



“Thankful for Christians”¹ **Romans 1:8-15**

As a pastor, I will at times be asked to perform a wedding ceremony and give premarital counseling. I personally *love* to officiate weddings. Seeing the joy on the bride and groom’s faces, having better than a front row seat to the whole thing, fills my heart up because marriage is such a glorious gift. The Bible says that marriage is a unique picture of Christ’s love for the church.

But even though marriage is such a glorious gift doesn’t mean that it’s perfect. Two sinners are coming together; so, there are bound to be issues. With all my joy at a ceremony, I can also have this thought: “they have no idea what’s coming.” Sure, they say “for better or worse,” but I remember what my grandmother once said, “When I was dating your grandpa, I loved him so much I just wanted to eat him up. After getting married, I wish I had.” You’d have to know my grandma to understand that statement. She *loved* my grandpa. My grandpa loved her. But her point was that marriage is difficult. And the wedding ceremony isn’t the marriage. Reciting words on a platform is one thing, but living it out is another.

You know, the same can be said for the church. The local church is a unique gift of God. Paul tells Timothy that it’s the ground and pillar of truth. It’s the local church that Jesus says has the keys to the Kingdom in order to perform church discipline. The local church is where we learn to live out the fruit of the Spirit and show forth the Kingdom values as Christ’s ambassadors.

Now, I can say all of these things, but it’s another thing to live it all out. We can say we love Christians, but what about the person in *that row over there or the one sitting right next to me*? Am I thankful for them? Will I sacrifice for them? I bring this out because as we read through this letter, this issue will come out later on. And, it’s alluded to at this point in the letter. The point is regarding mutual edification, unity and thankfulness within the church.

You see, in Rome, in the mid-1st century, Jews were expelled from Rome because of the tension between Jewish Christians and Jews. Then, Christianity continued to expand in Rome. More Gentiles came to faith in Christ. And then, the Jews began to trickle back into Rome – even Christian Jews. They wanted to worship with other believers and came to worship with other Gentiles. But that led to tension. You can read about it in Romans 13-15. But even before that tension, you see how Paul writes in the book of Romans to highlight God’s work in Jews and Gentiles – and how he is saving people from the whole world. This “good news” message of Jesus being victorious and winning salvation should be rejoiced in by all – and as a result, in the local church, the church members should rejoice in this and love one another.

But before Paul gets into all the specifics of these details, here in chapter 1, Paul models the joy and love that the Romans ought to have for one another. In verses 8-15, we discover how the gospel shapes

¹ This manuscript is still in the rough draft phase. I recommend you utilize these notes in conjunction to the sermon to gain greater insight and clarity.

Paul's view of the church in Rome. And, as a result, I think what **we see how the gospel shapes our attitude and actions towards Christians.**

Again, I'm stating this because of the bigger context of the book of Romans. Paul is concerned about their unity and their understanding of how the gospel affects their relationships with one another and the world around them. What we see specifically in these few verses is that **the good news of Jesus makes us thankful and prayerful for Christians.**

With that, turn in your Bibles to Romans 1, and we will read verses 8-15 together after I pray.

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. ²

The good news makes us thankful and prayerful for Christians. Now, I want to be careful that I'm not over-personalizing this passage. Clearly, Paul has specific concerns that are unique for him in what is written here. However, again, I do believe that he is concerned for the Christians in Rome to understand the value and joy to be had in Christian fellowship. In addition, he wants them to know just how much *he* truly does love and care for them. After all, he is the apostle to the Gentiles. He's never met them and he's ecstatic that there are believers in a place he has not been. Truly, the gospel is powerful. It's not dependent on any one person to proclaim it. It goes forth no matter who speaks it. And since Paul has heard there are believers in Rome, there are two things that spring up within him. In verse 8, we see the thanksgiving. In verses 9-15, we learn about Paul's prayer and hope for the Roman Christians.

Let's start with the thanksgiving:

1. The good news makes us thankful to God for Christians (v. 8).

Again, look at verse 8: ⁸ First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world.³

The word "first" often implies that there's going to be a "second," but Paul doesn't add a "second." It seems like he uses the word simply to emphasize something before he gets into the rest of the letter. So, it's like someone saying, "Let me say this before anything else." This is important to Paul, and what he states here is a personal love for people he doesn't even know.

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 1:8–15.

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 1:8.

