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Session 14 - New/Old Paul, Romans

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Okay, so you wanted to understand Paul's letters better, right? Well, buckle up because today we're diving deep into some fascinating New Testament scholarship. We've got lecture notes and some early Christian history to unpack. You know, it's easy to think of Paul's letters like there's some kind of comprehensive theological textbook, right? But that can actually lead to some pretty big misunderstandings.

Oh, really? How so? Well, they were written for very specific occasions. So it's almost like listening in on one side of a phone call or reading someone else's mail. Yeah, I get that.

You only get fragments of the whole story. So how do we even begin to understand what Paul is really saying if we're only hearing one side of the conversation? That sounds like a recipe for confusion. It definitely can be.

And that's exactly why understanding the occasional nature of these letters is so crucial. It means we need to piece together the context, the specific situation that Paul is addressing, and the questions that he's responding to. It's like trying to solve a puzzle with half the pieces missing.

Okay, I like that analogy. It helps to picture it. So I guess the question then is: when Paul talks about justification by faith in Romans, is he laying out some universal theological principle, or is he addressing a specific problem that's happening in the Roman church? That is exactly the kind of question we need to be asking.

And to answer it, we need to know a bit more about Paul himself. Who was this guy and what shaped his thinking? Okay, let's talk about the man himself then. Paul, what can you tell us about him that might help shed some light on his letters? Well, Paul is a truly fascinating and complex figure.

He was a devout Jew, a Pharisee steeped in the traditions of his ancestors, but also a Roman citizen, which gave him this really unique perspective and certain privileges in the Roman world. And here's the real kicker. He actually started out persecuting the early church.

Hold on. Wait. So he was trying to wipe out the very movement that he ended up leading? I know, right? That's pretty crazy.

It's a dramatic turn of events. And it completely changes how we understand his conversion experience on the road to Damascus. It wasn't just a change of religion.

It was a radical, life-altering encounter that transformed him from a persecutor to a passionate follower of Christ. Wow. Okay.

You've definitely got my attention. So how do we connect the dots between this radical transformation and the letters that he wrote? Well, you can actually see echoes of Paul's

own dramatic conversion in his letters, especially when he talks about the radical transformation that happens when someone encounters the gospel. It's like he's drawing on his own experience to explain the power of God's grace.

Okay. I can see that. So for this deep dive, we're focusing specifically on Romans, which I've heard is one of his most important and influential letters.

What makes it so special? Romans is really a cornerstone of Christian thought. It's a letter that has sparked debates, inspired movements, and shaped theological discussions for centuries. And to really understand Romans, we need to understand why Paul wrote it in the first place.

Okay. Let's get into it then. What was Paul's purpose in writing Romans? What was he hoping to achieve? Well, there are actually three key reasons why Paul wrote Romans.

The first is what we call missional. Paul saw Rome as a strategic base for spreading the gospel further west, potentially even reaching Spain. Wow.

So he had these grand ambitions to take the gospel to new frontiers. That's pretty impressive considering the challenges of travel back then. Absolutely.

And we actually see evidence of this missional purpose in Romans chapter 15, where Paul explicitly mentions his plans to visit Rome and then journey on to Spain. Okay. So he's got this mission in mind.

What else is going on? What's the second reason? The second reason is what we call apologetic. Paul was writing to explain and defend his understanding of the gospel to the Roman Christians. He wanted to lay out his core beliefs in detail, making Romans a key text for grasping his theology.

So it's like he's saying, hey, Roman Christians, this is what I preach and here's why it's true. He's not just sharing the good news. He's explaining and defending it.

Exactly. And then there's the third reason, which is perhaps the most important and also the most complex. It's what we call pastoral.

Paul seems to be addressing some major issues within the Roman church, specifically tensions that were happening between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Right. I remember from the early Christian history readings that this was kind of a recurring theme in the early church.

