



**Romans 1:8-15**  
**The Power of Friendship**

**Summary:** A relationship with God leads to friendships with unlikely people.

Think about the condition of the world today – think about the conflicts occurring. Now imagine a Palestinian writing a joyful letter to an Israeli in Jerusalem saying I’ve heard so many great things about you and I can’t wait for the chance to come to Jerusalem and spend time with you.

Or imagine a Ukrainian sending a cheerful letter to a Russian in Moscow saying the same thing. I keep hearing all these great things about you and I can’t wait to come to you and visit, I look forward to how much we’ll share with each other.

What could make two entirely unlikely groups come together given all the things that separate them? What could make them set aside bitterness, hate, prejudice, and anger over what your people have done to my people?

The answer is: the gospel, the good news of what God has done for us through Jesus Christ.

That’s what we see with the book of Romans. Paul, an ultra-nationalist, religious zealot from Israel, writing a compassionate letter to the church in Rome – the capital of the Empire occupying his homeland *while he wrote the letter*. And Paul wasn’t just writing to Jewish Christians in the capital, he was writing to actual Romans – members of the cultured elite – the kind of people he once looked down on as pagan infidels responsible for desecrating his holy nation. Today though, instead of despising these people, He loves them. Why? Because both he, and they, have been transformed by the gospel.

Friends, God is seeking reconciliation. He is seeking relationship – with us, and among us. God is in the business of decreasing the distance between parties – even unlikely parties. We saw last week that He can take someone like Paul the Apostle who was once so anti-Christian that he hunted them down, put them in jail, and in some cases, assented to their public murder - God takes a man like that and makes him a Christian pastor. God forgives him, reconciles with him, brings him into a divine relationship.

And if God can do that between us and Him, He can certainly do it among us as human beings. God can create deep, durable, and enjoyable relationships among unlikely people. This is part of that dump truck load of blessings we encounter in the book of Romans.

So, let’s read our passage and notice what it tells us about our relationship with God and our relationships with other people. Read with me here in Romans 1.

You remember this is a letter written by Paul the [bondservant](#) and [apostle of Jesus Christ](#),

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**Romans 1:7** To all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called *to be* saints:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

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.

13 Now I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that I often planned to come to you (but was hindered until now), that I might have some fruit among you also, just as among the other Gentiles. 14 I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise. 15 So, as much as is in me, *I am* ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also.

What I hope you can notice here is that Paul's relationship with God is leading him into relationship with other people – even unlikely or previously unlikable people. And then his relationship with people leads him back to God. So, the first point I want to make this morning is:

### **Be encouraged by the church**

Paul praises God because he is encouraged by the church. He says vs 8 ... *I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world*. Paul praises God that there is a church in Rome and it's spoken of throughout the world. It's not a secret. People have heard what God is doing there and it's encouraging and exciting.

Why? What's the big deal? Well, think about location. Paul is writing to a Christian church in the capital of the Roman Empire. Religiously, Rome had its own temples and practices. The emperor was considered a god not unlike the Emperor of Japan or the Pharaoh of Egypt. And yet, there was a church in Rome. And it was thriving.

And, we don't know who started it, but somehow, at some point, a church was formed in the heart of the Roman empire. God ensured it happened, and now Paul wants to visit, to catch up with them – to see what God is doing and be mutually encouraged.

This same kind of thing happens.

I think of the reports we hear of the Church in unlikely and inhospitable places today. For twenty five years or more there have been encouraging reports of the church growing in China, mainly through underground house churches. And in the past ten years there have

been growing reports of the Church in Iran. In fact, several years ago I was teaching at Calvary Chapel Bible College in Hungary and shared communion with several Iranian believers who were fleeing to Europe as refugees. Many others remain behind and there are phenomenally encouraging stories of what God is doing.

Similar things are happening in the Gulf States where Christians enjoy more freedoms than ever before. According to some estimates there are now 2-3 million Christians living on the Arabian peninsula making up between 13-14% of the population in places in UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar. Did you know that churches in Abu Dhabi are holding public baptisms at the beach?



To echo the words of Paul [I thank my God through Jesus Christ for \[them\] all, that \[their\] faith is spoken of throughout the whole world.](#)

And I thank God for you.

Last week I said we are the modern equivalent of the church in Rome. We worship here in the shadow of the capital of the world's only remaining superpower. If Paul wrote today, he would likely be writing to the church in Washington.

