

# Nothing Less Than Life

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Preacher: Derek Lamont

[ 0 : 0 0 ] Okay, so we're going to start a big new series on Sunday mornings from Romans. What I want to stress as we begin this series on Romans is that it's about nothing less than life, okay?

Nothing less than life. We'll say a little bit more about that as we unpack this passage here. I want you to keep that in mind. I want you to keep that at the forefront of your thinking that what Paul is speaking about here is nothing less than life.

I think it's very easy for, especially in the routine of church and coming to church and even the routine of being a Christian, that we lose that sense of urgency, that it's so easy for us to make Jesus Christ just an added extra into our lives.

The icing on the cake of our lives. Just maybe if there's a gap there somewhere that he's the one that fits into it, as he offers something to me, it ceases, easy for it to cease to be life and death for us, the gospel and the message.

Yet, what I want all of us to remember and to think about again and again, and I need to remind myself of this all the time, is that life without Jesus Christ is living, you're living on the edge, because life is His gift.

[ 1 : 2 7 ] You are here today because He is ordained and chosen that you breathe, that you—He's gifted grace, the grace of living to you today.

And if you're not a Christian here today, then you are here because of His grace, and He's here because He has given you life, and there's enough, more than enough in your life today for you to search for more, for you to question death, the reality of evil and the brokenness of your life, because this life for all of us is temporary.

And if you're not a Christian here today, then physical death for you enters you, ushers you into an eternal separation from all that is life.

And that's true of all of us, that we've been given that opportunity through what Jesus has done to come back to God, the author of life, who restores not just ordinary living to us, but life as He intended in relationship with Him, that is something that defeats even the death that we will undoubtedly meet with.

So this is nothing—the Book of Romans is about nothing less than life. And I want you to think about the Word as we go through over these weeks.

[ 2 : 5 7 ] I want you to think about your relationship to the Word, to the Gospel, to Romans. I want you to come prepared to meet with God, not just in church and in worship in a special way, but each time you open Scripture that you would be prayerfully prepared and ready to hear what God is saying into your life and into your situation.

As we go through this book, Romans, I want you also to remember Romans is a letter. Romans is a letter to a church.

It could just be as well be the letter of Paul to St. Columbus at that level, because it was written to ordinary people. It's not a theological treatise written to theologians, for example, or to academics.

Primarily, it's written just to a church that was full of all different kinds of people, including theologians and academics, but not exclusively ordinary people.

A church that had never had an apostolic visit from Paul or from any of the other apostles. And in this letter, Paul is setting out the significant truth of the doctrine of salvation.

[ 4 : 16 ] It's an apologetic for what he had been given from God, what he had experienced both in his own life and what he had been given by revelation from Jesus Christ.

It was to be a significant church. There was always the danger of heresy, and so he wanted to lay out exactly what salvation means, not just for the church in Rome, of course, but for the church of all time.

The first eleven chapters gives us that great summary of the doctrine of salvation. It's not a systematic theology per se.

It doesn't deal with it, but it specifically speaks about salvation. And then from chapter eleven onwards, there's the practical application of these truths, what it means to be a Christian.

So it must be—each time we take the word—I want to focus or stress this, that we take the word—it's an occasion primarily and firstly for worship and for spiritual nourishment and for hearing what God says.

[ 5 : 24 ] I don't want you simply to think, oh, I want to learn about Romans, it'll give me a deeper understanding of theology and blah, blah, blah. However significant that might be, I want us to see our interaction with God's word as a worshipful one.

And if you allow God to do so, he will strip you naked spiritually as we go through Romans, and he'll clothe you with Christ.

And sometimes we don't like that. We need to be willing for that to happen in our lives. You need to be willing for that to happen, to allow the eye of God to strip you spiritually naked and to cover you with Christ.

That is hugely significant as we come to the word. It's the first letter in the New Testament in terms of its preeminence coming after the book of Acts.

That doesn't mean it was written first, but it is, I think, in its rightful place, first in preeminence, first in significance, first in importance.

[ 6 : 26 ] It's a masterpiece, it's a fundamental truth. And through reading and understanding Romans, which very often preachers kind of balk from looking at or shy away from because there's some real, real meaty, gritty, challenging, frightening truths in it, through reading Romans, some of the greatest believers who ever lived have been transformed.

And Guston, Martin Luther, Calvin, John Wesley, and many others, let it speak. Invite your friends to come along to hear what God says about salvation in His word as He lays it out through Paul.

Invite your friends, pray for their conversion. We want 2019—oh my goodness, I'm sure my age is there—2018, okay, even 1918, I wasn't around, okay.

