

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Marks of True Spiritual Service, Part 1

Scripture: Romans 1:8-10a

Code: 45-05

People serve the Lord for many reasons. There are some people who serve the Lord because of legalism. They're afraid not to. They serve the Lord because they think that's what He requires if you're to get in the Kingdom. There are some cults that even teach if you don't go to the mission field for a couple of years, you'll never make it. There are people within the framework of Christianity who serve the Lord strictly because they feel bound to do that or else God may pop their balloon, make life miserable for them.

There are people who serve the Lord for prestige sake. They want to make a reputation. They want to be highly esteemed. They want to lord it over men. They want to seek a chief seat. They play the role of Deotrophes(?) who loved to have the preeminence.

There are some people who serve the Lord because they want to be thought righteous. They want to be thought of as holy, as godly, as religious. There are some people who serve the Lord because of peer pressure. Everybody else is doing it and they've got to get on the bandwagon or they won't be accepted in the group.

There are some people who serve the Lord because they've been forced to do it by somebody else, maybe their parents, perhaps even who have intimidated them in years past and they're still bound by that intimidation.

You can serve the Lord for many reasons. Out of your own ego, out of fear, out of legalism, out of intimidation. But none of those is true spiritual service because all of that is external. It's all functionary. It's all going through the motions, cranking it out. I might add there are some people who serve the Lord, believe it or not, out of money. They do it for filthy lucre sake. Jesus now days is a commodity that sells, in case you haven't noticed.

But all of these show an external kind of service. We could call it serving in the flesh, for external reasons. And what I want to share with you tonight out of Romans chapter 1 verses 8 through 15 and right into the beginning of verse 16, is something very different from that and that is true spiritual service.

Now let me go a step further and say that all of us who may serve the Lord from time to time because we really have a pure motive can find ourselves drawn into the other kind of service. There are times,

for example, when I might preach because I have to preach. And it's mechanical and I've got to do it, if I don't do it you'll all come and we'll sing and you'll go home. And that will never do so I'll preach. It's a function.

There might be times when you teach a Bible class or a Sunday-school class or something like that because you feel that if you don't do that, you're not going to be a part of the group because all your friends are doing it and you just go through the motions. You may do it sometimes so people will think you're spiritual, you may do it sometimes so you can have that leadership that you've always wanted. It's possible to serve the Lord for money. I hate to admit the thing but it's true. There are times, you know, when somebody will call or write and say, "We'd like to have you come and speak." And my first thought is, "You know, the last time I went there they only gave me \$25.00." And I say I would never think that, it must be the devil putting that in my mind because he tempts you that way.

I remember one time being invited to speak at a campus. I spoke for 45 minutes on the credibility of Christianity to an open forum student body and they had 45 minutes to ask me questions. Now that's putting your head on the block at a college. And I did that for three Tuesday nights in a row. And I drove 50 miles one way to do it here in the southland and I received a check in the mail for \$3.00...a dollar a night. I never forgot that. And my reaction is "A dollar a night!" I had just gotten out of seminary at the time and I was really desperate. Oh, it's so easy to be tempted like that.

All of us find ourselves fighting off emotions and bad motives, improper motives as we serve Christ. And as we look at the Apostle Paul in Romans 1:8 to 16, I think we might get a glimpse of the right motives. And maybe the Lord will really begin to reinforce in our hearts the perspective of true spiritual service.

Almost 1900 years ago this passage was written. And yet though over 1900 years old, it still had a tremendous warmth. It is just alive with affection. There is in these verses a tremendous sensitivity. There is a tenderness and a strength that just breathes its way through the letters and the words. As I read this over and over and over and over this week, it just seemed to me that I could sense Paul's great heart beating with love for the church he had never seen in Rome. It wasn't his church, he didn't found it. He had never met with that church. And it was not like him to build on another man's foundation as he says in chapter 16, so this was a very, very unusual passion that he had for this church. And as I read the message again, it seemed as though Paul was alive and his heart was beating and the thing was so fresh that it spoke to me of my own service for Christ right here and right now. And I hope it will for you as well.

