

Committing to Christian Relationships (Part 4)

Romans 1:8-15

September 28, 2014

*Tom Pennington, Pastor-Teacher*

*Countryside Bible Church*

We live in a time when people seem, increasingly, to lack real commitment to relationship. Frankly, many struggle to even initiate commitment to a relationship, but then once in a relationship it's very difficult to maintain that commitment. Of course, the most obvious example of that in our culture is the lack of commitment to one's marriage, one's spouse in marriage. Wedding vows always include the promise that we will remain faithful to our spouse, whatever happens, 'til death do us part. And yet, many take that promise that they make, that vow they make to God, so lightly.

Fortunately, there are shining examples of those who have remained committed in human relationships, even through the worst of circumstances. I think one of my favorite examples is that of a man named Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, BB Warfield. He was, for 34 years, a Professor of Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. He is one of the finest theologians that America has ever produced. I have on my shelf in the library, all of his works, and I benefit greatly from them. They are still in print, now more than 100 years after his death.

What most people don't know about BB Warfield is that in 1876, when he was 25 years old, Warfield married his sweetheart Annie Pierce Kincade. For their honeymoon they went to Germany and while they were there, just really a few short weeks after their marriage, they were caught in a fierce thunderstorm and Annie was struck by lightning. She survived but it left her permanently paralyzed for the rest of her life. Warfield cared for his Annie for the next 39 years until her death in 1915. Because of her extraordinary physical needs he seldom left his home for more than two hours at a time during those 39 years. He remained committed to her, heart and soul and body, a beautiful picture of what it means to be committed in a relationship.

It's that same spirit of commitment that we are to have toward one another. In Romans 1 Paul shows us what it's like to be truly committed to our relationships, not merely to our spouse or to our children, but to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. Let's read it together again. Romans 1:8-15.

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world. For God, whom I serve in my spirit in the preaching of the gospel of His Son, is my witness as to how unceasingly I make mention of you, always in my prayers making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you so that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established; that is, that I

may be encouraged together with you while among you, each of us by the other's faith, both yours and mine. I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that often I have planned to come to you (and have been prevented so far) so that I may obtain some fruit among you also, even as among the rest of the Gentiles. I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

This paragraph describes the historical circumstances behind Paul's writing of this letter to the Romans, but as we've discovered, it, at the same time, shows us how Paul thought and how we should think about our relationships with fellow believers in the church. By his example, as we look over his shoulder here in this early chapter of this letter, Paul shows us the commitments we must make to our Christian relationships. So far we have studied five of those commitments. Let me just briefly remind you of them. We need to thank God, number one, for all our brothers and sisters in Christ. Secondly, we need to pray for them consistently. Thirdly, we need to enjoy being with them. Number four, we need to promote their spiritual growth. Number five, we need to pursue the mutual benefits of fellowship.

Now, today we examine the final three of the commitments that we ought to make to one another. Let's look at them together. The sixth commitment is to use your giftedness to serve them. Use your giftedness to serve them. Look at verse 13, "I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that often I have planned to come to you (and have been prevented so far)." Now, the opening expression in verse 13 is one that Paul uses when he needs to tell his readers something important that they have no way of knowing on their own. I don't want you to be ignorant of this, brothers. You see, for many years, according to chapter 15 verse 23, Paul had wanted to come to Rome for years and verse 10 of chapter 1 tells us that he had consistently prayed that God would make that possible. Here in verse 13 he adds, that he had, on a number of occasions, even make definite plans to come. But in spite of his desires, in spite of his prayers, in spite of his repeated plans, he had so far been prevented from doing so. Now, he doesn't tell us how he was prevented. You know, there are other occasions where he mentions specifically, for example, to the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 2:18, he says, "I wanted to come to you more than once - and yet Satan hindered us." In Acts 16:6, Luke tells us that Paul had wanted to go into Asia, but the Holy Spirit prevented Paul from going into Asia.

Here in Romans 1 I think Paul likely means that he was prevented from coming to Rome by the demands of his mission and ministry in Eastern Europe, where he had served now for 25 years. I think there's a hint of that in the passage we've already looked at in chapter 15, verses 19 and following. He couldn't come to Rome because there were things he still had to do where he was serving in Eastern Europe, but he says, I have, on a number of occasions, made plans to come.

