

“Gospel Relationships”
Romans 1:8-15
September 18, 2022

INTRODUCTION:

It’s important to remember that Romans is a letter and not a theological treatise. The difference is that a letter is a personal communication, while a treatise is an explanation of a particular topic. When you read someone’s letters, you can begin to see that person’s heart. A treatise might give you insight into a person’s intellect, but a letter reveals more of the whole person. Over the years, I have read many books by Francis Schaeffer. But it was only after reading his collected letters that I felt like I had come to know the man himself.

In today’s passage from Romans, its quality as a letter is obvious, and it reveals to us Paul’s heart for people. Though he knew some of the Christians in Rome, most were unknown to him. Yet his loving heart toward them is obvious. The gospel that Paul has believed and that he proclaims has changed Paul into a man with a loving heart. The gospel will have that same effect on us, helping us learn how to love people.

I suppose there has always been a need for people to learn better how to love others and how to have good relationships, but it seems to me that this need is greater today than normal. As we emerge from the pandemic and its isolating effects upon people, it feels like we all need something of a refresher course on relating to others. What’s more, the pandemic began at a time when we were already experiencing epidemic levels of loneliness in our nation. A recent study by the Harvard Graduate School of Education reported that 61% of young adults aged 18-25 and 51% of mothers with young children rated themselves as seriously lonely. According to this report, “About half of lonely young people in our survey reported that not a single person in the past few weeks had ‘taken more than just a few minutes’ to ask how they are doing in a way that seemed genuinely caring.” The results of such loneliness include such things as premature death and a wide array of serious physical and emotional problems, such as depression, anxiety, heart disease, substance abuse, and domestic abuse.

It may seem to many that today’s passage is nothing more than some polite words before Paul gets to the good stuff. On the contrary, it shows us some of the practical effects of believing the gospel in the way we live and relate to one another. I note three qualities of gospel relationships in these verses.

I. He Begins with Encouragement – v. 8

Paul begins with the word “first,” leading us to think that he’s going to make at least a second point. But the expected second point is never made. Perhaps, then, this is just Paul’s way of emphasizing the importance of what he’s about to say. He wants the Romans to know that he thanks God for them. In particular, he is thankful **“because [their] faith is proclaimed in all the world”** (v. 8). He means that Christians everywhere are encouraged to know that there are believers in Rome. Rome was at the heart of political power at this time as well as the source of the idolatry of emperor worship. But now the kingdom of God has spread even to this city that represents all things opposed to Christianity. In our day, it would be like hearing of a revival in New England, where Christianity and churches have been on the decline for so long. Paul has heard of a growing church in Rome, and he is thankful because he knows that it will encourage Christians everywhere.

It is significant that Paul begins like this, with a word of encouragement and thanks instead of a word of criticism. It’s not that there is no fault to be found with the Christians in Rome. This church consisted of both Jews and Gentiles, and it would seem from some of what Paul writes that the Gentiles outnumbered the Jews. Tensions and conflicts were present between these groups, and Paul will address much of that later in his letter. It is important to remember that much of Paul’s effort was to bring reconciliation between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. That was one of the reasons for his big project of collecting funds from largely Gentile churches in order to help the struggling Jewish Christians back in Israel. So these tensions between Jews and Gentiles in the church at Rome must have brought pain to Paul.

Are you the kind of person who first sees what’s wrong with someone or who sees first what’s right with a person? Is the default of your heart to find in another something to affirm or something to criticize? It is a gospel trait to affirm and encourage first rather than to criticize. How is that a gospel trait? We can begin to answer that question when we understand what’s behind the instinct to criticize. It is often fueled by guilt. It makes us feel better about ourselves to point out the faults of others. To do so, however, is a blatant denial of the gospel. The gospel says that any who are in Christ have all that they need in him. They are forgiven; they are sons and daughters of God Almighty; and they are loved and accepted unconditionally. When our first move with others is to find fault, we are in effect saying, “I can have a relationship with you only after you’ve dealt with this issue.” The gospel says, on the other hand, God has loved you and died for you not *because* you’ve straightened up your life, but *before* you straightened up your life. That is nowhere as clear as in Romans 5:8. **“But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”**

The gospel calls us to make our first move with people one of encouragement and affirmation. Whether it’s in the area of parenting,

evangelism, or just in our normal relationships in church, the gospel teaches us to see what a person could be by God's help. We see that because we experience it in the love of Jesus for us.

