

FRIENDS WHO GO THE DISTANCE

Making and Maintaining Gospel Friendships

Romans Series
PBC 2025

Text: Romans 1:8-15

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. ⁹ For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you ¹⁰ always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. ¹¹ For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— ¹² that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and the foolish. ¹⁵ So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

Introduction:

This week, I received a text from the daughter of a man who has been one of my closest friends and a life mentor for 40 years. The message she sent in the very early hours of the morning contained just four words: ***"Dad just passed away."*** (2/28 at 12:11 am)

When I visited him in the ER about a week earlier, I held his hand and prayed for him just before leaving. As I walked out the door and down the hall, I paused and sat on a bench near the elevator, weeping because I knew I had likely seen my friend for the last time.

As I read her text, my soul was flooded with an ocean of emotions:

- Deep Sorrow and Personal Loss

- Tearful Joy as I thought about his deliverance from the frailties of this life and the abundant entrance he received when Jesus welcomed him and escorted him to meet the Father.
- Immense Gratitude for the investment he made in my life by inviting me into his life for almost forty years!

As I processed these emotions, I thought about the nature of true friendship and how it had shaped our relationship. Given how different we were, it surprises me that we had a friendship, let alone one that was so deep, long-lasting, impactful, and mutually enjoyable.

- He was a numbers guy with a PhD in Math – I am a Word guy who loves coffee and commentaries.
- He was a gregarious person – I am more of a hermit (believe it or not).
- He loved going into the woods at the earliest, coldest hour of the day to practice a new turkey call or set up a deer blind. I have no appreciation for such things at all.
- He was confident and comfortable in his own skin – I struggle with fear and insecurity which God constantly helps me overcome.

What establishes and sustains a friendship like this? How do such friendships develop? How are they maintained over time? How are they nurtured and upheld despite the rough edges and personal imperfections we all share, even as Christians?

This morning's text reveals the beauty of an unlikely friendship that Paul desires and God creates between him and the Roman Christians, most of whom he has yet to meet in person.

We know from the book of Acts that the friendship Paul longs for in our text truly happened! When he finally arrived in Rome, facing the possibility of being imprisoned or even executed for the gospel's sake, the Roman believers traveled a considerable distance to welcome him (Acts 28:11-16, 30-31). When they met for the first time, Dr. Luke, who witnessed the meeting, noted three important things: 1) Paul immediately thanked God for them, 2) he took courage because of them, and 3) he was supported and sustained by them during the two years he was imprisoned for the sake of the gospel!

God provided Paul with friends who stood by him, encouraged him during uncertain times, and supported him through difficult and dangerous situations. In other words, God gave Paul the kind of friendships we all need in our own lives and endeavors for the gospel!

I want us to ask and answer this question from our text: ***How does God create this kind of friendship among His servants, and how can we establish and sustain such gospel friendships in our own lives?***

Friendships that go the distance are:

I. Built on the Gospel (1:8)

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world.

- How did someone with a strong religious upbringing, a distinct ethnic background, and deeply held social, ethical, and moral values that shaped Paul ever come to the point where he was not only willing to tolerate people like the Romans as followers of the Messiah, but also longed for a deep and lasting friendship with them?
- The answer is the gospel! It was the common ground between them!

- Romans 16 tells us that God had already given him gospel based friendships with certain people in the Roman congregation who could vouch for the truthfulness of his theology and the sincerity of his desire to establish a meaningful gospel partnership.
- However, this text reveals that Paul wanted more than just a gospel partnership with people he barely knew—***he yearned to cultivate genuine, lasting friendships with them—the kind of friendships that would endure regardless of how challenging the path or how long the journey might be.***
- Where does one find such friends? What enables this kind of friendship to grow and thrive over time and distance?
- What kind of people should we look for and pray for when we desire this same kind of friendship for ourselves?
- Most importantly, what kind of person should I strive to be in order to be this kind of friend to others?

A. Look for people who have genuinely obeyed the Gospel by repenting and believing what it announces about Jesus Christ and who have gladly owned Him as their Lord.

- ***1:8a*** I thank my God **through Jesus Christ** for all of you. . .
- ***1:6-7*** Including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ . . . who are loved by God and called to be saints. Grace to you and peace from **God our Father** and the **Lord Jesus Christ!**
- Seek friends who are genuine believers who have repented and turned from the sins for which they have asked God's forgiveness.
- Seek friends who gladly submit to the Lordship of Christ as the owner of their lives.

B. Look for people whose lives are being radically transformed by their faith in Christ's work through the gospel.

- ***1:8b*** . . . because your faith is proclaimed in all the world.

- Seek friends with a personal faith that is faithfully obeying.
- Seek friends whose commitment to Christ is evident to others.

