

Service to the Church

Romans 1:8-15

January 22, 2017

Introduction:

Have you ever gone to a movie theatre and found yourself with people who don't seem to understand the difference between watching a movie in a public theatre and watching one in their living rooms? Recently Karen and I went to see a movie over at Crossroads and we had the good fortune of being joined by a gaggle of teenagers. Now I have nothing against teenagers – I have a few of my own – but this particular group was unable to grasp the concept of proper movie theatre etiquette. Apparently they were illiterate because they failed to read the notices on the screen that all cell phones should be turned off during the film. Nevertheless, while it seems they couldn't read words, they sure were proficient in speaking them, as they continued to do throughout the first twenty minutes of the film. Eventually the management was notified and they either left of their own accord or were kicked out: regardless, the rest of us in the movie theatre were relieved to see them go. So, by way of a friendly service announcement, talk all you want when watching your DVDs at home, but when you go to a movie theatre, zip the lip!

Just as there are certain expectations of how one should behave in a movie theatre, there also are expectations of how people should behave in the church. When Christians gather together, what should our behavior be like? What words and actions should characterize the community of faith? This morning I think we can gain some insight into how we should act towards one another by learning from the example of the apostle Paul. Paul is writing to the Roman believers in preparation for his upcoming visit to them. As he does so, he communicates what he hopes will take place during his time with them, and so I think we can learn from what he says and apply it to our own situation. If this is how Paul related to those in Rome he didn't know, how much more should these things be true between the believers who we do know.

So then, let's look at what Paul has to say by opening your Bibles to Romans 1, which can be found on pg. 939 of the hardcover pew Bibles if you happen to be using one of those. We'll read through the passage first and then I'll draw out four points from it. Our focus this morning will be on v. 8-15 of Romans 1. Please follow along in your Bibles as I read. Paul writes, **“First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you - that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.”**

As an apostle, Paul served the people of God through his ministry, and his example of service to the church serves as an example to each of us. So then, I want us to consider four ways we can serve the church in light of how Paul hoped to serve the church in Rome. The first and most fundamental way is that we serve the church is we...

1. Serve the church by meeting with others

Perhaps the most important thing to notice about this passage is the most obvious one and that's Paul's eager desire to come to Rome to spend time with the believers there. Consider what Paul says in v. 10. He prays that, "**somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you.**" Then in v. 11, "**I long to see you...**" and in v 13 "**I have often intended to come to you.**" Finally, in v. 15, Paul says, "**I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.**" It's clear that Paul isn't indifferent about whether he gets to Rome or not; Paul wants to visit them. He clearly longs for the opportunity to make the journey and spend time with them.

So let's state the obvious here: you can't serve God's people unless you are first with God's people. Foundational to everything else in terms of how we are to relate to our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ is that we need to be with them! The idea that Christians will naturally want to meet together with other Christians is assumed in Scripture, but the assumption needs to be made explicit today because many people who claim to be Christians will neglect the regular gathering together of God's people for corporate worship. One doesn't need to look too hard to find folks who say, "I'm a believer, but I don't go to church." They'll claim they don't need church, that they can worship God just fine at home or by taking walks in the wood or while fishing at the lake. Or maybe they were hurt by a church they attended in the past and so they've washed their hands of it and decided to go all Simon and Garfunkel on God's people and say, "I am rock. I am an island. And a rock feels no pain. And an island never cries," and so they avoid the church because they don't want to be hurt again.

But neglecting the regular assembly of God's people is not a valid option. Hebrews 10:25 reminds us to "not neglect meeting together, as is the habit of some." To not want to gather with the church when you're able to do so is actually a sign that you aren't really a Christian. The apostle John says in 1 John 2:19,

"They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us."

In other words, if they had really been Christians, they would have remained as part of the church. One of the evidence of being born again is that you want to be with God's people. God creates in you a love for the church, despite all its imperfections.

