



## God's Intention for the Church

Romans 1:11-15

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We are still in chapter 1. We are going to be looking specifically at verses 11-15, but I'd like to read from verses 8-15 for context. This is Paul's first initial statement after his address of the letter. Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, and the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative. Romans 1, verse 8.

*"First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome."*

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. O Lord our God, we pray that by the power of your Spirit you would open up your Word, that you would open it up, Lord, that we might see Jesus, that we might know our Lord Jesus Christ, that we might know your will for our lives, and that we might love one another more deeply. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

This morning I would like to talk about the subject of the church, because that is what's on Paul's mind here in verses 11-15. Have you asked yourself, "Why is the church so important?" Why should we bother with church? After all, it's not like there's no effort involved in church. We have to get up, get ready, drive, find a place to sit, be in a room for more than an hour, do various things, follow an order of worship. Why is church so important?

Well, I can tell you this: you are not going to hear this morning why Pastor Greco thinks church is important, because if anyone thinks church is important here it should be the pastor. Right? What we are going to look at is why *God* thinks church is important and how God has spoken to us through his apostle Paul about the connection we have with church and the purpose and intention of church.

What I would like us to see this morning are three things God intends with respect to the church. First, God intends the church to be *a place of connection*, a place where we belong, a place where we are connected, and

perhaps most importantly where God is connected to us. Secondly, God intends the church to be *a place of growth*.

Church is not a place where we just sit and take up space. The church is designed by the Lord that we might grow, that we might grow as Christians and that we might grow as his people. Then finally, God intends the church to be *a place of the gospel*. The gospel is found *at* the church, *in* the church, as a part *of* the church. God intends the church to be a place of connection, of growth, and of the gospel.

### **God Intends the Church to Be a Place of Connection**

Let's begin, then, by looking at what we mean when we say God intends the church to be *a place of connection*. Paul starts this section of Romans by saying, "For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine."

Paul is starting by telling us how important the church is to him. He longs to see the church. Now don't lose sight of what is going on here. When Paul is speaking to the Romans, to you, he is speaking to the church. It's the church at Rome. It is those who are called by God at Rome. Paul is saying he longs to be with them.

It is important for us to remember that the Bible teaches the church is not an afterthought. Some consider the church as an afterthought, as something that is God's plan B, if you will, as if somehow things didn't go the way God wanted them to or thought they would go so he changed course. In this type of theology, if the Jews had just done what they were supposed to do there would have been no need for the church.

We can't view the church as being unnecessary. This can't be the case because the church is the body of Christ, and Christ is the only Savior, the only Mediator, the only King. Therefore, our eternal Mediator and Savior is the Savior of all people. Not just *some* people at a certain point in time with a beginning and an end. Jesus is the Savior not just of you and me, not just of Peter and Paul, but of David and Abraham and Moses. So we can't think of the church as an afterthought, as God somehow patching up something.

Jesus intentionally sent his Spirit to the church for their benefit. This comes from what I find as one of the most remarkable verses in all of the New Testament. It's John 16:7. Let me posit it this way. If I were to ask you, "Do you think we would be better off if right now Jesus joined us, if Jesus walked right down the center aisle and sat with us? Would we be better off if Jesus were with us?" I think most of us would say, "Well, of course. Who wouldn't want to be with Jesus? Who wouldn't think it would be better if Jesus was here right now?"

There's one person who thinks it is better that Jesus is not with us. It's Jesus. He says this in John 16:7. "Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away..." What? How can I possibly be benefited, Lord? "...for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to

you." Jesus has sent his Spirit to the church, and that is our advantage. The church is where we connect with the Spirit of God, because that is where Jesus has sent him. What a blessing we have.

We treat the church sometimes very cavalierly, but what our Lord is saying is "The church is a place that is better for you to be than if I were on earth here with you because in the church is where my Spirit is found." Secondly, we need to see that the church is not an add-on. Others think of the church as kind of an optional addition, something that's good for Christians but not really necessary. The best way I can think about it is to use this analogy.

