

ROMANS SERIES #3

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, October 1, 1995, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

ROMANS 1:5-11

THE MINISTRY OF INTERCESSORY PRAYER

At the outset, let me tell you about letter writing in the ancient world. In New Testament times, letters were fairly short because paper was extremely hard to get. Paper was made from papyrus which was a reed that was cultivated in the mud of the Nile Delta in Egypt. It is from the word “papyrus” that we get our word “paper.” And it was expensive stuff. What was even more expensive was when they wrote on vellum, which is made from animal skins. So, because of the scarcity and the expense of these materials, you didn’t write long letters. The average letter in the Roman Empire at that time was about 150 words in length. Cicero once wrote a treatise of 4,500 words, and everyone thought that was very lengthy. But Paul, when he writes to the Romans, uses 7,100 words. He had a lot to say, hadn’t he?!

Now the section that deals with intercessory prayer begins at 1:8; but before we get to that, I want to comment briefly on verses 5-7.

(a) The PURPOSE of Paul’s life is found in verse 5 — “Through Him (i.e., Christ) and for His name’s sake we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith.” The purpose of Paul’s life was to be obedient to the Lord Who had called him to be an apostle.

The Book of Romans was written by a slave to the saints about the Savior, and Paul says that he has received from the Lord two things: Grace and apostleship. Now apostleship was his call, and grace was his supply. What is grace? As someone has said, it is: G-R-A-C-E — “God’s Riches at Christ’s Expense.” Grace is everything that God does for us and gives to us because of Jesus! God, by His grace, gives us what we need, not what we deserve. Let me say that grace and apostleship always go together. Where God guides, He provides. When God orders anything, He will always pay the bill. That’s one way to know whether or not God is leading and guiding you: Does God supply? For example, if God calls a young believer to be a preacher or a missionary or a doctor or a lawyer, or whatever, you can be sure that God will see to it that the means are provided for him or her to go to college and graduate school and will provide a sphere of service when the training is completed. God never tells us to do something that we cannot do. When you receive apostleship, you always receive grace. So, what God requires, He supplies.

Now, as an apostle, Paul was to “call people from among all the Gentiles.” This seems to imply that the Christians in Rome were predominantly Gentile since he specifically mentions them. What he is affirming is that the Gospel is for everybody. He himself was a patriotic Jew who retained his love for his people and longed passionately for their salvation. At the same time, he had been called to be the apostle to the Gentiles. We, too, if we’re to be committed to world mission, will have to be liberated from all pride of race and class, and acknowledge that

God's Gospel is for everybody, without exception and without distinction. This is a major theme of Romans.

And Paul continues by saying that he has received his apostleship to call people to "the obedience that comes from faith." Now this phrase highlights a gospel truth we must never forget, namely, that a true and living faith in Jesus Christ necessarily includes within itself two things: (1) An act of submission and absolute surrender, because faith's object is Jesus Christ our LORD; and (2) It leads inevitably into a lifetime of obedience. That is why the response Paul looked for was a total unreserved commitment to Christ which he called "the obedience that comes from faith." That is our answer to those who argue that it is possible to accept Jesus as Savior without surrendering to him as Lord. It is not possible to do that.

There are those who say, for example, that Christians are free from the dictates of the Law of God and that they are not to be in bondage to the Law. Listen to what one popular writer, Hal Lindsey, says, "The Law holds as little obligation for Christians as the highway code holds for birds"! Well, that statement is for the birds, and it is pure heretical nonsense. Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law... but to fulfil it." (Matthew 5:17) To honor and obey the moral law of God is part of what it means to acknowledge the Lordship of Christ. Remember — Christ will be Lord of all, or He won't be Lord at all.

(b) The PEOPLE of Paul's concern are found in verses 6 and 7, "And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ." So, these Roman Christians were "the called ones." When God saves individuals, He is the One Who seeks them out. Do you think it was your idea to seek the Lord? It was not. It was God's idea, and He sought you as did the shepherd in our Lord's parable, out on the hills seeking the one sheep that had been lost (Luke 15:1-7). God gave you the faith to believe.