When I travel people ask where I'm from and I say DC – it's not uncommon to see their look sour a bit. This city does not have a stellar reputation with the rest of the state or country. But I tell them I pastor a church here and it's full of people just trying to love Jesus and do a good job at work each day.

I tell them our church is full of people who work in every government agency you can imagine and there are people who love Jesus in the Pentagon, on Air Force One, in the White House and Congress, and all the other places you people serve. I try to give them hope and encouragement by knowing the church is here – and it's not just us, there are many good, Jesus-loving, Bible-teaching churches in this area. And many of them are solid and healthy. Politically this region may be a mess, but we can praise God for the church in the greater Washington DC area.

And specifically, we can thank God for our church. I'm stunned by the people who remain connected to this church long after they have moved away – people still listening in to the podcast of the sermon, people still signing up for Turn Aside studies. People still sending texts and emails and staying connected online.

In just the past month we had a family stay with us who were back visiting from Bahrain. Their extended family is in Washington State on the West Coast, but they flew back here to visit because of the relationships they forged in this church. Also in the past month, I got an update from a couple in Japan that were married here in the church – they're having another baby and wanted to share the news. Then I heard from a couple in Switzerland who are looking forward to getting back to DC this summer and can't wait to plug back into the church – and they've had another baby too.

God brings people here to DC. They come and worship with us. They forge relationships and then He moves them on but they have such good memories that they either try to come back or they tell others to come check us out. So, people who used to worship here with us get transferred to a place like Okinawa, Japan and learn that a friend is being transferred to DC and they tell them – I have a church you have to check out – and it's us. Our church, *like the church in Rome*, is [spoken of throughout the whole world](#). It's encouraging to people, and it's all to the glory of God.

So again, the point is *we should be encouraged by the church*. But there at least three different ways to speak of the church. We can think of the Church global – comprised of all true believers in Christ. Then there is the church local – individual churches like City Gates. But there is also the church individual – individual saints who make up the church, they can encourage us as well.

You are, personally, a trophy of God's grace – think of who you were without Him. Think of who and what you would be today without Him. Think of the ways He has changed you. Think of the things you willing and joyfully do for no other reason than because it seems like the right thing to do to serve Jesus. Some of your lives look, sound, and smell an awful lot like Jesus.

People tell stories about you when you're not around and I get to hear some of them and [I thank my God through Jesus Christ for \[you\], that \[your\] faith is spoken of throughout the whole world](#). You're the reason people tell their friends to come to this church when they come to DC. You're the reason some people want to stay here even though they have the opportunity to move – they see Jesus in you. They connect with you. And they praise God for you. My friends, your lives, individually and collectively give others reasons to praise God. You are trophies of His grace. You mean something to Him, and therefore you mean something to other people too. So be encouraged *by* the church, and then be encouraged *as* the church.

Then, point number two: **Be prayerful for each other.**

Look with me at vs [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,](#)

When you read Paul's letters this theme is inescapable – he prays, a lot - for lots of people and churches and he asks people and churches to pray for him. Personally, it's super convicting. He calls God as his witness of how faithful he is in his prayer for them.

I don't want to condemn you or frustrate you, but I do want you to remind you – prayer matters. Even short prayers. Even occasional prayers. There's only one way to pray right and that's to mean it. You've got flexibility. But it's a tremendous privilege and opportunity – it's a very real way you can make a difference for someone.

I want to share something because it's meaningful to me and I hope some of you will pick it up and do it for others. About two years ago I started to receive voice memos from Pastor Vic, often early in the morning. It's just the recording. I hit play and it's Vic praying for me – a minute or two or three – he prays to God, for me, and then sends me a recording of what he prayed.



Can you imagine how encouraging that is? How personal it is? What a blessing it is? Who might you want to do that for? To [make mention](#) of them in your [prayers](#)?

Sometimes I like to send someone just a random text – ‘hey God brought you to mind and I prayed for you today.’ It’s a simple way to make a difference, stay connected, and show you care.

I don’t use Facebook – I post every now and then on Instagram and it pushes over to Facebook – but I don’t go on there much myself. When I did, there was another pastor I know down in Central Virginia and every so often he would post “How can I pray for you today?” And it was amazing the things people would comment, listing their concerns, their needs, their praise reports.

My point in all of this is: yes, we should pray for others, but it doesn’t have to be a burden or a guilt trip, it’s a magnificent opportunity to care for and about people.

But you also need to know people are praying for you. Like Vic does for me – and I know he’s not the only one – the staff of this church and our families are blessed beyond measure by how much you pray for us and for the difference it makes. Thank you.

