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SERVING SAINTS

Romans 1:8-15

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Romans, Lesson 4

Serving Saints Romans 1:8-15

Recently I received an email from David and Denise Moore, who serve with Wycliffe in Malaysia, saying that a fellow Wycliffe missionary's sister and her family had been in a bad accident near Flagstaff. They asked if I could visit them in the hospital and if we as a church could help with any needs.

Marla and I went as quickly as we could to the hospital. We found out that the family was on vacation, driving west on I-40 near Ash Fork, when a car in the left lane blew a tire and swerved in front of them, forcing their motor home over an embankment, where it rolled many times. Miraculously, everyone survived, even the wife who was thrown from the vehicle, although she and their son were pretty banged up.

They told us how well the body of Christ in Flagstaff had come to their aid. I left them my contact info and asked them to call if they needed anything else, but they said that I was the third pastor to visit them and that the other two churches had already largely provided for their family. They said, "The body of Christ is alive and well in this city!"

The wife also told us about an atheist friend of her husband, whom they had known for a long time. He had seen on other occasions that wherever this family went, they encountered other believers who treated them like family. This atheist couldn't believe that even though the family didn't know a soul in Flagstaff, when they had this accident they suddenly had an extended network of people coming to their aid. What this atheist observed is what we see in our text, namely, serving saints.

Paul is still introducing his letter to the Romans, most of whom he has never met. He knew that due to his enemies, he was sometimes portrayed as a radical who was teaching all sorts of dangerous things (Rom. 3:8; Acts 17:6; 21:28). But he longed to visit these fellow believers in Rome and share together in the things of God. So he has the delicate task of explaining to these mostly un-

known Christians, some of whom may have heard negative things about him, who he is and why he wants to visit them and preach the gospel there.

So he shares how he has heard of their faith and how frequently he prays for them. He shares his heart about wanting to come and spend time with them, both strengthening their faith and also being encouraged himself by them in the things of the gospel. He lets them know that he has often desired to come, but thus far has been prevented. But now he hopes to come and find opportunities to preach there. So Paul wants to use his gifts to serve these people he does not yet know, and he wants to benefit from them using their gifts to serve him, as together they labor to see the gospel expand in Rome. This little snapshot of Paul and the church at Rome gives us a picture of serving saints. The overall lesson is,

God wants all whom He has saved to be serving saints.

I'm taking the theme from Paul's words in verse 9, "For God, whom I serve in my spirit" But it's obvious that Paul is not the only one in these verses who is serving. He begins by mentioning how he has heard all over about the faith of the Roman believers. He also says that he expects not only to minister to the Romans, but also to be ministered unto by them (1:12). As we saw in verse 7, the believers in Rome were "called as saints." Thus all believers are to be serving saints.

There are four lessons here: (1) Serving saints spread the gospel and rejoice to hear of it being spread (1:8). (2) Serving saints serve God sincerely in the gospel as they wait on Him in prayer (1:9-10). (3) Serving saints long to be with other saints for the purpose of effective ministry (1:11-13). (4) Serving saints are debtors to all people to proclaim the gospel to them (1:14-15).

1. Serving saints spread the gospel and rejoice to hear of it being spread (1:8).

"First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world." Paul says, "First," but there isn't any "second." He probably just means, "to begin with." "My God" shows that Paul's relationship with God was personal. Paul knew God as *his* God. If you do not know God personally through faith in Jesus Christ, then you are

only into religion. True Christianity is not primarily a matter of religion, where you go to church, go through various rituals, and keep certain moral standards. True Christianity is a matter of coming to know the living God personally through His Son as you trust in Him to forgive your sins and give you eternal life (Phil. 3:1-10).

Paul thanks God “through Jesus Christ” because Christ mediates all of God’s blessings to us. It is through Christ that we have access to God in prayer. Paul is thankful to God “because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world.” Paul didn’t thank the Romans for their faith, as if it came from them. Rather, he thanked God, because He brought these former pagans in that corrupt city of Rome to saving faith in Jesus Christ (John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries* [Baker], p. 52). Salvation is God’s gift.

