

Building Foundational Faith Romans 1:1-32

Welcome to the first lesson in our revised Building Foundational Faith series! As Carol mentioned in her introduction, we've made some changes in this series – seeking to spend a little more time on the foundational, doctrine-rich books of Romans and Hebrews. Any faith-based system must have a foundation – something that can provide an unshakeable confidence even when the eventual storms of life come and seek to challenge what you believe. For Christians, our foundation isn't built on some mystical thought, good works, or money. The Christian faith's foundation is built alone on Jesus Christ – the only begotten Son of God the Father. The Apostle Paul confirms this in his first letter to the Corinthians, "*For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.*" (1 Cor. 3:11) And what a marvelous foundation He is. He is characterized throughout the Bible as things like "the rock," "the cornerstone," and "the fortress." The chorus from one of my favorite hymns, "*On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand*" speaks to this very point, "On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand."

During Jesus' first arrival to Earth in human form some 2,000 years ago, He unveiled a more personal and clarified picture of God's character. He gave us insights to the seriousness of sin via His crucifixion as the sacrificial Lamb. However, what also was accomplished at the cross was He put on as clear a display as any human could ever ask to see of God's love towards us. He showed us that forgiveness comes at a heavy price, and for reconciliation to happen, someone has to die. Yet, His ministry lasted only three years before He died, rose again, and ascended back to heaven to sit down at the right hand of His Father. He made a way for us to be reconciled to God by believing in Him, but then what? Was that it?

The book of Acts opens up with an important word – see if you can catch in the first verse of chapter 1, "*The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach.*" What's the key word? – "*Began.*" The writer of Hebrews characterized Jesus in verse 2 of chapter 12 as "*the author and finisher of our faith.*" The resurrected and ascended Jesus was not at all finished with His work – coming to faith in Him is just the beginning of a glorious journey. Via the Holy Spirit, He imparts Himself into every confessed believer in Him. He does this because He has a purpose for each of us. He seeks to forgive, restore, and grow us into the original plan He had when He created us. Out of His love and grace, He gave instructions and guidance on how to accomplish His customized purpose in each of us. How to discover this purpose and live that life of faith is what this series seeks to unveil. These instructions are God's Word – Romans 10:17 plainly states this, "*So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.*"

When you read instructions to something you want to build or assemble, have you ever thought about who the author is of the instructions? For me, I just assume that the instructions are from the manufacturer – the entity that created what I'm trying to build. You figure the designer should know how to explain how to put together what he/she has created, right? The New Testament is our faith instructions. God entrusted the disseminating of these instructions to a handful of amazing men – the authors of the New Testament books who were obedient to the Holy Spirit's leading in creating these instructions.

Perhaps the most unlikely, and, yet the most prolific and one of, if not the most, influential of the New Testament authors was the Apostle Paul. He identifies himself as the author of this amazing book of Romans in the first verse of Chapter one. As you saw in the homework, we find three primary points to cover in this chapter:

- The Apostle Paul revealed in his greeting
- The just live by faith
- Gods' righteousness vs. man's unrighteousness

Paul wastes no time in revealing things about himself in the opening verses. Significantly, the *first* word he uses to describe himself in verse 1 is “servant.” This is the NIV’s interpretation of the Greek word, *doulos*. This is an unfortunate interpretation of this word. As you saw in the homework, the more accurate and appropriate definition is “slave.” At first glance, you can’t fault the NIV interpreters from shying away from using this word, as it comes with a terrible connotation. Slavery is one of the deepest and darkest wounds and stains not only on this country’s history, but also human history. However, a little closer look at this word, as Paul is using it, reveals a different and more profound meaning.

Several other translations use for the word *doulos* “bondservant.” Back in Exodus 21, we learned that if a Hebrew was purchased as a slave, he/she would serve their owner/master for six years. In the seventh year, he/she was to be set free. However, and I am quoting Exodus 21:5, “*But if the servant plainly says, ‘I love my master . . . , I will not go out free.’*” In other words, the servant/slave is so content living under his/her owner’s/master’s care and provision, he/she is willing to surrender their freedoms and voluntarily serve their master forever. They do this because the love, provisions, and protections they get from their master exceed their independent freedoms. This is the definition of a bondservant – someone who consciously gives up their life for the service and devotion to another.

