

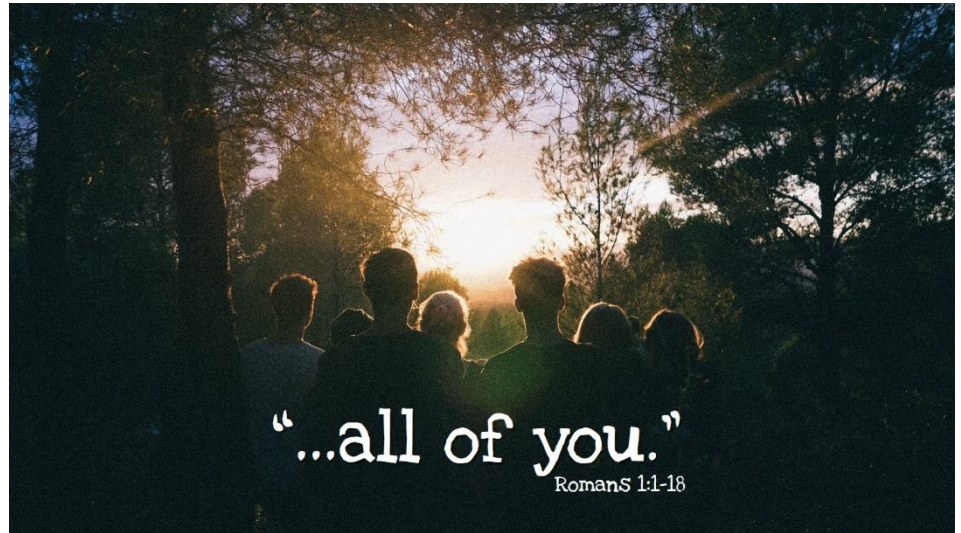
“...all of you.”

- *Romans 1:1-18*

by Pastor Tim Dodson
at JF Believers Church
in Menomonie, Wisc
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Romans 1:1-18 Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God 2 which He promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, 3 concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the

seed of David according to the flesh, 4 and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead. 5 Through Him we have received grace and apostleship for obedience to the faith among all nations for His name, 6 among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ; 7 To all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 8 First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world. 9 For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of His Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers, 10 making request if, by some means, now at last I may find a way in the will of God to come to you. 11 For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift, so that you may be established— 12 that is, that I may be encouraged together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me. 13 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. 14 I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise. 15 So, as much as is in me, I am ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also. 16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live by faith." 18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,



The book of Romans has been referred to as the “*Christian Manifesto*.” It is generally thought of as the pinnacle of scriptural works, being the most complete explanation of the gospel and the biblical doctrines which make up the Christian faith. In this book we have the explanation of such critical doctrines as justification, sanctification, divine election, condemnation, the perseverance of the saints, the last judgment, the fall of man, the revelation of God in nature, the final restoration of the Jews, and many more.

Frederick Godet made the statement that “*The probability is that every great spiritual revival in the church will be connected as effect and cause with a deeper understanding of this book.*” Already it has profoundly changed the world, having had a serious effect upon the redemption and subsequent ministries of the likes of John Calvin, John Wesley, Augustine and Martin Luther. Luther spoke of reading this book and for the first time in his life coming to a realization of what he called “*the righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justified us through faith.*” His discovery brought not only that ever illusive personal peace, but propelled him into ministry that would change the world and the fate of untold thousands...

It even found its way into the heart of this pastor, then just a searching 18 year old kid, who upon reading it through in a Living Bible scribbled this note in the back cover: “*I've found the answer! Jesus... your fantastic. Just read the underlined verses in this bible. God didn't expect us to follow 100's of rules, for that is what the Jews did. It's faith. Faith is the answer. I want the world to know the past few months I have been closer to God than ever in my life. We're friends... best friends.*” (January 24, 1979)

Paul wrote this letter to some believers in Rome. A church that no one seems to know for sure how it began or even who planted it outside of the very Spirit of the living God. At the time of its writing, Paul had not yet even visited this church so he was not the church planter there and we know of no apostle or prophet who actually planted this church. So how did it get there? Apparently on its own. A birth that began simply through the will of God and those hungry for the real and living truth...manifested in its' unique unity...embodied by one Jesus Christ!

Many believe that it is quite plausible that these founding members of that church in Rome were in the crowd in Jerusalem the day the Holy Spirit, the "comforter," arrived and came upon those in the upper room. That historic day when Peter stepped out and delivered that clear and concise gospel message which brought 3,000 to salvation. Like it has for so many of us throughout the ages, the gospel inexplicably reached into the crowd of humanity and changed a single soul for eternity...one now armed with a mission and a destination. It seems the Spirit of God hitched a ride then to Rome, as He has throughout the world, and the church there sprung spontaneously from their midst.