But what was causing this tension in Rome specifically? Well, it likely stemmed from a real-life event: Emperor Claudius's edict that expelled Jews from Rome around 49 AD. When that edict was lifted a few years later, the returning Jews found a church that had become predominantly Gentile in their absence. Ah, so you have this clash of cultures and expectations.

Some Jewish Christians might have been clinging to certain aspects of the Jewish law, while Gentile Christians might have seen things differently. It's like two worlds colliding within the same church. That's a great way to put it.

And it seems Paul is trying to navigate this complex situation in Romans, advocating for unity and a shared understanding of what it means to be part of God's people. So Romans has these multiple layers: mission, theology, and addressing real-life conflicts that are happening within the church. No wonder it's considered such an important and challenging letter.

But with all these different layers, how are we supposed to understand what Paul is really saying? Especially when it comes to a concept like justification by faith. That seems to be at the heart of so many debates. You're absolutely right.

And that brings us to one of the biggest debates in New Testament scholarship: how to read Romans. Specifically, what did Paul mean when he talked about justification by faith, not by works of the law? And to understand this debate, we need to take a little trip back in time and look at how different scholars have interpreted this key phrase. A history lesson.

I'm ready. Take us back in time. Who should we start with? Well, let's start with Martin Luther, the reformer.

He famously read Romans and saw it as a rejection of legalism. The idea that you can earn your salvation through good works. He believed that Paul was saying we can't be good enough on our own.

So we need to rely solely on God's grace through faith in Jesus. Wait, so you're saying Luther might have gotten it wrong. That's a pretty bold claim.

What evidence is there to support this other way of reading Romans? It's not necessarily about right or wrong, but about different perspectives. In the 20th century, a group of scholars started questioning Luther's interpretation, offering what's become known as the new perspective on Paul. And at the heart of this new perspective is the idea that 1st century Jews weren't actually legalistic in the way that Luther imagined.

They didn't believe they could earn God's favor through good works. Okay, now I'm really intrigued. What did these 1st-century Jews believe? And how does that change our understanding of Paul? That's where things get really interesting.

These scholars, starting with E.P. Sanders, pointed out that 1st-century Jews believed in salvation by God's grace just as Christians did. They saw the law not as a way to earn God's favor, but as a way to live out their covenant relationship with God. So it's not about earning salvation, but about expressing gratitude and loyalty to God.

I can see how that challenges the traditional view of legalism. Exactly. Sanders called this covenantal nomism.

Think of it like this. God made a covenant with his people, and the law was a way to live out that covenant, to show their loyalty and love for God. And it wasn't about earning salvation, but about living in a right relationship with God.

That's a helpful way to understand it. But if Jews weren't trying to earn salvation through the law, then what was Paul's issue with it? Where does justification by faith come in?

That's where another scholar, James Dunn, added another layer to the picture. He agreed with Sanders about covenantal nomism, but argued that Paul's main concern wasn't legalism, but something else entirely: Jewish exclusivism.

Jewish exclusivism. What does that mean exactly? Dunn saw the law as a set of identity badges that separated Jews from Gentiles. It created a barrier to Gentile inclusion in God's people.

So for Paul, the problem with the law wasn't that it was legalistic, but that it was being used to exclude people from experiencing God's grace. So Paul was challenging the idea that these identity badges were necessary for belonging to God's people. He was advocating for a more inclusive understanding of salvation, one that was open to both Jews and Gentiles, based solely on faith in Jesus.

Precisely. And this is where we start to see how different the new perspective on Paul is from Luther's interpretation. It's not just about individual salvation from sin.

It's about communal inclusion, about breaking down the barriers that separate people from God and from each other. Wow. This is really making me rethink everything I thought I knew about Paul.

It's fascinating, but also a bit confusing. Can you help me unpack this a bit more? What are the key differences between these two perspectives? It's helpful to think about the different questions that each perspective is asking. Luther focuses on the vertical relationship.

How is a sinner made right before a holy God? Okay. Well, the new perspective focuses on the horizontal. How did Jews and Gentiles relate within the people of God? So Luther is concerned with how individuals are saved, while the new perspective is concerned with how communities are formed and who's included.

