

For God, By God

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[0 : 0 0] name is Matthew Capone, and I'm the pastor here at Cheyenne Mountain Presbyterian Church. And it's my joy to bring God's Word to you today. A special welcome if you're new or visiting with us. We're glad that you're here. And we're glad that you're here not because we're trying to fill seats, but because we're following Jesus together as one community. And as we follow Jesus together, we become convinced that there's no one so good. They don't need God's grace, and no one so bad that they can't have it, which is why we come back week after week to hear what God has to say to us in His Word. A couple weeks ago, we finished up our year-long project working through the book of Judges. And so now this week, we begin what I've been telling you all about for a little bit. We start the book of Romans. The book of Romans is a letter, and it's written by the Apostle Paul in the 50s AD. Many people think it's around 57 or 58 AD. And Romans is called Romans for a very simple reason, which is that it is written to churches that are in the city of Rome. And Paul's focus here is on the gospel, the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection. And there's a lot of different things. He's going to explore a lot of applications about the gospel, and those are all spokes that tie into the hub. And so he's constantly, we're going to see this even this morning, bringing us back to what's central and primary. Paul is always going to be bringing us back to the gospel, and he's especially concerned in the letter to the Romans about the mission and the unity of the church.

Now, I would guess that some of you, as you see this morning that we are covering only one verse, and you see that there are 16 chapters in the book of Romans, Romans, might be feeling a little bit of anxiety. But how many decades, in fact, will we be together in Romans? And so I want to assure you we're going to start slow at the beginning, especially in the introduction. We will, in fact, speed up. We will not do one sermon per verse throughout the entire letter. And we're also going to do chunks. So we'll do a few chapters of Romans, we'll take a break, and then we'll come back. And so for some of you, that's good news, and for others of you, a tremendous disappointment. Whichever one you find yourselves in, I invite you to turn with me to Romans chapter one, verse one. Whether you turn in your Bible, or on your phone, or in your worship guide, remember that this is God's word, and God tells us that his word is more precious than gold, even the finest gold, and sweeter than honey, even the honey that comes straight from the honeycomb. And so that's why we read now Romans chapter one, verse one. Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God. I invite you to pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word.

Our Father in heaven, we do praise you and thank you that you haven't left us alone as orphans in a merciless universe. And you don't expect us to figure out life on our own, but instead you have instructed us clearly and directly in your word. We thank you for the book of Romans that reminds us over and over of the good news of the gospel. That Jesus lived the life that we should have, and died the death that we should have, so that we can be with you forever. And we ask that you would be at work in a powerful way this morning by your spirit. That this word would be more than words on a page that you would honor your promise in Isaiah 55, that your word would not return to you void, but it would accomplish great things in the lives of your people. And so we ask that for us, that you would accomplish great things in our lives, that you would grow our love and our affection, our reverence, our all, and our obedience to your son and our savior, our Lord Jesus. And it's in his name that we ask all of these things. Amen. Now, the writer Ryan Holiday tells the story about the English heavy metal band known as

Iron Maiden. At one point, someone came to the manager of that band and they said, hey, I really admire the work that you all are doing in the music industry. And the manager immediately replied, the music industry, I'm not in the music industry. I'm in the Iron Maiden industry. Later, there was an interview with their lead singer, Bruce Dickinson, in The Guardian, a British newspaper, and he said this, we have our field and we've got to plow it and that's it. What's going on in the next field is of no interest to us. We can only plow one field at a time. The point of that story is to highlight this focus and clarity, the success that comes from being about one thing and only one thing. It's that same clarity and that same focus that Paul demonstrates for us here, the very first verse of his magnum opus. We have this introduction. It's longer than most of the introductions to Paul's letters and it is the introduction to what is arguably the most important letter in the history of the church. And so what does Paul want them to know as he begins writing the longest of his letters, in some ways the most important of his letters? There's in fact so many things that he could say. Paul is known as one of the most influential men who has ever lived in world history. In fact, we could make the argument that Paul is second in the history of the universe to only to Jesus himself. We could also make the argument that Romans, and some people do make this argument, is the most important letter ever written.

Many people regard Paul to be one of the greatest minds who has ever lived. And so you have here one of the most influential people writing perhaps the greatest letter as one of the smartest individuals to ever walk this earth. And how does he introduce himself? A servant of Jesus Christ.

[6 : 27] That for Paul is the most important thing, the first thing, the primary thing that he wants this church to know as they read his letter. First off, Paul is in the Jesus Christ business. What's going on in the next field is of no interest to us. We can only plow one field at a time.

And so Paul begins by letting us know he is about and only about one field. You remember Bob Dylan told us back in 1979, when some of us were alive, you're going to have to serve somebody. And so Paul's chosen, right? He's chosen who he's going to serve.

