

**April 7, 2015**

Romans 1:8 (NASB), ***“First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world.”***

Many people spend a tremendous amount of time serving the Lord or serving the church or doing “good” works. This is a good thing in general but there are many people who serve for the wrong reasons, or for superficial reasons. In Romans 1:8-15 the apostle Paul suggests to us nine marks or evidences of what true spiritual service looks like.

The first mark in view here is in verse 8 and it is that of a thankful spirit. Paul by the grace of God has this mark in abundance. He was thankful to God for what God had done for him and what God had and was going to do through Him. Paul was also thankful for what God was doing through other believers. There is a tendency in evangelical circles sometimes to not appreciate and be thankful for what God is doing through other believers, ministries, and churches. As Christ followers we are to rejoice with those who God is using to bring sinners to salvation.

Paul wrote, ***“I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you.”*** Paul’s thankfulness was an intimate and personal thankfulness. First of all this is because of Paul’s closeness to God that he is able to write ***“I thank my God.”*** There is no way that a pagan would have made a statement like this. Most of the Jews of Paul’s day would not have addressed the Lord that way either. For the apostle Paul, God was not some theological abstraction but a beloved Savior and a close friend. Friends we serve a God who is a personal and intimate God not a distant God who cares little for us. The God of the Bible is a God who loves His people intimately and desires fellowship with them.

Paul gives thanks here ***“through Jesus Christ,”*** the one Mediator for all of eternity between God and man. In John 14:6 Jesus said, ***“No one comes to the Father but through Me.”*** If you are a believer in Jesus Christ then you have the right to address the God of heaven and the creator of all things as ***“my God.”*** 1 Timothy 2:5 says, ***“There is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man of Christ Jesus.”***

Friends it is because we have been given access to the Father only ***“through Jesus Christ”*** and because of this it says in Hebrew 4:16, ***“Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”***

Paul’s thankfulness was also intimate because of his spiritual intimacy with fellow believers, even to those in Rome who he really didn’t know all that well. At the writing of this letter Paul had never been to Rome. ***“I thank my God... for you all,”*** that is, for ***“all”*** the believers in the church at Rome. His gratitude was impartial and all-encompassing, making no distinctions.

In all of Paul’s letters to the churches and individuals Paul shares his thankfulness for those to whom he writes. The only exception was the letter to the church in Galatia, which had defected from the true gospel of grace to a works based system of righteousness. The other churches were by no means perfect, which is apparent since Paul wrote most of his letters for the purpose of correction because of unholy living, incorrect doctrine or often times both. But even when he

would write very sternly he seemed to always find something in those churches to be thankful for.

Paul didn't let his circumstances effect whether or not he was thankful either. Some years later when he was a prisoner under house arrest in Rome while awaiting a hearing before Caesar, he was still thankful. It was during this time that Paul wrote four epistles: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon. In every one of these letters Paul gives thanks to God for the people in those churches and for the work God is doing through them. During his second imprisonment Paul may have actually spent time in the horrible Mamertine prison. We can be assured that even as he sat in the prison in which the sewer system of Rome ran through, he was still thankful. Paul's thankfulness did not rise and fall based upon his circumstances in life and neither should ours. Instead our thankfulness should be based on the richness of our fellowship with our Lord and Savior.

Paul then gives the specific reason for his thankfulness as it related to the church in Rome. He writes, ***“because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the world.”*** We know from history that the Roman Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome with the rationale that they were followers of someone called Chrestus (which was a misspelling of Christ). The testimony of Jewish Christians had so upset and angered non-believing Jews that the turmoil that ensued threatened the peace of the entire city. The believers had, then, a powerful testimony not only to Rome but ***“throughout the whole world.”*** I can think of no better commendation for a body of believers!

Paul uses the word ***“faith”*** and what he is referring to is not the initial trust in Christ that brings salvation to the sinner but rather to the persevering trust that brings spiritual strength and growth. Faith like this often brings persecution which we will increasingly see in our own culture as true Christians remain faithful to God and His Word. Believers in Rome lived in the midst of a very anti-Christian environment but despite that they lived out their ***“faith”*** with integrity and credibility.

Some churches are famous for their celebrity pastor, for their architecture, for their beautiful stained glass windows, or for their mega-church status or their wealth. The church in Rome was known worldwide for its ***“faith.”***

John MacArthur writes, *“A thankful heart for those to whom one ministers is essential to true spiritual service. The Christian who is trying to serve God's people, however needy they may be, without gratitude in his heart for what the Lord has done for them will find his service lacking joy. Paul could usually find a cause for thanks so that he could honor the Lord for what had been done already and hope for what God would use him to do.”*

Those who are superficial in their beliefs are rarely satisfied and are therefore seldom thankful. Why? Because they tend to focus on their own desires for the things of this world, the result being that they are often times resentful rather than thankful. A thankless heart is a selfish, me-centered, and legalistic heart. Paul had a thankful heart because he was continually focused on what God was doing in his own life, in the lives of other faithful believers, and in the advancement of His kingdom throughout the world.