


The Heart of an Authentic Apostle for the Gospel

2026-04-19 – Romans 1:8-15

	<p>Christians often wonder what it was like to live in the ancient world of the first century when the Bible was written. To be clear, your life expectancy would be much shorter, you would have no modern plumbing or medicine, and unless you were wealthy or in the military, you would likely never leave your hometown (So let's not overly glamorize it!). However, in Romans 1:8-15 the Lord reveals the heart of an authentic apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ in the first century. This text offers a glorious glimpse into the Apostle Paul's life that can and must powerfully shape the heart of every true Christian and local church. Do you have the heart of an apostle gripped by the gospel, trusting in God's sovereignty and committed to building up Christ's church? Romans 1:8-15 is full of eternal truth that helps us personally answer this. It serves as awesome encouragement to live fueled by and for God-centered, Christ-exalting, Gospel-driven, Body-building truth to the glory of God. Soli Deo Gloria</p>
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With grace and peace to you from God our Father, through Jesus Christ our risen, ruling, one-day-soon-returning Lord and the only Savior. Brothers and sisters and friends, it is good to be with you on this Lord's Day again. And again, a very warm greeting from the brother and sister saints of the local church family I have the privilege and joy of serving just ten minutes south of here, Christ the King Reformed Baptist Church. It is good to be with you on this Lord's Day and open up God's Word again.

I'm going to pray right now and entrust our time to the Lord. I will pray a little more extended pastoral prayer for you and for the good work the Lord is doing in all of our lives, also this nation and the nations. Then we will open up God's Word and dive into today's sermon. Let us go before the Lord now in a word of prayer. Would you bow with me?

Almighty God and merciful Heavenly Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, we come before you, and it is in true fact that, God, our sins—they are many. As we just sang, but your mercy is more. And so we praise you and thank you, God, for the assurance and pardon found in your holy Word, that your steadfast love, Lord, it endures forever. And God, we marvel at this. We marvel at this because of who you are: the God of all creation, the Lord of heaven and earth, the God of all glory, by whom and through whom and for whom all things were made.

And so, God, we do entrust our lives to you this day. We entrust our nation to you this day, and we pray for your blessing upon this "Americans Read the Bible" project as many politicians and influencers and leaders read the Bible over the next week. We praise you, Lord, that this is happening and ask for your blessing upon this. We pray that many would encounter you, Lord Jesus, the promised prophet, priest, king, and judge, the only Savior. We cry out to you, God, that you would draw many of our neighbors to saving faith in Jesus Christ all across this nation.

We do entrust to you our president, Donald J. Trump, and pray that you would sovereignly put your hand upon him and grant to him saving faith and repentance. We also pray, God, that where his policies and plans agree with yours, those would succeed; where, God, he is surrounded by foolish counselors, those plans will be thwarted. And so, God, please protect, we pray, our nation and those who are counseling our president and others in his cabinet.

We do pray, God, that you would bring to Washington, D.C., and also to the state of Illinois—our beloved but broken state that so desperately needs you—saving faith in Jesus. And so we pray for our governor, J.B. Pritzker, and cry out to you for his salvation, God, that you would draw him to saving faith in Jesus. We pray, God, that you would bring many Christians into his life. And where, God, our governor is promoting policies and that which does not please you, we pray that those plans would fail and be thwarted.

God, we entrust to you this village, and we are thankful, Lord, for Glenview. We pray, Lord, for the Glenview Police Chief, Mark Chesla. God, we pray for him that you would bless him and keep him and strengthen him. God, if he is not your child and has not trusted in Christ, draw him to saving faith in Jesus.

And God, we pray for each and every brother or sister in this local church: strengthen them and fortify their faith according to the Word of God. Do what only you can do in the Holy Spirit today and throughout this week through your Word. Set them apart increasingly and conform them more to the image and likeness of Christ, to the praise of your glory, that each one might live zealous for your kingdom.

God, we confess that we have so much sin in our lives, and we confess, God, that we are not the people we ought to be so often. And yet, God, we praise you for the pardon and assurance in your holy Word that Jesus Christ is faithful and just and our mediator who stands between us and you. And so, God, we are in awe of you. And we thank you for your Word. We thank you for these friends. Be glorified today, God, as your Word is opened. We pray this all in the precious and powerful name of King Jesus. And all who agreed said together, "Amen."

Amen.

Well, this morning I'm reading Romans 1:8–15. We are pressing forward in the book of Romans. Romans 1:8–15. And to really set our hearts up in a right posture, would you please stand for the reading of God's Word if you are able? Hear now the Word of the living Creator God from Romans 1:8–15:

"First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because the news of your faith is being reported in all the world. God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in telling the good news about his Son, that I constantly mention you, always asking in my prayers that if somehow, in God's will, I may now at last succeed in coming to you. For I want very much to see you, so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—that is, to be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. Now, I don't want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I often planned to come to you, but was prevented until now, in order that I might have a fruitful ministry among you, just as I have had among the rest of the Gentiles. I am obligated both to Greeks and barbarians, both to the wise and the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome." (Romans 1:8–15)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated.