I think we tend to see Paul as a strong resolute determined hard confrontive bold dynamic individual. We primarily see him as an initiator. And that's true. And we also see him as a brilliant logical astute genius, a definitive theologian. He's not only an initiator but he's an intellectual.

But I have to add a third word, he's also an intimate. There's something very tender down inside Paul, something very sensitive, something very loving, something very soft and warm and gentle. He had the zeal of the prophet. He had the mind of the teacher. He had the determination of the Apostle. But he had the heart of a shepherd. And that's what you see in these verses here. He was no paid preacher with a fee in the place of a heart. He wasn't a preacher with a bag of old-hat sermons in place of a passion. He was every bit the shepherd.

Now he has already introduced the gospel in the first seven verses of Roman in a brief summary of what he'll unfold in the sixteen chapters. He's already introduced the gospel. But before he moves into its full explanation which begins in the middle of verse 16, before he gets into that unfolding explanation that runs the length of the book, he wants to open up his heart and it's most important for him to do that because the people in Rome basically don't know him. And there might be the question, first of all, why is this man whom we've never met writing us this long epistle? Secondly, this great Apostle to the Gentiles, why has he never come to our city? Doesn't he care about us? Is he going to treat us at arm's length?

And so, I believe he wants to answer the question of why he is writing and why he has not come. And the answer is very simple, he's writing because he cares so deeply about their spiritual maturity and he hasn't come because although he's wanted to so desperately, God has never allowed him to come. But he has to say that so they'll understand. The Romans had never met him and the only way they could get an insight into his heart is if he opened his heart to them. So, what we have right here in verses 8 to 16, the first part of the verse, is the Apostle opening his heart to reveal the character of his service to Christ. It's a tremendous passage. We get a glimpse into the real Paul, behind that initiator and behind that intellectual, the spirit of the man.

I read this passage I can't tell you how many times before something finally clicked in my mind as to what was going on here. In fact, I can't remember a passage in months and months that I went over and over and over like I did this and never really got the whole thing put together till half way through yesterday...after spending all week on it. Because I never could really see what the key was. And then there was a sort of "eureka" and I caught a phrase in verse 9: "For God is my witness whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of His Son." And the phrase that jumped out at me was "whom I serve with my spirit."

Paul had been raised in Judaism. He knew the Pharisees. He knew the Sadducees. He knew the scribes, the chief priests, the elders. And he knew the externalism. He knew that the service was so much mechanics, so much activity, so much formality, so much routine, so much liturgy. They served with the flesh. They served in the physical, in the external, in the superficial. And he grew up in a Gentile world and he knew how the priests of the pagan gods served. They served externally out of fear that if they didn't do it the god would step on them and crush them, or bring calamity on their city

or their town or their country. All of it was so shallow and so superficial. He had seen so much religiosity. He had seen so much phony functioning in the name of religion. And he sums up his whole approach in the statement "God whom I serve with my spirit."

And I believe what he is saying is that my service comes from deep within me, not from the outside, not from the external. In my service, in the gospel of His Son which gospel he has already alluded to in the first seven verses, when I serve God in the gospel of His Son, I serve with my spirit. In other words, my inner man is what motivates me. My inner man is what drives me. It isn't what people think. It isn't what they pay me. It isn't peer pressure. It isn't legal obligation. It's in my heart to do this. It's in my spirit to do this.

The best way to see that beautiful phrase is as an affirmation that his whole being, his whole heart, his whole mind, his whole soul, his whole spirit was in the service that he rendered. He's saying to them, "I'm not insincere. I am genuine." He's just saying it's an all out effort for me.

We use the word "spirit" sometimes in that same way. We may watch an athletic team participate or an athlete participate in some sport and we see him lethargic, indifferent and just going through the motions. On the other hand, sometimes you see somebody just go all out, just put out everything and we tend to say, "That is spirited play." He's got his whole being in that. In fact, when I was in college we used to give an award on the football team called the "esprit de corps" award," for the one who rendered the greatest spirit, really had his heart in it. And that's Paul.

