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# FIVE MARKS

of *Fruitful Churches*  
"Gospel Driven"

Romans 15:14-21  January 8, 2017

It is good to be together on this winter California morning. The sky is as pretty as it gets in Southern California.

We are going to be in Romans Chapter 15. Please join me there as we begin a venture into the final segment of the book of Romans. We have been studying this amazing epistle for over two years. This morning we turn the page into Paul's closing comments. The section contained in Chapter 15:14 – 16:27 is very, very personal in nature.

Here Paul laid out his heart with us. He shared his hopes and his plans and his desires as an apostle and as a missionary. What I have recognized and hope we all will recognize in what Paul wrote, is that these qualities of fruitfulness in the Christian begin to emerge from these passages of Scripture.

Fruitfulness is one of the great New Testament illustrations for spiritual health and life. The fruitfulness of the Christian life comes out in the character qualities that the Holy Spirit produces in us. It comes out in the form of service to influence others for Jesus Christ. These are the things that make up fruitfulness in the Christian life. I think we will see what leads to fruitful living for the Christian throughout this portion of Scripture.

We are going to take this section in five parts over the next five weeks. Here is what I have identified as I have read over this section several times. Fruitful churches are Gospel driven. They are mutually supportive of one another in their generosity and prayer. Fruitful churches are hard working. They are made up of people who diligently serve the Lord. I think we will see this as we get into Chapter 16.

Then in addition to that, fruitful churches are deeply discerning. They know that when it comes to teaching about the things that are in Scripture, not everything that glitters is gold. There are distortions to be aware of. Finally, fruitful churches are focused on the Lord. Their eyes are on God. They are zeroed in and paying attention to God and His glory in all of His grace and majesty. That is the map that is ahead of us for the next five weeks.

This morning we are going to pay attention to the fact that fruitful Christians are Gospel driven. They are made up of people who want to see the Good News get out to those who need to hear it. We are going to see this Gospel driven tenacity in the example of the Apostle Paul himself. As he wrote these personal reflections, he presented himself as a priest who wanted to offer up a harvest of Gentiles who had come to Christ.

Let's read through this section of Scripture and see the way that Paul had a yearning heart to get the Gospel out. Romans Chapter 15 and Verses 14-21:

**<sup>14</sup>I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another. <sup>15</sup>But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God <sup>16</sup>to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. <sup>17</sup>In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God. <sup>18</sup>For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience – by word and deed, <sup>19</sup>by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God – so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ; <sup>20</sup>and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation, <sup>21</sup>but as it is written,**

**“Those who have never been told of him will see,  
and those who have never heard will understand**

In those words, we see Paul yearning that the Gospel go forth to those who had never heard about the Messiah, so that they might see and understand. He wanted to get it to those who have never received the message, so that they might understand.

Did you see that language of Paul? It is almost like he pictured himself as a Jewish priest at Pentecost, offering up the first fruits of the harvest to the Lord. But his harvest is of Gentile believers that the Spirit of God brought in through him as he proclaimed the Gospel. He was a man driven to spread the Gospel. I pray that his example will influence us, that we may have that same tenacity.

This week here at Bethel Grace we had two memorial services. They were occasions of worship as we remembered two dear sisters in the Lord, Louise Novak and Mary Farguson. Both of them were 98 years old. They lived almost the same number of days here on this earth.

I have been thinking about these two women, gathering close to family members and hearing from others about their lives and legacies. Louise and Mary were women serious about Jesus and His Good News. They influenced so many people for Christ. That is motivating. What is your legacy going to be from the years you have to serve Jesus?

They both passed into the presence of the Lord at 98 years old. I started wondering how old I am going to be when I die physically. I'm not sure that I really want to know, but sometimes I wonder. If I make it to 98, wow! But I kind of doubt that I will. I think very few approach the century mark. On average a person has about 80 years that they can expect on this earth.

It would not be too shabby to have 80 healthy years. Then I started thinking that I am 43. If you add it up, that puts me over the hill! But where did those 43 years go? They went by so fast, and those of you who have a decade or two on me, think, “Wait until you get into your 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> decade.” It keeps increasing in momentum, and the years keep flying by. I wonder if any of us have that sense of the temporary nature of this phase of our existence.

I’m a man born again into the Kingdom of Jesus. I think that most of you here are people born again. We are going to enter into eternity, so we do have a long, long, long, long, long time to live. But how many years are we going to have to reach people with the saving message of Jesus Christ while they can be saved? These are the years for evangelism before Jesus comes back and splits the skies with His glory like we sang about this morning.

Now is our time of opportunity to reach people with the Gospel. I pray that something of the Spirit that was upon Paul would be manifested upon us and within us. I pray that mantle would cover us, that we would desire with greater fervency to be more outspoken with the Good News of the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

Fruitful churches are Gospel driven. Productive, prolific churches spiritually do not marginalize that good news that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. They understand that that message is the one message, that it is the power of God for salvation to all who believe, Jew and Gentile.

They know that it is by that Good News of the death of Jesus on the cross and His resurrection from the grave that sin is cleansed and that people are reconciled to the Lord God. They recognize that it is this message that transforms lives, and that it triggers newness of life. It makes it so that the spiritually dead rises up to new and everlasting life.

I pray that the Spirit would fill us with this. I pray that we come in here and get fired up for the Lord, and that the preacher gets fired up too. But do you know what happens when we step out that door? The drift immediately begins. We get lazy. It is one thing to have our hearts filled in here, but will you pray with me that the Lord will fill our hearts with renewed fervency tomorrow morning and all through the week? Humbly I pray that the Lord does that in me, and within all of us, so that we might be spiritually fruitful as a church.

As we take a closer look at what is in our portion of Scripture this morning, we are going to see that fruitful churches are Gospel driven. For our encouragement to be a Gospel driven church, I want to take a closer look at the paragraph that we just read, where I think we are going to see a couple of things. First, we are going to see what the Gospel does. Then we are going to see where the Gospel goes.

So, we are going to see how the Gospel transforms lives. This is what the Gospel does. Then we are going to see that the Gospel is to be spread out to all sinners throughout the earth. That is where the Gospel goes. Let's take a closer look.

To encourage fruitfulness as a Gospel driven church, let's see:

## 1. What the Gospel does (14-16)

First, let's see what the Gospel does as evidenced in the lives of the Roman believers. Did you catch that in what Paul said in Verse 14? Look at what he said.

**<sup>14</sup>I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another.**

Did you just see what Paul said about the Christians in Rome? He just said, "I am satisfied that you are full of goodness." Isn't that amazing? Have you forgotten what Paul said about the fallenness and the depravity of all humanity apart from Jesus Christ, as he described them way back in Romans Chapter 3 and Verses 10-12? He said:

**<sup>10</sup>as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one;**

**<sup>11</sup>no one understands; no one seeks for God.**

**<sup>12</sup>All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."**

That was his testimony about humanity and its fallenness, and now Paul told the Roman church that they were full of goodness. There had been a change in the believing people there in the city of Rome, and really wherever believers are gathered. The Holy Spirit comes and He starts producing the fruit of goodness in their lives, along with other fruits.

So, we see what the Gospel does. It changes people. It transforms people. We see that the Holy Spirit was leading these Roman believers, both Jew and Gentile, away from moral and relational impurity. Instead, He was moving them into the holiness and goodness of life. The Spirit was taking away the tendency that people have to use other people for their good. He was filling them up with more of a desire to bless and benefit other people. There was this goodness that was starting to truly characterize these believers in Rome. So, we see what the Gospel does.

But, that is not all what Paul had to say about was happening there among those believers. He also said, "You are full of goodness, and filled with all knowledge." These people were studying the Scriptures. They were in the Word. These people were putting some life-giving doctrine into their minds and hearts. Those Gentiles who had formally been polytheistic and worshiping false deities, were coming to understand the One True Triune Living God.

These Jews that had been so legalistic and rule oriented in their approach to gaining God's favor were coming to understand that their standing before God was first by grace. They came to understand that they were received by grace, then God began giving them hearts to live out the Law of the Lord.

They were filled with knowledge. They were learning doctrine. They were learning the Word. They were understanding by the teaching of Scripture what comprises a life as God designed it to be live. So, Paul said they were full of goodness, and they were full of knowledge. Then what was the byproduct of that? They were able to instruct one another. They were able to build each other up in the truths of God. What an amazing transformation took place there!

So, Paul had a vision that the people in Rome would be building one another up in the Word of God. Their hearts were being filled with goodness toward one another. They were growing in their knowledge so that they could speak truths into each other's lives that was real and not be misrepresenting the Lord by giving their own opinions. Instead, they were filled with goodness and knowledge, building each other up.

We need to factor in this verse and verses like it if we are going to have the full and clear picture of the vision of the ministry of the Word of God in a local church. There is preaching. There is teaching. There are individuals getting into the Word by themselves. You better believe that if a church is operating on all cylinders, the people throughout the church are going to be in the Word themselves and, like sponges, taking it in and then blessing others by sharing what they have been learning in the Word of God. It is the ministry of the many. We see this all throughout the pages of Scripture.

We desire to see ministries like our Home Fellowship Groups, where people are studying the Scriptures themselves and speaking it into each other's lives. We want to see those types of groups increasing here at Bethel Grace. Verse 14 is one of the verses that gives the vision for such a ministry. There are others like it. You can read about them in the study questions for this morning's message.

We see that this kind of transformation and the Good News that Jesus saves sinners and makes them clean was triggered by the Gospel. But we have more to see about what the Gospel does in Verse 15 as evidenced in the lives of the Roman believers, but we also see what the Gospel does as evidenced in the life of the Apostle Paul who wrote this text.

Think about how he was transformed by the Good News of Jesus. In Verses 15 and 16, Paul said this:

**<sup>15</sup>But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God <sup>16</sup>to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.**

Do you see Paul speaking these gracious and loving words in relation to seeing this harvest of Gentiles? This was Saul of Tarsus. This was a man who had previously in his old life terrorized the Church of God. This was a man who was a Pharisee. This was a man who had looked down upon Gentiles as subclass human beings, but then he had such love in his heart, given this ministry by Jesus to go and bring them into the Kingdom. This was a man transformed by grace. This was man living in newness of life.

There in the Apostle Paul, we also see what the Gospel does. There are two pictures of transformation here. I pray that this would give us a vision in our hearts of what God can do in the people that we know so that we will be Gospel driven people, and that we will maintain that hope that God does transform lives.

I started thinking about people of Bethel Grace. I'm not going to name drop right now, but I started thinking about transformation, the old life and the new life. One brother who was kind of living the thug life in his former days is one of the most gracious men you will ever meet now. I was also thinking about some who use to live to get high. Now they are longing for the Spirit of God to fill their lives. They now want something new and better. I think about people whose internet browsing history is being cleaned up, because God is changing their hearts and their desires.

That is not to say that Christian still don't battle against sin and those old tendencies. We still have those battles, but that inner inclination gets transformed from having the top desire for one thing to desire the things of the Lord. There is transformation that takes place.

I Corinthians 5:17:

**<sup>17</sup>Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.**

This is what the Gospel does, and we need to get this into our hearts that we might be motivated as a Gospel driven church. To be encouraged in our fruitfulness as a church, we got to understand what the Gospel does. But we also need to understand:

## **2. Where the Gospel goes (17-21; 24)**

I think that is laid out for us in this portion of Scripture as well. We see it here as we read of Paul reflecting on his ministry of missions and evangelism. As we move forward into the next verses, Paul boasted a little bit, not about what he had done, but about what Christ had done through him. He talked about some of his former areas of evangelism and ministry, where he had gone and preached the Gospel. He talked about where he was yearning to go in the future.

Take a look at what it says in Romans Chapter 15 and Verses 17-21:

**<sup>17</sup>In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God. <sup>18</sup>For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience – by word and deed, <sup>19</sup>by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God – so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ; <sup>20</sup>and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else’s foundation, <sup>21</sup>but as it is written,**

**“Those who have never been told of him will see,  
and those who have never heard will understand**

Then look at Verse 24. Here is where Paul wanted to go.

**<sup>24</sup>I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while.**

Paul was talking about where he had been with the Gospel, and where he wanted to go. Based upon what Paul had said here, and based on what we read about him in the New Testament, he viewed Judea as ground zero where he was first active with the Gospel.

On his missionary journeys, Paul went from Jerusalem into Syria where Antioch was, then up to Galatia, Cappadocia, Lystra, and Derbe, where he met young Timothy. Then he went into Asia where Ephesus was, all the way around through Macedonia to the Philippians and Thessalonians, and down to Achaia where Athens and Corinth were. He said here that he even made it all the way up into Illyricum which is modern day Albania

That’s where Paul had been. He was taking the Gospel to all these places. I expected Paul to start singing some Johnny Cash,

I’ve been everywhere, man.  
I’ve been everywhere, man.  
Crossed the desert’s bare, man.  
I’ve breathed the mountain air, man.  
Of travel I’ve had my share, man.  
I’ve been everywhere.