What would it be like to live in the first century in the Greco-Roman time period where the Apostle Paul wrote? What would it be like to be in Rome? Perhaps sometimes you have wondered this or asked yourself this. Here's another question: What would Paul have said to you? What would Paul have said to you if Paul were alive today in the 21st century and you didn't know him, but he wrote to you and he heard something about your faith—what would he say?

What would the Apostle Paul write to Christians in Rome he did not know personally?

What was on Paul's heart to share first?

What would the Apostle Paul write to you today?

Do you share Paul's deep-rooted convictions?

See, these kinds of questions are important ones for us to ask. We need to ask, "What would Paul have said to Christians today?" But we also need to ask this: What would Paul say to the church in Rome whom he did not know? Remember, we said last week, Paul has never been to Rome. He did not plant this church. He did not establish it.

When we think about this letter and the letter that Paul writes to these brothers and sisters in Rome, we should not be so naïve as to think it would all be glamorous and wonderful. The truth of the matter is that in the first century, they lacked many things that we have today. Modern plumbing was not a feature. Many of the advances when it comes to technology and dental care—if you wear glasses, these kinds of things—they did not have that same kind of technology. The life expectancy was considerably shorter. Famine was not uncommon. And so we should not glamorize the first century world.

We should also not be so naïve as to think that everything Paul wrote to the church in Rome would be said exactly to us. However, brothers and sisters in Christ and friends, there is a great deal of truth, many lessons we can learn from Paul's words here in Romans 1:8–15. Particularly when you think about Rome. Rome is the epicenter of pagan power, filled with superstition, polytheism. There was pride; there was wealth. But in the first century, you probably almost certainly would not travel beyond your limited geographic area unless you were wealthy, unless you were in the military.

My encouragement to you today is to ask this of yourself: If the Apostle Paul wrote to you today, to the saints of Cornerstone, what would he say? And then personally ask yourself this: Do you share the Apostle Paul's deep-rooted convictions? Because what Paul does here in Romans 1:8–15 is he says, "Let me tell you about my heart. Let me tell you about my convictions." Before Paul dives into some glorious theology all throughout the book of Romans, Paul is going to share a little bit right now in verses 8 through 15 about what is on his heart.

And my friends, I would absolutely encourage you to not only thank God for what the Lord inspired the Apostle Paul to write, but also to use it to challenge your own life and ask yourself, "Is this my heart? Are these my convictions?" Because for the true Christian, I can guarantee you the Apostle Paul would say, "Absolutely, this is what a true Christian should be marked by and their hearts ought to be filled with."

1. **Personal gratitude:** God centered thanks for their faith!

"First, **I thank my God** through Jesus Christ for all of you, **because the news of your faith** is being reported in all the world." (Romans 1:8)

So today I want to look very briefly with you at seven deep-rooted convictions in the Apostle Paul's life. The first is this: personal gratitude. Paul had a God-centered thanks for the faith that was in Rome. Remember, Paul had never been to Rome; he had heard about their faith. But in verse 8 there it says this: "**First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because the news of your faith is being reported in all the world.**" (Romans 1:8)

“We are here taught that faith is God’s gift; for thanksgiving is an acknowledgement of a benefit. He who gives thanks to God for faith, confesses that it comes from Him.”

- John Calvin

Notice how personal this is: “I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you.” John Calvin notes concerning this passage that one of the things we learn is that faith is a gift; it is God’s gift. And how are we taught that? Well, Calvin says this: *Thanksgiving is an acknowledgment of a benefit. He who gives thanks to God for faith confesses that it comes from Him.* This, friends, is a confession that the faith found in the Christians in Rome was generated by the living God. And so God alone gets the thanks and the gratitude for this. It’s a personal, heartfelt thanks.

Remember, the church in Rome had its divisions. Pagan Gentiles who were gloriously converted out of their paganism and polytheism were now converted and Christians in the church in Rome. And the church in Rome had taken on a very distinct Gentile flavor, because the Jewish Christians had been expelled from Rome, and they had just come back. And now there’s all sorts of questions in their minds about Old Testament law, ceremonial law. How do we relate to one another? How are we supposed to live when for years, hundreds upon hundreds of years, my ancestors practiced this according to the Old Testament? Now these Gentile pagans know none of that, but they do worship and serve Jesus, and so do we. How do we live together? How do we approach the law?

Paul writes here, though, with a personal gratitude, a God-centered thankfulness in his heart for the fact that both these Jewish Christians and these Gentile Christians have faith in Jesus. To be clear, one of the things we should note about this is that thanksgiving was prominent all throughout Paul’s work. New Testament scholar Anthony Thiselton notes this: the Greek word *eucharistō*, or thanksgiving, is used 46 times in Paul’s 13 New Testament letters. Paul is clearly an apostle of thanksgiving. Only in the book of Galatians does the Apostle Paul not open with a word of thanks concerning the faith of those he writes to. So Paul was constantly saying, “I thank the Lord for your faith.”

