

## “TO BRING ABOUT THE OBEDIENCE OF FAITH”

Romans 1:1–7; Key Verse: 1:5

“...through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations...”

Today we'll be looking at the formal introduction of Paul's letter to the Romans, verses 1–7. Somebody may be asking, “Why don't we just move on to the main text?” In our fast-paced world, it's unusual to slow down and meticulously analyze just these brief opening remarks. But if we unpack Apostle Paul's words here, they're like a theological bulldozer: He stresses that Jesus is “Lord,” he calls himself his “servant,” and he declares his mission, which sounds like a global takeover. If we really accept these words, they just might plow up our every comfort zone and strategy for a secure life. As we slow down to ponder these verses, we find a revolutionary truth: the gospel is not just some ideas to be believed; it's a life we all need to enter. God helped Paul enter into this “gospel life” and live it out powerfully. So what is the “gospel” life we all need to live? How do we get in? And why would anybody today want to live this kind of life? May God speak to us today.

Read verse 1. Paul starts by identifying himself as “Paul, a servant...” In Greek the word is “δοῦλος,” and it literally means “slave.” It's an intense word, even shocking. Who introduces themselves as, “Hey, I'm Mark, and I'm **a slave**”? In Paul's time, “slave” was an all-too-familiar word that described the tough lives seen everywhere every day, especially in Rome. Being somebody's slave was a humiliating, negative experience. We still think like this today. So sometimes we tell someone, “Hey, **I'm not** your slave!” But Paul begins by calling himself Jesus' slave. Of course he's “serving” Jesus.<sup>1</sup> But this one word means so much more.

As his slave, Paul is obedient to Jesus. But there's a quality to it. He's willing. He's devoted to Jesus. In fact, he loves him. Why? It's because he's been bought at a tremendous price, by the precious blood of Jesus (1 Cor. 6:20; 1 Pet. 1:18–19). Jesus is now his Owner, Lord, and Master. It's why Paul worships Jesus, and why he's so humble and modest before Jesus. In his past he used to be all about himself, “Saul, the Great One.” But now, Jesus is the focus of his life. In verse 1 Paul calls him “Christ Jesus,” and “Christ” means “King.” Put together, Paul is saying, “Paul, a slave of King Jesus.” He's got the greatest honor: to be the servant of the greatest King who ever lived. He gives all his loyalty to Jesus;

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<sup>1</sup> In Romans, the word δοῦλος in some form is repeated sixteen times.

he's out to bring all glory to Jesus' name (5). He's even willing to die for his King Jesus. He's not *ashamed* of his status as a slave—he's *proud* of it! He's got the greatest privilege there is, to serve the King of kings.

It's not just Paul's story; he's modeling for the Roman believers, and us, what real Christian life looks like. We no longer live for ourselves. **We live in full surrender to Jesus.** In chapter 6 Paul will unpack this. We used to be slaves of sin, but now we're slaves of our Lord Jesus. We don't serve him reluctantly or barely, with a slavish mentality. We present ourselves to him wholeheartedly, in deep gratitude for his grace. We're happy if we can just be his instrument (6:12). Instead of being used for a sinful purpose, by his grace we're now used for a righteous purpose, as Paul was.

Also, we should remember that Paul had been Christ's enemy, breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord (Acts 9:1). But by his incongruous grace, Jesus called such a man to be his "apostle." "Apostle" means "sent one." Sending him, of all people, was only by his grace (1 Tim. 1:13–14). Jesus called this enemy not just to get work done, but to represent him. He made Paul one of his ambassadors (2 Cor.5:20). How could Jesus trust such a man? At first, no one else could trust Paul. But Jesus did. It was the grace and mercy of Jesus that made Paul a trustworthy person (1 Cor.7:25). In his own ministry Paul could see this same grace and mercy of Jesus transforming sin-sick, broken people into new creations and trustworthy, reliable servants who love Jesus.