Although it's not the primary point of this passage, let me just stop here for a moment and point out that there are some insights in this passage about discerning God's will. You know, a lot of people struggle with how do I know God's will for my life? How do I know what spouse to choose? How do I know what career path? What job I should take? Where I should live? And on and on it goes. Well, Paul gives us two, I think, very good instructions here that are filled out in the rest of Scripture. First of all, I would encourage you to pray that God's will will be done in your life. Verse 10, Paul says, if it's God's will, this is what I've prayed. That's a great place for you to start, to start by humbling your will before God and say, God, I want what You want in my life. I want Your sovereign purpose to be worked out in my life. So give me wisdom as I pursue the decisions that must be made. And then secondly, don't wait for God to write something in the sky, don't put out a fleece, don't wait for some feeling in the pit of your stomach, but seek to make biblically wise decisions and biblically wise plans. That's what Paul did. Paul says in verse 13, I made plans on several occasions to come. And yet this reminds us that, as the proverb says, "Man makes his plans, but the Lord directs his steps."

But let me just caution you against a couple of misunderstandings Christians have. Some Christians see an opportunity and they think, well, that must be God's will. An opportunity in and of itself does not mean, that's God's will, nor is it true, what some Christians think, when they begin to pursue a path and there are obstacles on that path, they take that to mean, well, this can't be God's will. That isn't how Paul thought. He had made plans on multiple occasions to come. Obviously, his plans were not colored by self-indulgence, but rather by a desire for the kingdom, a desire for the kingdom to progress, but he made plans. Now, if you want to read more about this, let me just recommend a book to you. It's a book that's in the top 20 of the books that have influenced me in my own life. It's a book entitled, *Decision Making and the Will of God*. *Decision Making and the Will of God* (I expect we've run out in the bookstore today since I didn't give them warning.) by Gary Friesen. *Decision Making and the Will of God* by Gary Friesen, excellent book on this issue.

But let's come back to Romans 1:13, "I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that often I have planned to come to you (and have been prevented so far) so that I may obtain some fruit among you also, even as among the rest of the Gentiles." Now the comment there at the end of verse 13 only confirms what we've already discovered and that is that most of the Christians in the Roman churches are Gentiles. There are Jews, as we will discover, but mostly these are Gentile churches. But notice at the end of verse 13 Paul adds yet another reason that he wants to be with them in Rome. Not only does he desire to enjoy their company and to promote their spiritual growth, but he also wants, notice the end there of verse 13, to "obtain some fruit among you." Now what does Paul mean by that? Well, he uses the word fruit in several different ways in his letters. He uses it, you remember, of spiritual attitudes. In Galatians 5 he talks about the fruit the Spirit produces, love, joy, peace, and so forth. So he uses it of spiritual attitudes.

In Romans 6:22, he uses it of righteous actions. If you'll notice, the marginal note there in verse 22 of chapter 6, the Greek word for fruit occurs in that text and he's talking about righteous actions that we produce in our lives. In chapter 16 of this book, in verse 5, he uses the same word fruit. Again, you'll notice it in the marginal reference, the Greek word is there. It's used there for a new convert. And then the fourth way he uses this word fruit is in a general sense of spiritual results from his ministry, the salvation of unbelievers, the edification of believers.

So what does he mean here when he says, I want to "obtain some fruit among you"? It's possible that Paul is referring here to seeing other people come to know Christ through the preaching of the gospel in Rome and there are many commentators who take it that way, but I'm not convinced of that because Paul here is talking to Christians about Christians, so I think it's likely that he's primarily speaking about their spiritual maturity, their spiritual growth, or the fruit of spiritual attitudes and righteous actions. Paul wanted to use his giftedness in Rome to produce spiritual fruit of spiritual attitudes and actions.

