

# Priorities for the Church

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, as I mentioned today, we are continuing our study on the letter to the Romans, and we're going to look at the next section of chapter 1. We can read again at verse 8. Paul says, First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. For God is my witness, who my serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing, I mention you always in my prayer, asking that somehow by God's will, I may now at last succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you, that is that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you, but thus far have been prevented, in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles.

I am under obligation both to Greeks and to Barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish, so I am eager to preach the gospel to you also, who are in Rome. Last week we saw how Paul's introductory greeting is absolutely bursting with rich theology concerning the nature of the gospel. In just a few verses, verses 1 to 6, Paul just saturates us with remarkable teaching. But one of the amazing things about Paul is that at one moment he can be filling us with abundantly rich doctrine, and then in the next moment he switches to the most personal, practical and real life application. That's exactly what we find in this chapter, because in the first part, verses 1 to 6, we have this deep, rich teaching, and then in a moment from verses 8 to 15, we have wonderful personal and practical application for our lives. And that's reminding us of one of the great principles that lies at the heart of studying God's word. Theology and application always, always go hand in hand.

In other words, what we know about God must have a real effect on how we live our lives. So what we talk about together on a Sunday should shape how we live our lives on Monday and every other day. And here we see that in these verses, Paul's practical application is focusing on this great expression of his appreciation for the church that is in Rome, and he outlines some of his hopes and expectations for them. And that takes us back to the key themes that we were talking about in our first sermon. Remember we said Romans is all about the gospel, the church, the world, and the Christian life. Verse 1 to 6 in this chapter is talking all about the gospel. But here in this section, the focus is much more on the church. So what's Paul teaching us? Well, at a general level, we have been reminded here that the church is at the very centre of God's purposes for salvation. In and through

Jesus Christ, God is calling out a people for himself. That's what the Greek word for church means. The Greek word for church is *ecclesia*, which is where we get the word ecclesiastical and ecclesiology. And that word basically means called out. God is calling a people to himself. Back in the Old Testament, the people of God were bound up with the nation of Israel. But the ultimate purpose of Israel in the Old Testament was to be a light to everyone. And now in Jesus Christ, that division between Jew and Gentile has been broken down and the gospel has been proclaimed to everyone, to all peoples. That's why the church of Jesus Christ is the true Israel of God. This is the new covenant people that God is establishing.

So the church is at the very, very centre of all that God is planning in terms of salvation. And that means that for us, we must never, ever, ever play down the importance of the church in God's plan. God's purpose is not to save millions of people in isolation. God's purpose is to establish a people, a family who are united to Jesus and who are united in Jesus. And that's very, very important because a lot of people might say, I'm a Christian but I don't need to go to church. And I remember when I was newly converted, a lot of people spoke like that. They were very negative about church and they would also almost saw church as this sort of traditional thing that wasn't really that important and that you didn't really need to go to because all that really mattered was your own personal relationship with Jesus. A lot of people say that but it is absolutely not true. And it is absolutely unbiblical because God's great plan is not just to save you as an isolated individual.

[ 5 : 36 ] God's plan is to bring you into his family, into his church. I once read a book by John Stott who was a minister in London from a huge part of the 20th century, very good writer, very influential. He said that the unchurched Christian is a grotesque anomaly. Now that's very strong language but, biblically speaking, he's absolutely right. Because quite simply, if we are united to Christ, it means that we're united to each other. We are together as the Church of Jesus Christ. And so now we are in the New Testament era where God's purposes are no longer focused exclusively on the nation of Israel. That was only ever a type, a shadow of God's ultimate plan. Now God's purposes are to establish his people as the Church of Jesus Christ. Jesus' great commission at the end of Matthew was to go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

And that commission is utterly church focused because the church is made up of disciples who work together and who depend on each other. And baptism is the sign that brings us into membership of the church. In fact, the church is so important that the New Testament describes it as the bride of Christ. It's that important. It's that precious. And of course, if Jesus is passionately committed to his bride, then every Christian should be as well. So God is establishing his people as the Church of Jesus Christ, is at the heart of his purposes.