Through the years of this ministry community, I have been asked...even with what the world at large would perhaps consider a mere moderate success, what was the "secret"...the answer to this church's inexplicable survival and it's dynamic. The studies on church plants are many, as is the scrutinizing of methods and philosophies. Each one looking for the "smoking gun"...the magic elixir...the sure bet. Some claim it is the pastor...the lead church planter. Criteria runs the gamut here...attributes of charisma, staunch training and preparation, an unrelenting spirit, and of course he must be very 'cool.' That's imperative, they will say. Issues of finances, meeting location, digital footprint and multi-media presence. There must be a cohesive church planting "team," and a clear all-encompassing vision. A tenacious "attack plan" as the troops storm the beach. But alas, by all appearances, it seems Rome had none of these things. And come to think of it, *neither did we*. Were they...*were we*...merely a lucky anomaly or was there something else here?

Perhaps the simple answer is found in what could be consigned as an inconsequential and passing mention in verse 8? *"I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world."* If there is any breadcrumb trail back to the answer for this church in Rome, I would contend it is here in this verse. For Paul was not specifically addressing a pastor, resident apostle, or even a 'church-planting-team.' This letter, as well as Paul's thanks to God, seems to have stemmed from an understanding that everyone from that church in Rome had their "fingers in the pie." Paul addresses this letter to "all of you." He thanks God for "all of you." There is again no mention of a great charismatic pastor-leader. Just the flock. The body of Christ. Each one having their own story...their own strange and maybe wonderful account of how they got there.

Even Paul, who was writing this letter would know of such wonder. Truly if there had been some sort of list out there in those early AD days...one that would place odds on the spiritual and pastoral "race-horses", such would most certainly have found Paul...*at that time one "Saul of Tarsus,"* somewhere at the bottom, *if he made the list at all!* For Paul had gained fame far and wide for persecuting the church...arresting and sometimes even killing the pastors that he found.

But like many of us that have followed, God inexplicably reached down and plucked Paul from the pack with nothing more than a sentiment of "I want **you**..." And of those of us that have been so selected...if we come to an understanding...a "clarity" of who and what we are...a humility in the mandate of unity, other-centered love for my brethren as well as for my God, we are privileged to participate in *moving*...in **changing** the world! Every one of the chosen apostles were men cut from that same bolt of cloth. The world wouldn't have bet a dime on any of them, and yet they altered the course of history.

And we here in this fellowship...just like these in Rome...have been flung into the each other's lives...our destinies now intertwined. We corporately and personally have an opportunity to be a part of something that will, God willing, outlive us all.

*"Let me say first that I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you,
because your faith in him is being talked about all over the world..."*

Such a unity and group participation would have been a rarity even in Paul's day. Perhaps that is why we don't have too many letters addressed like this one. But however scarce such a dynamic was in that day, it would pale in comparative rarity to the day in which we live.

Paul began this masterpiece by clarifying his position...his part in it all. The letter does not begin with reverend Paul. Not bishop, evangelist, apostle, or even "Christian" Paul! He begins with a clarity and understanding of himself in the grand spiritual scheme of things. Paul was not a youngster at this point in ministry. If ever he thought himself to be anything at all, he was over that now. The miles of life have a way of doing that to a man. Paul referred to himself as a *doulos*, a "bond-slave" of Jesus Christ. He was just a servant to Christ and to his brethren. He knew there was no way to fly solo as a Christian. And certainly not if one desired to affect the world around him or her. No one does that alone. To live out this faith, we must at some point come to the clarity that there is no "me." There is only "us" now.

I was having a conversation a while back with a successful pastor-evangelist-church planter. We were talking about ministry...things we were are involved in...what God was doing. I was expounding upon the things God was doing in this church when he...in the middle of it all, suddenly says to me "you have some really good people don't you?" "*Oh yes. You have no idea. A bunch of bond-slaves...and "I thank God for you all."*

Let us remember that God never needs us. Surely we are often like mosquitoes just buzzing around His head. But the fact remains that God has chosen to use men and women...*our* hands and feet...*our* voices, for the furthering of His kingdom. He needn't use us. He could have "called ten thousand angels." But He has chosen to use us. With all our failures and shortcomings...all our selfishness and our frail egos. But let us know this: *we are absolutely in this together*. We "live together, or we die alone."