Do you know when you go to get a new phone and you get service turned on and you're ready and you want your phone and want to make sure it works, that it has cellular coverage and you have the data you need so you can play all of the Candy games you want and listen to all of the music you want? Then, inevitably, the salesperson says to you, "You know, we have an optional protection plan. It's an excellent plan, because if you drop your phone you're covered. If your phone gets in water, you're covered. It's an excellent thing, and it's just an add-on for this additional amount per month."

If you're anything like me, you try to find ways as quickly as possible to say, "No, thank you. I don't need that. That may be good for other people, but it's not really necessary. As long as my phone works, I don't need your optional protection." Some people view the church that way. "The church is good, but I'm fine just Jesus and me. I don't really need the church. I don't really need the place where the Spirit is. I don't really need these things in my life. it's good for some people. It's an optional add-on but not really something that's necessary for me."

If we think about the church this way, it may sound good at first, because we could talk about *our* relationship with Jesus and *our* connection individually with our Lord, but this point of view, this theology, is lacking. While we're acknowledging that the church is good we're saying it's something we can do without. This is often expressed by those who think a mere personal relationship with Jesus is enough, but this is not what we see Paul expressing in the Scriptures.

Paul presumes the importance of the church. As a matter of fact, he doesn't even come out in our text today and tell us the church is important. He just assumes you know that, because he is writing to the church. All of this great theology we get in Romans we only have because Paul thinks it's important for the church. He sends it to the church at Rome. That's his whole point in writing: to reach the church, to teach the church, to encourage the church, to be with the church.

This is what happened in Acts, chapter 2, when Jesus preached and he preached faith and repentance and people came to know the Lord Jesus as their Savior. Acts tells us immediately they became a part of the church. They joined the church. There was no other place for them to be. They were Jesus' so they were a part of the

church. That's where they connected. It's the God-established place where the Spirit is. This shouldn't surprise us, because the Spirit gives the Word of God.

So how is the Spirit present in the church, then? The first thing for us to remember is that the Spirit authors the Word of God. We only have the Word because of the Spirit's work, and that work finds its place in the church. Paul puts it this way in 1 Timothy 3: "The household of God, which is the church of the living God, [is] a pillar and buttress of the truth."

You'll notice Paul does not say the church has a corner on the truth or that what the church says is the truth. He says it is a pillar and buttress. That is, it lifts up and establishes and sets forth the truth of God. The church is a place where the truth of God can be seen and displayed, but it is God's truth that comes to us from his Spirit. The Bible doesn't come from men alone but only from the Spirit as he inspires men.

This is what Peter meant when he wrote, "For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." This is exactly what Paul is doing. He's bringing God's Word...that is, the book of Romans. And who is he bringing it to? The church. Why do we even have this book to read? Because of the church. The Spirit gives the Word to the church. The Spirit is connected to the church.

The second way in which the church connects is the church connects us. It connects people. We were not made to be alone. If you go back to the very foundations, to the beginning of Genesis, to the creation account, over and over again the Lord creates all things in the world, and there is this refrain that comes each and every day: "And it was good. And it was good."

There are a lot of things that are good because God is making them, but there's actually one thing where God breaks in and says, "This is *not* good." What he says is, "It is not good that man should be alone." Stop and think about that for a moment. If God himself declares that it is not good for man apart from sin in the state of innocence to be alone, how could it possibly be good for you or me in a world filled with sin and conflict and pain to be alone? It's not what we were made for.

We're made to be relational beings, and this is not a weakness of who we are. Sometimes we think, "Well, if we have to be around other people or if we have to relate to other people, that's a weakness. The strong man stands alone." We have this idea in our mind of John Wayne somewhere standing, and he doesn't need anyone, ever. That's what we want to strive for.

I'm here to tell you this morning to stop it. We are relational people because God is relational. It's one of the reasons our theology is what it is. God is triune, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, because God could not be perfect if he was only one person. God is three persons eternally because God in himself...Father, Son, and

Spirit...has eternal love, eternal relations, eternal cooperation. Our need for each other is a reflection of who God is. It is good.

We also weren't redeemed alone. God is not redeeming individuals and transporting them off to some island somewhere. No. Every time God redeems people he redeems them together to himself. Think about it in the Bible. The family of Abraham, the people of Israel, and then as the gospel goes even wider, as redemption goes worldwide, throughout all of the earth all of God's people are brought together in the church.

