

The Heart of a Servant: 5 Essentials for Effective Gospel Ministry

Eric C. Coher

Romans 1:8-15

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. Romans 1:8–15

1. THE HEART OF A SERVANT IS THANKFUL FOR VISIBLE EXPRESSIONS OF GOD'S GRACE. (v.8)

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. Romans 1:8

It is undeniable as you read through the New Testament, of which Paul penned about 50%, that Paul considered himself in every way to be a servant of Christ. From the day of his conversion on the Damascus road Paul referred to Christ as his Lord and Master (Acts 9:5), and subsequently he referred to himself as a servant of Christ (Gal. 1:10, Phil. 1:1, Tit. 1:1), a minister of Christ (Rom. 15:16), a good soldier for Christ (2 Tim. 2:3), and a prisoner for Christ (Eph. 3:1, Philemon 1). This is an expression that we know had both literal and figurative realities. Paul's view of himself as a servant had a significant impact on his view God, on his view of himself in relation to God, and on his view of the calling that he had been given by God to preach the gospel.

The first thing that I want us to notice this morning in verse 8 about the heart of a servant is Paul's thankfulness. Paul leads our text this morning, before he says anything else, expressing his thankfulness to God. He even labeled this as of "first" importance. I want to consider thankfulness in broad strokes for a moment before we hone in on exactly what it was that Paul was thankful for in this text. Most of us, if we are honest, struggle more often than not to possess a thankful heart. When our circumstances are favorable we tend to be grateful and thankful, but when our circumstances are less than desirable, we oftentimes tend to grumble and complain.

I can't help but think that there were a lot of circumstances in Paul's life that assuredly would have looked dramatically different if he could have planned them himself. In other words, if Paul could have sat down and written the itinerary of his life, it probably would not have included being arrested and imprisoned multiple times, trying to minister to the churches under his care from a jail cell by letter, being mocked (Acts 17:32), being beaten, being shipwrecked (Acts 27), being bitten by a poisonous snake, and finally being martyred. Paul outlined some of his sufferings as a servant of Christ and a minister of the gospel in 2 Corinthians 11:23-27 saying:

[I have endured] far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. 2 Corinthians 11:23–27

Those aren't the types of life circumstances that are desirable to anyone. Some of us might have even bailed out somewhere along the line thinking, "I didn't sign up for this." When any given set of circumstance come to pass in our lives we have the opportunity to either trust the good providence of God and therefore be thankful, or to play the victim card and be discontent, frustrated, and embittered. For Paul, suffering was synonymous with what it meant to be a servant. That was the model that he had seen exemplified in the life of Christ. Remember Jesus said, "Even as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28).

Being a servant of Christ, provided Paul a window through which to see the magnificent grace of God. And when Paul saw evidences of God's grace in His life or in the lives of others, he was profoundly and overwhelmingly thankful. You see, the more you realize what you don't deserve, the more thankful you will be for every grace of God in your life. Some of God's richest graces, come in the times of the most difficult circumstances.

Paul expressed his thankfulness to God for what he was doing in his own life, in the lives of others, and for the advancement of the gospel in almost every letter he penned. Gratitude for God's work of grace both in his life and the lives of others was one of Paul's defining characteristics. I want you to hear this theme of thankfulness that weaves its way through Paul's writing and serves as the resounding motivation for his life in ministry:

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. Romans 1:8

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus. 1 Corinthians 1:4

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. 2 Corinthians 2:14

For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. Ephesians 1:15–16

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy. Philippians 1:3–4

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints. Colossians 1:3–4

We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3

I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service. 1 Timothy 1:12

I thank God whom I serve, as did my ancestors, with a clear conscience, as I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. 2 Timothy 1:3

I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers. Philemon 1:4

John Calvin, speaking about our need for thankful hearts said:

It is needful [that we] become accustomed to such forms of speaking (thankfulness), that we may be led more fully to rouse ourselves in the duty of acknowledging God as the giver of all our blessings, and to stir up others to join us in the same acknowledgment. If it be right to do this in little things, how much more with regard to faith; Which is neither a small nor an indiscriminate (promiscua) gift of God.¹

¹ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries (Complete)*, trans. John King, Accordance electronic ed. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847), n.p.

The second thing that I want to draw out of the text, that might be easily missed, is Paul's use of the personal pronoun "my" God. This little word is the fruit of the gospel! Here is what I mean by that: Apart from Christ's substitutionary death on the cross, we stand condemned in our sin and at enmity with God. But Paul reminds us that God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, [He] made us alive together with Christ (Eph. 2:4–5).