I've heard people say before, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." It's a true statement. And, with Paul, he knew a lot. Even the apostle Peter in 2 Peter 3 talks of Paul's writings by saying: "There are some things in them that are hard to understand. . ."⁴

Even the apostle Peter thought some of Paul's writings were hard to understand! But it's Scripture and we must seek to understand. Yet, Paul doesn't write these things in a stilted way, not caring for the people reading. It's not like he's saying, "What's the hardest way I can write to make people miserable." Nor is he saying, "How can I show people how smart I am?" He genuinely loves the people. And, on the outset, he wants the Roman Christians to know that. Maybe they'll care to know what he says even through the love God has given him for them! By the way, it does seem like they receive Paul. From a historical perspective, within ten years of writing this letter, Paul dies. And, do you know where he dies? In the city of Rome, probably among some of the very people who received this letter!

So, Paul starts here by expressing his gratitude! What is he grateful for? Well, the end of the verse says that he's thankful "for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world." He's thankful for each and every Christian in Rome. And why is he thankful for them? Because their faith is proclaimed in all the world! Paul is not simply thankful for people. He's thankful for Christians. And he's not simply thankful for people who claim to be Christians. He's thankful because they actually are Christians.

This is an important point to make because even in our culture still, many people like to claim to be Christians, but they don't listen to the Bible whatsoever. It boggles my mind how certain people fight to be considered Christian and yet they deny truths that the Bible makes absolutely clear – like the Trinity, or certain statements about growth in holiness. If you want to pursue sin, then make your denial of God plain. If you want God, then turn to Jesus!

This is what Paul sees in the Romans! They had faith. Again, let me state again what I stated last week. Faith is belief in and reliance on Jesus for salvation. Faith involves knowing information, but it's more than that. Faith depends on the Lord as the superior hope and treasure of your life. But even as I say all of this, I want to make something explicit here. Paul doesn't say that he's thankful that their faith is stronger than other people's faith. He says nothing of the strength. He's highlighting the faith itself. This should be an encouragement to every believer in this room. Some have weak faith and often say, "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief." Other people's faith is strong. But even weak faith can move mountains! It's not the strength of our faith that saves. It's the object of our faith!

And so, Paul rejoices at this faith. And he rejoices that the faith is proclaimed in all the world. This is hyperbole. Paul isn't saying that people in North America has heard. But the news of the Roman Christian's salvation has been heard in different places. The point Paul makes here emphasizes God's missions to save the world, and even Paul's mission as an apostle. Imagine being Paul. He was an apostle almost from the very beginning. The message of Jesus' death taking the place of sinners started in Jerusalem. Whereas in the Old Testament time period, many nations did not know of the One True God; now all nations can hear and respond and have eternal hope instead of dying in their sins. Then, the good news spreads from Jerusalem. Then it went it a little further. Then even further. And then Paul sees it makes it to Rome! King Jesus really has taken the punishment sinners deserved. Jesus really has offered it to people of all tribes, nations and tongues! The good news of King Jesus has reached the central city of the Roman Empire – and people have trusted King Jesus. Praise God!

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), 2 Pe 3:16b.

Think of this, Ventura. Within the Roman empire – the empire that crucified and tortured people – in this empire, the gospel spreads. Nothing can stop the good news of Jesus. And we need to remember that in our day. Communism can't stop it. Look at how many Christians are in China. Laws can't stop it. Look at persecuted countries. Even prosperity can't stop it. No matter the scenario, God's message of Jesus' victory on the cross will travel through the world and around the world. So, Christian, don't be afraid when you hear of this world around us getting worse and if you hear that laws will restrict our freedoms. No matter what freedoms we may lose (or other Christians may lose), remember that the gospel is free! And the Spirit will move like the wind wherever he wants. He cannot be stopped! Praise God!

And this is where Paul goes. He praises God! He continues with his "thankfulness" statement by saying, "I thank my God." Paul directs his gratitude where it deserves to go. This is very important to keep in mind. I've heard scenarios before where someone says that they have trusted Jesus, and someone will respond to them and say, "I'm proud of you." What? God saved that person, miraculously, and you're going to say to the sinner, "Wow, way to go you!" That's like me talking to a person who just had the electric paddles performed on them in the ER, and when I hear that their heart is beating again, I say to the person, "Way to go! You breathed!" No, both the person who had the paddles and all around will thank the person who took the paddles!

Give honor to whom honor is due. But this is for our greater joy to do this as well. God created us to rejoice in him. He's eternal; therefore, our rejoicing finds its completion and satisfaction in him. Let me give a different illustration. A week or two ago, I was asked to have a phone conversation with someone who was doing a study on church building campaigns. Going into it, I wanted to ensure that he heard the miracle of God's mercy in all we're doing. But, at a few points when I said what we did, he would say, "Oh wow. Good for you." He focused on me. But here's the thing. If we focus just on the temporal and on what we can see, we miss the miracle.

