



Sermon Transcript September 13, 2020

Staying Connected in an Isolated World

Keeping My Eyes on Jesus

Romans 1:1-15

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on September 13, 2020 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text
Romans 1:1-15

¹Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God ²which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, ³concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh ⁴and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, ⁵through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, ⁶including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,

⁷To 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.

⁸First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. ⁹For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you ¹⁰always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. ¹¹For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you-- ¹²that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. ¹³I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. ¹⁴I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. ¹⁵So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

Introduction

What spills out of you when the cup of your life is shaken? If I had a cup in my hand and shook it rather vigorously, whatever is inside the cup is what spills out of it. If it is a cup of water, then water is going to spill out of it because that is what is inside the cup. My shaking of the cup doesn't change what is inside the cup. My shaking of the cup doesn't turn the water into something else. Instead, my shaking of the cup reveals what is already inside of the cup. So I ask you again, "What spills out of you when the cup of your life is shaken?" Whatever is inside of you is what spills out of you when your life is shaken.

Have you ever noticed how we can be quick to blame our circumstances—the things that are shaking us—for what comes out of us? We can quickly dismiss an outburst of anger or a biting word of criticism or a grumbling spirit simply because "we are having a bad day." But are the circumstances that make for a bad day, producing these words that come out of us or are they simply revealing what is already inside of us?

I don't always like what spills out of me when my life is shaken. This year, 2020, has been a year of "shaking the cup." We have all felt it. One of the things I have noticed spilling out of my cup more than I care to admit is worry and anxiety. Now I can quote the verses that tell me not to be anxious. And yet, I have noticed an increasing anxiety spilling out of me as I "worry" over the condition of the church during this unique time of isolation and as we "wrestle" through challenging issues and difficult times facing our culture. It would be easy for me to blame my worry on my circumstances. As I talk with other pastors, I am finding that my experience is not unique, and part of my struggle is the reality of being human. So, I get that. And yet, it is also revealing what is inside of me. I am reading a book right now on what it means to be a pastor and it is called *The Care of Souls*. And the author said something that really spoke to me and perhaps got to the root of my anxious heart. He said, "The church already has a Savior. What she needs now is the Savior's servant, someone to do his bidding and brings his gifts. That someone is you, always remember that you are nothing more than an errand boy for Jesus."¹ Part of my worry comes from forgetting who I am . . . "nothing more than an errand boy for Jesus."

So what is spilling out of you during this time of "shaking?" Now that we are six months into COVID, understandably, many of us are longing to get back to what once was—what we consider to be normal. But I want to encourage you to not waste your COVID time. Often it is hard to know what is living inside of you when everything in

life is going good. But when your cup is shaken, you get to see what is inside of you because it spills out. I know what I want to spill out of me when my life is shaken. I want Jesus spilling out of my life when the cup of my life is shaken.

I remember visiting a pastor friend of mine who was in the hospital and he was very sick. He had sepsis, a life-threatening infection that was shutting down some of his vital organs. Actually, another pastor friend of mine went with me to visit him. When we came into the room we realized how serious things were. While we were able to talk with him, he wasn't making much sense. It was fascinating to hear what was spilling out of his mouth. He was quoting Bible verses, singing songs of faith and he was talking about Jesus. While what he was saying wasn't necessarily coherent, it was insightful to see what spilled out of his mouth when all his filters were gone. In fact, when my friend and I left the room and we were walking down the hallway, we looked at each other and confessed, "I hope those are the kinds of things that come out of my mouth when all my filters are gone." It made us a little nervous to even think about it.

