

"The Longings of Paul"
Sermon Series on *The Fifth Gospel* #2
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First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC
January 10, 2021
(Rm. 1:8-17)

Introduction.

Jerry Clower was a southern comedian who used to tell stories of growing up in the rural South. One story he told was about a time when he and his family were eating supper over and Uncle Versey and Aunt Pearl Ledbetter's house one Sunday evening. The way Jerry tells it, "Everybody was enjoying the meal, eating up a storm, and fried chicken was the main dish.

It got down to one piece of chicken left on the platter, and everybody was eye-balling it, wanting some kind of bad. But no one dared to take it, 'cause it weren't good manners. All of a sudden, a gust of wind came through the window and blew out all of the candles on the table. Then there was a scream. Aunt Pearl rushed to get the candles relit, and when she did, there we saw Uncle Versey Ledbetter's hand on top of that piece of chicken with 5 forks stabbed in the back of it!"

All the members of Jerry extended family knew the meaning of the word "longing" that night. They were longing for that extra piece of chicken. What are you longing for this morning? Is it for this pandemic to be over? I sure am. It's getting very old, isn't it? I'm sure we all long for the craziness in Washington to settle down and for the lawmakers to get along and work together. Perhaps you're longing to fit into your jeans again after all the feasting over Christmas. I need to lose a few pounds myself. What are you longing for?

This morning we look at a passage which speaks of the longings of the apostle Paul. In the book of Romans Paul was writing to a group of believers he had never met before, and yet reading the words of this passage, one gets the feeling that Paul has genuine affection for them. He affirms them as a church, and he expresses his deep longing to see them.

As we take a look at this passage, there are three matters I want to emphasize this morning: 1) the thankfulness of Paul; 2) the longings of Paul; and 3) and the Gospel of Paul.

I. The Thankfulness of Paul.

The first thing Paul expresses after his customary greeting was a note of thankfulness for the Christians in Rome. There are three questions I want to ask and answer in regard to verses 8-10. Who does he thank, why is he thankful, and what was the result of his gratitude? **First, "Who did Paul thank?"** Notice that the apostle expressed his gratitude to God the Christians in Rome. God is the giver of all good gifts, and we should be grateful to Him for the wonderful things that come our way, especially the people we meet and the friends we make. God should be the first recipient of our gratitude.

The **second question** is **"Why was Paul thankful?"** We're given the answer in verse 8 where the apostle writes, "... because your faith is being reported all over the world." The

believers in Rome had developed an international reputation for faithfulness that was known the world over, and they were renowned for the depth and quality of their faith.

What a great thing to be known for. Have you ever known a person you thought was full of faith? Dr. Christy Wilson was a former professor of mine in seminary, and he was a remarkable person of faith. He had an amazing capacity to trust God, and it was inspiring, and it made you want to be like him. His life was a walking example of humble dependence on the Lord for everything. I remember thinking, "I wish I had faith like Dr. Wilson."

What are you known for as a believer? What kind of reputation do you have as a follower of Christ? And what kind of reputation does our church have in this community and around the country?

I asked several people this week, "If our church could be known for one thing, what do you think it should be?" The answers that were given are very interesting. One person said, "First Pres should be known as a church which isn't afraid to address problems in Winston-Salem in a Christ-centered and biblical way." Another person said, "I want us to be known as a church that lives on Mission and lives as Jesus would." Still another said they wanted our church to be known for helping people see Jesus more clearly through worship, teaching the Gospel, and how we act towards others in our community. These are all good things for our church to be known for, and we should aspire to make them a reality.

The **final question** I want to ask and answer regarding Paul's thankfulness is, "**What was the result of his gratitude?**" We read in verses 9 and 10 that his thankfulness prompted him to pray for the Christians in Rome, and the passage says that he prayed "*at all times*" for them. In other words, the believers in Rome were a regular part of his prayer life. He interceded on their behalf, and he lifted their needs up to the Lord. That's an amazing statement given the burden of prayer Paul must have felt for all the churches he had planted over the years. The apostle also added that he prayed now that a way might be open for him to go to Rome because he wanted to meet them face to face.

When you're thankful for someone, it should prompt you to pray for them. Remember to lift up to God those individuals who have made a special impact on your life and ask the Lord to bless them. Prayer is one of the greatest and most powerful tools with which we can express our thankfulness for another person, because in prayer we tap into the eternal and limitless resources of heaven and bring the power of God to bear in a person's life.

