

Three Dimensions of the Christian Life

(Romans 1:1)

A Textual-Expository Sermon

by Avon Malone

“Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God, . . .”
(Romans 1:1)

William James said religion is either a dull habit or an acute fever. In 2 Timothy 3:5 Paul speaks of those who have a form of godliness but have denied the power thereof. They have a facade but no reality.

The apostle Paul was one whose spiritual life might be described as an acute fever. He courageously said on one occasion that he wanted to preach where the name of Christ had not been named lest he should build on another man’s foundation (Romans 15:20). He said at another time, “I labored more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me” (1 Corinthians 15:10). Paul, that great apostle to the Gentiles, was a vivid demonstration of the commitment and concern for souls that should characterize us.

Our text is a short passage from the beginning of one of his great letters. Though it is only a brief statement, it contains three powerful truths concerning the dedicated life, the life that takes seriously Christ’s call to drastic discipleship. It is the salutation, the prescript of the great and profound Roman letter.

I. A SERVING LIFE

Observe, first of all, that the Christian life is a serving life. Paul said, “Paul, a *servant* of Jesus Christ, . . .”

The word he used for servant is *doulos*, which means bondservant or slave. There were other terms in the Greek language which a New Testament writer might have employed. He could have used the word *diakonos*, a common word for a servant which does not designate the kind of service rendered. *Doulos* is significant because it means, among other things, “I belong to an-

other.” Paul was a possessed person. His life was not his own. He understood full well a truth we need to recognize. When one is buried in the liquid grave of baptism, he comes forth from that birth-death experience into a fellowship over the threshold of which is written, “You are not your own. You have been bought with a price. Therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit which are God’s.” The Christian is the personal property of Jesus Christ.

May I ask you a question? Whose slave are you? You are going to be enslaved to something or somebody. Romans 6 makes it clear that sin is a mighty monarch that dominates the entirety of a man’s life. It is a slave owner, a slave master. Paul said, “I am the slave of Christ. My life is a life of service.”

The Bible presents a real paradox. It says slavery to Christ is the way to freedom. One is never more free than when he is surrendered to Christ. Jesus said, “For the Son of man also came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Paradoxically, it is in that process that the greatest fulfillment, the greatest spiritual liberty is experienced. Our Lord said, “He that would be the greatest of all, let him be the servant of all.”

We misunderstand greatness. The world thinks the king who wades through blood to his throne is a great king. Our world believes that the arrogant, the autocratic, the dictatorial, the domineering, are the great people. But the Book keeps saying the greatest of all is the servant of all. The way up is down and the way to real greatness is service. Our names could be household words in the world, but we could lack much in being great in God’s sight.

A marker placed at the burial sight of an Alpine guide read, “He died climbing.” A great epitaph for the Christian would be this, “He died

serving." A Christian is a servant. He follows in the steps of that suffering servant of Isaiah 52 and 53.

II. A SEPARATED LIFE

Paul also said, "I am separated unto the gospel." There is no way a life can count for Christ unless it is a separated life. I do not mean Christianity is something to be lived monastically, behind cloistered walls. The separation taught in the Word is a different kind of separation. We are not supposed to be so other-worldly we are of no earthly good. A good question is this: What on earth are you doing for heaven's sake? We need to do something on earth for God. This separation is not an aesthetic, monastic kind of separation. It is not the kind of separation that enshrines a sort of anachronism in dress and conduct. Christian separation involves our allegiance and our affection, our standards, concepts, values, and priorities. Paul can write in Romans 12:2, "And be not fashioned according to this world: . . ." Phillips renders this phrase, "Don't let the world squeeze you into its mold," We must not live, act, talk, or dress like the world about us. We have been called to live a different kind of life.

When Paul says, "I am separated unto the gospel," he is giving a great positive thrust and emphasis. He is saying, "I have been set apart for the purpose of communicating the gospel. That is why I live."

Have you ever thought about the difference between a thermometer and a thermostat? A thermometer reflects the environment. A thermostat has some of the same characteristics with one significant difference—the factor of control. It does not just reflect. It seeks to exercise some measure of control and influence upon the environment. We are to be nonconforming transformers. We are to be different from the world, not in superficial ways, not in perpetuating peculiarities, but in terms of the morals and mores, the standards, concepts, and values.

Henry David Thoreau is well remembered for his words about the man who hears a different drummer. If his step is more measured, it may be because he hears a different drummer. The Christian hears a different drummer. He is walking to a different cadence. He gets his orders from another source. He is not going to

allow money to become his deity. Some men make counterfeit money, but more often money makes counterfeit men. The Christian will not allow the level of his speech, his thought pattern, his attitudes or actions sink to the substandard ones of this world. He has been separated.