Instead of saying that he had his share of traveling, Paul said no, here is what is next. He was writing from Achaia there in Corinth. He wanted to go to Judea, back to Jerusalem to help the improvised Christian saints. Then he wanted to go back to Italy where Rome is. He wanted to spend some time there with the Roman believers. He had not been there yet. He expected them to be his foundation, his mission center, so they could send him where he wanted to go next. That was to Spain.

That’s what Paul wanted to do. He wanted to get the Gospel out! But what it boiled down to for Paul was this: I think his desire was driven less by geography and more by



what we read as he quotes Scripture in Verse 21. He wanted to get the Gospel to those who had never been told. He wanted to get the Gospel to those who had never heard. That is what was filling Paul's heart.

To be prolific and fruitful as individuals and collectively as a church, may we be renewing ourselves in this prayer: *Lord, fill my heart with who You want to send me to be. God, You're a sending God. Will You send me to people who You want me to influence for Christ with the Good News the Gospel?*

Have you been praying that way? I need to be praying that way on a daily basis. Together we need to be praying that we be fruitful with a harvest of Gospel ministry. That is the desire here. So, for some of us the Lord may stir us up and send us afar, for a short period or for an elongated period.

There are some who will go to distant places to tell people about Jesus, and we have plenty of opportunities right here in Southern California to do the same. Understand, there are people far off and there are people close by who have not heard the Gospel message.

A friend of mine by the name of Andrew Callaway was serving as a pastor here at Bethel Grace some years ago. I remember one time when his family celebrated Thanksgiving Day on another day, and he had that day free. On that Thanksgiving Day, he just decided that he would go out and bless somebody in Jesus Name.

So, he got in his car and he started driving toward Second Street in Long Beach. He was asking the Lord to bless and guide him. Finally, he saw a man who looked kind of down on his luck, possibly a man who was homeless. Andrew parked his car and approached this man, asking him if he could buy him dinner. The man said okay.

They went to a restaurant together and they had dinner. Toward the end of that meal, Andrew asked the man if he could read a verse from the Bible, and to explain to him what fills his heart. The man said that would be okay. So, Andrew read John 3:16 to that man. Then Andrew asked him if he had ever heard that verse before. That man said no, he had not!

Isn't that kind of eye opening? It affected Andrew so much that this man had never heard John 3:16. There are people around us who have not heard the hope of that central Gospel verse. May the Lord put it in our hearts to be a part of the missionary team, doing something about that.

Here in our area, demographers are identifying what they call The Rise of the Nones. By that, I am not talking about the Roman Catholic ladies with the vow of celibacy who wear black. Instead, it is the *Nones*. When surveys are filled out, more and more people are checking the box that says *none* when it comes to religious affiliation – that is The Rise of the Nones. There are more and more people around us who have not heard the basic explanation of what the Gospel is.

I pray that the Lord would ignite us and send us forth to help us be a part of the mission to do something about that. Will you pray with me that He does? Isn't that why He has us here? Aren't we here to glorify His Name in our lives, in our worship, and to tell the truth about Jesus Christ to others? O may He put it in our hearts, that we might be fruitful, and see new life coming to people.

Not only is there The Rise of the Nones, but we also must be careful to explain the Good News to people who do have religious affiliation, even in churches that identify themselves as Christian. The Gospel is so marginalized and watered down that you might have a person that considers himself Christian, but he might be part of a church that is so liberal and has drifted from Scripture so that even sitting in the pew, he does not hear the clear Gospel of Jesus Christ. That is a fact!

So, may the Lord stir our hearts to be more lose-tongued and joyful with this Good News that Jesus saves. Pray it. How are you doing praying for you SOIL, your sphere of influenced lives? God has placed you in the midst of people that you might influence for Christ. God has providentially located you in time, in history, and in geography.

He has you where He wants you. He might be stirring your heart to go other places too. But understand, He has you where you are right now as His agent. May the Lord renew our hearts for our SOILs that we might be evangelistically prolific.

Here in this text we have seen what the Gospel does. We have seen where the Gospel goes, but if you will pardon a surfing illustration, I have one more wave to ride from this passage of Scripture. We have something very interesting that is stated by the Apostle Paul here. I think that we might recognize the Apostle Paul as one the most prolific missionary evangelist of all time.

Here in this passage of Scripture, he gave this statement of how he discerned the power of God moving through him, using him, and how God empowered the Gospel in his ministry. Paul was very careful that he did not boast in himself, but could only talk about what Jesus was doing through him to bring in this harvest of Gentiles.

Then he gave a statement of how he discerned Christ empowering the Gospel. He spoke of three different aspects of it, one of which was unique to him and the apostles, two of which are very necessary and at work in our day and time as well. So, take another look at Verses 18 and 19. Paul said this:

**<sup>18</sup>For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience – by word and deed, <sup>19</sup>by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God – so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ;**

Christ accomplished Gospel ministry through Paul. According to those verses, he did so in three ways. First, Paul said it had been accomplished through him by word and deed.

By word: The Gospel is a message that must be communicated. There is a pithy statement that, in my humble opinion, is an incorrect statement. The statement says, *I preach the Gospel wherever I go, and if necessary I use words.* The Gospel is a message. It can be written words, verbalized words, it could be in braille, but it is a message. So, it comes with words that Jesus died for sinners on the cross as a substitute, and He rose on the third day.

The Gospel comes with words, but Paul also said that it comes with word and deed. Those who are going to be prolific and fruitful as Gospel agents in this world, they need to talk the talk and walk the walk. If we want maximum effectiveness being used by the Lord, we can't just walk the walk, we have to speak up. We just can't talk the talk, we have to show love and kindness and perform the good deeds of the Kingdom of God, which applies the Gospel message.

It is the Gospel that saves, but the good deeds of the Kingdom accompany the Gospel. That is why Paul said that it had been accomplished by words and deeds. He went and cared for people. The example that I gave from my friend Andrew, he bought a man dinner who was in need of food. There was a deed, but that deed did not go without words. He explained the Good News of John 3:16. This is an example of word and deed.

That is how the Gospel comes, and we see this written for us here. Paul said, "Christ has accomplished this through me by word and deed." Then he continued on and he said this in Verse 19, it is also:

**<sup>19</sup>by the power of signs and wonders...**

Does that mean that we who are evangelists are miracle workers, given the capacity to turn water to wine like Jesus did, or be able to cause the lame to leap like Peter did? Paul said that it happened through him with signs and wonders. He was talking about miracles.

This is what helps me to understand verses like this: We must understand that in redemptive history it seems that there were three periods that saw a flurry of miraculous signs. The first was that of the Exodus when God was pulling His people out of slavery in Egypt, and giving the Law at Sinai. God empowered Moses to perform amazing miracles.

A second period in redemptive history was the rise of the great prophets initiated by Elijah and Elisha. When you read about their lives, you will see that they were performing all kinds of miracles. Those miracles resembled the miracles of Jesus. They were so concentrated. There were so many of them taking place. Something was happening there. That seemed to be an authentication of Moses and his ministry and his

giving of the Law, and maybe something of an authentication of the prophets and their authority to speak through God was happening in those miracles.

The third period in redemptive history, where we saw this flurry of miraculous signs and wonders, was the rise of the Messianic Age, when King Jesus came into this world with divine power. Jesus came performing miracles. Then He also empowered His apostles, His spokesmen to perform the same miracles that He performed as they crystalized the Gospel message, and as they fulfilled His teaching ministry.

Jesus said to His disciples in the Upper Room, “I have so much more to say to you, more than you can now bear, but when the Spirit comes He is going to give you all the rest of My words.” That is the Jeff Saltzmann paraphrase. Jesus also authenticated these apostles with signs and wonders as they initiated the Gospel Age, and as they completed canon of New Testament Scripture.

That is why Paul could say through signs and wonders. It would be ludicrous for any of us to say that God is not performing miracles in the world now. I am not saying that He does not. God is clothed with power that is omnipotent. God created this world and everything that is in it, including the laws of thermodynamics, including the laws of science, and God has every right, authority, ability, and, when His will calls for it, interrupting those laws with displays of His divine power through miracles.

God can do miracles. We should call upon Him to do miracles, but, understand, there were these moments in redemptive history where there were flurries of authenticating miracles that took place. That is what Paul was speaking of in this passage. So, I don't want you not to pray for miracles to happen. But don't become totally and utterly perplexed and dumbfounded when you try to heal a blind person, and it does not happen like it did with the Apostle Paul.

Paul had the sense that the Lord was working through him by word and deed, by signs and wonders unique to the apostolic age, but also by the power of the Spirit of God. Look at one more aspect of this. Again, Verses 18 and 19:

**<sup>18</sup>For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience – by word and deed, <sup>19</sup>by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God...**

That is what we need to hold onto. When the Gospel goes forth, the Spirit is the One who works to bring dead sinners to life in Christ. The Spirit is the One who causes that message to enter into the heart with renewing power. The Holy Spirit is the One who activates the message in the lives of sinners. The Holy Spirit is at work today very, very powerfully raising the dead to newness of life.

I see about 180 people right in front of me that are evidence of this, people that are raised to life in Christ with spiritually dead hearts beating again. There are stories to be told

even here, and there will be stories to be told into the future as we follow the Lord Jesus Christ, preaching His Gospel message. May the Lord bless us that we may be fruitful in this way.

If you are here this morning and you are hearing the Good News about Jesus in a way that is affecting your heart for the first time, saying to yourself that you are a sinner in need of Jesus, and discern Him coming after you to bring you into the fold, put your trust in Jesus today. Humbly confess your sin to Him. Tell Him you turn from your sin to Him, and ask Him to be your Savior and Lord. If you do this, you will be born again. You will be brought into the everlasting Kingdom.

If that is in your heart, please talk to me after the service, or please go into the Prayer Room through the back doors to the right. We want to encourage you in your new life in Christ.

Let's pray together.

# FIVE MARKS

of *Fruitful Churches*  
"2 – Mutually Supportive"

Romans 15:22-33 ✨ January 15, 2017

We are going to be in Romans Chapter 15 this morning to see how fruitful churches are mutually supportive.

This week I heard the story about something that happened to a Jewish man back in the First Century. He was travelling that seventeen-mile stretch of road that connected Jerusalem and Jericho. He was brutally attacked by roadside thugs. It was not enough for them to rob him and to take his animals. It was also not enough to take what would have been his First Century luggage, something like a knapsack that was slung over his animal.

In addition to that, the robbers beat him severely, and to add insult to injury, they stripped him down and took his clothes, and left him there on the road. Things seemed to be looking up, however, when a priest came walking down that same road. He was walking from Jerusalem and going to Jericho. He had been in the City of Peace in the Holy City. Perhaps he was there in the Temple for some worship. Perhaps his heart had been recently refreshed, like a pastor spending some time at a pastor's conference.

As this priest walked upon that road he observed what had happened to this Jewish brother of his. He took it all in, and he altered his course. He walked around that man who was in so much need. He left him for the next person.

Perhaps it was going to get better for this man because also walking down that road was a Levite, a man from the tribe of Levi. The Levites were to be ministers to all twelve tribes of Israel. It boded well for that man when this Levite came walking down the road. Maybe he would give him the aide that he so desperately needed. But this Levite also took in the situation, and he walked around the man, altering his course to avoid contact and interaction with this man that was in such need.

Another person came walking down that road. This time it really did look like trouble for the Jewish brother who was hurting so badly, because it was a Samaritan who came traveling down the road. There was an ongoing bitterness and resentment, even hatred, between the Jewish people and the Samaritan people. So, here was a Samaritan man seeing a Jewish man totally vulnerable on the road. This Samaritan could do anything he wanted to do to that Jewish man. Heaven knows the Jews really looked down on the Samaritan people.

But as this man approached and understood what had happened, his stomach literally turned with compassion. He was moved by the scene of suffering that he saw. So, this Samaritan man gently approached that Jew. He did everything that he could do to clean his wounds and to disinfect him. He poured oil over him so their healing properties could have their effect. Not only that, he dignified this man by throwing a garment over him.

Then he lifted him up onto his animal, and he led this man to the closest inn that he could find. Finding that inn, he approached the inn keeper and gave him the equivalent of about two hundred dollars. He told the inn keeper that he wanted him to give the man room and board so that he could regain his strength. He also told him to provide whatever treatment the man needed, and that he would be back to pay for it all. That Samaritan man was concerned that he got all the care that he needed so he could recover.

So, we have the famous parable of the Good Samaritan. That is a story that was told by King Jesus, the Lord of grace and truth and mercy and love. That parable was told to illustrate the nature of the love of the Kingdom of God, the kind of love that will go out of its ways and make sacrifices for the person who is suffering and in need.

Here is the point: The closer people are to us, the more rapidly we are willing to act. What if it was your close friend or family member that had been beaten and was on that road? What would you do, and how would you respond? How rapid would you be in emergency-care mode, doing whatever it took to help that loved one recover? You would be right on it, right? I would be on it. It would be easy.

But in that parable, Jesus was answering a question about what love look like and who is the neighbor that we must love. Jesus is broadening our perspective of just who it is that we Christians and followers of Jesus should go out of our way to care for in their need. He wants us to love more than those that are just in our immediate sphere of care. He wants it to reach out beyond that. He wants us to love people we might not have even met before as we come to understand the needs that they have. This is the love of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ.