"Apostle" also means Paul was sent with the authority of Jesus. He was sent "not from man nor through man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father" (Gal.1:1). Later in this letter Paul says Jesus sent him especially to the Gentiles (11:13). And at the end of Romans Paul describes his ministry: "I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God..." (15:18–19a). This is the evidence that Paul really has been living and working by the authority of Jesus: Lives were being changed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

When we're upset with a person, we say, "Who do you think you are?" But Paul wasn't claiming any authority of his own. He didn't think he was sufficient in himself to claim anything as coming from himself; rather, it was God himself who made him sufficient (2 Cor. 3:5–6a). Paul was weak, but his glorious hope in Christ made him very bold (2 Cor. 3:11–12). Writing to these believers in Rome, he was eager to share the gospel with them. At the same time, he was well aware that some were likely to be skeptical, unlikely to really listen or learn from him. Some would be predisposed to be critical and dismissive. So he begins by saying he is "called to be an apostle." This means his words in this letter bear the

authority of Jesus himself. Instead of always playing the critic, we need to humbly and seriously pay attention to what Apostle Paul is writing in Romans.

He also says he's "set apart" for the gospel of God. It means his new life in Christ has been sectioned off, **set apart**. He has much to do, but his life has become laser-focused on one thing, and one thing only: the gospel. Many people think being "set apart" means being superior, "a cut above." But here it just means "utterly devoted." **It means the consecration of my life to Jesus because of his grace to me.** For busy parents with little ones, or busy students, just getting to church once a week can seem heroic. But entering into a gospel life of being set apart means letting Jesus be Lord of all my life. This is not just talk. And it's not just doing drastic things. It's the practical things each day like my mind and heart, my use of time and money, and my privacy. It means putting Jesus first in every life choice, every priority. It means dedicating all I'm doing each day to Jesus—even when life's busy or hard. It's living in his presence, for his sake. This is what it means that Paul is "set apart for the gospel of God."

But what is this gospel? It's not a trendy new idea. Look at verse 2. "...which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures." "Beforehand" covers thousands of years. Paul often quotes these Scriptures, proving that the gospel fulfills what God had been planning all along. Knowing the gospel is based on Scripture will strengthen the Romans' faith, and ours.

Finally Paul gets to what he really wants to say about the gospel. Read verses 3–4. Wow that's a lot of words. But Paul's point is that the gospel is all about Jesus. "According to the flesh" means Jesus was a real, historical human being with a DNA connection to Israel's King David. He has the legal, biological right to be called "Christ," which means Israel's promised "Messiah." By coming in the flesh, Jesus entered into our humanity, all our weaknesses, to fully understand us. "According to the Spirit of holiness" simply means that God the Father used the Holy Spirit to raise Jesus his Son from the dead (8:11). Through his resurrection, God invaded this world filled with sin, death, and the curse and declared the most powerful event in human history: Jesus Christ came as our Lord. Jesus, who humbly became human and died in our places, was raised from the dead. If we truly believe in him, he becomes our personal Lord. Paul, so thankful for his grace, dedicated his life to our Risen Lord. So should we.

Paul goes on to describe the direction that faith in the Lordship of Christ takes. Read verse 5. Basically, when we really accept Jesus as Lord, we get on board with his program. What if we accept Jesus, but only on our own terms? Maybe we want Jesus as our consultant, our life coach when we need him, or a counselor to help us get through rough patches. What if our concept is only to ask for his forgiveness, but it's still for our own happiness, our own fulfillment? Yes, the gospel is about forgiveness, about restoring us as God's children. But

Romans 1:5 tells us that the gospel helps us do a **complete 180°**. With Jesus as our new Lord, we start living for **him** and **his** agenda, not our own. Paul writes elsewhere, "...and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised" (2 Cor. 5:15).

So, what does it mean to "live for Jesus"? Verse 5 tells us. First of all, we receive his gracious "apostleship." Let's be honest, we'll never be on the same level as the original apostles of Jesus. But if we experience his saving grace, he doesn't want us to just selfishly enjoy it; he wants to send even us out into the world as "gospelized" persons. What's a gospelized person? It's someone who embodies the grace of Jesus, who's united with him in his death and resurrection (6:5), someone who shares in his sufferings daily, with the hope to share in his glory (8:17), whose life is transformed by the Spirit (8:2,4). It's such people who influence those around them to learn the obedience of faith.

