



## Sermon Transcript

### May 31, 2020

# God's One Story of Redemption

## Devoted to the Teaching

### Romans 1:1-7

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on May 31, 2020 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at [www.wethefc.com](http://www.wethefc.com).

**Sermon Text**  
**Romans 1:1-7**

<sup>1</sup> Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God,  
<sup>2</sup> which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures,  
<sup>3</sup> concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh <sup>4</sup> and was  
declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his  
resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, <sup>5</sup> 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, <sup>6</sup> including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. <sup>7</sup> To all  
those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace  
from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

## Introduction

A couple weeks ago, on May 19, one of the most influential Christian teachers of our day went home to be with the Lord. Ravi Zacharias died at the age of 74 after a brief battle with cancer.

Ravi was born in Chennai, India and was raised in New Delhi. His ancestors belonged to the highest caste of Hindu priests, but somewhere along the way, his family was converted to Christianity, by German-Swiss missionaries. But as he grew up, he was not very religious. In an article he wrote for *Christianity Today* he recounts his story where at the age of 17 he tried to take his life by swallowing poisonous chemicals.<sup>1</sup> While recovering in the hospital, the director of the local Youth for Christ came to visit him in the hospital and left him a Bible. Ravi said he was too weak to talk, and so the youth leader left him with a verse from John 14 where Jesus said, “*Because I live, you also will live.*” Five days later, he was wheeled out of the hospital a changed person.

He and his best friend started attending Bible studies at the local Youth for Christ. They were walking one day past the local garbage dump when they noticed a book lying on top of the garbage heap: *Commentary on Romans* by W. H. Griffith Thomas. He and his friend grabbed it, studied it and they started hosting Bible studies with other teenagers. He held onto that commentary that was filled with notes he had written in the margins. The rest, you could say, is history. He went on to preach in more than 70 countries and he authored more than 30 books in his 48 years of ministry. I love the motto of his ministry: “Helping the thinker believe. Helping the believer think.”

I have heard Ravi speak on numerous occasions and have always found my mind and my heart stirred by what he taught. Whenever I think of his teaching, my mind immediately recalls him quoting a poem that describes the mysterious way that God shapes us and uses us. In quoting this poem, Ravi makes the point that God often uses our brokenness and our struggles to shape us and to prepare us for how he wants to use us. It is a reminder that God’s ways are not our ways. In my mind, I can hear him quote this poem in his Indian cadence and accent:

When God wants to drill a man, and thrill a man and skill a man;  
When God wants to mold a man to play the noblest part;  
When He yearns with all His heart to create so great and bold a man  
That all the world might be amazed;  
Watch His methods, watch His ways.

How He ruthlessly perfects whom He royally elects.  
How He hammers and hurts him, and with mighty blows converts him,  
Into trial shapes of clay which only God understands,  
While his tortured heart is crying and he lifts beseeching hands.  
How he bends, but never breaks, when his good he undertakes.  
How he uses whom he chooses and with every purpose fuses him,  
With mighty acts induces him to try His splendor out.  
God knows what He's about.<sup>2</sup>

I love that last line: “God knows what He’s about.” That is a fitting phrase for the next letter in our acronym CASKET EMPTY. We now come to the letter “T” in the word EMPTY. CASKET EMPTY is the acronym we are using to put the story of the Bible together and the word EMPTY outlines the New Testament for us. The letter “T” stands for TEACHING. As illustrated through the life of Ravi Zacharias, God uses the ministry of TEACHING to expand the reach of the kingdom of God to all the nations. On one hand, he uses extraordinary teachers like Ravi Zacharias who had been given an international ministry that has reached untold numbers. We are grateful for those who are gifted like he was and for their contribution to the work of the church around the world. But in even more ordinary ways, God uses the teaching ministry of local churches, local pastors, local Sunday school teachers, Bible study leaders, small group leaders, youth leaders—who week in and week out—humbly teach the Word of God. God knows what he is about and through the ordinary teaching of the Word of God, “Jews and Gentiles are justified by faith in Christ and taught to walk in his ways together.”<sup>3</sup>

The teaching ministry of the church has always been an important part of the ministry of the local church. When Jesus commissioned his disciples to go into all the world and make disciples he told them that they will make disciples by “*teaching them to observe all that I commanded you.*” Consequently, at the founding of the church in Acts 2, this newly formed church is characterized this way, “*they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching.*” That word “*devoted*” is a pretty strong word. The teaching of the Scriptures is a high priority of the ministry of the local church.