II. The Longings of Paul.

We read in verses 11-13 that Paul had developed a deep desire to visit the followers of Jesus in Rome, and he expresses it this way, "*I long to see you....*" This is a term of affection one might expect to see in a note from a boyfriend to a girlfriend, but Paul uses it to describe his feelings for the followers of Jesus in the city of Rome.

There are three things for which Paul longed for in this passage. **First, he longed to see them.** I suspect all of us can relate to this longing of the apostle. This time of isolation and separation has created a deep desire for all of us to see family and friends from whom we've been prevented getting together with because of the threat of Covid-19. I sure have missed seeing all of you in worship, and it's just not the same being in this sanctuary without you. I long for the day when this pandemic is under control, the numbers decline, the vaccine is widely distributed, and we can gather together again in worship.

Second, Paul longed to impart some spiritual gift to the Christians in Rome. *"I long to see you that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong" (1:11).* The word that is translated "spiritual gift" here is the Greek word *charismata*. Its root word means "grace." It is the same word the apostle uses elsewhere when he talks about spiritual gifts like the gifts of healing, giving, speaking in tongues, teaching, and so forth. So, what does Paul mean here? I suspect he wanted to use his spiritual gifts as a preacher and a teacher for the church's benefit in Rome. Certainly, there would be a great blessing for any group of believers to have someone like Paul come and teach them. It would be like N.T. Wright or Tim Keller writing us and saying they would like to come and preach at our church. Just name the day!

The **third** thing that Paul says **he longed** for was **to be encouraged by them.** *"I long to see you..., that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith" (11,12).* The ministry of believers to one another is intended to be a mutual blessing. Oftentimes ministry can feel like a one-way street where one party takes more than it gives. All of us need to be blessed, and all of us need to be encouraged. And that's especially true for spiritual leaders. The elders and deacons who will be ordained and installed later today need it, and so do your missionaries around the world in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Egypt, Guatemala, and Kenya. Your staff needs encouragement, as do your pastors. It's easy to get discouraged in life and in ministry, and it feels like there has never been since I was ordained when people have been so ready to criticize those in leadership as they are today. A kind word of encouragement can make a world of difference.

I have a friend who gave a sermon once in which he contrasted two kinds of people. The first kind of person he called a **basement person**. They're the sort of individual who calls you from below. They seek to bring you down by complaining and griping, and they are very draining people. The other kind of person he called a **balcony person**. They are the sort of individual who calls you from above. They lift your spirits. They bring you up, and they fill you with encouragement and affirmation. My friend's charge in his sermon was to be a balcony person. That's good advice. What kind of person are you?

I remember earlier in my ministry at another church I had an administrative assistant who knew that I was particularly down about some matters in the church over which I was troubled. Do you know what she did? She made a Book of Encouragement for me, and it was such a special gift. It had words of affirmation, sayings of encouragement, and pictures of joy. That little gift was such a blessing to me, and it turned my whole world around. For whom can you be a balcony person in the coming week.

III. The Gospel of Paul.

In vv. 14-16 we read, *"I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome. I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes...."*

Here Paul makes three strong affirmations about his desire to preach the gospel in Rome, and he says, "I am *obligated*, I am *eager*, and I am *not ashamed*." The reasons these affirmations are so striking is that they are a direct antithesis to the attitude that is found in many of us today who claim Christ as Lord and Savior.

Nowadays people tend to regard evangelism as an optional extra activity, and they think they're doing God a favor if they share their faith. The attitude today with many American Christians is reluctance as it relates to sharing the gospel, and if we're honest, many of us are actually embarrassed by the gospel and we're worried that people will think less of us or that we might be rejected if we actually try to persuade someone about the truth of Christianity.

Paul had just as many reasons to feel reluctant or embarrassed about the gospel as we do today. Rome was the symbol of imperial power and pride, and Christianity was a tiny sect of believers which was persecuted by both Jewish leaders and Roman authorities alike. Some people claimed that Christians were cannibals because they talked about eating the body and blood of Jesus in communion. Others thought Christians were foolish and empty-headed to worship a weak Savior who allowed Himself to be humiliated and crucified. Despite all this, Paul overcame any feelings of insecurity and fear, and he boldly declared, "I am obligated; I am eager; and I am not ashamed."

A. I am obligated. It was a universal obligation. Paul said that he was obligated to both Greeks and non-Greeks, to the educated and the uneducated, to the wise and to the foolish. There was no regard for race, culture, sophistication, or social standing. God is concerned about the whole world, and the followers of Jesus Christ need to be, too! If the gospel has come to us, we have no right to keep it to ourselves, and no one can claim a monopoly on the gospel. Good news is for sharing, and we are under an obligation to make it known to other people.