This is what Paul means as he calls himself a *doulos* – a slave. His experience on the road to Damascus where Jesus revealed Himself to him and every step taken thereafter had convinced Paul that being a voluntary slave to Jesus Christ was better than living in charge of his own life. He summed up this decision in Philippians 3:8: “*Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ.*” A full surrender to the leading and Lordship of Jesus Christ is the decision to be a bondservant. This is a huge step for any person, and it requires total trust in God’s character and provision. For most of us, that’s a big ask, but the Scriptures promise enormous blessings for those who make this decision.

Paul, secondly, calls himself to be an apostle. Literally, apostle is defined as one who is sent off on a mission. However, Paul uses this term to establish his authority to write this letter. With Judas Iscariot’s betrayal and suicide, the 12 disciples were reduced to 11. In Acts chapter 1, Peter led the group to choose another 12th member of the group – Matthias. Given Peter did this on his own leading and the fact that we don’t hear about Matthias again, I personally don’t count Matthias as one of the 12 apostles. To be clear, this is my belief. There are many people who know the Bible better than I do that count Matthias as one of the 12 apostles.

I believe, given that Jesus personally called Paul to “*show him how many things he must suffer for My name’s sake.*” (Acts 9:16) that, in Jesus’ eyes, Paul is the 12th apostle. Regardless if he is Apostle #12 or #13, him giving himself the title of apostle is significant. The apostles were clearly the leaders of the early church, so for Paul to want people to believe what he was writing, he needed to let them know he had the God-given authority to provide this teaching. Don’t think, though, Paul is trying to puff himself up or put himself on a pedestal. Don’t forget what he *first* called himself – a slave/servant.

The final descriptive he uses for himself in verse one is that he is “*set apart for the gospel of God.*” With the first two descriptives, he is defining his *position* in Christ. In these words, he is defining his *purpose* in Christ. Paul was “hard core” in everything he did. He described himself prior to his conversion in Philippians 3:5-6, “*A Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.*” He trained under Gamaliel – one of the most respected Jewish scholars in Scripture. Few people had a better grasp of the Old Testament than Paul.

From a human’s perspective, Paul would have been the last person to choose to be a foundational apostle in Jesus’ church. The good news for those of us who think our pre-Christ confessing days were wasted (I’m one of those), God knew exactly who and what He was getting in Paul. With his deep knowledge of the Old Testament, by unveiling Himself to Paul, Jesus knew Paul would connect the Messianic prophesies to Him. Moreover, given Paul was a Roman citizen and grew up in a Greek culture, he would be relatable to his ultimate target audience – the Gentiles. The next time you’re not sure or are doubting what your personal history can do for the Kingdom of God, remember the story of Paul. God can do amazing things with a willing and surrendered heart.

In verses 8-15, Paul put on display another component of his character – a passion for the saints. He had a pastor’s heart. He makes statements such as, “*without ceasing, I make mention of you always in my prayers.*”; “*I may find a way in the will of God to come to you.*”; and, “*For I long to see you that I may impart to you some spiritual gift, so that you may be established.*” He also wasn’t shy about sharing his primary mission – His God-given purpose, “*So, as much as in me, I am ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also.*” In summary, let’s look at how Paul presents his qualifications as the provider of this epistle:

- A bondservant/slave to Jesus
- An apostle
- Set apart for the preaching of the gospel
- A passion for people

Before he goes into the primary focus of this first chapter, Paul provides a two-verse preamble, if you will, in verses 16 and 17. He introduces important terms as critical components of the gospel message. These terms are:

- Salvation
- Righteousness of God
- Faith

Merriam Webster’s online dictionary defines “salvation” as, “*deliverance from the power and effects of sin.*” Despite the efforts of many churches today to down-play the seriousness of sin in exchange for greater attendance, the central debilitating issue in every human’s life is just that - sin. Sin literally means to fall short of the mark. A fair question to ask is what is this “mark” that sin is measured against? That mark is God’s holiness and righteousness. One of God’s core character traits is His holiness. Righteousness is the fruit of holiness – it is the behavior of holiness. Jesus being God, was sinless – see 1 John 3:5, 2 Corinthians 5:21, 1 Peter 2:22, and Hebrews 4:15. He was, and is, the embodiment of God’s righteousness.

Because God is holy, sin is an offense to Him. As the offended, He has the option to choose to forgive, or not to forgive. More importantly, if He chooses to forgive, He gets to define the terms to which He is willing to extend His forgiveness. Thankfully and remarkably, God, in His passionate love for us – His creation, was willing to make His forgiveness available. However, he needed to set a backdrop to His holiness and His righteousness that was so clear that our sinfulness, exposed to such pure light, would be unmistakable. This backdrop was the Law – the 10 Commandments. We'll get more into the Law's purpose in the next few chapters.

