

Romans: A Solid Foundation for Christian Living

Message 9: Why We Are a Missional Church

Text: Romans 1:21-32

When people hear about all we do in terms of mission work, they often ask why. The question usually comes like this: “With all the needs here, why send money over there.” And I understand where they are coming from, for I see the needs both around our church and across our community as clearly as anyone. But we are a missional people – a people on mission for Christ. Our vision statement says it all: our vision is to be a center of revival and awakening in and beyond the Panhandle. As a church, we settled this a long time ago. But why?

The short answer is that, apart from the grace of God through Jesus Christ, all people are lost. As we read in vs. 18 last week, “*The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all godlessness and wickedness...*” Apart from the grace of God which one receives through faith, people deserve God’s wrath and are lost forever – separated from God in this life and thereafter.

But this raises another question: how do we know they are lost? It’s an important question, for I believe one of the reasons why Christianity today has lost much of its punch is that we’ve lost our conviction about the lostness of people apart from Christ. Recent surveys indicate that a majority of church attenders in America believe that there are other ways to heaven apart from Christ. The newly installed leader of one of the largest denominations in America has said when asked if Christianity is the only way to God said, “I would not put God in that kind of box.” We’ve lost our conviction – our absolute conviction of the lostness of people without Christ.

But when you read Romans, especially Romans 1:21-32, you see that there was no such problem with the apostle Paul. Listen to what the Bible says...

Paul had earlier written of his longing to visit the Romans and preach the gospel among them. One reason, according to 1:11, was to strengthen the believers there. But another, given in verse 13, is that he would have a harvest among them. He knew that living and working all around these believers were countless unbelievers – people who had yet to learn of God’s grace. He was determined to go and preach God’s word to these people, to leave where he was – perhaps Corinth, where the work was not nearly finished – and go where the need was even greater. Why? Because he was absolutely convinced, deep down in his soul, that apart from Christ people were lost. How do we know? Because in verses 21-32 he tells us so. In fact, vs. 21-32 gives us three truths to help us understand that apart from Christ, people are absolutely lost.

1. People are lost apart from Christ because they reject God.

Vs. 21: “*Although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God, nor gave thanks to Him...*” Notice two things:

- **People know God** – knowledge that there is a sovereign God over this universe is not the problem. Vs. 19-20 make this point (read). Paul said that the natural world is enough to show people the reality that there is a God (not whole plan of salvation, but as Adrian Rogers preached once “light received brings more light.”) The problem is not that people do not really know inside their hearts that God exists.
- **People reject what they know** – the problem is that they reject Him; they ignore the evidence in order to block Him out of their lives and break any accountability to Him.

Ex: In 1859, Charles Darwin wrote the classic text on naturalistic evolution, *The Origin of Species*. Since then, the prevailing theory on creation has been Darwinian evolution. It is so dominant in scientific circles and education now that even sound theories from other non-believing scientists are not considered. Discussion is not even allowed. Ideas such as Intelligent Design are simply dismissed as the attempt of religious fundamentalists to get their way.

And yet, Darwinian evolution itself fails when scrutinized by the classic scientific method. A major principle for the evolutionist is that complexity evolves from simplicity. It doesn’t work the other way around. Still, in 1996 biochemist Michael Behe wrote that his analysis of a the simplest life forms shows what he calls “irreducible complexity”, not simplicity. For example, the flagellum of a bacteria is a whip like rotary motor that propels the organism through its environment. It includes an acid-powered rotary engine, a stator, o-rings, bushings, and a driveshaft. It requires approximately 50 proteins to construct. And Behe argues that such complexity cannot be the result of any naturalistic theory proposed to date. It must be design.

And yet, rather than debate the position and even suggest that there might be a God, science dismisses the evidence. Richard Dawkins has said, “Biology is the study of complicated things that give the appearance of having been designed for a purpose.” And Francis Crick, co-discoverer of DNA, has said, “Biologists must constantly keep in mind that what they see was not designed, but rather evolved.”

Why must they fight to keep it in mind? Because they know. They really know, but they refuse to glorify Him and give thanks to Him. They are lost.

2. People are lost apart from Christ because they create substitutes for Him.

Vs. 22-23: *“Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.”*

The strange thing is that, because of the image of God within man, we cannot live in a godless state. And so, once humanity rejects God, he must create a substitute. In the ancient world, and even primitive cultures today, they do this with idols. But the real issue is not the idol. The idol is simply a symptom. What makes an idol better than the real thing? Answer: they can control the idol.

See, the word changed in vs. 23 also means “to imitate.” So they wanted to mimic the glory of God, to take it for themselves. Now think about it. This was at the heart of sin, going back to the garden of Eden. What did the serpent say to tempt Eve to eat from the forbidden tree? Gen. 3:5, “Eat it and your eyes will be open. You will be like God.” Sin and lostness is about taking God’s glory. It is about removing Him from the throne of our lives and taking that place for ourselves. Lost people still have a god. Atheists still have a god. Agnostics still have a god. It’s just self that they place on the throne.

And therein lies the problem, for the first of the ten commandments says, “You shall have no other Gods before me.” And this is just what the unbelievers in Rome were doing.

It’s also what’s going on today. Today, just as in ancient Rome, we seek to please the god of self. Pursuit of personal freedom and pleasure is the order of the day. And to deny anyone any of these is to be “out of touch” and even bigoted. This is especially true since the 1948 publication of the Kinsey Report. Since then, the fullest experience of personal pleasure without any restraint has almost been considered a protected right. Why? Because once we remove God, someone has to take His place.

3. People are lost apart from Christ because their condition worsens by the minute.

Vs. 24-32: Sin is progressive. It goes from bad to worse. Things that were once done in private – in the closet – are now flaunted in the open with no sense of restraint. And we’re not only supposed to allow it. We are expected to embrace it. Why?

Three times in these verses the same words appear: vs. 24, “God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity,” vs. 26, “God gave them over to shameful lists...”; vs. 28, “God gave them over to a depraved mind...”. What’s happening here is this: God’s wrath is being revealed against sin. But notice that He doesn’t do it with fire from heaven. The ground does not open up and swallow them. What happens is that God says, “Ok. If

this is what you want. This is what you get.” And He simply lets them live as they choose and face the consequences.

The problem is, things cannot run this course forever. In ancient Rome it lasted for only about 300 years after Paul. They sensual indulgence ran its course until their society could not stand. Peoples they considered barbaric conquered them. Even the Vandals and Goths, pagan though they were, saw a society that was decrepit and depraved. I wonder how this fits into today’s news?

God judges sin in this world by letting it run its course. Like an avalanche, he will let the snow accumulate until it caves in on itself. That’s why Paul longed to preach. He knew that in such a case politics is not the answer. Jesus is the answer. And in our world, the same is true.

Conclusion:

The bottom line: apart from God’s grace, people are lost. We know it because they reject God; they create substitutes for Him, and the condition only worsens over time. So, what do we do?

We do what Paul did? We make the grace of God our priority. In Romans 1:5, Paul says, *“Through Him and for His name’s sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people to the obedience that comes through faith.”* We need to embrace this text as our own. Because people are lost without Christ, we must show them they way to Him.

- We must share the grace of Christ in our homes...
- We must share the grace of Christ in our communities, through our church...
- We must share the grace of Christ across the world...