

## ***Club Rules*** *Romans 3: 21-25*

**First Presbyterian Church  
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Through the years, I've had the privilege of being part of many boards and organizations, such as the Christian Outreach Center or the Dunham School Board of Trustees. But did you know I spent a term as an officer of a yacht club? It's true. I was the Commodore of the Brevard Yacht Club. I still have my anchor cap and polo shirt with a logo. Now, it's true this was not one of the great yacht clubs in Brevard County, Florida, on the gold coast near Cocoa Beach. No, it's the Brevard Yacht Club in Brevard, North Carolina. Our club currently has two vessels. A paddleboat and a yellow rubber raft. Club membership is simple but exclusive: you have to paddle out on our tiny pond and drink a beverage with me. After that, you're in for life. Sadly, since the rubber raft developed leaks, club activities have been drastically curtailed. We're having a hard time getting new members. My term as Commodore has been suspended for now. But if we ever get some decent raft patches, I have high hopes for a revival.

Membership has been on my mind recently. Last week, we received 17 confirmation students into active membership in our church. They prepared since August to stand before the elders, their families and guests and make a public profession of faith in Jesus Christ. They're now officially part of First Presbyterian Church. But what exactly does *membership* really mean? What does it do for you? What does it ask from you? Does membership in the church matter any more than membership in the Brevard Yacht Club? Membership in First Presbyterian Church revolves around answering yes to five important questions. This morning I'd like to walk you through these membership questions of our church. We'll discuss their Biblical basis as we walk along what's come to be called the Roman Road of Salvation. This is a series of great lines from Paul's letter to the Roman Christians. I hope that we will see what an energizing, unifying, clarifying effect these have on our life together.

When we go over these questions in classes, I almost always begin with a disclaimer. The first question is a negative one. It slaps you in the face like a bucket of cold water. Here it is:

*Do you acknowledge yourselves to be sinners in the sight of God and without hope for your salvation, except in his saving mercy?*

In terms of modern marketing, Christianity seems ridiculous. What kind of a crowd will you draw by asking people to admit they are hopeless? Who will respond if you lead off with asking people to say that they are not right with God?

The apostle Paul didn't pull any punches as he explained the faith to the people in Rome. He rips it right out in chapter 1. "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them.... [But] although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened" (Rom. 1: 18-21). How could you ever get an audience for that kind of talk? Christians have an unflinching realism about the human condition. We are not all right. We know in our bones there is a God, but we do not want to submit to this God. So we fail to thank God for our lives or offer our lives for him to direct. And that has made us plumb stupid. We're a mess.

Romans 3:23 says all that in one sentence, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." And Romans 6:23 nails it home, "For the wages of sin is death." Bang. Mike drop. I am not OK. I have some desperate problems. I have tried to live my life my way and it hasn't worked. In fact, I am cut off from the God who made me, and I realize I am by nature under his wrath. I'm a sinner. Not just a mistake maker. I am a sinner without hope unless God is merciful to me.

That sounds at first like such a downer. But I find it energizing. We gather here as the people who have stopped pretending. I'm not OK. I cannot make my life work. I could not survive an examination by God of what I've done with the life he gave me. I have a high propensity to mess up everything. I've done damage and there's blood on my hands. Left to myself, I am without hope. I've come to the end of myself. So I can stop pretending. Stop faking. Stop posturing. Stop writing my resume. Stop rehearsing my speeches. Stop defending myself. We can breathe easy here. No more pretense. I am a sinner without hope unless God turns out to be merciful.

So there comes the second question, the glorious, relieving, life-giving question.

*Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Savior of sinners, and do you receive and depend on him alone for your salvation as he is offered in the gospel?*

I am hapless and hopeless in myself. But One has come to save me. That One is Jesus. He is Savior and he is Lord. He is the Son of God who came to us as a man to take our sins and give us his rightness with God.

So let's hear the second half of the Romans passages:

The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 6:23). All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Rom. 3:23-24).

We are the fellowship of those who have freely admitted that we cannot solve our own lives. We cannot endure the holiness of God in our own merits. But we have discovered that we are not on our own. God is merciful. And he has sent a savior. I'm a sinner. But Jesus is the savior of sinners. I rely on him. I accept the gift that Jesus' faithfulness to God is given to me as a gift. He took my record of messing up to the cross. And now I get a new record. Jesus' rightness with God is given to me. I also get a new heart. I get his Spirit living inside my life, joining me to him and changing everything. So Paul would say, "For the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (Rom. 5: 5).