In verse 7 we discover that these "called ones" lived in Rome. Now Rome was the seat of the Roman Emperor and of Emperor worship. It was perhaps the most wicked city of that day, and yet there were committed Christians who had been called to salvation even in Rome. We are told in Philippians 4:22 that there were Christians even in Caesar's Palace — that is, Caesar's Palace in Rome, not in Las Vegas! You'd have trouble finding a Christian out there! But the point is, if you could be a Christian in Rome, you can be a Christian in Washington, D.C., and Northern Virginia. Don't ever say that it is impossible to serve the Lord and be His witness even in that office where you work.

Notice too that these Christians in Rome were "called to be saints." Their old name, before they were saved, was "sinners." Their new name is "saints." Now what's the difference between a saint and a sinner? The SAVIOR! He's the difference! Now sometimes we get the idea that an exceptionally fine Christian is a "saint," but a person who is a run of the mill believer is not a saint. But that is not true. A saint is simply one who has truly received Jesus as Savior and Lord and who, therefore, has been made to be "different" from unbelievers, "separated unto God," delivered from sin's guilt and power; for that is what "saint" means, someone who is "different," "set apart" for the service of God. So, all Christians are "saints"; not "Latter Day Saints," but "every day of the week saints"! So, we have Saint Jerry down there, and Saint Helen, and Saint Hilton, and Saint Paul!

In the Roman Catholic Church, they sometimes decide to “canonize” a person, that is, make that person officially a “saint” of the Church. Undoubtedly, they will institute this process for Mother Teresa sometime following her death. Why? Because they will say, “She lived such a holy life, serving the poor with such devotion, that she deserves to be called a “saint of the Catholic Church.” They appoint a commission to study the life of the proposed “saint,” and among its members is one called “the devil’s advocate.” His task is to examine the life of this individual, and he brings up everything bad he can find about this person. Others on the commission find out all the good things the person may have done and any miracles that may have been performed by this holy person. And if the devil’s advocate does not have a strong enough case, and if the positives about the person are overwhelming, then finally, by decree of the Church, this person is “canonized,” that is, given the title of “saint.”

I’m glad I don’t have to gain sainthood that way because the devil’s advocate would have a field day with me! I’m glad I can say with Paul, “Who shall bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God Who justifies.” (Rom. 8:33) Praise God our sins are gone; they are washed away by the blood of Jesus, and we are immediately made acceptable to God because of what Jesus has done for us.

So, we see the purpose of Paul’s life in verse 5; the people of his concern in verses 6 and 7; and now,

(c) The PRAYER of his heart, beginning in verse 8. I want to speak today primarily about intercessory prayer because I don’t know of anything that’s more needed in my life or in the life of Faith Church than intercessory prayer.

Notice in verse 8 the ESSENCE of intercessory prayer. “I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all.” (Was Paul a Southerner? He says “I thank God for y’all”! We can be sure, however, that he wasn’t a Texan, because he says in Phil. 4:11, “I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content”!) So, what is intercessory prayer? It is (1) prayer to God; (2) it is through Christ; and (3) it is for others.

1. Intercessory Prayer is to God. “I thank my God, through Jesus Christ, for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world.” Here was a church that was famous not for its stately architecture, its magnificent music, its famous preacher, or its huge budget; but for its faith, and Paul was so grateful for this. Now the essence of intercessory prayer is that God is your God. He says, I thank MY God.” That means that Paul knew the Lord personally. He didn’t just know about Him; He really knew Him because of his personal relationship with Christ. So intercessory prayer is (1) to God.

2. Intercessory prayer is through Christ. “I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all.” Now to thank God “through Jesus Christ” is to pray “in Jesus’ name.” In John 14:13-14 Jesus said, “Whatever you ask in My name, I will do, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask Me for anything in My name, and I will do it.”