III. A SOUL-SAVING LIFE

The Christ-centered life is a "sent" life. Though we are not apostles in the sense that Paul was, we too are sent. Thus, the Christ-centered life is a soul-saving life. Paul was separated unto the gospel.

He tells us what his letter will be about in the salutation. When he uses the word *gospel*, I can already see that that is going to be a major emphasis in this letter. He later says, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek." The word *gospel* means good message, good news, glad tidings. Jesus did not just die, He died *for our sins* (1 Corinthians 15:3). The death of Christ has been put to our account. Paul says, "I have been separated for soul-saving purposes. I have been sent to reach others with this good message."

The late J. W. McGarvey said, as he praised and evaluated Ben Franklin, "He knew the word and treasured it in his heart." I cannot help but believe that that is one of the traits we need. Jeremiah said, "His word was in my heart like a burning fire shut up in my bones. And I grew weary with forebearing and I could not stay" (Jeremiah 20:9; KJV).

Sin is progressive and one sin leads to another. If I do not study the Word, then the lack of the Word within my own heart will lead to the failure to reach others. I will lack sufficient motivation. I will not be equipped to reach out.

McGarvey also made this observation: "Franklin pressed the Word upon the heart of the hearer." I do not believe a passive, unconcerned presentation of the message is worthy of the gospel we preach. I do not see how in personal teaching or in public preaching we can just put it out in a kind of antiseptic air of objectivity and say, "There it is. Take it or leave it." Paul did not have that attitude. He said, "Knowing therefore the fear of the Lord, we persuade men, . . ." (2 Corinthians 5:11). We know something not only of His goodness, but also of His wrath. We

know something not only of His love, but also of His terror. I am not exactly sure what Agrippa meant by his response when he said, "With but little persuasion thou wouldest fain make me a Christian" (Acts 26:28). It could have been an almost caustic response to Paul with perhaps a note of sarcasm. It could be that the phrase "with but little persuasion" or "almost thou persuadest me" (KJV) meant he was almost persuaded to become a Christian. Whatever Agrippa's attitude was, whatever might have been his tone or inflection in what he said, I have no doubt about what Paul was trying to do. He was trying to persuade him. Paul said, "I would to God, that whether with little or with much, not thou only, but also all that hear me this day, might become such as I am, except these bonds."

McGarvey observed that Ben Franklin believed his message. He had a strong conviction about its truth. We are not going to try very hard to save people unless we believe they are lost. We are not going to work very hard about sharing the gospel with others unless we really believe it is God's spiritual dynamite. *Dunamis* is the word Paul uses. We get *dynamite*, *dynamo*, and *dynamic* from that word in Romans 1:16. Unless we really believe the gospel is dynamite which can shatter the guilt of the sin-sick soul, we will not do much with it. Unless we believe it will reach the ego-dominated, pride-filled man and bring him to his knees in trust and penitence, we will not do much sharing of it.

Why was Paul so effective in the soul-saving department? In 2 Corinthians 4:13 Paul quotes from the great Psalm 116. He said, "But having the same spirit of faith, according to that which is written, I believed, and therefore did I speak; we also believe, and therefore also we speak." Paul spoke because he believed. Our failure to speak reflects adversely and seriously upon our profession of faith. James said, "Thou believest that God is one; thou doest well: the demons also

believe, and shudder." You believe the gospel is God's power to save, but are you sharing it with anybody?

A little fellow came home from Bible school. He said, "Mom, my teacher's brother died and she believes she is going to see him again." His mother said, "Well, son, we all believe that." The little boy said, "But, Mom, she *really* believes it." Think about that a minute. We sing, "Oh, will you not tell it today"; we sing, "I love to tell the story because I know 'tis true." But I am afraid our singing sometimes is kind of in the spirit of the mother who said, "Well, son, we all believe that." That little boy had noticed that there was a difference in the way his mom and the teacher believed. We need to really believe the gospel is God's power to save.

CONCLUSION

Take a personal inventory. Ask yourself, "Is my life a serving life, and do I live consciously in the awareness that I am possessed by another?" Ask yourself, "Is my life a separated life? Do people about me see and hear in my speech and attitudes the reflection of the world or the Word? Have I succumbed to the mores of a passion-crazed age?" Ask yourself, "Is my life a saving life?"

J. H. Jowett said, "He that would not bleed will not bless." Paul, who writes so beautifully at the beginning of this Roman letter, later writes, "I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience bearing witness with me in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing pain in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were anathema from Christ for my brethren's sake, my kinsmen according to the flesh" (Romans 9: 1-3). This passage makes it clear that Paul could bless because he bled within his heart for those outside of Christ.

May Romans 1:1 describe our lives in Christ as well as Paul's.