

Pastor's Heart - Evangelist Zeal

By Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson

Text: 1:8-15

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OPENING PRAYER:

Gracious God and Heavenly Father, thank You for the privilege we have of access into your presence. And thank you that so often you stretch out the scepter of Your Word to us, and speak to us in power and wisdom and grace. We come a fresh this evening, hungry men and women and young people needing to be fed from your word and equipped for this coming week. And so we pray that through your truth and by the secret and marvelous Ministry of your Holy Spirit, you would lead us to Your Word, that your word would lead us to Christ, that Christ would lead us to you, and that we might be bowed before you at the end of this service, in a fresh willingness to do your will, whatever that may be. Whatever it may cost. Wherever you may lead us. And this we pray together for Jesus our Savior sake, Amen.

Please be seated.

SCRIPTURE READING AND SERMON:

Well we're turning this evening, for the second time in this series and we've freshly begun on Paul's great letter to the Romans. I think it's safe to say that we could be doing nothing better for our souls on the Lord's day evening than gathering like this, and giving ourselves in this way to the study of this extraordinary and magnificent and so amazingly influential letter in the life of so many Christians, and indeed, of so many ages of church history.

Some of you I know have read the great biography of Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones, by a friend of this church, the Reverend Ian Murray. It is one of the great biographies of the second half of the 20th century and rightly so, since Dr. Lloyd Jones was undoubtedly one of the greatest, if not the greatest, preacher in the English speaking language in the second part of the 20th century. And there is a marvelous and rather sweet little section in that two volume biography, where Ian Murray quotes the words of Mrs. Lloyd Jones, on her husband. A rather dangerous thing to ask of somebody, and perhaps especially dangerous to ask of somebody like Dr. Lloyd Jones who was so much in the public eye, to be asked what she thought about her husband. What she said was this. "Nobody, nobody understands my husband, unless they first of all, understand that he is an evangelist, and a man of prayer". An evangelist seeking to win others for Christ and a man of prayer. What a great thing it would be if your wife, or in the instance of some of you, your intended wife, were able to say that about you. You want to know what makes my husband tick. There are two things. He longs to see men and women and young

people brought to faith in Jesus Christ. And he engages fervently in prayer for that purpose. Well, that certainly was true of Martyn Lloyd Jones. And it was undoubtedly true of the Apostle Paul. And we have been discovering already in this letter that when the Apostle Paul begins in the relatively formal manner of these letters of antiquity, he transforms even the details of the way in which he writes letters because of his passion for the glory of God and the honor of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And he has introduced this letter in the following way. He is a servant of Jesus Christ. He's called to be an apostle. And he longs to see these Roman Christians many of whom he has never seen, never met, never corresponded with before -- he longs to see them knowing that they are loved by God. Longs to see them experiencing God's saving grace and knowing as a fellowship of churches and Christians, longing that they should know the shalom, the well being, the joy, the sense of fulfillment of those who belong to Jesus Christ.

Now, you will probably know from other studies in Paul's letters, that characteristically he goes on in his letters, as ancient letters tended to do, with some word of felicitation. Some word of gratitude,. Some word of appreciation. Some word of compliment to those who are being corresponded with. And the Apostle Paul follows that pattern of antiquity. But of course, he wouldn't be the apostle Paul, if he simply left the pattern there. And so the verses that follow our passage for this evening from verse eight through verse 15, are a demonstration of how this man who is such a man of prayer, and at heart, an evangelist, how he transforms ordinary gratitude into a glorious expression of what it means to be a servant and a soldier of Jesus Christ.

