

**Intro:**

Back to Romans! I won't review our first ten messages for you, but in them we set our theme, centered on *the gospel of God*.

The first seven verses are a fairly formal salutation for this letter. Paul is writing to people who, for the most part, he does not know. He establishes credentials, expands on this theme, and addresses them in proper formal style.

As we work our way through the book, we are going to find that most of the book could be described as formal doctrinal discussion. If you compare it to Philippians, for example, or almost any of the other Pauline epistles, it has much less of a personal touch, or personal flourish than the others.

Of course, this is partly due to the fact that Paul has not yet visited Rome, and partly due to the massive subject matter of this epistle.

But these formalities as seen in the salutation and in the body of the letter don't mean that genuine Christian feeling and 'long-distance fellowship' are non-existent. The second part of the introduction display great personal and spiritual affection on the part of the apostle for the people in the Roman church. That is the section that will concern us for the next month or two.

People say that 'Doctrine divides'. Have you ever heard that phrase? I think it is entirely wrong.

Lloyd-Jones said of this section that it is not particularly doctrinal, it is personal. But he made the point that underlying the personal warmth of the section are great doctrines.

I believe that true Bible doctrine unites in the best possible way. It makes people of all kinds closer in this world than they could possibly be in their own nature.

As we see the apostle speak of his interest in the Romans, we are going to see an example of the kind of attitude Christians should have for one another.

And as we think of that kind of attitude, we should be challenged as a local church about the kind of Christians and kind of church we should be in this coming year.

So I want to preach today this message:

*Thanksgiving for Saints*

Read Rm 1.8-15 (note esp. 1.8)

**Proposition:** Christians delight in God's grace displayed in other saints.

## I. The first reaction of one Christian for another: Thanksgiving

### A. A heart connection

1. God has appointed a structured order in the Christian church
  - a. Apostles
  - b. Prophets
  - c. Evangelists [missionary church planters in NT context]
  - d. Pastor-teachers
2. In the local church we see the structure in official and unofficial offices
  - a. Bishops/elders/pastors
  - b. Deacons
  - c. Various teachers and leaders in many kinds of ministry
3. Over all of us God has appointed a certain guide for our belief, thinking, practice: the inspired Word, delivered through apostles and prophets

There is an obligation on us as believers in Christ to order ourselves under this structure. None of us are exempt.

Breakdowns occur when men in the appointed structure fail in their own submission to God and his word, but we are thinking of the ideal here... As God intended it, we must order ourselves within his Church.

- a. Paul's salutation presented the apostle in his full credentials
- b. Paul's salutation introduced the majestic doctrinal authority which the apostle carried in his preaching of the gospel

But...

"But there is more to be done in order to reach this group of Christian brethren in Rome. Authority must be implemented in order for it to be accepted. Paul feels that he must move beyond mere formalities to reach the hearts of these people."<sup>1</sup>

True ministry reaches hearts (from a foundation of true doctrine)

<sup>1</sup> Herman A. Hoyt, *The First Christian Theology*, p. 31.

B. A place of prominence in personal affections

1. Our verse starts with “First”
2. You will look in vain from one end of Romans to the other for “Second”
3. The wording implies a list
  - a. Paul could be just distracted by what he is saying and forgets to plug in the “second”
  - b. But I think that he means: First and only.
    - 1) This is the place that other Christians occupy in Paul’s affections
    - 2) Thanksgiving: Gk word is the word we get ‘eucharist’ from – eucharist means ‘a giving of thanks’ (we don’t tend to use that word because of its Catholic association)

When you think of other Christians, is *thanksgiving* your first thought? Your priority thought?

C. A wide reservoir of affection

1. Paul thanks God for ‘all of you’, *i.e.*, all the Christians in the Roman church
2. Many of these people were yet unknown to him, but still an object of his thanksgiving

“That he gave thanks for them *all* evinces the bond that united the apostle to *all* at Rome, even though he cannot be supposed to have known them all. The bond of Christian fellowship is not limited to the circle described by personal acquaintance.”<sup>2</sup>

In the breadth of Christian love, we have an interest in Christians we have never met, yet love.

- The Mongolian Christians in Ulan Bator
- The Alaskan Christians in Selawick

Now let me ask you something. If you knew all those Christians personally, with all their problems, personality difficulties, etc., would you like them? Would *thanksgiving* be your primary spiritual thought about them?

