

## ***Grounded: Getting our Bearings***

Trinity CRC, January 17, 2021AM

Romans Series

**Romans 1:18-32**

Rev. Richard deLange

Dear friends in Christ,

We've probably all had the experience of being lost at some point or another. I have a very vague memory of being returned to my parents after wandering away from the church picnic when I was probably 4 years old. There was lots of commotion at the picnic, people socializing and playing games. Kids running around, in and out of the water at Cultus Lake. Somewhere in that beehive of activity, I started walking down the beach and no one noticed. Frankly, I don't even know if my mom and dad missed me. They probably just assumed one of my older siblings was taking care of me. I really don't know. But I walked a few kilometers down the sandy shore to a completely different picnic area. And that's where a few women noticed me, figured out that I was lost and walked me back down the beach until they reconnected me to my family. In any event, I was lost and, thankfully, found.

The book of Romans tells the story of our being lost and found as well. You will see as we continue through this book that Romans teaches about sin, salvation and service, themes you've likely heard before if you've studied the Heidelberg Catechism. Romans 1-3 starts out examining sin. How did humanity fall into sin and what does that look like? It helps us get our bearings in our relationship to God. It helps us fit ourselves into the gospel, which is Paul's major concern in this book.

When we come to Romans 1:18 now, Paul shines the light on the unrighteousness of mankind in relation to the righteousness of God our creator. He says very strongly that our sin has invoked the wrath of God. So, Paul wants us to get our bearings straight. He shows sin to be our rebellion against the innate awareness of God that we have. Sin is resistance to our created awareness of God as our moral authority.

More simply put, Paul is saying that everyone knows about God. He created us with that awareness. And because of that, we can't say we don't know. We're all guilty of turning our back on God. There's no excuse since we are born with that knowledge.

Saint Augustine put it like this in the 4<sup>th</sup> century: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

Another common quote goes like this: "There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every person, and it can never be filled by any created thing. It can only be filled by God, made known through Jesus Christ." That quote is usually attributed to the French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. His actual words are a little longer and more confusing so let's stick with

this shortened paraphrase: “There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every person... that can only be filled by God.”

Yet we try to fill it with all kinds of other things. That’s the point of Romans 1.

### **Idolatry: Rejecting God and His Self-Revelation**

First of all, then, I hope you’ll notice with me that Romans 1 reminds us that the root of sin is idolatry. And idolatry is rejecting God and his self-revelation to us. Our sinful heart keeps trying to fill the God-hole with anything other than the one true God. We exalt the wrong things to the place of God. V.23 in one translation reads,

*<sup>23</sup> People swapped the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mere mortal humans and birds, animals and reptiles.*

We worship creatures instead of the Creator.

Isaiah has these great monologues from God where he basically says, “What is wrong with you people? Don’t you see how crazy you are? You cut down a tree and then you bring part of it to a woodworker and ask him to shape that wood into a god. Then you bring that idol home and put it in your livingroom, bow down and pray to it. Meanwhile, you take the other part of that same tree and cut it up for firewood and heat your house with it. Don’t you see that praying to a piece of wood is ludicrous?”

Sin causes us to look elsewhere to fill the hole in our heart. Sin leads us to reject our inner awareness of God and his self-revelation to us in favour of gods of our own making. That’s God’s message to Israel through Isaiah and Paul’s message to the church in Rome.

So, picture the Apostle Paul writing this letter. Rome is the heart of Caesar worship. Roman society confesses, “Caesar is Lord” and the gospel comes into that context with Jesus as Lord. People are being called to look to God in Jesus Christ to fill the hole in their heart. In Jesus’ words, people are being called to give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to give to God what is God’s. Caesar as a human king can receive our obedience to laws that help society flourish. And he can expect us to pay our taxes. But he cannot expect what is God’s! He did though. Caesar expected people to worship him as god. He was making idolatry part of citizenship in Rome. It’s not a lot different than what you find today in a place like North Korea. Or think of Nebuchadnezzar calling Daniel’s three friends and all of Babylonians society to bow down and worship him or be thrown into the fiery furnace!

In our democratic societies, we often place our hope for a better future in people, whether that’s our own Prime Minister or the US President or anyone else. Even Christians fall into this trap. We look to our politicians to be our Saviour and Lord, even if we don’t always realize it. Our allegiance to these leaders can be hidden behind good intentions like protecting the lives of the unborn, protecting

women's rights, caring for the poor and destitute and championing civil liberties, including the freedom of religion.

