



There is something special that comes from encouragement in the faith. I was 20 years old when I surrendered my life to the Lord and I knew not one other person, besides my mom, who loved the Lord. I used to run with a rough crowd who had no desire for Jesus. One day at college, I saw a flier for a church closer to my home than the church I was attending. It was close to my house but I didn't have a car, so I walked 20 minutes to get there. That night something fantastic happened: I met other Christians my age. I was shocked when I walked into the church and saw other people—my age—worshipping the Lord. It was what my young soul had been longing for, to connect with people my age who loved Jesus.

That night I met three guys who invited me to a Bible study. My first night attending the Bible study I met other guys who became some of my best friends during my college years! In that Bible study, these men taught me about faith, prayer and Christian encouragement. They encouraged me as I abandoned the ways of the world and began to surrender more of my life to the Lord. These were guys I attended college with, went surfing with, hung out with on the weekends and served alongside. When I look back on that night or think about that church, I almost didn't go because of the 20 minute walk. But that 20 minute walk infused my Christian walk with what it was longing to experience: encouragement! My connection with these guys brought life-giving words to my parched soul.

Have you ever had a similar experience? Have you ever met with another Christian, or attended a Bible study, or gone to a prayer meeting, and left incredibly encouraged and filled up? Maybe you are here this morning and that is exactly what you are looking for; you are looking for life-giving words. You might be feeling discouraged or lonely and looking for a community of faith to support you. Or you could be on the opposite end of the spectrum and live as one of the amazing people who is an encouragement to others.

Open your Bible to Romans 1:8-15. This is the second part of Paul's introduction to the church in Rome. In these verses we learn how it is that we can stay encouraged and be an encouragement to others. Have you ever wondered about that? Where does encouragement really come from?

### **Paul's Prayer for Roman Believers**

Paul begins this section by thanking God for all the believers in Rome.

**First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. God, whom I serve in my spirit in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you (verses 8–10).**

In verse 8 Paul starts by thanking God. This isn't the only place Paul does this. *"I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus"* (1 Cor. 1:4); *"I thank my God every time I remember you"* (Phil. 1:3); *"I thank God, whom I serve, as my ancestors did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers"* (2 Tim. 1:3). Paul does the same thing in 13 of his New Testament letters. Here, he specifically thanks God for their reputation of faith.

Paul didn't start the church in Rome but he longed to visit it. Some have suggested that Christianity was carried to Rome by Jews who visited Jerusalem on Pentecost and heard the message of Christ. After Pentecost, they traveled back to Rome where they helped to start the local church. Even though Paul has not had the chance to visit Rome yet, he has heard reports about their incredible faith. People all over "the world," meaning the known world at that time, have spread good Christian "gossip" about what God is doing in and through the church in Rome. In his scholarly work on the book of Romans, R.H. Mounce says, "The growth of the church has always been contingent upon the openness of believers to express their faith." The faith of the believers in Rome was doing this!

Next, Paul expresses his constant prayer for the church in Rome. Paul was led to pray often for the believers in Rome. He says he "constantly" and "at all times" prays for them. I don't think Paul is making this up or faking it. Have you ever done this before? Someone shares something with you or gives you a prayer request and you say, "I'm going to be praying for you." Then the week hits, you watch the game, deal with something at work, and you totally forget to pray. Let me be the first to confess that I'm a complete culprit of this. A few years ago I stopped saying, "I'll be praying for that" and started saying, "Can we pray right now?" This way I don't forget to pray for the person or the need. Another idea you can use to remember to pray for people is to keep a prayer journal. You can write the requests in your journal in order to be constantly praying for people. If someone asks you to pray

for an upcoming doctor's appointment, ask them to call or text you a reminder before they go in. Like Paul, let's be the kind of Christians who pray all the time for the needs of our church.