<sup>2</sup> John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 19.

*It should be.*

And it should be with your Christian brethren here in this local church (in spite of our many faults).

[Paul thanked God for the Christians he knew in all his other epistles, except the epistle to the Galatians.]

## II. The intercessory reaction of one Christian for another: thanksgiving through Christ

A. Paul is stating his thanksgiving, not expressing it

1. His thanksgiving is expressed to God
2. Remember, his statement is intended to reach the heart of his as yet unmet brethren – he tells them how he feels about them

B. Paul's thanksgiving is offered through the mediation of the Lord Jesus

1. A concept a bit difficult to grasp at first

**“Through Jesus Christ.** These words are not to be connected with the immediately preceding words, ‘My God through Jesus Christ’ but with **I thank:** ‘I thank God, through Jesus Christ.’ This expression implies the mediation of Christ, through whom alone we have access to the Father, and for whose sake alone both our prayers and our praises are accepted.”<sup>3</sup>

2. Parallel passages

- a. Eph 5.20 – giving thanks *in the name of* the Lord [‘through’ not used]
- b. Col 3.17 – thanking God the Father *through* him
- c. Heb 13.15 – *through* Him let us offer praise
- d. 1 Pt 2.5 – offering acceptable sacrifices to God *through* Christ

3. Thanksgiving for other Christians is an intercessory ministry, enabled by Christ, that you and I can perform before God

Do you think to pray for your fellow believers?

Do you think to offer prayers of thanksgiving for fellow believers?

<sup>3</sup> Charles Hodge, *Romans*, p. 23.

### III. The cause of thanksgiving for other Christians: your faith

#### A. The fact of faith

1. “One quality about them elicited special mention: their faith. This probably has two aspects: the body of truth they held, and their own personal committal to it.”<sup>4</sup>
2. “Nothing is implied in this about their faith being particularly strong; the very fact of their faith is sufficient reason for giving thanks to God, the author of faith.”<sup>5</sup>
3. This term “is practically equivalent to ‘your Christianity,’ the distinctive act which makes a man a Christian carrying with it the direct consequences of that act upon the character.”<sup>6</sup>

Paul’s expression of thanksgiving [a very warm personal revelation] rests on a solid doctrinal foundation: believing faith.

- They are people who believe *the gospel of God* he preaches.
- They are people in whom God the Father has worked through the operation of the Holy Spirit to bring them to salvation.
- They are people whose lives have been transformed by their repentance and faith – they are new creatures.

At the very ground of our relationship with other Christians must be this knowledge: God works his miracle of salvation in others. I thank God for that, regardless of how ‘unlikable’, how difficult, how many problems the other Christian might have.

#### B. The publication of faith

1. Their faith was not only known to Paul but to all the Christians through the known world (all the way back to Jerusalem)

<sup>4</sup> Herman A. Hoyt, *The First Christian Theology*, p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 57.

<sup>6</sup> William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, p. 19.

2. The church was not founded by an apostle – just by the witness of anonymous Christians, but real faith is evident to others

“Not fathered or founded by any apostle, the assemblies that God had Himself gathered from all quarters into the world’s capital, had a faith in Christ which was ‘spoken of,’ nay, announced as a wonder, throughout the whole Roman Empire. Announced, too, without steamship, without telegraph, without newspapers, without radio! [!! – written in 1938] God sees to it that a real work of His Spirit is published abroad... So with every real revival: the whole world soon knows about it.”<sup>7</sup>

3. The thanksgiving of outsiders is a remark on the importance of locale – “Even in Rome!”

“The very existence of a church at Rome was something to be thankful for.”

### Conclusion:

Our theme today is very others oriented. I think it is very appropriate for us to carry ourselves forward into the New Year.

How will you develop a heart of thanksgiving for your fellow-believers right here in this church this year?

- Will you renew a commitment to intercede in prayers for one another, especially prayers of thanksgiving?
- Will you make an effort to spend more time with one another?
- Will you increase your commitment to our collective work together as a church? If you attend one service a week, will you attend two? If two, three?
- Will you find a place to serve within our assembly? Even if it means a sacrifice of time somewhere else?

**Proposition:** Christians delight in God’s grace displayed in other saints.

Let us love one another, not just in word, but in deed.

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<sup>7</sup> William R. Newell, *Romans Verse by Verse*, p. 11.