This morning I want to remind you that Christians are to be fruitful people. Churches are to be gatherings of fruitful Christians. What is the fruit of the Spirit first and foremost? The fruit of the Spirit is love. It is Agape, the willingness to roll up our sleeves and get our hands dirty by meeting people's needs and caring for them in their trouble. The fruit of the Spirit is love.

We need to pray that the Lord will do within us what is so unnatural to our flesh left to itself, and that is to seek its own interest. We need to pray that He would stir this love within us so we would have eyes to recognize the needs around us, that we might even go out of our way to help people. Fruitful Christian living is going out of our way to help people we don't even know. This is fruitful Christian living.

The Apostle Paul was a man filled with the Spirit of the Living God. By the Spirit, he was a man filled with love. He was given eyes to see the needs around him. He knew that those needs were diverse. There were spiritual needs, people dying without hearing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul knew that there were physical needs, people languishing in conditions of poverty. He knew that there were emotional and relational needs, people existing by themselves and not connected to others.

Paul knew the diversity of needs that are present in the human race. He was given eyes to see, and he was given love to provide, but the Apostle Paul came to understand that he could not meet all those needs all by himself. He was just one tool in the hands of God. He came to understand that as a man of God he needed to gather a team. He needed to pull some people together who would also be willing to love others by meeting their needs.

I think that is the spirit of what we are going to be reading in Romans Chapter 15. The whole church needed to be supportive of the efforts to meet spiritual needs through the Gospel, and to meet physical needs with the good deeds of the Kingdom that supplement the Good News of the Kingdom. Paul knew this and he was gathering people together.

After explaining to the Romans in his closing comments about all the traveling that he had done spreading the Gospel in the eastern portion of the Roman Empire, Paul shared some more of his plans. Notice with me that in the midst of the things he was talking about, he was pulling the Christian army together.

Let's see if we can identify this as we read through Romans Chapter 15 and Verses 22-33. Paul said:

**<sup>22</sup>This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you.**

He had been hindered from coming to them as he was out preaching the Gospel in virgin territories among people who have not heard. Verse 23:

**<sup>22</sup>This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. <sup>23</sup>But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, <sup>24</sup>I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while. <sup>25</sup>At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. <sup>26</sup>For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. <sup>27</sup>For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. <sup>28</sup>When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave Spain by way of you. <sup>29</sup>I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.**

**<sup>30</sup>I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, <sup>31</sup>that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, <sup>32</sup>so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. <sup>33</sup>May the God of peace be with you all. Amen.**



We read the longings of a man filled with the Spirit of the Living God. As I mentioned before reading this text, Paul was given eyes to see their needs. He had come to understand the spiritual needs far away in Spain. There were people there who had not heard the Gospel. Those were the kind of people that Paul wanted to get to. He wanted to meet their spiritual needs.

Not only that, he understood that there were also needs in the Holy City in Jerusalem. The saints were improvised. They had needs that needed to be met, so he had been trying to do something about that by gathering an offering. He had to go there first, then out to Spain.

Did you notice how Paul gathered people to help meet all those needs? He was not trying to do it all by himself. He told them that they were going to get him to Spain. He told them there were physical needs that had to be met in Jerusalem, and that Italians would get him to Spain. The Greeks in Macedonia and Achaia had been giving to meet those physical needs.

So, we see that Paul was bringing the Italian Christians to the effort. He had already brought the Greeks into the effort. If Paul had heard of some strange far off place called California with Christians who had resources and abilities, he would have been trying to get them on board as well.

The same Spirit that filled the Apostle Paul is working through the church today. The same Spirit wants to move the hearts of His people to meet needs in our time like he was doing back in his time as well. So, from this passage, I want us to reflect on a few ways that we Californians can be a part of meeting different kinds of needs.

May the Spirit bless. May the Spirit be at work. May the Spirit be doing the things that I simply cannot do, and that is to speak into our hearts in a fruitful way, so that we will be responsive to what we read in Scripture.

Looking at this passage of Scripture, I think we will see how we can be a part of helping meet the needs of others in one of three ways. First,

We can help meet the needs by...

### **1. Giving cheerfully (22-24; 28)**

That is the way that Christians are to give, is it not? God likes hilarious givers, happy-hearted givers. He said so in II Corinthians Chapter 9, "God loves a cheerful giver." He fills the Spirit-filled children of God with grace so that they have generous hands, and joy in giving.

If we want to be a part of helping meet the needs found on this earth, we got to be people who have giving hands, who have generosity. There are all kinds of different facets to what Christians give to, but the main ones are here in this passage of Scripture.

We give financially to help meet spiritual needs. We give financially to help physical and material needs. We see both of these in this portion of Scripture. First, we see this example of giving to meet spiritual needs by sending forth Gospel preachers, missionaries, and church planters.

Do you see it in Romans Chapter 15 and Verse 24? Paul said:

**<sup>24</sup>I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while.**

Paul said he wanted to get there, and they were going to help him to do it. Then in Verse 28:

**<sup>28</sup>When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave Spain by way of you.**

In Verse 24, Paul said that he wanted to be helped by them. The verb translated “help” is *propempe* in the Greek. Greek scholars who really dig into the history and how these words were used, they identify the fact that the early church was so involved and devoted to the global mission that that word took on a unique nuance among the early Christians. The equivalent of that word in our day is the word *send*.

When Paul used the word *propempe* when asking for help, he was asking the people to send him there. This term includes the idea of providing money and resources. For Paul that would have been food to fill the knapsack, perhaps sacks of grain to throw over his camel or donkey. Perhaps it included some maps that would have helped him stay on the right path. Maybe this would include a traveling companion who had been to Spain before.

This is a comprehensive idea of helping support an evangelist or a missionary so that they have everything they need to go get somewhere with the Good News of Jesus Christ. Paul was asking the Roman church to be his sending church. That is the essence of what is going on in this passage of Scripture.

When you study some of the history in the context of the book of Romans, you get the idea that Paul was a man who understood his time. He was watching nightly news. He knew what was going on in the world, because it was only in recent years that the Iberian Peninsula had been subjugated by Rome. Nero was in power when Paul wrote this. Prior to Nero was Claudius, and under Claudius the Romans went into that entire territory and captured it. Then they spread the *Pax Romana*, the Roman peace.

In addition to that, Rome was putting in cities and colonies. Paul knew that he was a Roman citizen and felt that the wild west had just opened up, and he wanted to get there. If you listen very carefully when reading this text, you can hear Paul saying to send him.

He would go, and he asked the Romans to provide those resources so that they could reach the west with the Gospel.

Likewise, in our day, some brothers and sisters will stay and edify the local church. Others will have a burning heart-desire to go and reach frontier lands with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, or places where the light of the truth of God seems to be dim without much Christian testimony. These people have a yearning to get there.

The Lay family are an example of this. Brad and Julie said they had to get Albania, and asked who would help them get there. Praise God, Bethel Grace stood up and said they would help them get there. Portugal needs to have the Kingdom represented there, so John and Dot Andrews asked us to help them get there. Praise God, we are on board to help them get there. Donovan and Heather Drew asked for help in getting to South Africa with the truth and mercy of Jesus. Praise God, we get to help them with that. We joined Amy Ravenscroft while she had been on the team for a while ministering in Japan.

When we give, we are giving that people might be reached with the one saving message that delivers people from Hell into the glory of Heaven through the forgiveness of sin and the creation of new life. That message is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We as followers of Jesus Christ, we need to be part of this mutually supportive team in helping people go out with the Good News. Some people will be sent far off. Some of them will be sent as church planters. I love the fact that our denomination, the Pacific Church Network, has this emphasis on starting new churches. That is a good thing!

There needs to be those who go out here and abroad to strengthen the body of Christ, and we need to be mutually supportive in this. They pray for us, and we pray for them. We support them. There is a collaborative effort. We see that part of our generosity goes toward advancing the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

This is one way in which Christians ought to be supporting the effort. We give to meet spiritual needs for the truth of God to be spread out. There is another way that we give cheerfully as well. We also give in order that tangible needs might be met as well. We give tangible expressions of love so that people can have their needs met when they are in conditions of poverty.

This is a part of Christian love. These are the good deeds of the Kingdom. This is what Paul was a part of in gathering this love offering for the impoverished Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. He spoke of it in Verses 25-27. Look at what Paul said there:

**<sup>25</sup>At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints.**

**<sup>26</sup>For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. <sup>27</sup>For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings.**

The saints in Jerusalem were Jews born anew in Christ. They were the true Jews – the physical line of Abraham – who had come to understand the Gospel. With their hearts burning, these Jews began to send out missionaries, along with the truth of Scripture. Paul was telling the Gentiles that it was befitting to help them out because they were suffering. They were even being ostracized for their faith. They were in need.

So, when Paul travelled to all of those Gentile territories, he asked them if they would be willing to give to their brothers and sisters in need in the Holy City of Jerusalem. What Paul found was that the Gentile Christians responded with robust generosity. There is repetitive language about Paul collecting this love offering from the Gentiles for the Jews throughout Paul's letters.

This passage tells us that the Macedonians, who were struggling themselves, gave with such cheer, even hilarity, because the grace of God was filling their hearts. As followers of Jesus Christ, not only do we give in order to get the Word out, but we give in order to alleviate the needs of those who are going without. There should be generosity for those who are without things that they need in the physical sense.

Have you ever noticed the irony of our use of money? It is very easy to spend, but it becomes more difficult to give. We are very willing to spend money we don't have to buy things that we don't necessarily need. But suddenly when it comes to giving to others for their good, we become very sensible about our budget. There is something in our flesh that resists that.

That rich section on Christian generosity found in II Corinthians 8 and 9 is plump full with the language of God's grace. They were generous because the ongoing grace of God was activating them with generosity toward those who were in need. Similarly, the language that Paul used in Romans 15 is that they were pleased to give. They wanted to give.

Have you ever notice the language of *pleased* as it is related to *pleasure*? These people were being Christian hedonists. They had joy and delight in knowing God and doing the things of God. They were pleased to give. As followers of Jesus Christ, let's pray that God gives us eyes to see and hands to give where we see need. Let's pray that God is going to fill our hearts with joy in so doing, finding the words of Jesus to be true. It is better to give than to receive.

When you go forth from here this week, will you pray that God will give you eyes to see needs you can meet? Will you pray that God will open your eyes to somebody in this church, or maybe somebody in your neighborhood, or maybe an organization like Kingdom Causes, which is a growing force in Bellflower to help alleviate the homeless, or maybe the Doors of Hope Women's Shelter that is helping women that are battered and abused. Will you pray that the Lord gives you eyes to see and hands that give for the sake of your joy and His glory and the benefit of others in such giving? That is what fruitful Christians do.

We can help meet the needs by giving cheerfully. We see this taught here in this passage of Scripture. There is more. How else can we go about meeting needs?

We can help meet the needs by...

## 2. Praying strenuously (30-33)

By laboring in prayer. Look at Paul put it in Verses 30-33.

**<sup>30</sup>I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, <sup>31</sup>that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, <sup>32</sup>so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. <sup>33</sup>May the God of peace be with you all. Amen.**

So, Paul was talking about their need to pray for him and to collaborate with him on the effort through their prayer. Prayer is collaboration. It is getting into the ministry of meeting needs in this world in Jesus' Name.

Paul had two prayer requests in that section. First, he asked that they pray that he would be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, especially in the city of Jerusalem. He was talking about the Pharisees and Sadducees and the teachers of the Law. He was talking about the elite Jews, and spoke of them as the unbelievers.

Sometimes unregenerate religious people can be the most fierce and vicious of them all. We see that very clearly in the Gospels with the unregenerate Jewish leaders who were so ferocious toward the early church. Paul was saying that he was going into a real beehive and needed them to pray for him. Then Paul asked them to pray that the offering would be acceptable to the saints.

It is better to give than to receive, but sometimes it is hard to receive. Sometimes pride gets in the way from receiving things that we ought to receive. Historically, these Jewish people they looked down upon the Gentiles, and now it would be a real ego check for them to receive this very generous offering from those same Gentiles that they once looked down upon.

But Paul had such confidence that he needed fueled by prayer. He was thinking, "What an amazing evidence that the dividing wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile is, in fact, being broken down if the Gentile offering is received in humility and with warmth from the Jews, who needed to receive it." We need to give. We need to be characterized by our giving, but let me ask you this: Are you ever too proud to receive? Sometimes we need to receive. We need help in so many ways. We need to be willing to receive as well.

This is the bigger picture into the prayer requests of Paul, but now I want us to see the language he used to describe the activity of intercessory prayer. Paul asked them to strive with him in their prayers. Strive! In the Greek language to strive is agonizomie. Does that ring a bell? Agonize in your prayers! Wrestle in your prayers. Take pains and labor in prayers. Paul was saying to be prayer warriors.

