
Praying to Profit Others

Romans 1:8-15

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Introduction Before I read the passage for tonight I want to tell you a story that took place in the spring of 1988. The story is about how the Lord exposed my sin in order to strengthen my faith and expand my ministry.

In 1988 I was a junior in Bible College. I was focused on deepening my understanding of the Bible, sharpening my ability to serve in the local church and increasing my effectiveness in outreach. I believed that reading and mastering the argument of books was the key to achieving that agenda. And one knows that it takes undistracted time to peruse books and glean insights.

So, I moved off campus and into a funeral home. Having a menial job and no people to disturb me allowed me to pursue a greater understanding of theology. And this was thought to be the answer to the question, “what will increase my faith and strengthen my ministry”.

The Lord opened my eyes to a sin that was undetected and undiagnosed. My sin in Bible College, left unchecked, would have crippled my faith (the very faith I desired to build up) and would have shriveled my ministry (the very ministry I desired to expand). My thinking needed to change. And change it did.

After some time of living like a loner, a dear brother confronted me on a pattern he was seeing in me. He described for me a biblical alternative to my chosen lifestyle. He discussed how the Bible talks about community. He urged me to think about the benefits of relationship. Passages like Hebrews 3:12,13; 10:24-25 were used to both inform and rebuke me. I began to see that faith does not and cannot live in isolation. I was alerted to the fact that the environment in which growth occurs was real life with real people. My arrogance that I was to be a dispenser of truth and grace and others were to be a receptacle of truth and grace was exposed. I needed to believe what a noted pastor said, “Faith is a community project (J.Piper)”.

Since that eye opener, I’ve changed my mind over how faith is fostered. I came to see what ministry development requires. Though my desire was strong back in 1988 for these noble goals, my belief in how they are achieved was faulty and idolatrous. But thanks be to God who changes hearts. He forgave me of my sin of self-reliance that led to isolation. He renewed my interest in the biblical way. Over the last fifteen years or so he has been teaching me what the Apostle Paul understood in Romans 1:8-15. God has been giving me what I hope to give to you tonight.

To continue our series on N.T. Praying, I want us to look at Romans 1:8-15. My aim is that the topic of this text, *why God's servant desires to be with God's people*, will both inform and invigorate our prayer life in a tangible way.

<Read text>

Having introduced himself and his mission, Paul explains why he is writing to God's people at Rome. News that he received about the quality of their faith calls forth heart-felt thanksgiving to God from Paul. He tells the church of his long-standing desire and prayer for the opportunity of being with them. And now, after earlier hindrances, it appeared that his prayer was about to be answered.

As we continue to think together on the discipline of prayer we want to understand what was uppermost on Paul's mind? Why did he long to be with God's people? How will knowing what Paul really wanted help shape the prayers of Clearcreek Chapel?

To get to the answers to these questions, first look with me at Paul's expectation. This is found in vv.8-10.

Paul's Expectation

vv.8-10

In vv.8-10 we come to see what Paul desired. His prospect was quite strong and unrelenting as noticed by the tone of this paragraph. Phrases like "I thank my God first for you", "I mention you [in prayer] unceasingly", "I may now at last succeed in coming to you", "I long to see you", "I want you to know", "I have often intended to come", "I am under obligation eagerly". These phrases clearly point us to what Paul wanted. To put it simply, he wants to be with them.

To be with God's people

Paul longs to be with the saints in Rome. In v.13 he alludes to the fact that he attempted many times to come but was prevented by God's providence. In v.10 he tells us that he prays unceasingly for God to somehow get him to Rome. Paul wants to be with these people in the worst way.

To introduce another NT Prayer for our growth and change tonight, we start with looking at what Paul longed for. *Praying to Profit Others* (our NT prayer we are focusing on tonight) requires a heart that leans toward others. It involves wanting what Paul wanted in vv.8-10.

- Do we see this type of desire in our hearts? Do we long to be with each other as God's family? If we asked the question, "What do I really want", would our answers reflect Paul's desires? Isn't it strange that when times are tough (as in the Apostle's situation) we tend to move away from; not toward God's people? When deadlines are close and finances are tight, when a significant relationship is not in one accord and the kids are disobedient we say "I just need some time and space". The answer for this tendency is a belief that it will be better to do so. The myth we are buying into is that there is more profit in staying apart rather than coming together. We begin to think like I thought back in Bible College.

- If you can identify with this temptation, what will assist you in changing? If we will learn how to pray like Paul is praying in this passage, what will we need to be convinced of? Why was God's servant longing to be with God's people?

Paul's Explanation

vv.11-15

In vv.11-15 Paul gives us two basic reasons for his strong ache to be with God's people.