Paul heard others all over the Roman Empire talking about the faith of the Roman Christians. This shows that they were a witnessing church. They didn’t have or need a marketing strategy or an advertising campaign. Rather, they had vibrant testimonies of how God had changed their lives through the gospel. As people heard of what God was doing in Rome and talked to others, the word spread, so that Paul heard about them, even though he had yet to visit Rome. And so his heart rejoiced.

Faith in Jesus Christ is the essential thing: “Without faith, it is impossible to please Him [God]” (Heb. 11:6). Paul often couples faith with love (Gal. 5:6; Eph. 1:15; 6:23; Col. 1:4; 1 Thess. 1:3; 3:6; 5:8; 1 Tim. 1:5). Love for God and for one another is to be the main fruit of our faith in Jesus Christ. But faith in Him is the foundation, because it is through faith that the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in our hearts and produce His love in us (Gal. 5:22). Bringing it down to a personal level, does your home demonstrate faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and love for God and one another?

It is significant that the Roman church was not the result of Paul’s labors, but that didn’t matter to Paul. He rejoiced to hear of God working, no matter who was responsible for it (Phil. 1:15-18). He wasn’t out to build a name or empire for himself. Even so, if we hear that the gospel is spreading, even if we had nothing to do with it, we should rejoice, thank God, and be encouraged that the gospel is taking root elsewhere. Serving saints spread the gospel and rejoice to hear of it being spread.

2. Serving saints serve God sincerely in the gospel as they wait on Him in prayer (1:9-10).

“For God, whom I serve in my spirit in the preaching of the gospel of His Son, is my witness as to how unceasingly I make mention of you, always in my prayers making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you.”

The word translated “serve” means, “worshipful service.” It suggests that all of our service should be offered up to the Lord. It should be “for His name’s sake” (1:5). Paul adds that he serves God “in my spirit.” He means that his service comes from the heart or the inner man, which only God sees. This gets down to our motive for serving. Do we serve for the affirmation that we receive from others? Or, do we serve to please God, who knows our hearts?

This also addresses the methods that we use in our service. Do we get them from the business world or from worldly psychology, where they have been proven to yield results? “Just plug in these marketing techniques and your church will grow!” Or, do we use spiritual methods that come from God’s Word? The world often scoffs at such methods, but, as Paul explains (1 Cor. 1:27), “God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong.”

The gospel is such a spiritual “method.” Paul says that he serves God in his spirit “in the preaching of the gospel of His Son.” He states (1:16) that the gospel “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.” The gospel has repeatedly transformed sinners like Paul, a persecutor of the church, into godly saints who exemplify the fruit of the Spirit.

And yet today, many of the church growth “experts” say that you can’t preach the old-fashioned gospel about sin, God’s righteous judgment, repentance, and salvation through faith in Christ’s blood. That sort of thing will scare off the people you’re trying to reach. So we need to tone it down and share about how Jesus can build your self-esteem and give you a happy family and personal success. But it is the simple message of the gospel that God uses to save sinners.

Prayer is also a spiritual method. Weak people, overwhelmed by problems way beyond their ability to solve, cry out to the living God and He answers them! Again, the modern church is much more into techniques than into prayer. Seminars abound on the latest techniques for church growth. There is a proper place for using wise techniques, but the danger is, we then sing the praises of the techniques for how well they worked. God's way is (Ps. 50:15), "Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I shall rescue you, and you will honor Me."

But why does Paul call God as his witness with regard to his unceasing prayers about coming to Rome? First, some of Paul's enemies may have told the Roman Christians, "Paul doesn't really care about you. He doesn't even know you!" So Paul wants them to know that before God, his prayers for them are sincere and frequent. Also, Paul's immediate plans, as he will share later (15:25), were to go first to Jerusalem with the gift for the poor saints there. If he is delayed there, again his critics could say, "He talks a good line about wanting to come here, but it's all just talk!" So Paul wants the Romans to know that they are often in his prayers and that he prays often that God would open a way for him to go there.

