

## THE FOUNDATION OF SPIRITUALITY

All my life I've loved history. Since I was a child, I've studied history of all kinds. Throughout the course of my life, I've studied US History, World History, Alabama History, Latin American History, Military History, the history of Engineering, the history of economics, Church History and biblical history, and that's just to name a few. You would think then that I would remember the old adage those who don't remember history are condemned to repeat it.

The scripture is the history of people who placed their trust somewhere other than with God, and the consequences they paid for their misplaced trust. In the letter to the Romans, Paul is addressing one such misplaced trust.

Theologians will tell you that the Letter to the Romans addresses justification by faith rather than by works, and I don't disagree with that assessment, but I think it tells only part of the story. The specific arguments surround the Law of God and its application. To really understand what's going on in this passage, I think it's really necessary to read the entire book of Romans, But for our purposes the present passage will do just fine. The crux of Paul's argument can be found in chapter 9:30-1. "What shall we say then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; But Israel, pursuing a law righteousness, did not arrive at that law." Let's look at the second half first- verse thirty-one.

Israel was pursuing a Law of righteousness, but they did not arrive at that Law. That's what Paul writes. Now, we need to understand that the Law of Moses had been the guiding factor of their faith throughout much of the history of Israel. So, much so that when the rabbinical system started the Rabbis began to ask the question. What does it mean to obey the Law? They began to interpret the Law in minute detail.

For example, it says in the scripture that humans should rest and not work on the Sabbath. So, the Rabbis began to ask the question. What does that mean? How do we define work? What constitutes work?

The Pharisees set about defining work. They began to say things like to sew two stitches was work. To walk two miles on the Sabbath was work. And so forth. All these interpretations were written down in a collection of writings called the Talmud, and they were studied over and over by the Pharisees in an attempt to achieve righteousness by keeping the Law perfectly.

You know what? It didn't work. Why? Because the Law was meant to point them to God. They were so busy trying to keep the Law of God in order to achieve righteousness, that they forgot to worship and glorify the God behind the Law.

Probably nobody in this room has a problem with anything I just said and probably we are nodding our heads and thinking, " Yep! They just don't get it."

However, before we go too far down that road, let's stop for a moment. Years ago, when I was living in Jackson, I was pastoring First Presbyterian Church in Jackson, and they were studying a bible study called the Disciple bible study. That's a bible study put out by the United Methodist Church. One night during the Disciple study we were discussing the gospel of Mark and we spent some time on the passage dealing with the transfiguration. You may remember a couple of weeks ago we celebrated Transfiguration Sunday. In that passage we were discussing the fact that the Disciples didn't get it. They didn't understand what was going on in the Transfiguration.

Well, I want to say that it's very easy for us to make that claim. The thing is that we weren't there. We weren't standing on that mountaintop watching Christ being transfigured. Can we say, not having been there, not having ever personally met any of the Disciples, that we are so sure that if we saw something like that happen, that we would get it? Can we really believe that? That we would get it? That we would understand? I have to tell you that I have been studying that passage for over thirty years. I don't get it. I'm not sure I understand exactly what happened.

What kinds of things do we do in the name of God that deflect us from our faith, that take us down the wrong path? That's the question this passage raises for me. We mentioned a few in the past. In the past sometimes I've talked about the ABCs of the church: Attendance, buildings, and cash. I do things those things often deflect us from the gospel message, but I'm going to mention some other pitfalls today. One of those pitfalls, I believe is excessive moralism- with an emphasis on the excessive.

What do I mean by that? Do I mean that we should be amoral?

No, of course not! Do I mean that we should engage in immoral acts? No, absolutely not! What concerns me is not our moral code itself. Our morals if founded on faith help shield us from the destruction of sinful life. What does concern me is that we often use our morals as a sword rather than a shield. Sometimes, they can become offensive weapons rather than defensive armor. They can become an excuse to judge others. We judge people by how they act, and we use our moralism as an excuse to exclude others from the gospel- as an excuse not to love others.

This became clear to me several years ago when I was on a mission trip overseas. I was asked to go with a local minister to a small clinic where people were gathered to hear the word of God. While we were in that setting, he asked me to preach first, and I did. Then he preached. At the end of his sermon, he ended it by saying this group and this group and this group and group are not going to be going to heaven.

Folks, that's not up to me, and it's not up to him. We are saved by the grace of Jesus Christ- not by our works. Not by what we do. That decision is up to Jesus- not me! I would never stand up here and say, "You're not going to heaven, because you did this." I would never say that to any of you, or anyone else. I would never do that! To me that is fundamental departure from our theology. I'm in no position to judge any of you. I'm a sinner myself.

Excessive moralism- when we use our moral code as a reason to justify excluding others or as a reason not to minister to others, I believe we're committing a sin ourselves.

There's another pitfall that I believe is out there. I said earlier that I had forgotten the adage that those who forget history are condemned to repeat it. Well, this is a pitfall I have fallen into from time- to-time. At times, I've tried to plan and program my way through the ministry throughout my career. Not only that, but I tried to build my own righteousness my way. But that doesn't work; Christianity is more caught than taught. I want you to remember that. People have to believe in what they are doing and be fired up about Jesus for this to work. It's just a simple fact. You can't just program your way through Christianity. It just doesn't work. I have tried to do that many times throughout my ministry, and have failed because of it. Rather than focusing on the immediate needs or the business needs, I should have focused more on the spiritual needs- both yours and mine. That's part of what spurred me to go in the direction of Emotionally Healthy Discipleship. We need to focus on the spiritual needs before we can count on making an impact in the world.

At times I have talked about the four things to which we, as the church, should devote ourselves. The Apostle's teaching, and fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer. You can find that list in Acts 2:42. That's the list that the early church used. Now, I'm going to tell you to what each of us individually should be devoting ourselves. Faith. The foundation of faith is Spirituality, and foundation of Spirituality is prayer and worship.

Paul states it best in Romans 10:13-15. "For whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved." "How then shall they call upon him in who they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent?"

Now with due respect to the Apostle Paul, I think that list is presented backwards. Sending leads to preaching, preaching leads to hearing, hearing leads to believing, believing leads to calling, upon the name of the Lord. Look at my humble story as an example. Preachers were sent to the churches I attended. They preached to me, and I heard the and I believed. I called upon the name of the Lord. As a result, I was sent to you. Now I preach to you, and you hear. Maybe, by God's grace, some of you will believe, and maybe you will call upon the name of the Lord. That's my goal, because if I can lead you to call upon the Lord, then the cycle will continue. You will hear and you will believe and you will be inspired to preach.

If you open your hearts to God, then you will eventually hear God's call for you, and you will be sent out to minister. Maybe you will minister in a different way. Maybe you will preach with your hands or your heart and not with your mouth and that's okay. Others will hear and believe and they will call upon the name of the Lord. The cycle will continue, and the circle will grow. It can all happen if we start at the foundation. Faith.

We must begin praying . We must do so without ceasing. Praying is the act of calling on the Lord for help. That's where ministry begins. I promise you. That's where spirituality begins. A simple act of faith. If we turn everything over to God, God will care for us. If we don't, I can give you no promises- for yourselves, for this congregation, or for the future. The foundation of Spirituality is faith. Think about it