

FIRST THINGS FIRST ROMANS 1:8-15

By Pastor John Carlini, D.Mn

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Last week, we talked about how important it was to understand exactly what the Bible says, how important it was to believe it, and how important it was to live according to it. We said that in order to live a healthy, productive, and satisfying life, we must know who God is, so that will build our faith. We must know who we are in Christ so that will prevent us from falling into the two extremes of pride and arrogance, or hanging on to low self-esteem. Knowing that God has called us to be persons of the Gospel gives meaning and purpose to our lives, and knowing that God has given us the power and authority to live our lives free in Christ gives us the confidence we need to live boldly.

This week we are going to see what it takes to form a healthy church. Again, as we study through today's passage, let's keep in mind that Paul is not addressing an organization, an institution, or a building he is addressing a group of people who hold in common their belief in Jesus Christ. The people in Rome who have given their lives to Jesus are the church. You and I, not this building, not the organization or institution, are the church. We have been called and set apart to be the church and when we leave this building, we are still the church.

Sad to say, there were some pretty poor examples of church in the New Testament, and there are some real unhealthy models of church today. I've learned over the years how to identify these churches, and I have learned the most valuable lessons through meeting with some of these churches.

Certainly not here, but you remember that church that I used to pastor, the one that was so tough. (How tough was it?) It was so tough that the placement office at the seminary had to

use code language so I wouldn't be alarmed, but since then I have learned the language. Let me share with you what I learned.

- (i) When the Placement office says, "This church just needs someone to go in and love them," What it means is, "This group can't get along and is on the verge of a major crisis."
- (ii) When the Placement office says, "This church needs an injection of new life," what it means is, "There are no young people. The senior adult class constitutes 90% of the church."
- (iii) When the office says, "There's a good core of young married in the church," what it really means is, "The young married Sunday School class has been going for 42 years, and they haven't bothered to change their name."
- (iv) When the office says, "This congregation has an involved, well-mobilized laity," what it really means is, "They've called a special congregational meeting to vote out the last 6 pastors."
- (v) When the office says, "With a little bit of time, this church could bust loose," what it really means is, "The most cantankerous church boss is experiencing health problems and may die soon."
- (vi) When the office says, "This church offers a competitive salary package," what it means is, "It's on a par with what the door-greeter at Wal-Mart makes."
- (vii) When the office says, "This church features uplifting music," what it really means is, "The organist is so bad, he will make your hair stand on end."
- (viii) When the office says, "The building is highly visible," what it really means is, "The property is located so far off the beaten path that there's open space for miles around."

(ix) When the office says, “The leadership is very, very, stable,” what it means is, “The last time there was turnover on the power structure of the board was during the Eisenhower administration.”

(x) When the office says, “You won’t believe the benefits package,” what it really means is, “There is none.”

And, finally,

(xi) When the office says, “We are confident that you are the one for the job,” what it really means is, “Please take this assignment so we can get this church out of our hair for at another year.”

Well, I have learned many lessons the hard way now let’s see what Paul thinks is foundational to healthy churches.

Again, last week we were reminded that having a correct biblical view of God and who we are in Christ will allow us to live healthy lives. This morning we will see what it takes to have a healthy church. It seems to me that Paul is saying **we must recover a right ordering of our priorities if we want to see a healthy and prosperous church.**

Just as we hold on to many false ideas as individuals because of faulty theology and a lack of basic Bible knowledge, so does the church get confused as to what is important, and what is not, because of faulty theology and a lack of basic Bible knowledge. Getting our priorities right will help us to become a healthy body.

I. ACKNOWLEDGING GOD’S WORK (Vs. 8-10)

As we read verses 8-10, we can see that acknowledging God’s work must come first; **powerful prayer is the foundation of powerful ministry.** I’d like to say that again. Powerful

prayer is the foundation of powerful ministry. We are in a culture where action and doing are the most valued qualities. We are a very pragmatic people however let's pay attention to where Paul starts.