Paul's words here reveal several helpful lessons about prayer. *First, even Paul had delays and frustrations with regard to the answers to his prayers.* He prayed often that he might be able to go to Rome, and even often made plans to go, but thus far his prayers and plans had been frustrated (1:13). Sometimes we think that something must be wrong with our prayer life if we don't get instant answers. But Paul didn't get a quick answer and when he finally did get an answer, it wasn't in the way that he had prayed.

That leads to a second lesson: *Often God answers through delays or round-about ways that we don't envision when we pray.* Paul prayed that he could go to Rome. God's way was not a straight path. First, Paul got arrested in Jerusalem, falsely accused of bringing Gentiles into the Temple. Then, he spent more than two years in custody in Caesarea because the governor was hoping for a bribe and he wanted to please the Jews (Acts 24:26-27). Although he should have been freed, Paul had to appeal to Caesar to save his life (Acts 25:9-12). Then, en route to Rome, he was shipwrecked and spent

the winter on Malta. Finally, he got to Rome as a prisoner. It wasn't exactly, "I prayed and presto, God did just as I asked!"

A third lesson on prayer is that *we must always submit our prayers to the will of God* (1:10). There is a mystery here that I often do not understand. The sovereign will of God often includes evil things that are against His revealed moral will, although God is not responsible for the evil. But He uses the evil to accomplish His greater purpose. We should pray against evil, and yet be subject to God's will in things that we do not understand.

In this instance, Paul went to Jerusalem in spite of the Holy Spirit's warning that he would be arrested. He also rejected the pleas of his friends that he not go there. When he insisted upon going, they said, "The will of the Lord be done!" (See Acts 21:11-14.) Although many would disagree, I think that Paul should have heeded this warning from God. But, he went to Jerusalem, was arrested because of the false accusations of evil men, and spent two years in custody because of the sins of a pagan governor. God worked through all of these things to bring Paul to Rome, thus answering his prayers!

So the lesson for us is to pray, but always be subject to God's will. If He doesn't answer exactly as we prayed or in the timing that we expected, we must still be in submission to His will, acknowledging that His ways are not our ways.

James Boice (*Romans* [Baker], 1:87-89) suggests three reasons why sometimes our perfectly proper prayers go unanswered. First, "*Unanswered prayer may be God's way of teaching that we are not as necessary to the work we are praying for as we think we are.*" Paul wanted to go to Rome to minister to these saints, but they were able to do quite well without him in the meanwhile. While perhaps Paul didn't need to learn this lesson through God's delay in answering, often we do. We are not indispensable in God's program!

Second, God may not answer our prayers because "*He may have other work for us to do.*" Paul's ministry in Greece, Asia, and even in Caesarea, where he preached the gospel to Felix, Festus, and others, was a part of God's sovereign plan for Paul. If God has you stalled in a frustrating situation, serve Him there!

Third, Dr. Boice says, *“There may be spiritual warfare of which you and I are unaware.”* The answer to Daniel’s prayers was delayed because of a conflict between a holy angel and an evil demon (Dan. 10:1-14)! Paul explains that our conflict is against unseen spiritual powers, and that prayer is a chief weapon to use in the battle (Eph. 6:10-20). So we often do not know why our prayers are not answered quickly in the way that we envision. But we must trust in and submit to God’s sovereign will.

Thus, serving saints spread the gospel and rejoice to hear of it being spread (1:8). They serve God sincerely in the gospel as they wait on Him in prayer (1:9-10).

3. Serving saints long to be with other saints for the purpose of effective ministry (1:11-13).

“For I long to see you so that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established; that is, that I may be encouraged together with you while among you, each of us by the other’s faith, both yours and mine. I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that often I have planned to come to you (and have been prevented so far) so that I may obtain some fruit among you also, even as among the rest of the Gentiles.”

Someone has pointed out that it’s good that Paul was hindered from going to Rome sooner, because we now have the Letter to the Romans due to his delay (Griffith Thomas, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 53). These verses reveal Paul’s heart for these believers and the aim of his intended visit there. I can only touch on five lessons about effective ministry.

