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# The Good News of God—part 1 (Romans 1:1)

# 1

**Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, (1:1)**

A quick look at any newspaper or passing glance at a weekly news magazine reminds us that in our world most news is bad and seems to be getting worse. What is happening on a national and worldwide scale is simply the magnification of what is happening on an individual level. As personal problems, animosities, and fears increase, so do their counterparts in society at large.

Human beings are in the hold of a terrifying power that grips them at the very core of their being. Left unchecked, it pushes them to self-destruction in one form or another. That power is sin, which is always bad news.

Sin is bad news in every dimension. Among its consequences are four inevitable byproducts that guarantee misery and sorrow for a world taken captive. First, sin has selfishness at its heart. The basic element of fallen human nature is exaltation of self, the ego. When Satan fell, he was asserting his own will above God's, five times declaring, "I will. . ." (Isa. 14:13-14). Man fell by the same self-will, when Adam and Eve asserted

their own understanding about right and wrong above God's clear instruction (Gen. 2:16-17; 3:1-7).

By nature man is self-centered and inclined to have his own way. He will push his selfishness as far as circumstances and the tolerance of society will allow. When self-will is unbridled, man consumes everything and everyone around him in an insatiable quest to please himself. When friends, fellow workers, or a spouse cease to provide what is wanted, they are discarded like an old pair of shoes. Much of modern western society has been so imbued with the propriety of self-esteem and self-will that virtually every desire has come to be considered a right.

The ultimate goal in many lives today is little more than perpetual self-satisfaction. Every object, every idea, every circumstance, and every person is viewed in light of what it can contribute to one's own purposes and welfare. Lust for wealth, possessions, fame, dominance, popularity, and physical fulfillment drives people to pervert everything they possess and everyone they know. Employment has become nothing more than a necessary evil to finance one's indulgences. As is often noted, there is constant danger of loving things and using people rather than loving people and using things. When that temptation is succumbed to, stable and faithful personal relationships become impossible. A person engulfed in self-will and self-fulfillment becomes less and less capable of loving, because as his desire to possess grows, his desire to give withers. And when he forfeits selflessness for selfishness, he forfeits the source of true joy.

Selfish greed progressively alienates a person from everyone else, including those who are closest and dearest. The end result is loneliness and despair. Everything that is craved soon yields to the law of diminishing returns, and the more one has of it the less it satisfies.

Second, sin produces guilt, another form of bad news. No matter how convincingly one tries to justify selfishness, its inevitable abuse of things and other people cannot escape generating guilt.

Like physical pain, guilt is a God-given warning that something is wrong and needs correcting. When guilt is ignored or suppressed, it continues to grow and intensify, and with it come anxiety, fear, sleeplessness, and countless other spiritual and physical afflictions. Many people try to overcome those afflictions by masking them with possessions, money, alcohol, drugs, sex, travel, and psychoanalysis. They try to assuage their guilt by blaming society, parents, a deprived childhood, environment, restrictive moral codes, and even God Himself. But the irresponsible notion of blaming other persons and things only aggravates the guilt and escalates the accompanying afflictions.

Third, sin produces meaninglessness, still another form of bad news and one that is endemic to modern times. Trapped in his own selfishness, the self-indulgent person has no sense of purpose or meaning.

Life becomes an endless cycle of trying to fill a void that cannot be filled. The result is futility and despair. To questions such as, “Why am I here? What is the meaning of life? What is truth?” he finds no answers in the world but the lies of Satan, who is the author of lies and prince of the present world system (cf. John 8:44; 2 Cor. 4:4). In the words of Edna St. Vincent Millay in her poem “Lament,” he can only say, “Life must go on; I forget just why.” Or, like the central character in one of Jean-Paul Sartre’s novels, he may say nihilistically, “I decided to kill myself to remove at least one superfluous life.”

A fourth element in sin’s chain of bad news is hopelessness, which is the companion of meaninglessness. The consumptively selfish person forfeits hope, both for this life and for the next. Although he may deny it, he senses that even death is not the end, and for the hopeless sinner death becomes therefore the ultimate bad news.

Thousands of babies are born every day into a world filled with bad news. And because of the boundless selfishness that permeates modern society, millions of other babies are not allowed to enter the world at all. That tragedy alone has made the bad news of the modern world immeasurably worse.

The tidbits of seemingly good news are often merely a brief respite from the bad, and sometimes even what appears to be good news merely masks an evil. Someone once commented cynically that peace treaties merely provide time for everyone to reload!

But the essence of Paul’s letter to the Romans is that there is good news that is truly good. The apostle was, in fact, “a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest of the gospel of God” (Rom. 15:16). He brought the good news that in Christ sin can be forgiven, selfishness can be overcome, guilt can be removed, anxiety can be alleviated, and life can indeed have hope and eternal glory.

