

**Not Ashamed
(Week 2)
Romans 1:7-15
“Love Before Lecture”**

Introduction

“If I speak human or angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” **1 Corinthians 13:1**

The Apostle Paul desperately longed to visit the church at Rome. When he wrote this letter of introduction for Phoebe of Cenchreae, he was on his way back to Jerusalem from his missionary journey to Corinth. He knew full well that in Jerusalem many of the Jews there were lying in wait for him to take his life, but he was willing to risk it nonetheless. Paul had come to a place in his walk with The LORD that he would trust in Him no matter where the road would lead. If he were to die in Jerusalem, if that was the will of God, then so be it. But in his heart, he wanted the opportunity to preach the gospel in Rome, only if just once.

I am of the personal opinion (based purely upon speculation mind you), that Paul believed in his heart that if the gospel of Jesus Christ were to ever get a strong foothold in Rome, then it would quickly spread throughout the known world. For you see, Rome was the epicenter of the Roman Empire, and as Rome went, so went the whole world. Being the missionary that he was, I believe that Rome was irresistible to Paul. He prayed earnestly for the opportunity to preach there, but God, up till that point in the missionary's life, had other plans for him. So, when he was given the opportunity to write a letter of introduction for Phoebe, he took full advantage!

I have often heard it said that “People need to know how much you care, before they can care how much you know.” This is a very wise saying indeed. We must realize that the church of Rome had no doubt heard of Paul. After all, he had become quite famous in all of Christendom. But that being said, they did not know him personally. Therefore, Paul realized that before he could impart doctrine to them, they must be given a glimpse of his heart. They needed to know how much he cared for them, before they would care how much he knew.

In the opening statement of his letter, the missionary reveals his heart. He shows them his love for a people that he has never even met. Here at this church, we often speak of “Agape Love”. As I have said on many occasions, agape is the kind of love that is actually God loving through us. It is love on a much deeper level than this world can even begin to fathom. It is the kind of love that Paul describes in great detail for us in **1 Corinthians 13**. Agape is the only explanation for a minister like Paul to have such great affinity for a church full of people that he doesn't even know, to earnestly pray for them, and long for them to become all that they can be in Christ. Agape is the outpouring of a man filled with The Spirit of God.

“But the fruit of The Spirit is love (agape), joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” **Galatians 5:22-23**

The more that I read Paul's opening statement to the church at Rome, the more that I was struck with how every line was a demonstration of just what Agape love was all about. While normally, I would just read through the greeting, and then “move on to the good stuff”. this week I actually realized how important Paul's opening statement would have been to the fledgling church at Rome. I began to put myself in their shoes and think what they must have thought, when Phoebe presented the elders there with a letter from the Apostle Paul. I imagine that the first thing that went through their minds, since the church had not been established by any of the Apostles, was a sense of dread. Perhaps their first thoughts were, “What are we doing wrong, that the Apostle Paul has personally written to us?”

Can you imagine the relief and the encouragement that they must have felt after reading the first few words of his letter to them? You see, before we can teach people doctrine, my friends, we must first show them our agape. We need to let the world know that we love them. Then, they will respond to our teaching. Paul's greeting to the church of Rome is filled with agape love. He was **A.** Accepting, **G.** Grateful, **A.** Affirming, **P.** Prayerful, and **E.** Exhorting. **A.G.A.P.E.** This is exactly how we, as a church, need to be, if we are to be an effective witness for Christ. Please allow me to explain.

Accepting

"To all who are in Rome, loved by God, called as saints. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and The LORD Jesus Christ." ***Romans 1:7***

If in fact the elders of the church at Rome had any concerns that Paul might not have accepted their body as legitimate, those fears were set aside by these kind words. Paul called them "saints, called and loved by God". What a comfort that these words must have been to the people. Paul, nor any other apostle, had established the church there, but Paul wanted them to rest assured, that if they had accepted Christ as Savior, then he most certainly would accept them as brethren.

Too many churches these days operate in "competition mode". We act as though our church is the only "good church", and all those others are somehow lacking in spirituality. I remember when I first got into the whole "contemporary, non-denominational thing". Week after week, I heard comments made from the pulpit no less, about the inadequacies of so called "traditional churches". Me personally, I don't think the church needs to be about that at all. We are all "supposed" to be on the same team here! If you like hymns and organs better than contemporary worship songs and guitars, frankly... who cares! As long as a church is preaching Christ, and Christ alone, for salvation, I for one am praying that they succeed!