Paul will later say in Romans 3:23, *“for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”* In other words, our sin separates us from God. Yet, thanks be to God, He *wanted* to reconcile us – even while we were still sinners. God provided the salvation bridge from our sinful state to be reconciled and allowed us into His righteous presence. What is that bridge constructed with? - The cross of Christ. All of what Paul is talking about is spiritual. Yes, sin clearly has horrible physical effects. Every debilitating thing on this planet and with humanity is rooted in sin. The wages of sin are indeed death. While physical death is terrible, the far worse condition is spiritual death – a separation from God. He created us to be in a relationship with Him, but sin severed that relationship. Salvation offers a deliverance from spiritual death. This deliverance is a declaration of “not guilty.” By God's grace, this “not guilty” declaration is called justification, so the one who is delivered is considered just in God's eyes.

The question every person should ask when hearing this possibility of deliverance, is, *‘How do I get this deliverance?’* Paul offers the glorious truth that it is only available through belief – through faith in the gospel story. Hebrews 11:1 describes faith as, *“The substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”* The key words in this verse are “substance” and “evidence.” Paul tells us in verse 17 that God's righteousness is revealed in the gospel. He goes on to say that the just shall live by faith. Faith is indeed spiritual which, to the nonbeliever, is unseeable or unknowable. However, we've just heard words linked to faith and God such as “substance,” “evidence,” and “revealed.” The Christian faith is by no means a blind faith. The holy and righteous God is knowable and makes Himself known through His creation. That is what Paul is going to talk about in the rest of this chapter.

Commencing with verse 18 and through the end of the chapter, Paul not only seeks to bring clarity to the sins that separate us from God, but also God's feelings towards them. In verse 18, we're provided another character trait of God's – His wrath. This is not the first time we learn of God's wrath. We first learned about God's wrath way back in Exodus, and it is mentioned more than 150 times all the way through the book of Revelation. Again, Merriam Webster's online dictionary defines wrath as, *“retributory punishment for an offense or a crime: divine chastisement.”* How do we reconcile God being loving, forgiving, and merciful with Him being a God of wrath?

As a finite created being, fully knowing and understanding an infinite Creator is not possible. Moreover, God is sovereign, which means He can do whatever He wants. Romans 9:15 demonstrates this truth, *“For He says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.”* As we said earlier, sin is an offense to God. Yet, the totality of His character opted to make His forgiveness available to all who believe. Through faith in His only begotten Son's sacrifice on the cross and His resurrection, we are delivered from God's wrath.

What is God's wrath directed towards? According to verse 18, *“all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.”* Ungodliness and unrighteousness are sinful behaviors. Our sin

provokes God to anger – He is a feeling being. His wrath is His holy response to sin. What specifically are the ungodly and unrighteous doing that has God so upset? They are suppressing, or holding down, the truth of God and who He is. Suppress is a verb – it is an action. If something needs to be suppressed, then there must be a force that makes what is being suppressed both powerful and obvious. Paul points out what this truth is that is being suppressed in verse 19, “*because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them.*” Paul continues in the next couple of verses pointing out the obviousness of God’s existence with phrases such as, “*His invisible attributes are clearly seen;*” and, “*that they are without excuse.*”

The topic of the obviousness of God’s existence is too big for this lecture, but where Paul is going with this is if we were to stop and think about the universe and the human body, how can we not see the evidence of design? If there is a design, then there must be a Designer. Seems to me that it takes far more faith to believe in evolution or some other explanation that seeks to take away the plain truth of God as our Designer. People who seek to do this, according to Paul, do not glorify God as He is, nor are they thankful for His creation. Paul characterized intentional nonbelievers as:

- Futile in their hearts
- Their foolish hearts are darkened
- Professing to be wise, they became fools
- Changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man

Psalm 14:1 beautifully sums up the above list, “*The fool has said in his heart, “There is no God.” They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none who does good.*”

Verse 24 is one of the clearest verses that God has His limits. Yes, He is absolutely a God of longsuffering, grace, and mercy. However, repeated, unrepentant sin over a long period of time hardens the heart towards God, He simply acknowledges their prolonged choices and “*gives them up*” to uncleanness. Whatever resistance God was providing through the Holy Spirit to convict them of their sin, I interpret the giving them up as pulling back of the Holy Spirit’s influence. Without that holy influence, the insatiable flesh will be fully yielded to Satan’s destructive influences. What is Satan’s goal? To defame and destroy what God creates and loves.

