

A Christ-like Heart for the Church

Romans 1:8–12

Romans 1:8–12 (ESV) — **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.

INTRODUCTION

1. **Our heart reveals who we truly are: Proverbs 27:19** says: “As water reflects the face, so the heart reflects the person”.
 - a. Our heart is revealed not in times of peace but in times of difficulty.
 - i. In times of peace, it is easy to speak; in times of adversity, it is easier to remain silent.
 - ii. In times of peace, it is easy to say what we should do; in times of adversity, it is easier to remain passive.
 - iii. Do you want to see the true character of a man? Observe carefully what he does and does not do in times of difficulty.
 - b. We should be fearful of our hearts:
 - i. **Jeremiah 17:9 (NKJV)** — 9 “The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked; Who can know it?”
 - ii. **Ecclesiastes 9:3 (CSB)** — 3: “...the hearts of people are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live...”
 1. **Our heart is sinful:** Our heart is full of sin; there is nothing we can do. Sin is within us, which is why we are full of sin. This sin has the power to subjugate us to evil and the ability to lead us to death.
 2. **Our heart is self-centred:** Our heart naturally enthrones us as kings and lords, strongly desiring that all satisfaction, all honour, and all glory be given to ourselves. Our heart fervently demands that everyone else submit to our desires and quickly come to serve our purposes.
 3. **Our hearts hate God:** And not only that, but our hearts also hate God. How can a sinful heart be in the presence of God and rejoice in the person of God? How can a self-centred heart be in God's presence and long for God's worship? It simply cannot. That is why the sinful heart and the self-centred heart hate the presence of God. They run from God, insult God, blaspheme God, invent false gods to replace the true God, and create images of God to replace the true God because the natural heart hates God.

2. Someone may say, yes, that is why we need a new heart. No! We do not need only a new heart; we need the heart of Christ!

- a. If miraculously, God was to come and completely cleanse all iniquity, all injustice, and all sin from our hearts, and we were left with the same heart that Adam had in the Garden, that heart would still be prone to sin and likely sin again. Our solution is not to have a new heart but to have the heart of Christ Jesus. Christ Jesus the Lord and King, the only one who has been able to establish a new creation, a new creation that is not better than the old one because it is new, but a new creation that is better because it is under His lordship. God Himself is the only one who can contain the vulnerability of creatures to sin. He came to this world and fulfilled all that the Father required of Him. Through His death on the cross and His resurrection, He conquered death. After ascending to heaven and sitting at the right hand of God, He sent His Spirit and now reigns in His Kingdom. This divine intervention replaced the natural human vulnerability to sin with the divine righteousness found in Christ Jesus. Only for this reason will there be no more sin when we are in the new heavens and the new earth. This is because the new creation is the creation of Christ, who has already conquered sin. So now, before that happens, all who have faith in Christ Jesus have the glorious promise, not that their hearts will only be made new, but that their hearts will be changed to the heart of Christ Jesus. We need not just to be cleansed from sin; we need to have the heart of Christ. And this can only be achieved through the glorious Gospel of God in the person of Christ Jesus. It is the Gospel, which is the power of God for salvation, that alone can radically transform man's self-centred, sinful, and God-hating heart into the heart of Christ.

3. That is exactly what happened to the Apostle Paul. The Gospel and the revelation of Christ transformed his heart.

- a. Once consumed by sin, anger, and hostility towards Christians, Paul now had a heart overflowing with love for the church. Previously, as a vehement opponent of Christ, he held disdain for God and anything connected to the true God. Now, Christ was the centre of his existence; God had become the focal point of his life. He was willing to dedicate his entire life to God. The Gospel had not only changed Paul; it had given him a new heart that beat with the very heart of Christ Jesus. This remarkable miracle was a testament to God's glory and divine mercy in Paul's life. The one who had once been a sinner had now become a devoted servant, and the former hater had become an ardent church lover.

4. The heart of Paul in the text:

- a. I want us to observe the characteristics of Paul's heart for the church, which, as I have said, are the characteristics of Christ's heart for His beloved church. I want us, my dear brothers and sisters, to study three characteristics of Paul's heart for the church. In verse 8, we see that Paul's heart is a heart that is thankful for the church. In verses 9 and 10, we see that Paul's heart is a heart that prays for the church. And finally, in verses 11 and 12, we see that Paul's heart is a heart that desires to serve the church. Thankfulness, prayer,

and a desire for service are the three characteristics I want us to see in Paul's Christ-like heart.