Now, you may not consider yourself a servant of Jesus Christ. Maybe you do. Now, Paul raises this question for us, though, why is this the servant he wants to be? Why would he choose Jesus Christ out of all the other masters he could have? In his book, You Are Not Your Own, the author Alan Noble reminds us there are actually only really three options when it comes to who we belong to.

We can belong or serve. We can be the servant of another human, another person, whether that's a specific individual, whether it's represented by a corporation or an institution. That's one of the options that's before us. We can be a servant of that. And I really don't need to make the argument for you that that's probably not the best idea, right? We all know there is no one else who has our interests in mind as much as we do. And so if we hand ourselves over as a servant to someone else, we are ultimately in some way going to be used or disappointed. So that's one option. We know that's not a great option. The next option is the option that we really like.

Option two is that we can, in fact, belong to ourselves. We know what's best for us. We know what we like, what we don't like, our preferences. That's probably the safest one, right? If we belong to ourselves, we can keep ourselves safe. We can pursue what's most important and what's most valuable.

[8 : 40] The problem is this. Alan Noble reminds us that that's actually something that's not going to end well. You'll see this on page seven of your worship guide. Do we actually desire our own good?

If we are honest with ourselves, we'd have to admit that on average, we aren't much better than anyone else at desiring what is truly good for us. We regularly desire and pursue self-destructive experiences and goals. And so Noble says, hey, on the one hand, you don't think being the servant of someone else is a good idea. Actually being the servant of your own self is not a good idea either.

Other people don't want what's best for you. You actually don't want what's best for you. And so that leaves you with one and only one option. The third option is this. If you are not the servant of someone else, if you're not the servant of yourself, what is remaining is that you, like Paul, are a servant of Jesus Christ. In fact, he goes on to say this. This is on page eight.

We need to belong to someone who is perfectly able to desire our own good while desiring their own good. Someone for whom there cannot be a conflict between our good and their good. We need to belong to Christ.

There is only one position as a servant that will not disappoint. There's only one position as a servant that will deliver what it is we long for and want.

[10 : 12] And that is what Paul has discovered is the secret right here at the very beginning of this letter. Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ. Now, remember I told you we're going to have many spokes in the book of Romans, and they're constantly going to pull back to the center hub, which is that Paul wants this church to be rooted and established in the gospel.

In fact, he tells them that very thing later on in chapter one. And so as we're in this very first phrase, this spoke is already headed back straight into the gospel.

Notice how the verse ends. He is here for the gospel of God. And the element of the gospel that Paul wants us to see here is this.

Christ is the one, and he is the only one who has died for us. And therefore, Christ is the one, and he is the only one who cares for us better than we can care for ourselves.

Paul doesn't talk about his Ivy League education. He doesn't talk about his many accomplishments or his pedigree. He doesn't discuss the fact that he was first in the Pharisee class.

[11 : 37] Because all of those things fade and disappear in comparison. Paul wants us to know he's a servant of Jesus Christ.

And he reminds us, Christ is the only one we can fully trust and fully serve without any damage to ourselves.

Christ is the only one who ultimately and fully wants what's good for us. He's the only one we can trust more than we trust ourselves.

Part of the reason we're going slow through the introduction to the book of Romans is that Paul is presenting for us at the very beginning. In these first seven verses, he wants us to see some of the major themes that are going to reverberate throughout the entire letter.

And one of the major themes of Romans is this. That there is a horizon line to our life. There is a place where our lives are pointed. We are all focused towards something.

[12 : 43] And Paul is asking us, in a sense here, where are you pointed? He's going to come back to the same theme in chapter 14. And he tells us this. For none of us lives to himself.

And none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord. And if we die, we die to the Lord.

So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. And so at the very beginning of this letter, we're reminded of something very simple.

We all live for something. The Christian lives for the Lord. Because it's the only safe commitment.

The Lord is the only one for whom it is safe and good to be a servant. He's the only one who loves us more than we love ourselves.

[13 : 51] You'll remember we talked about this when we were going through the gospel of Mark. That there are multiple types of commitments that we have in our lives. We have what we might call accessory commitments.

Things that are on the periphery. Things that are secondary. And we have what we might call a keystone commitment. The commitment that filters and determines every other action.

And so if you're like me, you have all sorts of things in your life that you're committed to. You maybe have sports teams that you love, right? Friends that you are loyal to. Schools that you went to.

Hobbies that you enjoy. And all of those things are great. All of those things are part of God's good gifts to us in this world. And they cannot be our foundation.

Now we have a keystone commitment. We have a commitment through which all the other commitments are filtered. It is the commitment that all other commitments serve.