In this therapeutic day in which we live, we might reduce prayer to only going to a quiet place before the Lord where we can receive comfort. Yes, that is true. One day in my office a couple of weeks back, I sat there for an hour just quiet before the Lord slowly reading through Scripture and having my heart filled in a time of worship. That was so refreshing. You have to detach sometimes before the Lord and truly be restored by shutting the things of the world out and getting into His presence. I don't want to sound negative about comforting times of prayer.

But that is not all prayer is! Sometimes we labor intensely in prayer. Sometimes it could be such a struggle because our flesh languishes. We don't want to pray. We have phones, televisions, this or that, everything is distracting us and we must fight to pray. But Paul told the people they needed to labor in prayer for him. We need to be laboring in prayer for one another, for the missionaries we send, for brothers and sisters in local churches that are seeking to stand firm and faithful in the Word of God. We need to be laboring in prayer.

When was the last time you labored in prayer? If you are anything like me, it was probably when something bad was happening to a loved one very close to you. Maybe it was a spouse or a child in the hospital bed, and you did not know what was going to happen. Suddenly, gravity entered your heart, and you were on your knees before the Living God, striving with Him in prayer for their good. That is how I am.

Paul was saying, "I know you have never met me personally, Romans, but will you strive and engage in agonizomie prayer for me? Please pray that the Gospel can be robust, so that the needs of the saints can be met, and so that I can eventually get to Spain where they need to hear the Gospel. Will you pray with me in that way?"

If anybody here is being convicted about your prayer life, let me just inform you that I got convicted first. Reading through this passage of Scripture, I realized how I needed to step it up. If we want to be a part of the battle, we need to be people in prayer. If we are not in prayer, we are not a part of the battle. We are on the sidelines. We need to be people devoted to prayer that the goodness and the grace and the truth of Jesus will spread and bear fruit.

I was at a cool little combined birthday party in December for Nate and Aubrey Ricafranca. It was a great time. I began talking to a young man who was there by the name of Jason Royce. Jason approached me and asked if I was Pastor Jeff. I said I am! He knew all about me and Bethel Grace! He said that his church prays for us all the time. He also told me that Pastor P.J. leads prayers for our church, as he does with other churches.

It filled my heart to think that Bethel Grace is being named in the worship gathering of a church a few miles away from us, that we might be strong in the Word. Therefore, you will notice in your Body Life sheet the first installment of something that I want to be ongoing. I put in the Body Life sheet to pray for the First Southern Baptist Church of Bellflower and Pastor P.J. Tibayan, and to pray that the church will remain faithful to God's Word, active in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and fruitful in the ministry.

I am following the good example of my buddy and friend, Pastor P.J., so that is why that prayer request is there. We need to be praying, not only for what is happening in and through Bethel Grace, but through the collective effort of the Kingdom of God through the churches. Shall we do that? That sounds good to me.

As we conclude, there is one more way that we can go about meeting needs. We can help meet needs by giving cheerfully, by praying strenuously, and by:

### **3. Connecting personally (24, 29, 31)**

We can help meet needs by connecting personally with people.

We started this message with the parable of the Good Samaritan. Understand what a serious thing that Samaritan faced. Think about the risk that he brought upon himself as he helped this man who had been attacked. Those same attackers were lurking in the crevices, and he was exposed. He could have gotten beat up too, but he gave whatever resources he had for this man's recovery. Think about the blood that was potentially staining his garment as he went on from there. Think about how his heart was beating hard as he went to get care for that Jewish man.

If that Gentile man were anything like me, I would need to connect with a brother, or my wife, or somebody who cares for me and tell them what had happened, because serving others takes from you. It draws resources out of you when you go out of your way to provide for others. You are giving from yourself. One of the ways that the Spirit blesses you is that He gives you people that can process things with you.

If this had happened to me, I would have needed to tell someone, asking them to pray for this man. You have to get these kinds of things out somehow. As Christians, we are part of the Kingdom efforts to meet spiritual needs and to help alleviate physical needs, and we need to be refreshed by each other. We need to connect with one another. If we are going to remain energized, we need to be helping each other out, praying with and for one another.

We see traces of this in what Paul had to say. Did you notice it in Verse 24?

**<sup>24</sup>I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while.**

Paul was saying that he was going to savor being with some Spirit-filled Christians. He was going to enjoy it. It was going to be something helpful for him. Then again in Verse 32, pray:

**<sup>32</sup>so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company.**

Paul wanted to be rejuvenated, replenished with people who loved him, who prayed for him, and who were sold out for the same mission that he was a part of. Just think about the life of the Apostle Paul. He was hassled and harassed by so many people in the world, even to the point of harm. But how refreshing it must have been to enter in among brothers and sisters in the Lord, and be built up, replenished, and to be edified.

Oh, Bethel Grace, will you join me in praying that we will be a family of peace in Jesus Christ? It is so easy for us to get upset over things. Sometimes there are things that we need to address, but I wonder if we get upset about a great number of things that we don't really need to get upset about.

We need to be a community where we restore and replenish, where we tell others that we are praying for them and helping them. We need to pray that we will have Shalom, because if we are going to be good Christian soldiers, we will be taking our shots in the world. We don't need another left hook and uppercut when we come among our brothers and sisters. If I'm being a jerk, put an arm around me and say, "Jeff, come on, buddy. This isn't you." Tell me. There is reproof in the family of God.

Let's pray that the Lord would use us to refresh others, so that we will have fresh winds blowing us into mission to the world with restored joy in the Lord as we support one another.

What did Paul want them to pray? Verse 30:

**<sup>30</sup>I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf,**

Let's pray that God would fill us with such love for one another that we care about the things brothers and sisters are going through, that we would be concerned about the shots we are taking in the world, and that we would be taking each other to the throne of grace that we might be lifted up in the work that we are called to do for Jesus in this world.

Let's close in a word of prayer.



# FIVE MARKS

of *Fruitful Churches*

"3 – Hard Working"

Romans 16:1-16; 21-23 ☞ January 22, 2017

Joyful, joyful we adore the Lord. I pray that it is with that same spirit of joy that we get into the Word of God this morning. We are going to be in Romans Chapter 16, continuing the series called *Five Marks of Fruitful Churches*. So far in this series we have talked about how fruitful churches are Gospel driven, about how they are mutually supportive at the individual level and with other churches, and this morning we are going to consider how fruitful churches are hard working. They labor for the Lord.

There is something that I have learned in my very limited experience with landscaping around my house. What I have learned is that plant life requires lots and lots of attention. It takes a lot of work for the lawn to be green and healthy and for the shrubs to be blossoming. Several years ago, we were sitting out front and I felt something of a rite of passage when Albert Thomas Saltzmann, my father, said, "Son, I think you have found your green thumb."

As a result, I have been feeling some pressure on my shoulders ever since, because I can't say that the lawn has been perinatally green and flourishing and that the rose bushes have been blossoming on an ongoing basis. That comes in waves, because I have found that it is hard work and takes a lot of effort. If you let things go for just a little while and stop watering and trimming and pruning and fail to fertilize, you will find your lawn getting browner and your blossoms wilting. Then all those weeds will start to form. So, it takes a lot of effort.

Likewise, a fruitful church, a prolific and healthy local family of believers, requires lots of labor and hard work in the Lord if they are going to be a church that remains deep and steadfast and applicable in the teaching of Scripture. If we are going to be a church that reaches out to the community with the Gospel message and with the good deeds of the Kingdom, if we are going to be a church that offers ministries and programs to fortify and edify children, youth, men, and women in the timeless truths of Scripture, it takes hard work.

If we are going to have worship services that are filled with uplifting music that brings the truths of God into our hearts in such a stirring way, if we are going to be a church body that takes care of people who are in need, both within the church and in the neighborhood, if we are going to have a church property that is taken care of, if we are going to have websites, audio, video resources, if we are going to have organization of events, if we are going to have people meeting in each other's homes to deepen and enrich their fellow their fellowship, if we are going to have functions with meals that allow people to foster relationships – if we are going to do all of these things that are involved in church life, they take hard work in order for them to be worthy of the Lord.

Hard work is not simply the case with the leaders, the elders, and the pastors, although it most certainly starts there. Hard work is to be the case all throughout the church membership, the entire body of believers. All throughout the church believers are to be applying and utilizing the spiritual gifts they have been given. They are to use their time, their energy, their resources, pouring in their love and exerting themselves in the work of the Lord.

It is not abnormal for a Christian to be working hard for the Lord, both here and out in the community. That is normal. It is abnormal when a Christian is not working hard, because we are part of an eternal Kingdom and we only have these years of impact here in this phase of our existence. During that time, we are to be hard working. Fruitful churches are hardworking churches.

This morning we turn the page into the final chapter of the book of Romans. Romans Chapter 16, here we come! Included in this chapter is an extended list of greetings sent by Paul to the people he knew in Rome. He wanted to say hello to the people that he knew personally. While this section of Romans 16 is not necessarily the densest theologically, we receive here such of a wonderful snapshot of church life and Christian living.

Not only do we see the love that is to characterize the body of Christ as Paul greeted these people, but we see that these people were hard working for the Kingdom of Jesus. I pray that our brothers and sisters of the First Century will inspire us as they were filled with the Lord in their labors.

Let's read Romans Chapter 16 and Verses 1-16 and Verses 21-23:

**<sup>1</sup>I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, <sup>2</sup>that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.**

**<sup>3</sup>Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, <sup>4</sup>who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well. <sup>5</sup>Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia. <sup>6</sup>Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. <sup>7</sup>Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me. <sup>8</sup>Greet Ampilatus, my beloved in the Lord. <sup>9</sup>Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. <sup>10</sup>Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. <sup>11</sup>Greet my kinsman Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. <sup>12</sup>Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. <sup>13</sup>Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well. <sup>14</sup>Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them. <sup>15</sup>Greet Philologus,**

**Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. <sup>16</sup>Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.**

**<sup>21</sup>Timothy, my fellow worker, greets you; so do Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my kinsmen. <sup>22</sup>I Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord. <sup>23</sup>Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer, and our brother Quartus, greet you.**

We see that Paul was sending greetings to people he knew. What we find about Paul is not only did he win a lot of souls for Jesus, but he made a lot of friends in Jesus as well. He spoke of them throughout this amazing portion of Scripture.

At the beginning of Romans Chapter 16, Paul commended Phoebe, probably sent her with the original copy of the letter from the area of Corinth. Toward the end of the chapter in Verses 21 through 23, he sent love from five of his co-workers. Then in Verses 3-16, Paul sent greetings to twenty-six individual. He named twenty-four of them specifically, and he also sent a brief word of encouragement that was personal to the majority of the people he greeted.

As you look throughout this portion of Scripture, it is interesting to note the tone of love and affection that is very much evident. But what we see is that these people were serious about working for the Lord. They were putting forth a serious effort. The language of working in the Lord comes up repeatedly.

I want to point out two words for work that are used in the underlying Greek. The New Testament was not originally written in English. It was written in Koine Greek back in the First Century. It was a very rich language. There are two different Greek words used throughout this passage of Scripture, both with a slightly different nuance. They help us to understand the kind of effort that these people were putting in.

One of the words for work that is used in this chapter is the Greek term *kapiào*. At the heart of that word is the whole experience of exhaustion, being worn out, being tired. So, put in verb form, *kapiào* is *to work to the point of exhaustion and weariness*. To put it in noun form, such a worker is one who is characterized by working to the point of being tired.

This word is used several times in this passage. It is found in Verses 9 and 12 to describe four precious sisters of the First Century Church. Look at Verse 6:

**<sup>6</sup>Greet Mary, who has worked hard (to the point of exhaustion) for you.**

Then that word shows up again in Verse 12:

**<sup>12</sup>Greet those workers (now it is in noun form) in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard...**

She worked hard to the point of wearing herself out. We see these sisters just pouring themselves out.

I think there is something here that you are going to love. Reading through the different commentaries, an old historically oriented man by the name of Barklay pointed something out about Tryphaena and Tryphosa from Verse 12. It is all but certain that they were twin sisters, and their names mean dainty and delicate. Isn't that cute? Yet, they were such hard workers.

Can't you just picture the twinkle in Paul's eye as he said, "Greet Dainty and Delicate, those two four-wheeling, load-bearing, no nonsense workers in the Lord Jesus, who work themselves to the point of exhaustion setting an example for all of the men and women alike!" *Kapiao* is one of the words that is used throughout this passage of Scripture. Christians are to be people who work hard for Jesus, advancing the cause of the Kingdom.

Another Greek word that is used here is *synergon*. It is used in noun form throughout this passage. It has this nuance of people being engaged in hard work together. My study of the word indicated to me that the essence of it is that they are engaged and driven so that they are energetic in the work that the Lord calls them to. They have an active desire to produce.

It is easy sometime to want to take these Greek words and stretch them too far, but I thought they were so very interesting and inspiring as I studied them. There is a certain paradox about them that I noticed as well. On the one hand, we are those in Christ willing to make ourselves tired in all facets in the work of the Lord, whether it be focused on church-life activity, or reaching out to people in the world who are in need of the Gospel, or in the workplace. Christians should have the regular experience of working themselves to the point of exhaustion.