A. THANKING GOD (V. 8)

In verse 8, we see him thanking God in prayer. For those who have logical minds and do all of your thinking in analytic models, this verse has to drive you mad. Do you remember the rules in outlining? If you have a Roman numeral I, you have to have a Roman numeral II. If you have an A, you have to have a B. If you have a 1, you have to have a 2, and so on. Look how Paul starts this passage. The very first word is "first" so we naturally look for a second, third, and fourth, but we are confused and frustrated to find none. Well then, what could Paul mean? Many commentators want to say that Paul got sidetracked or confused or forgot where he was but let's also keep in mind that the Holy Spirit inspires Scripture and guides its writing.

Here is what I think Paul means. It is one simple word in Greek. I think Paul is saying, "In the first place, before we do anything else, primarily, or first things first." What is the first thing we should always do? We ought to thank God. Now even though the NLT is my favorite translation to read, it really misses the importance of this. In the Greek, in the NASB, and in the NIV, the word order is this: "First, I thank my God." Prayer always ought to start out by thanking God. It doesn't matter if times are good or if times are bad we have plenty to thank God for.

- THROUGH JESUS

Paul immediately gives us the primary reason to thank God, because he is praying to God the Father through Jesus Christ. If it were not for the person and work of Jesus on our behalf, we would still be enemies of God. If Jesus did not die for your sins and mine, we would still stand

condemned before God. But because of Jesus' death on the cross, because of His resurrection, and because of His ascension and seating at the right hand of the Father, any time we choose, we can call out, "Father?" and through Jesus, we are immediately ushered into the throne room of God. Did you ever stop and think about what a privilege that is? How easy is it to get to see the president or a politician? Even though I have no desire to talk to any of them, it would be very difficult to get an appointment if I wished to.

I do want to talk to God. All I have to do is call out, "Jesus," and I'm there. How important do we as a church value prayer? In a church of about 150, we average about 10 that's about 6%. In congregational meetings, in board meetings, and organizational meetings, in all sorts of meetings, we open and close with prayer, but it often seems as if that only meets protocol. We are at a church function so we should throw in a prayer at the beginning and the end. I think the problem is that our perception is that we have no problems. I know you're probably tired of hearing this, but Jesus said in the loudest, clearest, and most emphatic way, that without Him, we could do nothing. We really need to ponder that, believe that, and act on that if we are going to be a healthy church. The Bible is very clear that prayer in Jesus' name is the only thing that will bring health and power to a church body.

- FOR CELEBRITY FAITH

And look what Paul thanks God for through Jesus Christ. He thanks God for this celebrity faith in Rome. Keep in mind at this time Rome was the capital of the most powerful empire of the day. No one could stand up to them or resist them. Hence the saying, "All roads lead to Rome." But the opposite was also true all roads led away from Rome as well. They didn't have the Star or the Enquirer they didn't have television or radio but word traveled quickly and it traveled throughout the whole empire.

The faith of this fledgling church in Rome caught the attention of the city and the world. Here is where we are going to have to carefully define faith, because it will come up again in Romans and in the rest of Paul's writings. For Paul, faith is not simply believing something or holding on to some philosophy. That would not have caught the attention of the world. For example, the Muslim philosophy has not caught the attention of the world. But two planes crashing into the World Trade Center and suicide bombers draw attention to the beliefs of Islam.

Paul connects faith to life and the actions we take through what we believe are what Paul defines as faith. It is this church's obedience, faithfulness, good works, and their evangelistic bent that has made them famous. It is the way they got along and cared for one another. It was the example of racial, economic, and theological reconciliation that caught the attention of the world. It was their love for God, their love for one another, their concern for the world that set them apart from the other religions and caught the attention of Rome.

What are we famous for here at Devon? I'm not sure but the sad thing would be if we were not known at all. They say everyone has their 15 minutes of fame. If that is the case, then what would we be famous for? Paul thanks God through Jesus Christ for the faith of the church at Rome.

