

Rebuilding the Foundations - Romans

Part 1

“A Wholesome Self Image”

Romans 1:1-6

Pastor Charles Price

Now if you have got your Bible I'm going to read some verses from the book of Romans. We're going to turn to Romans 1. I'm going to read Romans 1:1-6 reading from the new international version. Paul of course is writing. And he says, "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God. The gospel, he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, regarding his son who as to his human nature, was a descendant of David and who through the spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the son of God, by his resurrection, from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him and for his namesake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith. And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ."

That's as far as I'm going to read, I heard a story one day of a multi-story building that had been erected and completed and was in operation for several years. When one day somebody discovered a crack on the 42nd floor of the building, the chief executive officer of the company that managed the building immediately called the architect and said, I need you to come. We've got a crack on the 42nd floor. When the architect arrived, the CEO was told the architect is here in the building. And so the CEO took the elevator to the 42nd floor to meet the architect. And when he got there, there was no architect. He waited for the architect, but didn't turn up, so he went back to his office and asked to be informed as soon as the architect was found. And a while later he got a message, we've found the architect he's down in the 6th basement.

So the CEO took the elevator to the 6th basement., and when he got there, he said to the architect, what are you doing down here? We called you to investigate a crack on the 42nd floor. What are you doing in the basement? And the architect said, well, you may have a crack on the 42nd floor, but your problem is not on the 42nd floor. The problem is in the basement. And apparently, so the story goes, there was a security guard who worked in the building. He wanted to build a garage in his yard at home, and he hadn't got the money or the resources. And so every night before he went home, he took the elevator to the 6th basement, chiseled the brick out the wall, put it in his backpack, took it home and added it to the growing pile in his yard. I think this may be an apocryphal story, but that's the story.

And suddenly after months or a period of time of doing that, suddenly a crack appeared on the 42nd floor, but the architect wisely recognized that it had nothing to do with the 42nd floor, it had everything to do with the basement, the foundation. And the reason I tell that story is because for those who have eyes to see it, there are all kinds of cracks on the upper stories of life

around us today. No matter where you look, we could give all kinds of statistics to give indication of that; family breakdown, moral confusion, but I'm not primarily concerned this morning about that so much as the fact that there are equally cracks on the upper floors of the Christian Church and of many, many Christian lives. There is and I know this from conversations and as I travel, there is confusion about what is truth. Is there such a thing as truth?

That is always true, and in any case, if there is what is it, what actually is the gospel message we have embraced? There is great confusion about behavior. How are we to behave as the agents of Jesus Christ in a fallen world? And there's lots of confusion because many of us have found ourselves conforming to the pattern of the world. Exactly something Paul said, do not do, but it's convenient to do it. And some of us do it because we have lost the navigation, the spiritual navigation that tells us certain things are right, certain things are wrong. Certain things, please, God, certain things displease God. And there are cracks on the 42nd floor or perhaps a number of lives here this morning. But the problem is not the 42nd floor. The problem is the foundation, the basis, and I want over these next number of weeks to talk to you from the book of Romans under the overall title, I'm giving this rebuilding the foundations. Because there's no part of the new Testament, like the book of Romans that enables us clearly to do that.

And I'll tell you why. The book of Romans actually is unique in the writings of the apostle Paul. Many of you will know. He wrote 13 letters in the New Testament. But to all the other letters he is writing to people or in all the other letters, he's writing the people that he knows in many cases, churches that he has founded. And in his letters, he is answering that questions. He's correcting some of the errors. He is resolving some of their problems. He is giving them instructions. In some cases is reprimanding individuals. And these are the reasons on the motivation for his writing the letter in the first place. But when he wrote to the Romans, it was altogether different. Paul had never been to Rome. He didn't know most of the Christians in Rome. He knew some of them because he sends greetings to them at the end of the letter, but he tells us, and you can read this in Romans 15, that he's on his return to Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey.

