“Taking The First Steps” Memory Verse: Romans 6:4

January 5th, 2025 Scripture Reading: Romans 6:1-11 **Introduction**

Good morning, and peace be with you all. For those of you who do not know me, my name is Rueben Carbajal, and this is actually my first ever sermon – so please bear with me for any hiccups that may come. I was brought up in a household that taught me that there is a God. And I am so grateful to my parents for that lesson. I was told from a young age to not forget about that God. But in all honesty, that was just about the extent of my accountability to be a Christian as it relates to my upbringing. At a young age, younger than I can remember any different, church was optional. Both of my parents stopped attending regularly, so there was no force saying that I ought to go. I was not dragged there, and as a kid with such an option as staying home, it’s almost a no brainer to sleep in on the weekend.

 But alas, I soon grew up, and the Lord pulled on my heart. And He also used many different people in my life, different relatives and loved ones, to convict me of my evil ways. I still recall one of the “aha” moments of my journey. It was through casually reading a bible advocate pamphlet which addressed some questions I had on faith that really made me need to learn more. Fast forward to 2017, at about the age of 16 years old, I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior and got baptized in a gorgeous, tranquil creek.

 As I was preparing for this sermon, I had many different subjects come to mind. It seemed as though I needed to address everything that was on my heart. However, doing so diffuses the depths of analysis and elaboration we can make on any of the subjects, which would not be beneficial for us here today. It is much better, in my opinion, to preach on one main theme and keep the focus central to a single idea, and thus applicable to our own lives. And so today's message is titled taking the first steps.

Two brief points I want to address regarding this title. Firstly, although it says taking the first steps, it’s actually targeted to both new and old Christians, as you will soon hear, one of these steps require repeating daily! Secondly, this title is not speaking to who is doing the initial prompting of “the first steps”— it is speaking to our conscious decision to live following Christ in this life, acknowledging that God is the one who ultimately prompts everything. “Ephesians 2:8 [8] For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” The grace of God works within us to enable our steps toward Him. And so this sermon has four points of action, or four “first steps” to take when trying to follow God, which I have compiled through both studying the scriptures and living my personal testimony. And every Christian’s journey starts with believing.

**1) Believe**

 The fact that you are sitting here in the pews listening to this service shows that you at least acknowledge there is more to this world, there is a higher power, there is indeed a living God. And I would say that you are wise to conclude such a thing. It takes but one glance to see that our entire existence has been orchestrated to the finest degree, whether that be our planet’s alignment in space or our intricate complexities of the human mind and soul. There truly is a creator. However, it is not merely enough to acknowledge God’s existence, or even to just acknowledge that Jesus is in fact the Son of God. Many people will accept that God exists, but they will not choose to follow His teachings, or to keep His commandments. This is the same group of people that are referenced when Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of Heaven. Please turn to Matthew 7:21-23. Jesus says, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’” This passage emphasizes that true faith is about doing God’s will, not just outward appearances of religiosity or works done without genuine relationship with Christ. There will be those who think they are saved who actually are not saved. Let that sink in. There will be those who think they are saved who are actually not saved. So how do I enter into the kingdom of heaven in light of what this passage says?

This was one of the first areas in my personal faith that made me realize I need to take my walk with Jesus seriously. It is NOT enough to just hear about the gospel and proceed to go about my day to day life. To exist in this world in passivity, and only mention my belief in Jesus when it’s convenient or when I’m asked about it, is insufficient… We cannot be lukewarm, passive Christians. The scriptures teach clearly that there will be ”lukewarm Christians” who do not enter the kingdom of heaven. Revelation 3:15-16 reads “I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were [either] cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth.” There will be people who have done works, and even claimed they were doing it for God, who will be rejected by God Himself. Perhaps they truly believed that they were on the right side of the fence. I encourage you to ask yourself— do you believe you’re on the right side of the fence? I know that the people referenced here, the lukewarm Christians crying out to God, truly thought that they were. This line of questioning kindled in me a NEED and yearning to make sure I was not the “self-proclaimed Christian” mentioned here in this passage. I don’t want to be the one who will be denied on that fateful day of Christ’s return.

So we know that a belief in God is not the only element at play here. Even the enemy “believes” that there is a God. This concept is found in James 2:19 “You believe that God is one; you do well. [but] Even the demons believe—and shudder!” This verse highlights that mere intellectual belief in God is insufficient for salvation. Genuine faith involves trust, obedience, and transformation, not just acknowledgment of His existence. I can’t emphasize enough that you need to be actively living, and wrestling in this spiritual warfare, and leading your life daily for and through Christ.