You say, “I offered a prayer in Jesus’ name, and He didn’t answer it.” I suspect we don’t

know exactly what it means to ask “in Jesus’ name,” because surely Jesus is to be believed when He made that amazing statement. Notice — (a) To ask “in Jesus’ name” means to ask as His disciple. We have to be born again and say “I thank my God” — that is, we must belong to the Lord. (b) But most importantly, to ask “in Jesus’ name” means that above everything else our prayer must have as its paramount purpose that our heavenly Father might be glorified. Only what will advance God’s cause and enhance His glory is certainly guaranteed to us.

So, if I say, “Lord, I pray that you will give me a pink Cadillac, and I pray for this in Jesus’ name, will God answer? Yes, and He will say “No,” because I seriously doubt that the Father would be glorified by me tooling around in a pink Cadillac! Because I say “in Jesus name” doesn’t make it in Jesus’ name. Abraham Lincoln asked a little boy, “If a dog has four legs and you called his tail a leg, how many legs would he have?” And the little fellow said, “Well, he’d have five.” And Lincoln said, “No, he’d just have four because no matter what you call his tail, it’s still a tail.” So, saying your prayer is “in Jesus’ name” does not make it “in Jesus’ name.” These words are not magical at all. But when I really pray in Jesus’ name,” I’m acting in His place, as His agent, with His authority behind my prayer; and that means that it must be Jesus Who is telling me to pray this way — I’m acting on His behalf, and God is going to answer that prayer.

3. Intercessory prayer is for others. “I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you.” Let’s face it, most of our prayers are for ourselves, aren’t they? But Paul was praying here for people he had never met! Now sometimes we act as if we’re praying for others when in reality we’re praying for ourselves. You’ve heard of the girl who prayed, “Dear Lord, I’m so concerned about my mother who needs a son-in-law. Would you please give her a wonderful, healthy, wealthy, handsome son-in-law?!” Do parents pray for the salvation of a prodigal son because of his never-dying soul, or simply because they want peace and respectability in the home. Now there’s nothing wrong in praying for personal needs because God is glorified when our personal needs are met; but there is something definitely wrong in praying for selfish needs. But even when we’re praying for personal needs, we have not risen to the highest level of prayer which is intercessory prayer. So, what is the essence of intercessory prayer? It is to God, through Christ, and for others.

Now notice the CHARACTERISTICS of intercessory prayer. Five of them are outlined in these verses.

1. It is SELFLESS prayer. Verse 8 says, “First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world.” — All of you; your faith. He had never met them, but he was concerned about them. Tell me — how concerned are you for Christians you have never met? How concerned are you for some need on some foreign mission field where you have never been? Do you pray for fellow EPC Christians in Argentina; or the believers in Eastern Europe; or the courageous saints in the house churches in Communist China. Intercessory prayer is selfless prayer.

2. It is SECRET prayer. Verse 9 says, “For God is my Witness, Whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of His Son, how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times.” Paul had to call God to be his Witness because no one else heard Paul’s secret

prayers. Jesus says in Matthew 6:6, “When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father Who is unseen. Then your Father, Who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” You see, Paul knew how to pray in secret where only God was his Witness; and the secret of a great Christian is not how well he performs in public, but how well he prays in private. To be great for God you must be much with God. Paul knew how to get alone with God and that was why he was the great Christian he was. So, one great secret of intercession is letting God be your Witness. How much time do you spend with God in secret prayer, when only He is your Witness?