And he says to them, my work in this area of the world, Asia, minor Greece, the areas where much of Paul's ministry had taken place has come to an end. You see he established churches, had put leadership in place and it was now their responsibility to spread the gospel throughout those regions. And he said, my ambition is to preach the gospel where Christ has not been named. And so I am going on my next journey, he says to Spain on the far Western side of Europe, and on my way to Spain, I intend to call into Rome and to visit you. But all kinds of rumors had circulated about Paul. Most of them critical or many of them critical, many of them uncomplimentary. And he says, when I come to you, I want to tell you what it is I'm going to talk about because you may have been misled as to what my message is.

So I'm going to tell you what my message is going to be. And therefore the book of Romans is the most comprehensive and the most systematic explanation that Paul gives us of what the gospel of Jesus Christ is. And for that reason, this book stands apart from many other books in the new Testament, as the book that we need to understand, and we need to live by if we're going to have a Christianity that is real and workable, and there's some surprises in this book, I'll tell you one of them, Paul never once mentions going to heaven. Now for a lot of people, their understanding of the gospel is basically it's a rescue operation to get them to heaven. Now, of course, heaven is a wonderful prospect and we will be eternally grateful for that. But when Paul explains the gospel here in the book of Romans, he never once mentioned heaven apart.

He uses the word when it talks about the wrath of God, is being revealed from heaven. He never mentioned heaven as the place to which we're going, though we are. Because the message of Paul here in this letter is that the gospel is primarily about human beings being reconciled to God, that having been reconciled to God we have been indwelt by the spirit of his son, the Lord Jesus Christ in order that he might reproduce the character of Jesus Christ in us and do the work of Jesus Christ through us. Going to heaven is a consequence, but it's not the point, it's a wonderful consequence. In fact, the gospel, according to Paul is not so much about how to get people out of hell and into heaven. It's more about how to get God out of heaven, into people. Does that make sense? It's about getting God into people that once again, men and women and boys and girls, no matter who they are, nor where they live, know what time they lived, might actually know God.

And they might know him, not just in an intellectual fashion. Well, yes, I can recite the truth about him, but because experientially, I'm in relationship with him. He indwells me. He lives in me. He empowers me. He directs me and I live in a love relationship with him. Over the next weeks, it'll take quite a few weeks, most of this winter probably, but I think it'd be worthwhile spending that time. We are going to examine what exactly from the beginnings to its fulfillment is the content of the gospel of Jesus Christ it is going to revolutionize people's lives. Because sadly, there are many folks who say I'm a Christian, but there's never been any revolution of their life that's taken place. There's not much about them that makes them different than the neighbors next door. They basically struggle with the same struggles in the same way.

They live with the same fears in the same way. They don't seem to have any resources the next door neighbors don't seem to have. And there may be cracks on the upper floor, but we resolve those cracks by rebuilding the foundation that Paul gives to us in this letter to the Romans. Now this morning, I want to just look at Paul's introduction of himself because there's some important themes that come into this, in Romans 1:1 let me read it to you again. When he says to them, "Paul a servant of Christ Jesus called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God," three things he says about himself, three things that make for a wholesome self image, self

understanding. And I'll explain why I say that to you by the end of this time. But first of all, he describes himself as a servant of Christ Jesus.

The foundation of all Paul's activities and ambitions lies this understanding of himself. I am a servant and a servant of Jesus Christ. Now it seems to me that this word servant is probably a very neglected one in our contemporary Christian vocabulary, but it's a very frequent one in the New Testament. So much so, I'm given to understand that by the end of the apostolic era, the common description of a Christian was he or she is a servant of Jesus Christ. That's how they understood themselves, because to be a Christian was to be a servant and this certainly was Paul's expectation. Let me read you what he said in Romans 14:9. He says "for this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living." The reason he says why Christ died and rose is that he might be Lord. And the flip side to Jesus Christ being Lord is that you and I are his servants. If he is Lord by definition, we live in submission to him.

