



**LIVING WORD
EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

A Debtor to Greeks and to Barbarians

Romans 1:8-15

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Around our house we have a joke: “If Bill has ten books and you ask to borrow one book, how many books does Bill have left?” And the answer: “Ten books. Bill still has ten books.” I’m not really quite that bad about loaning out books, but it’s not always an easy thing for me to do. To me, books aren’t just “things”. They’re friends and companions and their full of knowledge, which is valuable. And—I’ve learned from experience—sometimes when you loan them out, they don’t come back. I’ve never understood people who lose borrowed books. In particular, I think of a book that I promised to loan to a friend I didn’t see very often. It was a relatively expensive and very, very hard-to-find book. A mutual friend was more likely to see her and wanted to see the book for herself, so I handed the book to our mutual friend who was going to see her later in the week. “Please give this to So-and-so when you see her,” I said, “and in the meantime you can have a look at it.” A few weeks went by and I emailed my friend to see what she thought of the book. She emailed back and said she and our mutual friend had visited, but no book. We both kept asking our mutual friend about the book, but she kept forgetting about it. Months and months later the mutual friend moved away never to be heard from again. I assume she still has my book, because my friend never received it and I never got it back. I scratch my head and have to ask, “Who does that?” If I’ve been entrusted with something and asked to deliver it to another person I do my best to discharge my duty with all alacrity. More than once, as a minister, I’ve been given a relatively

significant amount of money so that I can either pass it along anonymously to someone in the church or to our treasurer for the church itself. I’m never comfortable until that money is out of my hands.

In our lesson from Romans this morning, St. Paul describes himself in just this sort of situation. He’s been given something to give to others and until he passes it along, until he discharges his duty, he describes himself as being in their debt. In Paul’s case it’s nothing so trivial as a book or a sum of money—it’s the gospel itself. Last Sunday we looked at Paul’s salutation to the Christians in Rome. In the next few verses he begins to explain why he’s writing to them. He wants to come and visit. He hasn’t been to Rome, but he’s heard a lot about these people and he wants to share in their work, but more importantly, Jesus himself has entrusted Paul with the good news for the sake of the Romans and he’s going to be in their debt until he’s brought the gospel to them.

Here’s what he writes in verse 8:

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

Paul first encourages these believers in Rome by telling them that he’s heard about them and that he thanks God for them. To understand what kind of encouragement this would have been, think about Rome. It was the capital of the empire. It was the centre of the world in the First Century. It was the centre of culture and law. And it was also the home of every sort of idolatrous worship. It was the home of Caesar and in Roman civil religion, the people worshiped Caesar as the son of God, the saviour who had brought peace to the world. And yet here, right under Caesar’s nose were these Christians proclaiming that Jesus, crucified and risen, is the world’s true Lord, the true Son of God, and the true and only real bringer of lasting peace. And they didn’t just

proclaim this gospel, this good news; they were living it out in ways that attracted attention. In a decade they would be proclaiming it and living it out as Nero threw them to the lions in the arena and covered them in pitch so that he could crucify them and set them on fire to light his garden parties. Paul gives thanks for their witness to Jesus, for their willingness to stand firm right in Caesar’s capital to proclaim that Jesus, not Caesar is Lord.

Paul knew this because his friends—and as we’ll see at the end of Romans even some of his relatives—had travelled from Rome and had told him about the Christians there. Everyone knew it was one of the most difficult places in the world to be a Christian, but there they were. When St. Peter fled Jerusalem—we read about that in Acts 12—he fled to Rome. He met up with fellow Jews there and he preached the good news about Jesus. They had no doubt heard stories about Jesus and his crucifixion. But Peter preached that Jesus really and truly was Israel’s Messiah, promised by the Prophets. He told these Jews in Rome how, yes, Jesus had been crucified, but that God had raised him from the dead. That meant that Jesus really was Israel’s Messiah, and not only that, it also meant that Jesus was the world’s true Lord.

