

Romans 1:1  
Bob Bonner  
February 19, 2017

After more than thirty years of our pleading for God's intervention in my dad's life, we were thrilled when he committed his life to Christ at about the age of eighty. For the next thirteen years I had the privilege of watching the power of Jesus transform him. In the years leading up to his commitment to Christ, there were several indicators that Jesus was drawing Dad to Himself through various channels. I remember on a two-week vacation, my dad surprised us by joining Becky and me in going to church. God moved in my father's life so much during those fourteen days, that when we heard him make this off-the-comment while walking by a waterfall-fed baptismal pool, we were stunned. He said, "You know, someday I might get baptized." Within days, he told his atheistic wife, "I have just become a Christian." For a while, that brought some tension between them and their thirty-four year marriage.

Weeks later, at the church Dad had begun attending, the pastor just happened to be leading the church through a series on *The Purpose Driven Life* based on Rick Warren's bestselling book. His book is a primer or introduction to guide and encourage new believers and others who want to grow in Christ. Dad joined the rest of the congregation's commitment to read the Bible and Rick Warren's book for forty days. After that forty-days, his wife told us that she had observed a radical change in my father's thinking and how he treated others. Soon after, I actually witnessed him practice the love of Christ in ways that were not natural to his nature. My father, for most of his life, was a racist; but that changed after meeting Christ. There are some who are critical of Rick Warren and this book, but I'm grateful for the fruit it produced in Dad's life.

I hope you understand my gratefulness for Rick Warren and his book, but I have to be honest with you. I personally struggle with the title, *The Purpose Driven Life*. I wish Rick had called it something different, like *The Purpose Directed Life*. To me, there is a big difference in those two titles.

To me, the term “driven” has a negative connotation. The Thesaurus lists other synonyms reflective of this. The term driven has hues in meaning of being “wrongly ambitious, obsessed, hammered, pushed, forced, and coerced.” That is not how the Spirit of God moves in people’s lives. So, my choice, “directed,” from the same Thesaurus gives the sense of being “single-minded, determined, motivated, focused, compelled, propelled, transported, piloted, guided, and empowered.” Those ideas are more consistent with what the Bible has to say about the lives of those who have been scooped up by the love of Jesus.

This morning we want to look at one spiritual man who reflects what I mean by a purpose directed life, one lived with intentionality. He was not a man driven, as being possessed by something. Rather, he had willingly submitted to God’s plan for his life. And as a result, the lives of those around him and literally millions of others whom he never knew have been forever changed by the Gospel he preached and lived.

At this point some of you, even some who have been coming here for some time, are probably asking questions like, “What really is the Gospel? Why is it so important for me to know about this thing called the Gospel? Why am I sitting here listening to this?” Those are all good and fair questions. In fact those are the very questions that the Apostle Paul intends to answer for Christians throughout the book of **Romans**.

If you are serious, Christian, and really want to know more about living a life that is worthwhile, study this book with us, not just here on Sunday morning but spend time reading and considering it for yourself throughout the week. For the next three weeks, I challenge you to read over and over again the first seventeen verses of this book. For these verses underscore that the purpose of the book is to point to the Gospel. They function as an introduction, and we will start looking at them this morning.

After that, we will move into the next major section of this book, **1:18-3:20**, where Paul reveals a very real problem. It is the biggest problem that has ever faced the human race. In turn, these verses reveal the need for all humanity to grasp hold of God’s solution to the problem of the human race, which is the Gospel.

In this section of Paul's letter, he speaks to the cause of human beings being separated from God, their Creator, the One who knows us best and is the only one who can fix us. The bottom line is that the problem rests with our knowingly suppressing the truth about God. As a result, all human cultures and societies, every nation down through history, has brought down upon itself its own destruction. Some nations have lasted longer than others; but in the end, they have all collapsed, even after their best efforts at trying not to fail. Even the United States, in its effort to become a "Great Republic," was once called "The Great Republic Experiment" and is presently en route to its own eventual downfall. I hope that this doesn't take place for a long time. But the evidence from all directions, regardless of who is in the White House or what party controls the Congress, is that this country is heading for a downfall. Even now, we are seeing uncommon behavior never seen before that resembles anarchy. This raises not only fear, but questions like, "How did we get here? How did nations before us get here?" Paul answers these questions in this segment of Scripture.