C. Look for people who live purposefully for the Gospel.

- *1:8b . . . because your faith is proclaimed in all the world.*
- Paul's calling and mission was to bring about the obedience of faith among the Gentiles (1:5).
- In Rome are people whose faith and faithfulness are known throughout the entire Roman empire!
- They publicly declared their loyalty to the Lord Jesus by their baptism (Romans 6:1-4).
- They displayed their love for Jesus by obeying his commands.
- Their new life was stunning, undeniable evidence that they were citizens of a far better kingdom than Rome, with a better Lord and Savior than Caesar!
- And Paul sought these kinds of friends who were living purposefully to advance the gospel to the world around them.

Friendships like this that go the distance are built on the gospel, but they are also:

II. Established through Prayer (1:9-10)

For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you ¹⁰ always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you.

- Paul enjoyed deep personal friendships with certain believers in this congregation – but he desired that God would grant him more!
- The way he gained more gospel-centered friendships teaches us a valuable lesson—he asked God for them! He prayed for them.
- How should we pray when asking God to give us these kinds of friends?

- A. Pray sincerely** – “God is my witness” (1:9)
- B. Pray purposefully** – “whom I serve in my spirit in the gospel of His Son” (1:9)
- C. Pray persistently** – “that without ceasing I mention you” (1:9)
- D. Pray urgently** – “always in my prayers” (1:10)
- E. Pray submissively** – “asking that somehow by God’s will” (1:10)
- F. Pray specifically** – “I may now at last succeed in coming to you.” (1:10).

Which brings us to the important questions we must ask and answer:
 “Why do I really want such friendships? What is my true heart motive?”

III. Motivated by Spiritual Objectives (1:11-12)

For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— ¹² that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine.

- Have you honestly considered why you desire a particular friendship with someone? What motivates your pursuit of that friendship?
- When Paul asked God to establish a deep, strong gospel friendship with the believers at Rome, he was motivated by desires that are often downplayed or absent from our pursuit of friendships.

A. To Establish a Sound Faith in Them (v. 11)

For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you

- Paul longed to see them in order to “strengthen” them.
- The term “strengthen” (sterixthenai) is passive, meaning something or someone is going to strengthen them.
- “Strengthen” = means to “establish” or to “firmly ground.”
- Paul uses the term “strengthen/establish” in 16:25, 1 Thess 3:2, 13, 2 Thess 2:17, and 3:3. The idea is to ground, solidify, or fortify an area of belief or behavior that is under attack.

- The means by which he will strengthen, solidify, and fortify their faith is a gift he has received from the Spirit for them and others like them. So, what is that gift? Paul identifies it in 16:25-27:
Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages ²⁶ but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— ²⁷ to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.
- The way God will strengthen the Roman believers is through the gospel Paul was commissioned to proclaim – and that gospel is the stunning news that when Jesus Christ appeared, he changed everything for them!
- At his incarnation, he was born into the old realm and defeated the powers that marked that realm – sin, death, and the Devil.
- At his resurrection, he inaugurated a new realm marked by grace, peace, and abundant, joy-filled life by the power of the Spirit.
- And the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write all of this rich, joy-producing truth in a letter called Romans!
- However, Romans is not an easy book to understand! How will his friends in Rome grow in their understanding of the gospel? How will they come to see and appreciate all of this rich, life-changing, joy-producing truth? God will send someone to explain all of this to them – Paul!
- And when Paul arrives and does this, something more will happen. Their faith will be established, and Paul's spirit will be encouraged.

B. To be Encouraged by a Steadfast Faith between Them (v. 12)

that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.

- We need to note two important things Paul is saying here:
- **First**, God designed mutual encouragement in the Faith to happen in person, which is why Paul longs to see them.
- **Secondly**, this type of encouragement in faith is most effective when the truth is explained, understood, and applied. It establishes a strong foundation for faith, deepens our commitment to it, and shapes our lives to showcase the power and beauty of that faith!
- ***In other words, the desires that motivate Paul happen when we show up and when we preserve in striving to understand the truth of the gospel being explained in a book like Romans.***
- And this exactly what we see happening at the end of Acts when Paul actually arrives in Rome where for two years he welcomed all who came to him and proclaimed the kingdom of God inaugurated by Jesus at his resurrection (the new realm we saw in 1:3-4) and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ (the rest of the book of Romans) with all boldness and without hindrance (Acts 28:30-31).
- ***So what was this like when Paul did it?*** Paul reported that often his words were misunderstood, his motives were questioned, and his ministry through the word was rebuffed or rejected (2 Cor 6:1-13). Peter acknowledged that the wisdom given to Paul and the theological truth written down by him was often weighty and difficult to understand (2 Pet 3:14-18) which is why they were so easily twisted by individuals who were ignorant (untaught) and unstable (who had never taken the time to let Paul's wisdom establish them firmly).
- ***Application: We must work diligently to understand and appropriate a book like Romans!***

