

Love the Lord your God with all your hearts, soul, mind and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself.

But how do you do that? How do you live in right relationship with God and with other people? Those are important questions. Perhaps they're one of the reasons you come to church, seeking the proper way to be in relationship with God. So, if you have those questions, I'd like to offer one word of advice to you: Romans.

We're right in the middle of 14 weeks of readings from the book of Romans. Beginning a few weeks ago on June 18, and continuing on until September 17, our Epistle lesson each Sunday is from Paul's Letter to the Church in Rome.

After the Gospels, Romans is probably the most influential book in the New Testament. Romans is Paul's longest letter. It's his best written letter. It's hands down his most important letter. So today, during week 4 of our 14-week trek through Romans, I want to spend a little time talking about the letter in general. Then I want to focus in for a few moments on our lesson from ch7 in particular.

Right off the bat, it's important to know the purpose of Romans. Paul didn't sit down to write a theological masterpiece. Instead, he was writing to 5 churches in the city of Rome asking for financial support. Romans is a fund-raising letter. Paul was at a turning point in his ministry. So far in his career, Paul has had 3 different base camps or headquarters for his ministry. His pattern was to establish some sort of base of operations in a region. Then he would use that base to go out and preach the gospel throughout the entire area and plant churches. Base camp 1 was in Syria. Number 2 was in Turkey. Number 3 was in Greece. There's a definite progression moving west. And now, Paul wants to establish base camp 4 in Rome, 1,300 miles west from where he started in Syria a couple of decades earlier.

Paul's not so interested in Rome itself. There are churches already established there. But he is interested in taking the Gospel even further west into present day Spain. And he wants Rome to be his base of operations. So he writes the Roman churches to ask if they would be willing to support him and equip him in his missionary venture to Spain.

Paul didn't found any of these churches in Rome. He apparently only knew about 2 dozen of the Christians there. The rest had no real ties to him. He can't command them. He has no authority over them. So he has to find other means to ask for their help. He chooses to send them a letter of persuasion soliciting their support.

But how do you convince people to financially support you in preaching the Gospel when they've never heard you preach the Gospel? Paul's solution is this. In the letter, Paul lays out what he believes, what he preaches and what he teaches. And that summary of his teaching is what we call the Epistle to the Romans. It's hands down the greatest fund-raising letter of all time.

And here's the core of the entire letter. It was a revolutionary and radical spiritual idea in its day. Paul talks about the importance of what in Greek is called *pistis*. In English, we

translate *pistis* as faith, or belief, or trust. The entire letter centers around *pistis*: faith/belief/trust in God.

What makes this revolutionary is that faith was not important as a religious idea up until this point. In both pagan and Jewish circles, religion was about what you did, not what you believed. As long as you showed up in the appropriate temple and offered the appropriate sacrifice at the appropriate time in the appropriate way, you were good. Nothing more was really required. Religion was about what you did. Following the appropriate rules, regulations, and ceremonies. What you believed in your heart or mind or soul didn't really matter

But in Romans, Paul emphasizes the importance, the centrality of faith. In fact the thesis, the topic sentence for the whole letter, is found right after the opening greeting in ch1. Early in chapter 1 Paul lays out his central idea. He writes:

"I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith (everyone who believes), to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it (in the good news) the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'"¹

That's the key. Righteousness, right relationship with God, depends upon faith or trust in God. You're not made right with God by doing things. You can't earn your way to salvation by your deeds, by following the rules, by offering the right sacrifices. Instead it depends upon belief/faith/trust in God. That's the central message of Romans.

And throughout the letter, Paul is warning us about 2 twin traps. Imagine a that faith is a road. And this road has a steep drop-off on either side. In the life of faith, you have to steer a course between those two sides without falling to one extreme or the other. Both of these traps hold special danger for us in our culture. Both of these traps are great American heresies that we find ourselves falling into when we're not careful. That's why Romans is so important for us.

And Paul addresses both of these problems in Romans. And we see a part of that discussion in our reading today.