[14 : 49] What Bob Dylan is telling us when he says you have to serve someone is this. Every one of us has an ultimate loyalty that determines every other loyalty.

The keystone, it sets and directs everything else. And so Paul is reminding us what our horizon line should be.

It's this and only this, Christ and his kingdom. That is the commitment through which we filter every other commitment.

Everything else is downstream of that. It's not that those other things aren't good and beautiful. It's not that they matter, don't matter. It's that they serve and flow out of something so much greater.

And so the point is this. As we live our lives, we want to be like Paul. We want to choose to be a servant of the one who loves us more than we love ourselves.

[15 : 57] We want to follow the line that is actually going to lead to our good, not the line that other people set for us and not the line that we set ourselves, the line that's actually going to lead to flourishing and hope and joy.

We set that, not as our accessory commitment, as our keystone commitment. It means we set aside money for God and for the poor.

And then we see what's left over for us. It means we honor our commitments as a spouse and as a parent. And then we see what's left over for extracurriculars.

It means that we know God's will first. And then we evaluate the expectations and demands and beliefs of our families. It means that we prioritize being together with God's family in worship on Sunday morning.

And then we see what time is left over for everything else. It means that we see if someone has faith in Christ first.

[17 : 07] And then we think about whether we want to date or marry them. Paul tells us this in a different letter, the letter to the Philippians, which we covered together, I think, back in 2019.

He says, Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ.

And then he explains that even more in the next two verses. Verse 9, he says, look, I want this righteousness from God. Paul's going to talk a whole lot about that righteousness in the book of Romans. And then he tells us even more in verse 11.

He says, look, this is what I'm headed towards. I want the resurrection from the dead. In other words, Paul here is setting himself out as a servant of Jesus Christ, not because he is some super religious nut, not because he enjoys religious activity more than a normal person, not because he can't enjoy the good things that God has given us in this world.

And so this is sort of the way that he works out his anxiety. No, Paul is dedicated and focused in this way because he knows this ultimately is the only investment that pays off.

[18 : 29] He knows that this is what leads to the resurrection from the dead. This is the way that he can lean into the future, the investment that he cannot lose.

He's a servant of Jesus Christ for his good and for God's glory.

If you work in finance or you know someone who works in finance, you know a big part, maybe the overarching piece of your job is this.

You have to know what things are worth. There's hours and days and weeks spent building models, right? Examining trends and patterns in history, trying to figure out what exactly is the value of this thing, whether it's the value of a house or a stock or an investment.

Paul is reminding us here that the Christian knows what things are worth. The Christian knows how to value things correctly.

[19 : 40] This is what actually lasts. This is what is actually valuable. This is actually what can't be lost or changed.

And so this is the goal that's worth aiming at. Paul has many things. He has great accomplishments. There's a wide variety of things he could tell the church in Rome about himself.

Maybe that would impress them or influence them. But instead, he simply wants them to know this. Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ.

Paul here goes on to tell us something else as well. It's not just that he's a servant of Jesus Christ. He's also called to be an apostle. This passage is not just about Paul's identity, about his loyalty.

He's also telling us he's a servant of Jesus Christ so that he can clarify at the beginning of this letter the authority that he has as he writes to the church. And so we won't spend too much time on this, but I'll give you just a brief overview of what it means to be an apostle.

[21 : 01] If you're familiar with the Gospels, you'll remember that Jesus picked 12 apostles. An apostle is a word that means someone who's sent. It's a type of a messenger who's meant to represent someone else.

And these apostles are meant to represent Jesus' teaching. Important thing, too, is to remember that these apostles are limited. They're finite. The office of apostle exists for a time.

It doesn't exist forever. In other words, there are no apostles present this morning. And as you go out and walk around the world in 2024, no matter where you go, you will never meet an apostle.

And there's two reasons for that. First of all, the apostles existed for a specific time to fill the gap between when Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven and when the 66 books of the Bible were solidified.

So we don't need apostles anymore. We have the scriptures. The second reason is that there are a set of requirements to be an apostle. You have to be personally selected by Jesus Christ.

[22 : 04] You have to have seen Jesus physically during his time on the earth. You have to be able to teach not what you know secondhand. You teach what you learned firsthand from Christ.

And so Paul here is helping them understand, hey, when I speak to you in this letter, I am not giving you options or opinions. I am giving you the very words of God.

This is not something to consider. This is something to believe and obey. Paul tells us more than that, though. He goes on to say that he has been set apart for the gospel of God, which is Paul's way of telling us, hey, God chose me before the foundations of the world for this specific role.

I didn't stumble into being an apostle. It wasn't haphazard that I'm representing Christ's teachings here to you in this letter.