God is working miracles all around us and we should want our eyes to be looking at the miracles. We should want to praise the Miraculous One and his work. Certainly, we do things that matter for his glory. And I'm not opposed to congratulating people for their work. I'm actually all for it. But, I believe that our joy increases when we hear, "God is at work in and through you!" Then our minds can teem with excitement at all the wondrous things God is doing!

Paul thanks God for the faith of the Christians in Rome. Not only that. He thanks "my God." This is what's phenomenal. When you see God at work around you and you can say, "That's *my* God." The phrase "my God" means there's a personal relationship. God is your God and he is at work in the world around you. Ventura, this is a joy that I have as a pastor. I get to see how God changes people's lives in different ways than many in the congregation don't see. I hear stories of heartache and pain and also stories of redemption as I'm sitting in my office listening to people share. As I hear these stories, there are times my joy is so full and I'm led to praise God and even think, "And, that's *my* God!" Wow. God loves me, too.

And, why this love? Because of Jesus Christ. Paul adds that he thanks God through Jesus Christ. This phrase "through Jesus Christ" could mean a couple things. Some think this means that his gratitude is accepted because of Jesus Christ. Others take this phrase to emphasize again Paul's role as an apostle. I tend towards thinking this is a reference of Jesus as the Mediator. God accepts Paul's gratitude because Jesus made the way for Paul to commune with God. Remember, when Jesus died on the cross, the

temple veil tore in two. When that happened, God opened access for all people to come to him through Jesus. Paul again emphasizes where the glory belongs and never wants to forget who has given him the privilege to know God! Praise God! Praise Jesus!

So, we see that the good news makes us thankful to God for Christians. Now Paul moves on and shows us that

2. The good news makes us prayerful for Christians (vv. 9-15).

Look at verse 9: ⁹For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you ¹⁰always in my prayers. . . .⁵

Paul has not met them, but he doesn't need to meet them in order to be joyful and also prayerful. But what he says regarding this prayer of his is somewhat interesting. Maybe the Roman Christians can't believe the apostle gives them the time of day in his prayers. Or maybe there are other variables. But whatever the reason, Paul uses strong terms to emphasize that he thinks of them. The first five words in the English are "*For God is my witness.*" The term witness makes us think about a court where we call someone to witness for or against someone. Paul is saying to the Romans that he is telling the truth that he prays for them. He even calls God to the stand to affirm that he prays for them.

By the way, this isn't some trite things for Paul to say. In our culture, someone can say, "God is my witness! If I'm wrong, let him strike me dead." And in our day, those words might not matter much. But in the first century, at the beginning stages of the church where God did strike some people dead (think Ananias and Sapphira), this was a serious statement of Paul. Plus, Paul's belief about God is that God is holy and righteous and will judge him someday. So, he doesn't take these words tritely. God is his Master. That's why Paul says he serves him.

And what does Paul do as God's servant? He *serves with his spirit in the gospel of his Son*. I believe that when Paul says "with his spirit," he's emphasizing that his service is with his whole self. From the inside-out, he serves God. And that's true service because those who worship God must worship in *spirit* and in truth. Paul has been changed, and it's the good news of Jesus that changed him.

Now, I don't want to mock your intelligence by saying this, but I do need to define "the gospel of his Son" again. This past week, I was hit more regarding the gospel. If you were here last week for communion, you heard me say that there's a difference between *knowing* the facts about Jesus and being humbled and amazed by Jesus. This past week, I spent a little time thinking about the wrath of God. I thought about the real punishment that Jesus speaks about that is eternal. I talked with David Pollard some about this and I said, "Hell isn't the absence of God. Hell is the presence of God in all his just wrath." Hell is a place for all the people who ran from God and sought after their sin and thought they were ok apart from submitting to God. And as they ran from God and sought to hide from him, ultimately they arrive in a place where they will forever be in the presence of God...in wrath. They can't hide from him yet they're in complete darkness. They're faced with their sinfulness – and even in Hell, Revelation says they are still sinners. As I thought about the torments of Hell, I said to David Pollard, "Imagine one person you know that isn't a Christian. Imagine that person in Hell! How can you not then be driven to want to see them knowing God's grace and not his wrath?" But I needed to take that further. Imagine yourself in Hell, Christian. That's what we deserve. And yet, we will never experience it.

⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 1:8–10.

Why? Because Jesus took Hell on the cross. God's wrath was poured out on him on the cross. He took the punishment, the justice we deserved. See him hanging on the tree! See the love as he cries out for the Father to forgive! Then he hangs limp on the cross. Dead. It was there, high and lifted up, that he was victorious in purchasing salvation. And then, three days later, he arose from the dead. As a result, salvation is declared to all – and all who trust Jesus for forgiveness and reconciliation with God – will receive it. The greatest battle against sin and death was won by Jesus. This is the good news. This is the message Paul heralds to the world – and it's a message we can herald as well!