B. RELATING TO GOD (V .9a)

In our prayer life, we should start out by thanking God. In the first half of verse 9, we see Paul then relating to God. Paul makes it very clear that the way we relate to God is through worship

- WORSHIP
 - 1. NATURE

Let's look at the nature of worship. Look carefully at the phrase, "whom I serve with my whole heart." Let me give you a literal translation Paul says, "I worship in my spirit." Now, let's get to the word worship. The modern translations translate this as "service." That is o.k., except that the word is "latreo" which comes from the family of "littergein," which gives us our modern day word, liturgy. You know, I'm not that bright, and by no means would I ever consider myself to be a scholar, but I would like to know what all the confusion about worship is. Modern day worship leaders, are concerned about the movement of praise to worship. In other words, there is a movement in worship through smooth transitions. In traditional worship, we have the rituals and seasons and specific order and movement of worship. Each group has somehow come to think this stuff is sacred.

Before I say what I'm going to say next, let me preface this by saying that there is nothing wrong with either of these approaches to worship also I want to remind us what Jesus said about worship, He said we are to worship in Spirit and in Truth.

Therefore, in my opinion, all this debate and angst that centers on the order of worship is all nonsense. It's a waste of time when it goes beyond a simple tool that helps draw our attention to God and prepares us to do works of service. Paul equates worship with service. Worship happens through service. For Paul, it was exercising his gift in preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. Worship happens when we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick, and bring the gospel to the lost, and demonstrate forgiveness and purity. Worship is equivalent to living life according to our faith in Jesus.

Now, let me emphasize this. Learning different forms of worship is a good thing, learning different methods of worship is a good thing, but the key is to remember there is nothing absolute about them, they are to be used as tools that move us towards love and service.

2. INTENSITY

Paul is an intense guy. If we follow Paul's example, what could we say about the intensity of our worship, the intensity of our service? Let's get back to the phrase, "in my spirit." Paul is saying that he worships God in the deepest part of his being, the part that is created in the image of God, the part that communes with God. Paul relates to God by worshipping Him at the core of his very being, all that he is. I'm thinking here that Paul has in mind Jesus' two commandments. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul, and with all your strength and you should love your neighbor as you love yourself." In other words, whatever you do, do it heartily as unto God.

3. PURPOSE

Relating to God has a purpose. Again, Paul talks about the preaching of Jesus. That's what our life is all about. Our words, our actions and our thoughts are to be centered on Jesus. Church life, church programs, church activities are all meaningless unless they are centered on Jesus. Jesus is the only One who can give meaning to our lives. Jesus is the only One who gives meaning to the church.

C. REQUESTING FROM GOD (Vs. 9b-10)

We approach God through prayer we relate to God through worship and as the second half of verse 9 and verse 10 illustrate, we are free to make our requests known before God.

● BE MY WITNESS

First of all, Paul calls on God to be his witness. This is interesting if you stop and think about it. Paul has spent his life being a witness for God. Now Paul is asking God to be his witness before the Christians at Rome. He wants the Christians to know that even though he has not yet been able to visit them in person, he is filled with joy over their success, and he

constantly prays for them. He emphasizes how often he prays for them. Look at the words. He constantly prays for them and he prays for them at all times. They are on his mind always. Paul is not jealous of them, because he did not give birth to this church He is happy that God is blessing them and he desires to visit them.

- BE MY WAY

In addition to asking God to continually bless this church in Rome, Paul asks God to allow him to visit this church. I want all of us to look at the wording. Paul says that he prays that God will make a way for him to visit Rome. God is our way in life. This is so important. I know that there are many times in our personal lives that we don't really care what God's will for our lives is. The attitude we must take in our personal lives and in the life of the church is, if it is not God's will or desire for my life, I don't want it. On the other hand, in the church, we must have the idea, let's seek God's will because no matter how impossible it seems, if it is His will, He will make the way for it to happen.

Again, if we are going to pray powerfully and effectively then we must know what God's will for us is according to the Bible. This means that we need to study and know what the Bible says. But here is the critical step we have to be willing to worship we have to be willing to submit ourselves to the truth and we have to be willing to obey the truth, and live the truth, even if we don't like it. That's what a powerful life and powerful church is made of prayer and submission to God. **Powerful prayer is the foundation of powerful ministry.** We must acknowledge God for Who He is and for what He has done.