But at the same time, there is an energetic desire in Christians to keep on doing these things. Christians are engaged for the Lord from the heart. Do you see the paradox there? We work to the point of exhaustion, then we want to wake up and keep on working for the Lord again, because the Spirit keeps that desire inside of us.

Now, we got to pay attention to the first several verses of Genesis Chapter 2 where it says that on the seventh God rested to enjoy all that He had created. That is repeated in the Ten Commandments. So, we got to be those taking Sabbath and getting proper rest or we will literally work ourselves into the ground if we are not careful. But, I wonder if in some of American society, the danger goes the other direction where we are more apathetic than we ought to be in the work of the Lord. Maybe we need to pray that God will energize us more.

So, throughout this passage we have this language of working in the Lord and for the Lord. But now we have some more work to do. We need to identify from this passage what kind of work in the Lord is Christian work, and which work stands out as labor for

the Kingdom having a spiritual dynamic to it, because isn't it true that there are lots of people in the world who are working to the point of exhaustion?

Yes, you will find people all throughout your neighborhood, the nation, and the earth who work hard. But, what characterizes Christian ministry and effort? I think that we need to pay attention to this, because we want to labor with a spiritual dynamic. We want to be those producing spiritual fruit for the Lord, so we must understand what energizes such spiritual service, and the character which ought to describe us as we go about our serving. We should stand out in how we serve.

So, I want to take a closer look at this passage, and look at four aspects of Christian work in the world today. These characteristics need to be at work if we are going to be fruitful in the Lord. Let's take a look at them.

**In order to be fruitful, we need to:**

**1. Work in the power of Jesus**

We need to be about the work of the Lord. As we do so, we need to be connected to Christ, abiding in Him, attached to Him, asking that His Spirit would be working through us to produce fruit.

Did you notice here in this passage of Scripture that Paul mentioned being *in Christ* four times? Then another five times, he mentioned being *in the Lord*. Look at what it says in Verse 3:

**<sup>3</sup>Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus...**

Then back to the wonder twins in Verse 12

**<sup>12</sup>Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord.**

Not only are they in Christ by the working of His grace, but they are workers in the Lord. I think we are to understand that not only were they doing their service unto the Lord, but they were doing the work daily in fellowship with the Lord. We need to be workers in the Lord.

As I was thinking about this, I was reminded of the way one of my seminary student professors at Talbot started his class off one semester. This man opened his class in a way that was so humble and genuine that I appreciated him even more. He was familiar with his material. He had taught through the content of the course numerous times, to the point where getting ready for the class probably just took some review of notes that he had already been accruing.

I remember this professor standing up at the first session of class and in essence saying, “You know what? I was convicted on my way to school this morning. I need to apologize to all of you, my students. Look, I have taught this material before. I am familiar with it, and, yes, I did some review, but I did not go before the Lord, striving in prayer that He would truly anoint me with unique power to be a blessing to you. I did not pray. I did not go before the Lord, asking Him to make this material and you fruitful.”

I appreciated his vulnerability in saying that because sometimes there is a malaise that can set in even over our Christian living and service. We need to serve in Christ, connected to Jesus. As we go out into our daily lives and occupations, are we telling the Lord that we are His ambassadors, and asking Him to keep us tuned in to Him?

When we serve in the various facets of ministry at Bethel Grace, are we truly laying ourselves before the Lord? Apathy and familiarity with the things that are holy comes so easy, so got to remember that Christian service is service that is in Christ, attuned with Christ.

Here are some familiar words for most of us from Jesus:

John 15:5

**<sup>5</sup>I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.**

We need the daily renewal of being filled with the Spirit of Jesus if we are going to be fruitful in the work that we are doing.

May I offer a technical age illustration of this? I was thinking of my laptop computer, and how it needs to remain connected to the wireless internet router if it is going to pull up content when I open up the internet explorer. If it is not connected to the wireless router, it is not going to pull up content from webpages. It is not going to stream videos. It is not going to provide the audio. It needs to be connected to the wireless router.

Likewise, we need to be those walking by faith and by continuous dependence on the Lord Jesus Christ. We need to recognize that there is a spiritual dynamic that must be at work in our labor for the Lord. Hence, Paul kept referring to these people as laborers and workers in Christ, attached to Him, and covered in Him.

As we keep our hand to the plow, let us be dependent on Jesus to do the things that we simply cannot do. One aspect of being fruitful is to keep working in the power of Jesus. But there is more. The second is this:

**In order to be fruitful, we need to:**

**2. Work with the humility of Jesus**

We need to be those who are servants. We got to do our leadership, our teaching, our administrating, our children's work, our mercy work as those who are carried by a servant's heart in Christ.

There is a wonderful example of humility that I think opens Romans Chapter 16, as Paul talked about this amazing sister in the Lord by the name of Phoebe. The first thing we learn about Phoebe is that she was a sister. But then we learn that she was a servant to the church at Cenchreae. Verse 1:

**<sup>1</sup>I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae...**

She was a servant. The Greek word for servant is *diakonos*. She was one carrying out diaconal ministry. That is a familiar word for a church with deacons and deaconesses. There is a formal air about how Paul spoke of her. "I commend to you our sister Phoebe. My sister. Our sister. A servant, a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae." She represented that gathering of believers.

As we look at what the deacons and deaconess did in the early church, their ministry was focused in on visiting the sick and on teaching children. Not only did they visit the sick and teach children, but they were all about tending to the needs of the poor. So, they were really getting into the trenches and meeting some basic human needs in mercy. This is what that service was all about.

That is what Phoebe was all about, but then it is so cool when we learn a little bit more about this sister of ours, named Phoebe. It would seem that she was a woman of means, possibly a wealthy business woman in the First Century world with her business taking her to the city of Rome from the port city of Cenchreae. New Testament scholars piece all of this together and they suggest that Phoebe was probably heading up to Rome on a business trip, and volunteered to deliver Paul's letter for him.

Look at Verse 2 again.

**<sup>2</sup>...welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need for you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.**

She had been a patron, a benefactor, one who had the resources and the property space to help people materially and monetarily. She was a woman of means in the world who also had a heart to get down into the trenches of humanitarian aid. This was a woman who was expressing that humble love of Jesus Christ in the way that she went about serving God.

This is such a picture of Christ-likeness. Do you remember how Paul described the humility of Jesus that we are to pattern our lives after? He stated it in that wonderful passage in Philippians 2:6 and 7 He said that we should have the same mindset of Christ:

**<sup>6</sup>who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped. <sup>7</sup>but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.**

The King of Heaven and earth was found washing feet, and spilling His blood in the work of redemption on the cross. Jesus was the ultimate example of humility. Though He was rich, He became poor so that in Him we might become rich. Here we have this sister, Phoebe, she was evidentially a woman of means, but she was willing to serve people and get into some of the most difficult circumstances of life alongside of Paul.

This characterizes the humility, the servant's heart, that is about effective and fruitful Christian service and living. If we are going to be people who are prolific in Christ, then we should not be those looking down on any form of service, be it something menial. We are willing to get down and do whatever it takes. Christians are not going to be people who say, "Oh, no, no! You must be mistaken. I am not one who scrubs pieces of gum off the bottom of chairs. No that is not me!" Oh, yes it is! That is you!

We got to be humble people, willing to serve wherever the need is. While we do, we keep our attention focused in on our spiritual gifts. The lion share of our service should be where we are gifted by the Spirit, as we studied in Romans Chapter 12. But if we consider any kind of menial service beneath us, boy, no it is not! We got to get our hands dirty. We got to get our knees calloused. We got to be like that in prayer and in service.

We have got to be serving with humility. We may be people who have accrued monetary wealth. It could be that we have gained professional power. It could be that we have artistic skills. Whatever talent, position, or means we have gained, we are to be those renowned for our humility, serving the Lord Jesus Christ.

To be fruitful, we must work with the humility of Jesus. There is more for us to see here. Here is a third aspect as we continue.

**In order to be fruitful, we need to:**

### **3. Work with the surrender of Jesus**

We need to be those giving ourselves to the service of the Lord even here in this fallen world where there may be negative consequences that result from that service and the stands that we take in the truth of Jesus.

We need to be those willing to live with surrender in our Christian life. Did you notice that there are a couple of example of such surrender in this portion of Scripture? All of these people were giving time and energy, but there were a couple of them who were called to give a little bit more. Look at Verse 3 once again.



**<sup>3</sup>Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, <sup>4</sup>who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well.**

This prominent couple, Prisca and Aquila, were mentioned about a half a dozen times in the pages of the New Testament. They were very close and faithful friends to the Apostle Paul. Here we see that somehow, at some point, they put themselves in harm's way to help Paul out. By helping Paul out, they were helping the Gospel ministry out as well. They were willing to make sacrifices for the sake of the Kingdom.

That is one example. There is another example of surrender as we look down to Verse 7. Apparently, this is another married couple. Paul said:

**<sup>7</sup>Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me.**

We don't know all the circumstances, but they were an example of a First Century couple who got put into the slammer in Jesus Name! Perhaps they were standing up for the Gospel like Paul and Silas, and Aphroditis. These were people who often found themselves in jail. They were serving in love, but they were bold with the Christian message, and there were consequences that came of it. But they were serving the Lord with surrender.

There is a certain shadow that kind of looms over Romans 16, because of the time of its writing, Nero was now in power. This was written about AD 58, and it was in AD 64 that the persecutions of Nero against the Christians were unleashed. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that some of these people, the names that we read, they were the ones found in the colosseum of Rome, giving their very lives because of their testimony and their faithfulness in the service of the Lord.

There are brothers and sisters across the globe who are giving their lives as carried by the Spirit of Jesus that the Gospel might go out, and that people might have an opportunity to hear and repent. Are we people who are willing to surrender our physical lives for the sake of a Kingdom that is unshakable and eternal? In the time of need, may God give us the spiritual power to do so.

We are living here in the United States of America, and more and more it seems that the age that we are living in can bring sacrifice to Christians who are devoted to the service of the Lord. Last week I read on a yearly watch list produced by an organization called International Christian Concern that for the first time ever the United States of America was found as a nation antagonistic, sometimes even hostile, toward Christians.

I would imagine we were way down on that list, because we don't face the same threat as the people living in Iraq – those precious brothers and sisters – but what a turn that we were found on that list at all. They said that because of shifting public sentiment toward biblical Christian faith, there is the recognition of an increasing cost for many people who

will stand up in the truths of Jesus Christ. Are we willing to serve with surrender? For certain personality types, it might be easier to surrender in the flesh. But self-preservation instincts kick in for most of us, and we don't want to face bodily harm or incarceration for anything. But are we willing to do so for the faith?

I have been studying the life of a pre-reformation man of God by the name of John Huss, who in the end went to the flames for his testimony of Christ. But reading through his journals, you find him saying things like, "Oh, Lord. Oh, Lord, I don't stand among those Godly young men Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. I'm not made of the same substance they were made of. If I am going to live with this surrender and sacrifice, it is going to have to come as the result of Your Spirit filling my life."

What I took away from that is this: We might feel weak and we might wince and we might pull back, but if there is a Christian who is surrendered to the Lord and who is dependent on the power of the Spirit of God, he will find that he is able to make sacrifices that in himself, he would not be able to make. God will give us the ability and the substance when the time comes.

Our harassment in this nation of ours is very, very mild. We can pray that we will have peace, just like I Timothy 2 teaches us. Pray for the leaders and those who are in authority so that we may live godly lives in all peace and quiet, even as we are spreading out that message that Jesus is the One Mediator between God and man.

We need to pray that there will be conditions of peace here and elsewhere, but we need to pray that if the tide shifts we will be faithful to the end, because we need to have eternal perspective. Your life is very, very short even in the best conditions of peace. According to the Bible, life is a vapor. We need to be willing to be those surrendered in this service of the Lord in view of the fact that eternity and Christ is a long, long, long time, and that is the Kingdom that we serve.

I pray for peace in the United States of America. I watched the inauguration of President Trump. I thought I saw some promising signs. I really appreciated the Scripture readings that were read. I loved when Franklin Graham read out of I Timothy 2. I have read that passage many, many times. I know that front part where it says to pray for all the leaders and kings and all of those in authority that we may live quiet and godly lives.

As I was watching him read this passage, I wondered how much of that portion of Scripture he was going to read. This is a Spirit-filled man named Franklin Graham that I am talking about, and he just kept on reading, "For there is one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Jesus Christ." I was saying "yes!" and cheering him on. That passage was not read at the previous inauguration, by the way.

So, that is a promising thing. That is a good thing. I pray that the Lord gives the president of our country, a fallen and extremely flawed man, new wisdom, insight, and perspective to lead into a great period for the country that we live in. We need to pray that. It is biblical.

But we still serve the Lord with surrender, because according to the pages of biblical prophecy, as the return of Jesus Christ draws near, it is as though the light is fading. It gets darker and darker and darker. Then King Jesus comes with power and glory. That is the day we are living for.

We need to work with the surrender of Jesus. May that be the work of the Spirit in our lives. There is one last aspect of this. To be fruitful, we must work with the surrender of Jesus and, finally, we must work in the love of the Lord Jesus Christ.