In 2018, let it be a year when many people come to faith in Jesus Christ through the preaching of the word here, through your testimony, through your understanding of this truth, and through your passion and concern for people.

So we know and we see it's written by Paul. Paul loves these people, he's never been to them, but he loves them. He prays for them, he wants to help them. He's dead keen to visit them, to teach and encourage them.

[ 7 : 45 ] Verse 11 and 12 says that he wants to come and teach them and encourage them. That's a letter to a people, to a church. And so it's also passionate and personal.

A mixed church, mainly—not exclusively, it seems, but it would be a church that had a lot of people who weren't originally Jews, who were Gentiles and who'd come to faith.

And Paul is here, sitting out why he wants to speak to them, or why he feels and knows he has the authority to do so. He says, Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God.

A servant, he's a slave. Now, you need to get the idea, away from the idea of it being a slavish—an unwh—our idea of slavery is always unwilling slavery.

It's something forced. But there's an idea in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament, of a slave who became a willing servant because he loved—she loved the people that she worked—or that he worked for.

[ 8 : 54 ] It's absolutely voluntary, and he became this one who was willingly a servant of the Lord, who was changed, who was converted to know and love Jesus Christ, so that he came to the place where Christ was worth it, his identity.

It was really a mark of identity and belonging. Someone who willingly would for life become a slave of a certain master would do so willingly and identify with them.

That's interesting, because isn't that the direct opposite of the society in which we live, which is one which lods and speaks of independence?

It's important just to think for yourself. It's important to be true to yourself, to be completely free from any outside influence and be what you can be. Now, there's a lot of good in some of that thinking, but in spiritual terms it's bonkers, because we are to be people who recognize that there is an absolute truth and there is a truth and a person to whom we are to give allegiance.

And spiritually being independent from God is not a strength, it's a weakness. So his mindset is one of identity with Christ, and he gets his authority as an apostle.

[ 10 : 26 ] In Galatians 1, verses 11 and 12, he speaks about that authority and he said, for I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached to me is not man's gospel, it's not Paul's gospel, for I did not receive it from any man or make it up, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

So he sets out his authority as a called apostle, someone who had seen, although untimely, born, who had seen the risen Christ and who had met with the risen Christ and who was taught by the risen Christ.

And that was verified by the other apostles and by the churches it were, which gave him his authority, it's not that some madman said, well, you know, or today some madman might say, you know, I've had a revelation from Jesus and I think this is that and the next thing.

He wasn't like that, it was examined, it was tested, it was taken before the church, it was taken before the apostles, he was recognized as an apostle, particularly to the Gentiles, as one who like them met with Jesus was in the eyewitness of the resurrection, was gifted by the Holy Spirit, was able to do miraculous signs as one who brought the gospel, and he was set apart, not periling his own ideas.

He did that previously, he did that when he tried to crush the church, he did that when he thought the Christians had to be eradicated, that was his understanding of the Old Testament and of God.

[ 12 : 07 ] But God rescued him from that misunderstanding and gave him the calling which was to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. And God used him, not mechanically, but used him with all his life up to that point, with all his gifts, with his knowledge of the Old Testament, with his, the people he rubbed shoulders with, with his life in Tarshis, with his being a Roman citizen, with his initial hatred and opposition to the gospel.

God used all of these unique gifts and talents that Paul had been given. He was no machine, he was uniquely set apart for this work.

So it's a letter to an ordinary church and it's written by Paul. But I'll just say a little bit in conclusion about the gospel that's spoken of here, which is the core of the book, set apart for the gospel of God which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scripture concerning his son.

The gospel is the gospel, when it says the gospel of God, what he means there, what we have is the gospel not about God, it's the gospel that belongs to God, it's God's gospel.

It's the gospel that comes from him, not just about him, it's his gospel. Paul is simply an ambassador, he's simply passing on information that he's been given.

[ 13 : 42 ] It's originated, it's authenticated, it's designed, it's inspired and it's revealed by God, it's God's gospel.

It's hugely significant for us. It's not for Paul to take it and adapt it, it's not for me to take it and adapt it or for you to take it and mold it into our own image, it's given.

That's why the book of Romans and the doctrine of salvation is so significant for us. It is God's gospel, God's idea, God's design.

Now over the last number of months we were looking at the Old Testament and we were looking at what the Old Testament said about the gospel and that's been a really good runner towards this study in Romans because Paul quotes the Old Testament Scriptures over fifty-seven years, nearly sixty times because it's the promised gospel, promised beforehand through the prophets.

Everything points towards this gospel that belongs to God being revealed. God drip feeds it into the consciousness of the world before the coming of Jesus Christ.