And we have the amazing privilege of being part of that. Because remember, in verse 6, Paul says, this is including you, including the Romans way back in the first century and including us as well. But all of that raises a really important question. What should our priorities as a church be? God's establishment of the church is not about just theological teaching. It's about real practical day to day living as a church. And we have to ask ourselves what things are important? What should our priorities be? Well, if we look at verses 8 to 15, we see that in this practical, personal section that Paul focuses on, he is showing us what our priorities as a church should indeed be. And we're going to look through this together and we'll see that he highlights seven things, seven priorities that should lie at the heart of our life as the Church of Jesus Christ. So, priority number one, thanksgiving for one another. Paul says, first, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you. Here we see Paul's profound gratitude for this people, this church that has been established in Rome. And this is something that you see again and again and again in Paul's letters, whether it's Romans, Ephesians, Colossians, Philippi, he always says, I thank, I am so thankful for you. And Paul could see the remarkable way in which the church was spreading across the nations. And despite the fact that he was often dealing with problems and failings within these churches, he was still so thankful for the faith of these men and women. And of course, all of that's a brilliant example to us and an important example to us because it is all too easy to look at other churches with a sense of suspicion, or with a sense of envy, or with a sense of resentment. And it's also very easy for us just to be so focused on ourselves, we forget that we are part of a worldwide church. And

Paul is reminding us here that when we look at the congregations across our island, and that's not just the free church congregations, but all the Christian congregations across our island, across our nation, and indeed across the world, we should be so thankful for them. So thankful. And we have every reason to be thankful because we must always remember that believers are all on the same team. And churches should never, ever, ever compete with each other because they are on the same team. If you are watching Scotland play football, it's traumatic enough watching them, but if they were starting to compete with one another, if half of the defenders were starting to compete with the other half of the defenders, it would fall apart very quickly. They're all on the same team. And if a new generation of outstanding Scottish players was to grow up, and wouldn't that be brilliant if they did? If that was to happen, the existing players should not feel a sense of resentment or envy.

They should be delighted with these other players because they are all on the same team. And we must never forget that that is true of us as believers in Jesus Christ. We are all on the same team. We're not always on the same page. And of course, there are different views on different issues. And that's part of the church, and that is something that we have to address respectfully and wisely. And we are on our page because we believe that that's the biblical page that we want to be, but not everyone agrees with us. We're not always on the same page, but we are. We are on the same team. And so we should have the same gratitude that Paul has. But notice something really interesting. Look at that version. Ask the question, who does Paul think? Who is it that he thinks? Remember, Paul didn't find the church in Rome. As far as we know, he's never been there. So does he thank the missionary that went to Rome and planted a church there? Does he thank one of the other apostles or the pastor who is working there? Does he thank the person who did a great work in establishing the church in Rome? No. Who does Paul think? He thinks God. And that is a great reminder that the building of the church is God's work. It's not about what

[ 12 : 46 ] Paul or Peter or what any of the other apostles have done. It is about what God has done. And so as we look at the church today and as we look at the church in Lewis, in Scotland, in the world, there is one person who we should be thanking for that. And that's God. One of our priorities as a church is to ensure that we give thanks to God for his church, of which we are so privileged to be a part. So that's priority number one, thanksgiving for one another. Second priority, Paul highlights, is our reputation in the world. Look what he says in the second half of verse eight, he says, I give thanks to my God through Jesus Christ for all of you because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. And so Paul is thankful for this church. And in particular, he is thankful for the fact that their faith is being spoken about throughout the world. In other words, this church was developing a God honoring reputation. People across the world were talking about them. But they weren't talking about their failings. They weren't talking about their problems, as is so often the case. People were talking about the faith of these Roman believers. What's Paul talking about? Well, if we go to chapter 16, we find more details of what Paul means. He says, there, I appeal to you, brothers, watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles, contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught. Avoid them. 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 naive. 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. Notice the key phrase in verse 19, which I've underlined there. It is the obedience of this church that made them stand out. And that's reminding us of a vital principle that lies at the heart of the gospel. We are saved by grace through faith alone. But that faith has a transforming effect on our lives. And these Christians stood out in Rome. They stood out from the world around them because they were obedient to what God wanted in their lives. No doubt they were surrounded by people in that great city who indulged in all sorts of pleasures and practices that the world offers. Just as we do today, Rome would have been the centre of everything that the world would have offered. No doubt it was a city full of greed, full of lies, full of selfishness, full of all sorts of awful things. And these Roman Christians stood out. They were the talk of the empire because they were different. They followed

God's law. And that meant that their reputation honoured God. Their obedience was remarkable.