To enjoy mutual encouragement

vv.11-13

The first reason is set out in vv.11-13. He saw the value of being together because in being together there was mutual encouragement.

giving

v.11

Paul explains this mutual encouragement by first talking about the effect he would have on the congregation. V.11 says, "For I long to see you that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you". Paul really wants to be with God's people because he sees that it will profit them. Paul says back in v.5 that "[he had] received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations". Paul knows that God has blessed him in order to bless others. The aim of Paul seen in v.11 is to impart some spiritual gift to strengthen them. There has been much debate over the meaning of this verse. It could, I suppose, mean that Paul was to give them a supernatural, apostolic-type spiritual gift. Prophecy, signs and wonders, and so forth might be what he meant. However, by noticing the vague character of the expression Paul used "some spiritual gift" will not allow us to limit the thought to a special gift. All we can say is that the apostle longed to be a means of conveying to the saints at Rome what God has given him to strengthen faith.

Spiritual gifts transmit spiritual things; things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control. Paul desires to be with them in order to strengthen them through some spiritual gift. Paul knows that when faith is strong it embraces the all-sufficiency of Christ as the source of all grace. Spiritual gifts; serving gifts or speaking gifts (1Pet.4:10) spread to other people in the body of Christ the power of grace and the presence of the Spirit.

God's servant desired to be with God's people because God's Spirit through God's gifts strengthens God's people. This is one reason why he valued being together.

giving and getting

v.12

But for Paul, he didn't view himself as the giver of encouragement only. He did not view himself as a mere helper. He was aware that he stood in need too. Paul understood that ministry is not a one way thing. V.12 unpacks and explains v.11. It says, "that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine". Paul prays to be with God's people because he wants to enjoy mutual encouragement.

High priority

v.13

To round off his teaching on mutual encouragement Paul in v.13 talks about the priority of mutual encouragement. To get together to profit others was high on his list. He starts v.13 off with a typical formula that stresses the importance of what follows. He says, "I want you to know, brothers". What Paul conveys about the reason for his desire to be with them is of utmost importance. What was so important for them to understand? Paul goes on to discuss why it had taken him so long to get to Rome.

Though we have no writings telling us the exact circumstances that frustrated his plan, we do have clear information telling us that he was hindered. The reason why he had not made it to Rome was not due to lack of desire. Rather, what kept him back from making it to Rome and enjoying mutual encouragement was God's providence. Therefore, what will allow him to come would be God's permissive will. That is why Paul prays. He is asking God to allow him and help him to come to Rome. He longs for success to this trip because he longs for mutual encouragement.

And again, we see Paul's humility and the underscoring of mutual ministry. The idea expressed in this verse is that of gathering fruit, not that of bearing it. Paul reflects upon the fruit he was to derive from his visit to them rather than on the fruit they would derive from his ministry.

The point of vv.11-13 is clear. The first reason why God's servant longs to be with God's people is found in the blessings of mutual encouragement.

- Do we think like Paul? Our hearts, undoubtedly, long for encouragement. We seek out things we believe will strengthen our faith and extend our ministries. And yet, do we believe like Paul believes? Are we persuaded that getting together to profit others is a means through which God's grace flows in two directions; helping others and being helped by others? Are we convinced that the basic environment God promises to dispense grace is in the environment of togetherness?
- Secondly, do we pray like Paul? Paul had a deep desire to be with God's people because he believed that mutual encouragement was to be enjoyed among God's people. And so, he tried to get together with them. But let us not miss the obvious. Paul prays. He asks God to allow him to be with His people. Paul understood that his plans were God-dependent. It is one thing to plan to be together for mutual encouragement. It is another thing to pray to be together for mutual encouragement. *Praying to profit others* requires us to believe two things. 1) There is greater encouragement for us when we are together for the purpose of giving and receiving grace. 2) To enjoy mutual encouragement is in God's hands. He will allow or thwart it. Therefore, we need to desire for and pray that we will enjoy mutual encouragement.

To discharge an obligation

vv.14-15

Why God's servant desired to be with God's people should be apparent by now. There is strength and blessings when we are together for mutual edification. This was the first reason for Paul wanting to be with the saints at Rome.

There is a second reason for his desire to be with God's people. Paul looks forward to his visit because he sees it as an opportunity to discharge an obligation. He has told them in v.1 that he is Christ's servant. He has then outlined his mission in v.5. So, in vv.14-15 we are to interpret his desire as a longing to be faithful with an obligation entrusted to him.

Paul sensed he had a debt, in others words, he owed to the whole world. He longed to be trustworthy in taking care of this debt. How can these two verses help us to praying to profit others? To understand this obligation and how it relates to the topic at hand, let's think together on two types of debts. 1) The first one is an obvious one. When we borrow money, for instance, we are indebted to the lender. To maintain integrity and do what is right, we must pay it back. 2) The second way we place ourselves under debt is if we learn about something that would bring great benefit to others. If you discovered, for instance, a cure for cancer would it be right to keep it from the world? Paul has this idea in mind as he writes vv.14-15.