- ***Application – we come to a service like this and there are many distractions that get in the way:***
 - Distracted by our life circumstances
 - Burdened down by our afflictions
 - Exhausted mentally, emotionally, and spiritually
 - New to the faith and unfamiliar with some of the theological ideas in a book like Romans.
 - Shaped and stimulated by sound bites and media reels that portend to reduce robust theology to 180 seconds or less.
 - Conditioned by superficial teaching that is heavy on application and low on content
 - Unfamiliar with the biblical content
 - Intimidated by the theological depth of much of our NT
 - And in some cases, over exposed and overwhelmed by mandated times of teaching/preaching (chapel, bible class, etc.).
 - So when we come to messages like the ones you hear at a church like PBC – it is easy to check in and out.

Friendships that go the distance are built on the gospel, established through prayer, motivated by spiritual objectives, and committed to a gospel purpose.

IV. Directed to a Gospel Purpose (1:13-15)

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. ¹⁴ I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and the foolish. ¹⁵ So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

A. Gospel Fruit in Believers (v. 13)

- Paul desired that his friendship with these believers result in the gospel bearing rich fruit (harvest) in their lives.
- Paul has been preaching the gospel to the Gentiles throughout Asia Minor for almost 30 years.
- He has seen the gospel bring rich spiritual fruit into the lives of those who, like the Thessalonians, turned from idols to worship and serve the living and true God, and to wait for the coming of His Son from heaven (1 Thess 1:9-10).
- While in Ephesus, he observed the gospel teaching husbands to love their wives graciously and sacrificially, just as Christ loved the church. He saw the gospel encouraging wives to follow their husbands joyfully. He noted the gospel guiding parents to raise their children with the nurture and admonition found in Scripture, helping children to honor and obey their parents, and helping slaves and masters totally redefine their relationships (Ephesians 5).
- He observed the gospel change the moral and ethical behavior of the Corinthians who were practicing sexual immorality as idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, thieves, greedy individuals, drunkards, revilers, and swindlers until they were washed, sanctified, and justified by the truth of the gospel (1 Cor 6)!
- And now he desires the gospel to yield this kind of harvest in the lives of his friends in Rome! He fervently prays and longs to come and use the gospel to bring this about! We should also desire the gospel to produce this kind of harvest in the lives of our friends!

B. Gospel Proclamation to Unbelievers (vv. 14-15).

I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and the foolish. ¹⁵ So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

- Paul's desire to establish the kind of gospel friendship we have been talking about comes to one burning passion that he desires to come and instill in the hearts of his friends at Rome – to bring the gospel to unbelievers in Rome!
- This was the heart of all his friendships—the end goal! Becoming Paul's friend meant joining him in loving the gospel, living the gospel, and sharing the gospel—no matter the cost.
- ***True gospel friendships in our own lives must be driven by:***

1. A compelling Obligation to proclaim the Gospel (v. 14)

"I am under obligation . . . so I am eager to proclaim the gospel"

- This was what drove Paul to do what he did. This is what sustained Paul when he endured the unbearable suffering associated with the gospel. This is what motivated Paul to gladly pay the immense personal cost required by his calling as the Apostle to the Gentiles.

2. To all the Nations (v. 14)

"To the Greeks and barbarians; to the wise and unwise"

- To all people regardless of who they are, where they are, or what they have done.

3. For the Glory of the Name (v. 5-6)

Through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ . . . in Rome!

- So that thankful praise and glad worship would be rendered to the God of Heaven through His Son by His Spirit by every nation, tribe, and tongue . . . forever!
- Paul lived and died for this one purpose – and it was at the center of all his friendships!
- And these friends went on to change the world!

Conclusion: Life Lessons

- Paul sought after friendships that were built on the gospel.
 - He prayed fervently and faithfully for such friendships and for his friends.
 - He worked hard to build and establish his friends' faith in their understanding, conformity, and commitment to the gospel.
 - He oriented and developed his friendships around a gospel purpose.
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- And God granted Paul what he desired and prayed for among the Roman Christians! God will do the same for you if you strive to cultivate the kind of gospel friendships that Paul describes in Romans 1:8-15.

But this will require an honest answer to three questions:

1. Do I really want these kinds of gospel-centered friendships?
2. Do my current friends meet the description of the kind of gospel friendships I say I want? If not, what has to change?
3. Am I the kind of friend Paul was to his friends at Rome?