

# YOBL

## Year of Biblical Literacy

# Week 43: A Community Following Jesus, Part 3 - Reflection on Paul's Letter to the Romans

## Daily Reading for Week

- Romans 1-2, Psalm 133
- Romans 3-4, Psalm 134
- Romans 5-6, Psalm 135
- Romans 7-8, Psalm 136
- Romans 9-10, Psalm 137
- Romans 11-12, Psalm 138
- Romans 13-14, Psalm 139
- Read Scripture Video: Romans 1-4 and Romans 5-16

## Focus of time together

Using Paul's letter to the Romans, we will seek to orient ourselves to the New Testament Epistles by observing how these letters connect to the complex communal life of the early Jesus followers, who we observed in the Book of Acts. Specifically, we will read through a handful of passages to reflect on the dominant thread of the communal tension that was caused by the scandalous inclusion of the Gentiles into the people of God.

## Opening Prayer

## Intro to Discussion

The first two weeks of our New Testament series called "A Community Following Jesus" have provided space to reflect on our favourite Gospel stories as well as a handful of passages from Acts. For most of the rest of the year, we will read through the Epistles, which are letters written to various communities or individuals during the first few decades after Jesus' death and resurrection. These letters are all about the practical, ground-level tensions that the early Jesus communities were wrestling through. As we will see, it is these Jesus communities' specific questions and particular challenges which the Epistles seek to resolve. In essence, the Epistles were personal communications seeking to assist various early Christians in working out how exactly

they were supposed to live in light of the many spectacular truths about Jesus the Messiah. The Gospels posed the question, “Who do you say Jesus is?” Luke’s extension of Jesus’ ministry into the life of the apostles and early church, which we call Acts, essentially posed the question, “Then what?” And now the Epistles wrestle with, in various forms, the basic question, “How then shall we live?”

For this reason, most of our time together exploring the Epistles will actually not be devoted to exploring each letter, but rather by working through our four community values. These values — faith, humility, hospitality, and rootedness — are essentially our answer to that same question. How do we follow Jesus together as a community in San Francisco? By practicing faith, humility, hospitality, and rootedness. As we chew on these values beginning next week and the three weeks following, we will try to move beyond merely intellectualising and actually begin doing these things together. But we’ll also take various glimpses into the Epistles to try to see how this kind of communal exercise — trying to understand how we should live and beginning to practice living this way together — is at the heart of these texts. So before we jump into the values, we will use this week to try to understand and situate ourselves in the Epistles starting with Romans.

In order to engage the Epistles in this way, understanding what they mean and also letting them shape our community, we will have to deal with the contextual chasm that exists between their world and ours. The questions we ask today about “How then we shall practically live in San Francisco” are often completely different from the early Church’s questions. We have to try to understand what actual tensions and questions the apostle Paul’s audience were wrestling with before we can make sense of Paul’s response. And we cannot simply take those responses as the answers to our own very different questions. In other words, reading the Epistles and applying them to our community is difficult work. If you want more help, read our recent online hermeneutic resource called Paul & the Epistles .

Here are two key points: 1) We often misunderstand the questions that the Epistles are answering, and therefore, we tend to misread them. 2) Though the early church faced dozens of situations and theological conundrums, the most dominant questions underlying the Epistles are those related to the scandal of the Gentile inclusion: “How do we make sense of this shocking turn of events? What does this mean for Jews then, especially those who don’t believe Jesus was the Messiah? How Jewish do these Gentiles have to act anyway? And how the heck do we practically do community together, seeing as these non-Jews are totally foreign to our ways and were literally our enemies yesterday?”