If you glance down through these verses, you'll see that the apostle Paul refers to himself an unusual number of times. He is by nature, a self effacing man, because he's Christ centered, and God honoring. But you know, there are times in letters where you simply can't avoid the use of the first person singular. If you're anything like me, because you know that Christians ought to be modest, and shouldn't use too many "I"s, then you'll go over what you've written and score out a few "I"s and use a few passive voices and change it a little so that you don't look as though you're standing out there talking about yourself. But in this instance, the apostle Paul cannot stop talking about himself because he is, in the very same moment, talking about what the grace of God in the gospel has done to change him. For one thing, he says, "he thanks God", for another thing, he says, "he serves God". "Without ceasing. He mentions them in prayer", each time he prays for them, he says, Lord, "I really want to go and see them." He says, "I long to see you." He says, I want to come to you, because "I'd love to impart some spiritual gift to you." And and then he does what I tend to do, he kind of, he kind of says, "Now, I don't want you to misunderstand, as though all the gifts were mine — "I want us to share in mutual fellowship to be built up together." "I've often wanted to come to you, because I want to reap a harvest among you. But I've been prevented, something has gotten in the way." You know, I feel under obligation in this business of sharing and preaching the gospel. And so "I'm eager to preach the gospel in Rome." I make that 10 different statements in which the Apostle Paul is speaking about the Apostle Paul. But before that causes you apoplexy that there will be 10 points, let me reduce them in the usual way to three.

There are actually, essentially, just three things the apostle is saying here. The first of them is really very obvious. It is the tremendous gratitude he expresses for what God has done in Rome, in verses eight and nine. And the reason for that thanksgiving is that their "faith has been proclaimed in all the world." Now Paul is writing somewhere in the mid 50s. It is approximately a quarter of a century since the Lord Jesus died and was raised again and sent the Holy Spirit to his people. And in those 25 years,

and this is the reason Paul is so thrilled, in those 25 years, the Gospel has spread throughout the ancient world. And it has even penetrated into the very center, the epicenter of the great Roman Empire. And there are little Christian churches spread all over the great city of Rome.

Now, there were two natural reasons why Paul was thrilled about this. The first was he was himself a Roman citizen. Now when you and I hear that the gospel house has invaded, for example, the White House and the corridors of power -- or when I hear that there are many members of parliament in the United Kingdom who have turned to Jesus Christ -- of course, I don't think that their souls are any more important than the souls of people in some small country town. But I'm thrilled about that because this is my nation. These are my people. And so Paul, as a Roman citizen, as a free man, is thrilled that in this great empire in which he is a citizen, the gospel of Jesus Christ is making glorious progress. And of course, he's thrilled also, because the central calling of his life is to bring the Gospel to Gentiles. Peter has been charged to bring the gospel to the Jews, though, he also is called to know the gospel must reach the Gentiles. But Paul from his conversion has been given a commission to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. And here, the power of God has been at work savingly among the Gentiles, and it's reached the great city of Rome. And there are many Christians there. And although Paul, by no means knows all of them, if you turn at your leisure, and work your way through the last chapter of this letter, you will realize he knew more than two dozen of the Christians in Rome. And that apparently was just the tip of the iceberg of this glorious work that God had done by the power of the Holy Spirit in bringing the Gospel to Rome.

And if you pause and think for a moment, you will realize that there was another reason that thrilled the apostle Paul. If you think about the way in which God led the Apostle Paul and his ministry, through the Acts of the Apostles, one of the things that you will notice most obviously, is that much of his focus, indeed, the burden of his focus was upon cities. Paul did not spend time in country towns. Was it because he was against the rural life? No, it was because he understood that if cities can be captured for Jesus Christ; if there are churches in cities that are God-centered, Christ-exalting, living life's that are transformed by the gospel, it will not be long before the countryside around hears the gospel. It's given the opportunity to turn to Jesus Christ. So it wasn't that the apostle Paul thought that the church at Rome had more important people in it. It wasn't that he thought that their souls were more important than the souls of the folks in the countryside. It was that he realized that this was part of God's ongoing strategy to bring the gospel to the nations. That, incidentally, is why for the state of South Carolina, the city of Columbia is important. That's why our churches here are important. Not because we are more important than anyone else in South Carolina. But because if the gospel invades Columbia -- if the gospel reaches into the state capitol, and through the law offices and into the hospitals of Columbia, it will not be long before all around the city of Columbia, there will be men and women and boys and girls talking about the influence of this new thing. The power of God in Jesus Christ to transform people's lives.

