



Let's continue our time of worship by turning to Romans 1. We began our study of this New Testament book last week. First, we considered ten reasons why we should study Romans. Next, we explored the background of this book, which is actually a letter Paul wrote to believers in Rome near the end of his third missionary journey, around A.D. 57. Then we studied Paul's greeting in the opening paragraph, verses 1-7.

We'll read them again for the sake of review as well as to capture the flow of the text and the fervor of Paul's spirit as he writes to the church. Paul's words to them nearly 2,000 years ago are God's words to us today. So let's listen carefully to Romans 1:1-15:

¹ Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, ² which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, ³ concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh ⁴ and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, ⁵ through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, ⁶ including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,

⁷ To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁸ First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. ⁹ For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you ¹⁰ always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. ¹¹ For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— ¹² that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. ¹³ I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. ¹⁴ I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. ¹⁵ So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

God's word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Ps. 119:105). Where he leads, let us follow. The title of today's sermon is:

Gospel Identity and Relationships
Part Two

Romans 1:8-15

Paul introduces himself as “a servant of Jesus Christ” who has been “called” by God. Those receiving Paul’s letter are also “loved by God and called to be saints.” This is their *gospel identity*. God has called every believer to serve his Son, Jesus Christ. Paul points out in verses 1-7d that this is a *high* calling, it is a *holy* calling, and it is a *happy* calling.

A few years ago our son Ethan misplaced his wallet at work and thought it was lost. He came home and said, “I have to call the bank right away, because someone might try to steal my personality.” We said, “You mean your *identity*?” “Oh, yeah, my identity.”

That’s what Satan tries to do. He knows he can’t steal our salvation, because we are sealed by the Holy Spirit of God, and no one can snatch us out of his hand (John 10:27-30). But Satan tries to get us to lose a sense of our gospel identity by finding our identity in other things – whether it be our business, our education, our family, or any number of other things. That’s why Scripture says, “Give no opportunity to the devil” (Eph. 4:27).

A sure sign that you’ve lost a sense of your calling is that you don’t relate to other Christians as you should. But if you’re mindful of your calling as “a servant of Christ,” then your relationships within the church will flourish. That’s because . . .

***The gospel of Christ
binds us together.***

I want you to see how this truth is exemplified in Paul’s relationship with the believers in Rome. He says four things about himself in relation to them that should speak volumes to us today. I’ve condensed Paul’s statements for the sake of creating a simple outline, but we’ll consider the full scope of his remarks in verses 8-15. “First,” he says,

“I thank my God for you.”

The full statement appears in verse 8: “First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you.” Every part of this verse is important. Notice, first, that Paul refers to God as “*my* God.” God was not a distant Deity to Paul; he was his Father in heaven. Paul enjoyed a personal relationship with God, and his language of intimacy reflects that – much like David’s opening prayer in Psalm 18: “I love you, LORD; you are my strength. The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my savior” (vv. 1-2a NLT). *Is he yours?*

The reason Paul could refer to God as “my God” is found in the very next phrase: “through Jesus Christ.” Jesus Christ was Paul’s connection to God the Father. Jesus said in John 14:6, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Our sin created a barrier between us and God. But Jesus broke down that barrier for all who would trust in him for salvation. Jesus reconciled us to God by dying on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin. Three days later he rose from the grave. After appearing to hundreds of eye-witnesses and commanding his followers to spread the Good News of salvation for all who would believe in him, Jesus ascended to the right hand of God where he always lives to make intercession for us (Heb. 7:25).

Because God’s grace comes to us through Christ, our gratitude goes to God through Christ. Thus, the author of Hebrews says, “Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name” (Heb. 13:15).

Our sacrifice of praise includes thanking God for our fellow believers. That's why Paul says, "First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for *all of you*." No exceptions. In fact, Paul expresses such thanks in *all* his letters to *all* the churches, except in his letter to the Galatians. In their case, Paul was shocked at how quickly they were turning away from God to a false gospel. So he wasted no time in warning them. But in all his other letters to the churches, Paul begins by thanking God for them.