Recall again what we said last week: Paul had not only never been to Rome, this epicenter of pagan power, but also Paul had just said that he was a slave. He’s a slave of Christ Jesus; he’s an apostle of Jesus. And he’s writing to this church, and he wants them to know, “In my heart, I have a personal gratitude, this God-centered thanks, for the faith that I have heard of in your life.”

“Christianity was advertised in the first century at the very beginning simply by the lives and living of Christian people. Oh, that it might happen like that again! Are you advertising Christianity? Is your faith spoken of?...Oh, that we may know and experience grace, and the peace of God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, to such an extent that our faith will be spoken of throughout the whole world, and the thereby God be glorified and many drawn to Him.

- Martyn Lloyd Jones

In your own life, friends here at Cornerstone, what would the Apostle Paul say about your faith? What is he thankful for? Can he say, “I thank the Lord for your faith”? D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones notes that *“Christianity was advertised in the first century, the very beginning, simply by the lives and the living of Christian people. Oh, that it might happen like that again. Are you advertising Christianity? Is your faith spoken of? Oh, that we might know and experience grace,”* Lloyd-Jones says, *“in the peace of God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ to such an extent that our faith will be spoken of throughout the whole world and thereby God*

be glorified and many drawn to him.” Is your faith spoken of? What do your neighbors say about your faith? What do your colleagues and co-workers say about your faith? There’s so much here for us.

But true Christians are thankful people. We are grateful people—grateful for God’s kindness and grace in the lives of others. We’re not jealous; we’re thankful. When you hear about how God is blessing a local church with reformation, revival and repentance, conversions—you praise God for that, or are you jealous? You see a friend post something on social media, a Bible verse, and you see they’re committed to following Christ. In your heart, do you think, “What a self-righteous person,” or do you think, “Thanks be to God; this brother, this sister is still following Christ”?

I urge you to apply this in your own life. If you see a friend who is following Christ, you should be full of gratitude. You should not assume the worst; assume the best and reach out and say, “I’m so encouraged, friend, that you are following Christ. Thanks be to God for his grace in your life. What an awesome gift.” That’s the heart of a Christian: personal gratitude. Paul had that in his heart, and Paul wants us to have that in our hearts as well.

2. **Christ’s intercession**: He is the gap on our behalf!

Through him we have received grace... (Romans 1:5)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and **the Lord Jesus Christ**. (Roman 1:7)

First, I thank my **God through Jesus Christ** for all of you...(Romans 1:8)

The second core conviction in the Apostle Paul’s heart from this text, very clearly, is Christ’s intercession. I want you to see this so clearly. It says this in the next verse. There were a few verses. Look back in your Bible at verses 5, 7, and 8. Romans 1:5 says this: “**Through him [through Christ] we have received grace.**” Then down in verse 7 that we saw last week: “**Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**” And then today in our text, Romans 1:8: “**First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you.**”

Why does this matter? Why should we not skip past this? Far too often, God is spoken of in vague terms. We speak of God in vague terms, and the world often speaks of God in the same way. But a Christian understands that the incarnate, exalted Christ is the only way we can have access to God. Christ’s intercession is a theme all throughout the book of Romans. Paul goes back to it again and again. He talks about our union with Jesus Christ, that we the once-great sinners have been saved by a greater God, that he has reconciled us to God and forgiven us, that now we are united to God in Christ Jesus.

And we have to understand this, friends: there are so many who approach God as a vague deity, as some concept in their minds, but they do not know the true and living God. But we who are in Christ know the true and living God.

Through Jesus Christ—every approach must be made through the merits of the Mediator, for in order to know God as Father, it is necessary to recognize Christ as Lord and Savior [John 14:6; 1 Tim 2:5]. The solemn truth revealed by Scripture is that apart from Christ, God is a consuming fire (Heb. 10:26-29, 12:29).”

-Geoffrey B. Wilson

Here's what retired Baptist pastor Jeffrey Wilson says about Christ's intercession, this role as mediator. He says, *"Through Jesus Christ, every approach must be made through the merits of the mediator. For in order to know God as Father, it is necessary to recognize Christ as Lord and Savior."*

Many other texts point to this. *The solemn truth revealed by Scripture is that apart from Christ, God is a consuming fire.* That's who the Lord is if you do not have Christ as your mediator—a consuming fire. He is holy, holy, holy, and everyone apart from Jesus Christ does not have refuge, does not have pardon, does not have peace with God. The Apostle Paul is making that so clear in Romans, and he's already made it clear right at the outset. Everything is done through and in and for Christ Jesus. Amen.

This is a core conviction of the Apostle Paul's. Do not for a moment be so foolish as to think on your own merit or goodness, or because of what you've done over the decades, that you can stand before a holy God in heaven without Jesus. You need his role as mediator and intercessor and high priest as much today, as much on your most sanctified day, than ever. Understand it. Believe it. Have that as your core conviction.

