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Enjoying God Ministries
Romans #3
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**I am Eager to Preach the Gospel to you in Oklahoma City
Romans 1:8-15**

Rome. It is only one word, and yet it evokes an entire world of history, drama, and political intrigue. One cannot speak the word without thinking of the Coliseum and the Catacombs, not to mention the many Caesars: Julius, Octavian, Augustus, and Tiberias. The pomp and circumstance of Rome, its social influence, military might, as well as its moral decadence, have made it perhaps the most famous city in all of human history, second only to Jerusalem.

In these days of world superpowers in which countries and entire continents square off against each other, it is difficult to envisage how a single city could have become so powerful. One does not speak of a Washingtonian empire or a Parisian empire or a Moscovian empire or a Londonian empire. But we all know of the Roman Empire. Perhaps there has never been in the history of mankind nor ever will be a city like Rome. Of course, the Roman Empire extended far beyond this one city and eventually encompassed most of the known inhabited world at that time.

But for all its grandeur and greatness, Rome was not without its problems. Like all other ancient cities, but on a far vaster scale, Rome was a city of slaves and racial bigotry. Most estimate that the population of Rome when Paul finally arrived there was around 400,000. It was a city of lust and moral turpitude. It was a city of injustice, socially, politically, and economically, a city and empire whose legacy was stained with the blood of those helpless victims who dared stand in the way of Roman progress or dared protest Rome's inhumanity to man and utter disregard for God.

It shouldn't surprise us, therefore, that Paul writes in Romans 1:15, "So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome." But what is surprising is the gospel that Paul preached. To the consternation of some and the confusion of others, Paul did not preach what we have come to know as the social gospel. In a city where nearly 1/3 of the population lived in some form of slavery, he did not focus his preaching on securing their freedom, although he would have gladly welcomed it. In a city of corruption, he did not focus on moral reform. In a city of injustice, he did not call for a restoration of principles of equitable treatment under the law. Instead, he preached the gospel of God concerning his Son, Jesus Christ.

Why did Paul preach Christ? Was he indifferent to the plight of slaves? No. Was he calloused when it came to issues of justice and fair treatment under the law? Did he not care for the economic and political corruption that reigned in the city? Of course he cared. But he preached Christ because he knew that temporal prosperity and societal well-being, although important enough in their own right, were nothing compared in value to the eternal destiny of individual souls.

So today we continue our study of Romans with verses 8-15. These verses are actually part of a paragraph that extends through v. 17. Today we look only at vv. 8-15. In vv. 8-13 we find the apostle praying and planning. In vv. 14-15 we find him preaching.

The Apostle Praying (vv. 8-13)

Why does Paul thank God for these Christians? The answer is simple. If there are Christians in Rome it is only because God first loved them and called them and gave them faith that they might believe. Paul is not simply thanking God that there are Christians in Rome. He is thanking God for the mere fact that Christians exist. He is thanking God that they have faith.

Why? If saving faith is something we ultimately produce in ourselves by an act of our own free will, why thank God? Why not pat ourselves on the back? If John comes to my house and mows my lawn, I don't thank Kyle. If Ann purchases for me a new sweater vest at Christmas, I don't send a thank you note to Marsha. Paul doesn't explicitly say that God gave them faith in Christ, but other NT texts do (see 1 Cor. 4:7; Eph. 2:8-10; Phil. 1:29; 2 Tim. 2:25; 2 Pet. 1:1).

Growing up as a Southern Baptist, one of my favorite hymns was, "I Know Whom I Have Believed." I always loved, and still do, the lines that read:

"I know not how this saving faith to me He did impart,
Nor how believing in His Word wrought peace within my heart.
I know not how the Spirit moves, convincing men of sin,
Revealing Jesus through the Word, creating faith in Him."

The fact that there were Christians in Rome had reached the ears of everyone in the Roman Empire. This is not hyperbole. Paul intends us to know that the news of the faith of the Roman believers had been taken throughout the inhabited world, by word of mouth, on foot, in personal correspondence, and by countless other means. If there were no print media today, no TV, no Internet, no Social Media, would anyone outside OKC know that there was a place called Bridgeway Church? What visible, vocal impact are we having to make our presence known?

But why is Paul so pleased that their "*faith*" is known throughout the inhabited world? There are at least three reasons.