Now what was Paul's gift? Paul's gift was to be an apostle. In fact, two times in the New Testament the office of apostle is referred to as a gift, both in 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4, and so Paul desperately wanted to use his giftedness, that of being an apostle, for the spiritual benefit of the Romans. That was the reason behind his desire to visit. That's the historical circumstance, but let's go beneath that and see the spiritual lesson for all of us. Of course, none of us has, like Paul, the spiritual gift of apostleship, but each of us has been given a spiritual capacity for specific service in the church.

If you're in Christ, at the moment of salvation, the Holy Spirit gifted you. He equipped you to serve in the body of Christ. Turn to Romans 12. Romans 12:3,

For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you [*every one among you*] not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, [*particularly in the area of spiritual gifts. I want you to have sound judgment when you think about what*] God has allotted to you, according to the measure of faith. For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

And we all have different functions in the spiritual body of Christ, just as our physical members have different functions. Notice verse 6, "Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them appropriately," and he goes on to describe what that looks like in the case of a number of spiritual gifts.

Turn over to chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians; 1 Corinthians 12, as Paul begins to talk about the spiritual gifts and the problem that they were in the church in Corinth, he begins with a theological foundation. First Corinthians 12:4, "Now there are varieties of *charismata*," of

spiritual gifts, there are all kinds of packages of giftedness God gives, “but the same Spirit.” In other words, it is the Spirit who sovereignly delegates these different varieties of gifts and there are varieties of ministries, places to use those gifts, but the same sovereign Lord Jesus Christ who puts us in the place to use that giftedness. There are varieties of outcomes or effects, but it's the same God the Father who works all things in all persons.

So, the Spirit sovereignly decides the character of our gifts, the Son sovereignly determines the context of our service, and the Father sovereignly determines the results of our efforts. Now watch verse 7, “But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” Turn over to Ephesians 4, Ephesians 4:7, “But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.” And then in verses 8 through 10 Paul talks about when and how Christ gifted us. It was in conjunction with his descension to the earth and His ascension back to heaven, after He'd been victorious, that He gave gifts, and notice the gifts He gave. Verse 11, here it's not individual gifts to individual Christians, but it's leaders to the church. “He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastor-teachers.” That last expression is really one office, hyphenated. I'm a pastor-teacher; the other elders are pastor-teachers, and notice Christ gave these gifted men to His church, verse 12, “for the equipping of the saints,” that's you, so that you could do “the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to” doctrinal unity and to Christ-likeness in our behavior, verse 13.

Turn over to one last passage, 1 Peter 4. First Peter 4:10, Peter says, “As each one has received a special gift,” or a spiritual gift, “employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God,” and then he divides all spiritual gifts into two categories. There are speaking gifts and there are serving gifts, and he explains how we are to exercise both kinds of gifts.

Now, did you notice the purpose of the spirit gifting every believer? In first Corinthians 12, “for the common good.” In Ephesians 4, “for the work of service, to enable the building up of the body of Christ.” First Peter 4, “in serving one another.” Now, we have folks from all kinds of different church backgrounds. I don't know what your specific background was, but maybe you came from a church, you're accustomed to a church, in which the pastor or the staff or the elders do everything and you just get to sort of show up and enjoy. I want you to know that is not a biblical model; that's not how the church is to function. As Paul said in Ephesians 4, the elders and I exist to equip you so that you can do “the work of service,” so that you can use your giftedness, that has been individually designated to you by the Spirit, to promote the spiritual growth of the other believers in this church.

Now, I admit to you there was a time 25, 30 years ago when I didn't fully get this, and I thought that my involvement in a Christian ministry at that time was really my contribution to the kingdom, but such ministries exist to support the church, not to replace the church. God gifted

you, Christian, to serve the other members of the body of the church to which you belong. That's why God gifted you. Imagine for a moment that you gave a really significant financial gift to an organization for a specific purpose. How would you respond if they took your money, they took your gift, and they used it entirely against your wishes? Sadly, that is exactly what Christians do every day to God the Holy Spirit. They received a gift from the Spirit to use in serving others, but somehow they just never can find the time to do it.

