

The Starting Point

To the Romans...Pt. 19

I am excited that we are going to be having a water baptism service again after being unable to for well over a year. There are two ordinances of the church that were handed down directly from Jesus himself for his followers to do in perpetuity after his departure. One is the Lord's Supper – Communion – and one is water baptism. These are ancient rituals of the church and you will find them in every denomination across every nation, language and people group where followers of Christ gather.

Now, there's no set rules as to *exactly* how to carry them out – there are groups that would disagree with that, and of course, they think their way is *the* way, but I don't find that in the scriptures. On the other hand, it is ritual, and I don't think you can do it just *any* old way. I think they are meant to serve as anchors of faith in a tossing turning world.

So, I do have some words that I say every time we do one of the ordinances. When we take Communion, I always quote from Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians chapter 11. And when I baptize someone – as I have many of you – I ask everyone the same two questions. And those two questions come from our text this morning.

But they're not just some ritualistic formula. You have to understand the context in which they were written in order to really understand the power of these words. And there *is* a power to them, so I'm excited to finally get to this section of Romans. We've been looking at the Apostle Paul's letter to the church at Rome all year long – we've got a couple of month to go yet – but it's important stuff.

And so let me set up the context for where we are today. Paul was perhaps the most important missionary of the early church. He went from persecuting Christians to establishing churches of them all over the Middle Eastern world. And now, about 30 years after the death of Jesus, he felt led to expand his mission, *all the way* over to Spain. And as the saying goes, "you can't get there from here". So he needed help. Specifically help from Rome – because you *could* get to Spain from Rome – and so he was writing to the Christians who made up the church at Rome – who he had not met, never been there – to ask them to support him.

And by way of introduction, he began by laying out his theology – what he believed about what God was doing to make the world right through the death and resurrection of Jesus – this is the message he'll be taking to Spain. So chapters 1-5 lay out the gospel, chapters 6-8 show the practical implications of that gospel to live a changed life. And then chapters 9-11 are a new section.

And that's what we hit last week. And it's controversial – now as it was then – because Romans 9-11 asks the question, “But what about the Jews?” You see, the church at Rome was made up of Gentile Christian converts *and* Jewish Christian converts. But most Jews – then as now – did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah; the Savior come to rescue the world. So the question is, if God made a promise to Israel and they reject it, is God's faithfulness limited?

It's a challenging question and you'll have to revisit last week's message to get the details, but basically, we said the question boils down to what do you mean by Israel? It's certainly not referring to the modern nation state, but Paul says that even back then – even in the view of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible – not all Israel is Israel. We said the short hand is, “it's not about race, it's about grace.” That the people of God are not just those who are born into a religion, but *anyone* who chooses to embrace the messiah. And Christianity exists because of the claim that Jesus – an historical person – *is* the messiah.

And so we said that certainly doesn't exclude the Jewish race, but we Gentiles get to join them – not *replace* them! – but graft with them as spiritual Israel, as children of Abraham, and heirs of the promise.

And we left it last week at the big question; So *how do* we become part of Israel? If it's not by DNA, if it's not by being born in some geographic location, if it's not by cutting off the tips of our (whistle) – not religious practices like circumcision, or dietary laws, or observing festivals or *any* of the myriad of commandments found in the Old Testament....then what is it? What do we have *to do* to become a part of God's family?

Paul tells us very clearly in the text we're going to read this morning. What is at stake is nothing short of the way of salvation. How are we saved? By following the law, by our works? No, we are saved by faith. Faith in what? Remember Paul's thesis statement from the very beginning? **Romans 1:16**, “*For I am not ashamed of **the gospel**, because it is the power of God that **brings salvation** to everyone **who believes**: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.*”

So how does that “power of God” bring salvation? How do you get in on it. That's what Paul is addressing today. Very important. If you haven't heard a single message yet in this Romans series, you've picked a great Sunday to jump in. This is everything.

The gospel message is very, very simple. But it is not simplistic. It's simple enough for a small child to receive it – I hope we baptize some children in two weeks. But it is rich enough to enthrall a curious theologian for the rest of her life. Here's the question: “What is it that Christians believe that makes them Christians?” It's not some general ideas about how you should live your life. Oh, it includes that – we're going to see that Romans chapters 12-15 are all about how to live out the faith. But those are Christian ethics and they are only the *outcome* of what Paul puts before us here.