And so Paul was absolutely thrilled. He was grateful to God for the work that God had done in the hearts of these Roman Christians. And he expresses it so marvelously. "God is my witness, without ceasing. I mentioned you always in my prayers." Interesting, incidentally, that what was famous about the Roman churches, as David pointed out this evening, we know that God was doing mighty miracles there, but the men and women had come to faith In Jesus Christ. Always be very, very cautious when someone says, You should go there, because there are miracles. But when somebody says you should go there, you should see this, because of the quality of these people's faith in Jesus Christ. Then thats

somewhere the Apostle Paul wants to go. Because that's the real lasting evidence that God is doing a work. Apostle Paul is so manifestly thrilled about this.

But I wonder if you notice something else. He is thrilled about this glorious increase of the gospel. So what does he do? He prays for them. Now, humanly speaking, we would do the very reverse. The gospel is flourishing, the gospel is conquering. So we can sit back and watch. NO, says the apostle Paul, we must pray on in a multitude of different ways that this work of God will not be hindered by Satan. That it will not be spoiled by human pride, and that it will abound and increase to the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And so the first thing to notice is this wonderful gratitude that he expresses. The second thing in verses nine through 11 is this: not only the gratitude he expresses, but the deep desire he has. Verse nine, "As God is my witness, I pray for you." Verse 10, "always asking that somehow, by God's will, I may now at last succeed in coming to you." I don't know what the Lord thought about these prayers of the apostle Paul. I'm sure some of the angels were saying, oops, here he comes again. Every time he prays, he's saying as it were, just as almost like a child at the end saying... Couldn't you let me go to Rome? Please let me go to Rome? Not quite at the point of saying in a childish manner, you've never let me go to Rome. But why should he call God to witness? Why should he have to, as it were, take this oath as he writes to the Romans? I wonder if it's because he did actually know quite a number of people there. And perhaps he'd expressed to some of them -- You know, I really, I longed to go to Rome, and I'm coming to Rome, God willing, but he'd never come. He had been prevented. There had been things to do that one more immediately important for him to do. And it's not beyond the borders of possibility that he feared a little there might be some murmuring in the churches in Rome. As you remember there was murmuring in the church at Corinth. He says he's going to come and he doesn't turn up. But the apostle Paul then says, "As God is my witness" -- what I think to be able to say, incidentally, about your prayer life -- "as God is my witness I pray faithfully, constantly for you. And the honest longing of my heart" is that -- now notice the language he uses -- asking that, "somehow, by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you." Do you think that's a bit vague for an apostle? Somehow? No, actually, it's rather a warning to us never to second guess the way in which God is going to answer our prayers, isn't it? It's a beautiful illustration of this principle, in which he's expressing the longing of his heart to get to Rome -- to see what God has done -- to share in it, and by God's grace to advance it. And as we saw last Sunday evening, possibly partner with the church in Rome to be sent by them to further the gospel in Spain. But he's not laying down the terms to the Lord. He is simply saying, Lord, somehow, by some means, anyhow. And he prays this apparently again and again, because he's been hindered. He has had other things to do. Perhaps there actually have been other hindrances to his plans? And he's never got to Rome. And yet you understand there's something marvelous about the way in which he prays, "Lord, if there's some way of getting me to Rome find that some way." Actually, for several reasons. One is this. If he'd got to Rome before he dictated this letter, we wouldn't have any letter to the Romans in our Bibles. Isn't that something? And isn't there a great lesson for me as a Christian there, when I really longed to do something, and what I long to do, is faithful to the Lord. And I'm almost exasperated, because it's not happening in my life, or in my fellowship, or, or whatever, to be able to rest in the absolute wisdom of God and to know that when he prevents us in one way, it is in order to prepare us and use us for blessing in a way, that at the time, we would never have imagined. This must actually be one of the greatest illustrations in the Bible of that principle. That sometimes the disappointment of our aspirations leads to the glorious fulfillment of God's sovereign purposes.