This doesn't mean that we don't stand for sound doctrine. Quite the contrary, we strive to teach The Word and correct all erroneous teaching. However, that does not mean that we do not love and accept one another. Paul was undoubtedly concerned that the church at Rome, may or may not have had a complete grasp of sound doctrine. This is why he wrote such a long letter that basically outlined all the tenets of the Christian faith, but before he got into all of that he made certain that the church knew that he had accepted them!

Folks, everyone who walks in the door here at Freedom doesn't necessarily believe everything about *The Bible* that I do. But if they are willing to accept Jesus, then we are willing to accept them. It is our job to point out false doctrines, but people will only care what we know, when they know how much we care! I believe that every person who walks through the doorway of our church was sent here by Christ Himself. And because I believe that, I will do the best I can to treat each of them as an honored guest. Will everyone who comes here find a home amongst us? Probably not, we are not for everyone, just like any other church. Some may come and others may go, but so long as they love Christ, they are our brothers and sisters. The moral of the story is... Agape is first accepting. For how can we say we love as Christ loves, if we are not willing to show them His love and acceptance?

Grateful

"First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you..."

Romans 1:8a

One thing is for certain. A person who is filled with the Spirit of God will be a person of sincere thanksgiving. After all, it is impossible to fully comprehend the marvelous grace that we have been given and not be exceedingly grateful as a result. Nor is it possible to see the mighty hand of God at work in the redemption of others and not be filled with a sense of both awe and thanksgiving. Paul was filled with gratitude that God was doing a work in Rome. After all, I am convinced that Paul believed the key to the salvation of the entire world lay in the gospel being established in Rome.

He wasn't jealous that "someone else" had started a church there. He didn't murmur and complain that the church was somehow "less than legitimate", because he had not had a hand in planting it. He was grateful that God was doing a work in Rome, and he wanted to help in any way that he possibly could to cause that work to flourish!

Can I tell you something? I've known far too many "church folk" who, quite frankly, don't seem grateful for anything that God has done for them or anyone else for that matter. You know the type; complainers and faultfinders, who never seem to see anything good in... well, anything. I simply do not believe that a Spirit-filled believer can be that negative. Christians ought to be thankful, and not resentful.

"Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in EVERYTHING; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." ***1 Thessalonians 5:16-18***

Paul didn't have a pity party, or feel sorry for himself, because someone else got the call to start up a church in Rome. Those who are dead to self have crucified their egos with the flesh. Paul was genuinely thankful that God was at work in the capital city. He thanked God for the church there. That's what agape does. It isn't self seeking. It rejoices in the truth! (**1 Corinthians 13:5-6**). The truth was being shared in Rome, and Paul was grateful for it. Show me a person filled with agape love, and I will show you someone who lives a life filled with gratitude for what God is doing, whether they had a hand in it or not.

I've been in churches where the jealousy was so thick you could cut it with a knife. Kind of reminds me of an old country song that said, "Nobody wants to play rhythm guitar behind Jesus. Everybody wants to be the lead singer in the band." (Oak Ridge Boys). When is the last time you were grateful for someone else's success in the body of Christ? Agape fills us with gratitude for every kingdom success. We could all learn a lesson from Paul here, to be thrilled to see God at work, whether it be in our church or in one up the street from us! After all, aren't we in this thing together? Spirit-filled people... are a people of thanksgiving.

Affirming

"...because the news of your faith is being reported in all the world." Romans 1:8b

What an incredible testimony for the fledgling church at Rome. I know churches that are known for a lot of things; their potluck dinners, their church splits, their stained glass windows, or a myriad of other things, but wouldn't it be wonderful if our church was known world wide for its faith?! Paul not only accepted the church Rome, but he affirmed them as well. How encouraging it must have been for them to receive a letter with such an affirming statement regarding their faith.

Have you ever had someone come up to you when you are trying to serve God and give you just a bit of affirmation? It can be like an oasis in the dessert, can it not? We just finished a sermon series about spiritual warfare, so we are all too familiar with Satan's attempts to discourage us, but The Holy Spirit of God isn't called the "discourager", now is He? No! In fact, He is known as just the opposite. In Scripture, He is our "Encourager"! It is He who reaffirms us, when we feel weak.

"For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear. Instead, you received The Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father!' The Spirit Himself testifies together with our spirit that we are God's children...."

