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Session 15 - Romans, Intro to 1 Corinthians

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Welcome to a deep dive into early Christianity. We're going to be taking on some pretty complex stuff today. Paul's letters to the Romans and the Corinthians, using these lecture notes on New Testament literature.

And you might think you already know these letters, but these notes have some insights that will surprise you, I think. What's fascinating about Paul is that he crafts these letters almost like he is presenting a legal case. Oh, OK.

So is Romans like the opening argument? You could see it that way. Yeah. Yeah.

Romans is where Paul lays out the problem, the diagnosis, you could say, of the human condition. He says that all humanity, Jews and Gentiles, are under sin. And it's not just about, like, personal mistakes.

Right. It's about a fundamental brokenness that affects how we relate to God and to each other. So it's more than just, like, you know, going to heaven or not.

Much more. It's about our lives here and now. Absolutely.

It has implications for how we live. OK. But Paul doesn't just give a diagnosis.

He offers a solution. And that is righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ. Yeah.

And this is where it gets interesting. OK. Because his idea of righteousness might not be what you expect.

Yeah. So what does it mean then if it's not about following all the rules perfectly? Well, Paul is saying that righteousness isn't something we earn through good deeds or by perfectly keeping the law. OK.

It's a gift. It's freely given to us through faith. Wow.

That's a pretty radical idea. It is. It means that anyone can have access to righteousness.

Yes. Exactly. Not just those who are bound by the Mosaic Law.

Right. And to explain what Jesus accomplishes through his death and resurrection. Yeah.

Paul uses these two powerful terms, redemption and propitiation. OK. So let's break those down.

Those sound pretty intense. They are intense concepts. Yeah.

Imagine you were a slave. OK. And someone came and bought your freedom.

OK. Setting you free from bondage. That's redemption.

OK. Now imagine that same person then takes the punishment you deserve. OK.

For the crimes you committed as a slave. Well, that is propitiation. OK.

Taking the penalty in someone else's place. So Paul uses both of these. Yeah.

To explain the depth of what Jesus' death achieves. That's a powerful analogy. Yeah.

It really helps to clarify what he's talking about. But this brings up another question for me. How can God, who is perfectly just.

Right. Simply forgive sin. Yeah.

Without upholding justice somehow. That's a good question. And that's where the concept of the mercy seat comes in.

OK. The mercy seat. So in the Old Testament, the mercy seat was the lid on the Ark of the Covenant.

Right. Once a year, the high priest would sprinkle the blood of a sacrificed animal on the mercy seat as a way of atoning for the sins of the people. OK.

Paul connects this imagery to Jesus. Saying that through his sacrifice on the cross. Jesus becomes our mercy seat.

Taking the penalty for our sin. OK. And satisfying God's justice.

So God doesn't just kind of sweep sin under the rug. No, not at all. He deals with it in a just way.

Or just through Jesus. Through Jesus. OK.

So this leads to another one of those big theological terms: justification. Yes. What does that mean? So when we put our faith in Jesus.

God declares us righteous. Not because we've earned it. Right.

But because of what Jesus has done for us. It's like being declared not guilty in court, even though you committed the crime. That's a great analogy.

The verdict is based on someone else's actions, not your own. You got it. OK.

Now this brings up a concept that I've heard before. The already but not yet. Yes.

That sounds kind of paradoxical. It is. Yeah.

Paul is dealing with this tension. OK. Between what is already true for us in Christ.

OK. And the fact that we still live in a broken world. So we are declared righteous.

We are set free from sin's power. Right. But we still struggle.

Yeah. We still make mistakes. Absolutely.

We're new creations in Christ. Yeah. But we are still being transformed.

Right. So it's not like a light switch. It's more of a process.

It's definitely a process. OK. So we're in this in-between space then.

Yeah, we are. We've gotten a glimpse of the finish line. But we're still running the race.

We are citizens of heaven, but still living on earth. And Paul uses this image of two spheres to describe this. He does.

He describes these two realms. One ruled by Adam, characterized by sin and death. The other is headed by Christ, marked by righteousness and the Spirit.

OK. And when we put our faith in Jesus, we are transferred from one to the other. OK.

But it's not an instant switch. It's a process. It's a process of transformation.

It's like a change in citizenship. Yes. But with all the messy realities of adapting to a new culture and a new way of life.

I like that. Yeah. That's a good way to put it.

And this idea of being in Christ. Yeah. What does that really mean? Yeah.

