

Paul's Letter to the Romans

Chapter 1:1-17

A reminder: “The writer knew nothing of us and our circumstances, our culture, our language. He wrote to people of whom he presumably knew something, but we don't know much of what he knew.... we know far less than we would like to know about the emergence of early Christianity in the complex Greco-Roman cultural, religious, and political world within which Paul was writing (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 13).”

In the first sentence Paul claims for himself the identity of a slave. The translation of servant does not capture the fullness of Paul's claim or the reality in which Paul lives.

“The empire (Rome) was constituted as an economy and polity based on slavery. Its economics, political, and military power depended upon slavery. The majority of the population of Rome would have been slaves.... A slave was one who had lost all personal identity, whose existence was completely determined by the whim of the master (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 17).”

The title Christ is also political in nature. “This name points to the uprising of the oppressed, enslaved, and impoverished and to the bringing down of the high and mighty, the powerful and privileged. This reversal distinguishes a ‘messiah’ from a king or emperor (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 17).”

Theodore Jennings translates Romans 1:3 - “*the good news about his son, from the seed of David according to the flesh, but designated son of God in power according to a spirit of holiness through the resurrection from the dead* (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 18).” The dynamic to encounter here is the dichotomy between flesh and spirit. Jennings writes, “For Paul, flesh generally designates either opposition to God (and hence to spirit) or weakness (and so, lack of power). We shall see later that these apparently divergent meanings are in fact closely related. The opposition of spirit and flesh is a theme that Paul will strongly emphasize in this text (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 18-19).”

“Joshua (Jesus) is designated messiah, that is, the one hoped for by Israel who would liberate the people of Israel from imperial dominion. At least for Paul, what had been conceived of as a ‘regional’ messiahship (limited to the liberation of a territory or a people) will be regarded instead as universal in scope and radical in depth (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 21).”

In verse five we first encounter the word faith. Here is where some relearning must be done. The word faith should not be understood as belief or even trust, but should be thought of as faithfulness. It is relational. Faithfulness is what is at stake.

“Faith as faithfulness or loyalty is what is at stake, and this commonsensically entails something like a form of behavior that corresponds to the one to whom one is loyal or faithful. Indeed, in the Greco-Roman world, *pistis* was regularly associated with a set of mutual obligations that linked together patrons and their clients (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 21).”

We will explore this dynamic of faithfulness through Paul’s letter. It is a key theme for his argument as we will see in verses 16 and 17, the thesis statement for his argument.

Paul understands himself and his readers to be called into a new way of life, a new way of being in relationship with one another, as he writes in verse six, “...including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ...”

“But what Paul is concerned with is a calling that extracts one from the existing social and political order by subjecting one to an adherence to a radically disruptive existence and hence a new kind of subjectivity. His subjectivity, as well as that of his (intended) readers, is constituted by and through this disruptive interpolation, this messianic call (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 23).”

The greeting in verse seven could be understood as “generosity and peace...” The word grace has lost much of its currency. Generosity is the business of God and what God has done through Jesus Christ for the sake of the whole world.

Peace is an idea that was controlled by the empire. The famous *pax romana*, the Roman peace, was a peace won through military victory and brute force. The peace that Paul offers is in the name of Jesus Christ. “It will be a peace not enforced by armies but spread through the proclamation concerning one that empire executed. And it will be enforced not by the death penalty but empowered by the spirit of life (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 25).”

This is an important concept for us to recognize, as some would argue we live under the *pax americana* of a modern/post-modern imperial reality in the united states.

Paul’s Thesis

Romans 1:16-17 (NRSV)

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.”

Jennings Translation

“For I am not ashamed of the glad announcement: it is divine power for salvation (wholeness) for all the faithful, to the Judean first and the Greek. For in it divine justice is disclosed from faithfulness to faithfulness, for as it has been written: the just live through faithfulness (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 27).”

“It (proclamation of Jesus as the crucified messiah) is the quintessentially political power, the power to save, to overcome and prevent harm, the power to give, sustain, and protect life, the life of the whole human society. One difficulty here is that it is forgotten that salvation is basically a political concept. It has to do with establishing the common good, defending the common good from the predations of enemies or of overcoming the sort of civil strife that threatens the existence of society. For this reason the emperor could be called *soter*, savior (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 28).”

“This wholeness is connected to faithfulness or loyalty. Through loyalty to the divine announcement the world is protected from danger and human well-being is established (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 29).”

“What loyalty engenders is justice. In antiquity the theme of justice is indissolubly linked to the space of the political. When Plato turns to a discussion of the *polis* (the city) in *The Republic*, he does so as a discussion precisely of justice. This is not a completely new theme to him. Indeed, in his dialogs he returned again and again to the theme of justice as the principal way of understanding the common life of human beings (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 29).”

“Justice is the only possible basis for social well-being, for the well-being of the city or the body politic. Yet it is said that to just live through faithfulness; indeed, justice comes into being only as faithfulness or loyalty to what God is doing in the world.... As one lives out faithfulness, one is or becomes just (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 29).”

One of my professors, Dr. Ray Pickett, argues that salvation in scripture is communal, concrete, and cosmic. Salvation is communal in that it restores community. Salvation is concrete in that it takes place in real time, here and now. Salvation is cosmic in that it is for all people, not just for an ethnic or cultural group.

Paul’s argument about God’s justice is that it is salvation for all people, the whole world, and that this justice is lived out and experience through faithfulness to God. We will see this argument fleshed out in chapter three after Paul exposes the injustice of both Rome and the Judeans.