First, the atmosphere for effective ministry is warm personal relationships. Paul longed to see these saints. He often expresses his heartfelt desire to be with other believers (1 Thess. 2:8, 11, 17; 3:1, 5, 6, 10). While Paul couldn’t begin to be close with every believer in Rome, his heart of love and concern for them all still comes through.

Second, the aim of effective ministry is to see others established in their faith. As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, who were new in their faith and going through some intense trials, “for now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord” (1 Thess. 3:8).

Third, the sphere of effective ministry is spiritual gifts. Paul wanted to go to Rome to impart some spiritual gift to them (1:11). What does

he mean? There are several views, but in 1 Corinthians 12:11, Paul says that the Holy Spirit distributes gifts to each person "just as He wills." So it's not likely that Paul had the ability to impart various spiritual gifts to others. Rather, he probably means that he wants to impart the gift of his apostolic understanding of the gospel, which we have in the Book of Romans (Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* [Baker], p. 54; and Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Romans: The Gospel of God* [Zondervan], p. 226). As Paul exercised his gift of teaching, imparting especially his understanding of justification by faith alone (Romans 3-5), these believers would be more established in their faith.

Fourth, the spirit of effective ministry is mutual encouragement. Paul slightly corrects his comment about imparting some spiritual gift to them by adding (1:12), "that is, that I may be encouraged together with you while among you, each of us by the other's faith, both yours and mine." Even though Paul was such a knowledgeable, gifted man, the ministry would not be all one way, from Paul to them. He quickly acknowledges that he looks forward to being encouraged by their faith as well. Have you ever gone to visit someone in the hospital, to cheer them up, but you've come away ministered to by their faith? That's happened to me many times.

Fifth, the result of effective ministry is to bear fruit. Paul wanted to obtain some fruit among them, as he had among the rest of the Gentiles (1:13). He is mainly referring to new converts, who would come to faith under his preaching in Rome. But the word *fruit* can refer to any blessing or benefit that comes through God's working through us. Our aim should always be to glorify God by bearing much fruit (John 15:8).

There is a final lesson on service here:

4. Serving saints are debtors to all people, to proclaim the gospel to them (1:14-15).

"I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome."

The literal rendering of "I am under obligation" is, "I am a debtor." By "Greeks and barbarians," Paul means "all nations," since the Greeks viewed every non-Greek as a barbarian. By "wise and foolish," Paul means "every level of society, from the most

educated to the uneducated.” In other words, every human being needs to hear the gospel, because all have sinned and Jesus is the Savior of every sinner who will repent and believe in Him.

Being a debtor has been illustrated as being a person who has been cured of a deadly disease. You can tell others where to find the cure. And in this case, they don't have to go anywhere or pay any money. The cure is available and free for the taking. When you meet a sinner (that's everyone!), you owe it to them to tell them about the cure. And telling them should not be a difficult burden. Paul was *eager* to preach the gospel to those in Rome, because he knew that it is God's remedy for sin to everyone who believes.

Paul was eager to preach the gospel to the saints in Rome. He was referring not only to evangelism, but also to the application of the gospel to those who have believed. The gospel has much practical application for the saints, as Paul will show in chapters 12-16.

Conclusion

Thus, serving saints spread the gospel and rejoice to hear of it being spread. Serving saints serve God sincerely in the gospel as they wait on Him in prayer. Serving saints long to be with other saints for the purpose of effective ministry. And, serving saints are debtors to all people to proclaim the gospel to them. Has God called you as a saint, one set apart to Him? Then He has called you to serve in these ways for His name's sake.

Application Questions

1. Others were proclaiming the faith of the Roman Christians. What would others proclaim about your Christian life?
2. How do we determine whether our methods in Christian work are acceptable, since not all methods are given in the Bible?
3. How can we know whether to keep praying when our prayers do not seem to be answered? What principles apply?
4. How can the concept of being a debtor to lost people help us to share the gospel more often?

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