On one side is the trap of antinomianism. That's a long word that simply means anti-rules or anti-law. We heard Paul talking about that trap last week in ch6. In our culture, there is an atheistic expression of antinomianism, and there's also a Christian version.

The atheistic version is pure anarchy and hedonism. Anything goes. The rules don't apply to me. If it feels good do it.

The Christian version is this. You say, "If it's all about faith and not about anything I do, then I can do whatever I want. Because I'm a Christian, God's Law no longer applies. Since God loves me no matter what I do, that gives me carte blanche to go out and do anything I want." That's trap #1. It's one that's all too common in our culture.

¹ Romans 1:16-17

The response in the 7th chapter of Romans is this. No, God's Law is not a bad thing. Jesus said the core of the law is, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." And we need to continue to do that.

So the Law, the ethical and moral teachings in scripture are still useful. It's not an end in itself. We'll get to that in a minute. But the Law is a good thing.

Paul's position has turned into the classic Christian position. Jewish ceremonial and religious Law no longer applies to Christians. We don't need to sacrifice sheep anymore at our altar, since the sacrifice of the Lamb of God on the cross has taken place once for all time. But the ethical and moral aspects of the Law are still binding on Christians.

In other words, Paul is letting us know in Romans 7 that we can't just jettison the Law. Yes, Faith, not Law puts us in right relationship with God. But the Law still provides us guidelines in our day to day Christian life. Thus Antinomianism is not a viable option. So we as Christians need to stay away from Trap #1, anything goes.

But the other trap is also a problem. It is the trap of legalism. Legalism also has an atheistic and a Christian version in our culture.

The atheistic version is good old American individualism. I can do it myself. I don't need anybody. I can pull myself up by my own bootstraps, thank you very much.

The Christian version of legalism is this: "You have to follow this handy list of rules in order to be saved." Growing up in this part of the world, I had a lot of Christian friends from other churches who had lists of rules to follow: "I don't smoke or drink or chew / and I don't go with the girls that do." With legalism, the Law becomes an end in itself instead of being a means to an end. And legalism leads to this problem: Who needs God? If I do the right things, and avoid the wrong things, I'll get to heaven under my own steam.

And that turns into a HUGE spiritual trap.

If you try to reach God by your own efforts, if you try to reach God by DOING, then you're going to wind up trusting in yourself and not in God. Even something that is good, like God's Law can become twisted if you make it an end in itself. Following God's good law can become sinful if you put too much emphasis on it. You can't believe that by being super-righteous and obeying all of the Law you'll win God's favor. It's a very subtle yet dangerous trap.

If you try to keep the rules to please God, then everything backfires. You're trying to please God by keeping the law, but you end up trusting in yourself and in your own efforts. And nothing can take you farther away from God than that. That takes God out of the center of your life and puts you in the center. That's a spiritual death spiral.

How do you break out of it? Paul says, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"² Only Jesus can get you out of the dead-end trap of trusting in yourself. Only by faith, by trusting in God through Jesus Christ, can you get off of the treadmill of trying to get right with God through your own efforts. Only Jesus can bring you true freedom.

And over the next few Sundays as we hear the glorious 8th chapter of Romans, we'll hear what that freedom truly means. This past Tuesday we celebrated 241 years of political independence and freedom in this country. But true independence and true freedom does not come through our own efforts. It comes as a gift through believing and trusting in Jesus Christ.

As followers of Jesus, we are offered freedom from the powers sin and death. We are offered freedom from the responsibility of earning our place in heaven. The freedom Jesus offers is freedom from. It is a freedom from the trap of legalism. We don't have to earn our way into heaven.

But it's also freedom for. It's freedom for living as God calls us to live. That frees us from the trap of antinomianism, the trap of anything goes.

If you want to be in right relationship with God, it's not about what you can do. It's trusting and believing in what God can do.

Love your neighbor.
Love God.
And trust in him.

² Romans 7:25