As receptive as these people were to the gospel, it doesn’t mean there was a huge church in Rome. At the time Paul wrote, there may have been a few dozen or possibly as many as a hundred Christians meeting in various homes in the city. The Jewish Christians had been expelled from Rome by Claudius a few years before, leaving only the Gentile Christians. Some of those Jewish believers who had fled from Rome became close friends of Paul during his time in Corinth. Even without them the Church had continued to grow and at the time Paul wrote his letter to them, many of the Jewish Christians had come back. And now they were all struggling to figure out what the

gospel meant for everyone. With the Jews expelled from the city it had been easy for the Gentile believers to think that while God may have started with Israel, he was now moving on to something different. Those first Jewish believers in Jesus had continued to go to the synagogues. They still obeyed the Jewish law, practised circumcision, ate only clean food, observed all the Jewish holy days. But for the Gentile believers it was easy to write all of that off as irrelevant, especially after the Jews left Rome. Jesus was now for the non-Jewish, Gentile world, many thought.

But then Nero reversed Claudius' edict. The Jews came back. Some of them were Paul's friends. They'd worked with him in Greece and heard him teach and preach. They understood that, yes, God had fulfilled his promises to the Jews in Jesus. They knew that Jesus was Israel's Messiah. But they also understood that Jesus had transformed what it meant to be "Israel". They understood that Jews *and Gentiles* now stood together in God's covenant community through Jesus. But not everyone thought that way. God had given his law to Moses. It was for the Jews and it was going to stand forever. And now they were worshipping side by side with unclean Gentiles who didn't observe that law. How was the Church going to address this? This is what a lot of Romans is about—Paul helping them get straight what it means to be Jews and Gentiles in Jesus and what it means that Jesus is the Messiah for all people. And so Paul was in their debt until he had proclaimed the gospel in Rome. It wasn't just that the pagans needed to hear the good news, but that even the Christians in Rome themselves, as they struggled with what it meant to be Jesus' people, what it meant to be a Jew or Gentile in Jesus the Messiah, they needed to hear what Paul had to say about the gospel's continuing implications for them.

That said, even as the Roman Christians struggled with these issues, when it came to what was really important, when it came to proclaiming Jesus as Lord, they were very faithful. Paul's heard good things and he encourages them. And he also tells them in verses 9 and 10 that he's been praying for them. He writes:

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

I can't imagine very many things that would be more encouraging than to hear from Paul himself that he was praying for our church. But one of those things would probably be that Paul was planning to visit us. These Christians were struggling to know how to proclaim the good news to the pagans of Rome. They were struggling to know how Jew and Gentile could live together in Jesus. Paul was the expert on these things. He was the apostle called by Jesus himself to take the gospel to the Gentiles. Surely Paul would know what to do.

But this could have been a touchy subject. Paul goes on verses 11 to 13:

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.

They're engaged in the very ministry to which Jesus himself had called Paul. Not only that, but as a church,

the Romans are struggling with problems that Paul has already worked through. He wants to visit. He wants to help. God has entrusted him with a grace that isn't just for Paul, it's for people like these brothers and sisters in Rome.

But notice that Paul is also careful here not to write to them as if it's all about what the Great Apostle Paul has to offer them. This was probably a bit of touchy subject for Paul. It was one thing to write as a spiritual father to the churches he had started or helped to start, but this was sort of Peter's church. Peter was their spiritual father. And so Paul writes about how he longs to visit Rome, he longs to bring them his unique gifting and knowledge to strengthen them and to build them, in his phrasing he shows a pause and then he adds something to the effect of, "But it's not all about me and what I've got to bring. I don't want you to think that I'm saying you're lacking or deficient because you were started by someone else. I want to visit you so that we can build each other up in the faith.

When he wrote to the Christians in Corinth, Paul compared the church to a body. There are hands and feet, hearts and minds, eyes and ears and tongues. God has given each Christian a unique role to play. Each believer is God's gift to the church. Some may have more visible or prominent roles to play—as Paul did—but that doesn't mean that each isn't critical to fulfilling the mission of the church. Paul saw himself as a debtor to them until he'd brought them his gospel gift, but that also means that each of them was a debtor to the body of Jesus when it came to their own gifts. Paul is careful to stress this. Again, it's not just about him. Paul was humble. I like the way John Stott put it in his commentary on this passage, "[Paul] knows about the reciprocal blessings of Christian fellowship and, although he is an

apostle, he is not too proud to acknowledge his need of it.”¹

But, that said, his calling really was to the Gentiles and Rome was the centre of the Gentile world. He writes that he’d wanted to go there for a long time, but circumstances had prevented it from happening—he was willing to wait on the Lord’s timing. But he really did want to go. God had been sowing his Word in Rome and there was a harvest to be reaped. That was Paul’s specialty and as the apostle to the Gentiles he was naturally drawn to do his work in the capital city of the Gentile world.