The devotion to the teaching ministry of the church can be illustrated by how much of the New Testament is devoted to this ministry. Out of the 27 books of the New Testament, 21 of the books are what make up this letter “T” for TEACHING. The letter “P” for PENTECOST and the letter “T” for TEACHING are tied closely together. The letter “P” for PENTECOST tells the story of the book of Acts and how

the kingdom of God began to spread and go viral. From Acts 13 to the end of the book, the prominent figure is Paul and it tells of his three missionary journeys and how he planted and established churches all throughout the Roman Empire. The letter “T” for TEACHING refers to the letters—they are called *epistles*—that were “sent to the early Christian communities, so that they might be instructed on matters of Christian doctrine and how to live as followers of Jesus.”<sup>4</sup> Paul wrote 13 of these letters that provided Christian teaching for many of the churches he had planted. Many of these letters were written while Paul was on his missionary journeys. Here is an easy way to remember when these letters were written by Paul:

On his first missionary journey he wrote one letter: Galatians

On his second missionary journey he wrote two letters: 1 and 2 Thessalonians

On his third missionary journey he wrote three letters: 1 and 2 Corinthians and Romans

On his fourth “missionary” journey—prison in Rome—he wrote four letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon

Then he wrote three letters to the next generation of Christian pastors:

1 and 2 Timothy and Titus

Eight other letters make up the rest of the teaching part of the New Testament, written by various leaders—apostles—within the church: Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John and the book of Jude. Over the next three weeks we are going to look at the role of teaching in the life of the church.

This morning we are going to be in Romans 1:1-6 and I simply want to affirm how God uses the role of teaching in the life of the church. As we put the New Testament together we are reminded how the letter “E” - EXPECTATION tells us that as we move from the Old Testament to the New Testament that because of what the Old Testament prophets said there was an expectation that God was going to move once again on behalf of his people. The letter “M” - MESSIAH told us that in the coming of Jesus and through his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead, the long expected kingdom of God has broken into this world. The letter “P” - PENTECOST tells the story of the kingdom of God going viral as it spread from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. The letter T - “TEACHING” tells us how the kingdom of God spreads from generation to generation and from culture to culture and from person to person. It is through the TEACHING and proclamation of the gospel that the kingdom of God spreads.

Next week we will see how the TEACHING of the Word of God shapes the character of the local church so that we reflect the oneness of the body of Christ—a renewed humanity living in a broken world. And then we will conclude with a reminder that the

proclamation of the kingdom of God will cause the kingdom to expand even when times are hard. I love what Paul says in 2 Timothy 2:9 while sitting in prison—in chains—he says with confidence, “*But the word of God is not bound.*” That is a good word for us today. If the upheaval of persecution could not keep the kingdom of God from expanding through the TEACHING ministry of the church, then the upheaval of a pandemic can not keep the church from advancing through what we are doing right now. Perhaps, if Paul were writing 2 Timothy 2:9 to our generation, instead of saying that the *Word of God is not bound* he might say, “the Word of God is not quarantined.” God knows what he is about. Therefore, we are devoted to the TEACHING.

### **Devoted to the Teaching: With Authority**

The first reason why the kingdom of God advances through the TEACHING ministry of the church is because the Scriptures—the Bible—is the very word of God. We can open up the pages of the Bible and discover who God is and what God calls us to do. With the careful study of God’s Word and with the careful teaching of the Word of God, we can say with authority that “this is the very truth of God.” This is why we are “devoted to the teaching.” The Bible is the very authority of God.

At the beginning of Romans, Paul is introducing himself to those who are about to read his letter. And he begins by reminding them that he is an apostle. “*Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God.*” Later, in verse 5, he indicates that his *apostleship* is not something he applied for or pursued. Rather, it pursued him. It is something he *received* from God.