This is something we see in the book of Acts. It's something we see through church history. If I wanted to embarrass you all, I would ask you to start raising your hands here this morning. I would say, "Tell me who's from China. Tell me who's from Indonesia. Tell me who's from Africa. Tell me who's from Venezuela. Tell me who's from Mexico. Tell me who's from Texas. Tell me who's from New York." We're all different from different places, but God has brought us all together as one people.

It is right for believers to want to be together. This is natural. This is godly. This is a point of the church. We need contact, we need encouragement, we need accountability, and the church is the place where God connects us. So the church must be a place of fellowship and encouragement. The church must be a place of accountability and faithfulness. The church must be a place where we point each other to Jesus, where, like Paul, we long to be together. You can almost hear Paul's voice in the text, how he so desires to be with the church at Rome. It's because God has connected them.

### **God Intends the Church to Be a Place of Growth**

The second thing we see is that God intends the church to be *a place of growth*. It's a place where believers grow in Christ. Conversion is the beginning of the Christian life. We do affirm that we are justified by faith in Christ alone, and when we are justified by faith, when we are converted, when we are born again, we can be no more right with God at any future time than we are right then. It is a declaration by God that we are forgiven and redeemed.

That is also just the beginning of the Christian life. Jesus even reminds us of this the way he describes it. He says we must be born again. What happens after someone is born? They grow to become a child. Jesus tells us we must enter the kingdom as children, but we don't remain as children forever, do we? No, we have to grow up. We have to learn how to support ourselves. We have to learn how to do adult things, how to interact with other adults. We must understand how the world works.

This happens in the Christian life as well. We must understand that we are dependent on God. We must start anew, but we must grow in Christ. That's why Peter tells us in 1 Peter 2 that we are like infants who are dependent on the pure milk of the Word of God. But we're warned not to be satisfied with milk, that we have to grow up, that we have to be built up by God's Word so we can understand more of God's will for our lives.

Hebrews 5 puts it this way: "For everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child." What's happening here is Christ is our standard, and we are to strive to be more like him. We are to grow up into the image of Christ. Beloved, Jesus has given the church for this. Paul describes this in Ephesians 4, starting at verse 11.

He says, "[Jesus] gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ [the church], until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ..."

We have been given the church by Jesus so that we might grow more and more every day to be like Jesus. That's the mission of the church. Paul describes this as the reason he wants to see them. He says, "It's more than just a longing to be together with you. I want to be with you," in verse 11, "to impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you."

Paul realizes that he is not in charge, that he is not the one strengthening the Romans, but rather it is God himself, so Paul wants to impart this spiritual gift to them that they might grow. This word *impart* means more than just to give. It is as if a portion is being handed out by Paul to each of the members of the church at Rome. He wants them to be strengthened...that is, established, put firmly in place. They need to be supported in their faith, and Paul knows that where that happens is in the church.

He wants them to be encouraged. Notice what Paul says. He says, "That we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine." We have discussed this before about Paul, but it's worth repeating. Who of all people could do without the church? Wouldn't it be Paul? Who of all people would not need to be encouraged by other people in the church? Here we have Paul. He's writing the Bible. I mean, he has direct contact with the Holy Spirit, and he is planting churches all over the known world.

If anyone doesn't need the church with every average Tom, Dick, and Harry, Sally, and Mary, it's Paul, yet Paul tell us he needs the church to be encouraged. Again, if Paul needs the church, what about *you*? What about *me*? Are you saying to yourself that you are closer to God than Paul, that your life is better, more spiritual, more calm, more pointed than Paul's? I don't think so. Paul is reminding us we need the church because we need each other because we need to grow in Christ.

The church is not optional for the believer. God has established it for our growth. He has made it the place of his Spirit, and he has given us each other. This link between the Spirit and fellow believers is found in the church. When Paul uses this word *encourage*... He says, "We need to be mutually encouraged." It's a word you might recognize even in the Greek, because it's the same word that's used as a title of the Holy Spirit: the *Paraclete*.

You know that Greek word that means the Helper or the Comforter, like we looked at in John 16? The Holy Spirit is *the* Encourager, *the* Comforter, *the* Helper. Paul is saying we need encouragement, we need helping, we need comforting, and where the Spirit does that is through believers in the church. He has given us each other as a gift.

