

week 11 eleven



*I invite you to turn your attention to chapters one and two of
Paul's letter to the church in Rome.*



Discover

I write these words as our nation waits with bated breath for the results of the election. I find it is a discipline to not pick up my phone every thirty seconds and click refresh. I cannot anticipate the condition of our country when you read these words. Though I do not know who will accept the presidency, I clearly observe a nation that is divided and polarized more than ever before. This week, I draw our attention to the first four chapters of Romans as we near the end of our study of Paul's letter to a divided and polarized church.

Not unlike a modern letter, Paul's initial statements tell the church in Rome about Paul's identity and his credentials. We quickly sense that Paul is very confident that he holds the authority to speak into the challenging circumstances experienced by the church. Paul is a servant, or slave, to Christ, an apostle, one called-out, and tasked with proclamation of the gospel. Paul does not only emphasize his identity, but immediately affirms the identity of the followers in Rome. This is a challenging and confrontational letter but it is equally a letter of love from God to a struggling church. Paul's affirmation of this community establishes that the most important thing the Romans need to know from the very beginning is that they belong to Jesus, they are loved by God and called to be a part of God's people. Paul addresses his words "to all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people." I invite you to read this address again. Allow the impact of this claim to settle into your heart. "To All in Rome." "loved by God." "Called to be his holy people." Interwoven into this single address is the purpose of Paul's letter to unite a divided community through a shared identity and purpose. All in Rome are loved by God and called to be his people. But Paul reveals that embracing this identity is a challenge for both the Gentile and Jewish believers. The heart of their conflict lies in both factions experiencing a crisis of identity.

At the close of chapter one, Paul names idolatry as the threat that prevents the Gentiles from deepening their innate knowledge of God. Despite an awareness of the creator through creation, the Gentiles choose to worship created things. They misplace their identity by belonging to deities in the form of sculpted idols, animals, and their own bodies. As we read Paul's critique of the Gentiles, it is important to note that the Jewish believers were likely cheering as Phoebe read this portion of the letter grateful that Paul is putting these Gentiles in their place and condemning idolatry.

Do you feel the shock as Paul turns his attention to the Jewish believers at the close of chapter two? Paul confronts the Jewish believers for placing their identity in external markers of religious piety. Their allegiance is to the law's requirements and circumcision. Like the Gentiles they vehemently critique, the Jewish believers are comfortable with their own limited knowledge of God despite inheriting the wisdom of Judaism. Their comprehension of God is, like the Gentiles, only skin deep while God is asking for their hearts. God is seeking a circumcision of the heart, a decision to belong wholly to God in ways that define our whole being and not only our outward displays of obedience or disobedience.





Discover

Paul's letter is written to two factions who cannot comprehend who they are or rather; whose they are. Woven into every part of this letter, is Paul's invitation to allow the knowledge that you are beloved by God to resonate through your whole being. Come and be one people, the people of God. This invitation is to all in Rome. This invitation is to all of us to remember our identity is found, revealed, known only when we step into a relationship with God as individuals and as a community.



Pray

Monday

“To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.” Romans 1:1-7

God,

Thank you that you called me to be your followers and an apprentice of Jesus. I am honored to share this wonderful gift, message, and way of life with those around me. I am humbled to be a part of this story and plan that began in the garden of Eden, was foretold by the prophets, demonstrated with power and love in Jesus' life and resurrection and continues throughout history until the end of time. Thank you for the grace and peace you provide so that through faith I can be an instrument of your work in the world.

Tuesday

“For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.” Romans 1:18-32

God,

When you look at this world I wonder what you see. When I look around I see hate, wrath, cheating, malice, greed, stealing, contempt, arrogance, selfishness, condemnation, sexual immorality and violence. So much of what we do, say, and think comes from our brokenness and dysfunction. When I'm honest, I can see these evils in my heart and actions. It pains my soul to acknowledge their presence. I don't want them to be there, not just so I'm free of the guilt within but so I can bring your goodness, love, and kindness to all. I yield myself to you so that through your love and power you can transform my heart and mind to live as your child

Wednesday

“Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?” Romans 2:1-4

God,

It is difficult for me to think of you as a judge or giving judgement. When I do I think of you as looking for my faults, bringing them to my attention, convicting me of my crime, I don't think this is accurate but it is how I have thought of you in the past and occasionally still do now. In what ways should I correctly understand your truth and justice? What words and ideas truly reflect who you are? Help me to know the riches of your kindness, forbearance, and patience that draws me into repentance.



Pray

Thursday

God,

You are so loving, kind, protective, patient, faithful, and steadfast. I stubbornly cling to my own way and close my ears to your wise counsel. My stubbornness is not a pretty trait. I'm like the child who is willful and mad because I'm told not to play with the electrical outlet. How silly my behavior must seem to you, at least it would seem this way to me if I was you. Thankfully, unlike me, you are not condemning and judgemental. When I'm thinking clearly I know that many of my choices are storing up trouble and destruction. But in the moment of the choice I am often unaware or uncaring of the consequences. Oh how deeply I want to turn away from my stubbornness and accept your unforced love and gifts.

Friday

"No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God."
Romans 2:17-29

God,

It is so easy for me to fall into the trap of legalism. I think that by doing or not doing certain things that I somehow gain your favor or obligate you to me. How could I fall into such a wrongheaded way of thinking? Please write your character onto my heart so that the requirements of your laws are fulfilled as a natural result of who you have transformed me to be. Please keep reminding me that my relationship to you as your child and friend is first about who I am to you and then what I do will be as it should be.



Reflect

The following questions are designed to help you reflect more deeply on the themes we explore together as we journey through Paul's letter to the Romans. I invite you to make space to sit with these questions without any need for a quick or clear answer. As you settle into a quiet and comfortable space, I encourage you to discuss these questions with God. Ask God to prompt you, to guide your thoughts, or bring up new questions that could be more helpful to you.

1 How do you identify yourself? Our identities are complex but what roles or characteristics do you use most to identify yourself?

2 If God addressed the community at the Tempe Church of Christ, how would God define us?

3 The Gentiles and the Jewish believers both believe that they possess a clearer picture of God and pass judgment on one another. Paul challenges both groups that they possess only limited knowledge of God. How do we safeguard ourselves and our community against a tendency to believe we understand God's character and nature?

4 Paul uses a common prophetic tactic of naming the critiques of the Jewish followers of the Gentiles in order to prompt deeper awareness within the Jewish followers of their own shortcomings. Is there a community or an individual that Paul might use to highlight your own judgement and the state of your heart?