Paul isn't only praying for the church in Rome, he also tells them that he is praying for an opportunity to visit them soon. Paul prays in line with God's will. He doesn't assume it's God's will for him to visit Rome, nor does he claim to know what God's will is. Instead, through prayer, he fully submits himself to God's will. He wants to know God's will in this matter of travel and commits himself to praying about it. We don't know why Paul had never been to Rome. Most scholars think he had just been too busy planting churches and preaching the Gospel east of Rome and hadn't had the time to make it there. Later, in chapter 15, we're going to learn of his plans to travel to Rome en route to Spain.

What is Paul teaching us here? Has anyone's faith ever inspired you? If you're a follower of Christ, you can probably think of a special person whose faith radically impacted your life. Paul was encouraged and inspired by the reports he heard coming out of Rome. We need people around us who have "contagious faith;" people who encourage us to press on and to pray bold prayers. The faith of the Roman Christians was a source of encouragement for Paul. Take some time this week to think of a person who has encouraged you and let them know how thankful you are for them and what their encouragement means to you. This could be a quick email with a story of when they encouraged you, it could be a text message, a phone call, or a hand written note expressing your thankfulness for what their encouragement meant and means in your life.

This week I read a story that encouraged my own faith. There was a front page article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* about a metro-transit operator named Linda Wilson-Allen. She loves the people who ride her bus, learns their names, and waits for them if they're late and then makes up the time later on her route. A woman in her eighties named Ivy had some heavy grocery bags and was struggling with them, so Linda got out of the driver's seat to carry Ivy's grocery bags onto the bus. Ivy lets other buses pass her stop so she can ride on Linda's bus.

When she doesn't see her regulars at that stop she will honk her horn and they come running down from their apartment so they don't miss the bus. One morning Linda saw a woman named Tanya at the bus stop. She could tell Tanya was new to the area and she was lost. It was almost Thanksgiving, so Linda said to Tanya, "You're out here all by yourself. You don't know anybody. Come on over for Thanksgiving and kick it with me and the kids." Now they're friends. Linda has built such a little community of blessing on that bus that passengers give her flowers and scarfs and offer Linda the use of their vacation homes.

This does not sound like your typical bus driver! You are probably thinking, "How does she have this attitude?" Here's what

the *Chronicle* states, "Her mood is set at 2:30 A.M. when she gets down on her knees to pray for 30 minutes." Why does she pray? The article quotes her, "there is a lot to talk about with the Lord." When she gets to the end of her line, she always says, "That's all. I love you. Take care." Have you ever had a bus driver tell you, "I love you"? If you are wondering, "Where can I be encouraged in my faith?" I'll tell you where—on the #45 bus riding through San Francisco. People think, "Where can I find people like Apostle Paul?" I'll tell you where—behind the wheel of a metro bus.

### **Paul's Desire to Visit Rome**

After praying for the believers in Rome, Paul explains why he is so eager to see them. He gives them three reasons.

**I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith (verses 11–12).**

Here we see again that Paul's desire to visit Rome wasn't based on personal advantage but to strengthen those serving the Lord. The first reason: Paul expresses his longing to impart a spiritual gift. You might think, "Isn't it the Holy Spirit who gives us spiritual gifts?" That is a great thought! We honestly don't know exactly what spiritual gift Paul is talking about imparting. It doesn't seem like he is talking about the spiritual gifts we find in 1 Corinthians 12 or later in Romans 12. But he hopes to impart a spiritual gift to them.

As we continue reading, it seems to make sense that verses 11 and 12 are closely connected in the conversation of spiritual gifts. The second reason: Paul has a strong desire to visit in order to have mutual encouragement. Could this be the spiritual gift Paul is talking about, mutual encouragement in the faith? Could this be a practical expression of the "obedience that comes from faith" Paul spoke of in verse 5? It's a wonderful surprise in verse 12 to read that the great Apostle Paul wants to be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. He too wanted to sit down in someone's living room, have a coffee, be encouraged by their faith, and also to be an encouragement to them. It reminds me of the well-known proverb, "*As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another*" (Prov. 27:17).

