

Divine Self-Definition

Romans 1:7

January 15, 2017

Introduction:

I want to start today by asking you a personal question: Who are you? Now I'm not asking what your name is by that question but something far more significant: What defines you? What would you say that gets to the very core of how you think about yourself? There are several ways a person could answer that question. For example, I could answer in terms of my gender, that I'm a male. I could add to it that I'm a married man and father to three children and thus define myself by my family relationships. I could reply that I'm a pastor, defining myself by my job. Furthermore, I could define myself by my race and say that I'm Caucasian. And if I'm feeling especially patriotic, I could also add that I'm an American and therefore define myself by my nationality.

All those things are true. Who is Rob Borkowitz? He's a white American male, who is a husband and a father and works as a pastor at Grace Fellowship Church in Waterloo, IA. But as a description of me, while accurate, it is lacking something significant: it tells you nothing of how I'm defined in the sight of God. We can easily define ourselves in terms of our jobs or accomplishments or our relationship to others but how often do we neglect to view ourselves through the lens of our Creator? What does God have to say about who I am? How does he view me?

The goal of the message this morning is to recalibrate our thinking about ourselves. If you are a Christian, there is more to you than merely your gender, race, nationality, marital status, or job title. Our self-definition needs to be adjusted by a divine self-definition that gives us a far fuller and deeply more enriching picture of who are in Christ. We each need to have our minds refreshed by the wonderful truth of how our Heavenly Father views us.

To that end, please open your Bibles to Romans 1:7. Our passage today can be found on pg. 939 of the pew Bibles. We're going to be looking at just one verse, but it's a verse we need to carefully reflect upon because if we believe what it says about us, it has the power to revolutionize how we think about ourselves. So please follow along as I read v. 7 of Romans 1. Paul writes, **"To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."**

As those of you who have been here the past couple of weeks know, we've been studying Paul's letter to the Romans. Ancient letters followed a standard format: the writer would first identify himself and then second, he would identify the recipient to whom he was writing. This morning we're going to give our attention to how Paul describes those to whom he wrote. Usually when we read Scripture we rush past opening greetings like this without giving them much thought, but with Paul, there's often more there than may first meet the eye. So then, we're putting on the brakes today and giving this single verse far more attention than we normally would, but that's a good thing, because what Paul says about the Roman Christians is true for every Christian, no matter when or where he lives. We need to hear this as much as they did. So then, this morning I have four truths we need to see about our identity as Christians and this very first of those is this...

1. You are loved by God

The first description Paul uses in v. 7 to describe the Roman believers is that they're "**loved by God.**" Now I need to unpack this idea a bit so that we don't flatten what this means and make it into something less than Paul intends. When thinking about the love of God, one of the ways we can conceive of it is in terms of God's general love of the world. For example, in God's love towards all creation, we're told he causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good and that he sends the rains to bless the harvest of both the just and unjust (Matt. 5:45). Or there is John 3:16, which tells us that God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him will have eternal life.

So then, we can think of God's love in a general sense that is indiscriminate towards all people. He gives the gifts of life, sunshine, harvest, and more to all people everywhere as well as offers to sinners the opportunity to enjoy eternal life if they would believe in Jesus Christ, God's Son. But that's *not* the kind of love that Paul is talking about here in v. 7. When Paul says the Roman Christians are "**loved by God**" he's not speaking of his general love for all people but rather of his unique covenantal love for those he has called to himself in Christ. While in a general sense everyone who lived in Rome were loved by God, Paul is not addressing all of them but only a separate, distinct group in Rome. The love of God to those people is his covenantal love. It is a love mediated to them through faith in Christ and only to those who have faith in Christ.

One might think of it like this. While I am called to love all people, when I tell my wife I love her, I'm expressing a far different kind of love than I would to anyone else. I have a unique covenantal love with her that far surpasses the love I have towards any other woman. I've chosen and committed myself to her and her alone. So it is with the Bride of Christ, the church. God loves the world in general and is good and kind to all people, but he has a precious, covenantal love with his chosen people, the church, that is vastly different than his general love towards the world.