I remember how as I teenager, before I was a Christian, I didn't like attending church. I did it because I had to, but it was no sweat off my back when for whatever reason we didn't go due to sickness or inclement weather. I would have gladly slept in or done just about anything else with my time on Sunday mornings. But after I became a

Christian, my whole attitude towards church changed. I wanted to be around God's people. I was more than willing to go to church and join my voice with other believers in worship, and to listen to the preaching of God's Word, and to serve in whatever way I could. My attitude towards church moved from "I have to" to "I want to."

So then, the most foundational way you can serve the church is by regularly meeting with God's people in a local church that you're a member of. This should go without saying but in our American buffet-style approach to church that thinks we can love Christ yet reject his Bride, it needs to be said. Gather regularly with fellow believers. Do it on Sunday mornings but even beyond that, meet with others outside of these walls: get together for meals, do activities together, listen and encourage one another. Meeting together with God's people should be a highlight of your week.

Let me say then that if this is true, and it is, you need to make church a priority. That's not to say you can't go on vacations or spend a few weekends up at a cabin or such like that, but sometimes people have the habit of completely neglecting the church for a season due to other interests they put first. Hey, that's cool you have that cabin up north, but do you spend the majority of your summer up there such that you are rarely here between Memorial Day and Labor Day? When hunting season comes along, do you spend every weekend in your tree stand and neglect church for those weeks? Or is the golf course more appealing to you in the spring than being with God's people? If your possessions or your interests are consistently taking you away from the regular fellowship of God's gathered church, then you need to reconsider your priorities.

So then, the first and most foundational way you can serve the church and follow Paul's example is by first being there! It's difficult to do the rest of what we're going to talk about this morning unless you are present with God's people on a regular basis. But moving on now, the second thing I want you to see from our passage is that we're to...

2. Serve the church by praying for others

Look back in your Bibles now as I read v. 8-10. Paul says there, **"First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you."**

One essential characteristic of Paul is that he was a man of prayer. Throughout his letters to the churches, we find Paul communicating both the fact that he's praying for the believers he's writing to as well as the content of his prayers on their behalf. Right off the bat Paul tells the Roman Christians that **"without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers."** Now that doesn't mean that every single moment of his life was spent praying for them but rather he frequently, as part of his regular time of prayer, brought the Romans before the throne of grace.

He also mentions a couple of things he prays for. First, he thanks God when he prays for them because their faith was being **"proclaimed in all the world."** The fact there

were believers living in Rome was a matter of praise and joy to the other churches spread across the Mediterranean. In the very heart of the Roman Empire, under the nose of Caesar, there was a growing community of followers of Jesus, living out and proclaiming the gospel to their neighbors. Word had gotten out that in spite of the hostility of the pagan culture around them, the church in Rome had taken root. So Paul gives thanks to God when he prays, recognizing that God's hand had graciously moved to establish the church in the most influential city in the world.

The second aspect of prayer Paul mentions is found at the end of v, 10. He prays that, **“somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you.”** Paul wants to travel to Rome, both to strengthen the church there and to prepare for himself a base of operations that will eventually allow him to visit Spain, so he prays that God would open a door to make that journey possible.

So the point I want to make here is that even before he arrives in Rome, Paul is praying for them. He's praying he can visit them and thanking God for their faith. Prayer is part and parcel of how Paul serves the church, and of course the same should be true of us. We need to be praying for each other.

Now I recognize that we can of course pray for each other without necessarily being with one another. Obviously, Paul was doing just that before he came to Rome. But the normal practice of the local church was to regularly gather for prayer. In Acts 2:42 we're told the church, “devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” The early church devoted themselves to prayer much like Paul did in constantly lifting up the Roman church in prayer. It was a part of the normal pattern of their lives to be in prayer for fellow believers.

Let me remind you of a couple of opportunities for you to serve our church by praying. We have two corporate gatherings for prayer: every Sunday morning from 8:30-9:00 and once a month on a Sunday evening for our 2:42 Prayer Gathering. I'm glad for those who faithfully come and commit themselves to regular pray for the needs of our church family but I'm not satisfied. We need more. I want to challenge you folks who never come, while the new year is still young, to turn over a new leaf in 2017 and make corporate prayer a priority in your life. Stop sitting out in the lobby on Sunday morning and come in and join us for prayer. Record whatever TV show or football game you want to watch on the Sunday night we have 2:42 and come to pray.