What does that actually mean? It's about shifting our allegiance, about coming under a new authority. OK. It's not just about changing our behavior.

Right. It's a fundamental change in our identity and our reality. But if we're already in Christ, then why is there still such a struggle? Well, that's where Paul's idea of indicatives and imperatives comes in.

OK. Indicatives are statements about who we are in Christ, our new identity, our position in God's family. Right.

Imperatives are the commands that flow from that new identity. OK. So how we are called to live in light of who we now are.

Paul gives us both. He declares who we are and then he challenges us to live out that reality. So it's this interplay between grace and responsibility.

Yes. We're not just passive recipients. Right.

We're active participants in our transformation. That's a good way to put it. And that's just Romans.

I know. Like we've just scratched the surface here. A tip of the iceberg.

What happens when we turn to Corinthians? Well, Paul continues these themes, but with some really fascinating twists and turns. OK. Remember, we only have two of Paul's letters to the Corinthians.

Right. But we know that he wrote more. Oh, OK.

So there's this whole dialogue going on that we're only getting glimpses of. Wow. So before we dive into the content of those letters, can you tell me a little bit about Corinth itself? Like, what kind of place was this church trying to survive in? Imagine a bustling port city, a melting pot of cultures and religions known for its wealth and trade, but also for its moral laxity.

Oh, wow. Corinth was a city of extremes. OK.

So, like, traditional values clashing with the pursuit of pleasure. Exactly. Oh, wow.

So that sounds like a very challenging environment. Very challenging. Yeah.

For a young Christian community to try to grow in. Absolutely. You know, it's striking how Paul connects this idea of grace with these very practical challenges the Corinthians were facing.

So tell me, what are some of those specific controversies that Paul addresses in these letters? One of the first things Paul tackles in 1 Corinthians is the problem of division within the church. OK. It seems like there were factions forming, with people aligning themselves with different leaders or theological viewpoints.

You know, it's funny how some things never change, right? We still see this kind of infighting in churches and communities today. It's a human problem. Yeah.

But Paul's adamant that this type of division is incompatible with the unity that we have in Christ. OK. He reminds the Corinthians that they are all part of one body, the body of Christ, and that each member is valuable and has a role to play.

So unity in Christ should kind of trump our personal preferences or opinions? Exactly. He calls them back to this vision of the church as a place characterized by love, humility, and putting others before ourselves. So what were some of the things that were causing these divisions? Like, what were they actually arguing about? Well, Paul mentioned several things in the letter.

OK. Some people were claiming superior wisdom or spiritual gifts, leading to a kind of spiritual one-upmanship. Others were caught up in these debates about food sacrifice to idols, which was a huge issue in a city like Corinth.

Right. With all the different religious practices. Exactly.

And there were even disputes about marriage and sexuality. Wow. With some advocating for lifestyles that clashed with Christian teaching.

So a whole spectrum of kind of ethical and theological challenges. It really was. OK.

So how did Paul approach these issues? With a blend of wisdom, grace, and a lot of patience, he addresses each concern, but always brings it back to the bigger picture. You know, their identity in Christ and the implications for the community and their witness to the world. So it's not just about following the rules, but understanding like the heart behind them and how they affect our relationships with each other and with God.

It makes me think about how we navigate those gray areas where there might not be a clear-cut rule, but we still have to consider, you know, the impact of our choices on others and on our own growth. And speaking of gray areas, Paul also addresses the issue of Christian freedom in these letters. Remember, Corinth was known for its anything-goes attitude.

Right. And some believers were struggling to reconcile their freedom in Christ with the cultural norms around them. So they were asking, OK, we're free from the law, but what does that mean practically? Exactly.

Where do we draw the line? Yeah. And Paul's response is nuanced and insightful. He affirms their freedom in Christ, but emphasizes that true freedom isn't about doing whatever we want.

Right. It's about using our freedom to serve others and honor God. It's so interesting how he brings it back to love.

Yes. It's like, sure, you have freedom, but love should be your guiding principle. Right.

And that message is powerful for us today. Yeah. We live in a culture that often equates freedom with individual rights and self-expression.

But Paul challenges us to think about freedom in a more communal and selfless way. It makes me think about all the debates we have today about freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom to live as we choose. Yeah.

Paul's words remind us that true freedom is never just about me. That's right. It's about how my choices affect others and ultimately reflect God's love.

It's a powerful challenge. Yeah. To live in such a way that our freedom is a blessing and not a stumbling block.