This is a love reserved only for those chosen by God. I emphasize this point because you will have weakened this phrase if you only view it as God's general love. God does more than love you in general, like he does everyone else on the planet; you are loved by God specifically, individually, uniquely because in his grace he's chosen you before the foundations of the world to a recipient of his saving grace. Again, going back to my wife, I when I say I love her, I don't mean, "Yeah, I love you just like I love everyone else." What comfort and joy would that be to her? No, my love for her is a love vastly different than what anyone receives from me because it is a covenantal love that sets her apart from my general love towards everyone else.

So, my brothers and sisters here at Grace Fellowship who have trusted in Christ, hear this and hear it well: you are loved by God. You are loved by God not only in that he loves you as he loves all people in the world and blesses them with sunshine and rain, but far more than that, God has set his covenant love upon you, a love that was given to you before creation, a love that predestined you to be his child through faith in Christ long before you ever drew your first breath. God doesn't just love you generally, he

loves you specifically. He loves you by name. As Paul says in Ephesians 1, “In love God predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will...” That’s the kind of love God has for you: a love that has chosen you specifically in eternity past and will continue to love you far into the future. A love that will not ever let you go. A love that holds you fast that Paul can confidently say in Romans 8 that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither things present nor things to come, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

How we need to be reminded of this joyous good news each and every day! We can be misled by the examples of our earthly fathers who did not love us as they should have and then project that same lack of love on our Heavenly Father. Our repeated lapses into sin can burden our hearts with guilt and shame and cause us to view God as one who is constantly angry and disappointed with us. The people and circumstances in our lives can make us depressed and cause us to feel rejected and worthless. So, we need desperately to be reminded of the wonderful truth that we are **“loved by God,”** not because of who we are or what we’ve done but simply because God in his grace chose us to be the recipients of his covenantal love through faith in Christ.

So, my friends, hold on to that truth. Cling to it. View yourself not merely in terms of what you do for a living or by your marital status or by any other human relationship or accomplishment: see yourself as one who is **“loved by God.”** There is no single greater description of yourself than that. As a Christian you’re far more than just a man or a father or a teacher or an American: you are loved with an everlasting love by your Creator and Savior. Rejoice in that glorious truth about you every day.

But moving on now, I want us to see how God’s love results in the second description Paul uses to address the Roman Christians he is writing to. So, the next point for us to consider is that not only have you been loved by God but you also....

2. You have been called by God to be saints

Paul says the Roman Christians are both loved by God and **“called to be saints.”** Once again, it’s important we unpack this so we don’t minimize the incredible truth of this description. Much like one can understand God’s love in a general sense that’s true for all people and in a particular sense that’s true only for Christians, so also is the case with the word **“called.”**

One the one hand, the general call of God goes out indiscriminately to all through the preaching of the gospel. For example, when Jesus gave the Great Commission, he wanted disciples to be made of all nations, meaning the gospel should be proclaimed to all people groups without distinction or exception. Or in the parable of the sower, the seed was scattered on all kinds of soil, meaning the gospel should be proclaimed widely. Paul’s own ministry did just that: he’d enter a town and begin preaching the gospel in the synagogues and city marketplaces. So then, there is a general call of God to repent and believe that’s to be made to all people everywhere through the preaching of the gospel.

But on the other hand, there is a specific call of God that brings a person into saving faith that is only given to some and not to all. A couple passages in Romans 8 illustrate this well. In Romans 8:30 Paul says, “These whom he predestined, he also called; and those whom he called, he also justified.” God doesn’t justify every single human being. He doesn’t predestine to salvation everyone. So the specific call of God that results in salvation is not given to all. Also, in Romans 8:28 Paul says that, “God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those *who are called according to his purpose*.” All things do not work together for everyone; it’s a promise only for those who’ve been called by God’s specific calling.

So when Paul addresses the Roman believers as being “**called**” he’s referring to God’s salvific calling that results in people having their spiritually blind eyes opened to believe and not to the general call of the gospel made by evangelists and missionaries that is often rejected by those who hear it. Theologians refer to this as God’s *effectual call* meaning that, unlike the general call that comes through the preaching of the gospel, God’s effectual call always has its effect; that is, it accomplishes what it sets out to do. It means those whom God specifically calls to be saved will inevitably be saved. The calling has its effect: those who receive it repent of sin, believe in Christ, and are saved.