The apostles were a special group of men who were chosen by God to be the founding agents and leaders of the church. For example, the twelve disciples of Jesus were apostles. It says in Mark 3:14, “*And Jesus appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach.*” You get the sense here that one of the criteria for being an apostle is that they had been with Jesus, and more importantly can give testimony to his resurrection from the dead. They saw and heard and touched the risen Jesus. You also get the impression that there were a few beyond the twelve disciples who were called to be an apostle and Paul was one of them. Paul confesses in 1 Corinthians 15:8-9 that the way he became an apostle was different than the others. In fact, he feels least worthy to be an apostle because he once persecuted the church. To indicate the unique way Paul became an apostle, he says that he was *untimely born* as an apostle. But on the road to Damascus, he encountered the resurrected Christ and it was here where he was called to be an apostle to the Gentiles.

There is a hymn the church sings by the title, *The Church's One Foundation*. The hymn goes onto say, "The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord." There is truth to that, but it is not complete. Paul tells us in Ephesians 2:20 that Jesus is the cornerstone who holds the foundation together, but the foundation of the church is *the apostles and prophets*. R. C. Sproul notes that an apostle literally means "one who is sent." Sproul says, more specifically the title refers to an "emissary who was authorized by the king to represent the king in his absence, and he bore the king's authority."<sup>5</sup> This is why the early church was *devoted to the teaching of the apostles*. This is why Paul alludes to the *prophets* and the *holy Scriptures* in Romans 1:2. Through the prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles of the New Testament, we have the very word of God.

It is interesting to me that nine of the thirteen letters Paul wrote—the TEACHING—he introduces himself as an *apostle*. The letters where he doesn't use this title are letters where he doesn't necessarily need to address a major problem. For example, he writes the letter to the Philippians in order to thank them for the gift they sent him while he was in prison. But in most of the letters, he is having to address some difficult issues that are part of life in the church. And by using the title *apostle*, Paul is indicating that he comes to them with the authority of Jesus. The ancient church father Irenaeus said it this way: "to reject Apostolic authority is to reject the authority of Jesus. And the final analysis, to reject the authority of Jesus is to reject the authority of God."<sup>6</sup> And so in order for a book of the New Testament to be considered as part of Scripture, it had to be written by an apostle or one closely associated to and a companion of an apostle.

We are devoted to the TEACHING because what we teach comes from God. That is what Paul says in Romans 1:1. He is *set apart for the gospel of God*. Paul even says of his own ministry in 1 Corinthians 15:3, "*For I delivered to you, as of first importance, what I also received.*" Under the direction of the Holy Spirit, the apostles and the prophets have given us the very word of God. And so Paul says to the next generation of pastors, to Timothy, in 2 Timothy 13-14, "*Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me . . . guard the good deposit entrusted to you.*" It is of God.

Aside from his ability to take complex thoughts and explain them in a way that you can understand them, I think the other thing that made Ravi Zacharias an effective communicator is that he was passionate about what he taught. He said that what our culture needs is an apologetic that is not merely argued, but also felt. There has to be a passion in the communication. There must be a felt reality beyond the cognitive, engaging the feeling of the listener."<sup>7</sup> It is a passion that is anchored in the authority of the Word of God.

## Devoted to the Teaching: Points us to Jesus

Another reason why we are devoted to the TEACHING is because the focus of our teaching is centered on a person: Jesus Christ our Lord. Notice in Paul's introduction to Romans that this *gospel of God* is not merely a set of ideas or simply a philosophy. No doubt, our faith touches those issues, but it is more than that. The good news that Paul proclaims revolves around the Son of God. Speaking of Jesus, Paul says in verses 3-4 that this *gospel of God* is "*concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.*"

