

Praying for Gospel Fellowship: Romans 1:8-15
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Paul started his letter to the Roman church with a word of greeting in verses 1-7, and now he communicates to them his earnest desire to visit them. And he communicates this to them in a very meaningful way, and a very edifying way. There's much we can learn from Paul's example here. To summarize this paragraph, we can say that Paul is praying for gospel fellowship. He is thanking God in verse 8. He is praying without ceasing in verses 9-10. And both his thanksgivings and his petitions have to do with the gospel. He thanks God for their faith—that they have faith, and that their faith is being proclaimed in all the world. And He asks God that he would be able to visit Rome with the hope that there will be spiritual fruit as a result.

Notice the flow of thought in Paul's words here. In verses 8-10 he speaks of his prayers to God concerning them. He is praying fervently and continuously that he might visit the church in Rome. And then in verses 11-15 he gives three reasons for his eagerness to go there. The first reason is that he wants to impart some spiritual gift to strengthen them. He quickly adds that the edification will work both ways. He wants to encourage them, but they will also be an encouragement to him. This will all be part of the spiritual fruit that will come from their fellowship together.

The second reason, which he states in verse 13 and is very similar to what he has already said, is that Paul wants to reap some harvest among those in Rome as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. He wants to impart a spiritual gift, and he also wants to reap some harvest. Together, these descriptions probably refer to the fact that he wants to build up those who are already believers and also see new converts. He wants the church to grow in spiritual maturity, and he also wants the church to grow in numbers as unbelievers repent and believe the gospel.

In verses 14-15 Paul states a third reason for his eagerness to visit them, and it has to do with his apostolic duty. He had been called as an apostle to the Gentiles, and so he had a God-given obligation to all the nations. He had been entrusted with this amazing gospel message, and it was incumbent upon him to pass along that message to more and more people groups. So a visit to Rome was certainly fitting—Rome being the capital of the empire and the center of Gentile culture in that part of the world.

This gives us a brief overview of these verses, and the flow of Paul's thought here. Now let's dig into three facets of what Paul is communicating. The first heading will be, thanking God for

faith. Second, praying for fruitful fellowship. And third, preaching the gospel.

Thanking God for Faith

In verse 8 Paul writes, "First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world." There are a few things I'd like to highlight here. Notice that Paul thanks God *through Jesus Christ*. This is a recognition that we have access to God only through Jesus Christ. Apart from Jesus Christ, we could not pray to God. This is why we pray, "In Jesus' Name." Not that we always have to say those exact words, "In Jesus' Name," but we should certainly acknowledge that Jesus is the mediator between us and the Father.

Jesus, Himself, instructs us to pray in this manner. In John 15:16 Jesus says, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father *in my name*, he may give it to you."

And Paul instructs us, in Colossians 3:17, "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

This is something to bear in mind in everything we do, including our prayers (prayers of petition and prayers of thanksgiving). We live, we act, we speak, we pray, all in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is everything to us. By faith we are united to Him, and it's only because of our union with Christ that we can do anything good, or say anything that is beneficial, or live in such a way that God is honored. And it's only through Jesus that we can pray to the Father.

Another thing to highlight in Romans 1:8 is the fact that Paul is thanking God through Jesus Christ for the faith of the Roman believers. Did you catch that? Don't read over this too quickly, because there are some important implications in the way Paul says this.

He is certainly thankful to the Roman believers. And there wouldn't be anything wrong with him saying directly to them, "Thank you." He *is* thankful for them personally – he says "I thank my God for all of you." But he doesn't thank them directly here. Rather, he expresses his thankfulness for the Roman believers by directing his thanksgiving to God in prayer, and then telling the Roman believers about that prayer in this letter. So there's a vertical component to it, and a horizontal component. It's a very God-centered way of communicating this, because he's acknowledging that God is the author of their faith. Isn't that a clear implication of what Paul is saying? He is thanking *God* for *their* faith.

If their faith originated in them, Paul would have to thank them directly for their faith. But since God is the One who grants repentance and faith, since He is the One who opens the eyes of the spiritually blind, since He is the One who gives life to the spiritually dead, Paul naturally thanks God for their faith.