Now the Greek word translated servant in the NIV is the word "Doulos" and it's a stronger word than probably the word servant that we would use today. It is more akin to the word slave. Now, of course we don't like the use of the word slave because it has terrible connotations. It has connotations of forced submission and of harsh treatment. And we of course recognize that our relationship to the Lord, Jesus Christ is not on those kinds of terms. Nothing's forced. God will never twist your arm. He'll never hold a gun to your head and say, you better do this or else it's a free submission to him as Lord. That's why you can live outside of his Lordship. You can live outside of his mastery in your life very easily, but there are ideas of slavery, which are true to the New Testament in 1 Corinthians 6:19, Paul says, "do you not know that your body is the temple of the holy spirit? And you are not your own. You were bought with a price." It says Paul, don't you know this don't you understand that to be a Christian is to realize that you are not your own. You were bought with a price when Jesus Christ died on the cross. Amongst other effects of his death for us was that he purchased us outright. We were bought, says Paul.

He says in Romans 6:22. He says, "you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God. And the benefits you reap leads to holiness and the result is eternal life." That's Romans 6:22. In Romans 12:1, he says, "Therefore I urge you brothers, in view of God's mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. This is your spiritual act of worship." The King James says, "this is your reasonable service." This is not unreasonable. This is reasonable. Why? Because you've been bought and therefore to yield yourself and submit yourself and present your bodies. A living sacrifice is totally reasonable, says Paul.

Well, we have to say this isn't always the kind of Christianity that we embrace, is it? If you understand what is the New Testament definition of a Christian, it includes becoming a servant of Jesus Christ. And only as we live with that sense of submission to his mastery as Lord in our

lives, do we find all the benefits and blessings that derive from living in relationship with him. If I were to ask you this morning, how would your life be different if every morning you and I began the day by saying to ourselves, I am not my own today?

I've been bought with a price and today I live as a servant of Jesus Christ. How would that affect the way you live? How would that affect your family life if that was the theme of your family, we're servants of Jesus Christ. How would that affect your work if you go into your office or your factory or wherever your work may be, where this understanding I'm here today as a servant of Jesus Christ. Yeah, there are lots of demands on me, of course, that other people place on me, but in my fulfillment of those functions, I am a servant of Jesus Christ first and foremost, that is how I understand myself.

How would that change your life? Now, this may sound a little oppressive actually, because the whole idea of servitude is not an attractive one to us, but in actual fact, it's very liberating. Now I'll give you three reasons. Why? Because when we see ourselves as servants, we become concerned with our masters plan. In other words, we recognize there is somebody who is going to direct my life that day. That is a wonderful, liberating thing. If you are just left to just control your own life. You're unable to, to control the consequences. But when you know that you have surrendered your life to a master who is going to direct your paths and lead you and guide you, you can do so with the assurance. He's a God who knows exactly what he's doing.

You see, a servant is characterized by his seeking the plans of somebody else. That's what makes him a servant. Some years ago, I worked as a farm manager in Zimbabwe, in Southern Africa and we had over a hundred men that were, were accountable to me that I had to give direction to. And every morning, 6:30 in the morning, I would meet them. I'd meet many of the Foremen, but then we also have the workers who would also be there as well. And it was my job to work out what the plans for the day were going to be. And to give those instructions to the different people and they would carry them out. That was their job. They didn't come and say, look, I'm sorry, I've got my own ideas for today. I'm going to go and build a wall because I feel in the mood for building a wall. And I said, we don't need a wall. I want you to go and do something else. A servant doesn't come with his own agenda.