First, Paul is thankful for their faith because their faith was in Jesus! Faith, in and of itself, is of no use unless it is vested or placed in the proper person who is worthy of it. Everyone has faith. Even atheists trust in something, be it themselves, the promise of science, or the power of wealth. Paul doesn't thank God because they had faith in Allah or some dead idol or in the Roman emperor, far less faith in themselves. Paul gives thanks that their faith is in Christ, because this will bring glory and praise to Christ. Back in v. 5 Paul said that his ministry, be it in Rome or Ephesus or Jerusalem, was so that the "name" of Christ would be glorified. And the faith of the Romans did just that. In other words, Paul assumes that when faith spreads, the name of Jesus is exalted and honored. That's what he means by "for the sake of his name" (v. 5).

His point is that when people see and hear of your faith in Jesus even when life falls apart, that tells them something about Jesus. It tells them that he is the only hope we have in a world filled with greed and violence and hatred and death. That is why Paul rejoices and gives thanks to God for the faith of these Christians in Rome.

Second, Paul thanks God for the faith of the believers in Rome because invisible faith produces visible acts of love and obedience. God's desire is for his grace and glory in his people to be seen and heard. That's what Jesus meant in the Sermon on the Mount, when he said, "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). These good works of love are the fruit of faith. It isn't just faith that God is seeking in us but the obedience and sacrificial love and mercy that faith produces.

Do people see the fruit of your faith? Can they discern that you love and trust Jesus by how you talk, how you respond to suffering, how you react when mistreated and slandered unjustly? Paul says, "I am so profoundly grateful for your faith because it never lies fallow; it never just sits there; it works and bears fruit that points to the grace of Jesus in your life."

Third, what does faith do? It puts Christ on display! It shows him to be preeminently worthy and valuable. When our faith is in Christ instead of wealth or fame or power, Christ is seen as the immeasurable treasure that he is. When our faith is in Christ even when we suffer and are persecuted,

Christ is made known as more glorious and more worthy than anything or anyone else. If you want Christ to look great, trust him, believe him, obey him.

It's important that we remember that Paul prays fervently and often *for people he has never met*. It may feel strange to you when we pray for certain nations or Christians in cities throughout the U.S. or when we urge you to pray for someone at Bridgeway whom you don't know. God knows them, and that is all that matters.

Let me ask you a question. When was the last time you walked up to a fellow believer here at Bridgeway and said, "You may not know this, and you may wonder if I'm making this up, but I mention you in my prayers 'without ceasing' (v. 9). All I know to say to you is that 'God is my witness' how often I really, genuinely, passionately pray for you. He knows that I'm telling you the truth. And I want you to know the truth that I love you so much that I never cease praying for you." If you can't honestly do that in relation to another believer, why not?

And what has Paul been asking God in his prayers for the Romans? He says it in vv. 10-12.

He wants to see these Roman believers. He longs to be present with them. It isn't enough to know that the church is flourishing in Rome. Paul is willing to travel 1,500 miles by land and by sea to reach them. Isn't it amazing that we often find every excuse possible to avoid gathering with other Christians? We are too busy to join a community group. We are overwhelmed with the challenges of life and can't seem to make it to the corporate gathering of God's people on Sunday. We have too many other things that occupy us to find time to meet with a few brothers or sisters in a D-group. Not Paul.

But he knows that this is ultimately subject to God's will. Paul didn't know whether it was God's will for him to travel to Rome. But that didn't paralyze him. He prayed and took every necessary step in preparation to go should it prove to be God's will. Don't despair that sometimes you can't see or discern God's will. Remain steadfast in prayer, always submitting to what he ultimately desires for you. Paul then mentions four reasons why he wants to travel to Rome.

(1) First, he wants to impart to them a spiritual gift (v. 11).

The word translated "spiritual gift" (*charisma*) is used in several senses in the NT. Sometimes it refers to God's gracious *gift* in Jesus Christ (Rom. 6:23). In Rom. 11:29 it points to God's gracious gifts to Israel. Many believe that here in Romans 1:11 it refers to insights into the gospel of God that Paul will share with them. But I see no reason not to think of the Holy Spirit inspired ability to minister beyond one's natural talents. That is how Paul uses the word later in Rom. 12:6.

You may be asking, "Does this mean that although I already have one or more spiritual gifts that God can graciously give me more?" Yes! Paul wanted the opportunity to lay hands on the Romans and ask the Spirit to grant even additional spiritual gifts. This is what he did for Timothy:

"Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you" (1 Tim. 4:14).

"For this reason I remind you [Timothy] to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands" (2 Tim. 1:6).

(2) Second, Paul longs to impart spiritual gifts to the Romans so that they may be strengthened.

Spiritual gifts are not an end in themselves. They are given by God so that we may be strengthened and empowered and encouraged to cling to Christ when life is falling apart. They are given to enable us to bolster the sagging spirits of those who are suffering. They are imparted to console the despairing and to build up the weak.