From the very beginning of this letter, Paul makes quite an audacious claim about Jesus. On one hand, he claims that Jesus is fully human, like you and me. He has a human lineage, he descended from David. Here Paul adds, *according to the flesh*. But then Paul quickly pivots and says that Jesus is also fully divine, he is the Son of God. This was demonstrated by his resurrection from the dead. And so Paul begins his letter with the supreme mystery of our faith: the incarnation of God. Jesus is God in the flesh. C. S. Lewis put it this way, "The Central Miracle asserted by Christians is the Incarnation . . . Every other miracle prepares for this, or exhibits this, or results from this."<sup>8</sup> In other words, once you are able to answer the fundamental question: Who is Jesus? - all the other things we believe fall into place. If he is God, then the miracles are easily explained. If he is God, then his atoning work on the cross can be explained. If he is God, then his resurrection from the dead is easily embraced. If he is God, then we are not surprised to hear Paul say in verse 16 that the gospel is the *power of God for salvation to everyone who believes*. If he is God, then it is no small leap for us to get on our knees and confess with Paul that he is *Jesus Christ our Lord*. He is God! He is the Creator! Jesus Christ is the focus of our faith.

This is the point we have been making as we walk through the story of the Bible by using the acronym CASKET EMPTY. The acronym is more than just a catchy way of trying to remember the flow of the Old Testament and the flow of the New Testament. The phrase CASKET EMPTY gets to the climax of the story that Paul alludes to in his introduction to the book of Romans. Jesus has conquered sin and death. Like the youth leader who gave the Bible to Ravi Zacharias after his failed suicide attempt he quoted the words of Jesus from John 14:19, "*Because I live, you also will live.*" All of the Old Testament is leading to this point. Paul appeals to the Old Testament by noting that Jesus is a descendant of David. He also says in verse 2 that this gospel of God *was promised beforehand through the prophets in the holy Scriptures*. It is all about Jesus.



It is no accident that “one in every ten verses in the New Testament is a quotation or clear allusion to the Old Testament.”<sup>9</sup> Jesus is the focus of our message. Jesus is the way to God. Jesus is the truth of God. Jesus is the life of God.

I understand that an absolute truth claim like this flies in the face of our culture. Our culture has embraced a view of truth that self-determined. We are told to look within ourselves to determine for ourselves what is true. No “truth” is more true than any other “truth.” It flies in the face of logic. Some truth claims are naturally opposed to each other. Some claim there is no God. Some say there are multiple gods. Some say there is one God. Some believe in the Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They can’t all be true. And furthermore, how can you know unless it is revealed to us?

Mortimer Adler asks our pluralistic culture to evaluate these truth claims about Jesus.<sup>10</sup>

- Jesus Christ was a Jew who lived in Palestine during the early part of the first century. T or F
- Jesus was executed on a cross by Roman soldiers about A. D. 30. T or F
- Jesus rose from the dead after three days and appeared to over 5000 witnesses. T or F

If this is true, then Jesus Christ is Lord. This is the reason why the kingdom of God advances from generation to generation, from culture to culture and from person to person through the teaching of the church. It is because it is true! Jesus Christ is Lord!

While Jesus is the center of the apostolic message of the church, there are many things that are taught through these letters. The doctrine of the church and the way to live as followers of Jesus are taught throughout these 21 letters we call TEACHING. CAKSET EMPTY summarizes seven key teaching points that are stressed through the 21 letters of the New Testament. Here they are:

- Jesus is the Messiah, Christ our Lord
- We are justified (made right with God) through faith in Jesus
- We are indwelt by the Holy Spirit who gives us power to live for Jesus
- Jews and Gentiles are one in Christ
- The call to obedience of faith is made to all nations
- Our lives are living sacrifices, holy to God
- Jesus will return in glory as Judge of the world

This is why we are devoted to the TEACHING of the Scriptures. Through it we are justified by faith and we are taught to walk together in the ways of Jesus.

## Devoted to the Teaching: It changes us!

Finally, we are devoted to the TEACHING because the Word of God changes us. It transforms our lives through the dynamic power of the Holy Spirit. Notice the aim of Paul ministry in verse 5. He was *set apart for the Gospel of God . . . to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations*. Grant Osborne says that the Greek here for *obedience of faith* most likely refers to “the obedience that comes from faith.”<sup>11</sup> It is expected that our faith leads us into obedience. We are not perfect. But we are constantly looking to take a next step of obedience as the Word of God dwells in us richly and the Holy Spirit fills us and changes us *from one degree of glory to the next*. And so we need a steady diet of the teaching of the Scriptures.