3. It is STEADFAST prayer. Verse 9 says, “. . .how constantly (without ceasing KJV) I remember you in my prayers at all times.” So many of us don’t know the power of steadfast prayer. But Paul never gave up in praying for others. Jesus said, “Ask, and you shall receive; seek, and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened to you.” (Luke 11:9) But the verbs in the Greek really say, “Keep on asking; keep on seeking; keep on knocking. Remember how Jesus taught in Luke 11:5-8 about that man who went to a friend at midnight and said, “Friend, lend me three loaves for I’ve had some unexpected visitors and I don’t have food to set before them.” Now Jesus is talking here about intercessory prayer. He’s talking about getting some bread to give to a hungry person; and the bread represents “the bread of life,” and the hungry people represent people who have special needs, and you and I are the ones who are supposed to know how to go to our heavenly Father and get the bread we need to give to these people. This man went at midnight, banging on his neighbor’s locked door. The neighbor was provoked and shouted down, “Hey, cool it buddy. I’m in bed with my children; the door is bolted; I just can’t help you this time.” But the man wouldn’t give up. And Jesus says, “But I’ll tell you this — though he won’t do it as a friend, if you keep knocking long enough, he will get up and give you everything you want, just because of your persistence.” And then Jesus adds the punch line — “And so it is with prayer: Keep on asking, and you will keep on getting.” So steadfast prayer is bold, audacious, daring, shameless. It means storming the gates of heaven! Most of us don’t know how to get hold of God for our unsaved loved ones and friends that way, do we? But Paul did.

4. It is SURRENDERED prayer. Notice verse 10 — “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.” (NKJV) You see, when you pray for somebody else, you had better be prepared and willing to be part of the answer. I believe it is hypocritical when you pray for someone to be saved and not be willing to witness to that person. Prayer is not a substitute for action. Prayer is that which empowers our action. But Paul says, “Look, I’m praying for you, but I’m also praying that I myself may become a part of the answer.” He says, “I want to come to Rome; I’ve got something to tell you. I want to strengthen you in the faith, and I’m willing by any means to do it.”

You know, of course, that Paul didn’t reach Rome till three years later, and he came in chains as a prisoner to be tried before the imperial court of Caesar. He had appealed to Caesar because he was a Roman citizen who had been falsely accused before the court of King Agrippa (see Acts 26). Did you know that only one in five people in the Roman Empire were actually Roman citizens? And Paul, through his father, had been a free-born citizen of the Empire.

Isn't it ironic that Paul has said in the letter that "by some means" he might find a way in the will of God to come to Rome. Obviously, God's will was for Paul to come to Rome in chains. He had paid the price. Do you know why some of our prayers are not answered? We won't pay the price. I've known parents who wanted to see their children come to know the Lord, and they wouldn't even live a consecrated life before those children — they would bicker and fuss and fight just like ungodly unbelievers. We pray for loved ones to be saved, and we won't even witness to them. Now Paul prayed, and his prayer was a surrendered prayer. He would come to Rome "by some means"; and he didn't mind if he came even as a prisoner to stand before the infamous Emperor Nero. And God used Paul in Rome as you will discover if you read the last two verses of the Acts of the Apostles. And finally —

5. It was a SPECIFIC prayer. Notice in verse 11 — "I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong — that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith." Paul had perhaps heard of some particular needs in their life, or perhaps some weaknesses in the church, and he wanted to come and bless them in a specific way. And because he prayed specifically, his prayer was answered. I believe that some of us just don't know how to pray specifically, and the reason we don't pray specifically is that we're not praying in the Spirit. You know how a person prays when he's not in the Spirit — he prays like this — "Lord, bless the service this morning. Lord, heal the sick people. Lord, take care of those who are in need. Save the lost. Amen." That's a safe prayer, isn't it?! You'll never need to admit that that prayer won't be answered! But you could never prove it was answered, could you? It's just a general prayer. It's like a shotgun prayer, with the pellets flying everywhere in general and nowhere in particular.

You say, "How can I learn to pray specifically?" I'll tell you how — by getting a burden for someone who really needs your prayers. It's the difference between a shotgun and a rifle. With a rifle, the bullet is aimed at one specific target. And if you're not praying for specific individuals and specific causes, you're not engaging in the best form of intercessory prayer. If you are truly in the will of God, the Holy Spirit will lay a burden upon your heart to impel you to pray for some particular person or cause. Have you a burden upon your heart for some relative, some friend, some fellow worker, who doesn't know Christ?

Have you a burden for the support of some missionary at home or abroad? If not, ask the Lord right now to give you such a concern so that you may experience the joy and the challenge of intercessory prayer. Remember — it all hinges on that phrase — "My God" — "I thank my God..."

Is He your God? If He's not, then you're not on praying ground.

AMEN.