

Good Morning!

Today I would like to share with you from Romans chapter 8, verses 1-6. Let's read those verses together.

This is a powerful section of the Bible. You could spend a year meditating on this chapter and still not fully get it all. I've been working on it off and on for many years now and I still get fresh inspiration from it. Perhaps that is because it is loaded with truths that we need to be reminded of from time to time. If you want to have confidence in your Christian life, this is where you can get it. If you want to have peace about God's acceptance of you, it's here. If you want to find something to praise God for, it's here. I think pastor Dan could preach a year long series just on this one chapter!

Today I'm going to drop a bucket into this well and pull out just a little of the water of life it has for us. I'm going to speak on two points: 1) Our position in Christ and 2) Our mission in life. It is really more than I can do, but I hope you will draw at least one thing from this message.

Firstly, you are loved and accepted by God. Jesus came and died for you, to take away the penalty and the power of sin over you. There is no condemnation for anyone who is in Christ. Do you ever have a sense that you are not pleasing God? It might be a sense of guilt for something, but you're not sure what it is. Or it may come from a belief that you must be perfect in all things, especially in obeying God's commands.

You feel like you're just not a very good Christian. Maybe if you try harder and do better God will be happier with you. I've had those feelings. I somehow learned in church as a kid, that I really had to try to be good. We had a song, "O be careful little feet where you go. O be careful little feet where you go. For the Father up above is looking down in love, so be careful little feet where you go." "O be careful little hands what you do. O be careful little hands what you do. For the Father up above is looking down in love, so be careful little hands what you do." It goes on to name more body parts. Be careful little eyes what you see. Be careful little tongue what you say. Be careful little ears what you hear. The Father up above is looking down in love and if I sin He's going to be pretty sad and disappointed in me. I learned that Jesus saved me, but then it was up to me to be good.

Another case of this was in the teaching about Jacob's ladder. It takes place back in Genesis. Jacob was running for his life. He stopped to sleep on the ground one night. He used a rock for a pillow. Then he had a strange dream, perhaps it was from using a rock for a pillow!

No, actually the dream was a message from God. He saw a ladder coming down from heaven with angels going up and down it. Above it stood the Lord. He told Jacob that he would give him the land he was lying on as well as lots of land around for his descendants. He also told him that he would bless all people through him. When Jacob woke up he called that place the house of God, the gate of heaven. He used the stone that had been his pillow and made an altar out of it and named the place Bethel, which means "house of God."

We were told that story in Sunday school and then we learned the song, *Jacob's Ladder*, I am climbing Jacob's ladder, climbing, climbing. So, God provides the way, the big tall ladder and it's up to you and me to climb it, right? Wait a minute. In Jacob's dream, who was climbing? It was angels who were ascending and descending. Not Jacob, not any man or woman. The ladder was God coming down to Jacob, not a way for Jacob to climb to God.

In the gospel Jesus made a reference to Jacob's ladder. He said the day was coming when the disciples would see the heavens open and angels ascending and descending on him. (John 1:51) He is the ladder. We don't climb up. He came down to take us up.

Brothers and sisters, I say this to you who are in Jesus Christ, there is nothing in the world that you can do to get God to love you more than He already does. And there is nothing in the world

that you can do to make him love you less. Get that. There is more to the story, I know, and we will touch on some of it later this morning. But get this. He already loves you so much He can't love you more and He won't love you less. You can read more about this in Michael Horton's book, *Putting Amazing Back into Grace*.

The teaching that I received in Sunday school as a kid was over all very good. But somehow I thought I was to work really hard for God. I was to do everything the Bible said perfectly, which included always obeying my parents and honoring those in authority over me, like teachers.

This was good and kept me from a lot of trouble. But it did a number on (made quite a problem for) my sensitive conscience. If I slipped in any way I would feel so guilty. If I took the stairs at school two at a time I was guilty of sin, because the teachers said only one at a time! And if I did good and didn't slip up I felt pretty good about myself, which made me think I was being prideful, which is a sin! So I failed again! It was a pretty rough place to be in.