We learn something about their faith here, namely, that it is being proclaimed in all the world. Paul is probably referring here to all the churches that had been planted up to that point in history. Throughout all of those early churches, there was an excitement about the fact that there were believers in the great city of Rome. The faith of the Roman Christians was noteworthy, simply because of where they were. And their faith must have also been making an impact in that city and beyond.

There are a couple of important lessons I want us to learn from Paul's prayer in verse 8. I want us to apply this to our own lives. First of all, do you see that this prayer is a profound evidence of humility? I think that's something Paul models for us here. This is a display of happy, healthy, humility. Here's a question for all of us (hopefully a question that will cause us to examine ourselves, and where there's pride, to repent of it). When someone comes up to you and says, "Did you hear about so-and-so's Bible study? It's going so well. God is really doing a great work there!" Or if someone says to you, "Did you hear about so-and-so's ministry? They're reaching many people, and ministering in really cool ways. They're having a huge impact!" Or you hear that someone's marriage is going really well. Or you hear that someone's children are growing in the faith.

What is your typical reaction to those kinds of messages that come to you? Does your heart leap inside of you, and you well up with gratitude toward God for what He is doing? You say, "Yes, Lord, You're doing it! You're blessing Your people. You're changing lives! Thank You!"

Or is your reaction sometimes a little different than that? Maybe you *act* excited, because you want the person who just told you these things to think you're spiritual. But inside you're having thoughts of jealousy, competitiveness, criticism, envy. You start to think, "Well, I'm just as godly as so-and-so, why aren't more people talking about me? Why doesn't God seem to be blessing my ministry, my Bible study, my marriage, my family, in the way that He seems to be blessing that other person? And that person isn't even that great, anyway—I mean, I could list seventeen of their character flaws right now." That's the downward spiral that pride takes us on. We want to be noticed. We want the attention to be on us. And therefore we struggle to rejoice in what God's doing for others, or through others.

I know I have struggles with this kind of thing. Maybe you do, too. I hope we can all be encouraged by Paul's prayer. I hope, by God's grace, we can grow to be more like this. I want this kind of happiness and spiritual health, so that when I hear reports of the great things God is doing in other churches, or other groups, through other preachers, in other ministries, when their faith is being proclaimed in all the world, that I won't feel jealous, but rather be joyful.

The second point of application here is a way to combat jealousy and pride, and a way of fostering humility. It's the simple observation that Paul communicates to the Roman believers his thankfulness to God for them. How often do you do this? It first requires being attentive to other believers and noticing evidences of grace in their lives. And then it's also taking the time and the initiative to say something, or write something, to them to express that you're thanking God for them.

You may sometimes think, "Well, I don't want to puff up their pride, if I tell them that they're doing something well. I don't want to be too encouraging, because then they'll get a big head." Don't worry about that. God will deal with that person regarding their pride. That shouldn't be an excuse for us not to encourage one another and build one another up.

Take opportunities to do this, with brothers and sisters here in this church, and with other believers you know, both near and far. What a healthy thing this is, for yourself, and for the person you're encouraging. It will help you to look outside of yourself, to God and to what He is doing in the lives of other believers. And this will be a great encouragement to those other believers.

Praying for Fruitful Fellowship

In verse 9 Paul moves on to express another prayer he has been praying regarding the Roman Christians. And he says this very emphatically. He tells them how fervently and frequently he has been praying that he can come and see them. And as a way of showing how earnest he is he cites God as his witness.

Paul mentions the gospel again here in verse 9. In verse 1 he referred to it as the gospel of God. Here he calls it the gospel of his Son. In verse 1 he introduced himself as a slave of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God. Here he describes his relationship to God by saying, I serve Him with my spirit in the gospel of his Son. Paul's life was all about the gospel.

Paul says that he prays without ceasing. This doesn't mean that he is praying 24x7. It doesn't mean that he is sitting in a room, all day, every day, only talking to God. Paul was busy in his mission work, preaching and teaching and travelling and writing.

But he was also praying regularly and frequently, and he had the Romans in mind, as well as many others, for whom he prayed.