Now, it is not just that the church is a place for believers to be built up. It can be easy to view the church that way, because we look around and see fellow professing believers. We see people who have their Bibles open. We see people who know when to pray. We see people who sing songs of praise, but Paul also reminds us the church is where unbelievers come to know Christ. Look at what Paul says in verse 13. He says, "I do not want you to be unaware, brothers..."

Paul says this about four or five times in the New Testament. Every time he says it you could probably get out your highlighter and highlight what he says next and double underline it. This is Paul's way of saying, "Hey, listen up. Pay attention. I don't want you to be unaware. Listen to what I'm saying." "...that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles."

Paul is speaking in very strong terms here. This is something he wanted to do. This is something he tried to do and was prevented by either circumstances, ministerial demands, or the will of God. Paul wanted to come for the most important reason. Notice here he doesn't say, "I wanted to come and I tried to come so we could have fellowship," although that's important. He didn't say, "I wanted to come and I tried to come so you could have my protection," although *that's* important.

He says, "I wanted to come and tried to come that we might reap the harvest." Paul wants the gospel to go forward and to go forth, and he wants to see more believers in the church. It's important how he describes it. Paul is not bearing any fruit here. Do you see that? He's not expecting the Romans to bear any fruit. He says, "I hope to reap some harvest." God bears the fruit. Paul says we just reap the harvest.

What immediately should come to your mind is the parable where the seed is sown and the good seed lands in the good soil and grows up ten, a hundredfold, or perhaps Jesus' command that we are to go out into the world because the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. The laborers are the church. To go out into the world. The work is God's. He brings it about, but the church is the place where Christians start and grow.

This is a universal work of God, and by that it is indiscriminate. I don't mean from *God's* perspective it is indiscriminate, because as far as God is concerned, we know the Lord calls those whom he will. We know God brings to life sinners, that he calls them out of death and to life, out of darkness and into the light, but as far as *we* are concerned, this call is indiscriminate.

We don't get to pick and choose who are the objects of God's mercy. It's not as if we go out into our community and say, "Oh, that couple looks very much like we do. We should go talk to them about the gospel. They'd be perfect for our church. Oh, but him? No, not so much. I don't think he'll fit in. The way he carries himself, the way he's dressed... We ought not to go talk to him, because that might cause an uproar in the church. He's so different from us."

No, Paul says the gospel from the church is for the Jew and the Greek, and you can't find anything more different in Paul's day than the Jew and the Greek. "To the Greek and the barbarian." Paul says the gospel is for everyone. He's speaking of Gentiles, Jews, wise people, foolish people...all kinds of people. What God is teaching us through Paul is no matter who you are or no matter what your background is, God is calling you today to know Jesus Christ. That is his call.

Now, the church is not the *only* place where you can find Jesus, but it is *the* place for finding Jesus. Do you see the distinction? Perhaps I can illustrate it. If you were hungry, I might recommend that you go to a restaurant to get something to eat because restaurants are where you find food. You might say to me, "Well, but Pastor Greco, last week I was at this gas station, and they had food I was able to eat."

I would say, "I'm glad you found food at the gas station. I'm not so sure about those wrinkly-looking hot dogs. I really hope you didn't eat gas station sushi. You'd be in trouble. I'm glad you found something to eat at the gas station, but my recommendation would be not that you go to random gas stations hoping to find food, because you could go to five, six, or seven of them and not find any food, but if you go to a restaurant you *will* find food because that's what restaurants are all about."

That's what we have to understand with respect to the church. The church is not the only place of salvation. We are not proud enough to say no one can be saved but within our four walls. That's ridiculous and against the Bible account, but we should just as strongly say if someone desires salvation they should come to where we *know* Jesus is, and that is the church. That's the church's business: to tell people about Jesus, to spread the gospel.

Now this has an implication for you and me. We must strive to make the church a place where Christ is known, not a place where our preferences are accommodated. The church needs to be marked by the knowledge of Jesus, by the going forth of the gospel, not by all of the accoutrements that go alongside it...the color of our chairs, the fabric of our chairs, the time of our service, the instruments we use, the lighting we have. No, the church exists to tell a lost world about Jesus.