He never served the Lord without a wholehearted commitment. That's the only way to go at it. So he distinguishes himself from the hirelings. He distinguishes himself from those whose labor was formal and outward and pretense and insincerity. He separates himself from the traditional heathen cultic priests and the scribes and the Pharisees. And he says I serve God with my inner man. And the allusion to the Holy Spirit here is irresistible. I see in the spirit also the Holy Spirit behind the scenes. I serve with my spirit, but his spirit had been long energized by the Holy Spirit of God. His service then is the real stuff.

In fact, the word "to serve" comes from the Greek verb *latreuo*. It is used in the New Testament only for religious service, always for service to God. Except two times it's used for service to idols. But it always is used for service to God, divine service. And frequently the word is translated "worship." It always has fascinated me that this word exists in the New Testament and can be translated either to serve or worship. We think of worship as stained glass windows and pipe organs. You'll notice we have not a pipe organ and no stained glass windows. We don't want you to be confused. People think of worship as external. But the Bible says the same word that means worship also means...what?...service. The greatest worship you ever render to God is to serve Him. And Paul says I serve Him with my spirit.

Now frankly, for Paul that meant a total all-out commitment. Look at Romans 12:1...Romans 12:1, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God that you present your bodies...watch this...a living sacrifice." Oh, that's a great phrase. "Present your body a living sacrifice." That means one that is ever willing to die if need be, that's how deep the commitment...holy. And by the way, that is already holy..."Holy, acceptable unto God which is your...what?...reasonable, or spiritual service."

Paul says, "Look, I serve with my whole spirit." How do you do that, Paul? Well, by presenting your body a living sacrifice, holy acceptable unto God. Further, "By not being conformed to this...what?...world, but being transformed by the renewing of your mind that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God." In other words, your body is presented as a living sacrifice. Your soul is not conformed to the world. Your mind is transformed. Every part of you belongs to God. That is your spiritual service. That's the way Paul served, with everything he had.

In Philippians 3:3 he uses the same terms. He says, "For we are the circumcision who worship God in the spirit." And he makes the same contrast in Philippians 3:3. We're not external. We worship or serve God...same word again...from deep within our hearts. It is spiritual service, spiritual worship.

I love the statement he made when the boat was going through the Mediterranean Sea and they were having that terrible disastrous shipwreck and all those things were happening. And you remember what he said? He came and he said, "Look, everything's going to be okay because an angel appeared to me." And then he said this, I love this, "For I believe God...I believe God." How so, Paul? Earlier he says this, "For there stood by me this night an angel of God," here's the phrase I want you to get, "whose I am and whom I...what?...serve." I belong to God and I serve Him.

Second Timothy 1:3, he writes: "I thank God whom I serve with a pure conscience." In other words, you can look deep down inside of me and you will see that I serve with a whole heart. Paul's service is an act of worship. Paul's service was deep and genuine and honest. And that, my friend, is true spiritual service. That's the real stuff. That's the only way to serve. There is no other way to serve, but with total commitment.

Paul reminds Timothy who has defected in 2 Timothy 2, he says to him, "Timothy, you had better begin to call upon the Lord," listen to this, "out of a pure heart." You better get your act together.

Now what does this involve? If we are to serve the Lord in the right way, what does it really involve? What are the ingredients? Let me give you a test. We'll probably start it tonight and finish it next time. The other alternative is, we'll be here till midnight. We'll take alternative number one.

What are the marks of true spiritual service? How can you look at somebody and tell that they're really serving with their spirit? You know, we have a lot of people in this church who serve... a lot of

people...a lot of people. Do you know that Jim Welles was telling me the other night that just in the ministry of recreation alone, there are 400 leaders that are involved over a period of a year. I don't know how many teachers there are in the elementary division, 500? A lot of people serve, flocks ministries, missions, youth ministries. In fact, we figured a few weeks ago, I shared it with you, that between eight and nine thousand in this church are involved in some service, some fellowship between the Sundays. We have a lot of people who serve.

Now, how do we really evaluate whether our service is according to the heart? Here comes the test. And I think there are ten marks of true spiritual service. First, number one, true spiritual service is marked by a thankful spirit...a thankful spirit. Look at verse 8. First, "I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world."