In the next segment, **3:21-8:39**, Paul gives us God's solution to the problem of the human race. He explains how the Gospel works in a follower of Christ, a saved person's, life. These chapters represent the heart of the book. They only hold the interest of those who see their problem of sin and want to apply God's solution of the gospel to their lives today. He explains how a person can be saved from the eventual destruction that so many are headed for. He not only explains where to start a new life-changing adventure, but how Christ will continue to transform our lives en route. In this segment, Paul explains not just what it takes to be saved, but how to live an abundant life in Christ. He shows us how what Jesus accomplished for us through his death and resurrection sets the only foundation upon which a believer in Jesus can experience the life-changing power of Christ in their lives.

In the next major section of the book, **chapters 9-11**, Paul talks about the Jews' need of the Gospel. Up to this point, Paul had chiefly addressed his comments to non-Jewish followers of Jesus living in Rome. In this section he is calling these gentiles, who have been given incredible hope for their future, to not forget that if it weren't for the Jews, through whom we have a savior, we gentiles would have no hope of a future. Therefore, "Gentiles, don't forget to reach out to the Jews with the Gospel."

Up to this point in Paul's letter to the Romans, he writes pretty much from a strong theological, heady point of view. But beginning with **12:1**, through the end of the book, Paul gets down to earth. He is very practical about what the Christian's life is intended to be like and how we are to live out our lives because of the Gospel. In short, Paul gives us the present day, practical implications of the Gospel for the believer.

In the first eleven chapters, Paul theologically explains why the gospel is so important, answering the question, "So what? Why and how is this stuff so important to my life today?" In **12:1-16:27**, having answered that question, Paul then answers the reader's follow-up question, "Now what? What are we supposed to do with what we have learned?" I am a pragmatist, and when I look at the table of contents for a book, if I see that the author is getting to what's really practical towards the end of the book, I want to turn there and get with it. But I have learned that in this case, to jump to **chapter 12** without getting a grasp of what is written in **chapters 1-11** would be foolish. One cannot appreciate or even fully understand why Paul stresses what he does in these last chapters, unless we understand the first eleven. So, as the author intended, we start not at the practical, but with understanding the theological basis for what will later become practically urgent for us to live out.

With that overview, let's begin our journey through the book of **Romans**. As I just mentioned, the first seventeen verses make up the introduction to the book, and in this the very outset of his letter, we see that Paul's theme is the Gospel.

This segment breaks into three parts. The first is what we will spend the remainder of our time covering this morning. In this part, **verses 1-5**, we are introduced to two key men behind the Gospel. The most important is Jesus Christ, upon whom the Gospel is founded. But we will only study the lesser of these two men this morning, the apostle Paul himself.

Having said that, let's read the passage as a whole.

**<sup>1</sup>Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the Gospel of God, <sup>2</sup>which He promised beforehand through His**

prophets in the holy Scriptures,<sup>3</sup> concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh,<sup>4</sup> who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord,<sup>5</sup> through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the gentiles for His name's sake.

In verse 1, Paul introduces himself and who he has become as a result of meeting Jesus Christ. He says, **“Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the Gospel of God.”** Right off, Paul identifies himself as a **“servant.”**

In Christian circles, to call someone a **“servant”** is a compliment. But in the first century, to call someone a servant was not a compliment but was often considered a derogatory remark. To the Greeks especially, who worshiped their independence and individuality, to be called a servant was an insult.

For the Jews, who took pride in being God's chosen people, to be called a **“servant”** by a gentile would be humbling.

To be a Pharisee, as the apostle Paul had been, and to call oneself a **“servant”** was unthinkable. Yet Paul was a man whose whole life was transformed by Jesus when he met Him on the road to Damascus, including his perspective on himself. He did not see himself as a major leader. He did not have to be free, out of jail, and holding a highly respected Pharisee position to feel significant. Years before coming to Christ, if someone had suddenly removed his membership from the Sanhedrin, the leading religious governing body, I'm sure Paul's ego would have been shattered. But realizing that he was the servant of the King of Heaven, it no longer mattered to him what others thought of his circumstances, whether he was in jail or sitting at a governor's table. The most important peg upon which he hung his sense of worth was, **“I am a servant of Christ Jesus.”**

How you view yourself, or what others call your “identity” is foundational to how emotionally stable you will be and how confidently you can live your life in a world filled with surprise opportunities and sudden unexpected major life changes.