He submits himself to the agenda of the one who directs him. And you see Paul can live with confidence, whether he's in a prison as he spent much of his time in prison, we know four years after he wrote this book or whether he's out preaching the gospel or whether he's in a situation where he's well- received or a situation where they are seeking to destroy him. He lives with his confidence. I am where I am. For one reason, God put me here. That's an assurance you can have you see, we're told if you acknowledge God in all your ways, he will direct your paths. We don't have to know what God's plans are because he doesn't always show us. All we have to know is if I've committed my, if I acknowledge him in all my ways, he is directing my past because he

promised to direct my paths and God always keeps his promises. Whether I can explain what he's doing or not is a different matter. That's why it's often, in retrospect, you see the will of God, much more clearly than we do in prospect. When we try to see what's lying ahead, God doesn't always show us. I remember once being in a group of young people and I asked them or I gave them a questionnaire. It was a weekend retreat I was speaking at and I gave them a questionnaire. One question was, are you in the will of God right now?

Next question: 'how do you know?' If you are in the will of God, how'd you know, you're in the will of God? And the answer to the question: 'Are you in the will of God right now?', I've forgotten how many it was, but it was quite a few of them said, 'Yes, I am'. In response to the next question: 'How did you know you're in the word of God?', every one of them gave circumstances as evidence that they were in the will of God. And for instance, one said, I wasn't planning to come on this weekend because I couldn't afford it. And then my grandma sent me some money and I knew it was the will of God for me to come well, that's fine. Of course that's good. But the primary reason why, you know, you're in the will of God is not because your circumstances say so, but because your relationship to God is such that you acknowledge him in all His ways and he has promised he'll direct your paths.

I travel quite a bit. And I often say, Lord, if I can have an empty seat next to me on this plane, that would be great. I can spread out not to talk to anybody and relax. If there's somebody on this plane, you want me to speak to, I have no idea who they are, how can I possibly know? If there is, you want to bring them alongside me, that's your business. And you'll find a number of times, you'll be alongside somebody, you'll bump into somebody and you'll find their hearts are open and there's a situation in their lives that makes them right to hear what you may have to say to them about Jesus. You see, being in the will of God is not as difficult as we think it should be. He's the master, we're the servants, it's His job to put us there! And he does and we live with that assurance every day. I am where I am today because God put me here today.

And so a servant is concerned with his master's plans. He's also dependent on his master's provision. You see when a master gives instructions, he also has to provide the resources to accomplish those instructions. When I was on this farm in Zimbabwe, if I gave the workers a job to do, it was important that we also gave them the resources and the tools and the equipment or which to do it. In fact, there's one occasion in the Bible. When in the book of Exodus, you may remember that Pharaoh told the Israelites slaves to make bricks, but didn't give them the resources. He didn't give them the straw, which held the bricks together. And it was described next in Exodus 5 as 'cruel bondage.' To give somebody a job to do and not provide the resources is cruel bondage. And we have a master you see who, when he calls us and leads us, also provides for us.

So Paul can say, as a servant of Jesus Christ, I'm where I am, because God put me there and the resources I need to accomplish the job are the resources God provides me with, and if I don't have what I think I should have it's because that is what I'm not supposed to be doing. He provides me with the resources that I need, and that's why Paul could say to the Philippians. My God will supply all your needs because he had known and experienced that right through his life. And the third thing, if he's concerned with his master's plans and dependent on his master's provisions, he's also committed to his master's purpose. You see, the master has a purpose that the individual servant may not grasp, may not know the full story.

I was on a, um, I think it was a Airbus A321 constructed in France when I was across in Europe now these last couple of weeks, and I was reading in the in-flight magazine, a little bit of the history of the Airbus and where it is constructed. And actually it's constructed all over the place. There are bits made in Belgium, bits made in England, bits made in Germany, bits made in France, bits made in Sweden. The whole thing is just, just bits that are then brought together in, in France and assembled to form the Airbus A321. Now you've got somebody in England making a little part for a wing, he may not understand the significance of the piece of metal that he's forming or shaping. You go to someday across in Sweden and he's doing something else. And he may not know what the whole picture is like, all he knows is that I have this little job to do and this thing to fulfil, but I don't know what the whole picture is. And there are times when God gives us things to do and he knows the whole picture, we don't. We don't know the significance sometimes of the things that God has led us to do, or a conversation here or something over there. And you think, well, I don't send any results of that, but God, the master planner knows how this contributes to an overall purpose in fulfilling his plans and his agenda. So far from being oppressive to be a servant, is liberating. You can begin every day knowing I've got somebody who's capable of directing my paths, who is going to provide the resources and it's going to cause my little, little life to fit into a big overall plan and become significant in that overall plan.

