



THE MOTIVATION FOR MINISTRY

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

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Romans 1:7-17

Second Message

Gary Vanderet

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Last week was a difficult time for me emotionally. On Tuesday, I will say good-bye to my oldest son who is going into the military for four years. There is nothing like a loved one leaving to remind one of what is important in life. Only two things are lasting in this world: people, and God's Word. The most important things therefore are loving people and imparting truth. As I tried to write a letter to my son last week, I found myself wanting to do both of those: to connect and to impart.

Also last week, I watched again one of my favorite movies, *Mr. Holland's Opus*, a film that beautifully captures the importance of relationships. In one scene the music teacher, Glen Holland, is driving a student driver car like a madman, rushing to the hospital where his wife has just given birth. His joy at holding his firstborn child and kissing the woman who carried and delivered the fruit of their union, is wonderfully portrayed. But within a year, the Hollands discover that their son, Cole, is deaf. Joy turns to grief, especially for the music-loving father. He will never be able to connect with his son with music, the thing is so close to the center of his soul.

Larry Crabb, in his book, *Connecting*, describes one of the most moving parts in the movie:

Mr. Holland recognizes in Cole, perhaps now sixteen, a passion for life that lies behind his deafness. It finally dawns on him that Cole longs to be part of his father's world, and could be, through a medium far richer than music, one that deafness can't block. During a concert, Mr. Holland, who is a wonderful director, pianist and composer, but not a vocalist, puts down his baton and announces that he wants to sing a song dedicated to his son. He then sings (and signs) "My Beautiful Child," by John Lennon. As Cole reads the signing and his father's lips, in that moment, the two connect. Something very powerful comes out of the father and pours into the son, leaving Mr. Holland trembling with joy and Cole glowing with received love. The father's dreams of a lesser connection have died, and he enters into the joy of something far greater.¹

Larry goes on to say, "In the gospel, the good news, God offers mankind a richer joy than anything else provides in life. It is the joy of listening to God sing to us a love song in sheer delight, despite all of our deficiencies, and giving us the privilege of singing that song to others."

There is no greater joy in life than sharing the gospel of God's grace. This is what the apostle Paul communicates in the opening verses of his letter to the church in Rome. We come now to the second half of his introduction to this letter, where he speaks of his own burning motivation to minister in the capital of the Roman Empire. In our first study we looked at Paul's description of himself and his gospel; today, beginning with verse 7 of chapter 1, he addresses himself to his readers. Romans 1:7:

to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The apostle wrote this letter in 56 or 57 A.D., when Rome was the center of peace and civilization in the world. But it was corrupt to the core. Senators, soldiers and educators were a common sight in Rome, but so were prostitutes and pimps. But, miraculously, one by one, people of such diverse backgrounds were learning of the grace of God. In fact, in chapter 16 of this letter, Paul greets all types of people, from Roman officials to slaves, who had come to know Christ, reminding us that God bestows his grace on everyone, those who think they are somebody and those who think they are nobody.

Notice the first thing Paul tells these Romans is that they are loved. Many people think that God is mad at the world. They imagine he is cranky, out of sorts and insecure because people don't respond to his love, so he stomps around heaven shouting judgments at everyone. But nothing could be further from the truth. God loves us! As a consequence, when he sings his love song to us, our hearts begin to reverberate. That's where that longing, that yearning, that ache we feel inside comes from. We want something so bad we can taste it, but we don't know what it is. It is God singing his love song to us, wooing us to move toward him. So everything begins with God's love for us.

And notice that Paul addresses these people in Rome as "saints." Do you know that if you have come to Christ, that is what you are, a saint? Not that there is anything in us that is saintly. It is simply that God wants to love us and call us to himself. This word "saint" is used in the Old Testament for the people of God, the Israel of God, the covenant people. God said to Israel, "I will be your God and you will be my people." He called them the Hasidim, the saintly ones, the holy ones. After Christ's death, burial and resurrection, that

word was carried over into the New Testament to speak of God's people. Ray Stedman used to say that there are only two kinds of people in the world: the "saints" and the "aints." Christians are saints, not because we look saintly, but because of Christ's death and our faith in the good news.

In verses 8-13, Paul goes on to share his feeling for these believers, saying three things. First, he expresses his thanks for them. Verse 8:

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world.

Of course, it was this faith that had got them into trouble. Nero, the emperor, set in motion a vicious persecution of the church and many Christians were put to death for their faith. Notice these believers weren't talking about their children's ministry, their magnificent building or their paid clergy. They didn't have any of those things. The church didn't even own buildings until the fourth century. What the people of God talked about was their faith. They were counting on the risen Christ, not themselves anymore, and news of their faith had spread throughout the world.