Personal gratitude, but also a sense of God's awesome intercession through Christ Jesus. A third deep-rooted conviction for the Apostle Paul's heart that you should absolutely line up your heart with, your priorities with, and say, "Is that true of me?"

3. **God-focused service:** in His presence under His providence!

God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in telling the good news about his Son—that I constantly mention you [to God], always asking [God] in my prayers **that if it is somehow in God's will** I may now at last succeed in coming to you. (Roman 1:9-10)

Paul had this conviction that he was devoted to a **God-focused service**. His ministry as an apostle was always something done in the presence of God, under the providence of Almighty God. He had a God-focused service.

Now this almost seems so obvious—you're like, "Why are we including this?" But understand, beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, that the most obvious things and the obvious truths in the Bible can be so easily skipped over to our peril and our detriment. We don't make God at the center of our service. We don't make God at the center of our devotion. But over and over and over again, even in these opening verses of Romans, Paul goes back to God. We saw that last week: ten times in those first seven verses, God is at the center. And here in 8 through 15, it's no different.

Look in your Bible at verses 9 and 10: **"God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in telling the good news about his Son, that I constantly mention you [to God], always asking [God] in my prayers that if it is somehow, in God's will, I may now at last succeed in coming to you."** Paul, a slave, an apostle of the risen Lord Jesus Christ, was a man whose heart was filled to the brim with a God-centered theology. And friend, your thoughts about God matter. Your service to God matters. It is about to be something that you will stand before God and give an account of. Was it done to the praise and honor of his glory?

The end of his life, the Apostle Paul—months, perhaps weeks before he would die (tradition tells us he was put to death by beheading by the command of Nero when he was in Rome as a prisoner)—just a few months, maybe even weeks, some New Testament scholars think, before he died, the Apostle Paul would

say these words in 2 Timothy 4:1–2: ***“I solemnly charge you before God and Christ Jesus, who is going to judge the living and the dead, and because of his appearing and his kingdom: Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, encourage with great patience and teaching.”*** (2 Timothy 4:1–2)

Throughout his entire ministry, the Apostle Paul wanted everyone he wrote to to know, “My ministry is done in the presence of God. My ministry is done in the providence of God.” Here in the book of Romans, he says what? “I was prevented from coming to you. I wanted to come to you. I wanted to see you, but I couldn’t.” And so what was the language the Apostle Paul said? “If God wills. If God wills.” Do you speak this way, friend? “If God wills, we will do this.” The book of James teaches us this: Do not say you’ll go do this and that. Do not have that boasting attitude. If the Lord wills, you will do this and that.

Every day is a gift from God. Every day is a kindness of God, and we do not presume on the mercies of God. We say, “If the Lord wills.” We live in the presence of God in all of our ministry, and we do it to the glory of God. But we also recognize he, in his kind providence, sometimes prevents us from certain good things that we may want to do. You may have a good desire for something. Paul wanted to go to Rome to do what? To preach the gospel, as we’ll talk about later. And God had, in his providence, not allowed that to happen.

Is that how you live your life? Is that how you conduct your ministry? Is that how you live to the glory of God? With the sense of, “God, I’m in your presence. I’m going to make you witness to everything I do, everything I say.” Because ultimately, before it’s said to the person in front of me, it’s said to you. What did Jesus say in Matthew’s gospel? Every idle word you speak will be called into account in the day of judgment.

“Right now counts forever! Live Coram Deo!”

-R.C. Sproul

[Coram Deo=before the face of God]

Paul lived “*Coram Deo*”. It’s a Latin phrase that means “*before the face of God*.” The late R.C. Sproul often memorably said the following: “*Right now counts forever.*” Live “*coram Deo*”. Live before the face of God. Understand that everything you do and say is before him, it’s under him, it’s unto him. Do not be so deceived, foolish, naïve—whatever you want to call it—and think that you can escape God and his face. You cannot. We cannot.

Does He [God] not see my ways and number all my steps?

(Job 31:4)

The eyes of the Lord are everywhere, observing the wicked and the good.

(Proverbs 15:30)

Consider what the Old Testament teaches us: Job 31:4, Proverbs 15:3—just two texts, but there are hundreds we can add to this. Job 31:4 says this: “***Does he [God] not see my ways and number my steps?***” (Job 31:4) In Proverbs 15:3 ***the eyes of the Lord are everywhere, observing the wicked and the good.*** He sees it all. And so Paul said, “I’m going to acknowledge it that God is my witness, that I am always in his presence. My ministry is done to him, and the Lord has providentially hindered me from coming to see you, but I do hope, Lord willing, to come and see you.”

Are you constantly thinking of God, friends? Do you love him and delight in dwelling on him, conversing with him? Are you humbled before him? Are you thanking him for the ministry opportunities you have? And when you’re prevented from doing something—even something very good, even something very God-

honoring that would bring glory to him—can you acknowledge, “Lord, you have providentially hindered me from this, but I will live my life knowing that I am in your presence and work diligently to the praise of your glory”?

