

## Romans 1-3

By Trish Gerstel



Paul's writing in these first three chapters of the book of Romans can seem a bit capricious: He begins by telling the Roman Christians how thankful he is for their renowned faith, but almost immediately does an about-face, abandoning his praise for a lecture on just

how sinful the human race is and how much we deserve the wrath of God. Paul goes on to tell a church of mostly gentile believers, what is required "if you call yourself a Jew [and] if you rely on the law" (2:17a) and to make it very clear that they (like all humans) are an unrighteous lot whose sin has overtaken their lives. The writing finally loops back around to encouragement when it reminds the believers what a wonderful gift they've received, being "justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (3:23), but sneaks in a strong reprimand about being boastful just before the close of chapter three.

In truth, what may seem like a rambling flow of words is actually a well thought-out letter of edification, a term that is often confused with encouragement. Edification is not meant "to inspire with hope, courage, or confidence," but rather is the process of giving instruction that leads to "moral or spiritual improvement" (The American Heritage Dictionary, ©1994, Dell Publishing). In writing to the church in Rome, Paul did not intend to merely encourage his fellow believers, but to help them grow in their relationship with Christ; he knew this would only happen if they had a deep understanding of the need for Jesus' sacrifice on the cross as well as a clear warning against human-nature's tendency toward self-righteous and/or legalistic thinking. Paul recognized that a simple letter of encouragement ("You're doing great, now keep it up and God will be pleased!") would not promote growth and could, in fact, inspire the afore-mentioned misguided beliefs.



In his edification of the Roman church – which is just as important for the church today – Paul does include bits of encouragement (1:7; 1:11; 3:21-26, 28-31), but more importantly he imparts vital reminders and instructions. His "lecture" in chapters one and two helps us to understand just how deep God's love

is, that, although we are completely unworthy, He would send Christ into the world to be a holy sacrifice covering the sins of all who believe. It also is a strong reminder of how foolish it is to think we could somehow make ourselves righteous. This reminder carries through in Paul's discussion of the Jewish law, the point of which really is much simpler than it may seem: No one can keep the law! In his closing, Paul repeats his earlier, pivotal message (we have been offered an amazing gift, one that we do not deserve but which is offered in the purest love) along with another warning against self-righteous thinking.

As Christians we all are called to edify one another (Romans 14:19, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Hebrews 5:12-14). Some have a particular spiritual gift and strength in this area, but no one is exempt from the practice. In order to be successful in fulfilling our duty, we must first recognize that while it is very important (2 Corinthians 13:11),

encouragement alone is not always the most appropriate response to a situation. When we see another Christian struggling with sin, for example, they need not only to be inspired toward breaking away from that sin, but to be reminded of why it is ruinous to themselves and their relationship with God. When someone has a crisis in their faith, it cannot be addressed solely with words of inspiration, but also requires an examination of exactly what it means to have faith. We sometimes shy away from words of edification, afraid to offend someone – and this leads to our reliance upon encouragement as a method of spurring on the faith of a brother or sister in Christ. Ephesians 4:15 is a warning against offering encouragement without edification: "Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will become in every respect the mature body of Him who is the head, that is, Christ" (emphasis added). Amen.



\*Scripture quotations taken from the New International Version.

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