But the other thing to notice here is, we know how God answered the "somehow." Don't we? It's actually in the previous chapter in our Bibles, and that's chapter 28. We know what Paul didn't know, he prayed, Lord, somehow, anyhow, get me to Rome. And here's the thing. God took him, quite literally, and got him to Rome -- as a prisoner. Got him to Rome as a prisoner. Now, what's the lesson? The lesson is this, that when we asked for things that are in accordance with God's will, he sometimes gives them to us in ways that we never asked for. In ways that we never asked for, but in ways that actually marvelously demonstrate, you know, these Roman Christians actually came out of Rome to meet Paul, and to escort Paul who was a prisoner back into Rome. And it must have been a great moment and Paul's life when he saw them coming. And I wonder if it crossed his mind just at that point. Boy, oh, boy, they really believed me. They really believe me when I said, you know, I'm longing to see you to share with you in the Gospel. And when they saw him coming as a prisoner for the sake of the Gospel -- when they saw him coming as a prisoner, I think they must have realized he really did mean what he said -- that whatever was God's way of doing it, Oh God will you do it? What a great illustration, he is of one of those people who pray anything, anywhere, anyhow, any time and really mean it. And really, really mean it.

So Paul, gives us in these marvelous verses an expression of great gratitude. He indicates to us the presence of a holy desire that was wonderfully fulfilled by the purposes of God, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. Now, remember how the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians goes? He's writing from jail. Probably in Rome. He's writing to the Philippians, who he knows are discouraged, because this is what happens to somebody who really wants to serve the Lord -- he ends up in jail. And they're discouraged. What's going to happen to us if that happens to the very best one we've got? And he says, I want you to know that what has happened to me, has turned out to advance the gospel. I think there's a kind of divine inevitability about that. When a man or a woman or a boy or a girl says, Lord, this is on my heart to serve you. Anywhere you take me anytime you want me, anyhow you will do it -- I want to be yours.

And it's that that leads us to the third thing that Paul mentions. He speaks about his sense of gratitude. He speaks about his deep desire. And he speaks also in verses 12, through 15, about his profound obligation. He is a man, you see, under orders. I want to come, he says, because (verse 14), I am under obligation. Now, what does that mean? It really means the same as when the prophet say, "The hand of the Lord was upon me." It means that he has a sense that God has called him for something to do in his service. And he therefore constantly feels the pressure of that hand. I hope you feel that about whatever it is you've been called to do. There isn't just apostles or ministers of the gospel upon whom God lays his hand and says, I have a work for you to do and I want you to do it here. This is, this is one of the great differences between the Christian in the secular world and everybody else. Whatever your gift has been, the ways in which the Lord has led you. Or educated. What he's what he's kept from you. The home and family he's given to you. Or the singleness of life he's given to you, to have this sense: this is the Lord's calling for my life and I mean to use that life for His glory. It produces a sense of, the only thing I can call it is, most gracious obligation. Most gracious, obligation.

And you notice, verse 14, that sense of obligation was matched by a sense of aspiration. I'm under obligation, verse 14. So I am eager. That's beautiful, isn't it? That's the Christian life lived in grace as Cowper. Or "Cooper" I suppose I should pronounce his name, says in his wonderful hymn, *Love Constraining to Obedience* that "grace changes duty into choice."

