

“EAGER TO PREACH THE GOSPEL IN ROME.”

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Scripture Texts: Romans 1:8-15

Introduction.

Romans is the only letter Paul wrote to people he had never met, to a church he had not started, in a city he had never visited. But he had certainly heard about them and their faith.

And that in its own right is remarkable. Why would we say their faith is remarkable? There are Christians in the capital of the Roman empire, right under the nose of Caesar. Are you kidding? Faith in Rome, the greatest city in the world, the proudest, most advanced city, the most educated, the most powerful, most decadent city in the world.

Think NYC, DC, Chicago, San Francisco, Seattle, Paris, London. Cities are not humble places, they are hustling, bustling centers of commerce, skyscrapers, rich, famous, powerful people.

When I was at Wheaton College and friends would visit, I would take them into Chicago, up the world's tallest building, Sears Tower, Chicago Art Museum. If a girl was visiting, I would take her up Michigan Avenue to the Magnificent Mile, one of the most famous shopping areas in the world, Nordstroms, Saks Fifth Avenue, I Magnum, Marshalls, Bloomingdales, Neiman Marcus.

Cities are proud places, not humble places, cities are secular places, not known for faith.

This little church in Rome was letting their light shine, not for their glory, but for the glory of the Father. The church in Rome was small, but not insignificant. So how did their faith become spoken of all over the Roman Empire?

Under the Emperor Claudius there was a great persecution of the Jewish people and he exiled all Jews from Rome. This included Jewish Christians, brothers and sisters from this church, who were scattered. They shared their faith wherever they went. Among them were Priscilla and Aquila, a Jewish couple who fled to Corinth, Greece (see Acts 18:1-4). When Paul arrived there he stayed with them a year and a half. It was then Paul wrote this letter and shared his heart's desire to come to the Romans.

Why does Paul long to see them? Vss. 11-12.

Romans 1:11-12 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.

Paul says he wants to come to them to strengthen them, to help establish them in their faith, to improve them. Does that sound proud on Paul's part? Isn't their faith already strong and being proclaimed all over the world?

The truth being expressed here is even the best Christian is always in need of strengthening and improvement. We are growing or we are dying, we are increasing or we are decreasing. Paul's prayers are always reaching, stretching for more, that we would increase in the knowledge of God and be filled with the knowledge of His will.

What does Jesus say about complacency, about being lukewarm, just drifting along? May God give us all a constant spiritual dissatisfaction, what is accompanied with a prayer for God to meet us and fill us. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for more, for righteousness.

Notice Paul's posture in all of this. He is halfway through writing this sentence when he catches himself to say he doesn't see this as a one-way street, but that he desires to be mutually encouraged by their faith.

Paul doesn't consider himself above needing anything from them, he freely admits he does. His humility wins their respect and willingness to listen to his message.

Think about what is going on here. The Apostle Paul says he looked to be mutually benefited. The Christians in the little church in Rome are just like you and me. Some are married, some are parents, they have a wide range of jobs, some may be slaves in Caesar's palace. Normal people, normal Christians. What could they possibly have to offer to the Apostle Paul?

If Paul wrote this letter to us, what gift do you have to strengthen Paul's faith? I bet many of you think you have nothing to offer Paul.

But you are wrong. When Paul speaks of his affliction and despair and heavy burden in the midst of suffering, he could use your love, prayer, encouragement. He could be encouraged to see your faith in the midst of your own suffering. He could be reminded of what Scripture says.

You could ask him, how can I help you? How can I pray for you?

All Christians have spiritual gifts for the mutual encouraging and building up of the saints. This is why gathering together is so important. Being together in worship, in Bible Study, in Life Groups, in ministry teams, these are all ways God gives us to minister to each other according to our gifts, to build up, encourage, exhort, pray, give good and godly and wise counsel. Our faith feeds off the grace of God in each of our lives.

This applies to all of us, young and old. We all need improvement, to grow, to mature, to gain in wisdom and understanding. Who among us has arrived?

I Timothy 4:14 Do not neglect the gift you have.

II Timothy 1:6 I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you.

Parents give to children, care for them, sacrifice for them, so you kids, what can you do for your parents who put up with you? Do you realize how crazy hard it is to raise you? A kind word, some encouragement, a thank you, obedience, respect.

Ask not what your parents can do for you, but what you can do for your parents.
Ask not what your church can do for you, but what you can do for your church.

Paul anticipates his faith being built up and him being comforted and strengthened by witnessing their faith and seeing how the grace of God is being manifested in their lives and how the kingdom of God is advancing in a most godless culture.

Acts 28:14-15 We came to Rome. 15 And the brothers there, when they heard about us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage.

It is a most glorious and encouraging thing to see the hand of the living God tangibly and fruitfully working in the lives of the saints who are using their Spirit-given gifts. How are we using what God has given to us for the sake of others?

I have often wanted and tried to come visit you. Vss. 10, 13.

Paul wants to prove to these Christians he has never met how much he loves them. He wants them to know how much he prays for them and desires to be face to face with them.

Think about this. Paul's desire is a good desire. What he desires is certainly pleasing to God, yet God hinders him from going.

This reminds me of King David whose heart's desire was to build a great temple for the glory of God. The desire was good and pleasing to God, but God hindered him from carrying it out.

Why does God hinder the good and even godly desires of His children? If heaven was silent to some of the prayers of the Apostle Paul, there must be some instruction here for us.

God does this to humble us and to remind us who is in control and upon whom we are dependent. God is teaching us to trust His providence so we will learn to depend on it.