[ 15 : 01 ] It's promised and that's why the Bible is significant. This one is good for you and good for me to read chunks of the Old Testament and to read through the whole Bible in a year because it gives us a kind of overview of these promises.

I know there's lots of difficult bits but it gives us an overview. So our task is to recognize right at the very beginning that this is a message about life, absolute life and our task is never to change it but it is to know it and it is to understand it.

I just want a slight diversion here because I think sometimes we think that the gospel is just a set of words.

Simply as yes we know it's from God and we know it's unchanging but sometimes I think we think it's just like a magic incantation, like open sesame.

If we say the words in the right way, in a certain way to the right people, the right time that God will open our hearts like open sesame opens Aladdin's cave and it's just we need to get the kind of magic words right.

[ 16 : 17 ] We need to get it all in the right order, sin, death, hell, heaven. We need to say all and we need to say exactly what God has said and it doesn't matter how we say it, it doesn't matter to whom we say it, when we say it, as long as we blurt it out, that's all that matters and God will bless that.

I think it's more than that. I think it is an unchanging gospel and we do need to know it and we do need to live it but we also need to share it in a way that people from our point of view will respond to it.

Now we know that God is the one who opens that. I'm not denying that but I'm saying that Paul used all his natural gifts and abilities to share the gospel, all his baggage, all his background, all his experiences.

He used it and he changed the way he presented the gospel depending on who he was with because he was passionate and it was real and it mattered to him that they heard and they responded.

So he shared the gospel in Athens differently from the way he shared it in Jerusalem to people who knew the Bible to people who didn't know the Bible. And I think that's important for us as we hold on to the unchanging truth of the gospel but don't just blurt it out like some kind of magic formula and then walk away because God uses your tears and he uses your commitment to the people and he uses your experience of the gospel in their lives to bring it open and bring it alive.

[ 17 : 46 ] Can I give you an example? It's probably a poor example and rip me apart if it is but how would you persuade someone who has an eating disorder that they need help?

Because that condition is deeply complex and there's all kinds of things going on. Now the truth might be you could go up to them and say, you're too fat, you need to lose weight or you might say you're too thin, you need to eat more.

Now these may be bare truths but you would never say that because they can't see. That's part of the problem.

They don't understand their condition very often if it's a disorder. And so there needs to be much more thought and much more time and much more energy and much more concern and commitment to these people.

And so with the gospel, just simply telling people they're sinners and they're going to hell and walking away from them will generally not do the business because their concept of what hell is, their concept of being sinners might be completely unbiblical.

[ 19 : 01 ] And it involves us passionately and meaningfully like Paul and his commitment to people to take that unchanging truth and recognize that people need to hear inner blindness and need to be aware as we work out the gospel in our lives with them, this message.

And the gospel is of course good news. That's what gospel means. It's good news. We need to keep that in mind as we share it and as we live it. We often live like it's really bad news.

I know there's bad news involved in it, but we also need to remember it's not just like ordinary good news. Ordinary good news everyone likes.

And ordinary good news makes the front page of the papers occasionally and makes us feel happy. Everyone will embrace it. But I do believe biblically that the gospel is only good news to those who see their need.

It's only good news to those who see their need and then it becomes good news. Who recognize both the diagnosis of God and the remedy of God.

[ 20 : 14 ] Then it becomes absolute good news. And I do think that hits a square between the eyes today.

Very often we look at the gospel and we want to change it. And that maybe reflects that we don't really believe it. Or we want to ignore it.

And maybe that reflects that we don't agree with God's diagnosis. Or we want to abuse it. And maybe that's because we haven't appreciated what He has done for us and the cost of setting us free.

So the gospel is the gospel that comes from God. And it's also the gospel that's about the Son of God.

That's what we're told here. Concerning His Son who was descended from David according to the flesh, declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of Holiness by His resurrection from the dead.

[ 21 : 17 ] He lays aside His divine nature. He assumes a human nature. He is called Jesus, the Savior. He is called Christ, the anointed one.

He is called Lord because He is sovereign. And in taking Him, He becomes sovereign in our lives. There's this remarkable, from His humiliation, there's this remarkable, and I don't have time to look at this section, this remarkable declaration of power and victory in His resurrection, His ascension, and His coordination with King of Kings.

So He gives out the gift of the Spirit. But what we see here about the Son of God is that it's about life, nothing less than life. And as we see it, biblically, it's nothing less than life through death.

You know, He dies on the cross and He's resurrected from the dead. And that message of life is absolutely everything.

It's the key to everything and to our understanding of this gospel and to our understanding of our faith and of life. Suicide, isn't it?

