

## **Romans 1:1-17**

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world. For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, asking that by God's will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you. For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you – or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. I want you to know, brothers and sisters, 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 I have among the rest of the Gentiles. I am a debtor both to Greeks and barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish – hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it was written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.”

## **Matthew 9:10-13**

And as [Jesus] sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” But when he heard this, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

## **Sermon: “A Letter to the Church”**

Good morning, Church Family! I, Jason Cashing, greet you in the name of our risen Lord and with all the grace afforded me through him in the name of God the Father and in the Spirit which sanctifies and guides us! I am sorry to be absent from you again in such a short period of time, but know that even as I, too, am in worship right now in a different place, my mind dwells with you in the union of the Spirit.

I am, in fact, in Louisville for the graduation exercises of Louisville Presbyterian Seminary, though I know you know this. After several long and attention-consuming years, I am finished – finished with the seminars and classes, finished with the required and assigned readings, finished with planning and organizing my project, and above all, finished with writing! In fact, when I

recently defended my work as the last step, someone here commented, “I bet you’re glad that you no longer have to write papers!”

And while this is, to a degree, true (I do enjoy writing, at least on my own schedule), the aspect I am most grateful for is the knowledge that I am returning to you without academic distraction; with this chapter now finalizing, I feel that I will once again be able to be more fully present with you in our shared ministry, and return to a schedule and good work with stability. This may seem like a small thing to be looking forward to, but I am aware of how my calling in this manner has brought about a feeling of instability for us all, and I look forward to reclaiming stability in our lives and ministries together.

And in all the letters of Paul to the various congregations of the newly forming Church, this is an aspect that I feel gets overlooked far too easily. Most of the letters Paul writes, which we now have to benefit us in our own faith today, are written in response to questions or concerns from the local congregation – reflecting anxieties or uncertainties that Paul needs to reassure and soothe. In many cases, he offers what so many loving parents would offer a child who is feeling anxious and uncertain: “Remember who you are, whose you are, and who loves you” (this is a general paraphrasing, of course, but I would say it is accurate).

The Letter to the Romans, however, is slightly different: rather than writing to a congregation which knows him and to which he is trying offer guidance and comfort, he is writing to a congregation he is longing to meet face-to-face, as he writes in verses 11-12, “so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you – or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine.”

Yet even in this is the desire to establish and deepen the stability of relationship, of mutual regard and edification, of comfort and renewal. The mutual uplifting of one another, in fact, can only be realized in a stable and committed relationship, built on a sense of being present with one another in all things, joyful and sorrowful, peaceful and challenging. We often hear Paul responding to the challenging aspects of life together in ministry, but he is only able to respond because of the peaceful and committed time he has spent with these congregations.

And this is what I am most excited to work to reclaim with you upon my return: to be present with you and to know that, short of some vacation time this summer, I will not again be called away from you in the foreseeable future.

In fact, this covenant relationship is one of the most overlooked blessings in the church today, and the one which, when stressed or absent, creates the most anxiety: that the relationship between minister and congregation would be fractured by the calling away of the minister. Eugene Peterson, theologian and unofficial “pastor to the pastors” of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, writes about how crucial it is, how deeply theological it is, for a minister to commit to being present with a congregation for the long term. “Somehow we American pastors, without really noticing what was happening, got our vocations redefined in the terms of American careerism. We quit thinking of the parish as a location for pastoral spirituality and started thinking of it as an opportunity for advancement...The moment we did that, we started thinking wrongly, for the

vocation of a pastor has to do with living out the implications of the word of God in community, not sailing off into exotic seas of religion in search of fame and fortune.”<sup>1</sup>

You have allowed me a great privilege in pursuing my academic interests while serving at the same time as your pastor, and I know – whether or not it was spoken – that this created no small amount of anxiety; you have been burned before by pastors who sought their degree and then left when it gave them opportunity to do so. I aim to prove to you that this is not my intent; rather the opposite is becoming true: having achieved this degree, my desire to stay among you has increased and not decreased, and I find myself echoing Paul’s sentiment mentioned earlier: I am longing to share with you some spiritual gift (as I have worked for) to strengthen you, or rather, that we may mutually strengthen and uplift one another in faith.

This is no small task, to uplift one another and to be uplifted in the faith. It will continue to take our deliberate effort in discipleship and as the community of faith. But we can take comfort in the remembrance that Christ’s yoke is easy and his burden is light; the work is serious but in the fellowship and community of faith, committed to in the covenant of God, we find deep joy and everlasting peace.

I look forward to sharing in this with you once again, and continuing to do so for the foreseeable future.

In Christ,  
Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing

---

<sup>1</sup> Peterson, Eugene. *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness*. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, 20.