So that's the first thing Paul says about himself. I'm a servant of Christ Jesus. The second thing he says about himself is that I'm called to be an apostle. Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus there in Romans 1:1, called to be an apostle. Now on the one hand, he says, I'm a servant. But on the other hand, I'm called to be something, I'm called to be an apostle. One is a very lowly description. I'm a servant. One is a very lofty description. I'm an apostle. He combines a sense of humility as a servant with a sense of authority as an apostle. I am called! Wasn't my choice. I didn't look in the local paper and find a vacant position. 'Apostle wanted need to be interested in world travel', and I applied and got the job. I'm an apostle because God called me to be this. So as a servant, Paul lives with this divine sense of a call from heaven to be something on earth.

My life on earth has a divine eternal significance because God has called me to be something. Now, of course, Paul was called to be an apostle. And that is something which was personal to

Paul. And if we understand what makes an apostle an apostle, my understanding would be that there are no apostles, not that follow the New Testament criteria at least, but these were foundations to the church. Paul talks about the apostles and prophets being the foundation of the church, Christ himself, being the chief cornerstone, but apostles and prophets being the foundations. And it was a call that God gave to him specifically and personally. You and I will not take that same title. The word apostle simply means to be sent and it was used generally as anybody sent by one person on an errand. But it was used specifically of those who are sent by the Lord Jesus as the foundation of the church.

It was being formed here now in these early days. But it may be, God has called you to be something entirely different. But the significance of it is, is just the same. If you say, God has called me to be a teacher, that's where he is going to fulfill his work, his purposes in your life. If God has called you to be a mother and to stay at home with your children to nurture them and bring them up or even to work as well, but you're bringing them up and that's your primary calling in life, that is a divine function. And you can live with the dignity every day. I have a call from heaven to be a mother, to be something that's a divine ministry.

If you're called to be a taxi driver, you drive your taxi with the consciousness I'm here, because God put me here and therefore God has agendas other than simply ferrying somebody from A to B. It makes life much more exciting. What is God's agenda in this? God's called you to be a doctor, to be a pilot, to be a financial manager, to be a pastor, to be the father of a family. It doesn't matter what the role is. That is incidental. The important thing is you understand, I am where I am because God has put me here. Now you may not have had any specific sense of call where you woke up one night and felt a sense of God saying, I want you to be a taxi driver. You say, I didn't get a call like that. I just got it because it was a job, but remember what we've said, you acknowledge him in all your ways. He'll direct your path.

And therefore, if you've allowed Him to direct your paths, you can be sure that where you are is where God has put you and it gives new dignity and new purpose to that role when you say I am here by divine appointment. And Paul lived with this sense of humility, I'm a servant, but with a sense of authority, I'm called to be something in order to satisfy God's agenda on the earth and be a channel for his purposes on the earth.

And then the third thing he says is that he's set apart for the gospel of God back there in Romans 1:1. "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God." He says, I've been set apart for something. That word 'set apart' is actually the root of our word holiness. To be holy does not mean to be sort of goody-goody. It certainly doesn't mean to be perfect because there is no promise of perfection in this life, but we're called to be holy.

The word holy means to be set apart, you have that attitude of being set apart to the Lord Jesus, to his gospel, to his purpose. Doesn't make you perfect. When I got married some years ago now on the 30th of August, we just had our wedding anniversary. I wasn't home for it, but I remembered it. I ended up sending her two bunches of flowers by mistake, but that's okay. She liked it. But when I was, when I got married, I stood in front of the congregation, the people and the gentleman who conducted our wedding said to me, something like this, 'Will you say after me?' And I had to say these words, 'forsaking all others, I take you only unto me.'