#### **4. Working in the love of Jesus**

We got to work in that affection that ought to characterize every family of believers. If you take a close look through Romans Chapter 16, maybe, just maybe, you will smell the fragrance of effusive love that perfumes this passage of Scripture. It is all throughout it.

In Verse 1 Paul said, “Our sister Phoebe” - our sister. In Verse 5 he said, “My beloved Epaenetus” – my beloved! He called him the first convert to Christ in Asia. Can you imagine the flack Epaenetus took from his family and his neighbors being the first one who worshiped the Jewish Messiah, who died on that horrible Roman cross and rose from the grave? He took some shots, and Paul said that he loved Epaenetus. There is love there.

Then in Verse 8, Paul said, “Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. My beloved Stachys.” Verse 12, “The beloved Persis.” And what a beautiful touch in Verse 13. Paul was talking about his love for others, but how about somebody’s love for him? “Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well.” We see affection here.

By the way, that Rufus may have been the son of Simon of Cyrene, who carried the cross of Jesus, because his boys, Rufus and Alexander, are understood to have been dwelling in Rome. So, this Rufus might be his son. That means that the wife of Simon of Cyrene was somebody Paul wanted to get acquainted with, and they got so close that she started treated him as though he were her very son.

We see affection all throughout this passage of Scripture. Love and tenderness should define and describe Christians as they serve the Lord together. The fruit of the Spirit is gentleness. The fruit of the Spirit is kindness. Preachers and pastors and Christians need to lift up their voices and preach this, sometimes even correcting and rebuking fellow brothers and sisters.

But there is to be an unmistakable tone of humility, love, kindness in the Lord as we serve the cause of Jesus Christ together. Love is not rude. We are not to be those who go around barking orders at one another. We are to be gracious, and there is a spirit of love that is found all throughout this portion of Scripture.

With that desire to serve with one another in the love of the Lord, let's look at one final commandment that comes to us from this passage of Scripture. There is a lot for us to apply here, and we have one more that we might be able to apply as we finish up and head out into the foyer.

There is a command that we are carry out. Did you see it? Verse 16:

**<sup>16</sup>Greet one another with a holy kiss...**

What? Maybe I will go first to my lovely wife with this command. You will be glad to know that we have given the ushers Tic Taks and Altoids so that we can carry out this command with as little offense as possible.

This command is found five times in the New Testament. So, what do you think? Shall we pucker up? What do we do with this one? This is one of those commands where you must distinguish permeant abiding truth from the cultural expression of it. In the First Century, it was quite normal to greet each other with a kiss. It would freak no out to read this command. That was the custom back then.

It is not the custom in our day and time. Every now and then, maybe so, but, by-in-large, it is not, but a kiss was the cultural expression back then. The timeless truth is that however we greet one another, there is to be holiness about the way that we interact. The way that we greet one another ought to reflect the fact that we are brothers and sisters in an everlasting Kingdom, brought in by grace by the Lord.

We are going to know each other forever and ever, and the way that we greet one another ought to express that. There ought to be a sense of focus. There ought to be a sense of warmth. There must be the sense where we slow down and greet one another in a way that is reflective of the relationship that we have in Christ.

So, here is the application of this command. Do we greet everybody with a kiss? Walk slowly through the lobby, and say hi to people. Are you an introvert? Raise your hand. Wow! Pray that the Lord will help you just to say hi with a warm handshake and hug to somebody that you have not said hi to recently. That is all that I am saying. Why is that so funny? Why are you laughing? It is not funny. It is serious. Yes, I am laughing too.

Let the way that we interact with one another reflect the service that we are doing together in the Kingdom, and the family that we are a part of. Final application – work hard for Jesus!

Let's close in a time of prayer.

# FIVE MARKS

of *Fruitful Churches*

"4 – Deeply Discerning"

Romans 16:17-20 ☞ January 29, 2017

We are going to get into the Word together on this fine Winter morning here in Southern California. Will you join me in Romans Chapter 16 please? From this passage I pray we will receive robust encouragement in the fact that fruitful churches are deeply discerning churches. They are filled with people who have the ability to distinguish between truth and error; between that which is truly good and that which is evil; between that which is false spirituality and that which is of genuine godliness.

We must be discerning people, because there has been an enemy from the beginning seeking to thwart God's purposes in the world. His name is Satan. He works in subtle ways to disease the church, to introduce parasites, and to pollute the well of pure Christian doctrine so that those who belong to Jesus Christ might be hindered in their fruitfulness. We have got to be those who are discerning people as we follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

If you will take a look at the title overhead slide that we have been using during this series called Five Marks of Fruitful Churches, the first thing that you might notice is the trademark Jeff Saltzmann brown parchment background. I tend to gravitate toward those. In addition to that, you might notice the lush clusters of grapes that might make you want to eat some!

Throughout the pages of Scripture, the vineyard and the grapes they produce they are put forth to us as symbolic of the fruitfulness and the productivity in the way that God's Word brings life and the way that God's people are to be prolific people and fruitful people. So, I used a graphic of plush grapes, rather than grapes infested with Phylloxera Wine Louse. This is a parasite that afflict vineyards, hindering their fruitfulness, killing the plants.

Such pictures remind us that in the same way that plant life can be diseased, spiritual life can become diseased as well. While the church of Jesus Christ at large, the universal church, will always stand and expand on this earth, it is possible that local manifestations of the church can get sick, and sometimes local churches even die.

They die because they succumb to attacks. They do not have the discernment to distinguish between truth and error, that which is truly of the Lord and that which is deception. I want Bethel Grace to remain fruitful and prolific until King Jesus comes back. If that is to happen, we got to be mindful of the fact that we need to be discerning. We need to be careful, because from the beginning the church has been warned about false prophets and false teachers sent in by Satan himself to afflict churches. So, we need to be careful and cautious.

What we find in the paragraph we are going to be in this morning is that Paul took on a tone of vital concern. He had taught the Gospel in this letter in all of its breadth and beauty and grace. He instructed the Romans in the Good News of Jesus Christ. In addition to that, he taught how those of us who are in Christ are transformed to newness of life by the power of the Holy Spirit both at the individual and community levels as we are being transformed by the renewing of our minds.

Paul taught all of this, but as he came to the end of his letter, he appealed to them and gave them a warning. He told them to be careful and cautious, because Paul was ever so aware of that unseen enemy of God and the churches of God. He gave this very sober call to discernment that we need to receive.

Let's look at Romans Chapter 16 and Verse 17-20. Paul said this:

**<sup>17</sup>I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. <sup>18</sup>For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naïve. <sup>19</sup>For your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, but I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil. <sup>20</sup>The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.**

In this paragraph, we receive this call to discernment from the Apostle Paul, realizing that we always need to remain aware that there is an enemy. The time is coming for the final defeat of this enemy, but in the meantime, he is seeking to cause trouble for local churches just like ours. We need to be discerning people in view of these things.

What I want us to notice in this passage of Scripture, is how Paul's tone differs from the tone he used in Chapters 14 and 15. What we found in Chapters 14 and 15 was that there were some differences of opinions among the Christians in the church of Rome. They were having some disputes about some aspects of Christian living. Some of the disagreement we saw there were about the observance of the Sabbath and the Old Testament festivals. There were disagreements about how those got carried out in the church.

They quarreled over the dietary laws about eating meat and drinking wine. These issues were specifically stated in Chapters 14 and 15. Paul's tone throughout that section was for the brothers and sisters to stop judging one another on these issues. He used that language repeatedly to the family of believers. He was saying, "Look, you are going to have some different perspectives on how these different aspects of Christian living gets played out, but just welcome each other. Receive each other. Accept each other, and sometimes bear with each other." He was telling them not to bicker over those things.

That was his tone in that portion of the letter, but it is different here. In this section, Paul was telling the church to watch out, keep eyes open, and be observant. He was telling them that there were some people that they needed to avoid. That was his command in Verse 17. His first command was to watch out. His second command was to avoid certain people.

What we see is that we are to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that we have received. Paul was talking about those who enter strong churches and undermine the core doctrine of the Christian faith, the essentials. He was saying to watch out for those who upset things, who put up obstacles, and if they are encountered to avoid them.

Based on Paul's language, I think this passage has broader applications to what we would recognize as the essential doctrines of the faith. That is: one God in three Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the authority and inerrancy of Scripture.

I think what Paul was dealing with in this setting was those who were undermining the Gospel, those who were making coming to faith in Christ more complicated than it really was, those who were putting up barriers and obstacles, and those who were altering the Gospel which is that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, and in Christ alone.

A sinner is humbled. His heart comes to understand that he is a sinner before the holiness of God. There is contrition in his heart, and he says that he is a sinner and needs Jesus to save him. Then faith comes by grace. We are saved by grace! Paul had people back in the First Century called the Judaizers. They were the first Christian cult. They were the first ones to be afflicted with that notorious and on-going Christ Syndrome. That syndrome says that we need Christ plus "this" in order to be in God's good graces.

In their situation, it was that they needed Christ plus circumcision and obedience to the Old Testament Law to truly be right with God. That is what was being preached, and Paul told them no and that it was an obstacle and wrong. Paul told the church to watch out for such people and to be careful and observant, because they would pollute the church.

In our day, there are continued manifestations of this. People will tell you that you need Christ plus baptism by a duly appointed church leader in order to truly be saved. People will tell you that you need Christ plus works, you need Christ plus penance, you need Christ plus this and that. In the Christian life, the Spirit comes and He transforms us. But entering into God's saving grace is by faith. We must be careful about those who would put up obstacles.

This is what Paul was dealing with in this passage. He had the perception that so very early in the church's life in history, Satan was already setting in. He was seeking to distort the Good News of Jesus Christ and His salvation. We see in Verse 20 that Paul

named Satan. Satan is named in the book of Romans just like he is named in so many other of Paul's epistles.

Paul was aware of Satan's on-going and widespread activity. He knew that it was Lucifer, it was Satan who was behind the serpent that tempted Eve in the Garden. In the same way, it was Satan who was behind false teachers that altered the Gospel message and put up barriers to grace. So, Paul said to be careful and watchful. We need to watch out as well. We are going to walk through this passage of Scripture this morning so that we might grow in our practice of discernment. We want to be discerning people, and do it in a Christ-like way. We need to pay close attention to what is here.

There are four verses. We will take it in four parts. First, we are going to see the Christian's responsibility when it comes to discernment. Second, we are going to see the deceiver's methodology. Third, we will see the leader's tenacity in helping Christians grow in their discernment. Finally, to encourage us, we are going to seek the Messiah's final victory, which we are looking forward to seeing.

Let's see what we need in order that we might grow as those who are properly discerning.

For increased discernment let's see:

## **1. The Christian's Responsibility (17)**

Verse 17:

**<sup>17</sup>... watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them.**

The responsibility that is laid out for us in this verse is that Christians are to watch out for certain people and avoid them if they appear. Namely, those who undermine the Gospel of grace in Jesus Christ. Christians are to watch out, and they are to be careful if somebody is pressing and pressing, trying to teach a different Gospel than the one we have received in the pages of New Testament Scripture. Paul was saying to be careful and to watch out.

We got to distinguish between those who cause deception and those who are deceived. Look at the careful language of the text.

**<sup>17</sup>... watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught...**

Be careful of those who are creating these things. Not everybody who is deceived is a deceiver. We need to be careful of those that are so convinced in a false Gospel that they actively perpetuate and try to get other people spun in its web. But, understand, that not every person in a cult is necessarily a deceiver. Some of them are just flat out deceived, and they are in Satan's trap. They are burdened. They are heavy laden.



Do you remember all the people of Israel under that First Century Pharisaic legalism? Jesus said to them, “Come to me all you who are weary and burdened. I will give you rest.” There are people in cults who are bent down in all the legalism of those systems. So, we got to be able to differentiate between deceivers and the deceived. The deceivers are carrying sickness and are imparting it to others. We got to stay clear of them. But there are people that are deceived, and we need to have a heart for them. We need to seek to alleviate them from the burden that they are under.

This passage of Scripture says that the Christian responsibility is to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles. I pray that we would have eyes to see those who are oppressed in these situations, and seek to give them the Gospel of grace, the Good News that can deliver them from it.

We see the Christian’s responsibility in this passage. Watch out for those who will trip us up rather than build us up when it comes to that core Gospel message that we have been taught in the New Testament. Watch out. Be careful. Distance yourself from certain people.

We continue and we see:

## 2. The Deceiver’s Methodology (17-18)

Paul wanted us to be aware of some things as far as how deceivers operate. So, we see what it says in Verse 18, but I will start again in Verse 17:

**<sup>17</sup>I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. <sup>18</sup>For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naïve.**

Paul was telling us that those who are false teachers, they are going to be very effective communicators. They are going to be smooth talkers.

Here is the problem with ice-cream: It is so creamy. It is so smooth. It is so sugary. At the same time, name one element of ice-cream that is actually good for you. There is so much sugar and cream in it. That is why we must watch out for it. Like I have told you before, Haagen-Dazs is Swedish for heart attack! What is going to happen if you live on a diet of Haagen-Dazs? Are you going to be a healthy person? No!