His desire was to go visit them. He hopes and prays that it's God's will for this happen. He says that in verse 10, "asking that somehow *by God's will* I may now at last succeed in coming to you." This is just the attitude that James tells us to have regarding our future plans. "Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.'" (James 4:13-15) This is the manner in which Paul prays. He asks that somehow by God's will he could visit them.

Paul had been wanting to visit Rome for some time. In verse 13 he makes that parenthetical comment that he had thus far been prevented from doing so. He explains this a little more in Romans 15, where he speaks of his ministry in Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum. And then in Romans 15:22 he says, "This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you." He had been involved in important frontier mission work in the eastern parts of the Mediterranean, but now that he had done the work that God had for him in those places, it finally seemed like a trip to Rome was on the horizon.

What was Paul hoping for in Rome? Well, he says here in Romans 1:11 that he wants to impart some spiritual gift to strengthen the believers there. He doesn't specify what kind of spiritual gift he has in mind, but it's certainly his desire to preach the gospel to them and give them a more firm footing on the truth of God's Word. He wants to minister to them and be a blessing to them.

And then Paul quickly adds in verse 12 that it will be a two-way street of blessing and encouragement. And this is another evidence of humility. [We were talking at the dinner table last night about pride and humility, and sermon titles that wouldn't quite work for this subject—"How to be Humble . . . Like Me" or "The 15 Pitfalls of Pride, and How I Overcame Every One"] Paul wasn't preaching here about humility, but he we can see evidences of humility in the way he's saying these things.

Paul, even as an apostle, does not presume that he knows everything there is to know or that he is coming in as the sole teacher and leader and encourager. He knows that there is this wonderful dynamic among believers that works in multiple directions all at once. Many people can be built up at the same time. It's not like there's a bunch of people who are just givers, and a bunch of other people who are just takers. Everyone should

be giving and receiving, and thus everyone benefits. This is the beauty of the church. We need each other. The Christian life is not to be lived in isolation. We need to be in community with one another. We need to humble ourselves and seek the help of others and seek the encouragement of others.

This should spur us on in various ways. For those who think you don't have any gifts, any abilities, any understanding that could be helpful to others in the church, you need to realize that God *can* use you to have a great impact on others. John Calvin wrote that "there is none so void of gifts in the Church of Christ who cannot in some measure contribute to our spiritual progress."¹ You may think that you're immature in the faith, you may think that you don't know much about the Bible, you may think that you don't know enough theology, and that may all be true, but it doesn't mean that you can just sit back and be passive in the life of the church. If God has saved you, then He has something for you to do that will build up the body of believers. There's something you can do that will contribute to our spiritual progress. We need you! We need one another! So be praying about how God would be pleased to work through you to be a blessing to others.

For those who are the leader-types, the teacher-types, there's an important lesson here from Paul's example. No matter how gifted you are, no matter how much you may think you have to give to others, no matter how much God uses you to bless others, you, too, need the encouragement of other believers. You need to be able to listen to other Christians and hear how God is working in their lives. You need to learn from others and hear their insights.

And this also goes back to what I was saying about verse 8. We all need to look for ways to express our thankfulness to God for other believers, because that will encourage those believers. That is part of this mutual edification that Paul wants to happen between him and the Roman believers. And hopefully we can emulate that attitude. Open your eyes to what God is doing in the lives of other believers, and see what an inspiration that can be for your own walk with the Lord. Thank God for the godly examples around you. And don't *just* thank God, but also share that with the ones for whom you're thankful.

I'm happy to say that I've experienced the mutual encouragement of believers in this church. I'm really grateful for that. In the 6 years I've been here, I've learned a lot from many of you, I've been encouraged by seeing your faith in God, even in difficult times, I've been spurred on by your zeal for ministry. I've learned from your biblical insights. And I know that I'm a

¹ Calvin (1960:24), quoted in Schreiner, *Romans*, 52.

different person, a better person, because of your influence in my life.

I had to smile when I read this quote by R. C. Sproul, and it reminded me of how grateful I am for this church, because what he describes is not the case here. He's writing about these verses in Romans 1, how Paul wanted to be an encouragement but also wanted to be encouraged. And Sproul laments the fact that in many churches today there is not this mutual encouragement between pastors and congregations. He says, "Every pastor needs to be encouraged. So often, the work of the pastorate in our day is an exercise in discouragement. The pastor is fair game for all criticism, and every Sunday afternoon people have roast pastor for dinner."² I want you to know that I don't feel discouraged here. I feel very encouraged. And I hope we can all be an encouragement to one another, as we live out our faith as a family of believers.