SERMON: A Christ-like Heart For The Church

1. A Christ-like heart is thankful for the church.

- a. **Text:** Romans 1:8 (ESV) — 8 First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you because your faith is proclaimed in all the world.
- b. **Explanation:** The theme of Thankfulness is a very important topic in the theology of the Apostle Paul. He mentions it approximately 50 times in his writings, making him the Christian author with the most emphasis on Thankfulness. It is so important to Paul that in **1 Thessalonians 5:18**, he says: in everything, give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.
- c. **Text:**
 - i. Here, we can see the Apostle speaking about and experiencing thankfulness. Of all the things he could mention, the Apostle begins with gratitude, saying, "First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ." The heart of the Apostle is a heart that is thankful to God for the church in Rome and specifically for the work of faith of the Romans that was known throughout the whole world.
 - ii. **The whole World:** When the Apostle speaks of 'the whole world,' he does not literally mean every nation in the world. Rather, in the Apostle's vocabulary, this refers to the entire known world in which the Gospel had been proclaimed and in which churches had been planted. These churches had received reports and were aware of the faith of the Christians in Rome, and this report had reached the ears of the Apostle Paul. At least in this, brothers and sisters, we can see how the churches and the Christian world in the times of the Apostle Paul were not only interested in the faithfulness of their own local church but also had a vision that transcended their local church. They were interested in reports of the faithfulness of other churches in different parts of the world. Therefore, the Apostle's heart was filled with gratitude to his God.
 - iii. **Genuine selfless gratitude:** Now, let's consider this: as an Apostle, his role was the proclamation of the Gospel to the Gentiles, the establishment of churches in different nations, and the spread of Christ's name through the preaching of the Gospel. In a sense, the success of the Apostle's ministry was measured by things like the establishment of churches that he planted, the spread of the Gospel that he preached, the missionary journeys that he started, the men he disciplined, or the people converted under his preaching. However, in the case of the Romans, we see something interesting. I think we have an insight into what a Christ-like heart feels: genuine selfless

gratitude. He is thankful not for what he has accomplished through his ministry but because of what God has accomplished through the proclamation of the Gospel. The Romans were not a church he had planted, nor one he had started directly or indirectly. As far as is known, Paul's apostolic efforts had no influence on the initiation or establishment of the Roman church. In short, this Apostle to the Gentiles had no vested interest or reason to be concerned with the Romans, yet he is thankful to God for them.

- iv. **Intimate, christ-centred thankfulness:** As the Apostle says, this is a gratitude to His God that can only happen "through Jesus Christ". How can a heart not impacted by the love of Christ be thankful for others whom we do not know? How can the heart of a person dead in their sins be grateful for the salvation of people living far away? This is simply not natural to our hearts. Being thankful to God for the achievements of the Gospel is solely a result of Christ's work in that person's heart.
- v. **The heart of the proud cannot give thanks to God:** In fact, it is very interesting how the Apostle, after he has manifested his personal gratitude here, will give us, later in this chapter, a glimpse into the heart of the ungrateful. In verse 21, speaking of those who reject God, he says they did not thank God. The verse states, "For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools." The heart of the proud cannot give thanks to God. And perhaps you might say, 'Yes, but the text here refers to the lost who have rejected God and are therefore proud.' To that, I ask you, dear brothers, will you claim that there is no manifestation of pride in your hearts? Do not be deceived; the heart of the proud cannot give thanks to God. And specifically, in the case of verse 8, the heart of the proud christian cannot give thanks to God for the church. A person's heart hardened by the undercurrents of pride cannot praise God in gratitude. The heart of a person who is secretly hardened by pride cannot truly be impacted in such a way that it holds genuine gratitude for what the Gospel has achieved. Such a person's heart can only be satisfied with their achievements. The heart of the proud can only express gratitude when the results are directly or indirectly linked to their own efforts. The proud heart sees itself as the centre of God's Gospel work and cannot rejoice unless it is the reason and focus of the Gospel's accomplishments.

d. Application:

- i. Are you thankful to God, through the Lord Jesus Christ, for the work of faith that the Spirit has accomplished in your brothers and sisters?
- ii. Or are you filled with envy, resentment, frustration, impatience with your brothers and sisters, and unable to see any work of grace in those whom the blood of Christ has bought?