The Apostle Paul was marked by this. He was convicted at his core and in his heart by this: personal gratitude. Are you a person of thanks to God? Christ’s intercession—he was obsessed and consumed by the idea that Christ was our mediator and is forever our mediator. And a God-focused service.

4. **Fervent Proclamation**: preaching the good news of Christ.

God is my witness, whom I serve **with my spirit in telling the good news about his Son...** (Romans 1:9)

So **I am eager to preach the gospel to you** also who are in Rome.” (Romans 1:15)

And the fourth mark or conviction, you might say, in the Apostle Paul’s heart was this: **fervent proclamation**. Fervent Proclamation. Paul was committed to preaching the good news of Christ. Does this mark your life? Are you committed to this? Are you contributing to this, participating in it, and encouraging it to the best of your ability, to the glory of God?

The Apostle Paul would say this in verse 9: **“God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in telling the good news about his Son.”** And then down in verse 15, look what it says there in Romans 1:15: **“So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.”** (Romans 1:15) Paul was committed; he was fervently devoted to preaching the gospel to non-Christians—yes and amen, those far from Christ—but also, clearly, from Romans 1, to Christians.

Do you understand that, friends? The gospel, according to the Bible, is for Christians. It’s for you. It’s not just for someone out there who’s lost and hopeless and dead in their sins. The gospel is for you. We so quickly forget the promises of God seen when we dwell on the gospel. We forget that the character of God is on display in the gospel, the goodness of God, the mercies of God, the excellencies of God. All those things are on display in the gospel. And they strengthen us and they bless us and they build us up because we are in a fallen world and we are sinners who are forgetful, easily manipulated.

Not me, Pastor Brandon. Yes, even you—easily manipulated, easily consumed by worldliness. You give yourself to your idols; you get discouraged easily. And the gospel—the good news of God’s grace in Christ, his mercy in Christ to sinners who don’t deserve it—this message of hope, this message of reconciliation with the eternal God your Creator, that message of what God has done through Christ in his cross work, in his resurrection, in his intercession—this message is for you. It’s for me. It’s for all beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, not just people in the world.

Paul was committed to a fervent proclamation of preaching the good news of Christ. Never, ever, ever assume you have enough gospel in your life. You don’t. You do not have enough gospel in your life, and neither do I. And to be clear, you never graduate from the school of the gospel. You never graduate and move past it. Don’t think, “I want something else. I want to get to the deeper things of the faith.”

If a small child—your son or your daughter or your grandchild, your niece or nephew—comes and says, “Jesus died on the cross for you and he rose again,” what do you say? You say, “Yes and amen,” and you

say, “Praise God; he knew I needed to hear that gospel message from the voice of this child.” A true Christian understands that we desperately need the gospel of God. Paul knew this. He was eager to preach the gospel to those in Rome.

One of my seminary professors, Dr. D.A. Carson, told a story once of one of his colleagues in the missions department, Dr. Paul Hiebert. Dr. Paul Hiebert’s been with the Lord now for a few years, a number of years. But he grew up in the Mennonite tradition, and Dr. D.A. Carson noted this story that Paul Hiebert told about assuming the gospel in a tradition. Paul comes from Mennonite stock. That’s his heritage. And here’s what Paul said about the Mennonite tradition.

The first generation of Mennonites, Paul Hiebert said, believed the gospel and thought there were certain social entailments, behaviors we had to practice in light of the gospel. The second generation assumed the gospel and focused more on those social entailments. How do we love our neighbor? What do we do? And the third generation denied the gospel, and all that we’re left with were these entailments. Do not assume the gospel of God’s grace in Christ. Preach it. Love it. Promote it in your own homes. Promote it in this local church. When someone tells you the gospel, delight in it and praise God for it. Do not, beloved brothers and sisters in Christ at Cornerstone Evangelical Free Church, assume the gospel.

The gospel is worth living for. The gospel is also worth dying for. Charles Haddon Spurgeon once said the following: *“There was once in the church a gospel which believers hugged to their hearts as if their soul’s life. It used to be there used to be a gospel in the world which provoked enthusiasm, commanded sacrifice. Tens of thousands have met together to hear this gospel and periled their lives. Men to the teeth of tyrants have proclaimed it, have suffered the loss of all things, gone to prison and death for it, singing psalms all the while. Is there not such a gospel remaining? Will we not return to the substantial meat of infallible revelation and cry to the Holy Ghost to feed us upon his own inspired Word? Grace is the essence of the gospel. Grace is the hope for this fallen world. Grace is the sole comfort of saints looking forward to glory. It is news of the best kind: that the judge is prepared to pardon transgression and to justify the ungodly. It is good news that the Lord will blot out sin, cover the sinner with righteousness, and receive him into his favor—and that not on account of anything he has done or will ever do, but out of sovereign grace!”*

That good news of God’s grace in Christ, that gospel message, is for those in the world who desperately need Christ and are without hope and without Christ today. It absolutely is. But that gospel is also for you and me, believers, who desperately need to be committed to a fervent proclamation of the gospel amongst ourselves.