Secondly, the apostle says he prays for them. Verses 9-10:

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

In Paul's ministry, preaching and praying went hand in hand. Praying is the way to get truth from the head to the heart. John Stott comments, "He assures them that even though he doesn't know most of them personally, he still intercedes for them *unceasingly*, and *always*."²

Thirdly, Paul says he longs to see them. Verses 11-13:

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

The apostle wants to see them, for two reasons. First, to encourage them in their faith and to be encouraged by their faith. He is not coming to impart a spiritual gift in the way the New Testament refers to the gifts of the Spirit, which are given by the sovereign God. Paul would never claim to be able to do that. He is using the word in a more general sense. The gift that he wants to give in this context is to encourage them in their faith. And he wants to be encouraged by their faith, too. So there will be mutual encouragement.

The second reason Paul wants to go to Rome is to share the good news. He wants to evangelize, to go in the streets and preach. He is keen to go into the schools and the marketplaces, because he wanted to share the gospel with everyone.

In verses 14-16, Paul makes three strong personal statements about his desire to preach the gospel in Rome. When I compare these statements with my own casualness and complacency at times in sharing the gospel, they almost seem exaggerated. Verse 14: "I am under obligation"; verse 15: "I am eager"; verse 16: "I am not ashamed."

Why did Paul feel that way? For two primary reasons. Verses 14-15:

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

The first reason Paul feels such a powerful inner compulsion is that he views the gospel as a debt to the world. John Stott helps us understand what the apostle is saying here:

There are two ways of getting into debt. The first is to borrow money *from* someone; the second is to be given money *for* someone by a third party. For example, if I were to borrow \$1000 from you, I would be in your debt until I paid it back. But equally, if a friend of yours were to hand me \$1000 to give to you, I would be in your debt until I handed it over. In the former case I would have gotten myself into debt by borrowing, in the latter it is your friend who has put me in your debt by entrusting me with \$1000 for you. It is in this second sense that Paul is in debt. He hasn't borrowed anything from the Romans that he must repay. But Jesus Christ has entrusted him with the good news for them.³

Paul is saying, in effect, "Wherever I find people with a need I want to share the good news with them. *I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and the foolish.* I don't care how much education people have or how successful they are in business, I owe them the love of God." Do you realize that this is an obligation for us, too? We owe people love. That is a debt we will never fully pay off. You owe love to the cashier at the grocery store, the mechanic who fixes your car, your associate at work in the next cubicle, your teachers at school, your students.

David Roper shared this story of a woman who was listening to someone teach on the parable of the Good Samaritan. The point the teacher made was that the next person you meet who has a need is your neighbor. It isn't necessarily the person living next door. Later, this woman happened to be driving in a rainstorm when she noticed a young couple standing on the side of the road. One of them was black, the other was white, and they were carrying a baby. She stopped to help them. They were obviously down and out, and she

put them in her car. When she asked them if they were interested in spiritual things, the young woman said that the man she was with had a Spanish Bible, but she couldn't read Spanish. The woman gave them her Bible. She took them home and gave them her phone number. She found out later that they had gotten thrown out of their apartment because they had not paid the rent. She brought them to her home and ministered to them. Eventually the young woman came to know Christ.

Years later, the first woman was browsing in a Christian bookstore and saw a tract entitled, "The Woman Who Came Out of the Rain." It was the story of the young woman's conversion. The man who was with her on that rainy day was not her husband and he had left her. She had gotten involved with what used to be called the American Mission to the Jews, which had an outreach in the San Jose area. She ended up marrying one of the executives in the organization. They moved to New York City, and she herself became involved in leadership.

God loves to do that sort of thing. It doesn't have anything to do with how intelligent, articulate, or filled with the Word we are. It's a matter of making ourselves available to God and being willing to love those whom he puts in our path. I am not recommending that we all go out and pick up hitchhikers. The point is, we owe a debt of love. We are under obligation to make this good news known to others.

Secondly, Paul felt this obligation because he knew this was the power of God for salvation. Verse 16:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

Education doesn't change people; it just makes them more intelligent in their evil practices. Bettering social conditions doesn't change people, either. Doing something to help meet their material needs is good, but it doesn't change their hearts. The only thing that can change the heart of a man or woman is the gospel, the good news about Jesus. That was why Paul preached it and that is why he was not embarrassed by it. The gospel is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes."