But that raises the question, what does obedience involve for the Christian? What is it that Paul's talking about with this obedience? Well, he tells us in chapter 13 of Romans what lies at the heart of that obedience. He says, Oh, no one anything except to love each other. For the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments you shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet.

And any other commandment are summed up in this word, you shall love your neighbour as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbour. Therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

[ 16 : 39 ] And so at the heart of this godly reputation that we find at the church in Rome was their love for each other. And all of this raises the vital question, what's our reputation?

Well, if our reputation as a church is anything other than that we are a place where we love each other dearly. If our reputation is anything other than that, then there's something wrong with us. And that raises the next key question, which is how is our reputation formed? It's by what I do and what you do today and tomorrow and in the rest of the week. As a church, we must strive for a God honouring reputation like the Romans had. At the heart of that is our love for God and our love for our neighbour. So, reputation in the world. The next priority is in verse 9 and then the first part of verse 10. What does it say? For God is my witness who my serve with my spirit in the gospel of his son that without ceasing you, I mention you always in my prayer. Paul is highlighting to the Romans that they are constantly in his prayers. And in so many ways that's a basic thing, but it's reminding us that prayer for one another must always, always be at the forefront of our priorities. That means we've got to pray for other congregations and it means we have to pray for each other here in Carlaway as well. And at the heart of that lies the fact that we should be taking an interest in each other. We should share prayer points with one another. We should, if we've got concerns, troubles, things in our minds, we should tell one another so that we can pray for each other and pray together. As a congregation, we want to be a people who praise for one another in a loving, committed and meaningful way. And that involves all of you. Every one of us participate in that work. Elders, deacons, members, adherents.

You can all pray for one another. You can pray for the person beside you, the person in front of you, the person behind you. Wouldn't that be brilliant? Every day this week. Remember who's on your left, who's on your right and pray for them. Every day. It's a priority for us all. And it's something that we should take immensely seriously because look at what Paul says in verse nine. God is my witness. That's telling us that Paul is not half-hearted in his prayers for the Romans. It's not some nice thing to say. It's not just a token comment. Oh, by the way, I'm praying for you. He is absolutely committed to pray for his brothers and sisters in Rome, who he's never met most of them. And yet he is praying for them with immense dedication and devotion. And he is so committed to it that he can actually call God as his witness. And I look at myself and I pray that God would make me more like that. Wouldn't it be amazing if we could all say to each other, God is my witness that without ceasing, I mention you in my prayer. That's the kind of prayer life we want. And it's important that we prioritize prayer for each other. And as I said, that applies to all of us because we can all pray. God will hear every one of you when you speak to him.

The fourth priority highlighted here is a desire to be together. The rest of verse 10, we see Paul saying, always mentioning in my prayer, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you for I long to see you. Remember, we keep saying this, Paul has never been to Rome. And yet he longs to see these people. And he is praying that he could come and be with them. And that desire to be together is something that should be the very heart of everything that we do as a church. And that's not just about coming together on a Sunday, although that is brilliant to be together this morning and again this evening. But in every way, we should make that effort to be together. We should be ready to eat together, to walk together, to laugh together, to work together, to share concerns with one another, to bear one another's burdens, to even confess our sins to one another as the New Testament tells us. And here is where our forefathers in Lewis are such a brilliant example to us. Because when you read back to what happened in days of old here in Carlyway and in other places, people came together. They came together at church, at home, in the community, even at the peats, at the phang. All of these things were an outworking of the desire to be together that lies at the heart of the church. So this week, go and visit someone in the congregation or invite somebody to your home. Go for it. Be like

Paul. Go and be with somebody else who is connected to this church. Because at the heart of our church, there should be a great desire to be together. And the theological basis for that is abundantly clear. God has made us a family, adopted children, united to our Heavenly Father through our elder brother, Jesus Christ. And all healthy families spend time together. And of course, you don't have to read very far in the Gospels to see that Jesus is the greatest example of this. He constantly met with people. He ate with people.

[ 23 : 17 ] He visited people's homes. He was always, always, always desiring to be with people. And we must make that a priority ourselves. The fifth priority is in verse 11b and 12.

Paul says, I long to see you that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you. That is that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.

Paul wants to give a spiritual gift to these Romans. You think to yourself, oh, what's that? What's a spiritual gift? It can sound quite mystical. And maybe he wants to go, you could use to think, oh, maybe he's going to go and perform a miracle. Maybe he's going to go and do something remarkable. Maybe he's going to go and transform the situation there.