Romans 8:15-16

So you see, The Spirit of God affirms us. He gives us the encouragement that we need to stay in the game. The church has plenty of "discouragers". What we need is more "encouragers"! Can I get a witness? Agape **"believes all things and hopes all things"** (**1st Corinthians 13:7**). In other words, it longs to see others become all that God has for them. So, be an affirming, reassuring Believer and just see what a bit of encouragement can do for your church... or for someone else's church for that matter. As I was typing up this sermon, I received a text of encouragement from one of our members. Little did they know when they sent it, that it AFFIRMED what I am preaching about this week! Isn't God amazing? Be an encourager. Let God love and affirm others through you. Agape is an affirming kind of love.

Prayerful

"God is my witness, whom I serve with my Spirit in telling the good news about His Son — that I constantly mention you, always asking in my prayers that if it is somehow in God's will, I may now at last succeed in coming to you." Romans 1:9-10

I just love this! Paul is telling this church, a church to which he has never even been, a church of which he doesn't know any of its members, that he is continually praying for them! He says that he is serving Christ in his spirit as he preaches the gospel and praying for them. The word that he uses for

“serve” (*latreuo*) actually means to “serve as a priest”. He serving as a priest in his spirit, which means that he is completely sincere in his love and devotion for the saints at Rome. He has no ulterior motive. His prayers for them are springing forth from the purest of intentions. Again, motivated by agape.

When is that last time that you prayed for the surrounding churches in our area? And if even you do manage to mention them in prayer on occasion, do you pray for them continually? I have a theory about this... just a theory mind you, but I believe that if ALL churches started praying for the churches around them, then all of them would grow! Why do I believe this? Because we live in a world that is continually trying to shout down the opposition. I can hardly bear to watch the news these days, because everyone seems to think that the best way to express their opinion is to belittle any who would disagree with them.

What if The Church, not just our church, but THE CHURCH, actually started behaving like The Church and started earnestly praying for each other, even as we disagree on some things? Many years ago, I decided to do a joint Christmas program between the local Methodist and the local Baptist Church in my area. I was the worship leader at the Methodist Church at the time. Can I tell you something, I believe that was the most rewarding “church experience” that I have ever had. Just to see those two separate churches, with their varying degrees of doctrinal disputes, coming together to sing praises to God... was inspiring. You do realize that in heaven we won't be divided by denominations, right? What if we were to practice a little more “harmony” here on earth. Agape should lead us to pray not only for those in our congregation, but for all believers, and to take it one step further, for all who do not believe. We need to be a praying people. Paul didn't really know the flock at Rome, but he certainly wanted to, and he prayed for them constantly. You see, when Christ is all that matters to you, you want Him to be all that matters to everyone else as well! Remember this the next time you bow your head to pray. Expand your prayer circle, for there are many people are standing in the need of prayer.

Exhortation

“For I want very much to see you, so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you, that is, to be mutually encouraged by each others faith, both yours and mine. Now I don't want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I often planned to come to you (but was prevented until now) in order that I might have a fruitful ministry among you, just as I have had among the rest of the Gentiles. I am obligated both to Greeks and barbarians, both to the wise and the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.” Romans 1:11-15

Now, we come to it at last! Paul has assured them of his love for them. Now, he wants to teach them sound doctrine. Webster's Dictionary defines “Exhortation” as: “An address or communication emphatically urging someone to do something”. Paul longed to go to Rome and preach the gospel, to impart the wisdom that he had been given by Christ Himself in order that the church in Rome could live according to its truths. This is the very purpose of the church... to go throughout the world and make disciples of Christ (**Matthew 28:19-20**).

Paul's spirit was fully submitted to Christ (**vs. 9**). And, as such, all that Paul cared about was spreading His gospel. He tells the Romans that he longs to encourage them with the Truth of God's Word as he would any who would listen. When he speaks of Greeks and barbarians, he was using the vernacular of his day to simply say, to the sophisticated, as well as, the simple. Paul wanted everyone to know God on a personal level. He wanted, with all his heart, to make the world “saints called by Christ Jesus”. This too is the purest form of agape love. Paul had revealed to the church at Rome, his very heart. They knew of his love, now they were prepared to learn of his doctrine! What an example for us to follow, if we truly wish to make a difference. Love should always come before the lecture. Let them see your heart, before you let them hear your teaching.

And all of God's people said... truth!!!