- He thanked God for giving them his grace in Christ (1 Cor. 1:4).
- He thanked God for their spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 1:5).
- He thanked God for their faith in Christ and their love for one another (Col. 1:3-4; Eph. 1:15-16; 2 Thess. 1:3).
- He thanked God for their partnership in the gospel – for standing with Paul in declaring it and defending it (Phil. 1:3-7).
- He thanked God for their work produced by faith, their labor motivated by love, and their endurance inspired by hope in the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess. 1:2-3).

If you read Paul's letters to these churches, you'll see that they were far from perfect. But Paul still thanked God for them. Paul told the Romans, "First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, *because your faith is proclaimed in all the world*." The Greek word "proclaimed" (*katangelló*) can also be translated as "celebrated."

We know from Acts 18:2 and other historical records that in A.D. 49, Emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome. Among them were Aquila and Priscilla, whom Paul met in Corinth. Other Jewish Christians scattered throughout the Empire during this time. As Paul planted churches "from Jerusalem ... to Illyricum" (Rom. 15:19), these assemblies celebrated the faith of the Roman believers, some of whom they met personally.

In A.D. 54, five years after issuing the edict, Claudius died. So Jews began migrating back to Rome. By the time Paul wrote his letter in A.D. 57, a good number of the Jewish Christians had returned, including Aquila and Priscilla, whom Paul greets by name near the end of his letter (Rom. 16:3).

Paul thanked God for this church. In a letter to another church, Paul wrote,

"We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right...."

- 2 Thessalonians 1:3

Thanking God for our brothers and sisters in Christ is the *right* thing to do, and it is the *first* thing we ought to do.

Application: Is that what you do? The first thing our flesh wants to do – the part of us that goes against the Holy Spirit – is to criticize our fellow Christians and complain about them. But the *right* thing to do and the *first* thing to do, Paul says, is to *thank God* for them. Those who are loved by God and called to be saints should be precious to us.

***The gospel of Christ
binds us together.***

We see this not only in Paul's first statement, "I thank my God for you," but also in his second statement:

"I constantly pray for you."

Paul's full statement appears in verses 9-10: "For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers...." Do you see how the gospel energized Paul's service to God, including his prayer life? Not only did Paul have a good grasp of the gospel, but the gospel had a good grasp on Paul. It fueled his love for God's people. Paul was constantly praying for them.

In Ephesians 6:18, the Holy Spirit tells us through Paul,

"Pray in the spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people."

- Ephesians 6:18 NIV

If you want to pray well for God's people, follow the pattern of Paul's prayers recorded in his New Testament letters, such as Ephesians 1 and 3, Philippians 1, and Colossians 1. Meditate on these passages. Commit them to memory if you can. There's nothing more powerful than praying God's own words back to him.

Paul not only prayed for God's people, but he told them so, saying, "God is my witness." Since Paul is making a claim about his own private prayer life, only he and God really know whether he's telling the truth. So, Paul acknowledges his accountability to God in telling these believers that he's praying for them.

He also shares the specific ways in which he is praying for them. Paul's prayer for the Philippians is a great example of this. He tells the believers that he thanks God for their fellowship in the gospel, for God's continuing work of grace in their lives, and for standing with Paul in declaring and defending the gospel. He prays that their love will flourish – not in a merely sentimental way but in a scriptural way, through a right understanding of God's word. This is so that their lives and relationships will display the fruit of righteousness that is produced by Jesus Christ "to the glory and praise of God" (Phil. 1:11).

Application: Imagine how enriched our relationships would become if we prayed for one another in this way! And not just for our closest circle of friends, but for *everyone* in church family. I have found that the best way to do this is to pray through a portion of our membership directory each day. An updated copy of our Directory will be emailed to all of our church members this week. Make good use of it by praying for one another.

Another way to do this is to go to the "Church Center app" and click "Directory" on the right side of the menu at the bottom, and you'll get a list of all the members who have granted permission to publish their profile. By the way, if you have not granted permission to publish your profile, please be sure to do that if you would like other church members to pray for you and be able to contact you. This is something you must do. We cannot do it for you. If you have any questions, please contact Hannah Bell in the church office, and she will be happy to assist you.