What does Paul say happens to the individual who God has given over to himself/herself? They follow the lust of their hearts and dishonor their bodies. They exchange the truth of God for the lie and serve the creature rather than the Creator. As spiritual beings, we seek a spiritual God to serve and worship. However, without the Holy Spirit’s indwelling, unholy spirituality steps in. Masked as something “spiritual” – all other religions are designed to appeal to the flesh. With a heart that is void of morality, the flesh goes to places it was never designed to go.

In verses 26-28, Paul specifically and clearly lays out the sinfulness of homosexuality. Given it is only 3 verses of an entire chapter, I’m not going to overemphasize this particular sin, but it is most definitely sin. I know this is not a popular position in today’s culture – it’s not politically correct. As a teacher of God’s Word, there is only one correctness I am concerned about, and that is biblical correctness. Homosexuality is a sin, but it is not an unforgivable sin. For a church to take a truly biblical position on the sin of homosexuality, it is going to take some hits from a society that has largely grown very accepting of this behavior. I’d rather take hits from society than to have to know one day I’m going to come face-to-face with the Word of God and the

visible wounds of His crucifixion and tell Him I was too worried about my standing in society to stand up for the truth of His Word.

The church has largely failed on the handling of this sin. On one side, it has swung too far to the right, like the Westboro church – spewing hatred, judgment, and condemnation – showing no signs of the compassion of Christ. If Jesus were to come back today, I have zero doubt He would be spending time in the middle of the Castro district in San Francisco ministering to the homosexual community. He would be telling them what they are doing is sin, but He would be telling them He loves them and forgiveness is available. The other side of the church has taken the position that homosexuality is not a sin, and allowed their influences into the highest positions of leadership. This position is denying the truth of the Scriptures, and doing a terrible disservice to these sinners.

Homosexuality is not the only sin those who God had given over to partake in. Paul continues with sins such as sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness, whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventor of evil things, and disobedient to parents. Turn on almost any television show or movie these days, and tell me you are not assaulted by most, if not all of these behaviors? How about social media? Seems to me the *only* thing that is *not* allowed on much of social media is pro-God talk. Today, standing up for God and His Word immediately makes you a “hater,” out of touch with “progressive” society, and you are cancelled. If you can’t see the spiritual warfare raging and escalating in today’s media outlets, you’re not paying attention.

The homework asked the question what was different about the sins mentioned in verse 31 compared to the previous ones. To refresh your memories, these sins were, “*undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful.*” Take off the “un” prefix in each of these words, and you get the character of God – discerning, trustworthy, loving, forgiving, merciful. That is what sin is – it is the polar opposite of God’s holiness. Sin and God’s righteousness are mutually exclusive – they cannot coexist. Don’t believe that? Just look at the cross. Jesus took on all of our sin and became sin for us on the cross. Sin is as serious an issue to God as can be, so any effort to water it down, dilute it, or dismiss it is a spiritual slap in the face to Jesus. I don’t have the nerve to look Jesus in the face and tell Him what He did on that cross wasn’t that big of a deal. Do you?

Paul concludes this chapter with the natural consequences of sin – death. However, he not only proclaims this death sentence on those practicing the sins, but also, he pronounces it on those who approve the practicing of these sins. For the pastor who has chosen to take a liberal position on sin, this pronouncement should have him/her shaking in his/her boots. I try not to be too judgmental of pastors as I know they are subjected to greater spiritual warfare than I am. However, as shepherds of God’s Word and His flock, they cannot escape their accountability. This is why I pray not just for a revival, but also for a reformation. We need the church to once again find its foundation – Jesus Christ and His Word. We need, as Jesus said in Revelation, to get reacquainted with our first love – namely Him.

Chapter 1 gave us insights to:

- The apostle Paul
- The just (declared not guilty) live by faith alone
- God’s righteousness vs. man’s unrighteousness

There is some heavy stuff in this chapter, and this will continue for the next several chapters. What Paul is doing is setting a backdrop of the *necessity* of Christ crucified. From there through the end of Romans, he will show us the *fruit* of Christ crucified. What's the common theme? Jesus Christ – He is the firm foundation. We can stand on Him because nothing can stand against Him. All other ground is sinking sand – all other ground is sinking sand. Let's pray.