But I eventually found out how great is God's grace. The law in the Bible was given to show us how impossible it is for us to live right. You can't keep all the law. And if you are trying to please God by doing that, and you fail in one point, you are guilty of it all. That's why Jesus came to get us. He was perfect. He never did fail. And He took our punishment for failing, that is death, on himself. Through that we are free! That's what these verses we just read are saying. There is no condemnation for us in Christ Jesus. Through Jesus Christ the law of the Spirit of life has set me free! from the law of sin and death. Hallelujah!

Next, what is our mission in life? Well of course it is to win as many people to Christ as we can, right? I hear this a lot. But that can cause us to get into a mentality of trying to please God by our own efforts. You remember the parable of the sower that Jesus told.

Jesus told the story of a farmer who went out to sow his seeds. He scattered the seed and let it settle into the ground. Some of the seed fell on a path. The ground was hard from people walking on it and the seed didn't settle into the soil. Birds came and ate the seed. Some of the seed fell on rocky soil. The seed got into the ground and grew up. But when it got hot the plant withered and died because there were rocks just under the soil. The plant didn't have roots and wasn't able to survive. Some of the seed fell where there were weeds and thorns. It also grew up, but all of the weeds and thorns kept it from developing. It was just a skinny little plant with no fruit. Finally, some of the seeds fell on good soil. It grew with deep roots and produced even more seed, as much as a hundred times over. One seed became 100!

After this the disciples asked Jesus what the story meant. He explained that the seed was the word of God and the different types of soil represented people. Some people are hard hearted and the word doesn't even get into their thinking. The devil comes and takes it away. They are the path. Some people hear the word and get excited about it. But they don't stay with it. They don't put down the roots and when trouble comes, they give up. They are like the rocky soil. Other people hear the word and receive it. They put down roots and grow, but they get caught up in the worries, riches and pleasures of the world and they don't produce any fruit. Things of life are more important to them than Jesus. These are like the soil with the weeds and thorns. Finally, some people accept the word of God. They take it in and follow Jesus. They grow in faith, and put God first in their lives. They produce more seed.

Now, be careful with the interpretation of this. Many people see the seed as Christians, and the soil as what they do. But that is not what the story illustrates. The seed isn't people, it is the word of God. So when the good soil produced more seed, it wasn't more Christians it was producing. It was more of the word of God. It was giving glory to God. The word is scattered in other peoples' hearts through their fruitful lives.

The point is not that we have to be winning other people to Jesus Christ in order to be fruitful. The point is that as we grow in our relationship with Jesus, we give him glory in the way we live. This is the fruit. As a result of that other people hear the word of God. Yes, we witness, we

tell others about Jesus, that is bearing fruit for him. But it is not up to us to win them. If we don't have a bunch of people who we've won it doesn't mean we're not fruitful. The fruitfulness comes in daily living.

Part of this fruitfulness is love for God and others. When you read passages in the Bible, such as Romans 8, you can't help but love God. He did it for us! He is for us, who can be against us? Nothing can separate us from his love, nothing in this world or beyond. We are children of God, adopted into his family. All this is because of what? Because of his love for us. We don't earn it. He just gives it.

If we focus on trying to keep the rules, and trying to do lots of good things for God, we miss the point. We get to thinking about ourselves and what we're doing. It is about God and what He is doing in us.

It is the same with loving others. When we are trying to work our way to heaven we can be pretty harsh in our judgment of others who aren't even trying. We see how miserable and mean some people are, or how proud or selfish they are. Thank God, we're not like that, right? But without his grace, we really are like that. We just don't think so.

