

The Obedience of Faith

Romans 1:1-17

September 3, 2017

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, ² which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, ³ concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh ⁴ 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, ⁵ 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, ⁶ including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,

⁷ 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.

⁸ First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. ⁹ For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you ¹⁰ always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. ¹¹ For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— ¹² that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. ¹³ I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. ¹⁴ I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. ¹⁵ So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

Romans 1:1-17 (ESV)

This morning we begin a new series looking at Paul's letter to the early Christians in Rome, which is the most theological book in, at least the New Testament, and most likely the entire Bible. But really the entire Bible is theological because it is the story of God and how God has worked and revealed himself throughout human history. Because Romans is so theological, where the Christian church has received much of its doctrine on things like salvation, justification, sanctification and atonement, just to name a few, it is also one of the most challenging. It has also come under a lot of attack from those both outside and inside the church, probably even more so in recent years. Some have even made the claim that we should take out all of the Apostle Paul's letters and just leave the four gospels, maybe the Book of Acts, and maybe the Book of Revelation. That would probably leave less than half of the New Testament. Many see a sharp difference between what Jesus taught, found in the four gospel accounts, and what Paul taught. I personally don't think there is any difference at all, with the possible exception of Paul's thoughts and teachings on the role of women. But let's remember here, though Paul was one of the original apostles, chosen specifically by God for that purpose, Paul was still human, influenced by the culture of the day. Jesus was God in human flesh!

Paul had a very unique calling from God. In our last series on the five-fold ministry of Jesus, otherwise known as APEST, when I talked about the ministry of an Apostle, I said that as that term is used in the New Testament it really has two meanings: 1) An apostle is one who has been given the apostolic gift – to go out into the world and expand God’s kingdom, for that we can use a small a; and 2) An Apostle with a capital A is one who was called to be one of the original Apostles – mostly Jesus’ original 12 disciples, plus one! I say plus one, but plus one is actually plus 2. Matthias was chosen to replace the disciple Judas who betrayed Jesus, recorded in Acts 1, even before the day of Pentecost. And in Acts 1:21-22 we find the qualifications for one of Jesus’ original Apostles. He had to be there “the whole time that Jesus went in and out among them” and he had “to have been a witness to Jesus’ resurrection.” So with the replacing of Judas with Matthias we once again have 12 Apostles. Then the day of Pentecost comes and goes, the resurrected Jesus appeared to many, and then He returned to heaven. The church begins in earnest. Why is Paul unique? Because he has still not personally witnessed the resurrected Jesus. In fact not only has he not witnessed the resurrected Jesus, he’s out recruiting people to put to death all of Jesus’ earliest followers. Then we get a little further along in the story of the early church, in Acts 9:

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”⁵ “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied.⁶ “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

Acts 9:1-6 (NIV)

Simultaneously, it tells us, beginning in verse 10

¹⁰ In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, “Ananias!” “Yes, Lord,” he answered. ¹¹ The Lord told him, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. ¹² In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.”

¹³ “Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”

¹⁵ But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.”

Acts 9:10-15 (NIV)

What qualified Paul to be one of the original Apostles with a capital A? He witnessed the resurrected Jesus like none other and had a conversion experience like none other. Most of all what qualified Paul to write all these letters that we find in the New Testament and to be one of the original Apostles is that he was chosen for the task by Jesus himself. Paul was uniquely qualified to write all of his letters which we find in the New Testament and it is our responsibility to take the words found in his letters just as seriously as any other word we find in the Bible.

Several times in the Bible we are commanded not to add to God's word or to take away from God's word. Why? Because I think when we do that there are eternal destinies at stake – for others and or ourselves. It's with some of that reverence and fear for God's word that we begin our series this morning looking at the Book of Romans.

Paul writes his letter to the early Christians in Rome because he wants to encourage them. He's heard very good things about them. In fact he says that their "faith has been proclaimed in all the world." Paul has been wanting to visit them for a long time, but it just hasn't worked out. He has been serving as an apostle, working feverously to the Kingdom of God in other places. And then there is that little problem of persecution, being beaten, and put in prison at times which sometimes gets in the way of going where one wants to go. But Paul's been trying to get there to see his brothers and sisters in Christ in Rome and he wants them to know that. And by now he's probably wondering if he is ever going to get there, so he writes them this long letter, really explaining to them what the Good News of God is all about. It's kind of like someone writing a love letter to someone that you're not sure you are ever going to see again. What would be the most important thing you would want to tell him or her if you didn't see them again? Sorry, there is no phone (not just no cell phone, no landline either), there is no text, there is no internet, the letter is all you have!