**2) Be Baptized**

And so, a core building block to a Christian’s life is Baptism. Baptism is a subject of much debate—many argue whether or not baptism is needed in order to enter into the gates of heaven. Whether or not it is needed to be considered Christian. There are different understandings and interpretations of how baptism works, what exactly is happening during the baptism, and what exactly it means for a person’s life thereafter the baptism. I believe that these details should be studied and prayed on for each person’s individual clarity, with the discernment of the Holy Spirit, that they may know what they believe and be confident in that belief (relying on the written word of God). If you’d like to discuss more about that, I’d love to help you in your study of the subject at length. But I will leave you with a brief verse to conclude this point – 2 Timothy 2:15: “Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” (KJV). This King James Version really drives home the point of needing to actively read God’s word. It says to study, rightly dividing the word of truth.

 And so in light of my studies – the word baptism in the Bible originates from the Greek word βάπτισμα (baptisma), which is derived from the verb βαπτίζω (baptizō). The direct translation of the word in English means “to immerse, submerge, or dip.” The word literally conveys the idea of full immersion, often in water, and was used in contexts such as washing or ceremonial cleansing. In the New Testament, the word is used to describe the act of being immersed in water as a symbolic representation of repentance, cleansing, and identification with Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection. Baptism emphasizes the physical act of immersion, which is central to its original meaning and practice in biblical times.

And with this understanding of baptism, I believe that baptism is a crucial part of one’s commitment to leading a life for Jesus. Here are a few passages of scripture which address this further. This first one was written as Peter was addressing the crowd at Pentecost, calling them to turn from their sins and publicly affirm their faith through baptism. Acts 2:38 says “And Peter said to them, ‘Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’” This verse highlights the importance of both repentance and baptism as part of the response to the Gospel message. Mark 16:16, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” Romans 6:4: “We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”

So we know that there is an important need to accept and believe in Jesus Christ. We know there is an importance to be baptized in His name. Here’s where I can speak to a personal stumbling block I had which halted me from being baptized for a long time. I knew it was necessary to do so and I knew I wanted to get there, but I also was well aware of my constant stumbling and falling short on the commandments of God. The commandments that are very clearly laid out in scripture. I found myself asking “How can I be baptized when I’m still filled with brokenness and sin?” It seemed hypocritical in my eyes to be able to be baptized, to be able to proclaim a love and following of Jesus Christ, while I couldn’t even obey a simple commandment in His word.

But brothers and sisters this is a lie from the enemy himself. It is a complete perversion of the truth! It is indeed the opposite— we do not first get cleaned in order to come before Jesus. We CAN’T get clean without Jesus, we CAN’T get clean unless we come before Him and ask Him to be our cleanser. God takes our hearts of stone and turns them into a heart of flesh. Ezekiel 36:26 reads “And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.” God is the only one who can change us from our evil ways. As painted in proverbs 26:12 and repeated in 2 Peter 2:22, in our own strength sin will have us crawling back to the same sin over and over again like a dog returns to its vomit. We are too weak to do anything on our own.

I found myself delaying my baptism on account of “getting my life right first.” This life correction would never, ever come to be accomplished on my own. We are born into sin because of the fall of man. Sin entered into the world and we became helplessly bound up and removed from God. This is the reason that Jesus’ sacrifice was required, and it is the reason why His death and resurrection is such good news for us! John 14:6 reads that “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’” Jesus is the reconciliation to God, bridging the relationship that we had lost since the very fall of mankind.

So one day it finally clicked for me that I can’t get myself right before turning to God. All I can do is try my best to obey His call, to obey His commandment. Obey Him by believing in Him, and getting baptized in His name. And so that is what I did. July 30th of 2017, I went out to a creek with a bunch of family and committed my life to Jesus. Funny enough, I was scrolling through some memories on new years eve with my fiancé Emma and we came across my baptism video! I would like to share that clip with you all now. **[PLAY VIDEO].**

If you are here today and find yourself delaying your baptism I urge you to truly examine **A)** your belief in God, and **B)** examine why you have not accepted Him into your life. We know that we need to believe, and we know we need to be baptized if we want a relationship with God as we’ve talked about up to this point— and most importantly, we know what enables us to do these things is a complete and utter reliance on God. This leads us to step 3.