We’re also praying for you. Especially the members of the church – the elders of the church divide up all the members. We each have a list we use to pray for you all, by name.

Other people are praying for you too– your friends, family members, and people you don’t even know. The Christians in Rome hadn’t met Paul face to face, but he was still praying for them. Who might be praying for you, and what difference might it make?

I can tell you one person for sure. Even if you feel isolated and alone, even if you feel unseen and ignored. Even if you feel no one is praying for you. Someone is. And it matters.

Over in Romans 8, verse 34 Paul will point out that Jesus is at the right hand of God in Heaven making intercession for us. That’s a fancy theological word for intervening on our behalf, pleading our case and cause. Meanwhile the Holy Spirit is helping us as well.

**Romans 8:26** Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.

Bottom line: God’s got you. You are being prayed for – guaranteed. And it matters.

OK, one more thing to see here about our relationship with God and then we can look at how all of this affects our relationship with others.

### **Be submitted to God's will**

One thing Paul prayed for was the opportunity to get to Rome and meet the Christians there. But it depended on what God willed and when God might grant the opportunity. He prays, look at verse 10

10 making request if, by some means, now at last I may find a way in the will of God to come to you.

Here's an important thing to know about prayer – it's not a recipe or program with a guaranteed outcome. You're not guaranteed to get what you want just because you prayed.

That's disappointing for some people – they pray for something and they don't get it or it doesn't happen. And sometimes it's a really good thing – why would God say no to this? It's hard when that happens. It's even worse when you think something's going to happen and it doesn't. Times like that can try our faith. They can leave us cynical, jaded, and guarded because we prayed, and we prayed for something good, but it didn't come to pass.

We could spend a whole morning, a whole year, talking just about prayer – it's a complex subject – but all we have time for today is simply to make this one point: whatever we ask for in prayer, even good things, needs to be submitted to God's will. And that includes His timing. Because sometimes God says yes – but not right now or not that way.

Friends, listen to me – *when it comes to prayer, the goal is not to get what we want from God, but to get in line with His will for us.*

This is why Jesus prayed so famously in the Garden of Gethesemane – Father, if there's any other way than My suffering on the cross, let's go that direction, **'nevertheless, not My will, but Your will be done.'**

This is why we pray in the Lord's prayer – **Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be Your name, Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.**

Our greatest desire as Christians should be to see God's will done, in His way, and in His time – because that will bring our greatest joy. That will truly satisfy and sustain our souls. Not my good ideas – my good ideas submitted entirely to God in trust and faith.

Now let me pivot to what we can learn about relationship with others from this passage. The first thing is

### **Christian friendship is normal**



Paul says [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.](#)

Remember the Great Commandment – when Jesus was asked what was the most important thing to know or do from all the ancient teachings of Israel He said it was this: love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. Being in relationship with God pulls us into relationship with others. It has to happen. There's no other option. Even if you're an introvert. Even if you don't really like people. Even if you're not much of a talker.

You don't have to become an extrovert. You don't have to be Mr or Mrs Popular. But it's absolutely unavoidable – if you let Jesus into your life, He's going to bring along other people too.

But look, here's the upside of that – God brings people into your life who care about you and help you. They love you, in Jesus' name. *This is God's plan for you.* You don't have to go through life alone. You don't have to handle it all by yourself or keep it all to yourself. There are people who love God and love you and want to see you win, want to see you thriving and will actually speak up and show up or shut up and listen up in order to help you. Christian friendship is normal.

Arthur Brooks is a professor at Harvard where he teaches courses on happiness that fill up within seconds of opening for registration each semester. He's the former CEO of the Rand corporation. He says there are four macro nutrients to happiness. Much like a good meal is full of fat, carbs, and protein; a good life is filled with faith, family, friends, and work.

But he points out that there are two kinds of friends – real friends and deal friends. Most of us have deal friends – the people you work with or see regularly in the context of some duty. They provide something you need or you provide something they need – you like each other, you get along, you're friendly with them and might even call them a friend. But if you no longer need the service they provide, you're probably not going to have them over for dinner or go on vacation together because all you really needed from each other was transactional.

Real friends on the other hand may be completely useless to you. They can't help you get your work done. They might be in a different field entirely. They can't help you get connected or advance. But they know you. They care about you. Not just professional you. The real you. This kind of friendship is often anchored in something outside of either of you that you both appreciate or have in common. And the best possible thing for that to be, as some of you know, is Jesus. Faith is something powerful enough to hold two people together as a common point of interest.