In his Romans letter Paul speaks of the good news in many ways, each way emphasizing a uniquely beautiful facet of one spiritual gem. He calls it the blessed good news, the good news of salvation, the good news of Jesus Christ, the good news of God’s Son, and the good news of the grace of God. The letter begins (1:1) and ends (16:25-26) with the good news.

The entire thrust of the sixteen chapters of Romans is distilled into the first seven verses. The apostle apparently was so overjoyed by his message of good news that he could not wait to introduce his readers to the gist of what he had to say. He burst into it immediately.

In Romans 1:1-7 Paul unfolds seven aspects of the good news of Jesus Christ. He first identifies himself as the preacher of the good news (v. 1), which will be discussed in this present chapter. He then tells of the promise (v. 2), the Person (vv. 3-4), the provision (v. 5a), the proclamation (v. 5b), the purpose (v. 5c), and the privileges of the good news (vv. 6-7).

## THE PREACHER OF THE GOOD NEWS

### **Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, (1:1)**

God called a unique man to be the major spokesman for His glorious good news. **Paul** was God's keynote speaker, as it were, for heralding the gospel. A singularly gifted man, he was given divine "insight into the mystery of Christ" (Eph.3:4), "the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations; but has now been manifested to His saints" (Col. 1:26). That remarkable Jew with Greek education and Roman citizenship, with incredible leadership ability, high motivation, and articulate expression, was specially and directly called, converted, and gifted by God.

**Paul** crisscrossed much of the Roman Empire as God's ambassador of the good news of Christ. He performed many healing miracles, yet was not relieved of his own thorn in the flesh. He raised Eutychus from the dead but was at least once left for dead himself. He preached freedom in Christ but was imprisoned by men during many years of his ministry.

In the first verse Paul discloses three important things about himself in regard to his ministry: his position as a servant of Christ, his authority as an apostle of Christ, and his power in being set apart for the gospel of Christ.

#### PAUL'S POSITION AS A SERVANT OF CHRIST

### **a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, (1:1a)**

*Doulos* (**bond-servant**) carries the basic idea of subservience and has a wide range of connotations. It was sometimes used of a person who voluntarily served others, but most commonly it referred to those who were in unwilling and permanent bondage, from which often there was no release but death.

The Hebrew equivalent (*'ebed*) is used hundreds of times in the Old Testament and carries the same wide range of connotations. The Mosaic law provided for an indentured servant to voluntarily become a permanent bond-slave of a master he loved and respected. "If a slave plainly says, I love my master, my wife and my children; I will not go out as a free man,' then his master shall bring him to God, then he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall pierce his ear

with an awl; and he shall serve him permanently” (Ex. 21:5-6).

That practice reflects the essence of Paul’s use of the term *doulos* in Romans 1:1. The apostle had given himself wholeheartedly in love to the divine Master who saved him from sin and death.

In New Testament times there were millions of slaves in the Roman Empire, the vast majority of whom were forced into slavery and kept there by law. Some of the more educated and skilled slaves held significant positions in a household or business and were treated with considerable respect. But most slaves were treated much like any other personal property of the owner and were considered little better than work animals. They had virtually no rights under the law and could even be killed with impunity by their masters.

Some commentators argue that because of the great difference between Jewish slavery as practiced in Old Testament times and the slavery of first-century Rome, Paul had only the Jewish concept in mind when speaking of his relationship to Christ. Many of the great figures in the Old Testament were referred to as servants. God spoke of Abraham and Moses as His servants (Gen. 26:24; Num. 12:7). Joshua is called “the servant of the Lord” (Josh. 24:29), as are David (2 Sam. 7:5) and Isaiah (Isa. 20:3). Even the Messiah is called God’s Servant (Isa. 53:11). In all of those instances, and in many more in the Old Testament, the term *servant* carries the idea of humble nobility and honor. But as already noted, the Hebrew word (*‘ebed*) behind *servant* was also used of bond-slaves.

In light of Paul’s genuine humility and his considering himself the foremost of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15), it is certain that he was not arrogating to himself the revered and noble title of servant of the Lord as used in the citations above. He considered himself Christ’s **bond-servant** in the most unassuming sense.

There is, of course, an honor and dignity attached to all of God’s true servants, even the most seemingly insignificant, and Paul was very much aware of the undeserved but real dignity God bestows on those who belong to Him. Yet he was constantly aware also that the dignity and honor God gives His children are purely from grace, that *in themselves* Christians are still sinful, depraved, and undeserving. He wrote to the Corinthian church, “What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one” (1 Cor. 3:5). Here Paul uses the term *diakonos* to describe his position as servant, a term commonly used of table waiters. But as in his use of *doulos*, the emphasis here is on subservience and insignificance, not honor. Later in the same letter he asks his readers to regard him as a galley slave (4:1). The term used here is *hupēretēs* (“servants”) which literally means “underrowers,” referring to the lowest level of rowers in the large galley of a Roman ship. This was perhaps the hardest, most dangerous,

and most demeaning work a slave could do. Such slaves were considered the lowest of the low.