Some of you know that. You think about the calling God has given to you and you wake up in the morning and you say, I would be doing nothing else in the world. Because it's in the sphere I aspire to serve my Lord Jesus Christ. And it's the ability he's given me to do it in this context that makes my daily life, full of grace and sweetness. Now, friends, when these two things are combined, a sense of obligation, because the hand of God is upon us firmly but graciously; a sense of aspiration, in which what God wants for me, is what I want for him and therefore for me. When those two things meet in a life, there's a third thing that is always produced. Obligation and aspiration leads to expectation. And you see that here and, Paul. I long to come to you, verse 13, in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. Now, that's the way to live the Christian life. But it's possible only when obligation and aspiration, lead to expectation. In other words, when your sense of God's call to you to trust in His Son, to serve his son, however, he wants you to serve Him, when that meets with a desire on your part to serve Him in the way that will please him, there inevitably follows -- gloriously follows, this wonderful gift that God puts into our hearts. And it's this. I therefore expect God to use me for His glory in the place where he has put me. And that's wonderful, isn't it?

This isn't dear friends, this isn't just about apostles. This just isn't about ministers of the gospel. It's not just about missionaries of the cross like the Andes. This is about all the people of God. This is the pleasure of God for all of his children -- that He has given us a calling in life that we aspire to please Him and to be used by him in his calling. We may have this sweet confidence that our lives will bear fruit that will be a harvest for our Lord Jesus Christ. He actually says, interestingly, virtually the same thing again, in Philippians chapter one, when he says, you know, in some ways, I'd just rather die and go to heaven. You ever feel that? I just rather die and go to heaven and get out of this mess. It's so complicated, living in this ancient world. But he says, "If I am to remain, that means fruitful service for me."

You know, some of our older ones are providentially hindered this evening, I wish I could go and say that to them this evening. If you're longing to be away, and you wonder why you're not away, yet, that must mean the Lord has fruitful service for you. You may not understand it. I may not understand it. But he means to do something through your life. And that's a great way to live as a Christian believer. Every single day, I don't know what the harvest will be of the life I live for you today, Lord, but I live in the expectation that there will be a harvest.

I remember when I was a student, my great spiritual mentor, William Stills saying to me it was, it was a memorable moment, he said, You know what, Sinclair, I never preach now without a deep conviction, that the Lord will do something that will last for all eternity. And I remember thinking, Lord, give me that expectation. But you see. It's not just for ministers, for preachers of the gospel. It's for mums. It's for boys and girls in school. It's for dads in the office. It's for grandparents. It's for all of us, no matter what our calling may be in life, as our sense that God has called us to serve Him for His glory in the life in the family in the profession in the office in the college in which he's placed us and our hearts are knit together with that sense of calling and obligation that Lord has given to us. We may have the sweetest confidence that if he means us still to live, he means us still to bear fruit for His glory. And so, says Paul, he is eager to preach the gospel to those who are in Rome.

Now there's a phrase here, that may be the secret to this whole thing. And it's in verse nine. What's the secret of this kind of lifestyle, this quiet confidence that God will use us for His glory? The answer is, God is my witness, that I serve Him in this context, meaning, I worship him with my spirit in the gospel of his son.

Is that what we're doing at the end of this Lord's day evening? Our hearts full of gratitude to him for the blessings of this day. In this church, we've had baptism, we've had the Lord's Supper, we've had the preaching of the Word, we've had fellowship, we've had prayer. We've had meals. We've had, I don't know what else. And we're so thankful to him. And as we bow down before Him, and say to him, as God is my witness, I serve and worship Him in the gospel of his son, we may go out into the workaday world of the week, with a quiet confidence that there will be a harvest from our lives that will last for all eternity.

Do you know 70% of sermons I think I've ever preached I've wanted to end with the same words. Isn't it the most glorious thing in the world to be a Christian.

CLOSING PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, make it glorious for us. For some of us, it's hard and we are struggling. For others of us we've lost the way a little and your word calls us back to the center -- we pray for ourselves and for one another, that you would place your hand upon us with this obligation of grace, that you would work in our hearts to produce a fresh longing, an aspiration to serve you for your glory, and that you would give to us an expectation that there will surely be a harvest. And this we pray together. for Jesus sake. Amen.