Circumstances that shake the cup of our life often come unannounced. So what do I need to do to have more of Jesus spill out of my life when my life is shaken? **If I want people to see Jesus in my life, then I need to keep my eyes on Jesus.**

This morning I want to do two things. For one, I want to introduce you to the book of Romans. Over the next few weeks, we are going to walk through the first five chapters of Romans and take a look at the gospel. This morning I want you to see how Paul introduces himself and I want you to get to know something about the people he is writing to. But the second thing I want to do this morning is to give you "a pep talk." A coach often calls a timeout when the team has lost momentum, or is tired or needs to rethink what they are doing or just needs to be encouraged to dig down and give a little more effort. With six months of isolation under our belt and not knowing where we will be six months from now, it feels like to me that we could use a good "pep talk." **If I want people to see Jesus in my life, then I need to keep my eyes on Jesus.**

I want start by giving you an INTRODUCTION to Paul. He was a person who kept his eyes on Jesus and you could see Jesus shine through him. Then I want you to meet the church in Rome and take notice of the way their faith was to be an IMITATION of what they saw in Paul. Then I want to end with an INVITATION for us at WEFC to keep our eyes on Jesus so that Jesus can be seen in us even while our lives are shaken. **If I want people to see Jesus in my life, then I need to keep my eyes on Jesus.**

AN INTRODUCTION: A Life that Shines Jesus

Paul is introduced at the very beginning of this letter as the author of Romans. In Romans 1:1 it starts with *Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God.* Paul is yet to meet the people he is writing to. He says in verse 8 that he has heard of their great faith and he lets them know that their good reputation is known wherever he has been throughout the Roman Empire. He tells them in verses 9-10 that even though they are yet to meet, he prays regularly for them. Then in verses 11-13 he tells them how much he longs to meet them and that he has tried to visit them but to this point he has been prevented from doing so. Responsibilities and circumstances have not made it possible for him to visit them.

Paul is writing this letter from the city of Corinth at the end of his third missionary journey throughout Asia Minor. In Romans 15:19 he summarizes where he has been during these three missionary journeys. He writes, *“from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of Christ.”* Illyricum is the western region of Asia Minor right before you get to Italy, and to Rome. It would be like saying, “during these three missionary journeys I have been everywhere from Connecticut to the Mississippi River. I have been up and down and all around this region planting and establishing churches and my job is finished here. In fact, he says in Romans 15:22, *“this is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you.”* He has been busy saturating Asian Minor with church planting. But now he wants to go further west. It would be like standing on the eastern banks of the Mississippi River and writing to the church in Colorado and telling them that he wants to visit them so that they can help him get to California, because no one has gone their yet with the gospel. He wants to go to Rome so they can help him go further west and get to Spain with the gospel.

So here is his plan spelled out in Romans 15. After packing his bags at the end of his third missionary journey, he is going to return east to Jerusalem because he took a collection for the poor back in Jerusalem and he wants to safely deliver it. Then he says in Romans 15:28, that once he delivers this gift he is going to *leave for Spain by way of Rome.* But like with most of us, things don't always happen the way we plan. Circumstances change. Paul did get to Rome. But not as he planned. He arrived there as a prisoner. That is where the book of Acts ends.

But what is amazing about Paul in this introduction is that his is a life that shines Jesus no matter what his circumstances happen to be. If you know anything about the story of his three missionary journeys detailed for us in the book of Acts, it is filled with

incidents where the “cup of his life” is being shaken. And yet Jesus keeps spilling out of him. I feel like in 2 Corinthians 11:26 he was saying that “danger” was his middle name because it was his constant companion. He says that he was *“in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea and danger from false brothers.”* He testifies in Philippians that he knows what it is like to have plenty and he knows what it is like to be in need. But he goes on to say that no matter what his circumstances happen to be, he has learned the secret of being content. It is here where he says, *“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”* Shake his cup all you want. Jesus keeps spilling out. If I want people to see Jesus in my life, then I need to keep my eyes on Jesus. So how do I keep my eyes on Jesus?

Keep rehearsing the gospel: The reason Jesus keeps spilling out of his life no matter what his circumstances are is because Jesus is at the center of his affections. In fact, it is hard for him to even talk about himself without quickly getting to Jesus. Look at his introduction. Look at how he defines his identity, who he is. His name is Paul, but then he says of himself, *a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God.* His identity is wrapped up in Jesus. This reminds me of what he says in Philippians. He summarizes his life by saying, *“For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.”* In the same letter he says that he counts everything else as nothing compared to knowing Jesus. And he recognizes in that passage that it is often through our suffering—the shaking of our cup—that we come to know Jesus in a greater way.