Because he was called and appointed by Christ Himself, Paul would never belittle his position as an apostle or even as a child of God. He plainly taught that godly leaders in the church, especially those who are diligent in preaching and teaching, are “worthy of double honor” by fellow believers (1 Tim. 5:17). But he continually emphasized that such positions of honor are provisions of God’s grace.

## PAUL’S AUTHORITY AS AN APOSTLE

### **called as an apostle, (1:b)**

Paul next establishes the authority of his ministry, based on his being **called as an apostle**. Perhaps a better rendering would be “a called apostle,” which more clearly points up the fact that his position **as an apostle** was not of his own doing. He did not volunteer for that office, nor was he elected by fellow believers. He was divinely **called** by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

While Paul, then called Saul, was still blinded from his miraculous encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road, the Lord said to Ananias about Paul: “He is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel” (Acts 9:15). In relaying the message to Paul, Ananias said, “The God of our fathers has appointed you to know His will, and to see the Righteous One, and to hear an utterance from His mouth. For you will be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard” (Acts 22:14-15). Paul later gave the additional revelation that Christ already had given that message directly to him, saying,

Arise, and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you; delivering you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God in order that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me. (Acts 26:16-18)

Paul told the Corinthian believers, “I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel” (1 Cor. 9:16). God had given him a task he had never dreamed of and had never asked for, and he



knew he would be in serious trouble if he was not obedient to his divine commission.

Paul was “an apostle (not sent from men, nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead)” (Gal. 1:1). He went on to declare, “Am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ” (v. 10).

**Apostle** translates *apostolos*, which has the basic meaning of a person who is sent. It referred to someone who was officially commissioned to a position or task, such as an envoy or ambassador. Cargo ships were sometimes called apostolic, because they were dispatched with a specific shipment for a specific destination.

The term **apostle** appears some seventy-nine times in the New Testament and is used in a few instances in a general, nontechnical sense (see Rom. 16:7; Acts 14:14). In its broadest sense, *apostle* can refer to all believers, because every believer is sent into the world as a witness for Christ. But the term is primarily used as a specific and unique title for the thirteen men (the Twelve, with Matthias replacing Judas, and Paul) whom Christ personally chose and commissioned to authoritatively proclaim the gospel and lead the early church.

The thirteen apostles not only were all called directly by Jesus but all were witnesses of His resurrection, Paul having encountered Him on the Damascus Road after His ascension. Those thirteen apostles were given direct revelation of God’s Word to proclaim authoritatively, the gift of healing, and the power to cast out demons (Matt. 10:1). By these signs their teaching authority was verified (cf. 2 Cor. 12:12). Their teachings became the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20), and their authority extended beyond local bodies of believers to the entire believing world.

Although the apostles were “the sent-ones” in a unique way, every person who speaks for God must be called and sent by Him. There are many people preaching, teaching, and presuming to prophesy in Christ’s name whom Christ has clearly not sent. They obviously have no anointing of God because their teachings and living do not square with God’s Word.

False prophets have always plagued God’s people. They corrupted ancient Israel, they have corrupted the church through all the centuries of its existence, and they continue to corrupt the church today. Through Jeremiah the Lord said of such impostors, “I did not send these prophets, but they ran. I did not speak to them, but they prophesied” (Jer. 23:21).

Some religious leaders not only give no evidence of being called by God to preach and teach in His name but even give little evidence of salvation. In his book *The Reformed Pastor*, seventeenth-century Puritan pastor Richard Baxter devotes a hundred pages to warning preachers of the gospel to be sure first of all that they are truly redeemed and second that they have been called by God to His ministry.

## PAUL'S POWER IN BEING SET APART FOR THE GOSPEL

**set apart for the gospel of God, (1c)**

Because Paul was called and sent by God as an apostle, his whole life was **set apart** in the Lord's service. Even a person who has been called by God to a special type or place of service cannot be effective if he is not also separated unto God for **the gospel of God**.

Throughout the Old Testament, God provided for the setting apart of His chosen people. To the entire nation He declared, "You are to be holy to Me, for I the Lord am holy; and I have set you apart from the peoples to be Mine" (Lev. 20:26). Just before He delivered His people from Pharaoh's Army the Lord commanded: "You shall devote to the Lord the first offspring of every womb, and the first offspring of every beast that you own; the males belong to the Lord" (Ex. 13:12). God also demanded the firstfruits of their crops (Num. 15:20). The Levites were set apart as the priestly tribe (Num. 8:11-14).