Grace Fellowship is a church devoted to prayer... somewhat. Some people are, many aren't. I recognize some of you have legitimate excuses why gathering for prayer on Sunday morning or why one Sunday evening a month won't work. No worries. But to those of you who don't, who could come but haven't, I implore you: start serving the church by gathering with other believers to pray for the church. Stop being lazy, if that's what is holding you back. You have a responsibility and a privilege to pray with and for your fellow believers here, so start doing it. Decide today you're not going to keep driving around in the dead-end spiritual cul-de-sac of neglecting prayer in your life and make it a priority. This year, let's make Grace Fellowship a church deeply and consistently devoted to prayer.

Moving on now, not only does the apostle Paul provide us an example by serving the church through prayer, but he gives us another example of how to serve fellow believers in our next point which concerns...

3. Serve the church by encouraging others

Look back in your Bibles at what Paul hopes will take place between them once he arrives there in v. 11-12. He writes, **“For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you - that is, we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.”** The spiritual gift that Paul wants to give them isn't some supernatural gift like the gift of prophecy or speaking in tongues: we know that because he defines what that spiritual gift is that will strengthen them in v. 12: **“...that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.”**

Did you notice how Paul put himself on equal footing with the Roman believers? He's not coming to be the sole dispenser of spiritual gifts and blessings. Paul recognizes that the joy of fellowshiping with other believers is a two-way street. Not only does he hope to encourage them but he anticipates he will be encouraged by them as well. He will come to Rome both to give as well as to receive.

I have to wonder then, how often we come to church with the expectation to be blessed but not to bless others? See, if you have a consumeristic attitude about church, then you'll treat church like a visit to McDonald's: you'll want things your way and if things aren't done to your satisfaction, then you'll leave for somewhere else that provides the religious services you're after the way you want them served up. But if you have a biblical attitude toward church, then you'll gather with God's people both to give and receive. Sunday mornings won't be all about what you'll get but you'll also consider how you can bless others as well.

So let me ask, how many of you came today thinking about how you can be a blessing to others? Were there people here you know whom you thought to yourself, “I'm going to be an encouragement to them this morning?” Or do you look at church as only about getting yourself feed and blessed? Now don't get me wrong: I hope what we do as a church is of great benefit to you. My prayer is that the teaching and preaching here at Grace Fellowship nourishes you. My desire for our worship set is to lead your heart into ever-deeping praise for all that Christ has done for you. I hope our nursery and children's ministry and youth ministry are a blessing to our parents and have helped our young people in their faith. I want you to come and receive blessing and encouragement during our time together.

But that's only half the story. You have something to bring to the table as well. There are people here who you can bless by praying for them. They need to hear a kind word of encouragement from you. There are those who would be blessed to have you invite them into your home for a meal. There are needs, both physical and spiritual, that you can meet if you would only realize that the axiom that it is better to give than to receive applies no less to the church than in any other part of life.

For some of you, this means you need to change your approach to church. Come to be mutually encouraged: it's not all about what we can do for you but how you can serve others in your words and deeds. To begin with, it means you have to be present. If you are gone more than you are here, it's difficult to make this happen. Don't sleep in, don't take a whole season and abandon the church for golf courses and cabins: you can't be mutually encouraged if you are never around. But once you are here, be active, not passive. Don't come into the sanctuary on Sunday morning and simply find your normal spot in the pew and not talk to anyone. Engage people. Welcome visitors. Ask people how they are doing. Offer to pray for your brothers and sisters here. Give them the opportunity to pray for you by opening up to them about your struggles and concerns. Ministry here isn't just Rob Ely leading our singing or me preaching: ministry should be taking place in hundreds of little conversation and prayer and words of affirmation and comfort between God's people throughout the morning and into the week beyond.