Preaching the Gospel

We've seen in these verses that Paul thanks God for their faith. He prays for fruitful fellowship. And finally, in verses 14-15 he speaks about his eagerness to preach the gospel. The gospel is good news. It is the good news that Jesus Christ died in the place of sinners like us, and all who repent of their sins and put their hope in Jesus will be saved. Our sins are washed away, and we receive the great inheritance of eternal life in heaven. That is unspeakably great news!

Look at the way Paul describes his eagerness to preach this good news. He says that he is under obligation. Literally, the Greek reads, "I am a debtor." The question is, How is he a debtor? How did he get into debt, and how can he get out of debt? Well, he's not a debtor in the sense that he borrowed something and owes it back. There's another kind of debt, and that's when someone gives you something to pass along to someone else.

Imagine you have a wealthy relative, and you are put in charge of their estate. And you're given specific instructions of how to disburse the assets once that relative has passed away. Certain family members are each supposed to receive certain things. Well, when that wealthy relative passes away, you are then a debtor to the rest of the family members. Not that you owe them something that they had loaned to you. But, rather, you owe them something that has been entrusted to you and is intended for them.

That's what Paul is saying. There is something that has been entrusted to him, and it is intended for the nations. And what is this something? It is the gospel. The gospel message had been entrusted to Paul, as an apostle specifically called to the Gentiles. And so he has this obligation to preach the gospel to the Gentiles.

² Sproul, *Romans*, page 30.

In verse 14 he describes the Gentiles, encompassing the wide variety of Gentiles in the scope of his experience. He is under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. In other words, to the cultural elite and to the uncivilized and uneducated. He is called to take the gospel message to all of these different kinds of Gentiles. And he knows that Rome has a diversity of Gentiles who all need to hear the gospel.

When we use words like debtor and obligation, those may not sound very good to us. It may sound like this is just a burden and a duty. But then in verse 15 he says that he is *eager* to preach the gospel in Rome. Paul understood his obligation, but it was not merely an obligation. It was something he was passionate about, and something he saw as a great privilege. In Ephesians 3:8 he refers to it as a grace that was given to him. "To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ." Yes, it was an obligation which Paul felt very strongly. And it was also something he recognized as a gift from God.

We, too, should see that God has entrusted us with this good news, and He doesn't intend for us to just sit on it, or bury it. He wants us to tell others about it. The message has to go forth to the nations. It has to go forth to the folks in our neighborhoods and in the workplace and in the schools and in our families and around the world.

And the gospel also has to be preached to those who are already believers. I'll close with this point. Paul certainly hopes for new converts to the faith. He wants to reap a harvest among those in Rome as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. And his message here also shows us that the gospel is not only for unbelievers, but also for believers. He says in verse 15, "So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome." He's addressing the church in Rome, and he's saying he wants to preach the gospel to them.

The gospel is for unbelievers, yes! We need to shout it from the mountaintops for all to hear. We need to go and tell them that Jesus died for sinners and offers eternal life to all who will repent and believe.

And here's another thing we need to realize, too. The gospel is for believers. The gospel is for each and every one of us. It doesn't matter if you've been a Christian for 60 years, you need to hear the gospel, week after week and day by day. We need to hear the gospel from the pulpit. We need to speak the gospel to one another. We need to preach the gospel to ourselves. This is the fight of faith which is the Christian life. Each day we're going to face temptations, and we need to focus our attention on the glory

of Jesus and the beauty of Jesus and the hope of eternal life with Him. Each day we're going to sin in some way, and we need to focus our attention on the cross and repent of our sin and rejoice in the forgiveness we have through Christ. Often we will be discouraged by the sin in our culture and the atrocities happening around the world, and we need to continually put our trust in our great King Jesus who is coming back someday to make everything right.

We never move beyond the gospel. And so I close by exhorting us as a family of believers, to be a people of encouragement, building one another up and spurring one another on with the great news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.