

# Identity: Romans 1.1-7

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## *Growing Community - Talk 1*

**Aim of the Talk:** to establish that we find our identity in Jesus Christ and that this is an essential element of a growing community.

**Group discussion suggestion:** get into groups of threes or fours, and try to think of three adjectives to describe yourself.

### **Introduction**

#### **Introduce the theme for the term :**

- This term we are going to be doing a series on the book of Romans.
- Paul's letter to the Romans has always been seen as one of the most important elements of the New Testament. It brought about the conversion of Augustine, who became the greatest theologian of the early church. It dramatically changed the course of life of Martin Luther and Karl Barth, two of most significant theologians since Augustine.
- Luther said that it is worthy of being memorised by every Christian and meditated on every day. Calvin said that if you understand Romans you have 'an open door to the most profound treasures of Scripture.'
- We are not going to be doing a thorough study of the letter and all its implications.
- Instead we are going to look at just 5 short passages from the letter, and look at what they tell us about how we can be the kind of community that God longs for us to be – a community which is rooted in Jesus Christ, utterly devoted to one another, and looking outwards rather than inwards.
- Archbishop William Temple described the church as 'the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members.'
- So the theme for this term is Growing Community, and we will be looking at what the book of Romans can teach us about the characteristics of a healthy, growing community.

#### **Introduce the theme for this talk:**

- This evening we are going to be looking at the topic of Identity, for the most effective and attractive communities are made up of people who know who they are.

#### **Introduce Romans 1.1-7:**

- Romans 1.1-7 contains the greeting between Paul who is writing the letter, and the church in Rome who Paul is writing to.
- For us letters usually begin with the identity of the recipient 'dear John' and then end with the identity of the writer, 'best wishes, Bernie'.
- In Paul's time the convention was to put your own name first, then the recipient, then the greeting, so it would be something like: 'Bernie to John, greetings.'
- However here, Paul gives a much fuller explanation of his own identity, and the identity of his recipients.
- Because for Paul the good news about Jesus Christ radically alters the way we see ourselves – it shapes our identity.

### **Four ingredients of our Identities:**

- If we look at these verses carefully four things emerge about how we should see ourselves.

#### **1. A servant**

##### **The nature of servants**

- First of all we should see ourselves as servants.
- Verse 1: The primary way in which Paul sees himself is as a servant or slave of Jesus Christ.
- People often try to establish their identity of a way of putting them above other people, seeing themselves as richer, more successful, more attractive, more intelligent.
- Paul starts by trying to put himself to the bottom. He is a slave.

##### **The implications of a being a servant**

- Understanding our identity as servants encourages us to be willing to do anything for God – not always looking for important or visible roles – but being willing to serve God in whatever way he calls us.

##### **Illustration**

- People say that the thing that marks out Jackie Pullinger, who works in Hong Kong transforming the lives of thousands of drug addicts, prostitutes and gang leaders through the love of Christ, is her willingness. She has always been willing to do anything – no matter how risky or dangerous or painful – because she sees herself as a servant.

#### **2. Loved by God**

- Secondly, we should see ourselves as those who are loved.

### **The need to be loved**

- We all need to be loved, and to know that we are loved. It is the basic human need.

### **Being loved by God**

- Paul writes to ‘those who are loved by God in Rome.’ The first thing he wants them to know is that they are loved by God.
- This is the thing that God wants us to know about ourselves more than anything else: that he loves no matter who we are or what we have done.
- Augustine, the greatest theologian in the history of the church, wrote that the whole Bible does nothing but tell of God’s love.
- It is the reason why God created the world.
- It is the reason why God sent his son into the world: ‘for God so loved the world that he gave his only son.’
- It is the reason why Jesus died on the cross – it is a picture of God’s self-sacrificial love for us.
- It is the reason why God sent his Spirit – that we might experience God’s love deep in our hearts.
- It is the reason why God gives us eternal life – so that neither death, nor life could ever separate us from his love.