OK, so we've talked about division, freedom, and love. What else stands out to you as a key theme in these letters? Well, one of the most famous passages from First Corinthians is the chapter on love. Oh, yeah.

The one that gets read at weddings all the time. Love is patient, love is kind. That's the one.

But it's important to remember the context here. OK. Paul wasn't writing a greeting card or composing a sentimental poem.

Right. He was addressing this very specific situation in the Corinthian church where pride and infighting were threatening to tear the community apart. So it's not just some nice-sounding ideal.

No. It's a response to the problems that they were facing. Exactly.

He was offering them a radical vision for how to live together as a community. And that vision was rooted in humility, selflessness, and putting others' needs first. So he's saying love isn't just a feeling.

It's a choice. Yes. An action, a way of life.

Absolutely. It transforms how we relate to each other. And that leads into another key theme: Paul explores the nature of the church itself.

He uses a lot of metaphors, but one of the most powerful is the image of the body of Christ. Right. I've heard that before, but I'm not sure I fully grasp it.

Sure. What does it mean to say that the church is the body of Christ? Think about the human body. Every part has a different function, but they all work together for the good of the whole.

The same is true for the church. OK. We all have different gifts, talents, and personalities, but we're united in Christ and called to serve one another.

So it's not about comparison or being the most important part, but recognizing that we each have a unique role to play. Exactly. And that's why Paul spends so much time in Corinthians talking about spiritual gifts.

He wants them to understand that these gifts aren't for personal gain or status, but for building up the body and advancing God's kingdom. So don't hoard your gifts or use them to elevate yourself, but use them to bless others. That's it.

And certainly. Yes. And this vision of the church has huge implications for how we understand ourselves and our responsibilities to each other.

It's a reminder that we're not meant to live in isolation, but in community, supporting each other. Yes. And it speaks to the diversity of the church.

OK. Just as a body has many different parts. Yeah.

The church is made up of people from all different backgrounds and experiences. And that can be a source of tension, as we see in Corinth. It can.

But also a source of strength. Yes. If we learn to embrace it.

OK. So we need each other. We do.

We need each other's gifts and perspectives to help us grow. Absolutely. Speaking of mission, does Paul talk about the church's mission in the world in these letters? He does.

Remember, he's writing to these churches who are trying to figure out how to live as followers of Jesus in a really challenging world. Yeah. He doesn't shy away from the messy realities of life in a pagan culture.

So what are some of the challenges that he addresses that relate to the church's interaction with the world? Well, as we discussed earlier, one of the big ones was how to handle idol worship, which was everywhere in Corinth. There were temples and shrines everywhere, and social life revolved around feasts and celebrations connected to these pagan gods. So early Christians were constantly faced with these situations where they had to decide how to participate in society without compromising their faith.

Exactly. And Paul offers some guidance on how to navigate that. Okay.

He doesn't say to completely withdraw from society. Right. But he also doesn't condone uncritical participation in pagan practices.

So be in the world, but not of the world. That's it. Engage, but don't be consumed.

Exactly. And it's still a challenge for us today. It is.

We live in a world that's increasingly secular and pluralistic. Yeah. How do we live out our faith authentically without, you know, compromising our convictions or isolating ourselves? That's a tough talent.

It is. It's so easy to either retreat into our own little Christian bubble or to just become so assimilated that we lose our distinctiveness. Yeah.

Paul's letters challenge us to find that middle way where we can be salt and light. Yeah. Preserving what's good and true while also shining the light of Christ.

So no sacred versus secular divide. Exactly. For the gospel has implications for all of life, our relationships, our work, our leisure, our engagement with culture.

It's a holistic transformation. It is. Don't just be a Sunday Christian; live out your faith every day.

That's right. And it all goes back to the already, but not yet idea. We're new creations in Christ, but still in the process of being transformed.

We have the spirit, but we still live in a broken world. So that tension between who we are in Christ and the reality that we still struggle. Yeah.

And it can be frustrating. It is. But it can also be a source of hope.

Hope. How so? Because it reminds us that God isn't finished with us yet. Oh, okay.

We are a work in progress, and he is committed to completing that work. It's encouraging. It is.

It's like we're on this journey. We might stumble along the way, but we're heading in the right direction. We are.

And that's why Paul is so full of both encouragement and exhortation. Okay. He reminds us who we are, but also challenges us to live up to it.

So yes, you're forgiven. You're loved. You're accepted, but now go and live like it.

Exactly. Don't let the old patterns hold you back. I'm really struck by how practical these letters are, even though they were written so long ago.

