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Session 15 - Romans, Intro to 1 Corinthians

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Welcome to the Explainer. Today we're going to unpack the central argument of one of the most influential documents ever written, the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans, and at its heart is this profound theological puzzle. So, this is the big question, right? How can a God who is perfectly fair and just look at guilty people and say, "You're righteous, without totally compromising who he is? It's a dilemma that hits at the very nature of justice and mercy, and Paul lays out his answer with incredible precision.

All right, so let's jump right in. To really get this, we've got to start with how Paul sets up the whole problem. In fact, some scholars call these first three chapters the diagnosis of the human condition.

Paul builds his case like a prosecutor in a courtroom, putting all of humanity on the stand. He starts with the Gentiles, the non-Jews, which, you know, his Jewish readers would have been nodding along to. But then, in a move that would have been pretty shocking, he turns the spotlight on his own people.

He says, hey, just having God's law doesn't get you off the hook. You've disobeyed it, too. And this is the big takeaway from his diagnosis, right? It's totally universal.

In Paul's view, nobody gets a pass. It doesn't matter what your background is or your religious heritage. Everyone is in the exact same boat.

We're all condemned, and as he puts it, enslaved to sin. So, after painting this really bleak picture for all of humanity, Paul just completely pivots. He shifts from the diagnosis to the prognosis, the solution.

And he reveals that God himself has stepped in to fix this, offering a righteousness that comes from a source completely outside of us. The key word here, the whole concept, is justification. Now, this isn't about, you know, slowly becoming a better person over time.

Paul's thinking like a lawyer here. It's a courtroom scene. God is the judge, and he declares a guilty person righteous.

He vindicates them, not because of anything they've done, but because of what Christ has done for them. So, how does Christ's death actually pull this off? Well, Paul gives us these three really powerful pictures, these metaphors from his world. First, there's redemption.

That's language from the slave market. It's the price paid to set someone free. Then there's atonement.

That's language from the temple. It's about a sacrifice that cleanses and removes sin. And finally, propitiation.

This one deals with God's justice, satisfying its requirements, and turning away his righteous anger against sin. And this right here, this is the mic drop moment of his argument. Christ's death doesn't just solve our sin problem.

It actually proves God's own righteousness. It's how God can be both just and the justifier, how he can declare sinners righteous without ever ceasing to be perfectly righteous himself. He solves the dilemma.

And this is so, so important to get. Paul is not saying that God just kind of shrugs and decides to lower the bar because nobody could reach it. Not at all.

He's saying that the impossibly high standard of perfect righteousness wasn't ignored. It was perfectly met for us by Jesus. So, this naturally leads to a huge question, right? If our standing with God is this free gift, if it's all taken care of, what now? How are we supposed to live? Well, that's exactly what Paul tackles next.

And Paul knew people would ask this. He literally brings it up in chapter six. Should we go on sinning so that grace may increase? And his answer gets at this, this really deep tension in the Christian life.

It's a concept theologians sometimes call the already, but not yet. The way Paul explains it is by talking about these two, let's call them spheres of existence. By default, all humanity is in Adam, a realm, a sphere of influence that's dominated by sin and death.

But through faith, he says, we are transferred into a whole new reality. We're now in Christ, a sphere dominated by righteousness and life. And this slide, man, this just lays out that already not yet tension so clearly.

On one side, you have the facts, the indicative, what is already true about you. Paul says you have died to sin, period. It's a done deal.

But then right after he gives the command, the imperative, because that is true. You must not let sin reign. So for Paul, the Christian life is all about learning to live out the new reality.

That's already ours in Christ. Okay, so we've got this incredible high-level theology, but what does this actually look like on the ground, you know, in the real messy lives of actual people? Well, to see that, we can take a quick look at another one of Paul's letters, the one he wrote to the church in Corinth. Paul spent about a year and a half starting a church in Corinth, and you have to understand what this city was like.

It was a major, major hub. Think of a booming port city today, wealthy, cosmopolitan, super influential, but it was also famous for its wild anything-goes culture and pagan worship. It was, to put it mildly, a challenging place to be a Christian.

And here's a fascinating little detail. His relationship with this church was complicated and ongoing. We have First and Second Corinthians in the Bible, but the letters themselves mention at least two other letters that have been lost to history.

It just goes to show you that applying this profound theology wasn't a one-and-done deal. It was a real continuous pastoral conversation with a community that was wrestling with how

to live this stuff out. So what does all this show us? It shows that theology isn't just some dusty abstract thing.

For Paul, it was the powerful, logical answer to the deepest, most difficult questions of the human condition. And that kind of leaves us with a big question for ourselves, doesn't it? What are the profound dilemmas we're facing today, and where are we looking for answers?