You know that I'm not one to mince words and so let me just be really blunt, okay? If you only attend the corporate worship services of this church, but you aren't serving others in this church in some way, you are ignoring the Spirit's plan for you, and, in fact, you are disobeying Christ's clear command, "employ it in serving one another." So let me urge you to commit to finding a place to use your giftedness in the church of Jesus Christ. Use your giftedness to serve others in the church. It was a commitment Paul made and it's a commitment you and I must make as well.

There's a seventh commitment we must make to our fellow Christians. We must receive all Christians, even those unlike us. Receive all Christians, even those unlike you. Look at verse 14, "I am under obligation," Paul said, "both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish." The Greek verb translated "under obligation" is sometimes used of an actual debt, an actual financial obligation, but here Paul means he had a moral debt to all the Gentiles because of the commission that Christ had given to him specifically. Look at Romans 1:5, he says, "through Jesus Christ our Lord we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for His name's sake." This was Paul's commission, to reach the Gentiles, all of them. In Acts 9, you remember right after the Damascus Road experience, in Acts 9:15 the Lord sends Ananias and Ananias is a little less than eager to go out of fear of his personal safety, and the Lord says to Ananias, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel." In 1 Corinthians 9:16-17 Paul says,

For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel. For if I do this voluntarily, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have a stewardship entrusted to me.

Paul says, I have to do this. This is what Christ has given me to do. This is my commission, to reach all the Gentiles.

Now because at the end of verse 13 Paul mentions his ministry to the Gentiles he probably intends the two pairs of nouns in verse 14 to be descriptive of the Gentiles. Notice the first set, "I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians." The word Greeks is sometimes used very specifically of those who are of Greek descent, those who were born Greek, but eventually it came to describe all who spoke Greek and who had been influenced by the Greek culture. As you know, the empire prior to the Romans was the Greek Empire, the empire of Alexander the Great, and his influence was so extensive that even after the Greek Empire fell and the Roman

Empire came into existence, it was still known then, and still is to this day known, as the Greco Roman Empire.

Greek culture permeated the Mediterranean world at that time. Because Greek culture had so influenced the Mediterranean world, Paul even uses this word Greek at times to refer to all Gentiles, everyone who isn't Jewish. He uses it that way, in fact, five times in Romans, the first being in verse 16. Notice, he speaks of “the Jew and the Greek,” the Jew and the non-Jew, and he uses the term Greek to include all Gentiles, but that's not what he means in verse 14. In verse 14, notice, he contrasts Greek with barbarian. This makes it clear that he was describing the Gentiles who were like Greeks in their sophistication and in their culture, and that's clear because of the meaning of the word barbarian. The word barbarian is actually, the English word barbarian is actually a transliteration of the Greek word. We get the word directly from the Greek language. It is also an onomatopoeic word. That is, it's a word that sounds like what it means. It's like the English word buzz. That's the word and that's what it means.

To those who spoke Greek, with its beauty and its complexity, its polish and its sophistication, other languages simply sounded bad. They sounded rough and uneducated. They sounded like bar bar bar bar. That's literally where the word barbarian comes from. They sounded as though they were just muttering gibberish, bar bar bar bar. In addition, the barbarians had not been trained in Greek culture and so they were therefore considered to be unsophisticated and uncultured. If you want to get a feel for barbarians just picture in your mind how Hollywood pictures all rural Southerners and you'll have a pretty good idea for how people thought of barbarians in the first century. They didn't speak the same language as everybody else and they were untaught, unsophisticated, uncultured, and therefore to be looked down upon. So he said, I minister to the Greeks and to the barbarians.

Notice the second pair of nouns in verse 14, “the wise and the foolish.” In light of how Paul uses those same words in verse 22, which we will get to in time, and in 1 Corinthians 1, wise here probably refers to those who have been formerly educated, those who have been trained and taught. They are considered both by themselves and by the world to be men of intelligence, to be astute. The foolish were those who were considered to be uneducated, untrained, and untaught. So in the first pair Paul divides all the Gentiles into two groups based on their language and their culture. In the second pair he divides them all by their education and Paul says none of those external differences matter one bit to me.