### **Implications of being loved by God**

- This means that our identity is not based on our achievements, or personalities, or positions, but based on how God sees us, and what God has done for us.

## **3. Belonging to Jesus**

- Thirdly, we should see ourselves as those who belong to Jesus.

### **The need to belong**

- It is so common to feel like we don’t quite belong.
- As the Radiohead song, Creep, (so memorably sung by the X-Factor “star” Wagner) goes, ‘I’m a creep, I’m a weirdo, what the hell am I doing here? I don’t belong here.’
- It is easy to find some reason why we are on the edge, that everyone else belongs to a certain group in a way that we don’t.
- (Personal example of something which means you don’t feel like you quite fit in – at St Peter’s, at work, etc.)
- C. S. Lewis wrote an essay called *the Inner Ring*, in which he described this phenomenon of always being outside the group or circle or clique which he calls ‘the inner ring’. There exists within all of us ‘the desire to be inside the ring and the terror of being left outside.’ And whenever we manage to get inside one ring,

we discover that there is another inside that which we are excluded from. However far into the centre of things we will always feel on the outside of some other ring.

### **The way we belong**

- However, the Christian community should be marked by people who know that they belong, because, instead of belonging to a particular group, we belong to a person.
- In verse 6, Paul describes his readers as those called 'to belong to Christ Jesus'.
- Kaka, the Brazilian footballer and world player of the year in 2007, has often worn a T-shirt underneath his club shirt which says, 'I belong to Jesus.'

### **The implications of belonging**

- When we know we belong to Jesus this makes us incredibly secure as people.
- It gives us a freedom to go to the ends of the earth, because wherever we go we still belong.
- It means we don't need to spend our time trying to be in the right group or crowd, or worrying whether we are in or not, because we already belong.

## **4. Purpose**

- We should see ourselves as servants, those who are loved, those who belong to a person, and fourthly, we are people with a purpose.
- Being a Christian means being someone with a purpose.
- Paul knew he had a purpose: verse 1 he says he is called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God.
- Those belonging to the church in Rome have a purpose: verse 7 – they are called to be saints.

### **General and specific**

- Being a Christian means having a general calling and a specific calling.
- We all have a general calling – to serve God, to be obedient to him, to be 'saints'.
- Being a 'saint' means being different, being distinct from the world.
- We are all called to live lives which are radically different from the world.
- (Personal example of being different)
- But we also each have specific callings, things that God had for each one of us to do, which only we can do.
- Paul had his: to be an apostle to the Gentiles. This meant he had a specific calling to preach the gospel to those who were not Jews.
- It doesn't matter whether we know what it is yet, but the important thing is that we know that we are each essential to God's purposes for the world. The important thing is that we are willing to do whatever God wants of us.

## **Conclusion: Christ's Identity shows us ours**

- These are four essential elements of understanding who we are – we are servants, we loved by God, we belong to Jesus, and have a purpose.
- It is really important that we have a sense of our identities, but the way we understand who we are is not by looking inwards at ourselves, but looking at Jesus and his identity.
- In the Lion King, Mufasa says to his son Simba, 'You have forgotten me. You have forgotten who you are, and so forgotten me.' But for us it the other way round. We forget who we are when we forget who God is.
- Notice that in these verses Paul is supposed to be establishing his identity as the writer, and the identity of his audience, but he seems much more interested in Jesus who he talks about in verses 2-6.
- This is because we only know our identity by looking at his.
- The reason we know that we are servants, is because we know that Jesus Christ is Lord. It is not that we know that we are servants, and so he must be Lord. We know that he is Lord, and therefore we must be his servants.
- We know that we are loved, not by looking within, but by looking at what Jesus has done for us.
- We know that we belong because we see a God who has included us.
- We know our purpose by looking at what God's purposes are, and where we can join in.
- We find our identity by being focussed on Christ's.