Paul begins his letter in verses 1-7 with a salutation, a greeting. And he begins it in a way that most formal letters began in that day. In the greeting he identifies himself, his message and his Lord! He identifies himself by name, by his relationship to Christ and by his office. Paul, "a servant," which the Greek word used there is much lower than we would understand "a servant" to be today. The more accurate is found in other versions: "a bond-servant" or "a slave." By calling himself a "bond-servant" or "slave" Paul places himself at the most subservient level possible – a servant bound by debt to a master who has absolute authority over him and his life. And who is the master who has absolute authority over him? He tells us right in the first sentence of the letter – "Christ Jesus." Jesus meaning the one who saves, and Christ the anointed one from God. His name is Paul and his relationship to Christ Jesus is that of a slave, one in which Jesus has full authority over him. Then he writes of his office – "called to be an apostle." And here he is talking about mostly an Apostle with a capital A. He was one of the original ones who was "set apart." And why was he set apart? "For the gospel of God." I would venture to say that it would just about be impossible to fit more meaning into the opening words of a letter than Paul does here in the opening words of his letter to the early Christians in Rome.

And it's interesting because today we often we refer to the gospel, or the Good News, as the Gospel or the Good News of Jesus Christ. In doing so, we can easily forget that this whole idea, this plan of salvation originated with God: "which he [God] promised beforehand."

What is this Good News or Gospel of God all about? Well, let me break it to you gently this morning, the Good News or the Gospel of God, is primarily not about you, or me, or even us. I know, in our very narcissistic world, our highly individualistic society, that says me and I come

first, that hurts. But the sooner you realize that the better! The Good News or the Gospel of God is first and foremost and primarily about God's Son, Jesus Christ!

The story is told of a very wealthy man who lived many years ago. He was a collector of some of the most valuable art work in the world. The man had very little family. His wife had died several years earlier and he had only one son who never married. His only son was quite ordinary but he was dearly loved by the father because he was his only son. Unfortunately the son died unexpectedly. The father was so deeply grieved that he died a few months later. The father's will stipulated that, at his death, his entire collection of art work would be publically auctioned off and that a painting of his son was to be auctioned first.

On the day of the auction the specified painting of his son was displayed first and the bidding was opened. Because there was really nothing special in appearance about the son and that neither he nor his father were very well known, a long time passed without a bid being offered. Finally, a long-time servant of the father and friend of the boy bid a couple of dollars. It was all that he had but he knew how much the son meant to the father. There were no other bids and the painting was given to the servant. At that point the sale was stopped and the auctioneer read the remainder of the will, which specified that whoever cared enough for his son to buy the painting of him would receive the rest of the estate.

That story illustrates God's provision for fallen mankind, which is every single one of us. Anyone who repents of their own sinfulness, acknowledges it and agrees to try and turn from it, and loves and receives the Father's Son, Jesus Christ, will inherit the heavenly Father's estate. The Good News of God is that everyone who receives His Son by faith inherits the heavenly Father's estate, the Kingdom of God. That's what Paul's letter to the early Christians in Rome is all about. He introduces us to it in the first seventeen verses and he's going to expound on it in the next sixteen chapters.

The primary purpose of the Gospel or Good News of God? We find it in verse 5, "to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations." For the sake of whose name? For the sake of the Jesus Christ!

Paul kind of gives it all to us in the first seven verses. Then in verses 8-14 he tells those early Christians in Rome how much he cares for them, how much good he has heard about them, that he's been praying for them and just how bad he wants to come and see them, so they can mutually encourage one another in the faith.

Paul writes at the very beginning of his letter to the early Christians in Rome, that the primary purpose of the Good News of God, as translated in the English Standard Version, "is to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of Jesus' name among all the nations." That's in the introduction or the prelude of the letter. And then we find the exact same thing in the benediction, the closing words of the letter:

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—

Romans 16:25-26 (ESV)

So, it would seem pretty important that we understand what this “obedience of faith” is all about. “Faith,” or in other parts of the Bible translated as “Belief,” is the only thing that saves us. In our sinful human condition nothing that we could ever do can save us. Only our faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus tells us in John 3:16, *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*

The writer of Hebrews tells us that “faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1). Besides the truth that no works or anything that we could ever do that can save us, there is no faith that saves us except faith in Jesus Christ and what He did for us on the cross. I know that’s hard for us to accept in our very pluralistic world today. But not only does Paul tell us that, Jesus tells us that, “no one comes to the Father except through me.”

But “Faith in Jesus” is one of those rather ambiguous terms, not very easy to understand. It means more than just saying “I believe in Jesus,” because the Bible tells us that even the demons believed in Jesus. So the belief or faith has to have something behind it, some evidence that it exists. And, how much faith in Jesus does one need to really have?