Next week we will be looking at the theme verses for the book of Romans, Romans 1:16-17. I believe that the gospel is the theme of the book of Romans. Romans 1-11 is the most detailed presentation of the gospel we have in the Bible. And yet, I love how Paul gets to the heart of the gospel in his introduction. Ultimately, he says, the gospel that he was set apart to proclaim is rooted in a person and that person is Jesus. The gospel is not just a set of ideas or beliefs. Over the next several weeks we will be exposed to some key ideas and beliefs that make up the gospel. But it is more than that. The Gospel—Truth is a person. It is Jesus. Paul makes an amazing claim about Jesus in his introduction. He says that Jesus is human, *he descended from David according to the flesh.* But then Paul speaks to the divine nature of Jesus. He is the Son of God. How can he make such a claim? Jesus rose from the dead. Notice what it says in verse 4, *“he was declared to be the Son of God in POWER according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.”*

Next week we will see how the gospel is the POWER of God. That is why you need to

keep your eyes on Jesus. He has the power to save us. He has the power to change us. That why Paul says that the secret to being content no matter what his circumstances is anchored in Jesus. “*I can do all things THROUGH CHRIST WHO STRENGTHENS ME!*” Jesus spills out of us when we keep our eyes on the gospel which is anchored in the person of Jesus. So keep rehearsing the gospel.

Keep gospel commitments: The pattern you will see unfold in the book of Romans is that from the gospel comes our habits and our commitments. Paul’s circumstances didn’t alter or change his commitments. His commitments were not driven by his circumstances. Instead, it was the gospel that drove his commitments. That is why I call them gospel commitments. So for example he tells the Romans that he has prayed for them even though he had been prevented from seeing them. That is the great thing about prayer. No matter what your circumstance happens to be, you can still pray. That is a gospel commitment.

I love how Paul says in Romans 1:14-15, “*I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.*” Paul is under “gospel commitment” that no matter who he is with—wise or foolish—top 1% or the person on the street—it is his intent to have Jesus spill out of his life in front of them. Whether he is coming to a town for the first time and shows up at the local synagogue or on trial before the rulers of the land or chained in prison to a Roman guard . . . they will hear of Jesus and see Jesus spill out of his life. Why? Because his circumstances do not change his gospel commitments. Paul’s life is an INTRODUCTION of a life that shines Jesus. **If I want people to see Jesus in my life, then I need to keep my eyes on Jesus.**

An IMITATION: A Church that Shines Jesus

So let me tell you something about the church that is receiving this letter from Paul. Clearly, this is a letter written to the church in Rome, it says so much in verse 7. “*To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints.*” Where did this church come from if Paul didn’t start it? In Acts 2, on the day of Pentecost, we are told that Jews from all over the Roman Empire were in Jerusalem to celebrate this Jewish feast. It actually says that there were visitors from Rome there when the Holy Spirit came in power and the church began. No doubt, some of them were among the converts to Jesus among the 3,000 that believed that day and when they returned to Rome they shared in the synagogues throughout Rome the good news about Jesus. When they shared the good news about Jesus, some Jews were convinced that Jesus was indeed the promised

Messiah. Notice in Paul's greeting in verse 1 that he says he is a *servant of Christ Jesus*. That is the Greek way of saying that he is a servant of the Messiah, Jesus. As he says of Jesus in verse 2, he was the one *promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures*. So when the church began in Rome, it had strong Jewish roots. No doubt there were Gentiles as part of their number, but at its inception, the Jews were the predominant group within the early church in Rome.

