

Study Guide for Romans: Living Faithfully

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Session 1: “The Critical Importance of Romans for Lutherans”

Text: Martin Luther, “Preface to Romans”

Synopsis

The Church has been renewed when Paul has been read and studied. Augustine, Luther, and Barth were profoundly affected by Paul and his letter to the Romans and, in turn, they profoundly affected the Church. Romans provides much of the heart of Luther’s understanding of the Christian faith and thus of Lutheran theology in general. Scholars have developed many theories regarding why Paul wrote Romans. Two are explored: timeless treatise and the correction of false perceptions of Paul’s ministry.

Questions

1. Briefly summarize the place Romans has had in the development of Christian thought.
2. What is the place of Romans in Lutheran thought? Is it possible to base too much on just one book of the Bible?
3. Why do you think Paul wrote the Romans? What are for you the most compelling reasons?
4. What was the misunderstanding of Paul that some Judean Christians had?

Session 2: “Paul the Eager Slave: Why Did Paul Write Romans?”

Texts: Romans 1:1-15, 15:18-29

Synopsis

In chapter 1 Paul takes a lot of space to introduce himself and his message, because he is not the founding missionary of the Roman congregations. He calls himself a slave of Jesus Christ and an apostle, who is set apart for the gospel. As the apostle to the Gentiles he seeks to bring about the obedience of faith. He writes Romans to gain support for his missionary work in Spain; to heal divisions between Judean Christians and Gentile Christians; to ask for prayers for his trip to Jerusalem and, possibly, intercession with Jerusalem Christians; and to resolve any misunderstandings about his view of the gospel.

Questions

1. Paul calls himself a slave of Jesus Christ. How does that self-label strike you? What are the advantages of using that language? What are the disadvantages?
2. How do ethnic issues factor in to why Paul wrote Romans? How do such issues affect the community in which you live?
3. How does the phrase “obedience of faith” strike you? Do the two terms fit together? How so?
4. Why has Paul not been to Rome before?
5. What for you are the most important reasons that Paul wrote Romans?

Session 3: “The Bad News: We Have Sinned against God, Others, and Ourselves”

Texts: Romans 1:18-3:20, 7:14-24

Synopsis

Fundamental to Paul’s argument in Romans is that all people have sinned, because all people have lived in ways that dishonor God. Sin negatively affects all of our relationships: with God, with others, and with ourselves. In his discussion of the struggle of human beings with sin, Paul uses *flesh* to mean the body as it is being misused. In Lutheran theology people are called to confront the reality of sin in their lives.

Questions

1. What does Paul see as the basic sin?
2. How can people become their own gods?
3. How is Sin a power? In what ways do you experience that power in your own life?
4. How does Sin fragment our lives and divide us from ourselves?

Session 4: “The Good News: God Makes Us Right with God, Others, and Ourselves”

Texts: Romans 1:16-17, 3:21-26

Synopsis

Utilizing the honor-and-shame language of his culture, in the thesis of the letter Paul writes that he is not ashamed of the gospel. That gospel, in fact, is God’s power for salvation for everyone who believes. In that gospel God’s righteousness is revealed. It is a righteousness that seeks to restore humanity to a proper relationship with God, and it is a righteousness that calls for justice. The way that righteousness comes to humanity is through the death of Jesus, which Paul interprets in terms of justification, redemption, and sacrifice.

Questions

1. Are there ways in which, in a sense, you *are* ashamed of the gospel? How so?
2. What other examples of redemption can you think of in today’s world? In what ways does that language help you to understand the meaning of the death of Jesus? In what ways does it not help?
3. What do you think of the language of “lid of the ark of the covenant” as a way to talk about the meaning of Jesus’ death? What are its limitations? What new insights does it open for you?

Session 5: “Faith: How We Connect with What God Has Done for Us”

Texts: Romans 1:16-17, 3:21-30, 10:5-17, 4:1-25

Synopsis

For Paul faith is one of the two basic ways in which people connect with the justification that God offers humanity. Faith comes about through “the word of faith,” the message of and about Jesus, a message that demands to be proclaimed. Paul’s chief example of one who believes is Abraham. On the other hand, Paul specifically excludes justification through the Law of Moses as the proper way of re-establishing a positive relationship with God.

Questions

1. How would you define *faith*?
2. What does it mean to you to say that we are “justified by faith”?
3. Describe the most helpful sermon you have ever heard. What made it so helpful?
4. Most of us can’t remember in any detail the majority of sermons we have heard. What does that say about the importance of preaching?
5. In what ways are you able in your daily life to speak God’s word?

Session 6: “Living Faithfully as Children of God: Baptism”

Texts: Romans 6:1-6, 8:1-17

Synopsis

For Paul baptism is the second way that people connect with God’s gift of justification. Baptism has to do not only with the beginning of believers’ lives but also provides the dynamic for living faithfully, as Christians live in the tension of “already—but not yet.” The Holy Spirit, given in baptism, strengthens believers to walk the Christian life. By the Spirit believers are made into the children of God who can address God as Father and who also share in the sufferings of Christ.

Questions

1. Give two reasons why you think someone who believes in Jesus should be baptized.
2. What does it mean to die, in baptism? And why would we want to return to that death every day?
3. What do you *already* have from God? And what do you *not yet* have?
4. Share one or two ways that the Holy Spirit has operated in your life recently.
5. How does “Father” language for God work for you? What are the advantages of addressing God as Father? What are the limitations?