In order to have made this statement, Paul must have felt tempted to be ashamed of the gospel at times. He must have felt the same reluctance and embarrassment we feel on occasion. The Romans prided themselves on their power, just like Americans do today. They had military might that could conquer all nations that stood in their path; they had a tremendous program of road-building; they had some of the greatest law-makers in history; they had the ability to write great literature and create breathtaking art. Everyone hoped to visit Rome at least once in his lifetime, to enjoy the beauty and wonder of that magnificent city. But, as John Stott comments, "Paul wanted to visit the city, not as a tourist, but as an evangelist. He believed he had something to

share that people in the city needed to hear. What folly and presumption is this?"⁴

And Paul was no powerful physical specimen, either. I have always thought of him as a very masculine-looking individual, but the author of a third century book, Onesiphorus of Iconium, in *The Acts of Paul and Thekla*, describes the apostle in these words: "He was a man of moderate stature with curly hair, scanty, crooked legs, large knit eyebrows, and a long, ugly nose." Paul may have had a physical deformity as well. So what did a man like this think he could accomplish in the sophisticated city of Rome?

But Paul knew that as powerful as they Romans were in so many ways, they were powerless when it came to changing hearts. They were powerless to eliminate slavery. Half the population of the empire were slaves. They were powerless to change the stubborn, hostile, hateful hearts of men and eliminate violence, suicide, and corruption. But they could do nothing about these things. Paul says that is why he was so proud of the gospel—because it is the power of God to do the very things that men cannot do. So we don't need to apologize for the gospel. It is absolutely without rival.

The reason this gospel has such saving power is that it reveals God's righteousness. Verse 17:

For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "BUT THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH."

In the good news, the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed. It is brought into our experience from heaven down to where we are: the righteousness that is from faith to faith. The NIV translates this: "a faith that is from first to last" (lit., "from faith to faith"). What the apostle is saying is that it goes from faith to faith to faith to faith.

Paul, the rabbi, is thinking here of the Old Testament concept of righteousness, which refers to one's loyalty to keep his promise. In the Semitic world, when a man entered into a contract with another, if he kept his side of the contract, he would be known as "righteous"—he had done what was right. That is what Paul is saying. God is going to do what is right. He will be loyal to his covenant; and he will bring that righteousness into our experience. As the letter unfolds, Paul will say how all this becomes manifest.

In his book, *The Cost of Commitment*, John White illustrates this truth from the life of Abraham. God had called Abraham out of Ur and brought him to Palestine. He promised to bless him, to give him a land and a seed, and that through him all nations of the world would be blessed. The promises were very clear. Then God made a contract with Abraham. Contract making back then was very different from what we do today, and included an unusual ceremony. They didn't use contracts written on paper like we do, they used animals. They would slice animals in half, lay them a few feet apart, and the parties to the contract would walk

through the divided remains of the animals. This act was a way of saying, symbolically, “If I break the contract, may this happen to me: may I be cut in half.” Now, when God made all these promises to Abraham he said they were going to make a contract, and Abraham got certain animals and cut them in two and waited for God to walk through the parts with him. He waited and waited and waited. Every once in a while he would have to drive away the vultures which tried to scavenge the scene. Finally, he fell asleep waiting for God. Then God came down in the form of a fire and a torch and all by himself walked between the animals while Abraham slept. When it was all over, Abraham said, “I believe it,” and God told him, “You are righteous.” God had made all of these promises to Abraham. God would fulfill the covenant he had made. That was his part of the deal—that he was going to come through with salvation for Abraham and bless the world through him. Abraham’s part was to believe it. That’s all. God wouldn’t even let him walk through the animals. And when Abraham believed it, God said, “You are righteous.”⁵

Maybe you are thinking, “I wish God would give me such a visual object lesson. If he did, it would be much easier to believe.” John White goes on to say:

Stand at Golgotha as the horror of darkness falls. Look at the God-man who hangs in extremis from a gibbet. Dare you demand further evidence of God’s good will in his negotiations with you? The brazier and the torch pass between the animals. God has committed himself. He has spoken the irrevocable word for your comfort and your assurance. Perhaps you too are waiting as the sun goes down. Perhaps vultures would snatch away the evidence that any contract exists between you and God. Go to the Scriptures. Read in the gospels all that took place. Christ’s body was of human flesh, and it was lifted up on the cross. The darkness actually descended and the veil was torn in two. These things happened and were recorded that you might know God has committed himself to anyone, anyone who trusts him. He has gone to great pains to assure you that the gamble of faith is no gamble...But you must believe!⁶

That is our part. God’s part is to come through with salvation; our part is to believe that the righteous man or woman shall live by faith. That righteousness can be yours if you will believe what God has said. If you have been depending on yourself all your life, and if every well you have dug has come up dry, let today be the day when you turn away from all that and believe, by faith, in what God has done in your behalf, and accept the righteousness that he offers as a free gift in Christ.

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¹ Larry Crabb, *Connecting* (Nashville: Word, 1997) 122-123.

² John Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994) 56.

³ Stott, *Romans*, 59.

⁴ Stott, *Romans*, 58.

⁵ John White, *The Cost of Commitment* (Downers Grove: IVP) 87-88.

⁶ White, *Cost of Commitment*, 88.