Exactly. And both perspectives offer valuable insights. Paul was undoubtedly addressing Jewish exclusivism, but in doing so, he also speaks to the broader human need for reconciliation with God.

So it's not as simple as just picking a side. Paul's letters are nuanced and have layers of meaning. It's not just about individual salvation or just about communal inclusion.

It's about both. This is going to change how I read Romans from now on. That's the beauty of studying Paul.

There's always more to discover and wrestle with. And with these different perspectives in mind, we can dive deeper into the text of Romans and see how they illuminate Paul's message in new and exciting ways. I'm ready.

Let's do it. It's like looking through a prism, you know? Uh-huh. You turn it, and you see these different facets catch the light.

Each perspective kind of illuminates the text in a new way. That's a great analogy. So as we're digging deeper into Romans, should we be looking for both of these perspectives then, the individual and the communal, to understand what Paul is saying? Absolutely.

Remember, Paul isn't writing systematic theology. He's addressing real people, real communities wrestling with complex issues. And speaking of real people, you mentioned earlier that Emperor Claudius expelled Jews from Rome.

How does that historical event connect to Paul's letter and these different interpretations we've been discussing? Well, it's a crucial piece of the puzzle. That edict issued around 49 AD would have significantly impacted the makeup of the Roman church. When the Jews were allowed to return a few years later, they likely found a very different community than the one they left.

Imagine returning to your hometown after years away and finding that things had drastically changed. Wow. That's what it might have been like for those Jewish Christians.

Wow, I hadn't thought about it like that. It makes Paul's letter so much more relatable. Yeah.

It's not just some abstract theological treatise. It's a real pastor trying to address real issues in a real community grappling with its identity. Exactly.

And knowing this historical background helps us understand why Paul might be emphasizing certain themes. For example, the tension between Jewish and Gentile Christians sheds light on his discussion of justification by faith. Now, how different scholars have interpreted this phrase is where things get really interesting.

Okay. So we've got Paul, a Jewish Roman citizen turned apostle, writing to a church in Rome dealing with tensions between Jewish and Gentile Christians. And we've got these two major interpretive lenses.

Luther's focus on individual salvation and the New Perspective's emphasis on communal inclusion. Anything else we should keep in mind as we unpack Romans? Yes. Pay attention to Paul's language, especially the term works of the law.

It's a key phrase that can be understood in different ways depending on which perspective you're coming from. Okay. That makes sense.

So for Luther, works of the law would represent any attempt to earn God's favor through human effort. Right. It's about rejecting legalism and embracing the complete sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice.

Precisely. It's about saying that we can't earn our way into God's good graces. It's a gift freely given, not a prize to be won.

But for the new perspective, works of the law take on a slightly different meaning. It's less about personal righteousness and more about those identity badges that separated Jews from Gentiles. Got it.

It's about breaking down barriers to inclusion and recognizing that faith in Christ, not ethnic or ritualistic markers, is what unites God's people. So as we read Romans, we need to consider which works of the law Paul might be referring to in each passage. Yeah.

That adds a whole new level of depth and complexity to the text. And that's what makes studying Paul's letters so rewarding. It's like peeling back layers of an onion, you know, revealing new insights and challenges with every reading.

Okay. Let's try to put ourselves in the shoes of those early Christians for a moment. Imagine we're in the Roman church hearing this letter read aloud for the first time.

What would stand out to us knowing what we now know about Paul's background, the context of the Roman church, and these different interpretive losses? I think the first thing that would strike us is the boldness of Paul's claims. He doesn't shy away from controversy. He's directly addressing the tensions and divisions within the community.

Imagine the hush that might have fallen over the room as his words were read aloud, challenging their assumptions and calling for unity in the face of such deep divisions. And remember, this is just a few decades after Jesus's death and resurrection. Right.

The church is still very young, figuring out its identity and place in the world. They're literally wrestling with questions that would shape the future of Christianity. Talk about pressure.