Paul's ministry, both in whom he evangelized and in the Christians that he served and taught, was all the Gentiles without those external distinctions mattering one bit. You see, whether Paul was in Eastern Europe, where he had served for 25 years at this point, whether he was in Rome, where he planned to visit next, or whether he was in Western Europe, in Spain, where he hoped to begin his new ministry, wherever he went he would meet Gentiles that fell into both categories. He would run into Gentiles who were cultured and educated on one hand, and he

would run into other Gentiles who were completely uncultured and uneducated, but Paul felt a great sense of obligation to serve them all, regardless of those external differences.

Now, the foundation behind Paul's viewpoint here is the theological reality that God Himself is not a respecter of persons. This is hard for us to get into our minds because this is how we live, we look at someone and based on external differences we decide their value. This is not how God acts at all. God is completely uncaring about those external differences. Turn to chapter 2 verse 11. The context here, Paul is talking about God's future judgment and notice verse 10 ends by saying the Jew's going to meet God's judgment and the Greek, in this case the Gentiles, are going to meet God's judgment, "For there is no partiality with God." God doesn't care what your race is. God doesn't care what your ethnicity is. God doesn't care about those nationality issues. Those don't matter to God one bit. He will treat you without reference to those things. "There is no partiality with God."

In Deuteronomy 10:17-18, "For the Lord your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality." Moses goes on to say, "He executes justice for the orphan and widow." God is completely unimpressed by wealth and he looks out for the person who is in extreme poverty and need, and He "shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing." God doesn't care about citizenship. In Ephesians 6:9 Paul's talking to slaves and masters, "And," he says, "masters, give up threatening, knowing that your Master and their Master is in heaven," you both have the same Master, and then he says, "there is no partiality with Him." You know what Paul was saying? He was saying, God doesn't care whether you're the master or the slave. He looks at you both the same. God shows neither favor nor contempt for someone based solely on those external superficial issues.

Now, we use two different English words to describe the full range of this sin we're talking about, favoritism and prejudice. Favoritism is unfairly showing favor to someone based solely on external factors. Prejudice is showing contempt for someone based solely on these external factors, and it's all sin. Now, what do I mean by external superficial factors? Things like, and we've already discovered some of them, things like appearance, how you look, how you dress, your ethnicity, your nationality, your race, your wealth, your status, whether it's social status in the culture or political status or financial status, doesn't impress God. He doesn't care. He's the One who sets those things in place, so the fact that you have something and others don't doesn't matter one bit to him. He's already determined that. Your popularity; God's unimpressed by those who are popular and winsome and liked, and those who aren't.

Since God is no respecter of persons, you and I cannot be. Look at James 2. James 2:1, James says, "My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism," and then he gives an illustration from the early church.

For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and [*that was very uncommon in that day. Jews, most of the Jewish people, this is early in the*



*church, most are still Jews here, they often more rings, but not gold rings. That was very uncommon.] dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes and say, "You sit here in a good place," and you say to the poor man, "Stand over there, or sit here by my footstool," have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil motives?*

Notice, he's not criticizing the fact that this unbeliever wore gold and fine clothes, he's criticizing the attitude among the Christians that would base a value judgment of that person's worth based on those external differences and treat them differently based on those external differences. In fact, notice, he says in verse 9, "But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors." What law did we break if we show partiality? Verse 8, we haven't loved our neighbor as ourself.

So, God is no respecter of persons. Understand this, listen carefully, every person you will ever meet on this planet is made in the image of God and therefore deserves to be treated seriously and with respect because they're made in God's image, and all believers are spiritually equal in God's sight regardless of what external differences there might be. Galatians 3:28, Paul says, "There is neither Jew or Greek," your race, your nationality doesn't matter, "there is neither slave nor free man," your socioeconomic status doesn't matter, "there is neither male nor female," those differences don't matter, "for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

So, you and I then are to look beyond the external temporal differences and we are to value every member of the fellowship that is the church. Don't look at their appearance. Don't look at their race or their ethnicity or the color of their skin or their wealth or lack thereof. Don't look at their status. Don't look at their popularity. Don't look at their dress. We are not to ask, are they like me? We are to ask, are they part of the family? Has God adopted them? Receive all Christians, even those unlike you.