- iii. Brother and sister, if this is your case, I implore you to come to terms with Christ, repent of this sin, and ask for forgiveness. Who are you to judge the work of Christ? Who are you to dismiss the work of the Spirit? The bride of Christ is certainly not perfect; the bride of Christ has certainly not been fully adorned, but Christ loves the bride of Christ. And one day, Christ will come to gather His sheep, calling them from all places. On that day, if your heart continues with your elevated pride that does not allow you to thank God for the work of the Spirit in your brothers and sisters, you will certainly hear from the voice of the one you call Lord, "Depart from me, you worker of iniquity." Many will say on that day, "Surely the Lord is pleased with me, surely I am not like these other Christians, surely I am better than these other Christians, why would I not enter into the eternal joy of my Lord? I will be the first, I will be the best, I am the role model." Dear brother and sister, let not that day come without you having reconciled with God because he who loves Christ loves His church. He who loves the church is thankful to God through Christ Jesus for the work that the Spirit does in the brothers and sisters, from the simplest to the most exalted, from the poorest to the richest. Let our hearts, brethren, not be filled with pride that prevents us from giving thanks to God for one another, but like Paul, be filled with the love of Christ, that is, love for the church.

2. A Christ-like heart prays for the church.

- a. Text: **Romans 1:9–10 (ESV) — 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.
- b. **Explanation:** Just like the theme of thankfulness, the theme of intercession for the church is very important in Paul's theology. About four or five times, the Apostle directly mentions his prayers for the churches he ministered to. The Romans, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians received in their letters the apostolic confession that they had been included in Paul's prayers. Prayer was very important to Paul, both the prayers he offered for the churches and the prayers he requested the churches to make for his ministry. Despite being an apostle called by the Lord Jesus Christ for the ministry to the Gentiles, Paul knew that his ministry depended on prayer. The Apostle often asked the churches to pray for the clear and bold preaching of the Word and opportunities in his missionary journeys. He understood that the church's mission and her building up depended on prayer, so when he confesses his service to God here, he does it not as a slave but as a soldier. He says, "As a fervent soldier of Christ, I have been working for you; that is, I have been praying for you".
- c. Text:
 - i. **The prayer of a faithful soldier of Christ:**
 1. **A faithful heart, God as his witness:** The Apostle says, "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". When the Apostle says, "whom I serve with my spirit," he is referring to his selfless service to God. The Apostle was a devoted soldier of Jesus Christ, and God was his witness. Part of this service was intercession for the churches. This statement might seem like a boastful comment. The Bible tells us to pray in secret, but the Apostle makes his prayers known. These expressions would only be sinful if they were made with a heart of pride, but this is not the case with Paul. This is the confession of a faithful soldier of Jesus Christ who knows that prayer is fundamental for the edification even of those he has not seen face to face. The Apostle didn't need to be with them; what was necessary was for God to be with them. The Apostle knew that God's presence with the Romans did not depend exclusively on his face-to-face ministry but more fundamentally and primarily on his prayers. Therefore, the Apostle prayed diligently for the Romans.

- 2. A faithful report, he wanted them to know he had been praying for them:** The Apostle wants the Romans to know about his faithful prayers for them, and this, brothers and sisters, is because knowing that someone else is praying for us should give us a sense of peace and comfort. It reassures us that God's throne is constantly being approached with prayers on our behalf. How many times in the difficulties of our trials or temptations might we have been rescued not by our own prayers but by our brothers and sisters?
- ii. **The prayer of a diligent soldier of Christ:** Praying without ceasing for the church: It's truly remarkable when the Apostle says that he unceasingly makes mention of the Romans, always in his prayers. "Without ceasing" and "always" speak of the Apostle's diligent prayer for the church. This wasn't a prayer weakened or extinguished by circumstances. He was a very busy Apostle with many responsibilities. The Romans were not the only people on the Apostle's mind; there were hundreds, if not thousands, of Christians in his heart. Remember, please, that this same Apostle sometimes worked to provide for himself and was constantly travelling, not in comfortable contemporary modes of travel, but in physically exhausting and mentally taxing ways. Yet, the Apostle confesses before God as his witness that he always, without ceasing, mentions the Romans in his prayers. This again shows us how important prayer was to the Apostle in fulfilling the Great Commission, strengthening the church, and extending the kingdom. We see not only his diligence regarding time but also his diligence concerning the brothers and sisters. Among the hundreds or perhaps thousands of people he kept in mind. He prayed for, he confesses that he continues to mention the Romans, whom he had not met, seen, or visited, and for whom he had

no direct apostolic interest. The Apostle was a diligent soldier of Christ in prayer.

