January 2

Happy Monday and Happy New Year!

As we begin the new year, we will continue with our walk through the Biblical books in order and will start the year where we left off – with the book of Romans.

Romans is Paul’s letter to the church at Rome and was written in about AD 57 while he was visiting the church in Corinth, Greece. While it was not his first letter (that was probably Galatians), nonetheless, it is Paul’s great exposition of Christianity. He works through the theology of this “new” religion and in a very lawyer-like fashion presents his case. This is how he starts:

“Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord” (1:1-4).

Note at the outset how Paul identifies himself: “a servant of Christ Jesus.” Not Paul the theologian or Paul the former Pharisee or Paul the evangelist, church planter, or even follower of Jesus. Instead, these simple and profound five words: “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus.”

And then he goes on to say that Jesus was always the plan, born in eternity, and told through “the Scriptures,” which for Paul, as well as for everyone at this time, was the Old Testament. There was no New Testament. Nonetheless, Paul says that it was Jesus who was promised by God “beforehand through the prophets.” It was Jesus who was “a descendant of David,” meaning that Jesus is the one God promised to King David as the One who would be on his throne forever. And, it was Jesus who was raised from the dead “in power” by the Holy Spirit. In one single sentence, Paul confirms the reality of Jesus; His life, ministry, death, and resurrection and validates that all of Scripture proclaim this truth.

Among all the people in the world, Paul would have known. As a Pharisee, he knew every word of Scripture and could no doubt recite lengthy passages of it from memory. And, recall that he had encountered the risen Jesus as he travelled the road to Damascus. For Paul, there was absolutely no doubt. And because of it, he gave his life to planting churches and writing what it itself would, in turn, become Scripture – thirteen letters in all.

As we start the new year, my prayer for you is this: take a walk through this great book Paul wrote almost two thousand years ago. Read the words of someone who was an expert in the Scriptures – the prophets and the Psalms. Soak in the writing of someone
who actually spoke to the risen Jesus, and whose life was transformed in that moment. And as you do, like Paul that day, see what that same Jesus is saying to you.

IHS,

Pastor Lou
January 3

Greetings, DGCC Family.

The subject of what is right, or moral, is much debated in modern life. Contemporary times often teach us that morality is subjective, that is, if you think something is right for you, then it is, as long as no one gets hurt.

While I am no moralist, nonetheless, this is a slope that is quite slippery. It forecloses on the notion of a moral code that is absolute, and in doing so, shuts out of modern life God’s laws, and in turn, Gods desire for our lives.

The truth is that as God’s created beings, we are “wired” to know right from wrong. As having been created in the image of our Creator, our spiritual DNA gives us an inherent understanding of right and wrong, moral and immoral. The very definition of sin is the act of setting this aside and following our own moral compass which, without God, never points truly north.

The apostle Paul describes this sense of the inherent knowledge of right from wrong like this:

“Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them” (Romans 2:14-15).

Paul says that God takes the time to write His laws on our hearts and to instill them in our consciences. Whether or not we follow them, well, that’s quite another thing.

So, then, what are we to do in a world that teaches a moral code to the contrary? My suggestion is this: Let’s be the example. We are called to live our lives the way God intends us to live them. In that regard, I think we are so well instructed by the prayer of Francis of Assisi:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
   where there is injury, pardon;
   where there is doubt, faith;
   where there is despair, hope;
   where there is darkness, light;
   where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, 
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

IHS,
Pastor Lou

January 4
Grace and peace to you this day.

Time and time again, Scripture teaches us that what is in our hearts is so much more important than the words that come out of our mouths. If our words are soft but our hearts are hard, as we have seen many times, God has no room for such false piety.

Recall from yesterday’s lesson that God instilled our hearts with His laws and sense of morality. This is as he stated in Jeremiah: “I will put my law on their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people” (31:33). God is deeply concerned with the attitude coming from our spiritual hearts. Otherwise, He would not choose that as the dwelling place for His personal instructions to us.

In ancient times, the ark of the covenant, which contained the tablets of the Ten Commandments, the core of God’s law, resided in the Holy of Holies, the innermost part of the temple that could only be visited by the High Priest and only once per year, on the Day of Atonement. That is how God sees our spiritual hearts: an inner place that is so sacred and holy that He writes His law upon it.

The apostle Paul further explains this like as follows:

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Romans 12:1-2).

Animal sacrifice, as in Old Testament times, is no longer required to be reconciled with God. That sacrifice was made finally, and perfectly, by Jesus on the cross. In return, God desires that our response be that we conduct ourselves as “living” sacrifices that are “holy and pleasing” to Him. This doesn’t just mean physically, but spiritually as well.

As we go forward in 2023, my prayer for all of us, and for DGCC, is this: let’s guard the sacred space of our spiritual hearts. Let’s endeavor daily to keep it spiritually clean and holy. It is our personal “holy of holies,” inscribed with words by the finger of the Almighty Himself.

IHS,
Pastor Lou
January 5

Greetings, DGCC Family.

I’d like to conclude our very brief study of Romans with these words written two millennia ago. They are words, in my opinion, that were well ahead of their time:

“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchrea. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me. Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them” (16:1-4).

Much has been written about the role of women in the church. Here we see Paul referring to a woman named Phoebe as a “deacon of the church.” He is asking the church “to receive her in the Lord in a way that is worthy of his people,” in other words, as an equal.

He goes on to refer to two women named Priscilla and Aquila as “co-workers.” Again, in other words, as equals.

Sincere believers can honestly and respectfully disagree on many points of Scriptural interpretation, including Paul’s view of the role of women. Speaking personally, I find that all are equal at the foot of the cross. Again, Paul said it much better than me:

“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

IHS,
Pastor Lou

January 6

Happy Friday, everyone!

Here’s your musical devotional for the week. Turn up the volume and enjoy!

https://youtu.be/tXQpDDcrN-w

IHS,
Pastor Lou