Jesus tells us in Matthew 17:20 that even if we had just a little amount of faith, faith as small as a mustard seed, we could tell a mountain to move and it would move. Is that really what Jesus meant? Did Jesus really expect us to move mountains by our faith? I don’t know about you but I don’t see too many mountains being moved. I think Jesus was telling his disciples that our faith as humans is often rather “precarious.” I think we’re often a lot like the father who asked Jesus to heal his son (in Mark 9:14-32), right after Jesus said to him, “everything is possible for him who believes,” and “immediately the father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief.”

“Yes, Jesus, I do have faith, help me with my lack of faith!” That is one of the meanings of the phrase, “the obedience of faith.” To be able to have faith, even just a little faith, as small as a mustard seed, when that’s all the faith one can muster up. It’s fairly easy to have faith when things are going good. But what about when life doesn’t turn out the way you expected or hoped it would turn out. How about all those people in Texas who lost everything they owned over the past week, some even their loved ones? How much faith do they have right now? Or how about the family in Rushsylvania who lost their 15 month old son this past week in a tragic accident? Or those whose children are dying from cancer and other diseases? That’s when we really need “the obedience of faith.”

But interestingly when I looked up the word “precarious” in the dictionary. I don’t like to just throw big words out there, mostly because I usually don’t have any idea what the big words

mean 😊! But when I looked the word “precarious” up in Merriam Webster’s Dictionary I discovered its first definition to be “depending on the will or pleasure of another.” In that way our faith in God and Jesus Christ is precarious.

I think that in order for us to understand what Paul means by faith we need to look in his letter to the early Christians in Ephesus, otherwise known as Ephesians: ***8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,***

Ephesians 2:8a (ESV)

Grace is unmerited, unearned favor, in which a believer does not and cannot contribute anything of worth in the eyes of God. Grace is a gift from God. Grace is God’s loving mercy, through which He grants salvation as a gift to those who repent of their sinfulness and put all their faith and trust in Jesus Christ. Even our faith is a gift from God! That’s one aspect of what “the obedience of faith” is all about.

I know I’ve already given you bad news by telling you that God doesn’t primarily save us for ourselves, that He primarily saves us the sake of His Son’s name, He also saves us for the sake of others. Paul says in our passage this morning that *through Jesus we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith[of others] for the sake of his name among all the nations.*

We are not saved in the least part, not the tiniest fraction, by our works, no matter how seemingly good they may seem, but we are saved to good works. Because Paul goes on in Ephesians 2, *8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*

True biblical faith involves more than just ascent to Jesus as Savior or to acknowledge Him as the Son of God. True biblical faith is obedient faith. To call men and women to “the obedience of faith” is to fulfill the Great Commission, that which Jesus gave, to bring men and women to Him and to obey everything that He commands in His Word.

Because what God requires of us is perfect obedience, obedience can never save us. But true biblical faith is verified by our obedience. The heart of Jesus’ teaching in the *Sermon on the Mount* is that faith without obedience is not saving faith, but that it is evidence that one is on the broad road that leads to destruction, instead of the narrow road that leads to eternal life (Matthew 7:13-14). Jesus says that it’s not even enough to call him “Lord,” or to do some very important things in His Name. Only those who do His will and the will of His Father will enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 7:21-23).

I have been greatly pained recently by some people that I know and love, who freely proclaim to believe in Jesus, while at the same time are walking far from the way God the Father and Jesus the Son would want them to walk – and they don’t seem to have a problem with it. I don’t mean

just a little sin, or a sin here and there, I mean some very deep seated sin, the kind that leads to destruction, not only for themselves, but leads others down that road as well.

By God's grace the chosen one's of God are not just the ones who respond by faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, they are also the ones who respond by obedience because to call one "Lord" implies submission to His will for your life. That is what "the obedience of faith" is all about.

Hebrews chapter 11 is considered to be the greatest chapter on faith in the Bible. The author gives us a list of the greatest people in the Bible who were known for their faith. And then he begins chapter 12 with these words, which I give to you this morning as the closing words of my message this morning, these from the Amplified Bible:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses [who by faith have testified to the truth of God's absolute faithfulness], stripping off every unnecessary weight and the sin which so easily and cleverly entangles us, let us run with endurance and active persistence the race that is set before us, ² [looking away from all that will distract us and] focusing our eyes on Jesus, who is the Author [the founder] and Perfecter of faith [the first incentive for our belief and the One who brings our faith to maturity], who for the joy [of accomplishing the goal] set before Him endured the cross, disregarding the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God [revealing His deity, His authority, and the completion of His work].

Hebrews 12:1-2 (Amplified Bible)