Exactly. And it's crucial to remember that we often read Paul's letters through centuries of theological development and interpretation. But for those early Christians, this was groundbreaking, revolutionary stuff.

So we shouldn't just read Romans as a historical document then. We should try to experience it as those early Christians might have experienced it. A fresh, radical message that challenged the status quo and offered a new way of seeing the world and their place in it.

You're getting it. And imagine the conversations and debates that must have followed the reading of this letter. It wouldn't have been a passive experience.

I can picture people huddled in small groups, arguing passionately about what Paul meant, how it applied to their lives, and what it meant for the future of their community. This wasn't just an intellectual exercise. It was about shaping their understanding of God's salvation and their relationship with one another.

Precisely. And it reminds us that the Bible isn't just a static text, but a living document that has sparked countless conversations and debates throughout history. And guess what? It continues to do so today.

Each generation brings its own questions and perspectives to the text, enriching our understanding and challenging us to grapple with its enduring relevance. So as we delve deeper into Romans, let's keep this dynamic interplay between text-to-context and interpretation in mind. It's not about finding the one right answer, but about engaging in the ongoing conversation, wrestling with these ideas, and allowing them to challenge and transform us.

Absolutely. It's the key to unlocking the richness and complexity of Paul's thought and appreciating the enduring power of his message. So are you ready to dive back into the text

itself? But before we get lost in the theological weeds, let's circle back to something you mentioned earlier: Paul's desire to reach Spain.

Why was that so important to him? It speaks to the expansive vision of Paul's mission. He wasn't content with just preaching to established communities. He wanted to push the boundaries of the known Christian world, carrying the gospel to new frontiers.

He had this incredible drive to share the message of Christ with as many people as possible, no matter how far he had to travel or how challenging the journey might be. That's inspiring. It's like he had this insatiable desire to spread the message of Christ as far and wide as possible.

He saw no limits to the gospel's reach. It wasn't meant to be confined to a particular group of people or a specific geographic location. And that's a powerful reminder for us today, isn't it? The gospel isn't meant to be confined to comfortable spaces or familiar circles.

It has this universal appeal, a message of hope and reconciliation that transcends boundaries of culture, language, and ethnicity. You're right. It's a call to step outside of our comfort zones, to engage with those who are different from us, and to share the transformative power of the gospel in new and creative ways.

It's a reminder that the gospel is always relevant, always challenging, and always calling us to expand our understanding of God's love and grace. Precisely. And that brings us back to the heart of Paul's message in Romans.

It's about breaking down barriers, overcoming divisions, and embracing the radical inclusivity of God's grace. So it's not just about understanding Paul's theology, but about living it out, embodying that same spirit of unity and outreach in our own lives and communities. This is getting pretty deep.

I'm starting to see Romans as more than just a letter. It's a blueprint for building a more just, compassionate, and unified world. But where do we even begin? How do we translate these grand ideas into concrete actions? That's the million-dollar question, isn't it? And that's what we'll explore in the next part of our deep dive.

We'll look at some specific passages in Romans that offer practical guidance on how to live out this gospel message in our everyday lives. But for now, let's take a moment to reflect on what we've learned so far. What's standing out to you? What's challenging your assumptions? What's sparking your curiosity? I think what's really hitting home for me is the idea that Romans isn't just some ancient text that's irrelevant to our lives today.

It's a living, breathing message that speaks to the challenges and divisions we face in our own communities and in the world as a whole. And I'm starting to see how Paul's message of radical inclusivity and the power of the gospel to transform lives can actually help us build a better future. That's a powerful insight.

And it's exactly the kind of shift in perspective that we hope this deep dive will inspire. So are you ready to explore some specific passages in Romans and see how Paul's message can

be put into practice? Absolutely. I'm ready to see how this ancient letter can speak to our modern world and challenge us to live differently.