Some of us think Paul is a super-hero of faith, and he is. But he was also human. When Paul first became a follower of Christ, he wanted to join the other disciples in Jerusalem, but they wouldn't accept him until a young man named Barnabas believed his story. The book of Acts chapters 13, 14, and 15 document the missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas. Together they shared life and must have been a mutual encouragement to each other. How could they not be if Barnabas' name means "son of encouragement"? So Paul had experienced mutual encouragement in his friendship with Barnabas and longed for more.

The relationship between Paul and Barnabas isn't the only relationship of mutual encouragement in the Bible. In the Old Testament, there is a great friendship shared between David, the soon-to-be king, and his friend Jonathan. David and Jonathan had a relationship of mutual encouragement, honesty, protection, and unity that we can strive for in our own relationships. Do you desire the encouragement and fellowship that only happens when followers of Christ come together in unity? Encouragement comes from being in relationships with other believers that are defined by mutual faith, prayer and genuine fellowship. Write this down: Encouragement comes from faith, prayer and fellowship. This is what Paul models in this passage.

We should leave our worship gatherings—small groups, and other meetings, having spent time surrounded by God's people—more encouraged than ever because we share life-giving words. The goal is to meet with other Christians and leave filled up, fired up and more encouraged than ever! Unfortunately this isn't always the case. Too often Christians are critical instead of grace filled. We are condemning when we need to be comforting. We are superficial when we need to be sincere. Listen to what Timothy Keller says, "We should never leave our church meetings, having spent time surrounded by beloved, distinctive people of faith, without feeling encouraged." We need mutual encouragement, so let's be the ones to extend life-giving words first because we long for them ourselves.

Paul wants to visit Rome to be encouraged and to be an encouragement. The third reason for his visit: he wants to have a harvest among the church in Rome.

**I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles (v. 13).**

The word for "harvest" is literally "fruit." The idea here is that Paul wants to gather fruit, not necessarily plant or grow it. Paul isn't looking to till dirt or plant seeds, he is looking to lead people to our Lord. As the Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul wants to reach people for Christ in Rome, the capital city of the Gentile world. Paul is coming to Rome to both encourage the church and to evangelize the city. This is important to know because the ancient gods of Rome and Greece had no personal interest in mere mortals. Only the true God, ultimately revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, can satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart. This is the message Paul longed to share with the people of Rome.

### **Paul's Obligation to Share the Good News**

Paul is so very emphatic about his desire to preach the Gospel in Rome that he uses some very strong language in verses 14–15:

**I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, 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 word "obligated" can be translated as "I am a debtor." How could Paul be in debt to the Roman church? He has never even been there! If you are in debt, there are only two ways to get out of it: you either pay the debt back yourself or someone else gives you the money to pay for it. It's in the second sense that Paul is indebted to both Greeks and non-Greeks, both wise and foolish. One way to interpret the phrase "both wise and foolish" is to think of educated and non-educated people.

In other words, Paul is indebted to preach to all people everywhere. Why? Because in the first couple verses of chapter 1, we saw that God has revealed the Gospel to Paul (on the road to Damascus) and commissioned him to declare the Good News, or the Gospel, to others. In Paul's thinking, he owes people the gospel because of the goodness and grace of God to him. When he wrote to the church in Corinth he said, "*For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I don't preach the gospel!*" (1 Cor. 9:16). For these reasons, he was more than eager to get to Rome.

If you are a follower of Jesus, did you know that you too have an obligation to preach the Gospel? You might be thinking, "Wait a second! I'm no apostle. I can't preach. I wouldn't even know what to say to someone." For some reason we can think that evangelism is only reserved for people who excel in it. But Paul spoke about it as an obligation. Why? Because good news is meant to be shared, not kept to ourselves. All Christians have been commanded by Jesus to share the good news. "*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit!*" (Matt. 28:19). In my Bible there is a heading above this section that says, "The Great Commission." It doesn't say, "The Great Suggestion." The world around us is spiritually dying, and we can't just sit back and watch. We need to share the Good News of Jesus Christ.