Which brings me to my, second point:

## **Christian friendship occurs among unlikely people**

Notice the diversity of the church. Paul is writing to Rome – that’s who they are politically and where they are geographically. But then he mentions in verse [14 I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise.](#)

Now he’s speaking about their culture. You had the sophisticated and well-educated Romans who could read and write in Greek and were well-trained in philosophy and literature. And then you had immigrants and others referred to as barbarians – those unfamiliar with these things. They were all on God’s target list – God wanted to reach, save, and include all of them.

The beautiful thing is, that’s exactly what we see in this church too. Trip and I had lunch with a guy not long ago who was visiting from Texas and one of the things he said was “Ya’ll have a lot of diversity. I mean a *lot* of diversity.” And it’s true – there are people in this church from Ethiopia and Mexico, Australia and Panama, Vietnam and India, Cape Verde and Brazil, Cameroon and Nigeria, Burma and Mexico. We’ve got people on vacation this summer visiting family in Peru, at least three families in China, and one who just returned from South Korea.

And here’s the thing – we never, not once, said we need to reach out intentionally to these people. We all just found our way here because we love Jesus and want to know more about Him from His Word.

At this point in my life the only reason I have a relationship with most of the people I call friends is because we’re both friends with Jesus. What we have in common with Him brings us together.

Which brings us to our third point:

## **Christian friendship is anchored in the gospel**

Remember, again, this is like Ukrainian Paul writing to the church in Moscow, or Palestinian Paul writing to the church in Jerusalem. Roman politicians were taxing the Jewish people. Roman soldiers were walking the streets of Jerusalem. Roman governors were flying their flags in the Temple complex. They represented everything that Paul once hated and opposed from the very core of his being. And now he wants to be encouraged together *with people in Rome*.

We could, perhaps, understand if Paul thought he had something to share with them. It’s easier to be in the position of generosity because there’s still some dignity and superiority involved, but when you also receive from the other group? Now there’s true humility and equality. And that’s exactly what we see in the text.



So how did it all happen? Paul's life was changed by the gospel and some people in Rome experienced the same thing. They no longer see themselves first and foremost as Jews or Romans, as men or women, as sophisticated or simple. They see themselves primarily as Christians. And that is how they see each other too.

We live in an increasingly fractured and isolated society. Algorithms have sorted us and grouped and control what we see and don't see. We walk past people and never say a word because we're too busy with other things and you're not one of my people.

But God calls us into relationship with Him and into relationship with other people. God ministers to us, gives to us, blesses us – we receive from Him but the deliveries come both directly and indirectly. Often God meets our needs, or shows His love, or guides our lives through the lives of other people. You cannot escape it – drawing closer to God brings you closer to other people. The goal, as Paul points out, is mutual encouragement.

If you were in the church in Rome when this letter arrived, here's what you would have heard – someone else was encouraged by your church. Someone was praying for your church. Someone really, really wanted to visit your church, as soon as it was God's will. Someone who had very little in common with you actually thought of you as a friend because you both shared in the gospel.

My friends, all of those things are still true for you, here and now today and you have the opportunity to be all of those things for someone else – to be the one who is encouraged, to be the one who prays, to be the one who seeks God's will, to be the one who finds mutually fulfilling friendships with unlikely or unusual people because you've both been touched by grace.

Let's pray.



## Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

### Romans 1:8-15 The Power of Friendship

**Summary:** A relationship with God leads to friendships with unlikely people.

- Paul is a Jew writing to people in the capital of Rome with warmth and joy seeking mutual encouragement. Why is this a shocking turn of events? What does it say about the transformative power of the gospel?
- What is encouraging to you about City Gates?
- It's easy to focus on bad news, and there has been a good amount of it lately, but what have you heard, seen, or experienced that is encouraging to you about a church or ministry?
- What encourages you about the global church? What reports have you seen or heard?
- What role has prayer played in encouraging you?
  - o Who do you pray for?
  - o Who prays for you?
  - o Jeff shared about sending and receiving texts and voice memos – how else can you encourage people with your prayers?
- When have you had to pray for God's will and timing? Is there a desire in your heart right now that you're willing to share?
- Have you had any unusual or unlikely friends because you both shared the gospel in common?
- Ways to love Jesus more:
  - o Ask God to bless churches, ministries, and people in whatever they're doing that brings Him glory.
  - o Go to the The Gospel Coalition Website and read anything by [Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra](#) - her goal is to encourage readers with reporting on what God is doing.
  - o Pray all your prayers with "nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done."