

Gospel Devotion

Romans 1:8-13

We have some great heights and great depths before us in Romans 1:14-17 and 18-32.

But first we come the great lengths Paul is taking to come to Rome. And why? Because of the great breadth of the gospel to all mankind!

This section really raises a great question. How could it be possible that the Apostle to the Gentiles has been so late in coming to the Capital of the Gentile world? That question is behind Paul's lengthy defense of why he has not come yet.

This gives us a great window to look into the heart of Paul. What a model for us! Here is Paul the grateful songster in 8; Paul a priestly servant in 9a; Paul a constant petitioner/prayer in 9b-10a; Paul a passionate traveler – 10b; and in verse 11, Paul a lover of the saints; Paul a generous giver; and Paul a purposeful builder. Paul is an appreciative receiver – 12; a patient waiter upon God – 13a; and Paul a spiritual farmer, seeking a harvest – 13b.

You can see why there is a struggle to title this passage. It could just as easily have been Gospel Giving, Gospel Generosity, Gospel Serving, Gospel Desires, Gospel Dedication, or Gospel Fruit.

But we have called it Gospel Devotion – Paul's devotion to yet unseen believers, of whom he has heard. And that Gospel Devotion flows in two directions, which form our two points today. First, Paul's Devotion to His God and Savior, and Second, Paul's Devotion to Serving God's People, the Saints, at Rome.

Do you see how these are two sides of the same coin? Can we really be close to God and love our Lord Jesus, and not love and serve His

people? Can we really be a good churchman and love one another, when our hearts are cold to our heavenly Father, or if we grieve the Holy Spirit?

Let us come to Paul's Devotion to the Lord.

Paul begins with thanksgiving, with gratitude, not to the Romans, but to God and for the faith He has given to them there in the capital.

Paul says first but he never says second! Maybe that is because he is greatly excited in this moment and has much greater matters before him.

Thanksgiving is not unique to Paul's greetings. All his letters, with the exception of Galatians, for clear reasons, start out with gratitude to God in Christ. That is a good model for us; this is the will of God for you, to give thanks in everything.

But there is more here, for the expression used is unique when he says "through Jesus Christ".

Paul just mentioned grace in verse 7, the Greek word "charis", where we get the name Charissa, from. And now in verse 8, he says "eu-charis", the word for "thanksgiving". See how Christ is at the center of giving grace to us, and our prayers and devotions to the Father.

Paul is saying that God is MY God precisely because Jesus is My Savior. He who has the Son has the Father. And this results in a two-way road: through Christ, grace comes to us, and through Christ, our gratitude is conveyed to God.

As Paul writes miles and miles away from Corinth to Rome in the west, he begins not with the horizontal but the vertical; and with the most central quality of apostolic Christianity – GRACE!

Erskine wrote: 'in the NT religion is grace, and ethics is gratitude.'

Paul is moved to praise and thanks by the testimony of these far-off brothers and sisters in Jesus, and he lets them know it. How often are we expressing heart-felt gratitude to God in prayer? And how often expressing praise verbally to those we love and hold dear?

Aren't our lips more free in letting people know of our ingratitude – of complaining! Like when driving! Or when someone fails you! Paul covered much in love and so should we.

Now let come to a second and very rich part of Paul's Gospel Devotion in verse 9. That word serve is a different word than in verse 1 – not a bond-servant, but this word is the root for worship; a worshipful servant. It is the same root in Romans 12:1 – rendered 'spiritual service of worship'.

This is a worshipping and priestly picture – Paul is a worshipper, serving God Himself, being radically God-centered.

He is a worshipping servant in the Gospel of His Son, in the preaching of the gospel. That is the right attitude in every servant of the pulpit. And add further that he so worshipfully serves with all his heart – 'whom I serve with my spirit' – not the Holy Spirit nor in a spirit of prayer, but in the depths of his being, with a full, internal, hearty love and dedication to the High King of heaven.

And wow – look what he says next! He says this as before God, before the eye of the Lord! "God knows!" God sees what is on the inside, as He looks upon the heart, and knows what is in man, whether we speak the truth or only put on a good face.

How solemnly, how seriously, does Paul take his Savior into all of his life and thought and service! How fully he adores and praises and thanks and serves and prays as a child of God, as before the throne of the Father!

Don't you wish you had half this devotion! Half this spirit! Half this fire! God is His vision, and it fills him, owns him, captures and keeps him, thrills and enthralls him so!

We have one more item under this heading – skipping his prayer-life for now as part of his devotion to the Roman believers. Look briefly at verse 10.

