The Marks of True Spiritual Service

Romans 1:8-13

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In Romans 1:8-13 Paul said, “First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit…” which is a reference to his inner being, his whole heart “…in the gospel of His Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers, making request if, by some means, now at last I may find a way in the will of God to come to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift, so that you may be established—that is, that I may be encouraged together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me. Now I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that I often planned to come to you (but was hindered until now), that I might have some fruit among you also, just as among the other Gentiles.”

Someone said, “When God measures a man, He puts the tape around his heart, not his head.” I like that. Paul the apostle was a man with a large heart. You can look at Paul and learn a lot about the heart of a servant, the attitude we should have as a genuine, authentic servant of the Lord. So we will see the open heart of Paul.

Verses 8-13 is in between what is known as the opening salutation, verses 1-7, and the theme of the epistle, verses 13-17.

Paul wanted the Roman readers to know four things. Number one, he wanted them to know that he cared about them. Number two, he wanted to come to them. Number three, the reason why he had not come to them. Number four, why he wanted to come to them.

This may not sound that exciting, but when we look at the heart of Paul and how it speaks to our own hearts, we will see what the qualities of a genuine servant of God should be. Verse 9 is the key thought: he says, “God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit” or “with all my heart.” With all his being, Paul was serving God.

Many people serve the Lord with many different motives or reasons. Some people serve the Lord out of legalism; they feel like they have to perform and work hard, get God to be pleased with them. They are legalistic in their service to God. Some serve God out of fear; they fear what God might do to them if they don’t serve the Lord. Some serve the Lord out of a desire for prestige or the esteem of men; they want recognition from men. Some serve the Lord for position and power over other individuals. Some serve the Lord because of peer pressure; their friends pressure them to serve the Lord. None of these are valid motives for serving the Lord.

In Ephesians 6:6 Paul says, “As bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.” As God’s servant when we are serving God, we should be doing it from the heart. I believe that God wants every one of us, as God’s people, to be His servants and to serve Him from our hearts.

What kind of heart should we have in our service to God? I am going to give you five ways we should have a heart of service for God. First, we should have a thankful heart. The true servant of the Lord must have a thankful heart, verse 8. Paul said, “First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all.” Some said Paul was from the South; he said, “you all.” I don’t know about that. “…that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world.” Paul was a man with a thankful heart, and in all of Paul’s letters to all the churches he was thankful.

Paul’s letter to the church in Galatia. That was the only church Paul was not thankful for. He rebuked them saying, “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth?” (Galatians 3:1). He wasn’t happy with those Galatians, but generally Paul would open his epistle with a thanksgiving, as he did here with the church at Rome, even though it was a church he had never been to at that time. Even though they were Gentiles, they were brothers and sisters in Christ, and he was thankful for them, verse 8.

Who was he thanking for the Romans? “I thank my God for you all.” He made it very personal. And how did he thank God? “Through Jesus Christ.” The only way to really come to God, to approach God, to worship or praise God is through the mediator work of Jesus Christ. Jesus is our Mediator. “There is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5). So Paul is thanking God, and it is coming through his desire to serve Jesus Christ.

He said that their “faith is spoken of throughout the whole world.” What was it that gave Paul a thankful heart? Paul was thankful for their faith.

One of the reasons why we don’t give thanks to God is because we’re looking at ourselves, at others, at our circumstances and we’re not looking at God. Paul was looking to God and focusing on God. When we look at God, when we look to God we cannot but be thankful for what God has done, for the blessings He has given us.

And it’s interesting that Paul is thankful for the blessings that are in the lives of others. Are you glad and rejoice and thank God for what He is doing in other people’s lives? Not just your life, but in the lives of other people?

What was Paul thankful for? I like this, verse 8. He was thankful for their “faith.” This is not the faith that we put in Christ for salvation. It is the faith for persevering and trust, and it brings spiritual strength and growth in our lives.

All the way through Romans, we will be studying the doctrine of justification by faith; how a holy, righteous God justifies or declares righteous wicked, guilty sinners. That is through faith in Jesus Christ. We are saved by faith.