II. He Prioritizes Presence – v. 9-13

Paul was eager to be present with the Christians in Rome. Note the way he speaks of this, beginning in verse 9. He says that he is praying for them “without ceasing,” and his request is that he **“may now at last succeed in coming to you”** (v. 10). He assures them that this is the case, and not mere flattery, by invoking God as his witness. His language is quite strong. The word for “ask” in verse 10, where he says that he is asking God for the opportunity to visit the Romans, is a word that means to plead for something, with a connotation of urgency. It's the word you would use if your child is seriously injured in some way and you ask God to intervene and save that child's life. The next verse contains another word expressing Paul's strong desire to be present with the believers in Rome. He says, **“For I long to see you”** (v. 11). The word for “longing” is an emphatic word used elsewhere for the longing of a nursing infant for its mother's milk.

Why was Paul so eager to visit the Christians in Rome? He says that he wants to do so **“that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you”** (v. 11). This cannot mean the gifts of the Spirit that are referred to in such passages as 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12, because the Bible is clear that these gifts are imparted by the Holy Spirit and not by an apostle. We can understand his meaning by an alternate translation of the word “impart.” According to some scholars, it would be better translated “share.” Paul wants to share his spiritual gift to strengthen their faith.

This is one of the values of God's people being present with one another. We are able to share the gifts God has given us with others, for their benefit. The gifts God gives us are not for us alone, but are intended to benefit others in the church. God had gifted Paul with many gifts. He was an apostle, a teacher, a prophet, and at times a miracle worker. All these gifts were given to strengthen the church. Note too the mutual nature of this. The result of this desired visit would be **“that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine”** (v. 12). Paul did not have the condescending view that he would show up and rain down on the Romans all these pearls of wisdom in a one-sided transaction. While it is certainly true that Paul was massively gifted and had much good to bring to the Romans, he believed that he too would benefit from being with them.

It is in your best interests to prioritize being present with God's people. By God's grace, this element of mutuality is always present, no matter the difference in maturity levels of those who are face-to-face with one another.

Does that extend to teaching the four-year old Sunday School class? If you've ever taught children, you will know the answer to that question. They too encourage our faith as we are with them. This is God's design for the fellowship of God's people with one another.

If Paul was so anxious to visit Rome, why had he not done so by now? **“I want you to know, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented)”** (v. 13). Paul had planned on multiple occasions to come to Rome, but it seemed that something always came up to prevent the trip. Perhaps some of these obstacles are the sufferings mentioned in 2 Corinthians 11, his many imprisonments, countless beatings, and multiple shipwrecks.

Two practical points arise from this. First, it is necessary to plan times to be present with God's people. Paul made plans to visit Rome. It was a priority for him, and this priority was expressed in an intentional plan to come to Rome. Paul took the initiative for making this happen, rather than passively waiting on others to do so. If we are to benefit from such things as the corporate worship of the church and small group fellowship, it is necessary to incorporate those things in our plans. Though I didn't read the column, I saw the title of a recent David Brooks piece. It was something like, “If there are so many lonely people in our nation, why don't they just pair up with one another?” Perhaps one of the reasons is that something prevents them from taking the initiative to plan to do so.

Though Paul made plans to visit Rome, he was prevented from doing so. This is an example of Proverbs 19:21. **“Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand.”** When we make our plans, not even apostles are given the advantage of knowing the future. Yet we are still directed to make plans, while also submitting those plans to the Lord. We submit because we understand that God knows things we don't know, and we trust his love for us. Though we don't know the mind of God as to why he overruled Paul's plans to visit Rome, we can say that it is unlikely that we would have this letter to the Romans if Paul's initial plans to visit Rome had succeeded. The reason he is writing to them now is to present the foundational truths he would normally have taught them while face-to-face with them.