He goes on in verses 14 and 15:

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.

Under *obligation* to Greeks and barbarians. The Greek word Paul uses is the word for *debtor*. God had given the gospel to Paul in trust for the Gentiles—for Greeks and barbarians, for the wise and foolish. Calling someone a barbarian had a somewhat different sense in Paul’s world than in ours. Have you seen the movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*? At one point the father of the bride, a proud Greek immigrant, makes this statement: “There are two kinds of people—Greeks, and everyone else who wish they was Greek.” That’s how the ancient Greeks saw things too. You were either Greek or you weren’t. And the Greek language has a fluid beauty to it. In contrast, to their ears, the non-Greeks jabbered. It sounded like “Bar, bar, bar” and thus they were “barbarians”. But as far as Paul is concerned, he’s got a mission to *both* kinds of people. It doesn’t matter if you’re a Greek or someone who wishes he was Greek, you need to hear

the gospel, you need to hear the world-changing and life-changing announcement that Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, is Lord.

This was Paul’s trust and that’s why he writes that he’s eager to preach the gospel, the good news in Rome. He was in debt and to leave a debt unpaid not only left a heavy weight over one’s head, it was a profoundly dishonourable thing.

Have you ever thought of the gospel that way, Brothers and Sisters? Have you ever thought of your spiritual gifts—your God-given abilities, giftings, and calling—that way? I would like to suggest to you this morning that you should. Just as Paul was entrusted by the Spirit with gifts of grace to share, so have we. Just as Paul was entrusted with the gospel as an announcement held in trust for all those who had yet to hear it, so have we. We may not have been called by Jesus as Paul was to apostles to the entire world of non-Jews, but we have been called to be apostles to the people we know, to our families, to the people in our workplaces, to the people in our community. The good news has not been announced to us solely for our own benefit. The Spirit entrusted the good news to us so that we can announce it to the world. We are debtors to everyone with whom we have contact until we have discharged our duty of announcing that Jesus died and rose again for them and that Jesus is the world’s true Lord. But remember too, that we are also in debt to each other as the Church, as the body of Christ. God has made each of us unique, with our own personalities and abilities. The Spirit has gifted each of us uniquely. And Providence has brought us all together. God knows what we need to accomplish the calling and mission he has for us and he will never fail to equip us for the mission. But if we’re not each taking part, if we’re not each doing and being the part of the body that God intends us to be, we are not

discharging out debt to the Church or to the world. Big or small, loud or quiet, up front or behind the scenes, we each have gifts and abilities to share that, as Paul writes, we may strengthen each other and encourage one another in faith. And all this so that we can be the Church, so that we can be the kingdom people that Jesus has made us, walking in faith in the risen Lord, walking in the life his Spirit has given us, and announcing to the world that in Jesus God’s kingdom is here.

Let us pray: Almighty God and Father, we give you thanks for the gift of our Son who died and rose again for the forgiveness of our sins and to restore us to life. We give you thanks that he came not only to restore *us* to your fellowship, but to set *all* of your creation to rights—that you sent him to be your King. And so we ask you to remind us lest we ever forget that in your gospel you have graciously entrusted us with an announcement for the world—an announcement to be proclaimed to and lived out before our families, our friends, our co-workers, and our community. It is an announcement not just for us, but for them as well. Remind us that we are in their debt until we have discharged that duty. Give us strength we pray as we encourage each other and work together as your Church, knowing that while we discharge this duty every day, we will have never fully discharged it until all the world has heard the announcement that Jesus is Lord. Through him we pray. Amen.

¹ *Romans: God’s Good News for the World* (Downer’s Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), p. 57.