Paul prayed all kinds of requests for God's people. But he had a specific request when it came to the believers in Rome. He wrote, "I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at least succeed in coming to you." Paul's words suggest that he had been trying to get to Rome but so far had been unsuccessful. Perhaps this was due to the edict by Claudius. But now that Claudius was dead and Jews were returning to Rome, maybe Paul could finally get there too.

Whatever the case, Paul prays that this would happen "somehow" (any way possible) "by God's will" (providential plan). James tells us not to boast or be presumptuous about our plans for the future, because we don't know what tomorrow will bring. "Instead," James says, "you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that'" (James 4:15). That's what Paul does here. He prays, "Lord, if it is your will, please find a way."

It's a good habit to follow up our stated plans with the words "God willing." It reminds us and others that our lives are in the Lord's hands, and we commit all our plans to him.

Paul's prayer reflected the desire of his heart – a craving that should characterize every Christian. This leads us to Paul's next statement:

"I long to see you."

In verse 11, Paul expresses the motivation behind his prayer to come to them, saying, "For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you – that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine."

Paul says, "I long to see you." The Greek word for "long" is *epipotheó*. It's the same word used in 1 Peter 2:2, which says, "Like newborn infants, *crave* [*epipotheó*] the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow up into your salvation." Think of how a newborn baby craves her mother's milk. She cries out for this nourishment. That's how we are to crave God's word, and that is how we are to crave fellowship with God's people.

This word *epipotheó* also appears in 2 Corinthians 5, a passage I preached on two days ago at Carol Gerlach's memorial service. In that passage, Paul compares our earthly bodies to a tent, a temporary dwelling that wears out and is eventually taken down. Paul says, "in this tent we groan, longing [*epipotheó*] to put on our heavenly dwelling" (2 Cor. 5:2). As Christians, we long for Jesus to return and clothe us with resurrected bodies that will never get sick, grow old and die. Just as we long for our resurrected bodies, so we are to long for the body of Christ, the church. We should crave Christian fellowship.

Is this longing evident in your life? Paul told the believers in Rome, "I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you" (v. 11). Paul wanted to see God's people so that he could *strengthen* them. We're not sure what spiritual gift he was referring to, although the text would seem to indicate that it was Paul's preaching of the gospel. The gospel is the power of God in action. It saves sinners and it strengthens saints. As Paul preached the gospel, more believers would be added to the church, and the believers that were already there would be built up in the Lord.

Did you know that the Spirit of God has blessed every single believer with at least one spiritual gift for the building up of the church? Paul lists some of these gifts in chapter 12 as well as 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4. The apostle Peter says in his first epistle,

Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

- 1 Peter 4:10-11

Paul longed to be with the church, so that he could be a blessing to the body of Christ. At the same time, he didn't want them to get the impression that he thought of himself as "God's gift to the church," as if this were a one-way blessing. Paul is quick to clarify this in verse 12, saying, "that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine." Christian encouragement flows in both directions. That's why Scripture tells us to "encourage and build up one another" (1 Thess. 5:11).

Paul continues in verse 13, saying, "I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you, as well as among the rest of the Gentiles." In this context the term "brothers" (*adelphoi*) refers to his brothers *and sisters* in Christ, all the members of God's family. One commentator points out, "This is by far Paul's favorite designation of fellow Christians (127 times in his letters)."¹ With this kinship kind of language, Paul "both assumes and promotes the relationship" between him-self and his readers, "as one between equal siblings who share a sense of affection, , mutual responsibility, and solidarity."²

Paul wants his brothers and sisters in Christ to know that he had "intended to come to [them]." The word "intended" [*protithēmi*] means to determine, to plan beforehand. Paul not only *prayed* that he could be with the church, he *planned* to make it happen. He was determined to do it. The problem was not lack of desire or effort, but a lack of opportunity.