### **God Intends the Church to Be a Place of the Gospel**

Thirdly and finally, God intends the church to be *a place of the gospel*. Paul concludes this section with a very interesting point. He says, "I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome." We can understand that Paul

wants to see the Romans. We can understand he wants to see them built up. Who among us wouldn't want what's best for the Romans?

We can understand that he wants to see them grow numerically. Here's an aside: there is nothing wrong with numeric growth. Sometimes I think we think that if a church is growing there must be something wrong there. They must be being unfaithful. But I want you to note the kind of growth that's emphasized by Paul here. It is growth of new believers, new Christians. We should want to see growth by seeing the lost brought in.

Paul goes beyond this, beyond the benefit of the church at Rome, beyond their growth in grace. He says he's under an obligation. What does this mean? Why does he say this? Perhaps we can understand by asking a few questions. First... *What is an obligation?* An *obligation* is a debt. It is something that is owed to someone else. We might even go further and say it is a moral commitment we've made. It's not just an amount owed; it is a commitment to owing something to someone else and making it right.

We might even say that commitment is rooted and grounded in past benefits we have received. The question then is... *Who is Paul obligated to?* We could understand it if he said he was obligated to God, because, after all, God had saved Paul. God had given him mercy. Paul owed God. That makes sense to us. Paul actually says something else in verse 14. He says, "I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, to the wise and to the foolish."

Why is he obligated to *them*? He's obligated to them because they need the gospel. God has laid this obligation on Paul because they are in need of the gospel. What is remarkable here is that Paul is saying that preaching the gospel is not optional. It's not something Paul does so he might get an extra jewel in his crown or get an extra blessing from God. No. What he is saying is God commands that this is a part of redemption. The church and, therefore, *you* are obligated to spread the good news of the gospel. You are under an obligation.

This should put a new light on missions. This should put a new light on learning the Word of God, because we have to learn the Word of God not just so *we* are built up but so we can share the good news with others. It puts a new light on engaging with other people in our community. We can't somehow wall ourselves off from our community and say, "They're not like us. They don't read Bibles. They don't believe in God. They may even say things bad about God and bad about the Bible and bad about Christians. Let's all stay away from them."

Paul says you're under obligation to them, not because they're good, not because they're nice, not because they read their Bibles, but because they don't have the gospel. The only ones who are going to bring them the gospel are the church, the body of Christ, the body of believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. If we do not bring the gospel, how will it come to them?

Don't get the impression that Paul is being compelled to do this but he wouldn't otherwise. We could initially look at this and think Paul is like the young person among us (I won't name any names or ask any hands to be raised) who only eats their vegetables at dinner because they know they have to do that to get dessert. You'll do it. You're not happy about it. You don't like to do it. You might have to choke them down, but you're going to do it to get what you want.

That's not how Paul is operating. Actually, what Paul says is "I am eager to preach the gospel." He says, "This obligation has been laid on me and so, as a result of this obligation, I am eager to preach the gospel." Look at Paul's language. He has an obligation and that results in eagerness. This is more than mere lip service. The word Paul uses here to mean eager encompasses the idea of being ready to do something. Not just *willing* but being *ready*...ready in the sense of being prepared, ready to serve.

Paul is not just making a wish. "You know, if maybe sometime I accidentally bumped up against a Greek or a barbarian, yeah, I suppose I would share the gospel with them." No, what Paul is saying in our terms is, "I'm eager to preach the gospel, so I'm memorizing Scripture. I'm anticipating arguments they will use to try to refute the truth of the gospel. I'm trying to understand my Bible better. I'm praying more. I'm seeking guidance from the Spirit. I am ready and eager to take the gospel."

Paul is telling us we must follow him in his eagerness to preach the gospel. Why? Is it because the gospel saves people? Yes, but more than that. Is it because we want to see the church grow and flourish? Yes, but more than that. The gospel proclaims the glory and majesty of Jesus, and we want his name to be spread from shore to shore. We want everyone to know Jesus is worthy.

The church is a place where God brings his people together so they will grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, so they will spread the good news of who Jesus is and what he has done. *This* is why there is the church.