But it doesn’t stop there. Once you get saved, you must then live a life of faith and trust in God. “The just shall live by faith” (Hebrews 10:38). You must walk by faith, you must live by faith, you must put your faith in God. So what Paul was thankful for was not just their saving faith; he was thankful that they were living by faith.

Are you saved by faith? Then are you living by faith? D.L. Moody said, “A little faith will take your soul to heaven, but a lot of faith will bring heaven to your soul.” So we need to learn to walk in faith and trust in dependence on God.

So Paul is thankful and rejoicing in God through Jesus that their “faith is spoken of throughout the whole world.” He may be speaking in hyperbole to some degree, but this phrase was often used for all the Roman world. All the Roman world at that time had heard of the faith of the believers in the city of Rome. Paul doesn’t mention the Romans’ beautiful buildings, their budget, their church programs, the flashy, worship team they have, the church lighting, pews and air conditioning; he mentions their faith. Those things are all wonderful, but what caused Paul to be thankful was that they were people who put their faith and trust in God to be saved, to be sanctified and to serve the Lord.

As a pastor of Revival Christian Fellowship, I thank God for your faith. I thank God for your faith and trust in the Lord. It makes me so rejoice when I hear about a member of our church who is going through difficulty, but they are trusting in God, they are putting their faith in God and giving thanks to God.

“Do I have a thankful heart? Am I focused on God?” If you are looking at yourself, you’ll be depressed. If you look at the Lord, you will be blessed.

Second, the quality or mark of a true, spiritual service to God is a servant’s heart, verse 9. “For God is my witness….” Because he’s talking about motive in service where you really can’t see his motive, he says that God sees and God knows. So he says, “For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of His Son….” In verse 1, he called it “the gospel of God”; now he calls it “the gospel of His Son.” Then we’ll see he calls it “the gospel of Christ” and “my gospel.” Paul is all about the Gospel. The key words in verse 9 are “I serve with my spirit.”

The word “serve” is always used in the New Testament as religious service. The Greek word used in the Septuagint referred to the service of the priest in the Temple, including also the idea of worship. It is sometimes translated “worship” in the New Testament.

I like that thought. A genuine servant’s heart is a thankful heart and a worshipful heart. In Philippians 3:3, Paul is talking about the fact that they are the true circumcision, “who worship God in the Spirit,” and they don’t trust in the flesh. He is describing a true Christian. It’s the same Greek phrase there: worship God in spirit. It’s serve or worship; the two are coupled together. He’s talking about our worship to God.

It’s also used in Romans 12:1, which is a summary of this whole text, of this thought. Paul said, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.” “Service” here is the same Greek word, which could be translated “worship.” It’s a way of worshipping God: by serving Him. Serving and worship cannot be separated.

Paul said that he serves with all his heart. There is no distinction between the sacred and the

secular for the believer. In Colossians 3:23-24, Paul said, “Whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and…” here’s the key “…not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ.” If you don’t serve the Lord and do it unto the Lord, you’re going to get discouraged in service and give up. You won’t really be able to keep serving if you’re serving people instead of serving the Lord. You need to keep your focus on why you’re serving. You’re serving the Lord from your heart.

Is your service sincere? Is it whole-hearted? Do you have a thankful heart? Do you have a servant’s heart?

Third, the quality of true, spiritual service to God is a prayerful heart. We want to be thankful, worshipful and prayerful. Verses 9-10 say, “Without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers.” I like that. Paul was a man of prayer. When he was in prison and he couldn’t preach, he could pray. There are times you can’t preach, but you can always pray and talk to God. “…making request if, by some means, now at last I may find a way in the will of God to come to you.”

I want you to know that there is a link between prayer and service. You can’t separate prayer from service. If you pray right, you’ll serve right. If you’re serving right, you will be praying right. The two go together. Prayer must direct our service. We must be doing the Lord’s work in the Lord’s way.

Although sometimes we must do more than pray; we need to serve and get busy. Sometimes we pray, “Lord, I pray for my neighbors. You know how pagan they are and how heathen they are! So God, send someone to share the Gospel with them.”

Then the Lord says, “Why don’t you go share the Gospel with them?”

You say, “Lord, I pray you’ll send my neighbor. Send Pastor Miller to go talk to them!” Why don’t you just go tell them about the Lord?!