You know, if there's anything you learn about Paul, it's that he had a thankful heart. Do you know that in every single epistle that he wrote, he expresses thanks for the one to whom he writes...except for one? And that was the Galatians who had defected from the gospel and were functioning in the flesh. All the rest begin with thanksgiving. Now let me tell you something. The reason he wrote those letters, for the most part, was because those churches need to be corrected. But even where he saw that need and where he saw the need for instruction, he also could find something to be thankful for. Paul had a thankful spirit. He was always able to see God's purposes being accomplished. He was always able to see God's Kingdom advancing. He was always able to see people being saved. He looked for that. He focused on that. And he expressed what I believe you find in the heart of all true servants of God, the man lived out an attitude of gratitude.

Some people go through the world and all they ever find is what's wrong with everything. It's like Thomas Hardy said, he had a friend, you could take him in to any beautiful meadow and immediately he'd find the manure pile. Didn't matter where it was. There are some people who just go through life negative. They just cannot find the good things. You know why that is? Because the only good things they care about are the good things that happen to them and they know nothing of what it is to live a life of gratitude over what God's doing for somebody else. If it isn't happening to them, it isn't happening.

Now Paul expresses his thanks. He doesn't say, "Thank you, Romans." No, thanking the Romans would have been flattery. And he doesn't say, "I'm so thankful for what God has done for me." That would have been selfishness. He says, "I thank God...not the Romans...for what He's done...not for me, but...for you." He got just as much joy out of somebody else's success as he did his own.

You might be interested to know where he was when he wrote this. He was in Corinth. And you know what was going on? The Jews were plotting to kill him. But he never lost his perspective. That was nothing new, frankly. That happened in about every town he went into. But in the twentieth chapter of Acts and the second verse, it says, "They were lying in wait to kill him." In that particular

situation he still is filled with thanksgiving, even though things are pretty sad in his case. And he knew he was on his way to Jerusalem and everywhere he went people kept telling him when he got there he's going to be put in chains and his life would be in danger. It never even bothered him. He was thankful.

And what was he thankful about? That God had given them a testimony of faith that was going throughout the whole world. Their testimony was strong. In fact, the testimony of the church in Rome was so strong that in 49 A.D., Emperor Claudius had expelled all the Jews, kicked them all out. And if you read Suetonius, the Roman historian, Suetonius records that the reason Emperor Claudius threw all the Jews out is because there was trouble brewing under the influence of one named "Krestus(?)" which seems to be poor Claudius' feeble attempt at identifying Christ. They had had a tremendous testimony. They'd stirred up the Jewish community there. Their testimony had gone, as it were, through the whole world. And, of course, that's not comprehensively the whole world, but the whole world of their purview, the world of their living and the world of their understanding.

So he thanked God. I think superficial servers are basically thankless. They never get satisfied. They never get enough. They focus only on their own insatiable appetites. You show me a thankless heart and I'll always show you a proud self-centered individual. Because even when you can't find things in your own life to be thankful for, if you're really living the kind of life you should, you can find myriads of things that God's doing in somebody else's life. And you should be just as thankful for those. In fact, in the spirit of Philippians 2, more thankful.

And so, Paul had a thankful heart even though his life was being plotted against, even though he was heading to Jerusalem where he had been warned that he would become a prisoner and perhaps lose his life. His great concern was the Kingdom of God, not his own hide. So he was thankful. He was thankful in the midst of his distress because the joy came in the advance of God's Kingdom, not in his own success.

Notice what he says in verse 8. "First I thank my God." Pagans didn't say that. There was no intimacy. Jews didn't say that. There was no intimacy. But Paul said that because God for Paul was not a theological abstraction, God for Paul was an intimate friend. The God whose I am and whom I serve, there was a tremendous intimacy between himself and God. And he says that very often, "My God." In Philippians 1:3, "I thank my God." In Philemon, that little letter, I think it's in verse 4, "I thank my God." He felt a real intimacy and he was so...mark this now...so entwined with his God that his God's purposes and his God's causes and his God's ends became the source of his thanksgiving.