Me too. They're dealing with real-life issues that we still face. They are.

Relationships, identity purpose, how to live in a world that doesn't share our values. It's the power of the Bible. Yeah.

It speaks across cultures and centuries because it addresses the deepest questions of the human heart. I love that. And this conversation has definitely sparked some new questions for me.

Oh yeah. Like what? If we're already new creations in Christ, why is there still such a struggle? What does this mean for our understanding of sin and grace and the Christian life? Those are great questions. And I think Paul's wrestling with them too.

Okay. He doesn't shy away from that tension between who we are and the reality of our struggle. So maybe the struggle is part of the process.

Maybe it is. It's in those moments of wrestling and questioning that we grow and learn to rely on God. I think you're right.

It reminds me of what Paul says in 2 Corinthians. Okay. My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

Wow. That's powerful. It is.

Like, don't be afraid of your weakness because that's where God's strength shines through. Exactly. This has been amazing.

I feel like we've only just scratched the surface. Me too. There's so much more to explore.

But I've already got so much to think about. Okay. What's one last thought you want to leave our listener with today? If Paul were writing to you today, what do you think he'd say? How would his words challenge you or encourage you? What does it mean for you to be a new creation living in this already, but not yet, tension? That's a great question to ponder.

And it seems like a fitting place to end this part of our deep dive. Thank you for joining us as we explored Paul's letters. It's been my pleasure.

We hope you've been challenged and encouraged and maybe even a little surprised by what we've discovered together. Until next time, keep exploring. It's really easy to get caught up in the day-to-day and forget about this whole new creation thing.

Yeah, it's true. That Paul's talking about. Yeah.

And maybe that's why he keeps coming back to this idea of righteousness. He wants to make sure we get it. Okay.

So remind me again, how does Paul distinguish between righteousness through the law versus righteousness through faith? So in Romans, Paul argues that trying to earn righteousness through our own effort is just a dead end. Okay. It's like trying to build a tower to heaven with your bare hands.

Right. It's just not going to work. We need a different approach.

You need a different foundation. Yeah. And that foundation is faith in Jesus Christ.

It's not about what we do. It's about what he's already done. But it's not just about passively accepting the gift, right? No, no.

It's not about sitting back and letting God do all the work. Yeah. True faith leads to action.

It's about surrendering our lives to Christ and letting him transform us. So it's like we're saying, okay, God, I can't do this on my own. I need your help.

Here are the blueprints. Here are the tools. I like that analogy.

Right. And as we surrender to Christ, we start to experience the power of his resurrection. What does that look like, practically, experiencing the power of the resurrection? Is it just about believing that he rose from the dead? It's so much more than that.

Okay. Paul describes it as a new way of life. Okay.

A breaking free from the power of sin and death. So like a resurrection of our own hearts and minds. Yes, exactly.

A new way of seeing the world. A new way of seeing ourselves and our relationship with God. And that new way of seeing leads to a new way of living.

We're no longer slaves to sin. Okay. We are empowered to live by the Spirit.

That sounds amazing. But I think if we're honest, most of us would say we don't always feel that freedom. Yeah, it's true.

Like, we still struggle. We still make mistakes. We do.

And that's the tension of the already, but not yet. We are in Christ, but we're still being sanctified. Yeah.

We are new creations, but still being transformed. So it's a process. It's a process.

We're on this journey. We are. Okay.

We might stumble along the way, but we're heading in the right direction. That's right. And that's why Paul is so full of both encouragement and exhortation.

He reminds us who we are, but also challenges us to live up to that identity. Yeah. It's like he's saying, yes, you are forgiven.

You are loved. You are accepted, but now go and live like it. Don't let the old stuff hold you back.

That's it. Yeah. And that call to action is what makes these letters so relevant for us today.

Right. They're not just ancient texts to be studied. Right.

They are living words that can transform our lives. I think this whole deep dive has been incredible. It's been fun.

Yeah. We've only just scratched the surface, but I've already got so much to think about. Good.

What's one final thought you want to leave our listeners with today? If Paul were writing to you today, what do you think he would say? How would his words challenge or encourage you in your life right now? What does it mean for you to be a new creation living in this already, but not yet reality? That's a great question to ponder. And it seems like the perfect place to wrap up our deep dive. It does.

Thank you for joining us. My pleasure. As we've explored Paul's letters to the Romans and Corinthians, we hope you've been challenged and encouraged, and maybe even a little surprised by what we've uncovered.

It's been fun. Until next time, keep exploring.