Well, I think I've built it up enough. Let's get to the words. I'm going to read you **Romans 10:8-13**, don't sleep on this! *“But what does it say? “The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,” that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: 9 That if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. 11 As Scripture says, “Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.” 12 For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, 13 for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.””*

There it is. This is why I ask every baptismal candidate two questions – while standing in the tank in front of everyone – show up on June 6th and see if I don't! – “Do you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord? And do you believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead? Then upon these professions of faith, I now baptize you...”

Now, important to clarify, it's not the act of baptism that makes you a Christian. Water Baptism is the physical sign of the spiritual reality of what's already happened to you the moment you were “born again” – to use Jesus' terminology – you died to your old self – going down under the water – and were born to a new self, washed clean by the grace of God. That's a picture of what happened when you were saved.

But you were saved – what Jesus did on the cross was applied to your life – when you did the two things Paul says here. And notice how clear Paul is. It's not guess work. It's not “Am I or aren't I?” No, Paul says, “you *will* be saved”. Who will be? *Everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord. And it's all about that Lord.

One of our guides through this series has been the great London preacher of the middle 20th century, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. He says, “So we must put it like this: whatever else the content of the Christian faith may be, it is objective truth. This is the starting point. It is what Paul emphasizes. But what is it about? It is about Jesus, a person who belongs to history. ‘If thou shall confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus...’ it is about this person. So if you describe Christianity without mentioning him, you are not describing Christianity, whatever else you may be describing.”

That’s right. So let’s look at that this morning; at the person and the work of Jesus Christ – that’s what this is describing. And as we walk through this morning, we’re going to see three things. Who Jesus *is*, what Jesus *did*, and what *we* need to do about it. The person and the work of Jesus and our appropriate response to that knowledge – to that “objective truth”.

Ok, first, **Who Jesus is.** By the way, let me address this up front, what we “confess” and what we “believe” are really not two separate things – I’ll show you that in a minute. But the mouth and the heart both represent the core of human existence. By saying the head and the heart, Paul is basically saying that your *whole being* must profess these two things.

And they work together. You’ll notice that verse 10 reverses the order of verse 9 – mouth/heart, heart/mouth – doesn’t matter, two sides of the same coin of faith.

Also “justified” and “saved” are essentially the same thing. They are both about getting right with God and the way we do that is not by magic words – please note, there is no “sinner’s prayer” in the Bible. This is not Paul setting up some “oral vow” as a second requirement of salvation. You are saved totally and completely by what Jesus Christ has already done for you – for all of humanity – you just have to claim it. And you claim with you mouth and your heart by believing and professing who Jesus is and what Jesus did. As one commentator says, “Belief in the heart is clearly the crucial requirement...Confession is the outward manifestation of this critical inner response.” (Moo, 657)

Ok, so what do we confess with our mouth? Who is Jesus? Three simple, but powerful words; *Jesus is Lord.* We don’t use the word “Lord” a lot, it’s more of an English *Downton Abby* thing, “Right away, Lord Grantham.” It really means “master” or “boss”. So I will often update it in modern vernacular to “the leader of your life.” Recognizing Jesus as the leader of your life.

But I have to be careful, because that can be pretty weak sauce. Paul chose a word that was loaded, both in the early church and in Judaism. The word translated “lord” here is the Greek word *kurios*. It is the same word that is used in the Greek translations of the Old Testament to stand for the Hebrew word YHWH – the name by which God wished to be personally known. In the early chapters of Exodus, Moses encounters God in a burning bush and inquires who he should tell the Israelites has sent him. In other words, “What’s your name?” And God tells him.

Now, the Jews regarded the name of God as being so wonderful, so glorious that they were afraid to say it, and so they avoided it by substituting other words. In fact, what I just said, YHWH, is a guess. We don’t even know the vowels that go with the consonants. Some pronounced it Jehovah, but we really don’t know. So when the time came to translate the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek – it’s called the Septuagint – every time, this symbol YHWH appeared they used the Greek word *kurios*. When you read the Old Testament and you see the word “LORD” in all capital letters, you can know that’s what it is referring to. The very personal, intimate name of God Himself.