So then, why do some believe the general call of God made through the preaching of the gospel and some do not? Why when you tell others about Christ do some people receive it gladly and others reject it? The difference is the effectual call of God. Listen to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:23-24, “We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, *but to those who are called*, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” Paul preaches indiscriminately to all but to many Jews the notion of a crucified Messiah is a stumbling block and to many Gentiles such an idea is folly. But to a few who have been called by God’s effectual calling, their eyes are opened to see and savor beauty of Christ. Without God’s specific, effectual call, they’ll reject Jesus; but with the call, they repent and believe.

So then, that Paul is talking here about that specific calling of God is evidenced by what the call results in: he says they’re “**called to be saints**.” God’s calling creates what it commands. Those who receive it become saints. They are justified by faith and are set apart by God as his adopted sons and daughters through Christ.

Therefore, my friends, you need to understand that if you’re a Christian, it’s because of God’s effectual call that has made you a saint. Now I need you to get rid of the notion of a saint as being some particularly holy individual that Roman Catholics pray to. Sadly, the term has come to insinuate that only those Christians who are exceptionally pious and have performed miracles can be considered a saint, someone like St. Patrick or Mother Theresa, but that’s not how the Scripture uses the word. A saint is someone who has been “set apart” by God’s calling and made holy not by virtue of their own works but rather by Christ. Every Christian is a saint because God has called them to himself and imputed Christ’s perfect righteousness to them by faith. In other words, you are a saint not because of what you’ve done but because of what Christ did for you. It is not a lifetime achievement award: it is a gift of God’s unmerited grace.

So, you need to define yourself through this Scriptural lens. Not only are you loved by God but you have been specifically called by God to be a saint. That's what you are: a saint. Believe that. You have been cleansed from your sin by Christ's blood and given Christ's perfect righteousness as your own, so that when God looks at you he does not see your sin any longer because it's been removed as far as the east is from the west. When he sees you, he sees Christ's righteousness. He sees you not as a worthless failure but as his beloved son or daughter. He sees you as one whom he set his saving love upon in eternity past so that you could be set apart of a vessel of his saving grace.

How much better is this than anything the self-help gurus will tell you! You don't need to look within and try to convince yourself you are valuable; your Creator and Savior has called you to himself, has loved you and made you holy through the sacrifice of his Son, and so you are loved and you are a saint because the absolute Sovereign Lord of the universe has declared you so! Don't look within for self-worth; look to Christ. His Word speaks a far more certain truth about who you are than any self-help book can muster. You are a saint, set apart for God's glory, by God's salvific love and effectual calling.

That then leads us to the final two aspects of the divine self-definition Paul brings out for us in v. 7. He goes on to say to those who are loved by God and called to be saints, **"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."** Grace and peace: let's talk about each of those ideas for a moment. So our next point, our third point, is this...

3. You have been given grace

If we have indeed been loved by God and called by God to be saints, then there are one of two possibilities of how that has come about. The first is that we've earned it somehow, that there was something intrinsic in us that merited God's love and calling. For example, maybe we are loved by God because we're immensely lovable people. God just couldn't help himself. Perhaps it was like how you see cute little babies or toddlers and you can't help but want to hug them and kiss them because they are just so irrepressibly adorable. Perhaps God viewed us like that.

Or maybe God was put into our debt somehow. Due to the choices we've made, God was obligated to love and save us. We kept our end of the bargain and as a result, God is keeping his end of the deal. We met whatever standards or expectations he had for us and so God called us to himself as a reward for our efforts.

While that is possible, we run into a slight problem when we open up Scripture to, well, just about anywhere! Every page is filled with example after example of people who are greedy, selfish, boastful, ungrateful, uncaring, and rebellious. Time and time again God tells people what he expects of them and time and time again they ignore and willfully violate every commandment, law, and precept given to them. In fact, Paul is going to spend the first couple of chapters of Romans describing in detail of how sinful we all are, such that when he comes to the end of it in chapter 3, he'll quote the OT machine-gun style to demonstrate just how utterly unlovable and unrighteous we really are. So then, there is no doubt about how Paul and the rest of Scripture views things:

our salvation is not in the slightest degree something we've earned or merited by any thoughts, words, or deeds on our part.