In the Septuagint (Greek) version of the above passages from Exodus, Numbers, and Leviticus, the words translated "present," "lift up," and "set apart" are all forms of *aphorizō*, the term Paul used for his being **set apart**. It is used of setting apart to God the firstborn, of offering to God first fruits, of consecrating to God the Levites, and of separating Israel to God from other peoples. There was to be no intermingling of the chosen people with the Gentile nations or of the sacred with the profane and ordinary.

The Aramaic term *Pharisee* may share a common root with *aphorizō* and carries the same idea of separation. The Pharisees, however, were not set apart by God or according to God's standards but had rather set themselves apart according to the standards of their own traditions (cf. Matt. 23:1, 2).

Although Paul himself had once been the most ardent of the self-appointed Pharisees, he was now set apart divinely, not humanly. God revealed to him that he had been set apart by God's grace even from his mother's womb (Gal. 1:15). When he and Barnabas were set apart and commissioned for missionary work by the church in Antioch, it was on the direct instruction of the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:2).

Paul's clear understanding of this separateness comes through in his writing to Timothy. Timothy was a genuine servant of God, and he had been personally disciplined by Paul and succeeded him as pastor of the church at Ephesus. But at some point in his ministry he may have come dangerously close to being ineffective, perhaps because of fear of opposition or because of temporary weakness. Paul therefore exhorted his beloved friend, "I remind you to kindle afresh the gift of God which is

in you through the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline” (2 Tim. 1:6-7). He may also have been tempted to be ashamed of the gospel and of Paul, as suggested in Paul’s saying to him, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).

Perhaps because Timothy became distracted from his primary work of preaching and teaching the Word and had become involved in fruitless disputes with unbelievers or immature believers, Paul admonished him further, saying, “Avoid worldly and empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness” (2:16). It is even possible that Timothy was in danger of falling into some form of immoral behavior, prompting Paul to warn: “Flee from youthful lusts, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart” (2:22).

Despite Timothy’s high calling and remarkable training, Paul feared that his young disciple was capable of slipping back into some worldly ways. Like many Christians, he discovered that life can appear to be easier and less troublesome when compromises are made. Paul had to remind him that he was set apart by God for God’s work and for no one else and for nothing else.

The term *euangelion* (**gospel**) is used some sixty times in this epistle. William Tyndale defined it as “glad tidings” (*Doctrinal Treatises and Introductions to Different Portions of the Holy Scriptures by William Tyndale*, Henry Walter, ed. [Cambridge: University Press, 1848], p. 484). It is the good news that God will deliver us from our selfish sin, free us from our burden of guilt, and give meaning to life and make it abundant.

The most important thing about **the gospel** is that it is **of God**. Paul makes that clear in the first sentence of his epistle in order that his readers have no confusion regarding the specific good news about which he was speaking. *Euangelion* was a common term used in the cult of emperor worship that was common in Paul’s day. Many of the caesars claimed deity for themselves and demanded worship from every person in the empire, free or slave, rich or poor, renowned or unknown. Favorable events relating to the emperor were proclaimed to the citizens as “good news.” The town herald would stand in the village square and shout, “Good news! The emperor’s wife has given birth to a son,” or, “Good news! The emperor’s heir has come of age,” or, “Good news! The new emperor has acceded to the throne.”

Especially because he was writing to believers in the Roman capital, Paul wanted to be certain that his readers understood that the good news he proclaimed was of an entirely different order than the trivial and vain proclamations concerning the emperors. The fact that it was **of God** meant that God was the source of it. It was not man’s good news, but God’s good news for man.

One cannot help wondering why God would condescend to bring good news to a world that rejects and scorns Him. No one deserves to hear it, much less to be saved by it.

The noted expository preacher Donald Grey Barnhouse told the fascinating legend of a young Frenchman who was dearly loved by his mother but in early manhood fell into immorality. He was greatly enamored of an unprincipled woman who managed to gain his total devotion. When the mother tried to draw her son away from the wicked and debased association, the other woman became enraged. She railed at the young man, accusing him of not truly loving her and insisting that he demonstrate his commitment to her by getting rid of his mother. The man resisted until a night when, in a drunken stupor, he was persuaded to carry out the heinous demand. According to the story, the man rushed from the room to his mother's house nearby, brutally killed her, and even cut out her heart to take to his vile companion as proof of his wickedness. But as he rushed on in his insane folly, he stumbled and fell, upon which the bleeding heart is said to have cried out, "My son, are you hurt?" Dr. Barnhouse commented, "That is the way God loves" (*Man's Ruin: Romans 1:1-32* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952], pp. 21-22).

Paul himself was living proof of God's great love and mercy. Though he had opposed Christ and persecuted the church, God had made him the Church's chief spokesman. He could imagine no greater role than being set apart to God for the proclamation of His gospel, the good news of salvation in Christ. Perhaps that is one reason he was so effective. Who knew better than Paul just how good the good news really was?