So *Hesoun kurion* in Greek – “Jesus is Lord” – means “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord God Jehovah YHWH.” This means of course, as we know from so many other places in the New Testament, that Paul is asserting in the strongest manner possible the absolute deity of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Believing that Jesus was a good man or a wise teacher will not save you. Only the acknowledgment that Jesus is God.

And of course, this was the rub for so many of the Jews. This was their stumbling point. First Commandment, “You shall have no other gods before me” and they applied that to Jesus; he couldn’t be God. But Jesus’ whole life - and death and resurrection – was built around proving that he wasn’t an “other god”, he was *the* God that made that commandment in the first place.

I once had someone come to me who had been in the church for a couple of years, but wasn’t a Christian. She was from another culture and had been raised in another religious tradition. And her whole family was coming to the church and they loved it and *she* loved it. But she would not call herself a Christian. And one day she was talking to me after church and she said, “I love so much about the church, but I just don’t know what to do with Jesus.” And I said, “That is the *best* reason I know of not to be a Christian.”

It's not about church politics or an authoritative minister or an infighting congregation or rude evangelists or out of touch traditionalism or ignorant application of scripture to culture wars. All of that is distasteful to be sure. But none of that proves Christianity is wrong, just that the followers of Christ are flawed. And I can't argue that point with you – starting with me!

But the crux of the Christian faith is the confession that Jesus Christ – a man who lived in a particular geographic place at a particular moment in time – is God - the same God who created the universe, visible and invisible, and holds it all together every instant by his unmatched power. Not a myth. Not a good example. Not a love guru. God.

And by the way, when you confess that Jesus is Lord, do you know what you are also – simultaneously - confessing? A confession that Jesus is Lord, is a confession that *I am not!* God is like the *Highlander*: There can only be one! So confessing that Jesus is Lord is about getting things in proper order. Before I confessed that Jesus was Lord, I was running around acting like *I was* Lord. “I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul.” Um, no you're not.

And so recognizing that we've been sitting in the Lord's chair is a prerequisite to putting him in his proper place. This all goes hand in hand with the message that Jesus preached. Paul is not *inventing* Christianity. He's just teaching everyone about what Jesus said. So what was Jesus' ongoing sermon?

It spells it out rather simply in **Mark 1:14-15**, “*After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God...*” – in other words “the gospel” that's what “good news” means - “*The time has come,*” he said. “*The kingdom of God has come near. **Repent and believe the good news!***”” Jesus would repeat this over and over. How do you gain entrance into the Kingdom of God? How are you justified? How are you brought into right standing with God? How are you born again? How are you adopted as sons of the Heavenly Father? How are you *saved*? “Repent and believe.” That's how you get in, that's how you stay in – repent and believe.

And so “confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord” is Paul's way of saying “repent”. Jesus, you are God...and I am not. That's the first part, but what's the second? What do we “believe”? And remember, these are two sides of the same coin. The coin of the gospel – the good news of God. And that brings us to the second point. First, who is Jesus? The person of Jesus. He is Lord. He is God. That's who he *is*.

Second, What Jesus did. The work of Jesus. What did Jesus *do*? Or more accurately, what was done *to* Jesus? “Believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead...” The Resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus is the foundation of the Christian faith. The Bible is not the foundation of Christian faith. The Church is not the foundation of Christian faith. The teachings of Jesus are not the foundation of the Christian faith. All of these things are important, don’t get it twisted. But I’m talking about the *foundation*. The bottom line.

See, if Jesus taught all that great Sermon on the Mount stuff, and then when he died, he *stayed* dead...well, there have been a lot of great teachers over time. I’m sure he’d have his place among them...maybe. Then again, I’m not sure why the words of an executed slave with no power would have made a dent in the ocean of history...if he had stayed dead.

If Jesus went to the cross – even innocent, even unjustly, even in our place – and *stayed dead*...do you know how many Jews were crucified by the Roman Empire during First Century occupation? Tens of thousands. Can we name even one? Who cares? I’m sure he’d join the pantheon of martyrs throughout history...maybe.