The moment that a person comes to faith in Christ, God becomes to them a Father. Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 6:16 that God will "make [His] dwelling among [us] and walk among [us], and [He] will be [our] God, and [we] shall be [His] people." It is the privilege of every born again, regenerate believer to refer to God as being "my" God. Paul's use of the personal pronoun "my" gives us a glimpse into the intimacy with God that he enjoyed as a servant of Christ. Paul wasn't satisfied with mere knowledge about God; he wasn't satisfied with a wealth of theological understanding; he wanted to know God – personally and intimately.

God made us to know him! Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, just hours before his crucifixion, "And this is eternal life, that they might know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (Jn. 17:3). Paul longed to know Christ more than anything else in the world. He would have gladly resigned every earthy accolade, every earthly accomplishment, and every earthly possession to know Christ more intimately. This truth spills out of Paul's heart in Philippians 3:7-10:

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death. Philippians 3:7–10

J.I. Packer in his book "Knowing God" has done an excellent job of distilling what it means and looks like to know God intimately. I would encourage you, if you haven't, to read at least the first 6 chapters (65 pages) of this paradigm-shifting book. As I reread the first few chapters this week, I was freshly reminded of four truths that Packer distills about people who know their God. He says that those who know their God:

1. *Have great energy for God.*
2. *Have great thoughts of God.*
3. *Show great boldness for God.*
4. *Have great contentment in God.*²

² J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 27-31.

The last observation that I want to make about verse 8 is the specific reason for Paul's thankfulness. Paul is thanking God that the faith of the believers in Rome had been proclaimed in all the world. In other words, word had gotten out that God was working. Now, you need to know that Paul was using hyperbole here when he wrote "in all the world." Rome was considered to be the center of the world at least as far as its reach of influence was concerned. And so what Paul is saying here is that your faith is being proclaimed (celebrated) throughout the Roman Empire. This is significant because Rome was well known for its rampant wickedness.

As a geopolitical region, Rome was incredibly hostile to the gospel. To say that Rome was a difficult place for Christians to live in the first century is probably a massive understatement. Christians were widely persecuted in Rome for their faith in Christ. But as we look back through the history of the Church it's evident that when persecution has been the toughest, the Church, by God's grace, has been the healthiest – in terms of its purity and influence. And for this display of God's divine mercy in the church at Rome, Paul found great reason to rejoice and be thankful. John MacArthur, speaking about Paul's servant heart, said:

A thankful heart for those to whom one ministers is essential to true spiritual service. The Christian who is trying to serve God's people, however needy they may be, without gratitude in his heart for what the Lord has done for them will find his service lacking joy. Paul could usually find a cause for thanks so that he could honor the Lord for what had been done already and hope for what God would use him to do. Paul had a thankful heart because he continually focused on what God was doing in his own life, in the lives of other faithful believers, and in the advancement of His kingdom throughout the world.³

Let me ask you two questions in regard to this verse before we move on: 1. What displays of God's grace have you been thanking God for (both in your life and the lives of others)? Is thankfulness a defining characteristic of your life? If not, it is not because your circumstances are less than desirable, it's because your view of God is too low. 2. Is your faith being noticed by others? Has anyone heard your testimony? If your life doesn't make others talk, something is wrong.

2. THE HEART OF A SERVANT IS FERVENTLY PRAYERFUL. (vs.9-10)

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. Romans 1:9-10

The second characteristic of a servant's heart is that of prayerfulness. Paul has communicated how thankful he is for the display of God's grace in the believers lives in Rome, and now he

³ John MacArthur, *Romans 1-8, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*. Accordance electronic ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 36.

wants them to know that he has been praying for them – praying that if it is God’s will, he might be able to come and spend time with them. Paul was a laborer. Remember in Matthew 9:37 Jesus told his disciples that the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. And then in verse 38 He told them to, “Pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” Paul prayed for the harvest, but he also went into the harvest preaching the gospel. He labored for the sake of the elect (2 Tim. 2:10), but he also labored in the community of believers. In his letter to the Colossians he wrote, “Him [Christ] we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil...” (Col. 1:28-29). Paul labored both in prayer and in service for the sake of the gospel.

One thing is certainly clear here and that is that Paul loved the Church – not the institution, but the body of believers. Though he had never been to Rome, he didn’t plant the church there, and the believers there are not the direct fruit of his evangelistic ministry, Paul deeply desired their fellowship and their edification in the truth. He didn’t know them personally in any way, but as fellow members of the body of Christ, as fellow brothers and sisters in the gospel, Paul’s heart burned to be with them.