That then leaves only one other option: God's love and calling has come to us by grace. God's unmerited favor was given to those who did not deserve it yet God in the mystery of his kindness and mercy chose to bless anyway. That's grace. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. That's grace. Before the foundations of the earth were laid, before we had ever done anything good or bad, God predestined us to be recipients of his saving love. That's grace. Even though we were dead in our trespasses and sins and were by our very nature children of wrath, God made us alive in Christ. That's grace. Although we neither loved God nor sought him out, God loved us and called us to inherit eternal life. That's grace. While we followed, Satan, the father of lies, into all kind of immorality and wickedness, God adopted us into his family, so we could know him as Father and adore him as children. That's grace. Although we had earned only death and judgement, in Christ, God gave us life eternal and the forgiveness of all our sins. That's my friends, is grace.

So when Paul says "**Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**" that's not a throw-away line. It is a summary of what he has just said about himself and the Roman believers and it's a preview of everything he's about to say throughout his letter. If you're a Christian, then grace has been given to you from God, a grace so amazing, so astounding that it can utterly transform your perception of yourself if you let it. You don't have to judge yourself and beat yourself up over your failures. You don't need to walk in discouragement and shame. God has given grace to you in Christ. He has mercifully redeemed you from whatever it is you've done and given you a place at his table. He has washed the stain of your sin clean so that it is whiter than snow, pure and holy and pleasing to him. You are the recipient of God's amazing grace so celebrate it, delight in it, let your mind be transformed by it, and then live it the light of it each and every day.

But there is one more aspect of the divine self-definition that we need to understand about ourselves that has come through God's grace to us in Christ, and that moves us now to our fourth and final point, which is that....

4. You have been given peace

Paul concludes his introduction to the letter saying "**Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**" The grace from God is what allows us to have peace with God. Without it, we're enemies of God. The whole point of what Paul's about to say in Romans 1:18 through 3:20 is that because of our sinful rebellion, God's wrath stands against us. There's no peace between us and God but rather our sin has brought about divine opposition and judgment. And since there's no way for us to escape it since we love the darkness rather than the light and refuse to come it of our own accord, we need God's grace to do for us what we could never do for ourselves: we need a Savior to die in our place and we need a new heart that removes our spiritual blinders and liberates us from our bondage to sin so we can repent and believe and be saved. God in his grace gives that to us so that we in turn no longer need to be at war

but can have true and everlasting peace with God. God's grace to us in Christ is what makes peace with God possible.

So then, here's another self-definition that's worth recalling daily: as a Christian, you are at peace with God. God isn't out to crush you like a bug for the slightest infraction. He's not angrily crossing his arms and shaking his head at you as if you're nothing more than a huge disappointment that he'd rather not be bothered with any longer. He's not looking for the perfect time to have a lightning bolt strike you because he's so intolerably annoyed with you. He is at peace with you. Christ propitiated his wrath, meaning Jesus satisfied God's just punishment for your sin so God doesn't count it against you. Your Heavenly Father loves you and is committed working all things out for your good and his glory and won't allow anything to separate you from his love.

So, go to bed at night without worry, without fear, without the dread of doom. You need not be anxious about anything because your Heavenly Father loves you and is at peace with you. There is none to condemn you because Christ has paid it all. The war is over. God has accepted your terms of surrender when you bowed your knee to his Son as Lord and so there is now full amnesty, full pardon, for your former rebellion. You have peace with God, a peace that will never end, that extends from now to eternity.

Conclusion

As we close then, I want to encourage you to see yourself as God sees you. Stop merely defining yourself in relationship to your job or your nationality or your skills. Central to who you are is who God says you are. And so, if you're a Christian, he says you're loved by him, loved so much that he sent his Son to die for you long before you ever knew you needed saving. He called you to be a saint, and that is what you are, because Christ has become your righteousness by faith. You received grace from God, not because of what you've done but in spite of it. And finally, never forget that God has freely bestowed upon you his unmerited favor so that you can now enjoy peace with God, now and forever.

My brothers and sister in Christ here at Grace Fellowship, may you make those glorious truths the song of your heart and the foundation of your identity always. Let's pray.