There's an eighth and final commitment we must make our fellow Christians, we must keep the gospel the main thing. Verse 15, "So, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome." Because of Paul's moral obligation to present the gospel to all the Gentiles, regardless of their nationality or race or personal status or education or culture, he was eager to preach the Gospel everywhere, but here, specifically, he says he was "eager to preach the gospel." Notice what he says in verse 15, "to you also who are in Rome." Now if you're thinking with me there should be a question that immediately pops into your mind when Paul says that and that is, why does Paul say he wants to preach the gospel to those who were already Christians? It's because the gospel Paul preached is simple enough to grasp in a few minutes and come to genuine saving faith in Christ, but it has massive implications that take a lifetime to fully grasp and to learn how to practice and to live. Paul does not mean here that his goal in going to Rome is to go to their churches and to recite a simple package of gospel facts.

When I was growing up we attended a lot of churches where the message, almost every week, was the same. It was a good message, but it was the simple message of the gospel to Christians week after week and frankly many of us who were already in Christ were spiritually starving. That's not what Paul means. What he means is that he intends to go to Rome and as he meets with the Christians there, to draw out for them the continuing implications of the gospel and the application of all of it's truths to their lives. You see, Paul had made a commitment. This was his commitment; he had determined that when he was in Rome he would keep the gospel central in their relationship and you and I must make the same commitment in our relationships as well, but there's some confusion about what this means.

Over the last 10 to 15 years, there's been a renewed focus on the gospel here in our country. In 2005, D.A. Carson and Tim Keller founded The Gospel Coalition. In 2006 Al Mohler, along with some others, began biennial conferences called Together for the Gospel. Since then there have been countless sermons and blogs and articles and books all calling for a renewed emphasis on the gospel, and let me be clear, we have benefited greatly from that emphasis. However, as the volume of all the talk about the gospel and being gospel-centered has gotten louder, many have misunderstood and even frankly, at times, have distorted what that means.

Let me tell you what being gospel-centered, does not mean. It does not mean that we are obligated to constantly repeat the basic gospel message to Christians. I bring the gospel into my message. I include anything from a short passing comment about the gospel to a longer delineation of exactly what the gospel is; I don't do that in every message, but I do that often. There is nothing wrong with doing that, but you can't stop there and Paul wasn't saying he intended to stop there with the Roman Christians. That's not being gospel-centered.

Secondly, being gospel-centered does not mean that we just use the phrases a lot. Have you noticed that there's a whole lot of talk everywhere you go about the gospel, the gospel, the gospel, and being gospel-centered? Frankly, it has become a kind of buzzword that increasingly means less and less or nothing at all.

Thirdly, being gospel-centered does not mean, listen carefully, that no other biblical or doctrinal issues really matter as long as we agree on the simple gospel message. I'm afraid this is what some have taken out of things like Together for the Gospel. Listen, we can have fellowship with anyone who believes in the true Christ and the true gospel, and who isn't walking in open disobedience to Scripture, but that doesn't mean that the differences that we have doctrinally don't matter. They do matter. The rest of Scripture matters and we can't act like it doesn't matter.

Being gospel-centered does not mean, fourthly, and you know I've been on this hobbyhorse for more than a year, it does not mean the active pursuit of sanctification doesn't matter. Just be gospel-centered. Just relish the gospel. Just think about the cross and just relax. You don't have to work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, just relax.

None of those is what Paul meant when he said he planned to keep the gospel the main thing in his ministry to the Roman Christians. What Paul did mean was this, he meant two things. First of all, he meant for the lost that he would encounter in Rome he intended to present the essential truths of the good news from God. The essential gospel message unfolded in the first four chapters of this book. And secondly, for the believers, Paul intended to help them understand and apply the implications of the gospel.

You say, well, what does that look like? Read the rest of Romans or stay here for a few years as we work our way through it. I mean, think about what Paul does in the first four chapters of Romans. Starting in verse 16 of chapter 1 running through chapter 4, Paul explains the gospel, and it is in essence justification by faith alone. He explains the gospel. But then, beginning in chapter 5 and running through chapter 8, he explains the effects of that gospel. In chapter 5 verses 1 through 11, the immediate benefits of our justification, “having been justified, we have peace with God,” and so forth. In chapter 5 verse 12 through the end of chapter 6, Paul says, let me tell you the difference the gospel makes. The work of Christ unites us to our living Lord and in Him we have new life and righteousness.