In the book of 2 Kings chapter 7, there is a story about four men who suffered from leprosy in the city of Samaria who in desperation went over to the Aramean army in order to surrender. The Arameans had laid siege to Samaria, which was the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel at the time, and the result was a severe famine. The lepers figured that if they stayed in Samaria they would die of starvation, and the worst the Arameans could do would be to kill them. They hoped the Arameans would have pity on them and give them something to eat.

When the men arrived at the camp, they found it deserted. It seems that the Lord had caused the Aramean army to scatter the night before by a miraculous disturbance, and they thought they were being attacked. When the lepers discovered the camp completely deserted, they went from tent to tent, eating to their hearts' desire, and they were able to collect a great deal of silver and gold, too. Then one of the lepers said, "*We are not doing right. This is a day of good news, and we are keeping it to ourselves. If we wait until daylight punishment will overtake us. Let us go at once and report this to the royal palace*" (2 Kings 7:9).

Friends, you and I have been given some very good news about the love of God in Christ. Are we keeping it to ourselves? We have an obligation to share it, and God's judgment will overtake us if we fail to make known His grace to others.

B. I am eager. Paul said, "*I am eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome.*" The picture that I have in my mind of Paul's eagerness is that of an athlete who is eager for the game to start, an actress who is eager for the play to begin, or a parent who is eager to see a child who has been away and is coming for a visit. The heart is pounding; there is enthusiasm, anticipation, and desire. Paul was eager, not reluctant, to share the good news with the Romans. Do you have that same eagerness?

C. I am not ashamed. James Stewart was a famous preacher in Scotland in the middle-1900s. Once he gave a sermon on this passage in which he made this perceptive observation:

"There is no sense in declaring that you aren't ashamed of something unless you have been tempted to feel ashamed of it before."¹ Without a doubt Paul knew this temptation. He himself told the believers in the city of Corinth that he had come to them in weakness and fear, and with much trembling (1 Cor. 2:3). Paul knew that the message of the cross was foolishness to some people and weakness to others. Whenever the gospel is faithfully proclaimed, it always arouses opposition and contempt, and sometimes even ridicule.

Paul knew this, and yet he overcame the temptation to be ashamed of the gospel by remembering that the very same message which some people despised and rejected because of its weakness was the very power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. He understood that this message of good news is the only hope that a lost and broken world has of finding peace, everlasting life, and the reconciliation of all things. The source of Paul's pride was the gospel, and he wasn't ashamed of it. If God has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus,

if He has forgiven our sins,

if He has made us His children,

if He has put His Spirit within us,

if He has brought us into the family of God,

how can we possibly be ashamed of this gospel?

Jesus boldly warned His followers, *"Whoever acknowledges Me before others, I will also acknowledge before My Father in heaven. But whoever disowns Me before others, I will disown before My Father in heaven" (Mt. 10:32)*. Are you ashamed of the gospel, or are you willing to take a stand for Jesus, even when it may cost you? Think about it.

Conclusion/Application.

There is much more that I would like to say about this passage, but we don't have the time today. It will have to wait for another sermon. However, as I close, I do want to say a little bit more about a tiny phrase that it tucked away in the middle of this passage. The apostle writes, *"I thank my God, whom I serve with my whole heart..." (Rm. 1:9)*.

Let me ask you, what do you do with your whole heart? In what areas of your life would you say you're whole-hearted? Is it in your work? Is it your love for your kids, or your spouse, or that special someone in your life? Is it in how you play sports or the way you root for your favorite team? Maybe it's your schoolwork, or perhaps a special hobby – something you just love to do. What do you do with your whole heart? Paul lived a life of whole-hearted devotion to the Lord, and we would do well to follow his example. Think about serving the Lord with the same passion, the same commitment, the same intensity, and the same zeal with which you do some of the other things in your life. You'll be amazed at the difference it can make in your life.

Many people think that the great Reformer John Calvin (who is regarded as the father of Presbyterianism) was a stern and cold person. But do you know what his motto was? If you look at the image on the screen, you'll see that below Calvin's portrait is a symbol. And the symbol is an open hand with a heart in it. Calvin's motto was, "I give my heart to you, O Lord, promptly and sincerely." May that be your motto, your prayer, in the coming week, too. Be whole-hearted for Jesus. Amen.

¹Cited by John R. W. Stott, *Romans*, p. 60.