And I said that, I meant that I lived by that for the last 22 years whatever it is. I think that's what it is. Yeah. But when I said 'forsaken all others, I take you unto me,' what I meant was I'll never look at a girl in the way I look at you again. I'll never develop a relationship with a girl in the way I have a relationship with you. I meant it, I've lived by that over these years, but that didn't make me a perfect husband overnight. I think that took a week. No I didn't. My wife isn't here this morning. She's in the other service. So she would have something to say about that. Of course I'm not a perfect husband. Ah - you are here!

I have to go back again and again and say, I'm sorry. She says those words don't come easily from my lips, but they do get squeezed out of me once in a while. And she says it to me as well. You see, when we talk of being set apart to Christ, I'm set apart to Hilary exclusively. To be set apart to Christ doesn't mean that life now is lived on some kind of perfect level and there's never any faltering or questioning or doubting or failing or sinning. There is! And you know it, and I know it, but it means that the basis of everything else, there's this attitude I'm set apart to the Lord. Jesus. The alternative is I'm set apart to anything which happens to attract my attention at the time and that I'm weak enough to not resist.

That's why to be holy is to be set apart. And Paul says, I'm a servant of Jesus Christ. Every day I begin with this consciousness. I'm not my own. I belong to him. Paul is implying. In case that sounds not only humble, but humiliating. I want you to know second thing, you Christians in Rome, I'm an apostle. I'm called to be an apostle. I have a sense of purpose, a sense of dignity, a sense of authority about this. It's lowly to be a servant. I have this sense of purpose too. It's a lofty purpose to be an apostle. And I'm set apart. You see if it's lowly to be a servant and lofty to be called an apostle. It is lengthy to be set apart because it's a long term attitude. I love the title of a book by Eugene Peterson. I haven't read the book, but the title is "A Long Obedience in the Same Direction". Great title. It's not obedient today, decide again tomorrow, but it's a daily long-term setting apart for the purposes of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And I said, in the beginning of this gives Paul a very healthy, wholesome understanding of himself, a self image. You see, people need a sense of value. And Paul says, here's my value. I'm a servant of Jesus Christ. I've been bought with a price. People need a sense of purpose. And Paul says, I have this purpose. I'm called to be something. And I live every day with that sense of

purpose. People need a sense of significance that their lives actually count and make a difference, make a contribution and Paul says, this is my significance. This is what I contributed. I'm set apart from the gospel of Christ.

Like a three legged stool. One of those legs is broken the stool collapses. We need to know we are valued. We need to know we have purpose. We need to know we are significant. If you're struggling in those areas, you can find this in your relationship with the Lord, Jesus Christ. As you humbly come to him and say, Lord, I'm your servant. Thank you. You're my master. You plan my life. You provide my resources. Thank you and as my Lord, you've called me to be something and I go about my responsibilities today with that sense of purpose and dignity, that this has a divine call to it, divine stem to it. And I'm significant. I'm set apart for the gospel of God. I'm set apart for the purposes that the Lord Jesus Christ has. I wonder this morning, if this is a true description for you? If it isn't, it's very likely on the upper floors, there are cracks in the walls. And you may focus on the crack and that would be a mistake, you need to go back to the foundation.

Let's pray together. Father, we're grateful to you this morning that you have revealed to us in the Lord, Jesus Christ and his work through the cross, his death and resurrection from the dead. The possibility of being reconciled to God, to be brought into union with God again, where we know you, where we experience you, whereby your Holy Spirit you live within us and you reproduce the character of your son in us. And we know Lord Jesus this is only possible when we really understand the part of being a Christian is recognizing we're being bought with a price, and we're not our own. We want to submit to you humbly, but confidently, thanking you for the way you will take our lives and make them meaningful in a way that otherwise they would never be, and by your Holy Spirit do a work in people's hearts this morning. Some of us may look back on this day as a changing moment in our lives because Christ took his place as Lord.

Make this a reality for us we pray for, we ask it in Jesus name and for his sake. Amen.