You see, even when he became a prisoner and was in that stinking wretched Mammertine prison where the city sewage system ran by the door and after 40 prisoners were in that hole in the ground, they opened the sewage and drowned the prisoners and started with the next 40, even while he was a captive in his own house in Rome and when he was writing those prison letters, he was always

filled with joy because his joy had nothing to do with what was happening to him. In fact, he said, you know, even the people who ought to be my friends have criticized me. And some are adding affliction to my bonds. In other words, it isn't enough I'm a prisoner, they're wailing on me, criticizing my ministry, saying I'm in jail because God had to shelf me. But he says I don't care, if Jesus Christ is preached, in that I will rejoice. He had a thankful heart. Thankful language comes from one who serves the Lord with his deep inner man.

Notice just a couple of other notes in verse 8. He says, "I thank my God through Jesus Christ." Always the Mediator, one mediator between God and man. The only way he could come to God was through Jesus Christ. "No man comes unto the Father," said Jesus, "but...what?...by Me," John 14:6. Jesus is the one, says the writer of Hebrews, who has opened the way so that we can boldly come into the presence of the Father to seek mercy in the time of need. Apart from Jesus Christ I warn you that God would be nothing but a consuming fire. The reason He is my God is because the intimacy has been made possible by Christ. And so he comes to serve his God through Christ with a heart of thanksgiving.

And notice it's an all-encompassing thanks. "I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all." Some people say this indicates that he was from the south. But I'm not really sure that's exactly what it's intended to indicate. But that his heart was toward all of them. The man had such a big heart. He didn't look for what was wrong with people. He wasn't picky. He was just thankful.

I've always said, you know, if you're not thankful, the reason is you think you didn't get what you deserve. And let me just tell you. If you really got what you deserved, you'd get hell forever. I'm thankful, he says. And I'm thankful that your faith is spoken of throughout the world. What does he mean by their faith? The genuineness of their salvation, the true character of their redemption, the clear testimony that they were a really redeemed fellowship manifesting the life and the power of the Lord Jesus Christ. And there they were, right in the middle of the mouth of the Roman lion, right in Rome itself. And he was so thankful. They had credibility, they had integrity. They lived out their faith.

Wouldn't it great to be famous throughout the whole world for your faith? Some churches are famous for their pastor. Some churches are famous for their architecture. Some churches are famous for the high ceiling, or the glass, or the carvings. Some churches are famous for the dome on top. Some are famous for the art. Some are famous for the cemetery out back. Some are famous for the organ. Some are famous for their choir. Some are famous for the celebrities that go there. Some are famous for their money, some for their theology, some for their fanaticism. Wouldn't it be great to be famous for your faith throughout the whole world? No wonder he was thankful.

When people come to me, and they come every...almost every day either by letter or by phone call or person to person, they say, "Could you please recommend a church in my city? They don't say,

"Could you recommend one with nice architecture? Do you know a good church that has a dome on it? Do you know a church where there's a nice cemetery in the back? Do you know a church with a pipe organ? You know, we're moving to a new city, where do the celebrities go? People never ask me that. You know what they ask me? Do you know a good church in such-a-such-a place where they really believe God and take Him at His Word? That's what they want to know. And that's why Paul was thankful for this church.

A thankful heart is essential to true spiritual service. If you're trying to serve the Lord without gratitude in your heart for what He's done, you're serving in the flesh for other than proper motives.

Thankfulness, let me tell you, is an attitude that will always find a cause...always. It will always find something to express itself. And one who serves externally and one who serves legalistically and one who serves ritualistically, one who serves out of duty can hardly find things to be thankful for in his own life, let alone anybody else's.

Do you have a thankful heart? Are you overwhelmed with thanksgiving? If you are, that will take out any bitterness or any negative thinking. There's so much to be thankful for. And you know, the devil always wants to say, "Ah, it isn't like you to like it, is it?" And he plays that game with me, too. And then I just stop and stand back and say, "But wait a minute, look, so much to be thankful for."

Second point, true spiritual service is characterized by a thankful spirit and a concerned spirit...a concerned spirit. And here is a marvelous duality. While there is deep gratitude, at the same time there is concern for what isn't being done. You have to have the two. Sure, we're thankful but we don't just sit back and say, "Oh, there's three or four good things going on, so we just let the 84 bad things sort of slide along." No, we don't do that. There's concern. Look at verse 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."