Paul is a man of purpose, a man of plans, a practical man full of objectives and holy schemes to bring men to the Savior, and the saved to greater faith and obedience. He is a go-getter! And don't we know that, having completed the book of Acts not so long ago!

But all of his planning and purposing and managing and striving, are placed squarely beneath the will of God. To use the Latin term, he says, "Deo Volente"! Lord willing, Lord willing, Lord willing.

Here is his humble disposition or attitude; not a false humility which obstructed or limited his plans, but a gracious, self-surrender to his Lord.

He exemplifies what James warned about in James 4:13-15:

¹³ Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit." ¹⁴ Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. ¹⁵ Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that." (Jam 4:13-15)

Paul willed, Paul desired – but all his willing and desiring was subject to the Lord's willing and desiring. God's will does not swallow up or remove man's willing. There is a synergy exemplified here in the Christian life. The man of God can work because God works; man can will because God wills. God's will is the foundation for man willing

and doing. And that is our strength, not our hindrance! It is not 50/50, but 100/100. Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it; but they have to labor with God's blessing. Paul asserts to the Colossians his philosophy, in 1:29 – 'For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.'

Let us stop here and ask some high and important questions of ourselves? Paul saw himself in God's hands, and labored all the more because of God's will in and over EVERYTHING.

Do you see your life in the same way? Is God working in you? Does He have the right to rule and overrule you? Are you stirred up to make plans in and for your Lord and Savior? Are they plans and purposes worthy of Him? The great missionary, William Carey, said: "Ask great things from God; attempt great things for God." Now what is great to each of us in our own unique and important callings will be different – not all are to march off to the mission field. Nevertheless, there is high calling before every believer – from the lowest to highest. What is yours? Are you pursuing it? Are you accomplishing it? Are you doing so by the blessing of God?

And if not, why not? What is it that is the hindrance? Stop here and note what it is, mark it, call it by name – and by the grace of God, seek to remove what obstacle stands between you and your faithfulness to your great and high King, Jesus.

Paul's Devotion to the Lord included thankful praise; whole-hearted, worshipful service before the eye of God; purposing all by His sovereign plan and desires.

Now that does not lead away from the world, but rather to be active and serving in the world, and particularly to the church.

This brings us to the second point of Gospel Devotion to the Saints at Rome, the well-beloved of God in these verses.

The lessons of 1 John 4 are here before us – the great love of God to us, must translate into love for the brethren.

We love, because He first loved us. If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also. (1Jo 4:19-21)

So we begin with Paul's devotion in prayer – v. 8, I thank my God... for you all. Why? Because he has taken an interest in them from their testimony. And then again in vv. 9-10, how unceasingly I make mention of you, always in my prayers making request.

It is not that Paul is saying this all he did all the time is pray for them, but when he prayed or as he prayed, he held these ones in his heart and interceded for them. The word for prayer here means to call on God out of a sense of need.

So this is a remarkable part of gospel love for fellow believers. He has never seen them, never met them. But their testimony has reached him in the Roman Empire. We know that the gospel had come to the capital just after Pentecost. So Christ is named under the nose of Caesar, under the shadow of the Imperial headquarters.

We should add that their testimony was not for some great feats of skill, or some great measure of faith or eccentric holiness. Rather it was for sound faith in the true gospel, and which became rich in their thought and life, as in Romans 15:14: *And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able also to admonish one another.*

There they are, out of sight but not out of mind, not out of the Apostle's heart. This is what walking by faith looks like – a spiritually

rich understanding of the One, Holy, True, Church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

WCF 26.1 All saints, that are united to Jesus Christ their Head, by His Spirit, and by faith, have fellowship with Him in His graces, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory: and, being united to one another in love, they have communion in each other's gifts and graces, and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man.

WCF 26.2 Saints by profession are bound to maintain a holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification; as also in relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities and necessities. Which communion, as God offers opportunity, is to be extended unto all those who, in every place, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus.

How sadly divided is the church today – how little do we enter into the lines of our hymn: “I love thy kingdom, Lord” – “For her my tears shall fall, for her my prayers ascend, for her my cares and toils be given till toils and cares shall end.”

This is where the love of the church has grown cold. Christians can be so eager to dig into the riches of a book like Romans – but they are cool to the ties and fellowship of the people of God; they are willing to pass on church attendance, to mention nothing of church membership.

But not Paul, who greets us at the door of this powerful book, with his own outlook.

And this brings us to a second quality of his devotion – his love to his brothers in Rome in wanting eagerly to see them.

Love, said Manton, is the desire to unite. And so here is this loving Apostle expressing his devotion to them in how much he has wanted to come to Rome to meet the people of God there.