God often times places a burden or desire on your heart for the things that you pray for. I don’t think that Paul’s prayerfulness for the believers in Rome stemmed so much from the fact that he wanted to be with them as much as his desire to be with them stemmed from his prayerful heart for them. Have you noticed that? When you begin to pray for a person, God often accompanies that prayer with a greater love for that person. I challenge you to begin praying specifically for a non-believer, or a fellow brother or sister that might be able to use your mentoring in the Christian life, or a country on the other side of the globe that needs the gospel and then see what kind of love God places in your heart for the people you pray for!

Look for a moment at how Paul’s prayer isn’t just fervent “without ceasing I mention you always in my prayer,” but it is also tempered by the will of God “asking that somehow by God’s will I may at last succeed in coming to you”. Paul trusted that as much as he desired to visit the believers in Rome, God’s timing was better – and sometimes God says, “Wait.” You may have heard the old story of the little boy who prayed for a new bicycle for Christmas. This young boy belonged to a family that had very little means. It was no surprise that when Christmas morning came, there was no bicycle awaiting him. A friend of the family noticed and brashly said, “I see that God didn’t answer your prayer for a new bicycle.” To which the young boy replied, “Yes, He did; He said no.” God, in His wisdom, uses unanswered prayer to teach us:

1. That we are not as necessary to the work we are praying for as we think we are. 2. That God may have other work for us to do.⁴

⁴ James Montgomery Boice, *Romans 1-4, Justification by Faith*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 87-88.

Charles Spurgeon, in his commentary on Psalm 130:2, gives us some wonderful wisdom concerning God's will and our prayers. In Psalm 130:2 the Psalmist said, "O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy!" To which Spurgeon says:

If the Lord will but hear us we will leave it to His superior wisdom to decide whether He will answer us or no. It is better for our prayer to be heard than answered. If the Lord were to make an absolute promise to answer all our requests it might be rather a curse than a blessing, for it would be casting the responsibility of our lives upon ourselves, and we should be placed in a very anxious position: But now the Lord hears our desires, and that is enough; we only wish Him to grant them if His infinite wisdom sees that it would be for our good and for His glory.⁵

Who are you consistently praying for? And how do you respond when God, in His wisdom, puts a hold on what you are praying for? Remember Jesus' words as He taught His disciples to pray. He said, "Pray then like this: Our Father in heaven hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:9-10). Sometimes we make the mistake of trying to determine whether or not something is God's will without first laboring in prayer for an extended period of time.

3. THE HEART OF A SERVANT IS SELF-SACRIFICING FOR THE BENEFIT OF OTHERS. (vs.11-12)

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. Romans 1:11-12

Paul's desire to visit the church in Rome was to impart to them a spiritual gift that they might be strengthened in their faith. Now, it is necessary to define what Paul means here when he talks about imparting a spiritual gift. Here is what we know for sure. Paul is not talking about the gifting that God gives every believer at his or her conversion (Rom. 12:6-8). Rather, Paul is talking about teaching the sound doctrine of the word that the believers in Rome might "grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ" (Eph. 4:15). 1 Peter 2:2 says, "Like newborn infants, long (crave) for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation.

I like the way the NASB translates the Greek word *στηρίζω* (sterizo) as "established." Paul understood that conversion isn't an end - it's a beginning. New believers don't usually come to faith in Christ with a clear understanding of the doctrines of the Word and their implications. They must be taught, strengthened, established. For that reason, Paul prayed for the Ephesians:

That [God] according to the riches of his glory may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith— that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ

⁵ Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David, Psalms 111-150*. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1988), 119.

that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Ephesians 3:16–19

But Paul didn't just pray for those to whom he ministered - though that is of first importance (Ps. 127:1-2). He also got in the trenches and lived life alongside those he sought to establish. Paul also knew that he wasn't just a giver, but he was also a receiver. In other words, he wasn't beyond being challenged and edified by the believers in Rome. Paul was an Apostle, but he was also a man – created to live in a community of believers and to be mutually encouraged in the gospel. He wrote to the Corinthians, "I do it all [ministry] for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings" (1 Cor. 9:23).

What Paul is describing in this text is the essence of discipleship. One believer coming alongside another believer to help him or her grow in their walk with Christ and to help them be established and strengthened in the faith. Young believers have to be established. Not imparting sound doctrine to young believers is like bringing a new baby home from the hospital, giving them nothing but the checkbook, and saying, "Let me know if you need anything..." Martyn Lloyd Jones sums up the travesty of unestablished believers when he says:

How often has it happened that a glorious work of God in conversion has later been spoiled, not in a final sense, but with regard to its testimony value, because the people have not been established. And the world looks on and smiles, and says, "How wonderful it seemed! Look at it now! Is that your Christ?" And so the name of Christ comes into disrepute. The greatest testimony to the truth of the gospel of Christ is to be found in Christian people living the life – "Living epistles".⁶

And for that they need to be established. Who are you helping to establish? Many of us who have been personally poured into in our past by some faithful believer live life like a reservoir and not like a channel. Don't assume that because a person has been converted for 5, 10, 15, 20 years that they do not need to be established / discipled. Let me suggest that every one of you who is a believer pray for the opportunity to impart spiritual truth to someone else!