When we read passages in the Bible, like Romans 8, we realize that it is God who is working in us and who works in others. If He can love us, and He can love them, where do we get the right to look down on them; to think that they really ought to be better than they are? The only way they are going to change for the better is by the touch of God. There is a time and place for telling them what they need to know, but the best thing we can do to help them along is love them.

Now, if you've tried to love somebody, say somebody you work with, or live with, and it's been hard, I've got a couple of ideas for you.

First, try to see them the way God does. He doesn't see the outside, the things they say and do. He looks right at the heart. Can you see the little child in others? It's pretty hard sometimes, isn't it. But it is there if you look for it.

Second, pray for them. Pray for God to bless them. You can't go on feeling bad toward someone for long if you're praying for them. Pray for them a lot. Maybe they don't deserve to be prayed for so much. But when you think about what God did in Jesus Christ for you, do you deserve it? Do any of us deserve it?

I tried to say earlier that our first mission is to bring God glory. That is the fruit of our lives. However, a very important part of our mission in life is to tell other people about Jesus. If we love others, and we think about what is happening in their lives, we will want them to know Jesus.

One day I attended a chapel service at a Christian college. Most of the students at this college were not Christians. I was sitting in the back of the chapel listening to the chatting of the students, the shuffling of paper as they worked on their homework, the click of their cell phones opening and closing, their laughter. Over this din I could hear the voice of the speaker that day trying to tell them about the Bible. They weren't listening. They were too busy with their friends or their plans for later, or whatever. It bothered me. It usually does when students don't listen.

But as I sat there I thought about what is coming in their future. If they never receive Jesus, then the Bible is pretty clear what will happen to them. It says we all are going to die, but then we will stand before the judgment seat. If our names are written in the Lamb's book of life we enter heaven, a place of wonder, joy, happiness, peace, where everything is right, forever and ever.

Jesus is the Lamb. The book is a record of those who have believed in him, been forgiven of their sins and worshiped him. All of the others will be thrown into a lake of fire, where none die, but suffer forever. That is hell, it is a place of much intense suffering. There is no let up of the suffering and there is no end. I believe the Bible teaches clearly that those are the two possible futures facing each person who has ever walked this earth.

There were about 300 students in this chapel service. I thought, they are dying. They don't know it, but they are dying, just as surely as if a group of terrorists gunned them down. It was a terrible, sad thought. But the real hell is even worse.

People without Christ are like sheep without any clue as to what is coming. They are busy, day after day with work, television, friends, entertainment of various sorts, and never think about what is to come. It's like the orchestra that played to entertain the guests on the deck of the Titanic as it sank. In a few minutes they were all going to die in the icy water, but for the moment they had entertainment!

In the states a few years ago there was a campaign against drunk driving. They said, "Friends don't let friends drive drunk." Well, let's say, "Friends don't let friends go to hell without warning them."

What can we do? The faith to believe and pray to Jesus comes from him. We should pray for those around us who don't know him, that He would give them faith. Then we lovingly look for ways to share with them. We don't do it to win points with God, or get him to love us more. We do it because He already loves us, and love motivates us for others.

In closing I have a few thoughts I hope you remember.

1. God loves you as you are. He isn't standing in heaven frowning at you or saying to one of the angels, "Did you see that? There she goes again! How many times will she mess up?" He loves you so much, He can't love you more and He won't love you less.
2. You bear fruit for God, like the seed planted in good soil, by your life. You grow in your relationship with him. When you realize how much He loves you, and what He's done for you, this comes naturally. We only have to remember. Read the Bible, especially passages like Romans 8, the books of Galatians and Ephesians. Talk to him.
3. We don't try to win souls for merit with God. We don't try to win souls so we'll have more people in church. We love those around us and are sad when we realize the future they face. We see beneath the surface. And from that position we direct them to life in Christ.

Let us pray.

(my extemporaneous prayer followed by . . . )

May God bless you and fill you with the knowledge of his grace. May "the eyes of your heart be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe." (Ephesians 1:18, 19) Amen