5. **Constant Prayer:** a heartfelt desire dependent on Christ!

First, **I thank my God** through Jesus Christ for all of you because the news of your faith is being reported in all the world. God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in telling the good news about his Son—that **I constantly mention you, always asking in my prayers** that if somehow, in God’s will, I may now at last succeed in coming to you.”

(Romans 1:9-10)

Paul had at his core conviction: personal gratitude, Christ’s intercession, God-focused service, fervent proclamation, and fifth, constant prayer. **Constant prayer**—a heartfelt desire, a dependence on the Lord. It’s one of the sweetest. **“First I thank my God”** (that’s a prayer) **“through Jesus Christ for all of you because the**

news of your faith is being reported in all the world.” Verse 9 there in your Bibles: “God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in telling the good news about his Son, that I constantly mention you, always asking in my prayers that if somehow, in God’s will, I may now at last succeed in coming to you.”

... Pray Constantly... (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

Pray at all times in the Spirit, and stay alert with all perseverance and intercession for all the saints (Ephesians 6:18)

Devote yourselves to prayer; stay alert with thanksgiving. (Colossians 4:2)

Paul was a man who was constantly praying, and he constantly said throughout his other letters as well that you Christians must also be committed to praying. Consider the following texts on the screen there with God’s Word: Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:17, “Pray constantly.” In Ephesians 6:18, “Pray at all times in the Spirit and stay alert with all perseverance and intercession for all the saints.” “Devote yourselves to prayer; stay alert with thanksgiving.” (Colossians 4:2)

So let’s just personalize this. How is your prayer life going? Is there a constant dependence on the Lord, a crying out to him for the salvation of others, for your own sanctification? Is there a constant confession of your sins, a thanksgiving to the Lord like the Apostle Paul? People mock prayer in our day. We see this all the time, revealing themselves, by the way, to be worldly and godless. True Christians will never, ever mock prayer. True Christians will delight in the fact that God invites them as a Father into his loving and tender care to approach his throne of grace through Christ. You can call upon him anytime, anywhere. God invites you to do this, to commune with him, to talk to him and communicate with him. Pour out your heart before him.

Paul wanted to model this. He wanted to say, “At the core of who I am, you Christians in Rome who don’t know me, have not met me, I didn’t plant your church, but I’m a man devoted to prayer. And I’m constantly praying prayers of thanksgiving, prayers expressing my desire: God, that’s my desire—to go and be with these Christians and to encourage them in their faith.” Paul poured out what the desires of his heart were before the Lord, and he modeled this. Constant prayer. Is this what describes and marks you, brothers and sisters in Christ of Cornerstone Evangelical Free Church?

Far too often what happened in the life of the church over the last few decades is the prayer meeting on Wednesday goes away. There’s one or two people who are there. May it be the case that every single day we are pouring out our hearts in secret prayer. We are gathering to call upon the Lord and thundering at the gates of heaven and calling on him to move. We need him. Constant prayer was a core conviction in the life of the Apostle Paul, and it is in every true Christian’s life as well.

6. Fellowship longing: the gift of mutually strengthened faith

For I want very much to see you, so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you...(Romans 1:11)

Sixth, this one always stands out to me. It’s shaped my ministry and life probably for the last 15 years or so. And that is Paul’s hunger, his desire for fellowship. He was a fellowship-longing man. He yearned for fellowship. And what is fellowship? It’s the gift of mutually encouraged faith. He wanted to go; he wanted

to bless; he wanted to build up others. He wanted to say to them, “Brother, sister, praise God for his grace in your life. Praise God for his Word. Praise God for the gospel. Praise God for Christ.”

Look at how many times he says this in our text before us. **“If it is somehow in God’s will”** (verse 10), **“I may now at last succeed in coming to you.”** He wanted to be with them. Verse 11: **“For I want very much to see you, so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—that is, to be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine.”** (Romans 1:11–12) Verse 13: **“I often planned to come to you.”** Paul wanted to be in the presence of the saints of Rome. He wanted to be with them, looking at them, beholding their face. He had not seen them, but he had heard of their faith. He didn’t know what they looked like; he had not stared them in the face. But he had heard of their faith, and he wanted to dwell with them and be encouraged by them.

Does that mark your life? That you long, you hunger for Christ-centered fellowship? You want to be with the saints—not casually showing up once in a while, but to be with the saints, to encourage each other. And notice here, it’s not just a one-way street. Paul is fully expecting to come and be encouraged by their faith. He already has been encouraged by their faith, but just because he’s a slave of Christ with an awesome testimony as a former terrorist, just because Paul has this testimony that he is an apostle—just because that’s the case—does not mean that God cannot encourage his faith. And in fact, Paul expects it.

Do you expect to gather with the saints, the brothers and sisters, and to be encouraged? Is there this sense of “I’m going to show up and I’m going to give and I’m going to bless”? In far too many churches it’s “What do I get out of the church? What do you give me?” And it becomes about us and our desires and how we feel and not wanting to show up and be encouraged by the faith of others.