[ 22 : 28 ] It's the great indicator of the deepest disturbance, of the deepest disturbance at a human level. And we know and we recognize that there are great inhibitors to life as well, getting old, becoming ill, separation from loved ones in death.

And all of that speaks to the court of our existence. On Friday some of us here were up at Kenny McDonald's funeral. I know, I was going to say Kenny McDonald was my boss for five years and was a very powerful evangelist and minister in the gospel.

And while that funeral was very sad, and it is always tremendously sad, I was very sad, but yet a part of my life was gone. But there was also great rejoicing, not just in the fact that he's a Christian and a believer and has gone to be with Christ, but because we spent the time with whoever it was, six, five, six hundred people there, spent our time meeting with people who have been hugely important in the story of our life up to now.

That may be what you haven't seen for 10, 20, 30 years. And there's the richness of that, because it reminds us of what life is about. It reminds us of friendship, of belonging, of the pain of being separate, of all these kind of things.

And so a funeral like that kind of is such a desperate mix of emotions, but it focuses so much on what is really important and what life's about.

[ 24 : 16 ] And you know, you come away from these places and those of you who are about my age and older will know more about this and maybe you'll come away saying, we really need to catch up more. We need to see each other more.

We shouldn't just meet at funerals, because they matter, and life and being in their company matters. And that's just a shadow of what God wants for us.

He comes ultimately to bring life and life in all its fullness, to wipe away every tear, to deal with all separation and to deal with all partings and to deal with all illness and pain in the new heavens and the new earth, wherein lies righteousness.

But that's what the gospel is doing for us now. It applies to the very being of being a being, the very reality of living.

That's what the gospel appeals to. Appeals to your very deepest longings, your deepest needs, and because it deals with life. And you can go through life with your head in the sand and ignore who Jesus Christ is and what He comes to offer.

[ 25 : 28 ] But He comes and He clearly says He offers life. He comes with an authority to offer life. And it goes on, and I finish with this. He speaks about not only Paul being called, but also He speaks about those in the church who says, including you who are called through the obedience of faith to belong to Jesus Christ.

He knows that God comes with an authoritative call on our lives. Now we've often talked about the call of God like an invitation, which is right, it is an invitation, but it's not like any other invitation.

If you get an invitation to a wedding and you don't want to go, you can say no, you can decline the invitation and your life will go on, nothing will change, apart from a couple of might not speak to you.

But apart from that, things don't change very much. You can go to things and not go to things by invitation. But Christ says, his invitation is also both a call and it's authoritative because it comes from Him.

It's in Act of obedience, Acts 17, verse 30, says that, you know, for the time of God, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent. So there is a call, there is an invitation, but there is a call, because the reality is we either bow to His authoritative call on our lives now as Savior, or we recognize His authority in our lives as judge.

[ 26 : 55 ] And that is a very solemn reality. That's God's call. And God, He's calling us. If you're not a Christian today, He's calling you back to Him.

He's calling you to Himself. He's inviting you to come and believe and receive life. If you're a Christian, He's calling you back again and again and again.

And we recognize His authority and we recognize our responsibility. Philippians 2, 12 and 13 makes that abundantly clear, the paradox of the gospel, that it is we are to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good plight.

Great paradox of the gospel is we live as if it all depends on us, but we recognize it all depends on God, and we respond in obedience.

That's what He asks us to do. This is called here, the obedience of faith. That's what He wants from us, the call of love to obey and faith. Don't walk away from church today if you're not a Christian, with whatever reason it might be for theological reason you may have in a very calmest, for not coming to Christ.

[ 28 : 15 ] He commands you, He calls you, with an authoritative and loving call, and it's the offer of life. Life to the full.

So this year, 2018, maybe we are far from God. Maybe you've drifted from when you knew Him once.

Maybe this year you respond to Him and respond to His call. Maybe it be that you will live for Him and live out the gospel and mold your sharing of the gospel, sensitively and gently and yet powerfully and passionately and determinately, so that people will hear.

This might be a year when many people come to faith in Jesus Christ from our friendship circles, from our contacts, from among our neighborhoods. And maybe that we see that work of the gospel and play our part by God's grace as He did with Paul.

And remember His calling, His calling in your life isn't just to be some kind of indistinct metaphysical Christian.

[ 29 : 25 ] He's called you where you work. He's called you where you serve. He's called you with all your, like Paul, with all your experience up to this point in life. He's called you with your gifting, with your training, with your jobs, with your contacts.

He's not asking you necessarily to change anything from that, but He's using where you are and what you do to bring glory to Himself if you will let Him. This is where He wants you. This is where He's called you.

You're His wherever you are as you depend and rely on Him. And Romans is all about teaching and encouraging you and me to persevere in that.

Amen.