- iii. **The prayer of a patient soldier of Christ:** The Apostle Paul expressed his hope to visit the Romans, saying, “asking that somehow by God’s will I may now at last succeed in coming to you.” The Apostle says he may finally come to you if it is God's will. Again, "at last," brothers and sisters. This shows us the Apostle rests in God's sovereignty as he patiently waits for God's sovereign hand to allow him to see the Romans. He patiently waited for God to answer his prayers. This reveals his deep trust in God's plan as he patiently waited for the right time to be granted by God. Paul's desire to visit the Romans was strong; he often prayed for the opportunity to meet them, especially after hearing about their strong faith. Despite not receiving an immediate answer to his prayers, Paul didn't give up. He remained patient, trusting in God's sovereignty. His continuous prayers to visit the Romans show his unwavering faith and understanding of the importance of persistent prayer. Paul's heart stayed strong, fueled by his faith and the belief in the power of constant prayer. As an Apostle dedicated to spreading the Gospel to the Gentiles, Paul's commitment to prayer highlights his reliance on God's will to guide his journey, including his hope to one day visit the Roman believers.

d. Application:

- i. **Can we have God as our witness that we faithfully, diligently, and patiently pray for our brothers and sisters?** Intercessory prayer for the church is a demonstration of our confession of weakness in fulfilling the Great Commission and establishing the church. Often, we are quicker to criticise and point out things that should not be; we are faster in identifying the mistakes the church makes rather than being diligent in secret prayer. The mission we have as a church is one that transcends the physical and is rooted in the spiritual. Therefore, we must use our spiritual weapons to fight the battle we have been called to. Paul understood that prayer was vital, and perhaps we too, should be humble and show our dependence on our God through our faithful, diligent, and patient prayers. Oh, dear brothers and sisters, let not the fact that our prayers are not immediately answered discourage us when we pray for our brothers and sisters. Let this not discourage us from continuing to pray, from continuing to intercede for our brothers and sisters in secret and corporate prayer. Let us have a healthy, biblical view of God's sovereignty. If God has not answered a prayer today, as long as we continue to live, there is still a possibility that God will answer. And as long as that possibility exists, Christians should continue with persistent prayer before the throne of God so that the work of Christ may be completed in the church, so that we may have access to the heavenly throne and be partakers of God's mercies in times of need. This was the heart of the Apostle and should be the heart of the church. But only in prayer do we see Christ in the heart of

the Apostle. The Apostle's Christ-like heart is seen when he expresses the purpose of his prayers, and this purpose is that he wanted to come and be with the Romans. This leads us to our third point.

3. A Christ-like heart desires to serve the church.

a. **Text:** Romans 1:11–12 (ESV) — 11 For I long to see you, that I may impart some spiritual gift to strengthen you— 12 that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.

b. **Explanation:**

i. The Apostle wished to visit the Romans and tells us that his purpose for visiting the Romans was to impart some spiritual gift. Here, we should not think that the Apostle refers to charismatic spiritual gifts, as someone might think that the Apostle wanted to come to the Romans to lay hands on them so that they speak in tongues or prophesy or have some manifestation of charismatic gifts. What the Apostle refers to is explained in verse 12. The Apostle wants there to be mutual service and strengthening of faith. Words are good and greatly help in Christ's mission, but actions and service are also needed. The Apostle Paul not only talked about this but also set an example. The Apostle's ministry was not only about writing letters to the churches, which were later recorded as the Word of God; his ministry was also his physical service to the churches. The Apostle took great joy in physically moving distances to advance the Gospel of Christ and serve and strengthen brothers and sisters in all nations.

ii. **Text:** Let me please make two observations about this.