"...*your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world.*" As the years march on, this church planting dynamic is becoming even more rare each passing day. Numerous visiting pastors that have come to speak here have found in us a rare gem. They have found themselves surprisingly drawn to us. The rarity of it all. Their remarks still echo in my head... "you guys really love each other." "You have something very special here...something very rare and unique." Even years ago, when Chuck Smith from Calvary Chapel came out here to dedicate this church his words still fill my heart...on his way out after it all, he turned to me and said "you guys are old school calvary chapel...you remind me of our early days." I knew what he meant. I knew what those early days looked like. The people came from every walk of life and they came together and changed the world.

But you must know that it has not come without blood. I wish I could say that it wasn't so. But regularly there are those who come amongst us that know only one priority and that is themselves and themselves alone. Paul and the early churches experienced this also and they sometimes named names: Hymenaeus and Alexander, Philetus, Demus...the "hall of Shame" recorded in the bestselling book in history. Of course they eventually move on...sometimes after one Sunday, sometimes after years and even decades. They didn't love us. They loved only themselves. They were not part of us. Some after years of attending here, left in a moment without even a good bye or a thank you, and now they are relegated to spiritual obscurity. The moment passed...the day is lost. Sadly, this is the ground in which we, like others, are trying to plant churches in today.

Verse 7 tells us that Paul wrote this letter to "all who are in Rome" but he wrote moreover to those "beloved of God, called to be saints..." He wrote to Rome, but he unwittingly wrote to Menomonie, Wisconsin. For we too are "beloved of God." We, those of us born again, are also the "saints" of God. A saint is not one who is exalted, but one who exalts Jesus.

God is the source of our grace, and Jesus is the conduit. Paul was writing to introduce the church in Rome to God's boundless grace. It is a message that "kept on giving" throughout the centuries that followed.

Paul begins verse 8 with the word “first...” “First” he thanks God. That’s a critical element to everything we are talking about here. Paul was not blinded by the zeal for what lay ahead at the cost of forgetting how far they already came and how much God had *already* done for them. His constant thanks compelled him to constant worship. Does yours? This church had spontaneously rose from the active presence of the Holy Spirit. Obviously God had worked mightily and Paul was not about to let such go unmentioned!

The church in Rome had excelled and their reputation in faith was known far and wide. What a testimony of a body of believers! What could be a grander declaration? But what was even more extraordinary was the fact that Rome was one of the leading wicked cities of that day. In the midst of evil, this church thrived and lived out a faith of legendary reputation! Yet the broad church today has become lax and accepting of “small indiscretions” in the issue of sin. The problem, besides the overt issue at the beginning is that such a journey is a “slippery slope,” and soon there is no line that will not be crossed in the “new morality.”

Paul wanted to go to these believers *personally*. Everything that made up Paul’s ministry was personal even in its corporate manifest. He was in this thing body and soul. That is significant because he had no desire to be a vicarious missionary. He wanted to personally be a part of it all. Up close and on the front line. I guess that’s what makes an Intentional Christian Community. Everyone gets “into the pool.” He said he was willing to get to Rome by “any means” (KJV). Little did he know that that would mean in chains on a boat full of criminals bound for the Roman games.

In the heart of every individual is the ultimate question: “*How can a man be just with God?*” Galatians tells us that “*the just shall live by faith,*” and Romans tells us “*the just shall live by faith.*” Paul knew that the heart of man was depraved. Irrevocably and hopelessly lost. Without the truth of Romans...we are doomed. It has been correctly stated that only by knowing Christ personally can one truly *be* a Christian. You can be a Buddhist and never know Buddha. You can be a Muslim without ever knowing Mohammed. The list goes on. But you cannot be a Christian without knowing Christ. And you cannot know Christ, without loving and engaging your brothers horizontally.

Paul was “thankful” and He was “prayerful.” In these two practices lies the soul disciplines of a faithful individual. One that will come to know all the blessings of not just our personal salvation, but those that come from being a part of the furthering of God’s kingdom on earth. To experience a *faith in him* that will be *talked about all over the world...*”

MacArthur notes that “*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. Superficial believers are seldom satisfied and therefore seldom thankful. Because they focus on their own appetites for things of the world, they are more often resentful than thankful. A thankless heart is a selfish, self-centered, legalistic heart. Paul had a thankful heart because he 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.*” ([MacArthur, J: Romans 1-8. Chicago: Moody Press](#))

The Roman historian Tacitus writes that into the city of Rome “flow all things that are vile and abominable, and where they are encouraged”. And yet in the midst of such a “moral cesspool” the Roman saints were living singularly pure lives, giving glorious testimony to the supernatural source of Christianity and the transforming power of the gospel of grace. This is the “bar” of the faithful church. This is our call. I want to be a part of moving the world for Jesus, and I am thankful for all of you who seek the same...

“Let me say first that I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith in him is being talked about all over the world...”