II. ACKNOWLEDGING OUR WORK (Vs. 11-15)

So first things come first. Prayer is the recognition of who God is. We thank Him we worship Him, and we present all our requests to Him. The next step is for us to acknowledge our

work in verses 11-15. Just as powerful prayer is the foundation of powerful ministry, **healthy leadership is the foundation for healthy ministry.** Churches are no different from other organizations in the fact that they can only be as healthy and productive as their leadership.

A. DON'T CALL ME PASTOR (Vs. 11-12)

I think verses 11-12 explain my sentiment when I constantly tell you, “Don’t call me pastor.” I don’t understand why commentators have such a hard time understanding these sorts of phrases. Almost all the commentators I read seem to say that verse 12 is Paul softening what he said in verse 11 because he didn’t want to offend the Christians in Rome. In verse 11, it seems as if Paul is taking a superior position to them when he says, “I’ll come there, impart a spiritual blessing to you, and you will be strong” and then, he realizes that may seem a little paternalistic and arrogant, so he quickly adds, “Oh, I mean so that we can both be blessed by one another.”

Let me say this, anyone who has seriously read through Paul’s letters knows that he is not really concerned about offending anyone when it comes to speaking the truth. Paul is highly educated and doesn’t have much trouble saying what he wants. I am going to take this phrasing as the original intent of Paul. He wants to make it to Rome for two reasons. First of all, he wants to use his spiritual gifts in their church to strengthen them. We know the Apostle Paul had several spiritual gifts, he had the gift of apostle, of healing, of teaching, of casting out demons, and performing other miracles; he had the gift of pastor and leading. Paul had all sorts of spiritual gifts and the only proper use of spiritual gifts is to build up the body of Christ in unity and love. Paul wanted to do that in Rome. Secondly, he wanted the church at Rome to exercise its spiritual gifts so that he could be encouraged and built up as well.

Now I'm not sure how this slipped into the Christian church, but it seems by looking at church history, I'd say pretty early. The nature of Old Testament worship was that the priest was the mediator between God and the community of faith. However, with the coming of Jesus, and the tearing of the curtain that is the Holy of Holies in the temple, this mediation process was to be no longer. In fact the author of Hebrews makes it clear that there is now only one mediator, and that is Christ Jesus but somehow this separation of pastors and congregation members slipped in.

I really think it is unhealthy to give a title to pastors. What is it that you mean when you address me as Pastor John? Does that mean I am above you? Does that mean that I'm the CEO of the church? Does that mean I'm the boss? What exactly does the title means? More importantly, let me put it this way. Pastor is one of the spiritual gifts. As near as I can count, there are approximately 21 spiritual gifts listed in the New Testament. Why is this one elevated and given a title? Why not give the others a title? For example, if I'm called Pastor John, why are you not called Mercy Fred, Giving Freda, Wisdom Frank, Joe Miracles, or Healing Jim? Nowhere in the New Testament is pastor elevated above any of the other gifts. The only proper use of gifts is to build up the body in unity and love it is not to establish titles or positions or power.

Everyone who is a believer has a spiritual gift. The only way to have a healthy church is to have everybody exercising their spiritual gifts for the purpose of encouraging one another in faith, love and unity. Don't set me up as the leader; Christ is our head and we are all to be centered on Him and so healthy leadership recognizes that it does not stand above anyone.

B. NO HIDDEN AGENDA (V. 13)

Healthy leaders have no hidden agenda as described in verse 13. Paul makes it very clear what his intentions are. He says, “I don’t want you to be uninformed. This has been my plan and it is still my plan. I have wanted to come to you for a long time now however, I have been prevented from doing so until now.”

Let me just make a quick side comment here. Paul doesn’t mention who or what hindered him. Was it God? Was it Satan? Was it circumstances? All of this is important for us to understand. We may never get the answers to those questions in our lives. It’s not that I think that they are irrelevant so much as I think it is often a waste of time to pursue. My approach has always been, no matter if the hindrance in my life is from circumstance, Satan, or God, nothing could ultimately happen without God’s permission, so I will approach the hindrance as God’s timing and God’s will. Paul senses that now it is both in God’s timing and in God’s will that he visits Rome.