But Paul doesn't want them to think that the benefits of his intended visit flow in only one direction. His exposure to the vibrant faith of the Romans will contribute to his growth as much as will his to theirs.

The means of this mutual encouragement is each person's faith. It's as if Paul is saying, "I struggle just like you do. I'm not above discouragement and depression and a sense of despair. I need to see your faith in action. I need to watch how you endure hardship and hold fast to Christ when everything around you is falling apart. And by God's grace, I hope and pray that you will also be built up when you see my faith as well."

Paul's humility is remarkable! Here is an apostle longing to be encouraged and built up by these inexperienced beginners in Rome. He doesn't view himself as above them, contributing only to their growth in Christ. He sees himself as beneath them, standing in need of what they can provide him in terms of growth and encouragement.

And what I love most about this is that what concerns Paul is people, other Christians. He doesn't want to visit Rome so that he can enjoy the Coliseum or the many shops or perhaps have an interview with the Emperor. He wants to spend time with these believers, people he had never met but with whom he knew he shared a common faith in Christ and thus a common destiny in heaven.

(3) The third reason Paul prays that he may finally arrive in Rome is so that he may "reap some harvest" among them (v. 13).

The word translated "harvest" may also be rendered, "fruit". This probably refers not to new converts but to the spiritual profit they will receive from their deeper understanding of the gospel.

(4) The fourth reason Paul prays that he may finally make it to Rome is because he feels a deep debt or obligation to preach the gospel to everyone there. We'll devote our remaining time to this fourth reason.

The Apostle Preaching (vv. 14-15)

Paul carries a deep and abiding burden in his heart. He has been made the recipient of God's saving grace and now feels obligated to do everything in his power and through God's Spirit to share this good news with others.

By "Greeks" Paul means those who both spoke Greek and had adopted its culture, as over against "barbarians." Greeks, then, are people educated in the ancient Greek way of life. They stood at the top of the Roman social ladder. Barbarians stood at the bottom. Do you realize how utterly contrary to the gospel of God's grace in Jesus it is that anyone should ever despise or treat indifferently someone of another race, culture, educational, or socio-economic status?

As far as Paul was concerned, the gospel cut through the divisions of race and education and social sophistication. The gospel insisted that all humanity stood before God on equal terms: condemned. Yet the gospel is also the promise for everyone that no matter your background or earthly accomplishments, there is forgiveness and healing and salvation for all.

The "wise" and "foolish" is simply another way of making the same distinction. You don't have to be an intellectual genius to receive the benefits of Christ's saving work. Your IQ is no barrier to being saved. With this language we see once again the sweeping inclusivity of God's grace in Christ, regardless of culture, education, or background.

Culture and intelligence and education and monetary wealth do not qualify you for the gospel of grace. And being unrefined and uneducated and illiterate and poor do not disqualify you for the gospel of grace. There are no qualifications for this grace.

It comes easily to share the gospel with people who are cultured, socially sophisticated, well-educated, and wealthy. Although we know it isn't true, we often operate on the unspoken assumption that because of their worldly success they are somehow deserving of the gospel, while others less well advanced are not. Do you look on the unbelieving, uneducated, unsophisticated world with disdain and disgust and turn your back on them? Or do you feel profoundly obligated to share the gospel with them because someone else shared it with you and you received the forgiveness of your sins? Don't ever overlook the fact that Paul felt as much of an obligation or a debt to preach to barbarians and foolish people as he did to the culturally refined and wise.

But why would Paul want to preach the gospel to those who are already Christians? Yet, that is precisely what he says in v. 15. As I said in the previous message, there is nothing about the Christian life that is post-gospel. We never move beyond it into something greater or more powerful. It not only saves us, it sanctifies and transforms us. Let me give you just a few examples from things Paul says elsewhere in his letters.

Our approach to ***suffering*** is tied directly to the way Christ suffered for us and did so without reviling those who reviled him – “when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly” (1 Peter 2:23; see 2:18-25; 3:17-18).

Or take ***humility*** as another example. The basis for Paul's appeal that we “do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit but in humility count others more significant than” ourselves is the self-sacrifice of God the Son in becoming a human and submitting to death, even death on a cross (Phil. 2:1-5 in relation to 2:6-11).

All of us know that as husbands we are to ***love our wives*** “as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25-33). Men, you will never love your wife well until you understand how God in Christ has loved you by giving you eternal life.

Why should we be ***generous and sacrificial with our money***? Because, says Paul, “you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9; 9:13).