An illustration

2Kings 7:3-9

Placing ourselves under debt by learning about something that would bring great benefit to others can be illustrated in a story found in 2Kings 7:3-9.

In this passage we see four lepers in the city of Samaria. The situation surrounding this event is the Syrians besieging the city for some time. Death of starvation will occur should things remain the same. The lepers decided to cross over to the Syrian camp after nightfall. They thought that there might be a possibility that the enemy would spare them and give them food. When they reached the enemy camp, however, they were amazed at what they found. The camp was empty of enemies but full of food and treasures. God had caused the Syrians to hear what they thought was a great army coming against them. They fled leaving much to plunder.

After gorging themselves in fine food and after thinking how to hoard the treasures, something came over their conscience. Upon hiding the treasure they said, "We are not doing right. This day is a day of good news. If we are silent and wait until the morning light, punishment will overtake us. Now therefore, come; let us go and tell the king's household".

A sense of necessity impelled these lepers to "go and tell". What was Paul's good news that caused him to really want to be with God's people? Vv.15f tell us that Paul learned that Christ had come to die for the sins of His people. And that by being raised from the dead, God would declare righteous the unjust simply by trusting in His Son. With sin dealt with perfectly and completely God could now work all things together for good for those who love Him without jeopardizing His glory. Paul sounds a note of profound joy as he declares that he is a debtor to all in this sense.

- Are we able to see why Paul wanted so much to be with God's people? His knowledge of Christ urged him to extend this knowledge to others. He longed to discharge his obligation to dispense the good news of Christ because that would bring great benefit to others. He desired to be with the saints at Rome for mutual encouragement; whether they were Greeks or barbarians; whether they were wise or foolish. Nationality, culture and intellectual power were no grounds on which Paul would decide who he would enjoy mutual encouragement. Those who had the gospel had the power of God that would change all who believe. This drove Paul toward people rather than moving away from people.
- Praying to profit others increases to the extent that we sense our indebtedness. We know the good news of great joy. This knowledge is to lead us to desire to be with each other for two reasons. 1) We find that we profit one another when we are together. 2) We have learned about something that will bring great benefit to each other. Does this knowledge motivate us to get together in order to enjoy mutual encouragement? Do we value God's way of changing hearts, changing lives; namely by the gospel through His people?

Recap

So we've noticed how Paul started off his most significant letter to churches and individuals. He introduced himself as a servant of the living Christ whose desire was to be with God's people in order to profit others. He knew he had the spiritual gifts and the gospel needed to strengthen their faith. He knew also that they had some spiritual gifts and the gospel needed to strengthen his faith. He longed to visit Rome because he longed for mutual encouragement.

Some lessons can be drawn from this passage to help us pray specifically to profit others. Let's look as we close tonight at some of these lessons and applications.

Conclusion

Lesson

It is beneficial to be with God's people.

In a culture that prizes self-sufficiency and independence, we need a message like tonight. We need to see clearly the great value of not forsaking the fellowship. We need to be convinced that there is great profit to be enjoyed when God's people come together.

This benefit is two-way and wholesale.

Romans 1:8-15 prove that there is no such thing as one person who blesses and the rest receive. No Lone Ranger riding on Silver is found in the Bible. We must be persuaded that mutual encouragement is enjoyed when we come together to strengthen each other. The prospect of helping and being helped ought to motivate us to visit and be with each other. In addition, this passage makes clear that there is no one to mature in one's faith that (s)he cannot profit from the less mature. In Contrast, there is no one who is untrained, uneducated and uncultured who cannot profit someone who is intellectual and cultured. The benefits we see are two-way and extensive.

To the degree that we believe this, we will really want to be with each other.

Paul demonstrated a longing to be with God's people. This increased desire was due to the fact that he believed there were great benefits enjoyed when God's people came together. Let us tonight be persuaded that the notion I had in Bible College is erroneous. Let us tonight be persuaded that there is greater profit for each other when together rather than when isolated.

To be able to enjoy mutual encouragement is up to the Lord.

Paul was hindered by the providence of God. Paul asked the Lord if he could finally make the visit. Clearly a lesson to be learned from this passage is that God providentially oversees our fellowship. Therefore, not only are we to agree that together is better. We are to pray that God will bring us together for the sake of mutual encouragement.

Therefore, pray that we are able to be together and be effective with each other.

Our faith is vulnerable. Without the gospel and grace our hearts wander. By God's grace through His gospel and people our faith strengthens. Why would we not pray that we can see so and so this week and that we will be used of God to strengthen his/her faith? Why would we not pray that God will grant us access to so and so for the purpose of receiving encouragement?

Here, then, after five lessons we can create and use one application. Let us pray this week a simple, biblical and hopeful prayer. Pray this week like this:

Application

Father, grant that I may be able to be with _____ so that we may be encouraged together and that I may be able to minister to them so they will be strengthened in the gospel and by your grace. For the glory of Christ and the good of us I pray. Amen.