Let me point this out. Paul will be in Rome in the near future but not the way in which Paul thought. He would be arriving there, in chains, as a prisoner, and having been shipwrecked and almost drowned off the coast of Malta. But Paul makes his intentions clear. He also makes his purpose clear. He wants to enjoy ministry among his fellow Christians in the great city of Rome. He wants to exercise his gifts of evangelism, teaching, healing, miracles, etc. All he wants is to enjoy the ministry of exercising the spiritual gifts God gave him.

Let me make this very clear, because I think it is a model for healthy ministry I am not here at Devon Church to make a name for myself, or to use this as a career steppingstone to a bigger church or more prestigious church. I have nothing to gain here, I am here because God gave me the privilege to come here and exercise my gifts of pastor and teaching among you. I am equally blessed when you exercise your spiritual gifts as well. I have no agenda. I am here

with your permission, and I pastor only by your permission. Together we will discover what God's will is for Devon Church. People in church with agendas are dangerous, and so are their leaders.

C. PROPER MOTIVATION (Vs.14-15)

Good leaders are humble and good leaders have no hidden agendas. And finally, Paul demonstrates that good leaders are properly motivated as he illustrates in verses 14-15. Good leaders are solely motivated by love for God and love for people. Look at the wording in verse 14. Paul says, "I am obligated both to the Greeks and non-Greeks, both to wise and the foolish." The word obligated has the sense of a debt. In other words, Paul is saying I owe a debt to these people. John Stott illustrates this nicely where he says basically there are two ways we can find ourselves owing something. If I borrow money or charge something on my Visa card, I am in debt and I owe that money. However, there is another way I can find myself obligated in debt. If, for example, you give me a check to pass on to the missionaries, then, I owe them the money you gave me. I will be in debt until I pass the money on to them.

God met Paul with the Gospel, God saved Paul from the destruction of eternal Hell, God commissioned Paul to be the messenger to the Gentiles and Paul owes these people the Gospel. He has been given the message by God to give to them he is in debt until he delivers it. Paul is commissioned to give the gospel to all people, all cultures, all economic statuses, all ethnicity, all races, and also to the educated and uneducated to give the Good News that God loves us and wants to save us is for all people

But Paul, like us, owes a debt of love. Leaders are not leaders until they can let the full effect of what God has done in their lives sink in. Paul knew that he had been an enemy of Jesus. Paul realized that he was persecuting and harming the people of God. Paul realized that he was

headed for eternity in Hell. Paul realized that without Jesus, his life was meaningless it was the realization that God has extended him so much grace, and that God had approached him with so much forgiveness, and it was the realization that God showered him with so much love, that motivated him and compelled him to share with everyone that God was giving the same offer to them.

That's why Paul was so eager to preach. Paul loved to tell the story, over and over again. If leaders are motivated by anything else but love, then, they ought not be leaders. Leaders should be motivated by love, have no agendas, and be humble because **healthy leadership is the foundation for healthy ministry.**

We are a community that comes to worship God each week. Let's remember that worship is actually work. What we do here on Sunday is to prepare us and equip us to worship the Lord through service. **We must recover a right ordering of our priorities if we want to see a healthy and prosperous church.**

As we think about worship, let's think about service. Here's a nice anonymous poem that cleverly chides us.

**There's a clever young guy named Somebody Else,
There's nothing this guy can't do.
He is busy from morning till way late at night,
Just substituting for you.**

**You're asked to do this or you're asked to do that
And what is your ready reply?
Get Somebody Else to do that job,
He'll do it much better than I.**

**So much to do in this weary old world ---
So much and workers so few,
And Somebody Else, all weary and worn,
Is still substituting for you.**

The next time you're asked to do something worthwhile,

**Just give this ready reply:
If Somebody Else can give time and support,
My goodness, so can I!**