“No; I want someone else to do it!”

You can’t really pray if you’re not willing to be the answer to your prayer. Someone comes up to you and says, “I just need $10 this week. I gotta do this. Do you have $10 in your wallet?”

“Let me pray for you, brother.” “Lord, I just pray. Jesus, I pray that You will provide for them.”

The Lord says, “You’ve got $10 in your wallet. Why don’t you just give it to him?”

“I bind you, Satan, right now in the name of Jesus!”

You’re willing to pray for something that you’re not willing to be the answer for?! Rather, say, “Lord, if you want to use me, if you want me to be an answer to my prayer, then somehow use me.”

So prayer and service go together. Prayer changes us so we become the kind of people God can trust with the answer to prayer to accomplish His purposes.

I want to break it down further for you with some important characteristics of Paul's prayer life, from verses 9-10. Number one, Paul was consistent. He used the phrase "without ceasing." The Bible tells us to "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:16). That doesn't mean you have to pray on your knees with your hands folded and your eyes closed. It just means you have to constantly be talking to God in your heart. Paul prayed without ceasing. We ought not to faint when we pray (Luke 18:1). Keep praying.

Number two, Paul made it a personal prayer. He said, "I make mention of you." It's wonderful when you can keep a prayer list. Before my Grandmother went to be with the Lord, she became shut in and couldn't get to church. So she called her pastor up and asked him to give her a list of names of people in the church who were shut-ins and couldn't get out and needed prayer. She wanted their phone numbers, and she called them every day and prayed with them and for them over the phone. She was used by God to pray when she couldn't get out and do other things in service for the Lord.

So Paul makes mention of them personally, but he had never been to Rome at this time. Many of them he didn't know. That doesn't matter. You can pray for people in other parts of the world you've seen but don't know.

Number three, it was a specific prayer, verse 10. He said, "that I may find a way…to come to you."

Number four, it was a submissive prayer: "in the will of God."

So Paul's prayer was consistent—"without ceasing"; it was personal—"I make mention of you"; it was specific—"I may find a way." Paul wanted to have a prosperous journey. He wanted to go to Rome, and he wanted them to know he wanted to go to Rome. But he wanted to have a prosperous journey when he traveled to Rome. And he wanted it to be "in the will of God."

The purpose of prayer is not to get your will done on earth; it's to get heaven's will done on earth. We don't try to overcome God's reluctance; we lay hold of God's willingness. We have to grow in our prayer life to the point where we are willing for God's will to come. Paul mentions God's will in verse 10.

We don't need to be afraid of God's will. Sometimes when we pray, we say, "God, I want you to do…. Oh, God, please!" Rather we should pray, "Not my will but Thine be done." When Jesus taught us to pray in the Lord's Prayer, He said, "Our Father, in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:9-10). It takes faith to pray like that, to surrender your will to God. You can pray and you can ask, seek and knock (Matthew 7:7), but what we want more than anything is the will of God.

"Am I serving the Lord with a thankful heart? Am I serving the Lord with a servant's heart? Am I

serving the Lord by being prayerful over others? Do I pray for those who need help?

Fourth, a mark of true, spiritual service is a longing heart, verses 11-12. The longing is for spiritual fruit. “For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift, so that you may be established—that is, that I may be encouraged together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me.” Here is Paul’s shepherd heart. He longed to get to Rome so he could encourage them.

By the way, Paul eventually did get to Rome, but not the way he had hoped to get to Rome. And he did have a prosperous journey; Paul was arrested, put in chains, put on a Roman ship because he appealed to Caesar and he was shipped to Rome as a prisoner. On the way, he was shipwrecked and bitten by a snake. I would have been griping and complaining. But Paul said he was thankful; God wanted him in Rome, and he got to Rome. God wanted him in Rome, he didn’t have the money, so God got him arrested. So Paul had a longing heart and wanted to see the Romans.

Why did Paul want to see them? Number one, he wanted to impart a “spiritual gift” to them. I think the idea is that Paul wanted to use a gift God had given him to minister to the Roman Christians. I don’t believe he was going there to lay hands on them to give them a gift; that’s a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit. You can pray and ask, but the Holy Spirit gives to every man as He wills (1 Corinthians 12:11). Paul wanted to use the gift God had given him to encourage and strengthen them.