But too often we are bowing to the god of self. What we really want is political power for our own ends, even if those ends seem noble to us. This shows itself in people—including Christians—willing to do whatever is necessary to get their way, even justifying violence for the cause of their greater good. It can all sound so righteous but more often than not it is self-centered. We are worshiping at the altar of our right to freedom—freedom of religion, freedom of choice, freedom of association, etc.—instead of worshiping God himself. As I said, sometimes we are fighting for noble causes but we must be careful not to look to our leaders as if they will be the ones to create a society in our image. It happens whether we're liberal or conservative in our views. I think a lot of Christians in the US are waking up to that reality lately, but we aren't immune to it in Canada.

What about our social media images? A lot of people are obsessed with "likes" and thumbs up. We don't post pictures about reality, like "look at me here—I'm sick and haven't showered in three days! I look like crap." No, we portray an image of ourselves, wrote one blogger, that contains filtered photos, tweets, and memes intended to get a positive reaction. The more likes and followers, the more we're assured that our life is on the right path. The fewer retweets and mentions, the more certain we are that our life is insignificant and meaningless. Instead of turning to God in prayer to ask for all we need, we turn to social media. A new god for a new, digital age. A god that promises us that our every thought, emotion, and selfie can live forever.

On social media we worship the image of ourselves. In that way, we attempt to be like God. That, of course, means we don't need a flesh and blood Saviour to redeem us from real, concrete sins, death, Satan and the sorrows of life in our world. In virtual reality, we don't need Jesus to be really present for us. We just need more likes. Our false image of ourselves is a form of idolatry, a constant temptation for us. We bow to this idol instead of looking to Jesus to deliver us from ourselves and our wayward self-glorifying hearts.

Just to be clear, we must not think that God is somehow only interested in having us follow him for his own glory. He is not a social media personality interested in getting the most likes and thumbs up from the world. He's interested in rescuing us from ourselves because an idol-worshiping heart will lead us into trouble. Once we go down the road of idolatry, immorality is not far behind. We need to get our bearings straight in this regard. Our Creator and Redeemer God has put things in place to remove his wrath from our lives if we will turn our hearts to him and turn to his ways.

### **Immorality: Rejecting God's Moral Code**

Secondly, then, notice with me that Romans 1 says that if we reject God as our Creator and Saviour in favour of a god of our own making, we will, likewise, reject God's way of life in favour of the life of our own making. When we think we

don't need God, then we also won't follow his will for us. We'll do our own thing. Paul's point is that idolatry leads to immorality; rejecting God leads to rejecting God's moral code for our lives.

Notice in v.24 that a transition happens. Vv.18-23 spell out how we are prone to idolatry. Now listen to v.24:

*<sup>24</sup> Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. <sup>25</sup> They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator...*

Paul spells out how idolatry leads to immorality. This is challenging to the church today too. We don't live in a 'you do you' world, as some say today; we live in a world where God is the author of all things, our lives included. If you reject God as your creator and redeemer, you reject his moral authority. You choose, instead, the morals of your idols.

Depravity, Romans 1 teaches, comes in various forms of sexual immorality and—in the church world—we too often focus on those as the worst of sins. But Paul doesn't give a hierarchy of sin. He mentions sexual immorality and gives several examples of it. But he goes right on to talk about greed, envy, murder, strife, gossip, slander, arrogance, pride, and even things like disobeying our parents. Then he ends with v.32:

*<sup>32</sup> Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.*

Such is life when we don't follow God's moral code. We too easily think we can do our own thing. We are good people and so we approve of our own actions, without measuring how they stack up against God's moral code for us. Therefore, says Paul, we must remember that God judges us. God judges right and wrong. Doing what's right in our own eyes is not the standard. We don't have our own truth, as we commonly hear today. God's truth is over all. We must submit to him. We can't trust ourselves and our own judgement. That's why God graciously gives us his direction for our life in his word, the Bible. This is given to guide our moral choices about right and wrong. We cannot go with our own opinions that come from a idolatrous heart.