Paul was saying that those who perpetuate false gospels are smooth talkers and employ flattery to gain people into their system. So, when we think about the people who distort the Gospel, we don’t think about some tall imposing man with a black cloak and a large hood that hides his face, and with a pentagram tattooed on his back. Satan’s strategy is altering the Gospel of grace. That is what Paul was talking about here.

Paul was saying that those who perpetuate false gospels, they will be so smooth in their speech. They will use flattery. It is not necessarily that their doctrine is going to be so smooth and creamy. Instead, it is going to be their personal countenance. Oh, they will be so, so nice. Paul was telling us to watch out, don't be fooled by niceness. Know the Gospel, and understand that people will be perpetuating false versions of it through niceness and smooth talk and flattery. Paul said here that such people are not serving the Lord, but they are serving their own stomachs and appetites.

If you do a search of church history, what you will find is that virtually all cult leaders live high on the hog at the expense of their minions. You will see that on much religious, so-called Christian television, where there are people who have bad doctrine and are living in opulence, they are deceiving naïve people with smooth talk and flattery. These people and their comrades below them are driven people by pride. You better watch out for that.

So, this verse warns us about their methodology. Not every nice person that you encounter is going to be good for you. By smooth talk and flattery, they deceive the hearts of the naïve. Deceivers manipulate people emotionally. In order to be discerning, and in order that Bethel Grace never becomes a place that is afflicted with spiritual disease, we got to be discerning people, but still operating in grace to those who are lost and those who are caught up in deception.

So, we see the deceiver's methodology. There is a third element of this paragraph that we need to understand as well, and that is:

### **3. The Leaders Great Tenacity (19)**

I pray that the leaders of Bethel Grace will be encouraged as we see Paul's tenacity in this. Paul knew that deception was rising. He was so vigilant about preparing the people of God for it. Look at what it says going into Verse 19:

**<sup>19</sup>For your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, but I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil.**

Paul knew the Christians in Rome had basic obedience to the Gospel message. He knew they wanted to be people that were filled and carried by the Spirit, but the tenacious leader wanted more. Paul wanted them to grow in their wisdom about what is truly good and what is not. It says so in this verse!

**<sup>19</sup>...I rejoice over you, but I want you to be wise as to what is good...**

Paul wanted them to understand that not all that glitters is gold. He wanted them to be wise about what is truly good, and innocent about what is evil. He did not want them to get wrapped up in the junk.

As I see Paul's tenacity for the Christians in Rome, I see that he was celebrating their basic response of submitting themselves to the message that they were sinners, forgiven and cleansed by Jesus, not based on their works, but based on His grace through faith. But Paul also wanted them to grow in wisdom. He wanted the strength and steadiness of wisdom to be manifested in their lives.

Kristy, the boys, and I, we have a three-year-old Black Lab-German Shepherd mix. Her name is Lydie. We often call her Lydia after the person in Acts 16 that she was named after. We call her Lydie-Lou most of the time. Sometimes we call her Lydie-Lou-Lou, sometimes it just comes down to Lulu.

We also call her psycho-Lydie. The reason we call her psycho-Lydie is because she is loco en la cabeza! It sounds like you know what I just said. She is crazy in the head! We got her thinking that she would be so friendly to all our friends and guests, but she is scared of her own shadow.

She is paranoid. She warns people that love her with growling. She is the most fearful dog. It is seen in her countenance all the time. At 2:30 every Thursday, my dad comes to get the boys for some time away. Every week she stands back and growls. He has known her since she was a little puppy, but she is just worried about everything.

Lydie had a near meltdown yesterday afternoon. It was classic. The mailman came and a fire engine drove by at the same time. Lydie growled and threw a fit when the mailman came, with her hackles up, and just then a fire engine came blaring by our house. She heard the fire engine, and was confused. She was supposed to be barking at the mailman but then there was the siren as well. She just stepped back, threw her head up, and started howling. That is the first time I have ever heard her howl. Then she calmed down, went to her bed, curled up and fell asleep. The whole thing just stressed her out.

We are not supposed to be like my poor Lydie-Lou. That is not what God is calling us to in these discernment passages. We are not to be those who are constantly living in fear and totally suspicion of everything that lives and breathes. We are not to be constantly sniffing everything and everybody, getting all excited about things.

Instead, what Paul in his tenacity desired for the Romans Christians and all of us is that we be wise as to what is good, that we have a stability of maturity in doctrine, that we are not those like little infants being tossed here and there by every wind of doctrine. He wanted us to be stable and steady and strong and steadfast.

Paul told them that they had the basic Gospel obedience and that was wonderful, but he wanted them to be wise as to what was good and true and innocent in relation to what was evil. He told them not to get wrapped up in the sin and perversion of this world.

Brothers and sisters, we must be in the Word. We must be a Psalm 1 person. He was so fruitful. He was in the Word day and night, like a tree planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in season. His leaf never withers or gets those nasty little parasites, because

he is in the Word and he is discerning. This is how God speaks truth and strength into our hearts and soul. It is the Spirit of God speaking into us through the Word of God that He inspires.

If we are those who neglect the Word, we are not going to be strong and wise. We will be easily led astray. We will be the naïve that is spoken of in this passage of Scripture. So, we got to be strong in the Word, reading it and taking it in, praying that God will bless. When we are in the Word and hear some alteration, something that moves away from what is written in the pages of Scripture and deviates, we will detect it. The Holy Spirit will sound the alarm.

This is why Paul was so tenacious about his Bible teaching. I read this and thought about Acts Chapter 20 and Paul's final appeal to elders of Ephesus. Acts 20:27

**<sup>27</sup>...for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.**

He went on to tell them to watch out because even from their own number wolves will rise up.

So, Paul was tenacious in teaching them the full counsel of Scripture, and he was persistent in warning them about the fact that doctrinal aberrations would come. He did all of this so that they would be steady, not paranoid and upset about every little thing, but steady, strong, and mature. I pray that we would be agreed in such tenacity that the Word of God for us at Bethel Grace will always be just like a fountain of life, giving us gracious discernment.

There is one last aspect in this passage to help increase our discernment, to help us grow in character, to stay strong, and to be steadfast.

#### **4. The Messiah's Final Victory (20)**

As we look at that great verse recorded in Romans 16:20:

**<sup>20</sup>The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.**

We see here two things that the Lord will do. We see what the Lord is going to do. Jesus will crush Satan under foot at his appointed time, and Jesus will fill our hearts with grace for discernment and everything else we need in the meantime.

First, we see that Satan is going to be taken down in a final and decisive way.

**<sup>20</sup>The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.**

Isn't that amazing? The God of Shalom is going to crush wickedness. That is what peace requires, and that is what's going to happen.

Satan is going to be trampled underfoot, and it is going to be the doing of God, but did you notice whose feet he is going to be trampled under?

**<sup>20</sup>The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.**

That is a twist in the story, isn't it? King Jesus is going to include us in His victory over Satan. That is the nature of our union with Christ. We are bound up with the Messiah. As a man saved, I am in Christ and Christ is in me. That union and intimacy with Christ is so close that it is going to be our feet that Satan is under as well. That is how decisive the victory is.

The Lord knows how we have been tormented by this foe in so many ways. We think that Satan's primary work is temptation, and that is one of his ploys. He tempts Christians to sin. But, in addition to that, he uses deception to seek to confuse our minds. He will also sow seeds of doubt and discouragement. We see him doing this to Jesus in the temptation, seeking to bring Him down, by asking Him repeatedly, "Did God really say." He was trying to sow seeds of doubt in His heart.

The Lord knows the battle we have had with Satan, and so flowing forth from that He is going to include us in that final victory stomp over this great enemy. That is something that we look forward to. In the meantime, God is going to sustain us by His grace. He is going to sustain us by His sufficient grace. His grace is sufficient.

Paul was afflicted by that thorn. He asked the Lord to take it away, and Jesus said, "My power is made perfect in your weakness. I'm doing things in your life to grow your substance and to make you strong. I am with you every step of the way. My grace is sufficient for you. You will stand. You will be delivered into My Kingdom that is going to come."

His grace is going to see us through. In its subtotal, the Christian life is of the grace of God. We are saved by grace. We are sustained by grace. We are gifted by grace. We are given discernment by grace. We are going to be brought into His glory by grace. We are going to be flooded and overwhelmed, joyfully in His grace.

We need that grace in the meantime for discernment that we might be both gracious and watchful about all of the false doctrines that can affect a church so negatively. Bethel Grace, let's be fruitful. We don't want to be like those diseased grape leaves in the slide I showed you earlier. We want to be plush and green.

May the Lord fill us with His grace. Let's close in a word of prayer.

# FIVE MARKS

of *Fruitful Churches*  
"5 – God Focused"

Romans 16:25-27 ☞ February 5, 2017

We are going to be in Romans Chapter 16. Will you please join me there?

This morning we have the 82<sup>nd</sup> and final message in this series on the book of Romans. We have been at it for a while! In this final portion of Romans contained in Chapters 15 and 16, we have identified five marks of churches that are fruitful. This morning we consider the fact that fruitful churches are God focused. Their attention is focused on God and His unique ability to make them strong.

Not every follower of Jesus Christ will be physically strong. There are some believers who are very young in the faith and they have not matured yet physically. There are other believers who are advanced in years, and they are finding themselves hindered and limited and probably very frustrated as far as physical strength goes.

Things can afflict and hinder the physical human body from the beginning of life to the end. It is not a promise that all of us will be strong physically, but every single follower of Jesus Christ can be strong spiritually. By God's grace, every single one of us can be steadfast when our attention is centered on His love and truth.

We can be sturdy. We can have fortitude of soul that will stabilize us through all the ups and downs of life that we are sure to experience. We can be strong in the Lord as we focus in on Him. This is true of individual Christians and collectively true of churches. Every pastor's and Christian's desire is to be a part of a body of believers that is growing in their spiritual strength.

I think that is the desire that we have for the Bethel Grace body. That was the same desire that Paul had for the Christians in Rome, for the church in that great city back in the First Century. Paul did not plant that church. He had not even had the opportunity to visit them. Yet, his heart yearned for their strength.

He was so ecstatic about the fact that the Gospel had reached that First Century metropolis. He was thrilled to know that there were house churches that were there and thriving. He wanted them to be steady. He wanted them to be stable for the long run. He wanted the churches to be strong.

That is why Paul wrote this letter to the Romans. He could not be there in person to impart to them some spiritual gift to make them strong, like he stated back in his introduction, so he wrote this letter to explain the intricacies and the glories of the Gospel. He wanted them to be steadfast.

Now we come to the very last paragraph of this great letter that Paul wrote. I think at this point, he stopped dictating his message to his friend and scribe, Tertius, who we read

about a couple of weeks ago. Paul took up the pen himself. We know from the New Testament that it was his custom to write the doxology in his own hand at the end of his letters.

We see here just how it is that they could be strong and how he could move on with the confidence that they would, in fact, be strong. In this doxology, Paul entrusted them to the Lord.

Let's take at these closing words of the book of Romans. Romans Chapter 16 and Verses 25-27:

**<sup>25</sup>Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages <sup>26</sup>but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith- <sup>27</sup>to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen**

The book of Romans with all of its theology ends with this paragraph of doxology. In other words, all the study about God and His ways gave way to a burst of worship. Theology leads to doxology. As Paul brought glory to the Lord, we see that he fixed their gaze on God's ability to strengthen them.

Did you see this in Verse 15? Paul said:

**<sup>25</sup>Now to him who is able to strengthen you...**

Paul was confident that God was able.

The language of *strengthen* in this verse is translated from the Greek word *sterizo*. *Sterizo* has the nuance of *that which is able to establish*. While doing some reading on this passage of Scripture, it was interesting when I came to realize that the English word *steroid* is related to this Greek word *sterizo*. It is something that strengthens. It is talking about strengthening.

In the Lord, we find spiritual steroids to make us robust and strong and to give us staying power. But the good thing about these spiritual steroids is that they don't come with side effects that are negative. This is not strength that is artificial at all. It is true. It is robust. God is able to give spiritual strength to His people whatever it is that they are going through. God is the strength of our lives.

Likewise, churches collectively will go through seasons of difficulty as they serve God on this earth. It could be that cultures turn, and societies start to look down on and come against churches. Churches in communities of believers can go through difficult times, but when they are strong in the Lord, when they keep their focus on God, when they keep their gaze on Him and all His grace, they are going to be given the resources necessary to

remain true to their calling to be an outpost of Heaven here in a fallen world. We want to keep our eyes focused on God and the strength that He gives.

I noticed that in this passage of Scripture we are studying this morning that there is the repeated use of the phrase *according to*. It came up three times, twice in Verse 25 and a third time in Verse 26. So, we find that God is the One who is able to strengthen and sustain His people, and that the Lord's strengthening comes with certain priorities that are on the heart of God. It accords with His plan and His purpose.