As we dive into Paul’s letter to the Romans, we will try to understand the context and point of this letter and how it differs from the way we often try to read it. What we will see is that Romans isn’t primarily about how to get saved and go to heaven (as the “Romans Road” interpretation posits). Indeed, that question in those terms would have been totally foreign to Paul and the Roman church. Rather, the letter is dealing with the

kinds of questions listed above pertaining to the messy, heated, and theologically loaded issue of the inclusion of non-Jews into the people of God and the apparent self-selected exclusion of most Jews. Last week, we noted that this reshaping of the people of God to include believers from around the entire world but relatively few of the Jews was the dominant turn of events in Acts as well. This re-definition of God's true holy people incited fierce anger from non-Christian Jews and much practical confusion from Jewish and non-Jewish Christ-followers. Indeed, as Acts 15 illustrates, this hostility and confusion was cause for the first recorded church-wide council as well as the first recorded apostolic epistle. So, before we actually jump into Romans, we'll return briefly to Acts.

Practically, we will follow a similar pattern to the last two weeks, reading and journaling through several passages to get an overall snapshot of the text and then participating in a short discussion at the end.

## **Whole Group Discussion (60 minutes)**

### **Questions for Interacting with Scripture**

*These questions are to help us slow down, to taste and notice Scripture, savour its richness and meditate on its complexity of meaning.*

#### **Read Acts 15:1-34**

Journal Prompt (10 mins)

Though God had revealed that there was now no discrimination between Jew and Gentile (v9), there was a strong tendency amongst Jewish believers, especially those of the conservative sect called the Pharisees, to "make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God" (v19) "by putting on the necks of the Gentiles a yoke" (v11) that they themselves were unable to bear.

1. Why do we as humans have such a strong propensity to make it difficult for others to feel as if they belong with us?
2. What attitudes and ideas underly this tendency to create barriers of separation?

#### **Read Romans 1:1-17**

Journal Prompt (10 mins)

1. Considering this opening to the letter, what do you think is the motivation driving Paul's ministry to the Gentiles in general and his writing this letter to the Romans in particular?
2. What possibilities most excite him?

#### **Read Romans 2:17-29**

Journal Prompt (10 mins)

The biggest ask of Gentiles from the strict Jews mentioned in Acts 15 was that of circumcision. This was considered the ultimate badge of the insider, of the true people of God. But it was indeed a difficult yoke. Here Paul lambasts the hypocrisy of such demands and deems this bad religion. Verses 25-27:

“Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. So then, if those who are not circumcised keep the law’s requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker.”

1. What would it have cost such Jews to forego the requirement of circumcision and welcome the Gentiles just as they were?
2. Why does generous inclusion often feel like a dangerous threat?
3. What do “insiders” have to lose from such inclusion?

### **Read Romans 9:30-10:4**

Journal Prompt (10 mins)

Paul summarises the misguided religiosity of the anti-Jesus Jews this way: “Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness” (Romans 10:3).

1. Are there any ways you see this same religious tendency playing out in Christianity today?
2. What does it feel like to have to protect your own system/culture of perceived rightness, even to the point of defending it from God’s challenges?
3. What does it feel like to be part of a culture that wants to enforce their own perception of cultural rightness onto you, perhaps even in the name of God?

### **Read Romans 11:1-24**

Journal Prompt (10 mins)

Much of Paul’s language here and elsewhere in Romans shows that there is no room for contempt or disdain between Jews and Christians. That indeed is why the common dependence on grace and mercy is so often emphasised.

1. If a friend were to ask you, “What is the relationship, according to the Bible, between Jews and Christians, what would you say?”
2. Is there any religious contempt in your heart that the Holy Spirit desires to transform into compassion?

### **Read Romans 15:5-13**

Journal Prompt (10 mins)

“May the God who gives you endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had... Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God” (v5,7). Paul had an exceedingly high, even otherworldly, vision for the Jesus community as a sphere of radical reconciliation and unity. In Paul’s mind, the ongoing work of Jesus in the world was excluding exclusion, and Paul was fighting to help the church practically embody that reality.

1. The main issue at hand in the early Church was this religious and ethnic unity project shaped around Christ. And we live in one of the great melting pots of world cultures. So how might God be challenging us to expand our vision for Christian community?

2. How might you specifically begin participating in radical inclusion and unity in a costly and self-sacrificial way (as Jesus did for you)?

### **Small Group Discussion (15 mins)**

3. What stood out to you in these passages and prompts?
4. In what ways might God be trying to challenge you, encourage you, inspire you etc.?

### **Closing Prayer**