It is said of our culture that “expressive individualism” is our highest value. Therefore, we are most devoted to the things that promote personal human flourishing. We even approach our relationship with God and religion with this value in mind. If a belief in God or a god works for me or makes life better for me, then it is something I can add to my life. The only problem with that, John Starke says is that Christianity is not a means to human flourishing. He writes, “In fact, Christianity instructs us to die to self, consider others more important, turn the cheek, offer ourselves as a living sacrifice, enter into weeping and sadness with others. This of course, creates a conflict with the modern self that sees God and neighbor as enhancements that we can take or leave when they become burdensome or demand sacrifice. Christianity sees them as obligations rather than enhancements.”<sup>12</sup>

I don’t know about you, but my natural self is bent inward towards the value of “human flourishing.” It is not my natural bent to pick up a cross and die to myself. And now we live in a secular culture that encourages this way of thinking and this way of living. This is why we are devoted to the TEACHING. I need my internal compass to be turned towards God and others. Paul said it this way later in Romans 12:2. “*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.*” How is our mind renewed? How is the compass of our heart reset to true north? It is through our devotion to the TEACHING—the Word of God—that God transforms our lives to enter into the pain and suffering of this world and to offer ourselves sacrificially to those who are suffering and hurting. That is what we are called to. That is the *obedience of faith*.

What is the next step of obedience for you? What is the next step of sacrifice for you? These are very normal questions we ought to be asking ourselves on a regular basis. It is the way of life we embrace when we open up the TEACHINGS of the Word of God.

## Conclusion

Spend some time this week reading through an epistle or two. You have 21 to choose from! Most of them are short. They are letters. But as you read through one or two . . . or however many you choose to read, look for the things we identified this morning.

1. Accept it for what it is: God's authoritative word
2. Identify one or two things it tells you about Jesus
3. Identify one thing it is calling you to do

Then pray that the Spirit of God would empower you to devote your day to Jesus and for strength to be obedient. Let us ever be devoted to the TEACHING because it is devotion to Jesus our Lord and to God our Father.

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<sup>1</sup>Ravi Zacharias "Antidote to Poison" [www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com) April 26, 2013

<sup>2</sup>Unknown Source: Quoted by Ravi Zacharias in *Telling the Truth* ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) 31

<sup>3</sup>David Palmer *CASKET EMPTY New Testament* (Casket Empty Media, 2016) 185

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 183

<sup>5</sup>R. C. Sproul "The Church's One Foundation" [www.ligonier.org](http://www.ligonier.org) November 1, 2014

<sup>6</sup>Ibid

<sup>7</sup>Ravi Zacharias in *Telling the Truth* 42

<sup>8</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Touchstone, 1996) 143

<sup>9</sup>Palmer, 186

<sup>10</sup>Mortimer Adler *Truth in Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1990) 2

<sup>11</sup>Grant Osborne *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004) 33

<sup>12</sup>John Starke "Preaching to the Secular Age" in *Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor* ed. Collin Hanson (TGC, 2017) 42

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COMMUNITY  
**GROUPS**

## **Getting To Know Me Questions**

1. Share with the group one thing you are celebrating and one challenge you are facing.
2. Do you have a favorite New Testament Epistle? Which one is your favorite and why?

## **Diving Into The Word**

3. Read Romans 1:1-2. What do you observe about the titles Paul uses for himself? What do they tell us about him? How do these titles shape his life? What titles shape your life? How do they shape you?
4. Read Romans 1:2-7, 16-17. What do you learn about Jesus from this passage? Take time to make careful observation. How does what you observe strengthen your faith?
5. Read Romans 1:6 and 12:1-2. What do you think it means to “offer your body as a living sacrifice?” What does that look like on a daily basis? What role does the Word of God play in empowering you to this end?

## **Taking It Home**

6. What is a “next step of obedience” for you this week?
7. What epistles (there are 21 of them) do you want to read this week? Do you want to pick something to read together and talk about next week?