As was often the case, there were a lot of Jews who responded very forcefully against the news that Jesus was Israel's Messiah. Jesus experienced this kind of reaction among his own people. All through Acts, Paul experienced this kind of negative reaction from his fellow Jews when he traveled throughout Asia Minor. So it shouldn't surprise us that there was a major conflict in Rome from Jews who did not embrace Jesus. In fact the squabbles in Rome between the Jews and those who were followers of Jesus caused such a disturbance that in A. D. 49, Emperor Claudius was so exasperated over the whole thing that he expelled all the Jews from the city of Rome. He "gave them a time-out" and temporarily kicked them out of the city. We see evidence of this in Acts 18 when Paul is in Corinth and he meets a couple there by the names of Aquila and Priscilla. Acts 18:2 says they were there *because Claudius commanded all the Jews to leave Rome*.

This was a "shaking of the cup" for the church in Rome. But do you know what happened? The church continued to grow, especially among the Gentiles. And it grew so much among the Gentiles, by the time the Jews were allowed to return to the city of Rome, the church in Rome had been forever changed. Gentiles were now the predominant group in the church in Rome. That is good news, right? But it also caused a lot of tension. This is one of the reasons why Paul is writing this letter. As these two groups are coming together in the church, there is friction because of their differing backgrounds. And so one of the questions Paul is answering in this book is, "How can Jews and Gentiles live together as one people of God?" This tension was shaking their cup. Paul wanted them to IMITATE him. He wanted Jesus to spill out of them. Just as Jesus shined through his life, no matter the circumstance, he was wanting Jesus to shine through their life as a church body—even though things have changed. How can Jesus shine through this diverse body of believers? The same way it shined through Paul's life.

Keep rehearsing the gospel: Notice the gospel language of verses 6-7 as Paul reminds them of their identity in Christ. They were *called to belong to Jesus Christ* just like Paul was called to be an apostle and be set apart for the gospel. They were *loved by God*. It is a love Paul will talk about later in Romans when he says in Romans 5:8, *but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us*. And he says that they

were called to be saints. That is an expression taken from the Old Testament to describe the people of God, the children of Israel. It is a phrase that means that they were holy and set apart to represent God to this world. In the Old Testament the people of Israel were called a *holy nation*. Now what Paul is saying is that this church made up of Jew and Gentile are a people set apart unto God. Douglas Moo puts it this way, “The Roman Christians, Gentiles though most of them may be, have inherited the privileges and promises granted to the Old Testament people of God.”² In other words, through Jesus, the church is the people and the presence of God in this world.

I think that is one of the main reasons why Paul rehearses the gospel in great detail for the first eleven chapters of the book. It is the gospel that unites us as one body. It doesn't just save us. It shapes us so that we can live together in love—Jesus spilling out of us for the world to see. So Paul is going to say in Romans 1-3 that the Gentiles are sinners and the Jews are sinners and you each need Jesus as much as the other. Whether you come from a pagan Gentile home or grew up in a religious Jewish home, the only way you are made right with God is through faith in Jesus. In Romans 4 he is going to say that the true children of Abraham are children of faith. It is the gospel that unites us.

Keep gospel commitments: This is what leads us to keeping our gospel commitments. Look at how Paul describes his ministry in Romans 1:5. He says that *we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations.* There is an obedience that springs from our faith. Paul says of himself in verse 1 that he is a *servant of Christ Jesus*. And so it shouldn't surprise you to hear him say of himself in verse 9 that because he is a servant *God is my witness, whom I serve*. His gospel commitment as a servant is to serve God.

That is the outline of the entire book of Romans. The first eleven chapters rehearses the gospel. Then the rest of the book of Romans calls the church to keep their gospel commitments. Chapter 12 begins with a familiar verse, “*By the mercies of God, present your bodies as a living sacrifice . . . Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.*” By keeping their commitments to the Scriptures and by keeping their commitments to each other—to love each other and to differ to each other and to serve each other—even though they are a diverse group of people, Jesus will spill out of their lives. This is their mission no matter what their circumstances happen to be.

