

Sermons through

Romans

God-Given Faith

Romans 1:8

With Study Questions

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Romans 1:8

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world. ⁹ For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of His Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers, ¹⁰ making request if, by some means, now at last I may find a way in the will of God to come to you. ¹¹ For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift, so that you may be established – ¹² that is, that I may be encouraged together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me (Romans 1:8-12).

Introduction

Prior to and along with being a pastor of this church, I have held the roles of youth pastor, coach, teacher, volunteer, para-church minister, short-term missionary, etc, both locally and outside the area. At some level, I would hope, I was seeking to honor God with these efforts, whether they were directly ministerial (such as a youth pastor) or indirectly (such as a coach or teacher).

One of the tools I have used in my own heart to evaluate the genuine nature of my love and concern for these past acts of service or ministry is whether or not I still care about them. Am I at all concerned with past churches, schools, organizations or mission fields where I once served? Or were those things sort of stepping stone jobs I had which led to other jobs and now here I am at my final job with my final customers?¹ I must ask myself, is my ministry about where I end up, or should I approach with an altogether different disposition?

Having completed his salutation, Paul now begins his introduction. And we will see in his introduction heartfelt love and concern for brothers and sisters in Christ whom Paul had not even yet met.

¹ This is not to belittle “jobs” of any sort. Good workers will often be considerate of former customers, even when it is no longer to their financial advantage to serve them.

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world (Romans 1:8)

First

He begins as if he's starting a list of things; "First" he writes. But further examination reveals that there is no "secondly." Paul could just be saying that he's going to say this before he says something else, but since there is no "secondly" it is possible for us to understand this brief introduction to be above the remainder of the entire epistle in terms of importance or priority. Paul uses the same root word when he speaks of himself:

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the *foremost* (1 Timothy 1:15 – italics mine).

And of the preeminence of Christ:

He is the image of the invisible God, the *firstborn* of all creation (Colossians 1:15 – italics mine).

Before Paul enters into his theological arguments (of which there will be many) he wants his readers to know how thankful he is to God for their faith.

Faith

What conclusion can we draw that Paul is thankful to God for the faith of Christians? Paul thanks God for their faith because God is the giver of it. Thanking God for something is not the same as thanking a person in that we thank a person partially but thank God in totality. For example, when I thank my wife for a meal she has prepared, I am thanking her for her part in it (she purchased the food, prepared it, set the table, etc.)

But when I thank God for the meal I am thanking Him for everything (for the farmer who works, the crops that grow, the workers that harvest, the trucks that deliver, the grocery store that sells, my wife that buys and

prepares, my mouth that eats and on and on). Paul is not engaging in meaningless chatter when he thanks God for their faith (which likely speaks of the totality of their religion) the way people may thank God when they win an award. Paul recognizes in a very legitimate sense that their faith is the fruit of God's grace.

Jesus is the author of faith (Hebrews 12:2); the apostles appeal to Christ for increased faith (Luke 17:5); Peter acknowledges God as the one who grants repentance (Acts 5:31) as does Paul (2 Timothy 2:25). This confirms our early assertion that Romans, above all, is an epistle about God.

I doubt there was a person in that church who would have taken offense at Paul being thankful to God for an attribute found in them; quite the opposite I suspect – they would rejoice to know that the very faith they found in themselves did not proceed from man or through man – their belief in Christ was not by birth, blood, **“nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12, 13).**

Through Jesus Christ

Let us make note that even the thankfulness Paul extends toward God is through Jesus Christ. So wretched is man (Romans 7:24) and so pure are the eyes of God that He cannot **“see evil...(or) look at wrong” (Habakkuk 1:13).** We often tack the name of Christ onto the end of our petitions like a sort of holy credit card that seals the transaction. Instead we should recognize, every time we use the name of Christ in our prayers that these words testify to our own sinfulness and full dependence upon the grace of God for any good thing – including the very faith by which we are saved.

Our very praises would be a stench in the face of God apart from the blood of Christ. For this reason the author of Hebrews writes:

Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of *our* lips, giving thanks to His name (Hebrews 13:15).

My God

Perhaps all this talk of man's sin against the backdrop of God's holiness perpetuates a sentiment of distance between that two – the God out there who I can never seem to please! But Paul's use of the first person, genitive, singular (literally, "the God of me") seems to suggest otherwise. Might I propose that it was Paul's acknowledgment of his being the "foremost" of sinners (which itself was by the grace of God) that was the first step (at least in his experience) toward granting him this great intimacy.

Notice in the passage below how God is the primary active force in a passage which culminates with this wonderful expression of intimacy.

Their children also shall be as before, And their congregation shall be established before Me; And I will punish all who oppress them. ²¹Their nobles shall be from among them, And their governor shall come from their midst; Then I will cause him (him either referring typologically to Christ or representing all the people) to draw near, And he shall approach Me; For who *is* this who pledged his heart to approach Me?' says the Lord. ²²You shall be My people, And I will be your God (Jeremiah 30:20-22 – parenthesis mine).

The faithful can call upon God in a very personal and possessive way – not in such a way as to define God which is so popular today with the preface "My God is a God who does or doesn't do such and such a thing" generally followed by some abject denial of the attributes of God found in Scripture. On the contrary, it is the very God of Scripture – the Righteous, Holy, Creator, Judge who cannot look at sin and will in no way acquit the guilty (Numbers 14:18) that Paul calls His God.

How, but by counting as rubbish, the entirety of human excellence that he/we might found Christ "**not having my own righteousness, which *is* from the law, but that which *is* through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith**" (Philippians 3:9)?

The Whole World

Paul continues his commendation and encouragement by informing the Christians in Rome that the knowledge of their faith is widespread. One thing we learn here is the proper use of biblical language – the whole world *holos kosmos* certainly didn't include the Mayans and Aztecs but a large portion of the Roman Empire; and even then it didn't likely include the testimony of pagans which were by far the dominant population. This knowledge may be helpful when examining the use of those words in other contexts.

But we might finish by asking why Paul would write this? Perhaps due to the encouragement Christians need in the face of their many detractors. At some level those who put their faith into public should expect discouragement. It was with this obvious anticipation that Jesus preached:

Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. ¹² Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matthew 5:11, 12).

Not that it is always easy to ignore or even rejoice in the face evil, but it is the necessary consequence of taking rank against the world and its ways. One might do an evaluation to find it is it entirely absent from one's life and why.

Though we should have the conviction to do our works to be seen by the Father rather than men (Matthew 6:5), we also need to recognize our human weakness and the need for encouragement – as Paul will discuss in verse twelve.

This was a source of encouragement for the faithful who were outnumbered by pagans a thousand to one – how much more encouraged ought we be having seen the power of the gospel of Christ far along in that promise that it would cover the earth (Isaiah 11:9).

Questions for Study

1. With what kind of disposition should we approach our ministerial efforts (page 2)?
2. Why do you suppose Paul begins with the word “first” but then doesn’t have a “second” (page 3)?
3. Why does Paul thank God for their faith? What are the implications of this (pages 3, 4)?
4. Why do Christians pray “through Jesus Christ”? What does this tell us about ourselves (page 4)?
5. God is holy, Paul was a sinner. How does he have the right to call God “My God” (page 5)?
6. When the Bible talks about the “whole world” does that always include every last single person (page 6)?
7. Why do you suppose Paul tells these Christians about their faith being spoken of through the whole world (page 6)?