But he doesn’t say what that gift was. Most likely it was his gift of teaching, so he would go to them to teach them the Word of God. As a result, they would grow and mature and become strong believers. God has called pastors to be teachers, so God’s people may be fed and grow in their knowledge of the Word of God.

Number two, he wanted to go to them to use his gift to minister to them, so they would be strong in the Lord. Verse 11 says, “so that you may be established.” That means “strengthened, grounded” and “growing in the Lord.”

Number three, he wanted to experience the encouragement that he would receive from them, verse 12. That is a great picture of Paul’s humility. He’s not saying that he wanted to come to them as the great, gifted apostle to exercise his gift to them so as to build them up. Rather, he wanted mutual comfort and encouragement. Paul wanted them to encourage and edify him and build him up. “…that is, that I may be encouraged together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me.” So it wasn’t just a one-way ministry. Rather it was, “I minister to you and you minister to me.”

When you minister to others, they minister to you. When you are giving to others, they give to you. When you are a blessing to others, they become a blessing to you. So it’s a two-way ministry; we’re being built up and edified together. So Paul had a longing heart to go to minister to them using the gifts God gave him.

Do you have a longing heart? Do you recognize what gift God has given to you? Do you long to bless others? To encourage others? To build up others? Then you're not selfish and self-seeking.

The gifts of the Spirit are from the Holy Spirit and are given to you for the good of others in the body of Christ, for the building up of the body of Christ and to the glory of God. They are not jewelry to fight over or to show off. They are tools to build with. If God has gifted you, use that gift to bless and to build up others for the glory of God.

Fifth, the mark of a true, spiritual service to God is a purposeful heart, verse 13. We have a longing heart to minister to others, and we have a desire to bear fruit for the glory of God. "Now I do not want you to be unaware, brethren…" or "ignorant, brethren" in the King James translation "…that I often planned to come to you (but was hindered until now), that I might have some fruit among you also, just as among the other Gentiles." One of Paul's favorite statements is, "I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren." Someone said, "It is the largest Christian denomination in America."

"I often planned to come to you…" so he wanted them to know he wanted to go to them "…(but was hindered until now), that I might have some fruit among you also, just as among the other Gentiles." Paul was an apostle to the Gentiles. He wanted to go to the Romans, God hindered him from going, but he longed to do that. He wanted to bear fruit among them. The "fruit" Paul was referring to was no doubt evangelism. He wanted to see people saved, born again and coming to know the Savior.

attitude fruit, which is character-building; action fruit, which is serving the Lord; and addition fruit, which is evangelism, which is winning other people to Christ.

Jesus said, in John 15:16, "You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain." God saved you not just to take you to heaven when you die but to bear fruit on earth right now as you live for Him.

So Paul had purpose. And I do believe, as Christians, we need to have purpose in our hearts: "I want to bear fruit for God."

Years ago I saw a bumper sticker that I really liked that said, "God wants spiritual fruit, not religious nuts." That is so good! We should want the same. If there is anything I want for this church, it's spiritual fruit, not a bunch of religious nuts. I want fruit for the glory of God.

"Am I thankful to God through Jesus Christ? Am I looking to God? Am I looking at God in His Word? Am I thankful for the blessings of God—in my life and in others? Am I serving with a worshipful heart?" You cannot separate service from worship; everything we do is an act of worship. Ask yourself, "Am I prayerful?" If you're busy serving God but you're not praying, you can't do much until you pray. Prayer comes first. Prayer is foundational. Also ask yourself, "Am I humble? Do I recognize I don't have a one-way ministry; that others minister to me, and I minister to them?"

I can’t tell you how many times you’ve ministered to me—the encouragement, the prayers, the things you’ve said, the blessings God has done in your life that you’ve shared with me. What an encouragement that is to my heart!

Finally, ask yourself, “Is my life purposeful?” What is your purpose in life? A big house? Drive a nice car? Prestige, power and influence? Wealth? Pleasure? Exotic vacations?

Or is it to bear fruit for the glory of God? That should be our passion. That should be our purpose. As Paul said, “Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service” or “worship.”