Let's mention one application before moving on. There's a difference between being digitally present and face-to-face present. Perhaps one of the reasons for the high rates of loneliness of young adults from 18 to 25 is an over-reliance upon digital presence. A text or e-mail is just not the same as being present with someone and looking them in the eye. Once again, the gospel helps us with this aspect of our personal relationships. God's love has been expressed in the incarnation, in coming to be present with his fallen image-bearers.

III. He Pays his Debts – v. 14-15

When Paul says that he is “under obligation,” the literal word is that he is in debt. What did he mean? There are two ways you can be indebted to someone. First, you can be in debt by borrowing money from someone. Second, you can be in debt by someone entrusting something of value to you and asking you to pass it along to someone else. It is this second sense in which Paul says he is obligated, or in debt. He has been entrusted with the most valuable possession anyone can have, the good news of God’s action to rescue the fallen race. In the old saying that sharing the gospel is just one beggar telling another beggar where he can find bread, Paul has been shown the mother-load of bread and now has an obligation to tell other beggars about it.

It has been said that the ground is level at the foot of the cross, and Paul’s next words express that thought. He is indebted **“both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish”** (v. 14). These were class distinctions in Paul’s day. By “Greeks,” Paul doesn’t mean those who were native to Greece. Rather, he is speaking of those who would have been at the top of the social ladder. The barbarians would be those on the bottom, at least according to the world of Paul’s day. The wise were the well-educated and the foolish the uneducated. Paul neither curried the favor of the well-connected nor ignored the needs of the forgotten lower classes.

As an expression of his obligation, he said, **“So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome”** (v. 15). Note here that Paul believed that it wasn’t just non-Christians who needed to hear the gospel, but Christians as well. The “you” to whom he is speaking here are the ones addressed in the letter back in verse 7: **“those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints.”**

CONCLUSION:

Are you aware that you need the gospel preached to you? Did you know that your relational problems are rooted in the failure to believe the gospel? When you see a group of friends doing something fun and special on social media and you feel the pain of being excluded, did you know that the gospel is the medicine you need? The gospel says that you are included in the most significant club in the universe, the family of God. Entry into that club is not by being related to the right people, or by accomplishments of note, or by having enough money. Quite the contrary, entry comes by being poor of spirit through the humility of recognizing and confessing your sin. And it comes through receiving the grace of God through Jesus to pay for your sin completely. And through Jesus, you have everything. Believing this changes everything, and our need is to believe it every day, including today.

Discussion Questions

Romans 1:8-15

1. It's important to remember that Romans is a letter, and the qualities of a letter are particularly in evidence in this passage. Can you remember a significant letter or note you've received?
2. Personal letters used to be far more common than they are today. Is there still a place for handwritten, personal letters or notes in our age of texting, e-mails, and social media posts? Might there be opportunities for such letters or notes to be used for good?
3. Paul begins by thanking God for the Romans and their faith. Though he has some correction to offer them (which he will get to later), he begins with a word of encouragement instead of a word of criticism. Most of us find it easier to be critical than encouraging. Why do you think that is? How does the gospel help us learn to encourage others first?
4. Can you think of an example of the power of encouragement and affirmation, either in your life or in the life of someone else?
5. It is clear that Paul was eager to visit the believers in Rome. His unceasing prayer request was that God might provide a way for that to happen (v. 9-10). He valued being present. We have recently experienced the lack of such presence in the isolation brought about by the COVID pandemic. What did you find most difficult about that lack of face-to-face presence?
6. How is face-to-face presence a gospel trait? Are there steps you need to take to increase this feature of presence with others?
7. Though Paul made plans to visit the Romans, he reported that he had been prevented thus far from doing so. How does Proverbs 19:21 apply to this? "Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand." Can you think of a time in your life when God blocked your plans, and now you see that the reason for that was to do something better than you thought?
8. Paul said that he was eager to preach the gospel to the Christians in Rome (v. 15). Why did he feel it necessary to preach the gospel to Christians? Is there some application that has to your life?