I could say so much more here but I think you all get my point. You need to serve the church by actively encouraging others. But there's one more important way we can serve the church that Paul mentions in the last few verses of our passage that I need to highlight for us and that is this...

4. Serve the church by preaching the gospel to others

Paul, as a servant of the gospel, wants to minister to the Roman believers with the gospel. Look back at your Bible at what he says in v. 13-15. **"I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome."**

Paul is eager to preach the gospel in Rome, but it's a preaching that is both for the sake of evangelism and discipleship. When Paul says in v. 13 that he would like to **"reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles,"** he's speaking of evangelism. He wants to do in Rome what has been his custom during his other missionary journeys: enter the synagogues and forums and marketplaces so he can proclaim the gospel to those who have not yet heard it. Paul hopes to add to the numbers of the church in Rome by adding new believers to the church.

But the gospel is not just for unbelievers: it's for the Roman Christians as well. Paul says in v. 15, **"I am eager to preach the gospel to you also..."** referring to the Roman church. In fact, the book of Romans is Paul doing that in letter form: Paul is laying out for them in his letter what the gospel is and its implications for their lives.

So, in light of this, two points of application are necessary: first, serve the church by proclaiming the gospel to unbelievers. Our evangelism strategy here is pretty simple: we call it *Salt & Light* and the goal is for you to identify three unbelievers you have regular contact with and begin to pray for them. But even more, we want you to invite them over and engage in conversation with them so that in time you'll have the opportunity to share

the gospel with them. What better way to serve our church than by adding to our numbers new believers. I love this church, but we would do well to see new faces here, the faces of people you've been praying for who have come to know Christ as their Lord and Savior. We would be well benefitted by the excitement and zeal that comes with those who have a new-found faith.

So then, preach the gospel to unbelievers you know. Be active in trying to reach the lost. Recognize that evangelism is often a process and not usually a quick decision. You'll need to invest in people for the long-haul, doing a lot of listening and loving before you get to do much speaking. That's okay though. Show them the love of Christ in your deeds so that they'll be more receptive of it through your words.

But also, preach the gospel to the church as well. What I mean by that is the gospel is not just for unbelievers. It's not that we trust in Christ though the preaching of the gospel and then move on from it to other matters. As Timothy Keller has said, the gospel is not the ABCs of the Christian life, it's the A through Z of it. We need to be reminded of the good news of the gospel daily as we grow in our faith.

For example, in counseling people who especially are struggling with some besetting sin or who are weighed down with guilt and shame, I remind them of the gospel. I tell them that while they are sinners, God has accepted them through faith in Christ. Their sins are fully forgiven and there is no longer any condemnation for them. I remind them of the glorious truth that they are adopted into God's family, that their Heavenly Father will never leave them or forsake them, and that he has given them his Holy Spirit to guide, comfort, and empower them to break the bondage of sin and live righteously. Even Christians need to hear that. They need to be reminded of the gospel.

So serve the church by proclaiming the gospel to one another. We need more than pious platitudes and Hallmark card slogan. Encourage your fellow Christian with the gospel truth of God's unrelenting love and forgiveness toward them. Remind them of the good and sovereign hand of their Heavenly Father that promises to never allow anything in all creation separate them from the love of Christ. Rejoice with them in their successes and hope with them in the midst of trials, encouraging them with God's many precious promises in Scripture. It's not just my job as the pastor to do this: it's a joyful privilege given to each of us, so let's roll up our sleeves and be intentional about doing just there for the good of Grace Fellowship Church and the glory of God.

Conclusion

In conclusion then, there's a proper way to behave among the people of God. We're not to passively sit and soak but rather we're to stand and serve. We serve first by being here, by regularly meeting with God's people when they gather together. Then once we're here, we serve the church by devoting ourselves to prayer, by mutually encouraging each other, and especially through the proclamation of the gospel to each other. Let's follow Paul's example to the Romans and serve Grace Fellowship Church in the same way. Let's pray.

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