For instance, a pastor might retire or get fired from ministry. If being a pastor is the basis of how he views his significance in life, what happens to his identity, his sense of value, when he is removed from his vocation? I have spoken with several pastors recently who have retired or have lost their jobs. Because some had a sense of worth based on their standing as a pastor, or that they were a person of influence and are no longer, they really felt it rock their boat. Some don't see it as a natural change in life. Those who don't really understand who they are in Christ experience a major crisis. But when we see that one aspect of our Christian lives is that we are His servants, we realize that our lives have purpose and meaning everywhere we go. How we serve may change, but it does not change who we are. We are beloved servants of the King.

Or, if a woman has spent most of her key years caring for children and being a mother, what happens to her sense of purpose and direction when those children grow up and leave home? Or worse, what happens if her children turn on her, reject her, or even worse, die? How does she see herself and her purpose then? For some moms, children leaving home, rejecting them, or dying, signals the end of their world. They have no reason for living. But in reality, as servants of Jesus, nothing has changed except their focus of service. When my children matured and left home, my role as a servant changed big time. I now am free as Christ's servant to raise up other men to be followers of Jesus. I am free to be a grandfather, build into grandkids, and then send them home to their parents high on sugar! (Just kidding!) Paul knew that life takes on its greatest meaning when it is viewed through the lens of service to the King. Our service may change, but it never goes away. Our only problem is to not allow our specific service at the moment to become an idol or our basis for significance.

Consider a high school student who is president of the student body or a star athlete. What happens to that student body president when he or she graduates and goes to a highly rated university like Stanford, where every student there was the student body president, the most favored student, or the

best athlete? Surrounded by 20,000 other students who also were the best back home causes a student to remeasure themselves. What happens to their sense of value and place in their world? I remember when the late Professor Hendricks spoke to my entering class at Dallas Theological Seminary. He was not only an outstanding professor and model of a disciple of Jesus, but he knew how to correctly motivate men. He told us:

Men, you are surrounded by some of the brightest and most talented godly men in the world, or you wouldn't be here. Unfortunately, many of you will start measuring yourself against another. That's the biggest mistake you can ever make, because you will always find someone who you think is more gifted or smarter.

He then went on to tell us that the number one problem for student failure in seminary is they don't think they are good enough to make it in the ministry. But then he said:

Men, God brought you here, and you were accepted here because you are already His called servant and He has plans for you. You look for his ministry for your life. You are important. Do not fall into the sinful trap of comparing your specific assignment with someone else's.

Man, when he finished talking to this most inadequate feeling student/servant in the school, I was different. I was ready to take on the world for Jesus! I was a handpicked servant of Jesus and that is all that mattered!

Or, what happens to someone who wakes up later in life to discover that they are a miserable failure morally, professionally, or personally? Maybe they are in prison or enslaved to drugs. Take John Newton, for example. In 1725, John Newton was born to a father who was a shipping merchant. At the age

of eleven, he joined his father on a ship as an apprentice; his seagoing career would be marked by headstrong disobedience.

His disobedience caused him to be disciplined by being forcefully pressed into the Royal Navy, from which he became a deserter, chasing after the love of a woman. As so often happens, he was caught and forced to endure humiliation for deserting, but then he managed to get himself assigned to a slave ship, where he began a career in slave trading. While aboard the ship *Greyhound*, Newton gained notoriety for being one of the most profane men the captain had ever met; which is saying a lot if you know anything about sailors!

At a major turning point in his life, John Newton came face to face with the foul person he had become. He began to ask if he was worthy of God's mercy and if he could ever be forgiven. He soon discovered that after a life of shame and immorality, God could forgive and transform his life.