Show up and, as one of my professors Donald Guthrie put it, be a blessing machine in the life of your church. You show up and you’re just going to churn out blessings upon blessings upon the beloved brothers and sisters in Christ. Does that describe you? You yearn, you long for fellowship, for a partnership in the gospel of Christ.

In Romans 15:21–25, the Apostle Paul, after mountains of soaring theology, loads of wisdom shared, ton of truth revealed, we see his pastoral heart again. He says, **“I aspired to preach the gospel not where Christ was already named, so that I would not build on another man’s foundation. But as it is written: ‘They who had no news of him shall see, and they who have not heard shall understand.’ For this reason I have been prevented from coming to you, but now with no further place for me in these regions, and since I have had for many years a longing to come to you, whenever I go to Spain I hope to see you in passing and to be helped on my way there by you, when I have first enjoyed your company for a while. But now I am going to Jerusalem, serving the saints.”**

Paul longed; he hungered for fellowship—fellowship with believers, believers in Jesus Christ. Hebrews 13 the Word of God says, **“Let us continually offer up to God a sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Don’t neglect to do what is good and to share, for God is pleased with such sacrifices.”**

Is there anything in your own life today, brother and sister in Christ at Cornerstone Evangelical Free Church, that you’re neglecting, you’re holding back in terms of a blessing to someone in this church? Go to him. Go to her. Bless that brother. Bless that sister. Show up at prayer meetings. Be eager for times of refreshment through your mutual encouragement in your faith. You as a Christian are one who is

committed to Christ and to his kingdom, but also you are part of his body. And the Lord wants you to be a fellowship-hungering, a fellowship-longing brother or sister in Christ.

Are the saints in your life who follow Christ, who are committed to Christ—are those the ones you long to spend time with, or is it someone else? Does someone else in your life have a priority over the saints that often crowds out and pushes aside the saints? That’s something worth reflecting on. There’s a cost whenever we neglect our fellowship with Christ-centered brothers and sisters. Proverbs 18:1 says this: **“He who isolates himself seeks his own desire; he breaks out against all sound judgment.”**

If you do not have Christ-confessing fellowship around you and in your life as a vibrant part of your life, you will quickly turn to the things of the world. You will quickly swerve back into that old self and justify doing it all the while. Remember our Lord’s words in Acts 20: **“It is more blessed to give than to receive.”** Show up at church prepared to be a blessing machine, building others up, encouraging them. “How can I pray for you? How can I serve you? What’s going on in your life? How can I alleviate that burden just through our conversation?”

Does this describe you? Charles Haddon Spurgeon one time said the following: *“Some Christians are very poor because they do not exchange in spiritual bartering with one another. They that fear the Lord spoke often to one another. They that do not fear the Lord spoke often against one another. That is a very sad difference. Oh for more Christian communion! For when we blend our mutual faith we’re comforted together. Each believer grows stronger as he cheers his brother in the Lord.”*

That’s what we’re called to do: to cheer one another in the Lord, to be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith. Ask a brother, ask a sister this week: “What is God doing in your life? It’s been a while since we’ve connected. What is God doing in your life? How can I pray for you? How can I lift you up in prayer?” And seek to bless and seek to share a Scripture that has been blessing you or something God has taught you. Thank them for their service in the life of your local church.

D.A. Carson says this: *“Put the fellowship of the gospel at the center of your relationship with believers. You guys both have Christ in common. You have Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior in common. Put your fellowship in this good news at the center of those relationships.”*

7. **Mission-determined**: bold, fruit-producing gospel ministry!

...in order that I might have a fruitful ministry among you, just as I have had among the rest of the Gentiles. I am obligated both to Greeks and barbarians, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome.

The seventh and final core conviction of the Apostle Paul’s heart is this: He was **mission-determined**. The Apostle Paul was mission-determined. He had a bold, fruit-producing gospel ministry that he wanted to see succeed. He was not interested in settling for less. He wanted to go to the city of Rome to preach the gospel to these Christians and to all, and to others beyond that.

But notice what it says here in verse 13. He wants to obtain a **fruitful ministry among them, just as he had had among all the rest of the Gentiles**. Paul’s not boasting there pridefully. He’s saying that I’m a man determined by the mission of the gospel. See, too often we as Christians put ambition for the gospel almost as a

competitor with what we ought to be like when it comes to humility. We see someone who's bold and see someone who wants to take for Christ and his kingdom hearts and lives and neighborhoods. And we look at that person; we think, "How arrogant, how brash."

My friends, understand the Apostle Paul had a mission-determined heart. He wanted to see Christ glorified in every person. He wanted to see Jesus Christ lifted up and exalted. He wanted to see those at war with God be worshipping God and next to you here in this place. Do you want that for your neighbors? Do you want that for those in Glenview and beyond?