Well, what is that spiritual gift? What it tells us in verse 12, the spiritual gift is not some mystical, remarkable event. The spiritual gift is that they would encourage each other, that they would be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. And I think that is such a wonderful phrase because it is so easy to think that a great Christian like Paul would never need encouragement. If you imagine Paul came in here just now, you would think, oh, man, he is so much better, wiser, more Godly than we are, and we are just nothing in his sight. We need him to encourage us. Paul would stand here and say, I need you to encourage me. We need each other. Here we have this great apostle, and yet he longs to encourage these believers, and he longs to be encouraged by them. And of course, the same is true of us. We need each other. We need to encourage each other, and we need to be encouraged by one another. And that applies in so many different areas, but there's one thing I want to highlight in regard to this is that it's pointing us to the relationship that you have with your elders in the congregation. Because at the heart of the relationship between you and the elders here is mutual encouragement. As elders, we want to encourage you. Now, we have a minister that is just an elder as well. We are all equals as elders. A minister is just a teaching elder. The other elders are what we call ruling elders, but we are all elders. And we want to encourage you. We want to help you with the things that you're going through in life. We want to pray for you. We want to answer questions that you might have. We want to help carry your burdens. We want to see you grow in faith. And always, always, always feel that you can talk to an elder. We often think that if somebody was going to see the concession, it's because something disastrous has happened, that something bad has happened. But it should not be like that. You should be speaking to the concession about everything. Good things, bad things, joys, sorrows, challenges, blessings. An elder is simply a shepherd. An elder is there to help you, to support you. When I often watch

Shorris Graham feed his sheep in the Glebe, and when he goes to the Glebe, the sheep don't run away in fear. They run to him because they know that he's there to help them. And I'm sure it's the same for all of you here who are far more familiar with crofting than I am. A great reminder that an elder is a shepherd, somebody who you feel you can run to at any point to be helped. And of course, if there was a situation where you would prefer to speak to a woman, often women would rather speak to women than the women members here as well are always there for you to talk to. This is what we mean about real life effect of the Gospel. You've got real life elders, real life godly women here in this congregation and they're there for you. They're there for you to talk to. They're there for you to be helped by. So our great desire as elders is to encourage you. But also as elders, we want to be encouraged by you. We long to be encouraged by you, to be encouraged by your commitment to the Lord, to be encouraged by your participation in the congregation, to be encouraged by your growth in faith, to be encouraged by the fact that you are turning away from sin. It is so wonderful to see people grow in faith and to become more and more

[ 28 : 22 ] Christlike in their lives. Mutual encouragement should be at the heart of our congregation. And you know, that's the phrase that really lies at the heart of going forward. I've been talking about going forward at communion weekends, becoming a member of professing faith. We've got lots of ways to describe it and there can be so many fears and hurdles and misunderstandings about going forward. It can seem like such a big thing and it can seem so hard and I understand why people feel like that because I can totally understand why you feel like that. But if you are trusting in Jesus with a simple childlike faith and if you were to come before the elders, what do you think we would do? What would we want to do? Would we want to interrogate you? Would we want to assess your knowledge? Would we want to scrutinise your life? No. We would want to encourage you. To encourage you in your faith, to guide you and to support you. And do you know what you would do to us if you professed your faith? You would be a massive encouragement to us all. Mutual encouragement lies at the heart of our life as a church. It's something that we must prioritise.

Second last priority that Paul highlights is honesty and integrity. In verse 13 he speaks about the fact that he had tried previously to visit Rome but he had failed. I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you but thus far have been prevented in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. Paul had tried to visit them but it hadn't worked out. Same thing happened with Corinthians and it appears that the Corinthian church was really annoyed with Paul because he hadn't come to them. You can read 1 Corinthians chapter 1 to see what that is. In fact it might be 2 Corinthians chapter 1. I might have noted that down wrong.

Anyway, you can read both those chapters and find out. I've written 1 Corinthians but I'm pretty sure it's 2 Corinthians. They were not happy that Paul hadn't visited them.

All of that is a reminder that not everything goes as we wanted to go in the life of the church. These Romans might have been very, very disappointed that Paul had not yet come.