We are to ***forgive*** one another “as God in Christ forgave” us (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13). Until such time as you understand the gospel and preach it relentlessly to your own soul you will remain in the grip of grudges towards those who have hurt you.

We are to “walk in ***love***” toward each other, says Paul, “as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” (Eph. 5:1-2).

We are to ***serve*** one another in humility as Christ served his disciples by washing their feet and eventually suffering in their stead (John 13:1-20).

The ***freedom*** we have in Christ, says Paul in Romans 14, is to be controlled in its exercise by the recognition that the weaker brother who might be damaged by our behavior is one for whom Christ died (Rom. 14).

Paul encourages us to ***pray*** for all based on the fact that Christ “gave himself as a ransom for all” (1 Tim. 2:1-7)

If that were not enough, there are countless instances in the NT where we are directed back to the reality of the gospel and what Christ has done for us through it as the primary way to combat those false beliefs and feelings that hinder our spiritual growth. So, for example, . . .

When you don't feel loved by others, meditate on Rom. 5:5-11; 8:35-39.
When you don't have a sense of any personal value, read Matt. 10:29-31; 1 John 3:1-3.
When you struggle to find meaning in life, study Eph. 1:4-14; Rom. 11:33-36.
When you don't feel useful, consider 1 Cor. 15:58; 12:7-27.
When you feel unjustly criticized, rest in the truth of Rom. 8:33-34.
When you feel excluded by others, rejoice in Heb. 13:5-6.
When you feel you have no good works, let Eph. 2:8-10 have its effect.
When you are constantly asking the question: Who am I? take courage in 1 Peter 2:9-10.
When you live in fear that other people have the power to destroy or undermine who you are, be strengthened by Heb. 13:5-6; Rom. 8:31-34.
When you don't feel like you belong anywhere, take comfort from Eph. 4:1-16; 1 Cor. 12:13.
When Satan accuses you of being a constant failure, remind him of 1 Cor. 1:30-31.
When Satan tells you that you are an embarrassment to the church, quote Eph. 3:10.
When you find yourself bitter towards the Church and indifferent regarding its ministries, reflect on Acts 20:28.
When you find yourself shamed into silence when confronted by non-Christians, be encouraged with 2 Tim. 1:8-12.
When you find yourself experiencing prejudice against those of another race or culture, memorize and act upon the truth of Rom. 1:16; 2 Cor. 5:14-16; Eph. 2:11ff.; Revelation 5.
When you struggle with pride and boasting in your own achievements, be humbled by Rom. 3:27-28; 1 Cor. 1:18-25, 30-31.
When you feel despair and hopelessness, let Rom. 5:1-10 restore your confidence.
When you feel defeated by sin and hopeless ever to change, delight yourself in Rom. 7:24-25.
When you feel condemned by God for your multiple, repeated failures, speak aloud the words of Rom. 8:1.
When you lack power to resist conforming to the world, consider Rom. 12:1-2; Gal. 6:14.
When you feel weak and powerless, be energized by Rom. 16:25.
When you are tempted sexually, never forget 1 Cor. 6:18-20.

And again, when you find yourself saying . . .

I'm not having any impact in life or on others, be uplifted by 2 Cor. 12:9-10.
I feel guilty and filled with shame all the time for my sins, be reminded of Eph. 1:7.
I live in constant fear, be encouraged by Luke 12:32; Rev. 2:9-11.
I struggle with anxiety and worry about everything, don't neglect the truth of Matt. 6:25-34; Phil. 4:6-7; 1 Pet. 5:6-7.
I am defined and controlled by my past, look to 2 Cor. 5:17.
I live in fear that God will abandon me, consider his promise in Rom. 8:35-38.
I can't break free of my sins and bad habits, linger long with Rom. 6:6,14.
I'm afraid to pray and fear that God will mock my petitions, take heart from Heb. 4:14-16.
I carry grudges against those who've wronged me and live in bitterness towards them, reflect and meditate on Col. 3:12-13.
I can't find strength to serve others, fearing that I'll be taken advantage of by them, let Phil. 2:5-11; and Mark 10:45 have their way in your life.
I'm a spiritual orphan and belong to no one, rejoice in Gal. 4:4-7.

Each of these texts refers to the gospel of what God has done for us in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ and each text applies that gospel truth to the particular problem noted. These, then, are just a handful of the ways that the gospel affects all of life, all of ministry, and everything we seek to be and do and accomplish as Christians and as local churches.

That is why Paul wanted to preach the gospel to the Christians in Rome. And that is why I continually preach the gospel to you here in OKC.