Even the very best of our desires and plans in the service of God, are always submitted to God and subordinate to His wisdom and will. God's thoughts and ways are far above ours. So we pray and wait, we praise Him and thank Him in all things.

How often have I learned later how my timing and my ideas and plans, were not as good as what God had planned. This teaches me that the barrier, hindrance, detour, obstruction were the hand of God and I should not be angry, frustrated, upset, impatient, but give glory to God.

How can Paul go on praying for the same thing over and over when he is getting no result or no answer? Why doesn't he give up?

First, God has not told him to stop praying, like God did when Paul prayed for that thorn to be removed. Second, he understands himself to be a slave, a servant of his Master, so it is his place to ask and then wait. Third, Paul's prayer was not deterred by God's providence, rather he is confident in the providence of God, God will move when He wills. Silence from God is not interpreted by Paul as a no, so he remains earnest. Satan wants to make us impatient, so we give up quickly.

God's will was for Paul to go to Rome, but first by going to Jerusalem and be arrested and then go to Rome as a prisoner. God's path is the long way, often through some humbling suffering.

Prayer and providence belong together. Our prayers are fueled by confidence in the strong and powerful God who exercises His sovereign will over all the universe and over all our lives. So persevere with patience, confident in the providence of God and with joyful thanksgiving in the sovereign goodness of God.

God is the one who orders and arranges all events, small and great. We learn from Paul it is OK even good to pray for what we desire or wish to happen, we can bring all our requests to God, but always with the knowledge it is God's will that will be done, and that is always best.

I John 5:14-15 This is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. 15 And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.

I am under obligation, to Greeks and barbarians. Vs. 14.

How is Paul a debtor when what he has received is all grace. Grace doesn't put us in God's debt, it pays all our debt. The debt is when we receive good news, we are obligated not to keep it to ourselves but to share it.

We are reminded again of the sweeping inclusivity of God's grace in Christ, regardless of culture, education, or background.

Greeks are those of civilized nations, the source of the arts and sciences, of knowledge and philosophy, the enlightened ones. Barbarians are the unlearned, unenlightened, uncivilized, ignorant.

Wise and unwise, those in seats of power, and those low places. Governor Felix, King Agrippa, Caesar, the Philippian jailer, Lydia, a seller of purple. Paul was no respecter of persons. The Romans looked down on the barbarians, but Paul didn't.

May we have the same heart and attitude toward all, whether Dutch or black, migrant, immigrant, refugee, Sikh, rich or poor, blue collar, white collar, quarterbacks and linemen. I have said before I think being a minority in Lynden is a hard thing, and I hope that no Christian in this town makes it harder.

Paul is talking about both ends of the educational, socio-economic, social status continuum.

To Paul they are equal, both are in the dark, both equally ignorant of the way of salvation, both equally in need of the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Without the Gospel they are equally dead. There is no room in the Gospel for pride, superiority, bullying, second class.

Eager to preach the Gospel, to you also! Vs. 15.

The Romans are Christians already, why do they need the Gospel preached to them? The question exposes our false way of thinking about the Gospel, that it is just for the salvation of a non-believers.

The whole of Romans is Paul preaching the Gospel to the Romans. Romans is the Gospel According to Paul. We will hear much more about this in two weeks.

There is no point in our Christian life that is post-Gospel, that is graduating from or moving beyond our need for the Gospel.

Preaching the Gospel to ourselves means facing the truth about our sins, and feeling the guilt and shame of our sin, but then running to the cross, to Jesus and reminding ourselves of the undeserved forgiveness and mercy and grace of God.

The Gospel humbles us daily of our sin, it helps us see the log in our own eye more quickly than the speck in someone else's eye.

The Gospel compels us to forgive each other as "God in Christ forgave us" (Ephesians 4:32) and to serve one another as Christ humbled Himself to come to serve and not be served.

The Gospel helps not think too highly of ourselves and to make allowances for one another. By the Gospel we will seek less the approval of others and more to please God. The Gospel makes us more grace-filled and merciful.

The Gospel kills the root of hypocrisy in our hearts and legalism, trusting in our works or rule keeping. The Gospel doesn't let us play church or play religion or dabble in our faith or come to worship when we don't have anything better to do or when we are feeling guilty.

The Gospel changes how we deal with suffering and trials, remembering how Christ suffered and trusted Himself to God.

The Gospel guides husbands and wives in how to love and respect each other, to die to self.

The Gospel changes our view of money, and how to be generous and even sacrificial remembering “Christ, though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (II Cor. 8:9; 9:13).

The Gospel shakes us to the core. The Gospel is a hostile takeover of enemy territory, transforming our hearts into a dwelling place of the Holy Spirit who reconciles us with our Father in heaven. The Gospel humbles us, roots out pride, self-righteousness, racism, prejudice.

Don't let the Gospel become small or boring or a matter of indifference. Make it to increase by reminding yourself daily what is of first importance. (Missions celebration.)

And after you have preached it to yourself, apply it to others, to your spouse and children, relatives, church members. Help those you love preach the truth of the Gospel to themselves, especially when they are spouting off lies about themselves or some situation. Extend the Gospel, be gracious, merciful, slow to anger, quick to forgive, patient as God is patient with you.

The Gospel doesn't just save us, it sanctifies us and transforms us, and carries us all the way to heaven. Receive the book of Romans as the gift of God as He preaches the Gospel to all of us. I am eager to preach the Gospel to you also.

Prayer: Holy Father, I pray you would reveal to us your glory and grace in the Gospel and stir in us a greater desire to see your glory, to know the Gospel and the live it out in practical ways every day.