But since Paul has been given a responsibility to herald this message to the world, then he is emphasizing to the Romans that his care and prayers extend to them, too. Even though he didn't lead them to faith, he's concerned about their faith. So, his first concern is to pray for them. Ventura, I've heard people who downplay prayer and think it's of no value. I understand how prayer can be confusing. But, let me encourage you in childlike faith to believe that God hears and answers our prayers. That God works his will even through the prayers of his children! Paul, the apostle who labored harder than all the others, shows us time and time again that it's not his labor, but it's God's grace at work through him. And, if it's God grace at work through him, he must pray. And we must pray, too. So, persevere in praying for believers.

Practically speaking, what does that look like for us? Well, do you know Christians? Look around. What about Christians in different cities or other parts of the world? Pray for them. Prayer has an amazing affect to work even though you're not in the same location. But it's not the words that have power. It's the One to whom you're praying. Because God is everywhere present, he can work his will wherever! So pray! Follow the example of Paul who also followed the example of Jesus who prayed for his disciples, including us. And, Paul didn't stop praying. When Paul uses the phrase "*without ceasing*" and "*always*," he doesn't mean that he literally only thinks about the Roman Christians. The phrases emphasize a consistency and persistence in praying for them. In our day, I think we have even greater tools to help us to pray for one another (and others). Phones with prayer apps. Note cards with easy writing utensils. If we hear that there are Christians, praise God and pray for them that they would grow in the faith.

At this point, Paul moves on to detail the specific desires for the Romans. Some think that what's stated next really isn't part of his prayer because he goes on to mention himself and his hopes of what he's going to accomplish. But all of these things relate to how he might be able to bless the Romans and they him. I don't think it's unreasonable to conclude that these are part of his prayer; so, I'm going to treat them this way. So, in verses 10-15, we see what Paul prays for.

Paul's emphasis as an apostle is that he's submissive to God's direction. God has not yet given Paul permission to go. By the way, we don't know how God directed Paul. Could have been through circumstances that kept Paul from making it to Rome or through some other means, but Paul is submissive to God's providential working. Either way, Paul prays to visit the Roman Christians. He wants to meet these people that he's heard about. But why?

Mutual Encouragement. Verses 11-12 say, "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."⁶

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 1:11–12.

The desire, the longing, is that he might be able to impart some spiritual gift to strengthen them. In all transparency, I don't know exactly what that phrase means. But I think the context shows us that the gift is some type of teaching that would strengthen them as a church. I don't, though, think this means that Paul, as an apostle, was going to lay hands on them and give them a certain kind of spiritual action as a church. Instead, I think that verse 12 gives us the idea of what he's wanting to do. When Paul says, "that is." He's saying, "Let me say it another way." He doesn't just want to give them some "thing." He wants to be blessed by being with them, too.

The term is translated as being "mutually encouraged by each other's faith." The blessing comes through fellowship and as they're together, they'll all be blessed. So, Paul, as an apostle, has certain wisdom, discernment and insight to give this church. After all, "apostle" means "messenger." Jesus tasks the apostles to teach and reveal how Christ applies to the churches and to all of life. So, if/when he arrives in Rome, he wants to give them the gift of this kind of teaching that would strengthen the church.

But Paul isn't arrogant to think that he's the only one who can give the gift. He believes that he'll receive blessing, too. This is such a beautiful statement not only of humility, but also confidence in the Holy Spirit. Paul doesn't assume he knows everything – and Paul also is excited to learn from the Spirit's work in other believers. In our day, I think we forget this reality. I've heard people talk about them having the Spirit in them in such ways as to say that they don't need any other believers in their life. That is an outright lie. We need other believers even in order to understand the Scriptures more fully. The Spirit that is at work in me is the same Spirit at work in you. And as he works through you, there might be things he's teaching you that I need because I don't see it. Recently, this scenario happened in my life. I was talking with my sister who was telling me something she learned. Then, I went to meet with a few people for a prayer time that morning. In the prayer time, one of the guys mentioned the exact passage my sister was talking about. He specifically answered my sister's question. Then I contacted my sister and said, "Here's what that other person said!" The Spirit had me along for the ride as I saw how he was working to answer my sister's question! Now, that's just a small scenario. But I bring this up to encourage us to not shut the Spirit's mouth in our lives. Have other Christians around you and rejoice to be with them so that you might encourage them and that you might listen to be encouraged by them! Pray that you might experience this type of mutual encouragement. (And, if you're sitting there thinking, "I do pray for that, but people don't do that for me," watch yourself. The point is mutual encouragement. Paul wants to visit *them*, and he first states his desire to minister to them. While he hopes to receive, he prays to give no matter what.) So, he prays for mutual encouragement. The next thing is that he prays to

To reap a harvest. Verse 13 says, "¹³I 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."⁷

Not only does Paul pray for them, but he has also had many occasions where he has planned to go to Rome, but one thing or another thing has prevented him. But the intention of his visit is so that he may reap some harvest among them.