Paul was mission-determined. He was not interested in having this meek and mild ministry where everything's always comfortable and everything's great. No, he wanted to be bold and see a fruit-producing gospel ministry go forth, both in the Romans and beyond. Look at verse 14 in your Bible: "***I am obligated both to Greeks and barbarians, (that is non-Greek gentiles) both to the wise and the foolish.***" (Romans 1:14) Or your translation might say "the learned and the unlearned." That's the educated, the uneducated. Paul's saying, "I don't discriminate. If I go out and share the gospel, and many poor people who are unlearned come to saving faith in Jesus—praise be to God. If many wealthy people come to saving faith in Jesus—praise be to God."

We're not targeting certain people based upon demographics. Far too long the evangelical church has had these strategies about who to target, how to target them. And it's foolish, and it's unbiblical. There are men, women, boys, and girls from every background who need Christ Jesus. There are people in this nation, all around us, all around you in Glenview here, who desperately need Christ Jesus. They are people who are worshipping their idols; they are wasting their lives; they love their sin; they're enslaved to that sin; and they are deceived. And yet you and I have been entrusted with the gospel.

Paul knows this good news, this gospel of Jesus Christ, comes and it brings light; it brings liberation. It sets captives free. It gives people not only peace with God, but also hope. And it sets them aright. It sets them under the lordship of Christ, justifying them and actually channeling those gifts that they are all over the place on, in terms of where they're devoting themselves to, to kingdom work.

Paul was mission-determined. He had a bold, fruit-producing gospel ministry. Is that what you all are doing? Is that what you are committed to, to the glory of God? The Lord wants that for Cornerstone Evangelical Free Church. He wants you to be a mission-determined, fruit-producing, gospel-faithful people. Are your ambitions tied to the kingdom of God? Ask yourself this personally—not for someone else: Does your mission align with the advance of the glory of God?

Don't think this is just for the Apostle Paul; it's not. We live in the wealthiest country the world has ever seen, bar none. You and I have been entrusted with much. The Lord expects much from us, and God is honored by a mission mindfulness, a mission-determinedness, eager to produce a productive gospel work to the glory of God. John 15:8 the Lord says this: "***My Father is glorified by this: that you produce much fruit and prove to be my disciples.***" That's what Jesus said. He wants you to produce fruit—gospel fruit. He wants to see that happen.

The Apostle Paul said—Rob Ventura notes the following ascension when it came to what Rome was like. He said this: "*The city of Rome was the hub of the Roman Empire, a place which was staunchly*

polytheistic—many gods—and did not tolerate, at this time, the monotheistic beliefs of Christianity. The point is, Paul was very willing to go into an extremely hostile situation in order to preach Jesus. May we be willing to do the same!” Where are you unwilling to go to preach the gospel? What makes you nervous to take the good news? What kind of people? What kind of lands? What kind of neighbors?

We are called as Christian believers to be marked by these same core convictions. They’re not just for the Apostle Paul. If you took the Apostle Paul out for Chicago-style pizza and you wanted to talk about something like the Cubs, he is not interested at all. He will want to talk to you about his heart. He will want to say the following to you: “My friend, let me tell you what I am consumed with. I have so much personal gratitude. Isn’t Christ’s intercession absolutely amazing that God would be so gracious in Christ? I am focused on a God-focused service. I have a fervent desire to proclaim the gospel. I’m constantly in prayer. And I am a fellowship-longing, hungry man who wants Christian community to be Christian community. I want to be with you.” And Paul was mission-determined. He had a bold, fruit-producing gospel ministry. He wanted people to be about it. He wanted people to join him on which is clearly why he is going to Rome.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, can you say in your heart of hearts, “This describes me”? Can you say in your heart of hearts, “This describes our church”? And can you say by God’s grace, to God’s glory, “We want to see the gospel advance to the praise of God’s glory. And we want to see the gospel spread, not only in the lives of those who do not yet name Jesus, but also here increasingly that at Cornerstone Evangelical Free Church we would name and declare and proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and encourage one another with this truth that God saves sinners.”

May that be the hallmark of your local church until Jesus returns.

Let us pray.

Almighty God and merciful Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, I pray for these brothers and sisters in Christ and ask for your blessing upon them. Glorify yourself through them. May they be marked by these same truths, these same convictions that the Apostle Paul was so clearly marked by as your Word tells us in Romans 1:8–15. Honor and exalt yourself, we pray, in this people and in this place and across all the Chicagoland area to the praise and honor of your great name. We pray this in Jesus’ name. And all God’s people say, “Amen.”

Scripture References (in order mentioned or quoted)

- Romans 1:8–15
- Romans 1:8
- Romans 1:5
- Romans 1:7
- Romans 1:8
- Romans 1:9–10
- 2 Timothy 4:1–2
- Job 31:4
- Proverbs 15:3
- Romans 1:9
- Romans 1:15
- Romans 1:11–12
- Romans 1:13
- Romans 15:21–25
- Hebrews 13
- Proverbs 18:1
- Acts 20
- John 15:8
- Romans 1:14