Having experienced the first hand transforming power of Jesus Christ, he came to see himself with true perspective. He went on to write one of the most famous Christian hymns in history, "Amazing Grace," a hymn to which many closely relate. The opening stanza reflects what the Apostle Paul learned about himself and his old identity, which led to the birth of a new identity and a new life, one that was lived with new confidence, hope, and joy, no matter what difficulties he encountered. John Newton wrote:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound

That saved a wretch like me.

Unfortunately, when many sing these words, they misunderstand Newton's point. As a Christian, when he wrote these words, he was describing himself in his past life, not his present life. Before he was saved, he saw himself as wretched, which he was. Henceforth, once Newton realized he was saved, he looked no longer at himself in that same way. He looked at himself as God did. He was no longer lost, but saved. Hence, his words continue:

I once was lost but now am found,

Was blind but now I see.

What was it that John Newton finally saw? That he was changed. He was no longer an immoral slave trader, but he was who God saw him to be, a forgiven beloved child of God, called to serve Jesus the rest of his life, no matter whether he was on land or sea.

From that point on, John Newton's correct identity was that he was a servant of Christ. Nothing would ever change that. And that's how the Apostle Paul viewed his life, as a servant of his savior Christ. Previously, he may have been a murderer and a coveter. At present, whether called by others a failure in ministry, shipwrecked, whipped, seated at a formal dinner among the most politically powerful men of his age, wealthy, or broke, who Paul was never changed because of his past or present circumstances or difficulties. He would always be a forgiven, accepted, fully-approved-of, loved disciple of Christ. And as a result of this, he was confident and content with his life, regardless of circumstances. He could live through and endure anything.

How about you? Upon what is your life based? What identity or flag flies over your life? Is it something temporal, like beauty, wealth, intelligence, ability, position, or fame? The approval of someone you consider significant like a parent, child, coach, teacher, or pastor? Or is your identity founded upon something that is eternal that can never change, like who God says you are, a beloved, saved, fully forgiven, completely accepted, forever approved, never to be rejected servant/child of His?

Paul further explains that he was **“called and set apart as an apostle.”** If you look on your outlines, I have given you a word for word translation from the Greek of this verse. **“Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called apostle, having been separated to the gospel of God.”** If you look at this rendering, you will notice that the word **“called”** is not a verb, but it is used as an adjective here, describing who Paul is. Yes, it is true that God called Paul to be an apostle, but the point is that God not only called Paul, but that his identity from the moment he was saved was that he was **“a called apostle.”**

To keep it simple for now, Paul didn't choose to be an apostle, but rather this is who God made Paul to be. His first identity is something we all who know Jesus share in common with Paul. We are servants of Jesus Christ. From that point on, each of us has a different identity and thus a different calling or

direction for our lives. We are to live, not for ourselves, but as servants of Jesus Christ.

Hence, it was not until Paul understood God's direction for his life that he found his meaning or reason for living. From the moment he was saved and learned that as God's servant, God had called him to be an apostle to the gentiles, everything Paul did was because of his new identity and mission: "I am a servant, a called apostle of Jesus Christ to the gentiles!"

Do you know your identity, your direction, your reason for being here? If you have trusted Jesus Christ to be your Savior, He so wants you to know who you are and for what purpose He created you. And the key to learning what that is for you begins with understanding the Gospel. The best place to begin learning about that is to ask God to reveal that to you as you read the Bible, and in particular, this book of **Romans**.

You will see it declared later in this book, but for now, if you have committed your life to Christ, you are not just a servant. There is more! You are set apart from the rest of us servants. You are uniquely designed to serve God. There is more: you are His beloved child! God doesn't play favorites, because all of us are His favorite. If you were the only person to ever live, Jesus Christ would have come to die for you so that you could be forgiven and made his beloved child. Now, go out and live and work and play as His beloved child, serving Him according to His purposes as spelled out in the Bible.

If you are here this morning, and you have yet to commit your life to Christ, He desires that you do so. He desires that none should perish. If you aren't sure what that means or how to do that, I'll tell you before we are done.

But the bottom line is that if you want to know God purpose directed life for you, keep on seeking Jesus, and as you do He will reveal His purpose and direction for your life.