No, the witness of the gospel is that Jesus died for our sins and was raised so that we could have eternal life. You can’t have the one without the other. In fact, I don’t want you to think I’m discounting Jesus’ teaching or his miracles or his suffering and death either. Listen to how our commentator puts it, “Paul’s focus here on Christ’s resurrection is not, of course, intended to detract from his death or from other aspects of his work: as John Calvin explains, the resurrection alone is ‘often set before us as the assurance of our salvation, not to draw away our attention from his death, but because it bears witness to the efficacy and the fruit of his death.’” (Moo, 658)

And so yes, there’s no Resurrection without the cross, there’s no cross without the teachings and the miracles – the works – and there’s no works without the incarnational birth. It’s a package deal. But it’s all predicated on the Resurrection. We’re not told to “believe in the cross”, although we *are* told to remember it, to take it up and bear it daily. But there’s a reason why Easter Sunday is the climax of Good Friday. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the foundation of our faith.

This is not controversial, Paul acknowledges this very strongly. And let's be honest, the real issue is never how we rank the cross vs. the Resurrection. The great danger – and it's been a constant throughout human history – is *denying* the Resurrection. Ever since it happened. When the guards at the tomb reported it to the chief priests they were instructed to tell the governor, if questioned, that the disciples came in the night and stole the body. They knew what a big deal a Resurrection would be. What it meant.

Do you know what it meant? It's back to our first point, it meant Jesus is God. Gods – immortal beings - by definition don't stay dead. I told you these are flip sides of the same coin. Why is Jesus God? Because he was raised from the dead. Why was Jesus raised from the dead? Because he is God. At the very opening of our letter, Paul says that Jesus (**Romans 1:4 ESV**) “*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,*”

The resurrection is the lynch pin of the gospel and therefore in an attempt to disprove the gospel, every generation has had a theory to dismiss the resurrection. The day it happened it was grave robbers. A few centuries later it was, “Oh Jesus was just a ghost, but no physical body.” By the time you get to the scientific age it's “Jesus swooned on the cross. He didn't really die, he just passed out and they thought he was dead. And three days later he came too in some dark cave, said, “What the heck?” and walked out of the grave.”

By the psychological age it was, “The disciples had a mass hallucination due to the trauma they had just experienced.” 500 people hallucinating at the same time? I want what they were smoking. In the age of cynical Marxism it was, “The disciples just made it up in an attempt to consolidate their power. The myth gave them more control over the masses than the truth. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.”

It's always something and I'm sure there'll be a new explanation tomorrow. But Paul won't let us get away with any of them – at least not and be a Christian. He doesn't mince words. He leaves no wiggle room. **1 Corinthians 15:17-19**, “*And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.*”

Let me be as clear as I can be; if when I – Anthony Charles Scoma – when I die, I stay dead and my body rots and that's it for all eternity – wormwood, the great nada, bubkis – then I am a moron. I have wasted my life. “Anthony no, even if that's the case, look at all the good things you've done.” I have *wasted* my life. Because my whole life would have been predicated on a lie. I would have been better off to follow Nietzsche than Jesus and get what I could get, anyway I could get it, while the gettin's good.

That is the clear message of scripture. The bodily, physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the unalterable foundation of the Christian faith. If you don't believe in your heart that Jesus was raised from the dead – and again, that's actually the best reason *not* to be a Christian – but whatever you are, good person, spiritual person, loving person, you are not what 2,000 years of Christian faith would recognize as a follower of Christ.

And by the way, it didn't say “prove it with your intellect”. I can't *prove* the Resurrection. I wasn't there! As far as *my* experience base, the dead stay dead. We're batting a thousand. The issue is not proof, the issue is not certainty, the issue is faith. I believe it in my heart and when I get up in front of everybody in those baptismal waters, I'm not ashamed to say it out loud.

I repent and I believe. (V.10) “*For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.*” Two keys open the gates to salvation, the person and the work of Jesus. He is Lord – God – and he was raised from the dead.

And that leads to our third and final point, **What we need to do about it.** Somebody says, “Well what do you mean what we *do* about it? I mean, we've done the darn thing. You just said it. We've confessed with our mouth, we've believed in our heart...*la fine*. Now we just put it on cruise control until Jesus comes back to take us off for free pie in the sky.”