Session 7: “Living Faithfully: Transformed Lives”

Texts: Romans 12:1-21; 13:1-7, 11-14

Synopsis

To encourage Christians to act ethically and to serve others, Paul uses the indicative-imperative pattern. He calls on believers to present their bodies as a living sacrifice; in that way they refuse to be conformed to this world but in fact are transformed to be able to discern and do the will of God. Paul extends his concern for Christian behavior beyond the personal level to how Christians relate to the government. Even while advising Christians to respect authority, he lays the basis for opposition to unjust structures.

Questions

1. What does God want from you? How is God calling you to live “in the day”?
2. In what ways do you feel that the world tries to conform you to its understanding of life?
3. How is God transforming you?
4. What are some of the implications of a “cruciform” mind?

Session 8 “Living Faithfully in Community”

Texts: Romans 14:1-23, 15:1-13, 13:8-10

Synopsis

Paul advises Roman Christians who differ with each other to avoid judging each other and instead to welcome each other. On some issues Christians can agree to disagree with each other, but what Christians decide does affect other believers. The goal of life together in the Christian community is peace and mutual building up of each other. At that point the Law can be a positive guide for behavior, even though it is not the basis of salvation.

Questions

1. What do you find to be good ways to discuss issues with people who disagree with you and you with them?
2. What are the issues that are dividing your congregation? How might Paul’s advice be helpful in dealing with those divisions?
3. Paul says that, no matter what happens, we belong to Jesus. How might that perspective help in dealing with challenging times in our lives?
4. What are two ways in which your congregation is an oasis of peace?
5. How is your congregation’s body-building going?

Session 9: “Living Faithfully: The People of Israel, Christians, and the One God”

Texts: Romans 9:1-11:36

Synopsis

Has God rejected God’s people Israel? And if God has rejected them, how can he be trusted to fulfill his promises to those who believe in Jesus? Paul tackles these complicated questions in chapters 9-11 and anguishes over the place of Israel. He argues that, for the present, God has saved a remnant of Israel but has hardened the hearts of the majority in order that the message about Jesus would spread beyond the people of Israel. He maintains that all Israel ultimately will be saved.

Questions

1. What do you see as the relationship between modern Christianity and modern Judaism? Do Jewish people need to believe in Jesus to be saved?
2. What does the image of the olive tree say to Gentile Christians who might begin to feel superior to Israelites who do not believe?
3. Who do you think “all Israel” is?

Session 10: “Living Faithfully: Women in the Early Church”

Texts: Romans 16:1-16, Philippians 4:2-3, 1 Corinthians 11:3-16, Galatians 3:28

Synopsis

Paul has unusually prominent roles for women in his letters. In Romans 16 Phoebe, Prisca, and Junia are in leadership positions, and other women are mentioned as well. In Philippians he addresses a conflict between two women leaders, and in 1 Corinthians he assumes that women are leading worship.

Questions

1. What are the various responsibilities that Phoebe seems to have?
2. What was Prisca’s relationship to Paul, and what ministry did she have in the early church?
3. What is especially significant about Junia?
4. What restrictions in today’s church are comparable to the hairstyle and hair-covering restrictions in 1 Corinthians?
5. How do the passages we have studied inform our contemporary understanding of women as pastors?

Session 11: “Summary of Paul’s Message: Part One”

Text: Romans 5:1-11

Synopsis

Building on the foundation of justification, Paul writes that believers have peace with God and access to God’s grace. Because of those gifts, believers are even able to boast in their sufferings, because suffering leads ultimately to the hope that is brought to birth by the presence of God’s love through the Holy Spirit. Part of the wonder of God’s message is that Jesus died for the ungodly, the sinners, and for those who live as enemies of God. Because of the justification and reconciliation that come from his death, believers will be saved.

Questions

1. Paul says that believers have peace with God. How do you experience that peace? What is going on with you when you do *not* experience that peace?
2. Think of a time in your life when suffering led to what Paul calls *character*. How does the concept of *refining* help (or not help) in understanding suffering? What keeps us going when we are suffering?
3. Describe a time when you had a special sense of God’s love being poured into your heart.
4. For whom did Jesus die? How is that important when we are talking with a non-believer about Jesus?
5. Outline what *reconciliation* means in Paul. In what ways is that concept a helpful one for understanding what God has done for us in Jesus?

Session 12: “Summary of Paul’s Message: Part Two”

Text: Romans 8:28-39

Synopsis

In the face of the distractions and sufferings of this world, God works salvation for those who love him. The God made known in Jesus is a God who is for us, who has given Jesus for us, and who justifies us. Whether in this world or in the world to come nothing is able to separate believers from the love of God in Christ.

Questions

1. Do things always work out well for believers? If not, what do you think Paul means when he writes, “we know that all things work together for good for those who love God”?
2. How has God brought good out of the bad things that have happened in your life?
3. What is your thinking about the language of predestination? Is that helpful language for you, or does it not work very well?
4. “If God is for us, who is against us?” How could remembering that verse help you get through a normal day?
5. What events or people in your life might have the potential of separating you from God’s love? How does God answer that potential separation?