**3) Living Righteously**

John 3:36 reads “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.”

This verse shows us very clearly that there is action involved. We must believe in the Son (proclaimed in action by the baptism) and we also must obey the Son. The verse works both ways, if you don’t obey, you don’t see eternal life. So contrarily the same is applied, if you do obey you are able to find eternal life. As a side note— this is the reason I don’t believe we should just worship God how we see fit. God instructs us to worship Him the way He wants us to worship Him. Through a form if obedience and true submission we display our love to Him by following that way above our own human ways.

Now some find it as an excuse to be able to say “I’ll just believe, and that’s sufficient.” But the Bible is saying differently here. Yes, believing is crucial— but there is more involved. I want to take just a moment to expound on this… a common passage that is referenced when claiming that believing is the only thing a Christian needs to do is found in Acts 16:30–31: “Then he brought them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” But let’s take a look at the entirety of the passage. We see this is the story of a guard asking the question, and it’s asked right after a miracle took place that freed Paul and the prisoners from their cells. The jailer knew if they escaped that he would be executed so he was going to kill himself but Paul stopped him. It is at this time that the jailer asked what he must do to be saved? To which they responded “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved…”. But the story does not end there. Let’s keep reading. Verses 32-34 says “And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.”

So even this passage displays that believing in God is coupled directly with action. We proclaim our belief by living out the actions. This passage went as far as to specify that the baptism happened within the same hour! The two must be present, belief and action (specifically the action of obeying His words).

Matthew 6:33 says “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” Again, in 1 John 3:7, “Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as He is righteous.” We must do our best to live righteously, in accordance with Gods commandments.

But as many of us have come to find in the Christian faith, obeying the commandments of God is much easier said than done. In fact, we CANNOT , no matter how hard we try, we cannot live up to God’s standards on our own. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23). Another place this is found is John 15:5, Jesus says “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” And throughout the entire Old Testament we find a display of how God’s people fall short and need His redeeming. Without God, they are nothing.

**4) Dying Daily**

And so we find ourselves in this apparent cycle. We believe in God, we desire to obey his commandments, but we stumble in our attempts. A cycle of falling short. This, I’ve come to find, is actually a cycle of continual dependency on Jesus Christ. Again I’ll say, this pattern of wanting to live for God but failing to ever succeed on our own is a cycle of continual dependency on Jesus Christ. We are to die daily to ourselves. Die daily to our fleshly desires and sinful human ways so that we may live in the spirit and walk with God! Romans 6:4, a central passage for this sermon reads that “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”

We are weak and broken without Him, but we are saved by Christ’s death and resurrection, which was accepted and proclaimed by being baptized according to His commandment. When we accept Jesus, and have our heart’s turned from stone to flesh, and have the Holy Spirit sent to dwell within us, we are strengthened through Him to get up after our human stumblings. God’s strength is perfected in our weakness.

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 says “[7] So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. [8] Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. [9] But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. [10] For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

This passage is so powerful and could be the source of an entire sermon on its own. There are elements here that can be confusing, but the bottom line is that God is the only way that we can flourish. Here in this passage Paul makes clear that sometimes we are given weakness, sometimes we are given thorns put within us. And we wrestle and even ask God to remove them, but all of these hardships are for us to remember that our strength and sustenance is found only in Christ. Staying close by, in1 Corinthians 15:31, the Apostle Paul writes: “I protest by your rejoicing which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily.”

Paul refers to the daily surrender of his own desires, ego, and even physical safety for the sake of the Gospel. This “dying” can be understood spiritually as a commitment to putting aside the self to live fully for Christ. It reflects humility, sacrifice, and continual renewal in faith.

**Conclusion**

I encourage you to truly sit down and examine where you are at with your relationship with God. Are you still struggling to fully believe there is a creator? Do you believe there is a creator but delay wanting to take action and proclaim your relationship with Him? Have you fallen numb to the world and it’s evil ways? Have you become accustomed to live passively instead of fighting to live righteously? Do you die daily, as is the only way to truly live in Christ? Galatians 2:20: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” Luke 9:23: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”

 Brothers and sisters may we never grow stagnant in our personal walk with Jesus Christ. Let us deny ourselves, take up our crosses daily and follow Jesus! Praise be to God! Amen.