4. THE HEART OF A SERVANT IS BURDENED FOR THE MATURITY OF BELIEVERS AND BROKEN OVER THE ETERNITY OF THE LOST. (vs.13-14)

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. Romans 1:13-14

Paul here reiterates his long-burning desire to visit the growing church in Rome. It is interesting to note from this text that Paul knew that his inability to travel to Rome was according to the

⁶ D. Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Romans 1, The Gospel of God*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 185.

providence of God. Notice that he says that “I have thus far been prevented. Prevented by what? Prevented by the sovereign hand of God. Paul goes on to say that that he has been prevented “in order that he might reap a harvest” (obtain spiritual fruit) in Rome. So God, in His sovereignty, prevented Paul from traveling to Rome until He was ready to bring in a spiritual harvest.

What do we learn from a verse like this? We learn that God’s timing is best. Paul didn’t try and get “ahead” of God even though if it had been his choice, he probably would have traveled to Rome sooner. He trusted that God’s wisdom was better than his human understanding (Pr. 3:5). God had wonderful plans for how He was going to use Paul’s ministry in Rome, and He sent him at just the right time!

Notice that Paul says that he is under obligation both to the Greeks and the barbarians, both the wise and the foolish. What does he mean here? Paul is referring to the social class of his day. The Greeks were thought to represent the upper echelon of society. They were the “educated, refined, and distinguished” class. Barbarians on the other hand referred to everyone who was not of Greek descent. So you either fell into one of two categories – you were a Greek or you were a barbarian. But for Paul, the gospel knew no boundaries. The gospel was not a message for the elite, the gospel was a message for all men everywhere. God is calling all men everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30).

Look at what Paul says about himself in relation to the people to whom he ministered. Paul says that he was under “obligation.” You might have a version that translates this word as “debtor.” Paul uses similar language in 1 Corinthians 9:16 when he says, “For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For a necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” On what basis is Paul obligated or a debtor to all men? I think there are three reasons that Paul would make such a statement about his ministry: 1. God had reconciled Paul to Himself and gave him the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18). 2. Paul was called by God to minister to the Gentiles. 3. Paul possessed the truth of the gospel, which all men desperately need. If a house is on fire with people inside and you are in a position to do something about it – you have an obligation to do whatever is necessary to help save them.

You are under obligation to preach the gospel! If you have been converted, you have been made a minister of the message of reconciliation. Remember what Jesus said when he called his first disciples in Matthew 4:19? He said, “Come follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Here is the reality... If you are not fishing, you are not following.

5. THE HEART OF A SERVANT IS EAGER TO PREACH THE GOSPEL. (v.15)

So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. Romans 1:15

Why would Paul preach the gospel to people who were already Christians? The reason is that for Paul, “the gospel” was not just a call to initial saving faith but also a call to continue in a daily

walk of faith. The gospel is the one essential message for both the lost and the “found.” Paul explained this need for the gospel to be preached to believers in Colossians 2:6-8:

Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. Colossians 2:6–8

I think of those challenging words that Paul penned in his letter to the Philippians when he was torn as to his desire to depart and be with Christ or to live and continue in ministry. He said:

For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith. Philippians 1:21–25

Paul was ready to preach the gospel at all times. He had an eagerness. Do you? He was “always prepared to make a defense to anyone who [asked] for a reason for the hope that [was in him] (1 Pt. 3:15).

Paul was ready to preach the gospel at Rome. When he preached it at Jerusalem, the religious center of the world, he was mobbed. When he preached it at Athens, the intellectual center of the world, he was mocked. When he preached it at Rome, the legislative center of the world, he was martyred. He was ready for that.⁷

What makes a man or woman live with this readiness to preach the gospel? Paul’s heart had been utterly arrested by the love of Christ. He understood that his life was not his own - he had been bought with a price (1 Cor. 6:20). I am reminded of those three little words in Psalm 116:6 “He saved me!” Jesus had miraculously saved Paul and brought his dead heart to life. He knew that one day he would have to give account for the ministry that had been entrusted to him. He wrote of the life changing effects of Christ’s arresting love in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15:

For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. 2 Corinthians 5:14–15

Christ’s servant is thankful for visible expressions of God’s grace, fervently prayerful, self-sacrificing for the benefit of others, burdened for the maturity of believers, broken over the eternity of the lost, and eager to preach the gospel.

⁷ John Phillips, *Exploring Romans*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), 19.