He has his heart moved by their testimony. And if he cannot come to them, he carries them to the throne of God in prayer. This is the saint's help when at a distance and scattered.

But now he opens his desire, his devotion to them in verse 10, "may I succeed by the will of God to come to you"; in verse 11, "I long to see you"; and in verse 13, "often I have planned to come to you but have been prevented."

What prevented him was probably a mix of things: the ejection of all Jews from Rome in 44AD; Paul's church planting around the Aegean Sea; the collection for the poor Jewish believers in Jerusalem.

It is interesting that as Paul is saying that he will be coming to them soon, he is actually travelling the opposite direction to Jerusalem, to arrest and imprisonment, and to the sea journey at the end of the book of Acts.

So he puts at ease any question of his love for them. They are thinking, 'why hasn't Paul come to Rome? We have heard of his faith all throughout the world, but why does he not come to us?' Here is where Paul puts those questions to rest, and goes further – not only will I come to you in God's time, but here is my desire in so doing.

So, he devotedly prays for them, desires to come to them, and lastly, Paul is devoted to bearing fruit in his visit with them.

His purpose for the visit is not personal or historical. He is a citizen of the Roman Empire, and might have a natural curiosity to see the great city – if he had not already done so.

Remember, Tarsus was a cosmopolitan Roman city, so it may be that Saul had travelled to that place already.

Whatever the truth, he is earnest about a long-desired visit. But what is at the heart of that? Here then are three things of true Gospel Devotion – generosity, receptivity, and the Gospel Harvest.

He comes first of all – not to *receive* but to *give*; to impart gifts, spiritual gifts. These probably are not to be limited to the charismatic gifts, but all the gifts of God – the apostolic sign gifts as well the ongoing gifts of teaching, serving, leading – are all of the Spirit. See them mixed together in Romans 12:6-8 [read]. Wherever Paul went, both could be found in his effective service.

This gift bringing and gift giving has in mind, not the glory of the giver but the benefit of being strengthened. Paul does not see any particular weakness he would correct in them (as we heard earlier in Rom. 15.14 – full of goodness, full all knowledge). But strengthening the brethren; a great Greek word here – “starixthenai”, establish, make firm, and that by strengthening them in faith in the Lord Jesus.

Peter uses this word in 1 Peter 5:

⁸ *Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.* ⁹ *But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world.* ¹⁰ *After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and **establish** you.*

Paul immediately qualifies what he is talking about – this is not a one-way street but reciprocal concern. There is a co-encouragement, co-comforting and strengthening – sumparakaleo.

He assures them. Paul valued other believers and spiritually profited from their faith. We are taught that ministers are to be encouraged with their flocks.

Stott: “Happy is the missionary who goes to another country and culture in the same spirit of receptivity, anxious to receive as well as to give, to learn as well as to teach, to be encouraged as well as to encourage! And happy is the congregation who has a pastor of the same humble mind.”

None of us is set alone in the body of Christ; we have need of one another. How can we fulfill all the one another passages of the Bible on our own? And the church needs here undershepherds and servants as well.

Lastly, Paul’s Gospel Devotion aims at bearing fruit, or as some versions have it, a harvest. The fields are still white unto harvest in our day as it was in Paul’s. He aches to see that good fruit in the Lord’s vineyard.

Paul is following His Master, who taught in John 15 that He is the vine, the Father is the great planter, and that believers are his branches, bringing forth fruit.

¹⁶ "You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you. ¹⁷ This I command you, that you love one another. (Joh 15:16-17)

Paul’s life and passion, his devotion in the gospel to God and to the church, is like a bell ringing in our ears, that we too should be entering into this same spirit, this God-centered life, and the harvest work involved in bearing fruit for eternity.

That is what he had in his eyes – what counted most.

And what counts most for us is that what is before us, what is awaiting us, what is yet to be, is far, far greater than anything we have behind.

The harvest we are looking for is a new heavens and a new earth – where this world ultimately will end up by the power of God.

May we heed the sound of the Word today ringing in our ears.

WE must not continue thinking that we have plenty of time to fulfill our callings; as though the fields today will still be there for us tomorrow – they won't.

And yet what promise hangs over our speedy diligence today, responding by grace to this gospel call to serve, to share, to succeed in reaching the lost.

I close with this gripping poem found in Horatius Bonar's *Words to Winners of Souls*.

'Tis not for man to trifle.

Life is brief,

And sin is here.

Our age is but the falling of a leaf—

A dropping tear.

We have no time to sport away the hours;

All must be earnest in a world like ours.

Not many lives, but only one have we—

One, only one;

How sacred should that one life be—

That narrow span!

Day after day filled up with blessed toil,

Hour after hour still bringing in new spoil.