No, no, no. Like any truly good news, the very possession of it requires something of the possessor. If you discover the cure for cancer, you don't sit on that. You have an ethical responsibility as a member of the human race to share that cure with everyone you can. And the same thing applies to every Christian. What you do with what you know – what you confess and what you believe – matters. “Because I might miss heaven?” No, worse, because somebody else might.

Remember from last week how Paul started off this section? “I wish I *myself* could be cut off from Christ instead of my brothers!” If I am a Christian – which literally means “little Christ” – then I should have the same attitude that Christ had. And he was not willing that any should perish but that all come to salvation through him. And that's the promise that we saw today in v.13, “*for, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'*”

That's good news. But there's a caveat isn't there? It's not "everyone will be saved" – oh, that'd be nice – but Paul doesn't say that. "Everyone *who calls on the name of the Lord*" And that leads to a dilemma. I didn't read this to you at the start, but we're going to close with it. Because Paul's definition of salvation is not complete without it. There's a responsibility left for those who share the heart of Christ for a lost world.

Romans 10:14-15, "*How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"*"

Do you see the progression? You can't believe if you haven't heard and you can't hear unless someone tells you. You see, at its heart Christianity is not a philosophy. Remember our quote at the beginning? It's an objective truth tied to a person in history. Christianity is about history. You can sit thinking under a tree all day and come up with a philosophy on your own. You can come up with a mathematical theorem on your own – especially if an apple hits you on the head.

But you can sit under a tree for a hundred years and never come to realize that George Washington was the first President of the United States. That's history. And someone always has to tell you history. You can never know that there was a Jewish man born in First Century Roman occupied Palestine who claimed to be the Son of God come in the flesh and was tortured and murdered for it, but three days later came back to life...you'll never know that unless someone tells you.

Jesus told it first to his disciples. And then one of them told a couple named Priscilla and Aquila. And then they told it to a Jewish rabbi named Saul who'd recently had a blinding insight. And he became Paul who told it to a lot of people. And they told it to people. And they told it to people. And one day, somebody told it to you. If nothing else, today *I'm* telling it to you. And if you believed what they said – if you confessed with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believed in your heart that God raised him from the dead...you're saved. And now it's your turn to tell someone.

We're going to close out today with a time of reflection. I'm going to ask the band to come back up and lead us in a closing song. And while they sing, listen to the words – it's got our message in there "Jesus Lord of all", "Christ is risen" – Adrienne picked a good one. And while you sing, ask the Holy Spirit what you need to do with what you've heard today.

I want to ask you a question very bluntly. Are you saved? If you say, “I think so?”...you haven’t been listening. Were you playing a game on your phone this morning? Paul says you can *know*. That “everyone who calls will be saved”. Do you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord? Do you believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead? That’s the issue.

Look, we’ll grow into all the rest of it. Remember, the gospel is rich and deep enough to continually transform you for the rest of your life if you’ll let it. That’s called discipleship. But this is the starting point. If you can’t answer those two questions in the affirmative...again, that’s the best reason I know of not to be a Christian. And let me say this, you are welcome here. We built this church for you. This is not a club for insiders. It’s a place for people on a spiritual journey, wherever they happen to find themselves at the moment.

But...what’s holding you back from your belief? Why can’t you confess? I want you to know that I am here to talk about it with you. Not to pressure you, I don’t do that. But talking to people about their questions of faith is my favorite thing to do in the whole world. So please feel free to reach out and let’s start, or continue, a conversation.

But then second, for those of you who know you are Christians - Romans 10:9 is your foundation. You have the cure to *the* great disease of humanity. Makes COVID look like the sniffles. Here’s your assignment as we sing...who have you told? Who hasn’t heard and they are waiting on someone to preach to them? And Paul wasn’t talking about me. It’s not just you bring them to the preacher – although that can sometimes be part of it – but God has called you *to be* the preacher in somebody’s life.

Does that make you nervous? I get it. So just begin to pray. Ask the Holy Spirit to first of all, give you a heart, a burden for those who haven’t yet heard – it starts there. And then ask the Spirit to open your eyes to opportunities in your day-to-day life where you can share Jesus. And then pray that when that moment arrives, He, the Spirit, would give you the words to say. Did you know God has promised that he would? But whatever it is, use these next few minutes to intently listen to the voice of the Spirit on your heart.

Adrienne, lead us in song and then I’ll come back and pray at the end...