fact, Paul's passion for unity in the Christian Church is perhaps more apparent here than at any other point in the letter.

Paul says, "I have written to you rather boldly…" as a result of his special calling to minister to the Gentiles. (It is possible that "boldly" refers to the discussion of weak and strong Christians in 14:1-15:13. There is divided opinion over whether Paul is addressing problems within the Roman church or is speaking in general about difficulties facing Christians living in a pagan world. More on this with regards to 16:1-16.) In 15:16, Paul's calling is described in particularly "priestly" language. He speaks of his own priestly function of presenting the Gentiles as an offering that will be found acceptable and will be made holy by the Spirit. Almost certainly, this language refers to the offering of sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem, where only animals that were unblemished were to be presented to God. **What possible motives does Paul have for connecting his ministry to the Gentiles, and the Gentiles themselves, to the practices of temple Judaism?**

This "priestly service" that Paul is called to runs somewhat counter to the description of Paul in the book of Acts. Acts often speaks of Paul as going first to Jews and then to the Gentiles after the Jews have refused to hear him. Here and in other letters, Paul speaks of himself as going exclusively to the Gentiles. It is possible, however, that Acts and Paul are trying to make the same point, one related to a unity of Jew and Gentile. **How might Paul's linking his mission to the temple in Jerusalem and Acts' notion that Paul's mission was directed at both Jew and Gentile both serve the purpose of Christian unity?**

Paul understands his calling to be as a pioneer in the mission fields, quoting Isaiah 52:15 in 15:21 as the pattern for his work. This calling has kept him from visiting the Christians at Rome. He says he has wanted to visit them for many years but has "been hindered from coming to you." (This is an example of the so called "divine passive" where God is the one who did the hindering, but God's name is not used. This was a common Jewish practice employed so as not to profane God's name.) But since Paul has now worked the entire eastern Mediterranean mission field, he will be coming to Rome on his way to the west.

Paul now speaks of three separate journeys. He will come to Rome. From Rome he will engage in missionary journeys to Spain in the west. But before either of these, he will first journey to Jerusalem with an offering for the church there. This offering is spoken of in other letters written by Paul and in the book of Acts. Acts reports a famine in Judea which brought hardship to the Christians there, and Paul has urged his churches to contribute to the needs of the saints in Jerusalem. His was quite zealous about this offering, and it provokes his only request for prayer from the Roman Christians. **Read 15:30-32 very carefully. Paul has two distinct prayer requests. What are they?**

If we assume that Paul has concerns related to the two prayer requests, what are his two worries?

Consider the issues of Paul's "priestly service" (15:16), his desire for Christian unity, and his hope that his offering will "be acceptable to the saints" (15:31). How might these issues be interrelated and help explain the importance Paul places on his trip to Jerusalem?

Chapter 16 begins with a long list of personal greetings. There has been much unresolved debate over the years as to whether or not this belongs with the original letter to the Romans. Some argue it would be unlikely for Paul to know so many in a place he had never visited. They also point to the fact that the letter to Romans was apparently shared with other churches which Paul actually founded. If so, chapter 16 might be a different ending attached to a copy sent to Ephesus or some other church.

On the other hand, travel is the Roman world was surprisingly easy. The Roman system of roads was an engineering marvel and people flocked to the empire's capital via these roads. There was also an expulsion of Jews from Rome in 49 A.D. This was possibly the result of turmoil between Jews and Jewish Christians. (Rome at that time considered Christians one more sect among Jews.) We know that some of Paul's co-workers (like Prisca and Aquila) were caught up in this expulsion. Likely many of them returned to Rome when things cooled down. This makes it possible that Paul would have known many at Rome, and naming them might have increased his standing in a church that did not know him personally.

Which way one resolves the question about chapter 16 has some bearing on how much Paul knew about conditions in the Roman church. If he actually knew the large number of the members indicated in these verses, then he may have good information about whatever difficulties the church struggled with. If chapter 16 never went to Rome then one might assume Paul knew little about conditions in Rome. Thus none of his advice to them could be seen as addressing particular conflicts, rather general concerns.

There is another interesting aspect to the personal greetings. In 16:7, Paul names several relatives who "are prominent among the apostles." One of these apostles is Junia. This is a feminine name. Interestingly, different variants of Paul's letter list the person as Junias, a male name, but the male name occurs in later copies of the letter, with the female form of the name showing up in the more ancient copies. **Why do you think this name may have been converted to a masculine form by later church copyists, and how might accepting a feminine name as original to the letter affect popular understanding of what Paul says about women's role in the church?**

Paul cannot say goodbye without one final note on threats to the church. Read 16:17-20. **Where does Paul seem to see the greatest threat to the church?**

As Paul concludes, greetings from co-workers and friends of Paul are added. Note that Tertius, the actual transcriber of the letter, includes a warm greeting of his own. Erastus, the city official name in 16:23, is helpful for determining the place of origin for Paul letter to Rome. An inscribed paving stone listing a city official named Erastus has been unearthed in Corinth, making it likely the letter was composed there in the late 50s or early 60s.

Appropriately, Paul's longest letter closes with a soaring benediction which echoes some of the main points in his letter. **Drawing on your understanding of what Paul has tried to communicate in his letter, how does this final doxology bring the letter to a fitting close? In what ways does it fit with the main points Paul has been making?**