In chapter 7 Paul teaches us that justification frees us from trying to gain a right standing before God by keeping His law. Instead, in the first half of chapter 8, we are able to obey and to please God by the power of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The second half of chapter 8, every justified sinner will be glorified and nothing can separate us from God’s love for us in Christ.

And then he explains in chapters 9 through 11, he justifies God’s election and what happened to the Jews, and then when he comes back in chapter 12, chapter 12 through chapter 15, Paul applies the gospel to various areas of our lives. He shows us the life transforming power of the gospel of grace. In chapter 12 Paul shows us how the gospel applies to a life of sacrifice and to the way we think about everything: to a view of spiritual gifts, our relationships with others, both believers and with unbelievers who hate us and curse us. In chapter 13 he shows us how the gospel, and here's a lesson for North Texas, how the gospel should affect our view of government and our personal holiness. In chapters 14 and 15 he explains how the gospel changes how we look at Christian liberty. It's no longer, I can do whatever I want. It's, no, wait a minute, I'm looking at the blessing and benefit of others who've embraced the gospel and how it affects them.

So understand then, that for Paul, the gospel is two things. The gospel is an announcement, an invitation, a command that unbelievers need to hear about how they can be right with God and the gospel is the implications of that message in salvation, in every area of life that believers need to understand and apply.

Let me show you how this works. Turn to Colossians 1. A fascinating passage here, Colossians 1:5, in his introduction to this letter he says to the Colossians, verse 5, “because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard,” this, hope you heard about, “in the word

of truth,” and he says, what I mean is, “the gospel.” So he brings up the gospel at the end of verse 5. Now watch what he says about the gospel in verse 6, “which has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard and understood the grace of God in truth.”

Now, do you see how the gospel was doing two things in the lives of the Colossians? First of all, on the day they heard the gospel and understood the gospel of grace, the gospel saved them. It was God's power, as Paul says in Romans 1, but that wasn't the end of the gospel in their lives. Notice again what he says in verse 6, since the day you heard of it, and since the day you understood and came to salvation, the gospel has continued to bear fruit and increase in your life, even as it has been doing in you since the day you heard of it. You see the point he's making?

The gospel, first of all, is something you understand and respond to that brings you to salvation, and secondly the gospel continues its work as the implications of that truth are brought to bear in your life and cause you to bear fruit, and to increase and to grow in spiritual understanding and maturity. So Paul says, when I come to Rome I'm going to keep the gospel the main thing, because not only is that what births you into the family of God, but it's what ensures the implications of it, what ensure your continuing growth.

So those are Paul's commitments to his Christian relationships. Look at them. Eight of them. Have you made those same commitments to the people in this church? Have you? Can you honestly say before God that you thank God for all of them? Do you pray for them consistently? Do you enjoy being with them? Do you do everything in your power to promote their spiritual growth? Do you pursue the mutual benefits of fellowship? Do you use your giftedness to serve them, and do you receive everybody here, even those that are greatly different than you? Do you keep the gospel the main thing? Those were the commitments Paul made and by his example those are the commitments he urges us to make as well.

Let's pray together. Father, thank You for the opportunity to study this. Thank You for revealing the heart of the apostle Paul. For letting us see Your work in his life. For letting us see how he thought about those believers in Rome who were so different from him, in so many ways. Father, help us to develop these same commitments individually in each of our lives and Father, corporately, may our church be increasingly known in these ways. May we abound in these things. And Father, I pray for the person here this morning who can't keep the gospel the main thing because it's never become anything at all to them. Lord, even in a day when this isn't a message that lays out the facts of the gospel, may Your Spirit do what Your Spirit can do in bringing conviction, in bringing to bear on that person's conscience all of the gospel that they've heard so that today would be the day when they would bow the knee to Jesus Christ. We pray this in Jesus's name, amen.