Have you ever said anything like this: "What difference does it make? As long as I'm not hurting anyone, it should be fine." We create our own standards. Yet, our Creator, our loving heavenly Father and our Saviour Jesus Christ begs to differ. We often don't realize what hurt our actions may cause even to ourselves down the road. Two people mutually agreeing to have sex before marriage can say, "We both agree so we're doing it! It's all good!" That doesn't make it so. Often the effects of sexual immorality are not felt until years later. I wouldn't have to look very long to find people who would confirm that. Guilt plagues some. Strained relationships trouble others for many years because of a one-night stand.

Similarly, a married couple today can consent to have an open marriage where they can each have other sexual partners. They say, "We're in agreement. It's all good." We hear more and more about all kinds of sexual experimentation and even polyamory, which is more than two people in a marriage or so-called loving relationship. People identify in all sorts of different ways today and society says it's great.

But God says, "That doesn't make it so."

The same is true for greed and gossip and all the other things Paul mentions in this chapter. You talk freely about what other people are going through and say, "I'm just sharing facts; I'm not gossiping." But are you really speaking of others the way you'd want them to speak of you? Are you building others up with your words? And how will those words effect the people you're talking about? And how will they effect even you down the road? We think we can live by our own moral code and it'll all be good. But we don't know.

If you want the best life possible, which is what Jesus wants for you, then God says, "Believe in Jesus alone for salvation and then live by my word. Follow my code of morality. I'm the one who made you, I know you through and through. I want the best for you in your life here on earth and I know what that is. So follow my word. I will not steer you wrong. Do not trust your own sinful instincts or desires."

The Heidelberg Catechism Q&A we read earlier reminds us that God created us with ability to know and to do his good will. But we fell into sin and robbed ourselves of that ability. Now we must look to Jesus for forgiveness and also for the grace and power to overcome our idolatry and immorality.

He provides. I've seen it so many times. In my own life and in the life of other Christians. My mind goes to a dear woman I know. Years ago, she claimed to be a follower of Jesus. I think she was sincere. She knew she needed Jesus to pay for her sins. But she wasn't ready to let Jesus be Lord of her life. She wasn't ready to say no to a non-Christian husband if that's what Jesus said. She went ahead and married him. She had three children with him. But slowly he wandered farther and farther from her. He followed his god. Meanwhile, she grew in her love for Jesus and understanding of what it meant to be his disciple. But her marriage fell apart. Her husband left her. And that led to years of misery for her. Misery that following God's moral code could have spared her from.

Thanks be to God, my friends, we have a Creator, Saviour and Lord, who does not abandon his children in our sin. He's a God of second chances. A God of new beginnings. A God of redemption. He's always ready to help us pick up the pieces of our idolatrous and sin-damaged lives when we return to him. We see that over and over again in the Old Testament with stories of Israel's rebellion, eventually repentance and God's restoration.

Turning away from our sinful choices and seeking to follow God's will for our lives is a daily choice we must make. Doing life God's way means we need to keep filling our minds with God's word and truth so that we detect lies that we are believing and self-deception that we are engaging in. That's why we have the Romans Reading Guide for you as just one more tool to help you renew your mind. We also need to pray and worship. We need to seek God and be nurtured in our relationship with him.

That's also why we celebrate the Lord's Supper. Think about this as we prepare to eat the bread and drink the cup next Sunday. Jesus nurtures us in our faith. Jesus in the Lord's Supper and other ways strengthens us so that we can do his will. He helps us get our bearings in line with God's will for us. We are too weak in ourselves. But he is strong!! He uses things as seemingly ordinary as sacraments to strengthen us. But they are not magic, as if by popping bread and wine into our mouths we become like Popeye eating his spinach! No, they are signs and seals—guarantees—of Christ's power for us as we seek to live for God's glory in this world. Christ's power as we seek to put God's word into action in our lives. Christ's power as we struggle to put our sinful desires to death. Christ's power as we seek to live by the truth of the Word of God. They remind us, friends, that we are no longer slaves to idolatry. Yes, in Christ, our hearts return to God and seek his will. We don't do that perfectly on this side of heaven, but looking to Jesus for help and guidance makes us different. Partaking of his means of grace, like his word and the sacraments, strengthens us on the journey.

Friends, a growing awareness of our sin, our idolatrous hearts, helps us look for intently to Jesus for help every day. We recognize sin for what it is. We remember that we were lost but found in Christ. And now we have the power of Jesus in us to deal with sin and his Spirit to help us steer clear of all the damage idolatry and immorality will cause in our lives. Thanks be to God!