One day a man was heading home from work. He got off the train and started heading to his house. There was a shaggy little dog sitting on the side of the road. The dog was clearly homeless, hungry, and in desperate need of a bath and a good meal. The man did what many other people refused to do that afternoon and took the dog home with him. He delayed his dinner to give the dog a much-needed bath and brush his tangled hair. He didn't have any dog food so he shared some of his steak with the little pup.

The man put up signs trying to find the dog's owner, but no one responded to the posters. He went to the pet store and bought him a new bed, a shiny dog collar and his first dog tag. Engraved on the tag was the little dog's new name: Spike (it gave him a little more confidence). Over time the little dog added some much needed pounds, grew in strength and regained the confidence a

little dog needs. Every night when the man returned from work Spike was right there, waiting at the door, to meet him.

One day the man came home from work and Spike was nowhere to be found. It had been over a month since he rescued Spike, but this evening he was gone. The man was sad and the home seemed empty without his new friend; it wasn't the same without Spike. As the man made himself dinner, he heard the familiar voice of his new friend barking at the front door. He immediately left the kitchen and went to the front door. When he opened the door, there was Spike sitting in the front yard, but he wasn't alone. Now that Spike was in a healthy place, he went back to the streets and found all his hurting, dirty, lonely, hungry, unconfident doggy friends and told them about the man! Spike knew one thing to be true: he couldn't keep the secret of the man to himself, he had to share it with others. I imagine this is what Paul is expressing to the church in Rome. Paul's life had been changed and he couldn't keep the Good News of Jesus Christ to himself.

As we've studied these eight verses from Paul's introduction, I think the main message is about encouragement. Paul tells us here that encouragement comes from faith, prayer and fellowship. Anyone here need a little encouragement today? One of the most important things we need to do, as God's people, is to stay encouraged. Why? Because we live in a world that is constantly beating us down and stripping away our faith. It's so easy to become discouraged, especially about our faith. Listen to what Oswald Chambers says about encouragement, "A man who is continually criticized becomes good for nothing, the effect of criticism knocks all the gumption and power out of him."

Paul gave us three ways to stay encouraged. If you are discouraged, let me encourage you to first go to God in prayer. The first place we need to run is to God when we are facing discouragement. The more we focus on God, the bigger He becomes and the smaller our problems become. Throughout the New Testament

we see Paul running to the Lord in prayer, living a vibrant life of prayer. If you are discouraged today, begin with praying for yourself and for others.

Next, if you need some encouragement, get connected with other Christians. If you've been attending CPC for a long time, can I encourage you to break out of your circle of friends and find someone who has recently begun attending to connect with? Will you take the time to encourage them in their faith? If you are new to CPC, our hope is that someone will reach out to you. Not sure where to start? A great place to start is by turning to the person you met earlier in our service during our greeting time. Spend time with these people and be mutually encouraging. If you need help getting connected, let us know.

The last way you can stay encouraged is by sharing your faith. Nothing has energized me more than sharing my faith with a non-Christian. There is nothing more encouraging than sharing your faith with a person who has yet to commit their life to the Lord and having the opportunity to lead them to Christ. Our vision over the next five years is to be a church of 5000 people, meeting in multiple locations on the Peninsula. There are so many people who need to hear the saving message of Christ.

This week, will you intentionally look for ways you can be a source of encouragement to someone else? Maybe your boss needs a few encouraging words on Monday. Maybe you need to encourage your spouse today. Maybe you need to speak life-giving words to your kid who is overwhelmed with the rigors of school. You might be thinking of a friend at school right now who needs to hear some encouragement. Whatever it is, let's be like that church in Rome, where our faith is being reported all over the world.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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