Now, get that word "harvest." Reminds me of Jesus' words to his disciples that the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. Paul is a laborer. And, in the situation with Rome, he did not plant the seed nor

⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 1:13.

did he see the seeds grow. Instead, he's coming to reap some kind of harvest. Paul talks to the Corinthians about this. Some plant. Others water. God gives the increase. In Rome, Paul's looking at the increase. But why does he need to go there to reap a harvest? Again, it's because God summoned him to be an apostle to the Gentiles. Should he be unconcerned about the Romans? No!

So, he believes his visit will bring about greater fruit in ministry. He doesn't know what, but again, Paul is confident that God will do something. And, he says that he's confident the harvest will be reaped among the Romans and the rest of the Gentiles.

Again, this is interesting wording. It suggests that the majority of the Roman church were comprised of Gentiles. By the way, Gentiles means "non-Jews." So, Paul wants to reap a harvest amongst the Roman church and other Gentiles. Through the Roman Christian's growth, they're going to affect others. Ventura, this is Paul's prayer and hope – and this should be ours as well. Do you realize that if God grows and matures us, it's for our own growth (yes), but it's also to affect and influence others. Even as I look at Ventura over the last 6 ½ years, I see that. More missionaries exist now than before. More people within are church are reaching out to other believers through the things they're learning here. These are just a couple things. But, our prayers should also recognize that if God grows us, he intends to bless others through us. The gospel message has power to change us and then to lead others to change as it works through us.

So, Paul intends wants mutual encouragement. He wants to reap a harvest. Then, he seeks to

To preach the gospel. Verses 14-15 say, ¹⁴"I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. ¹⁵So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome."⁸

Within the first 15 verses of Romans, we understand that Paul is passionate about the gospel. This is God's good news and Paul agrees! But Paul emphasizes the urgency of the need to preach this gospel. He says that he's under obligation. This word for "obligation" is the word for "debt." He's indebted to Greeks and barbarians. Timothy Keller helps us to understand the idea of this indebtedness: someone may "have given me \$100 to pass on to you – and I am in debt to you until I hand it on. . . . God has shared the gospel with [Paul]. But God has also commissioned him to declare it to others. So Paul owes people the gospel" (Keller, p. 17).

And, in this text, he emphasizes the types of people: Gentiles and barbarians. The term "barbarian" was a word Romans used for people who spoke other languages than them. So, non-Romans. But Romans are Gentiles. They need the gospel, too. In addition, Paul is to preach to those who are wise and those who are foolish. By the way, you may notice that Paul doesn't say anything about Jews here. Isn't he concerned about the Jewish people? Absolutely. And you'll see that as we look at verses 16-17 next week. But it may be that in Paul emphasizing these people groups that Paul is subtly confronting the Jewish people regarding the fact that God came to save Gentiles, too. The gospel is the good news for all. It is intended for all types of people from all cultures. And the gospel is powerful to penetrate through any differences. Jesus, as the King of the Jews, is the King of Creation!

Therefore, Paul says he's eager to preach the gospel to the Romans. Some could say, "Why does he preach the gospel to Christians? I thought the unsaved need the gospel." Oh, the gospel is for all. Christians need the gospel. People who don't believe Jesus need the gospel. Everyone needs the gospel

⁸ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 1:14–15.

because every needs Jesus *always*. The message of his righteousness, his sacrifice, his resurrection transforms and shapes our entire way of life. And, Paul is going to go on now in the rest of this book to reveal how the gospel transforms.

As Paul states all of these things, we see the great love Paul has for God and his gospel. As a result, he genuinely loves the people whom God has saved. They're family. They're loved by God. Now, he wants to love them and experience grace through them, too. What we see here is that **if we understand the gospel, and if we know others who embrace the gospel, let us be thankful and prayerful for believers.**

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Keller, Timothy. *Romans 1-7 For You*. The Good Book Company North America. 2016.
2. Moo, Douglas. *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 1996.
3. Schreiner, Thomas. *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Romans*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic. 1998.