The key point being highlighted here is that Paul is giving them an explanation that is marked by honesty and integrity. He's acknowledging that he hasn't come but it wasn't for lack of desire but he had been prevented for various reasons. Paul is being honest with them and that honesty and integrity which acknowledges when things have not worked out is vital for the health of the church. There's two important lessons here for us. One, we must always speak to each other with honesty and integrity. Sometimes things won't work out as well as we would like. Sometimes things happen in the church that some people want and other people don't want. Sometimes things are not as we want them to be. Sometimes mistakes are made. But as a church family we aim for that honesty and integrity that ensures that we are open with one another and what we say is the same as what we mean. So we must speak to each other with honesty and integrity as a church. But secondly we must also avoid unhealthy suspicion because it may well have been the case that these Romans were a bit annoyed with Paul and attributed bad motives to him in his failure to come. That certainly seems to be the case with the Corinthians and it's a reminder that when things go wrong it's very easy to default to thinking the worst of people. But as a church we must not be like that. We must always err on the side of grace. And so if things happen maybe somebody had told us that they were going to come to visit us and they didn't manage it. Maybe we'd ask somebody to do something and they'd fail to do it. In that situation we should not default to thinking the worst of people. We should err on the side of grace. And of course as a church what do we do if someone does go badly wrong? What do we do with somebody who does make a massive mistake and who hangs their head in shame? We forgive them. We must prioritise honesty and integrity. Last of all very briefly our final priority is a common goal. There we have it in verse 14 and 15. I am under obligation both to Greeks and to

[ 33 : 41 ] Barbarians both to the wise and to the foolish so I am eager to preach the Gospel to you also who are in Rome. The goal of the Church of Jesus Christ is to bring the good news of Jesus to all peoples. That was Paul's goal. That is our goal that we would bring the message of Jesus to the people who are around us. And we must always remember that God has placed that responsibility on our shoulders and it is a responsibility. And that's highlighted by the word obligation there in verse 14. Literally that word is debtor. And so I think if you have the authorised version in front of you would say I am a debtor. Paul is a debtor to both Greeks and Barbarians. He owes them a debt. And what does he mean by that?

Well I heard this explained very very well by Eric Alexander who was Church of Scotland minister in Glasgow for many years. He explained that there are two types of debt. One type of debt is perhaps what we associate with debt where we would borrow money from somebody and we would have to pay them back. Whether it's from the bank or from a friend, a family member. We borrow something from them and we have to pay them back. That's one type of debt. That's not what Paul is talking about here. There is another type of debt. And that is the type of debt whereby if you imagine there was somebody in this congregation who was in clear financial need. Maybe they came in and their clothes were torn and they had nowhere to live and it was obvious that they were in great trouble. And then somebody in our congregation say Donnie beside me here came to me with £100 and he said give that £100 to that man who was at church this morning. I would then be a debtor to that person because

Donnie would have entrusted me with something that I have to give to that person. I owe this £100 that Donnie's given me to this poor soul who is in financial need. I would be indebted because of what I had been given. That is what Paul is talking about here. God has given him this gospel message and he is now a debtor to Greeks and Barbarians, to all people who need to hear it. And of course the point of it all is that the same as through us we have been given this good news of Jesus and we are to be ambassadors bringing the gospel to the people that God has entrusted to our care. So we owe the gospel to the people of Carlyle. That is a big challenge but a big motivation for us all. And of course if you are not yet a Christian the whole reason that God has entrusted that debt to us is because he wants you to come to faith as well. So as a church these should be at the forefront of our priorities. Thanksgiving for one another, cultivating a God honouring reputation, constantly praying for one another, building a desire to be together, mutually encouraging one another, gaining honesty and integrity and striving towards the common goal of bringing the gospel to the people around us. May God in his grace make us a church like that. Amen. Let's pray.

Lord our Father we thank you that your word is so full of teaching. So full of rich theology, teaching us about all that you are and all that you've done. But also it's so full of practical instruction and we pray O Lord that we would never be those who hear your word and then just let it drift out of our minds again. But Lord may your word be written on our hearts and may you shape us according to your word so that we would be the people that you want us to be. Lord it is such a privilege to be part of your church and we are so thankful for everyone here and for all our brothers and sisters throughout the world and we pray Lord that being part of this church would not just be something that we do on the first day of the week but that it would be shaping our lives every day of the week. We thank you for your church. We thank you for the privilege of being part of it and we thank you that Jesus has promised that he will build his church. We pray that in your mercy we would see that in our midst in these days. Amen.