Okay. I'm excited to get into the practical side of things. You know, we've talked about the historical context and the different ways to interpret Romans and Paul's vision for spreading the gospel.

But how does all of this translate into everyday life? What does it actually look like to live out this message of radical inclusivity and the power of the gospel? Well, that's the question, isn't it? It's easy to get caught up in all the theological concepts, right? But the real test is how we actually apply those concepts to our daily lives. And that's exactly what Paul tackles in the latter chapters of Romans. He gets down to the nitty-gritty of what it means to live as a transformed community, a community that's shaped by the gospel.

So he's not just giving us a bunch of abstract ideas. He's actually providing a roadmap for how to live differently, how to relate to each other in a new way. What are some of the key themes he touches on in these practical sections? Well, he talks a lot about love, forgiveness, humility, and serving others.

And these aren't just nice-sounding virtues, you know. They're the essential building blocks of a community where the gospel is truly at work. It's about putting faith into action, allowing the transforming power of the gospel to shape our attitudes, our words, and our actions.

So it's not just about believing the right things. It's about living the right way. It's about reflecting God's character in our interactions with others.

Even when it's difficult. Even when we disagree. Even when we're tempted to retreat into our own little bubbles.

You're catching on. And that's where it gets really challenging, right? Because living out the gospel isn't always easy. It requires us to step outside of our comfort zones, to challenge our prejudices, and to extend grace to those who might not deserve it.

It sounds like Paul is calling for a radical shift in our mindset and our behavior, then. It's not about fitting in with the world's standards, but about conforming to a higher standard, the standard of Christ-like love and compassion. Exactly.

And this standard applies not just to our personal lives, but to how we engage with our communities and the world around us. Paul challenges us to be agents of reconciliation, to build bridges of understanding, and to work for justice and peace in a world that's often marked by conflict and division. It's inspiring, but it's also a bit daunting, you know? It's easy to feel overwhelmed by the enormity of the task.

How do we even begin to live up to this calling? Where do we start? That's a great question. I think Paul would say that we start with ourselves. We start by allowing the gospel to transform us from the inside out.

We start by examining our own hearts, confessing our own shortcomings, and seeking God's forgiveness and guidance. And as we experience God's transforming grace in our own lives,

we'll be empowered to extend that same grace to others. So it's a process, a journey of ongoing transformation.

It's not about achieving perfection overnight, but about taking small steps, making daily choices that reflect the love and compassion that we've received from God. Beautifully put. And it's a journey we don't have to take alone.

Paul emphasizes the importance of community, of supporting each other, and encouraging each other as we strive to live out the gospel together. That makes sense. We need each other to stay on track, to hold each other accountable, and to remind each other of the grace that's available to us when we stumble and fall.

And remember, Paul's letter to the Romans was written to a real community facing real challenges. They weren't perfect, and neither are we. But that's the beauty of the gospel.

It's a message of hope and transformation for all of us, regardless of our past mistakes or present struggles. This has been such an eye-opening deep dive. I feel like I've gained a whole new understanding of Paul's letters, going beyond the surface level to grasp the depth and richness of his thought.

And I'm especially struck by how relevant his message is to our lives today. It's not just about ancient history or theological debates. It's about how we live, how we relate to each other, and how we can make a difference in the world.

It's been a joy to journey alongside you in this exploration. And remember, this is just the beginning. The more we engage with these texts, the more we'll discover their enduring power to shape our lives and our world.

I know next time I read Rummings, I'll definitely be able to see it with new eyes, to appreciate its complexity and its challenge. And speaking of challenges, you mentioned that Paul challenged those early Christians to rethink their identity badges. If he was challenging the idea that belonging was based on external markers, what does that mean for how we think about belonging and identity in our own communities today? What are the identity badges that we might be tempted to cling to? And how can we build communities that are truly inclusive and welcoming to all, regardless of their background or beliefs? Something to ponder as we go back into the world, transformed by Paul's message of radical grace and boundless love.

Thanks for joining us on this deep dive, and keep exploring. You won't regret it.