Here is an interesting observation I made this week from Romans. In Romans 1:5 Paul defines his mission this way: “*to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his*

name among all the nations.” When he gets to the end of this letter and pronounces a benediction on the church in Rome he prays that what he has written will strengthen them through the gospel. To what end? That Jesus would be *made known to all the nations . . . to bring about the obedience of faith.* The church in Rome was to be an IMITATION of a church that shines Jesus. **If I want people to see Jesus in my life, then I need to keep my eyes on Jesus.**

An INVITATION: An opportunity to shine Jesus

So what is the “pep talk” we need to hear from what we see in Paul and his message to the church in Rome? If I can start with this simple observation: life is filled with changing circumstances. Life is one shaking of the cup after another. But God is at work in all of these changing circumstances. Look at all that he accomplished through Paul in his ever changing circumstances. Church tradition tells us that Paul did end up getting to Spain before returning again to Rome and being martyred under the reign of Nero. Many of his letters that we read in the New Testament were written from prison—the shaking of the cup! And Jesus is still spilling out into our lives from Paul’s faithful ministry. And then look at the church in Rome. All the upheaval and the coming persecution of the church over the next few centuries is what led to the growth of the church. In fact, it was the way the church responded to the needs around them during the plagues—many of them embracing death itself—that led to the rapid and wide spread of Christianity in the first few centuries of the church. Their cup was greatly shaken and Jesus spilled out of it.

So what about us? This is not a time to be passive. This is not a time to be disconnected. This is an opportunity. Don’t just be sitting around waiting for things to come back to the way they used to be. Who knows when that will happen. But because we are gospel people, we are not dictated by our circumstances. Rather we must keep rehearsing the gospel and we must keep our gospel commitments.

Keep rehearsing the gospel: In our Way of Life we like to say: “By God’s grace and through faith in Jesus Christ, I have been delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of the beloved Son in whom I have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Therefore, we are sons and daughters—deeply loved by God, servants—called to put the needs of others before myself and stewards—called to invest what I’ve been given in the kingdom of God.” Pray that prayer on a daily basis. This doesn’t change because our cup is being shaken by a virus. Rehearse the gospel and remind yourself of who you are in Christ.

Keep gospel commitments: Stay in the game. There are opportunities all around you. God is at work. Stay connected in worship. Stay connected to the body—the church. Stay connected to your world. This world is being shaken and it needs God’s people to love and to offer the hope of Jesus.

Let me end with something practical. Trevin Wax wrote a great article called *Love What’s Near*. In it he quotes Kevin DeYoung who said that “Our generation is prone to radicalism without follow-through.” He adds, “We want to change the world and we have never changed a diaper.”³ In other words, the greatest and most lasting impact on the world is not found in trying to change the culture, but instead is found in what he calls “the romance of the small things.” Hear these words, “We must love *God* before we run after what we think we can do for God. We must focus on *our* family before we can focus on *the* family. We must love our next-door neighbor before we look for ways to improve the neighborhood. We must love the church member with whom we have little in common before we can love “the church.” The love that goes farthest starts with loving what is nearest.⁴ . **If I want people to see Jesus in my life, then I need to keep my eyes on Jesus.**

These are the gospel commitments we are called to embrace. And when we embrace them, Jesus spills out of our cup. And I can do these things no matter what my circumstance happens to be. When that is my focus, I find my worry and my anxiety dissipates and Jesus shines through me. So what do you say? Stay connected in an isolated world. Stay connected to God. Stay connected to each other. Stay connected to the world. Don’t use the pandemic to sit on the sideline. God is at work! I’m looking forward to being shaped by the gospel. May God use us to make him known to the nations and to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God be glory forevermore, Amen.

¹Harold L Senkbeil *The Care of Souls* (Bellingham, WA: Lexam Press, 2019) Location 777 Kindle Reader

²Douglamoo *Romans: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) 39

³Trevin Wax “Love What’s Near” www.thegospelcoalition.org September 1, 2020

⁴Ibid