No, this has been the plan all along. And many people have noted how perfectly that plan was executed. That Paul's biography works in such a way that, of course, he is the man set up for this job.

[23 : 25] Paul is the right man in the right place at the right time. Paul received an Ivy League education in Judaism. He knew everything about the Old Testament. He was the top of his class.

When it came to Pharisee school, Paul was the valedictorian. Paul was the one who gave the speech at the end. No one would want to go head-to-head with Paul at the Bible beat.

No one knew the Old Testament better than Paul. Paul also grew up in the Roman Empire. He understood how it worked. He tells us at one point he's a Roman citizen.

And so he's not just someone who understands Judaism inside out. He's someone who understands that cultural context inside and out. Even more than that, he doesn't grow up in some small town in the Roman Empire where he doesn't have a wide exposure.

No, he grows up in Tarsus, one of the great metropolitan areas of the time. And so Paul has this vast experience interacting with all sorts of people in all sorts of ways. He's exposed to all kinds of ideas.

[24 : 29] And so when this moment in his life arrives where he is the one who is representing what is new about the revelation of Jesus Christ as it's fulfilled in the Old Testament, no one is in a better position than Paul.

His biography is perfect for his purpose. Even more than that, Paul has the intellectual firepower to bring it all together.

And why do I tell you this? God has called Paul to a very specific task.

And God uses Paul in a special way that he will not use any of us in the history of the church. Okay, so there's something unique here about Paul.

There's something unique about the fact that he's set apart. And so what's true of Paul is not true of us in a narrow sense. However, what's true of Paul is true of us in a broad sense.

[25 : 38] If you are a Christian, God has also set you apart. If you are a Christian, God has been at work in your life since before the foundations of the earth.

If you are a Christian, God has been at work in your biography, preparing you for this moment in this time. And in case you think I'm being sentimental, Paul tells us this exact thing in a different letter, his letter to the Ephesians.

Ephesians chapter 2, verse 10, he says this, For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

You were set apart from the very beginning. God chose your works before you knew him.

God chose your works before you were born. God chose your work.

[27 : 14] God has called you to the works that he has before you. God has set you apart. He set you apart in a specific way.

He hasn't set you apart in the way of Paul. He set you apart in your way. Paul was prepared for his work by the family he grew up in, by the experiences he had, by his cultural setting, by his education, by his temperament.

God has also set you apart. You were prepared for your life and the works that God has for you, by the family you grew up in, by the experiences you've had, by the cultural setting you know, by your education and your temperament.

God has also set you apart. God has called you apart. God has called you apart. God has called you apart for the works he has for you.

God has called you apart. God has called you apart. That's also going to be a theme for Paul, the book of Romans, that God has been at work making and keeping promises longer than we can fathom.

[28 : 31] God has called you apart. God has called you apart. God has called you apart. It's another reason why it's worth being his servant over serving anyone else. It's another reason why it's better to be a servant of Jesus Christ than a servant of a person or an institution, a servant of our own pleasures and experiences and desires.

You'll hear me say this many times as we look into the book of Romans, but you'll hear me say it today for the first time, which is this. The book of Romans has been called many times the fifth gospel.

If you're familiar with the New Testament, you know there are four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And the reason people call the book of Romans the fifth gospel is this, that everything Paul teaches in the book of Romans, Jesus taught first.

Everything you see in the book of Romans, you can see in Jesus' life, his work, his ministry, or his teaching. And so as we look at this, we can always go back to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and say to ourselves, where did Jesus teach the same thing?

We'll do that in many different ways. As we move through the book this week, we'll see the particular way in which Jesus said this first. Matthew chapter 16, verses 24 and 25, Jesus says this, If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

[30 : 00] For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. Which is Paul's way of, Jesus' way of saying there, being a servant of Jesus Christ is the answer and the only answer.

It's the path to life. And then Jesus says this, For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?

Why are we servants of Jesus Christ and of no one else? We're servants of Jesus Christ and no one else because that's where life is found.

We're servants of Jesus Christ and no one else because he has set us apart. For the good works he's prepared beforehand. And so that's why we can sing together, In Christ alone my hope is found.

He is my light, my strength, my song. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we do praise you and thank you that we can trust you. That you're the one for whom it's safe to be a servant.

[31 : 16] Because you care for us more than we care for ourselves. And we thank you for your work in our lives, that for everyone who belongs to you, that you have been guiding and directing everything to this point.

Preparing us for the works that you've chosen for us. That it's not up to us to determine the path and direction of our lives, but you, in fact, go before us. We ask that you would remind us of this.

That we would see that our life is found not in saving it, but in losing it. And finding it in your son and our savior, our Lord Jesus. We ask these things in his mighty name.

Amen. I invite you to stand for our closing hymn. Amen.