Application: Is this the case with you? I want to speak specifically to those who are watching online. Some of you may be legitimately hindered from coming to church. You truly wish that you could be here. You've been praying for it and planning to do it, but circumstances have legitimately prevented you from doing it. But my guess is that's not the case for some of you. There's a reason why Scripture exhorts us not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together – that is, physically gathering with God's people. It's because we are prone to get spiritually sluggish and lazy. It's easier for us to sleep in, get up at our leisure, stay in our PJ's and grab a cup of coffee as we tune into the Livestream. Some of you are *watching* us when you ought to be *with* us. You have grown spiritually lazy, and you know it. If that is the case with you, own up to it and determine that with God's help, you will gather with God's people from now on. I can tell you this: We long to see you, that we might be mutually encouraged by each other's faith and enjoy the spiritual harvest that God is producing among us!

¹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, second edition, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, gen. ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), p. 64.

² D. G. Horrell, "From ἀδελφοί to οἶκος θεοῦ: Social Transformation in Pauline Christianity." *Journal of Biblical Literature*, no. 210 (2001), pp. 293-311. Cited by Moo, 64.

Paul's desire to go to Rome was rooted in a sense of duty. In verse 14 he writes, "I am under obligation [lit. "I am debtor"] both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish." How could he not share the blessings of the gospel with others, in light of God's mercies toward him? "His debt was to God, but his payment was to people."³

Paul emphasizes that his gospel indebtedness was owed to *everyone everywhere*. To prove his point, he mentions two pairs of people: "Greeks and barbarians," along with "the wise and the foolish."

- The "Greeks" were the cultured people, who typically spoke the Greek language and followed the Greco-Roman way of life. "Barbarian" is an onomatopoeic word – a word that sounds like what it means, such as the "boom" of a firework, or the ding-dong of a doorbell. The Greeks used the word "barbaros" to mock the way that "uncultured" languages sounded in their ears (bar-bar). They looked down on such people and saw them as inferior. Paul saw himself as indebted to all people, whether they were considered "cultured" or "uncultured."
- The second pair that Paul mentions, "the wise and the foolish," may be essentially the same classification as the first pair, but from a different perspective. Or he may be referring to people who, regardless of their culture, pride themselves on their intellect versus those who do not. Later on in this same chapter, in Romans 1:22, Paul talks about how people who claimed to be wise became fools because despite what they knew about God, they didn't honor him as God or give thanks to him. "As a result, their minds became dark and confused" (Rom. 1:21b NLT).

Rome, like America, was a melting pot for all sorts of people: educated and uneducated, cultured and uncultured, upper class and lower class, natives and foreigners. Paul saw himself as a debtor to all humanity. Regardless of how humans classify one another, Paul knew that there was only one classification that mattered: the saints and the aint's.

Even Christians can be tempted to classify people the way the world does instead of the way God does. We can even look down on certain people and see ourselves as superior to them. When that happens, we've lost a sense of our gospel identity. Because of God's love for us, we are debtors to all people everywhere. It is our duty to love them.

This takes us to Paul's fourth and final statement, which appears in verse 16:

"I am eager to preach the gospel to you."

The full statement appears in verse 16: "So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome." I came across one commentator who wrote that Paul wasn't referring to the believers in Rome, "as this verse might seem to suggest, for they had already responded to the [gospel.]"⁴ But I think that's exactly to whom Paul is referring, because he is writing to the church. That's who the "you" in verse 16 refers to.

³ R. Kent Hughes, *Romans: Righteousness from Heaven*. Preaching the Word, edited by R. Kent Hughes (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), p. 26.

⁴ William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary*, edited by Art Farstad (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), p. 1677.

Non-Christians aren't the only ones who need to hear the gospel. Believers do too. We need the gospel preached to us regularly and ever more deeply so that we can continue to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18).⁵

That's why we gather each Lord's Day – to preach the gospel to ourselves. ***The gospel binds us together*** "so that with one mind and one voice [we] may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 15:6).

⁵ As Colin G. Kruse points out, Paul's "exposition of the gospel would enhance the existing faith of his audience." *Paul's Letter to the Romans*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary, gen. ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), p. 66.