This is good news! It's the Gospel. And as Paul said, the gospel is the power of God unto salvation to all who believe (Rom. 1:18). This news calls me to faith. It makes me want to sing in my heart and sing with my lips. Jesus is the savior of sinners, even this sinner, and he gives me new life. Paul would say it so clearly in Romans 10: 9, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." There's an internal act of trust: I believe in the story of Jesus the man who died and got up, the God who was crucified and then rose. And there's an external act of faith: I speak it aloud before others. Jesus is Lord. He rules. He rules the world and he rules me, and I submit to that rule. That's who I am.

The third membership question flows directly from this faith. It's a declaration of commitment to the Christ who saves:

*Do you now promise and resolve, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as followers of Christ?*

In other words, do you commit your life to Jesus Christ your Savior and Lord? We pledge ourselves to a life of discipleship: the day by day following of Christ that

forms us over a lifetime into being like Jesus. This is the question answered by the old camp song, “I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back. No turning back.”

Don’t you think it’s interesting that the first three questions of membership in our church have nothing to do with our church itself? I think that’s beautiful. We are not interested in our branch of this club getting more people paying dues. We’re not about an earthly kingdom. We want people to be joined to Jesus. We want people to pass from death to life. From sin to forgiveness. From being lost to found. From living for themselves to living for Jesus. These first three questions are universal: they form the core of what Christians in all times and places have always held most dear. We are a multi-cultural, multi-generational, millennia spanning, worldwide fellowship of people who are united to each other because each of us is united to Jesus. We are bonded by a common need, a common hope and a common purpose: I am a sinner saved by Jesus who has given my life to follow him.

In Romans 12: 1-2, Paul summed up a life of discipleship this way: “Present your bodies to God as a living sacrifice...do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” I am not my own. I do not belong to this world. I have given my life to Christ.

After these three foundational questions, we at last turn to this particular church. We ask people if they would like to live out following Jesus by making a commitment to do that with this group of people in this part of the world.

*Do you promise to serve Christ in his Church by supporting and participating with **this** congregation in its service of God and its ministry to others to the best of your ability?*

Paul wrote that “we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another” (Rom.12: 5). The visible church of Jesus Christ is over 2 billion people currently living all over the world. But we each pursue Christ by giving ourselves to love and serve with a local congregation. You’ve already answered that you are a sinner saved by grace who’s given your life to Jesus. Now we just want to know if you want to live that out here, with us.

The fifth question is just an extension of the last one. We want to know if you’re willing to trust yourself to the leaders of this church and the form of ordering our lives that makes us Presbyterian:

*Do you submit yourself to the government and discipline of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church and to the spiritual oversight of this Church Session, and do you promise to promote the unity, purity and peace of the Church?*

This is what Paul is after when he prays for the Romans, “May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Rom. 15: 5-7).

It’s impossible to glorify God in isolation from others. He made us for community. He calls us to community. He calls us to a particular, committed community so that each local congregation can join with the universal church in harmonious praise. It’s right here, on the ground, in all the mess, that we live out following Jesus together—that connects us to the worldwide church. And to our worldwide mission. When we love, steadily and determinedly through the years, the world sees the heart of the God of grace.

That’s what we form around. It’s so encouraging to me to realize that we gather as a community of people who have made a public commitment to these core truths. We know the deepest secret about each other’s lives. You’re a sinner. Saved by the grace of Christ. What he has done for you is the truest thing about you. Together we have said to the world, “I belong to Jesus Christ. I have committed myself to serve him, to follow him and to share him with the world. That’s who I am in the core.” This shared core is what creates energy and unity in the church.

It works like this for me: I fall on my face before the cross of Christ. The truth of my sinfulness, my damaged soul and ruinous life drives me down. Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling. I fall on my face at first in despair over my unworthiness. Then I stay on my face in gratitude for his mercy. I bow in awe at his forgiveness and the price he paid to save me. And then an odd thing happens. On my face, I turn my head a little this way, and a little that way. And I see you. On your face too. Broken. Restored. Confessing. Forgiven. Dying. Made alive. And I feel our bond. The blood bond of the blood we share: the blood of the cross spilled to forgive us. The blood of the resurrected Jesus raised to give us eternal life. And we rise in shared blood to the shared mission of the church: to declare that the gospel is the power of God for salvation to all who believe.

That's the heartbeat of our life together. Stark realism. Soaring hope. Energized mission. Is that what you want? In a moment, I'm going to invite all of us to stand and answer as one the membership questions around which our church forms. Let's thunder out our heartfelt reply of Yes, yes, a thousand times Yes!