1. **The need for spiritual service to the brethren:** First, please, brothers and sisters, note that **if we want to have the heart of Christ for the church, we must serve.** This requires action. Thank God for a heart that is grateful to God for the church and for a heart that intercedes and prays for the church. But as Christians, we have also been called to serve. The Apostle's service was indeed different and unique, but all Christians have been called to serve. The service that the Apostle has in mind here is not so much the physical service of doing or providing physical things for the church. All that is very good and certainly is part of Christian service. However, I want you to pay attention to the type of service that the Apostle refers to here, which is a service to the brothers' faith. The Apostle wants to be an instrument of encouragement for the brothers. He wants to be used by God to encourage and spiritually strengthen the brothers. He knew that this work could only happen through the Word of God that presents Christ. Therefore, this was his mission: to go and visit the Romans to impart to them spiritually the knowledge of Christ through the preaching and teaching of the Word, through the manifestation of Christ in the Scriptures.

He wanted to spiritually feed his brothers and sisters in the church in Rome.

2. **Mutual service:** But second, and perhaps more importantly, the Apostle, this man of great diligence and great knowledge, this man of great experience who perhaps knew more than all the others, this man who had studied much more than the Gentiles, certainly humbly recognises that this service he plans to give to the Romans has to be reciprocal. The Apostle confesses that he also needs to be encouraged in his faith. He says, "by the mutual faith, both yours and mine." The Apostle, who has seen Christ and has received the revelation of the Gospel of Christ himself, the Apostle who has been trained at the feet of Gamaliel and who knows the Scriptures very well, the Apostle who can perhaps have a theological answer to all the questions that the brothers and sisters of the church of the Romans might have made, this same brother humbly recognises that he also requires to be encouraged in the faith. Brothers and sisters, all of us must have the heart of Christ to encourage one another. Brothers and sisters, this journey, this struggle of conformity to Christ, of being part of His kingdom, is not done individually. It is not something that is done isolated and separated. It is done with the mutual edification of the saints, with the mutual confession that we need each other.
- c. **Application:** When the heart of Christ is formed in us, we will naturally be led to want to serve our brothers and sisters through the edification of their faith. And in serving them in their faith, we will find the comfort of humility that will teach us that we also need our brothers and sisters. We cannot do it ourselves. If Christ is in our brothers and sisters, then we need our brothers and sisters because a measure of Christ is in them.

Call: Is your heart for the church the heart of Christ?

1. **Examine your heart:** Please let me finish in the same way I started: a person's heart reveals their true character. What is in your heart for the church? Is your heart for your brothers and sisters? The heart of Christ exists within your heart – love for your brothers and sisters, just as Christ loved His church. If you claim to be a Christian and say that the Spirit of Christ dwells within you, then you should bear the signs of His true presence in you. Dear brothers and sisters, as I mentioned, we don't need to have a new heart; we need to have the heart of Christ. So, if today we find ourselves aware of any lack of love for our brothers and sisters, it is our responsibility to come before Him, knowing that He is just and faithful to forgive our sins. We must repent of any pride or self-centeredness before the Lord, and He, in His justice and faithfulness, will forgive and cleanse us of all unrighteousness. We cannot change ourselves; we cannot make ourselves love our brothers and sisters. Only the Spirit of Christ working within us can lead us to love the church, just as Paul loved the Romans. Only the Spirit of Christ within us can make us genuinely

grateful to God for the work of the Holy Spirit and our brothers and sisters. Only the Spirit of Christ within us can lead us to intercede faithfully, diligently, and patiently for our brothers and sisters. And only the Spirit of Christ within us can inspire us to desire to serve our brothers. Let not the passions of our flesh lead us to believe that this is unimportant for our individual lives and the life of the church. Instead, let the spirit of freedom in Christ Jesus guide us on the path of righteousness. The local church must have the heart of Christ, and its members must have the heart of Christ for one another. Only then can we bear the fruit of righteousness as a local church, all for the glory of the Father. Perhaps you now wonder, "How can I have the heart of Christ?"

2. **How are we going to be more like Jesus?** The Word of God, Prayer, Fellowship and Evangelism.
 - a. The Word of God, as stated in John 15:7 (CSB): "7 If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you want, and it will be done for you."
 - b. Prayer, as mentioned in Jude 20 (CSB): "20 build yourselves up in your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit,"
 - c. Fellowship, as described in John 13:34–35 (CSB): "34 'I give you a new command: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.'"
 - d. And evangelism, as commanded in Matthew 28:19–20 (CSB): "19 Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."