Now we need to get into this phrase: "the obedience of faith." What is that? First of all, it's obedience not just to rules, laws, or even to words in the Bible; it's obedience to a real person, our Lord Jesus. In fact, this "obedience of faith" starts with just accepting the gospel (10:16). The moment I stop trying to save or prove myself or earn my good standing with God, and just humbly accept the grace Jesus offers me, I am engaging in "the obedience of faith."

But it also continues. "The obedience of faith" is an ongoing surrender to Jesus in my daily life. It's walking in the footsteps of the obedient faith of our spiritual father Abraham (4:12). I start living out my faith that Jesus really is the Lord of my life. Each day I surrender to the Holy Spirit to overcome my flesh and enable me to submit to Jesus. I let **him** lead me. I seek to please **him**, not myself. I offer myself to do **his** will, not my own. And I accept what **he** wants to get done in the world.

So, what does our Lord Jesus want to get done? He wants all people to hear his good news. He wants them all to know this amazing, transformed life they can have, to no longer live under the power of sin, death and the curse. He wants all people to have this restored, close relationship with God, and meaningful direction. He wants all people to learn how to step out in faith to trust him, surrender their lives to him, and find real freedom. They can best do that not by just reading about it in books, or hearing someone talk about it, but by seeing a real, flesh-and-blood transformed person.

Why would anyone today want to live like this? Romans tells that to live with Jesus as my Lord is the best blessing. Through faith in him, God promises us salvation (10:9). He gives us peace (5:1), joy (5:11), hope (4:18; 5:2,4–5; 8:20,24–25; 12:12; 15:4,12–13), deliverance from our body of death (7:24–25a), an inseparable love relationship with him (8:39), and a calling to spread the good

news (10:14–15). It's our faith in his Lordship that unites us with fellow believers (10:12; 15:6). By faith we keep our fervent spirit and zeal in serving our Lord Jesus (12:11). By faith we put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and “make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (13:14). And our Lord upholds us and makes us stand (14:4). Faith in his Lordship involves honoring Jesus in whatever I do (14:6,8–9). Basically, we learn to live “in the Lord” (16:2,8,11–13). It's not a theory. It's the best life imaginable. Those who are transformed, living out their faith in Jesus as Lord, are the ones changing the world.

Hormoz Shariat, a devout Muslim in Iran, came to the U.S. in 1979 to earn a PhD in Artificial Intelligence from USC. Following the Iranian Revolution, his 16-year-old brother, Hamraz, was arrested and executed by the government in the 1980s. Shariat was consumed by hatred and a desire for revenge. But after encountering our Lord Jesus, he experienced a radical “heart transplant.” God replaced his hatred with deep love for the Iranian people, including his family's persecutors. He writes, “...the theology of the cross is the theology of relinquishing rights. On the cross, Jesus did not demand His rights; He submitted His rights; He submitted His life so that His enemies could find life. I realized that if I wanted to follow a crucified Lord, I had to crucify my own right to revenge.”<sup>2</sup> Dr. Shariat eventually left his successful career in AI and founded *Iran Alive Ministries* in 2001, which uses satellite TV to broadcast the gospel into Iran and reaches at least 7 million people daily. He has no physical building or political power, yet his conviction that there is power in weakness in following our crucified Lord gives him such an influence. His story tells us that no area of our human experience, not even deep trauma, is exempt from the obedience of faith.

So Paul begins Romans not with a simple greeting, but with a challenge: the challenge to live a life radically surrendered to the King. He calls himself a “slave” of Christ Jesus. But he also was given Christ's authority, not because he earned it, but because of the incongruous grace of Jesus in his life. Today the question remains the same: “Are we trying to be exempt from his Lordship?” If we accept Jesus as our personal Risen Lord, and all the peace and joy and the eternal life that come through him, we also need to accept his vision to reach all peoples on earth. We lead others to the obedience of faith through the influence of our transformed life lived in deep devotion and submission to our Lord Jesus. May we all leave here today with a clear answer to his call. May God make each one of us real, flesh-and-blood transformed persons, who show the world that surrender to Jesus as Lord is the most blessed life. Let's read verses 6–7.

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<sup>2</sup> Hormoz Shariat, *Iran's Great Awakening: How God is Using a Muslim Convert to Spark Revival* (Mission Viejo, CA: Iran Alive Ministries, 2020), 25–28.