It is not any church that remains steadfast in the Lord. There are local churches that do close their doors. Read what Jesus said to the seven churches of Asia Minor in Revelation Chapters 2 and 3. Their eyes were being taken off the Lord and on to other things. Jesus addressed them and said, "If you don't get your first love set on Me, and if your eyes are not where they need to be, I'm going to remove the lampstand, because you are not properly representing me." So, it is a church that keeps its eyes on the purposes and plans of the Lord that remains strong with the power of the Lord.

I think there are three priorities in the heart of God that Paul brought our attention to in this closing doxology and prayer of praise. As we stay aligned with these priorities of the Lord, it is my firm belief that He is going to keep filling us with His ability and power to do the things that He designs for us to do.

We want to have ongoing strength as a church, and to have it we need to stay focused on a few things. First, we need to stay focused on:

### **1. God's Gracious Message**

Let's see how Paul brought our attention to that in Verse 25.

**<sup>25</sup>Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ...**

God's power to establish a church is in keeping with the Gospel. It is tied to it. It accords with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and their devotion to His message.

That word *gospel* means *good news*. To boil it down to its very basics, the Gospel is that wonderful news that Jesus the Son of God came into the world to save sinners, and He rose from the grave on the third day, showing that life in Him is everlasting. That is the Good News!

The Good News is like a diamond that has so many different facets to it. People can come under the impression that the Gospel is the doorway by which people enter Christianity, but the fact of the matter is that the Gospel is the mansion that we live in. By grace, we enter in by faith in the Gospel, but then we find the teaching about Jesus, His death, and His provision for life for sinners is so well rounded.



There are so many different angles and aspects to it. There is so much in the Gospel that fortifies us, makes us healthy, and makes it so that we have enduring strength. We live in the power of the Gospel. So, we have the Good News of Jesus Christ that we must remain centered on if we are going to be healthy and strong as a church for the long term.

For one thing, we have forgiveness. The Gospel message teaches us that we are forgiven people. Our sins are taken away. Wasn't it so beautifully expressed in that song this morning. Those words reached into my heart. The hands that should discard me as a sinner, beckons me. Those Holy wounded hands beckon me come. By humble contrite faith in Jesus Christ we are 100% forgiven. This is the kind of grace that strengthen the soul.

Not only do we bask in the fact that we are forgiven by grace, but the knowledge of this forgiveness makes it so that we are forgiving people. This is the kind of community that God will bless and enrich, people that have grace and who are forgiven and forgiving. We are saved by grace and by grace we become gracious. This is all in the Gospel, and this the kind of community that is going to be blessed of the Lord, a community of people who have hearts of truth and mercy.

In the Gospel, we find that we are redeemed. That means that we have been saved from slavery to sin, both in its penalty and in its power. Brothers and sisters, we are those who have been set free. As we reflect on these truths, we gather power for the soul by the Spirit to become strong. It is centered on the Gospel, the Good News. It keeps on going.

In the Gospel, we have the language of being regenerated. We are born again. God gives us His Spirit. The Spirit comes to permanently indwell us. Now we have spiritual life, transforming us from now through eternity. The Good News is so full and rich. If there is going to be a church filled with people who are spiritually strong, and if this church itself is going to be strong in a sustained and ongoing way, we must keep our attention focused on the Gospel.

We are never going to put the Gospel on the periphery, Bethel Grace. The Gospel is the drum that we will beat with joy over and over, week in and week out, year in and year out, decade in and decade out until Jesus Christ choses to come back and bring us into Heaven. It is all about the Gospel, the Good News.

So, this is what Paul was saying. "Now to him who is able to strengthen you," to give you true spiritual steroids, "according to my gospel," as Paul said it, "and the preaching of Jesus Christ." Now, Paul was not preaching a gospel that was unique to him and different from what Peter and John and the other apostles were preaching, but in his letters, Paul always talked about how Jesus revealed it to him personally as His special ambassador to the Gentiles.

Paul had this sense of ownership with the gospel. He said it was his gospel and good news. Jesus saved him by it and He entrusted him with it. Wait a minute. Shouldn't this

church be filled with a gathering of people who say, “This is my Gospel. It is personal to me. Jesus has caused me to be born again by grace.”

The first priority is to stay focused on God’s gracious message. We continue and see a second priority that we need to stay focused on. For ongoing strength as a church, let’s keep our attention upon:

## 2. God’s Global Objective

This will give us something to do and keep us active. The Lord’s plan of redemption includes all the nations of the earth. As we continue in this paragraph of doxology we see this global plan addressed in terms of the wonderful mystery that has become so crystal clear in the age that we are living in. Verses 25 and 26:

**<sup>25</sup>Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages <sup>26</sup>but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations...**

Paul was talking about the mystery. The strengthening of the church is consistent with and according to the revelation of the mystery. Paul talked about this mystery all throughout his letters in the New Testament. In the New Testament use of the word *mystery*, it is not necessarily something that is hard to understand. That is not what the New Testament mystery is.

Rather, the mystery is something that was kept hidden in ages past. It was there in seed and kernel form, but now it blossomed and has been made crystal clear in this age of Christ. That is what we are talking about with a mystery in the New Testament.

The mystery that Paul was talking about here is most clearly revealed and stated back in the book of Ephesians in Chapter 3 and Verses 4-6. Here is the mystery. Paul said this to the Ephesians and all of us.

**<sup>4</sup>When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, <sup>5</sup>which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. <sup>6</sup>This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.**

In the context of Ephesians 2 and 3, Paul was talking about how that dividing wall of hostility that separated Jew and Gentile in that First Century world had been broken down. The great mystery is that now in Christ the Gentiles have equal footing and status. They are joint heirs with Christ and with all the Jewish people. Gentiles stand side by side with the Jewish brethren. All the nations of the earth are joined with the Jews as those who are saved by grace and have the status of son-ship, with full authority as sons of God.

This is the great mystery that so powerfully revolutionized the thinking of born again Pharisees like the Apostle Paul who had the sense that the nation of Israel was up on a pinnacle above all the other nations. No, God's plan was to raise up all nations in equal status with the nation of Israel. Jesus is the Sovereign Lord over a global church made of all the nations, joined together in unified love for the Lord.

A church that is going to remain strong is a church that is going to be attuned with this global objective of God that all the nations of the earth will be brought into this salvation. This is not universalism - that every single person who ever existed from every nation will be saved. It will be those who have been given grace and have repentance and faith in their hearts. They are the ones who will be brought into this salvation, and they are brought from all the nations of the earth.

It is a global salvation that God is bringing, and we need to be attuned with that. We need to rejoice in that. We need to celebrate the fact that Germans and Frenchmen, Austrians and Australians and Aborigines, Syrians and Iraqis, and every single group of people are being brought into the body of Christ, being saved and brought to a living faith in Jesus Christ. There cannot be the slightest hint of racial prejudice because we are all on equal footing before the Lord.

There is a global church that God is creating. Churches that are going to be strong are going to be attuned with that multiethnic nature of the communities that God will be creating. In each local church, you will have people from different cultures. They are going to have different cuisines. They are going to have different clothing choices. They are going to have different styles. They are going to have different accents. This is the work of the Lord, but what will combine them is that they all know and love the Lord Jesus Christ who has brought them into this glorious salvation.

Christians and churches that are going to be strong are going to be those who are linked to this, and gladly availing themselves to be a part of this. Some will go. Some will pray. Some will stay in the neighborhood. Some will go across the earth, but hearts are engaged in this.

Several weeks ago, we laid to rest the body of a sister in the Lord by the name of Mary Ferguson. Her body expired and her soul went to be with the Lord when, as far as her earthly years goes, she was 98 year's young. She was physically weakened, but this woman had a stability and strength of soul that was marvelous.

I remember visiting her home where she had a big bulletin board. On that board, she had about every missionary's picture you can think of. She was praying for them, and the nations they were sent into, and the people they were seeking to reach. She was a woman who had become physically frail through the years, but she was spiritually strong. She was attuned with this global objective of the Lord. May the Lord grant us with just that yearning to see a very diverse Bethel Grace Baptist Church, and people supporting the mission in its global extent.

For ongoing strength as a church, let us stay focused on God's global objective. Finally, here is a third priority that Paul brought to us in this passage of Scripture. Let us keep our attention focused on:

### **3. God's Glorious Purpose**

I want you to remember that God has a purpose for your life. That purpose is not necessarily to make sure that you experience the American dream with being a home owner here in Southern California with manicured lawns, a nice picket fence, and muffins and coffee every morning.

Those are gifts God may give. They are gifts that God may take away. But to give you those kinds of things may not be God's purpose for your life. God's purpose for your life is what? It is to make you like Jesus. It is to make you like Christ. The glorious purpose is that we should bear the resemblance of Christ in increasing measure through our years on this earth.

Do you remember how Paul stated it back in Romans Chapter 8:29?

**<sup>29</sup>For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son...**

That is God's great purpose in the life of each and every single one of His children. That is what He is seeking to carry out. It says in the preceding verse, Verse 28:

**<sup>28</sup>And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.**

That is God's purpose, and I think we need to read what is next in this doxology with that glorious purpose of the Lord in mind. It is all rooted in that opening phase in Verse 25:

**<sup>25</sup>Now to him who is able to strengthen you...**

Then the third *according to* is down in Verse 26.

**<sup>25</sup>Now to him who is able to strengthen you...**

**<sup>27</sup>...according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith- <sup>27</sup>to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen**

We read here that the command of God is to bring about the obedience of faith. That accords with His glorious purpose for our lives because it is through the obedience of faith that people become like Jesus. We learn the teachings and the commands of Jesus,

and the more we obey those teachings and commands, the more we resemble the Lord who gave them to us, the very One who redeemed us by His blood.

This is the second use of that wonderful phrase the *obedience of faith* in the book of Romans. We also heard that phrase in the opening greeting of this letter. In Chapter 1 and Verse 5, Paul said:

**<sup>5</sup>through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all nations.**

This language of the obedience of faith among all the nations of the earth must be important, because this book is literally enclosed by that phrase. It is the purpose statement to bring about this obedience of faith. This is vital and important.

New Testament scholars will say that grammatically this is a genitive of source. What that means is that this is obedience that flows out of faith. Those who have come to a true knowledge of Christ, will also come to desire in faith to walk in the ways of Christ, obeying the wonderful commands of Christ.

That is what this obedience of faith is all about. The Christian who has come to humble faith in Jesus knows that is not their own obedience that renders them in a condition that is acceptable before God. No, it is not works righteousness! We know that we are saved based on the obedience of Jesus, His obedience of living a perfect, righteous and sinless life. Then dying as a sacrifice for our sin.

It is that obedience that we are saved by. When we have true and genuine faith in Him, we want to walk with Him throughout this life and all that it holds. We come to understand as those now born again that He is the Lord, we are the servants. He is the King, we are the subjects. He is the Commander, we are the soldiers under His command. He is the Creator, we are the creation. He is the Pilot, we are the copilots going where He leads and takes us.

Jesus is the Lord. He is the Master. We are the learners who walk with Him. Genuine faith leads to this obedient desire to be with Jesus, and to have His presence pervading our lives through everything that we face, including blessings and sorrows. Sometimes there are tears of joy, sometimes tears of laughter, sometimes tears of pain, but through it all the genuine Christian is the one who says, "I want the presence of Christ abiding upon my life in everything. I want Him to fill me up." It is this relationship with Jesus Christ that issues forth in this obedience of faith that Paul was talking about.

It is when Christians and churches are centered in on this kind of obedience of faith that they are made strong of soul, that they are stabilized in the things of the Lord whatever befalls their path in this life. This is what leads to spiritual fortitude, walking in the ways of the Lord.

This is God's purpose. This is part of the Great Commission found in Matthew Chapter 16 and Verses 18-20.

**<sup>18</sup>And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."**

Part of the Great Commission is reaching all the people groups and teaching them to obey the Living Word of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is part of God's glorious purpose. By this, people will grow in the Lord and be made strong in the faith.

Churches centered in on this purpose will be strong. This is talking about the full counsel of God. Jesus said to teach them to obey everything He has commanded. Where you have a church that humbly goes before the Lord with the Book open and hearts ready to receive, you are going to have a church that is strong and steadfast through the tides that go in and out in this society.

Bethel Grace, praise God that we are a church centered in the Word. I pray that this will always be the case. We will do this with a desire not to be people filled with head knowledge, although I advocate head knowledge. We don't want to be ignorant Christians. We don't want to be those who are biblically illiterate. We want to have the facts without big heads.

Instead, we want to have heads that are informed and that lead to hearts that become large and full, which leads to lives that are transformed. That is why we are studying the Book. We want to have its effect on our lives. It is a glorious purpose to keep us growing and growing in Christ.

The book of Romans is all about the Good News of Jesus Christ. One final aspect of its Good News is that we are going to be rejoicing and bringing glory to the Lord not for time, but for eternity. So, we read in Verse 27 in view of all the things written in this book:

**<sup>27</sup>to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen**

By grace we are going to be a part of that company, and doing just that. That is Good News. We are going to know each other for quite a while, brothers and sisters. Isn't that great? Forevermore we will give glory to the Lord.

Let's continue in that flow now as we pray and take this time at the Lord's Supper, enjoying the presence of Jesus together. Will you please join me in prayer?