Now the emphasis of that statement is simply this. Drop out the part that we studied in the middle and he's saying this, "For God is my witness that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers." Now you say, "Paul, you're being redundant. I mean, what you said without ceasing you didn't need to say always, or if you said always you could leave out the without ceasing. Why do you say without ceasing I make mention of you always? That's redundant. Yeah, but says that's how I do it. I just do it always and without ceasing. The first one is negative and the second one is positive, you see. He just wants to cover the ground. He says I pray for you all the time.

And now you have no way of knowing that. Because you don't know me. So he uses that little beginning in verse 9, "For God is my witness." Since you don't have that knowledge, I call on God. God is my witness. God knows my heart. Beloved, may I suggest to you secondly, that the spirit of true spiritual service is one of concern that issues in prayer? First a thankful heart and then a concerned heart that prays. If you see needs, go to your knees about those needs. True spiritual

service prays.

Oh, how many of his epistles does he begin with an indication of his concerned prayers for the readers? He does it over and over again. And here for a group he's never even visited, and a church he didn't even found, he says I never stop praying for you. He never took it for granted. He didn't say, "Oh, well, that church in Rome, their faith is spoken throughout the whole world. I'm so thankful, God, for what You've done. Cross them off the list." No. Continued to pray.

It was so with the early Apostles. In Acts 6:4 it says that they gave themselves continually to prayer in the ministry of the Word. Paul told the Thessalonians simply this, "Pray without...what?...ceasing." They could never know his intensity. They could never know his concern unless he told them. And maybe they wouldn't believe it except that he calls on God and says God is my witness. And after all, it's Him I serve with my spirit in the gospel of His Son. I'm lining up with God and telling you I pray like this on your behalf. He calls on omniscience for verification. God who cannot lie, God who knows the secrets of the heart, God who knows the hidden motives, let God be my witness that I pray for you and I never stop praying for you. What a testimony. If you have a little class of people that you teach, can you say to them, "I thank my God for you and with all your problems and I never, ever ever stop praying for you?" Boy, I tell you, that's the stuff that real service is made out of.

He wants them to know, you see, that his failure to visit Rome is not due to some lack of desire on his part for them, some lack of concern, some indifference. He never stops praying for them. That's characteristic of a true hearted servant.

In Ephesians 6:18, he says the same thing, he says, "Praying always with all prayer and supplication for all saints." Always praying for everybody.

What do you think the content of his prayer was? What did he pray for the Romans? Lord, there's one of them that's got a twisted ankle...Lord, one of them's trying to debate about whether they ought to buy a new chariot... What do you think the content of his prayer was? Lord, I want to pray for that Roman church, they need to add an education unit...heh-heh. What do you think he was praying about?

Well, I'll give you a little insight. You want to see some of his prayers? How about Ephesians 3, this is what he writes to the Ephesians and this letter probably got circulated around a lot more places than the Ephesians. We find manuscripts of it with different places in the indication of its objective. But in verse 14, here's a typical prayer of Paul. "For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ....now I'm going to pray." That last phrase may or may not be in the manuscripts, but he says, "I'm praying now to the Father and this is what I'm going to pray." Verse 16, "That He would grant you according to the riches of His glory to be strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may settle down and be at home in your hearts through faith and that you

would be rooted and grounded in love and able to comprehend with all saints the breadth and length and depth and height and know the love of Christ which passes knowledge, that you will be filled with all the fullness of God."

Now that's a pretty hefty prayer. Pray that you would be strengthened by the Holy Spirit, that Christ would settle down and be at home in your heart, that you would be filled with an understanding of love, that you would know the love of Christ that passes knowledge, that you'd be filled with the fullness of God, that you'd fulfill the ability to do abundantly above all you can ask or think and unto Him be glory in the church. It's all spiritual stuff.

You go to Philippians and he prays again. Chapter 1, verse 9, "And this I pray," what are you going to pray, Paul? "That your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, that you may be filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God."

You look at Colossians and he prays again in chapter 1. Verse 9, "For this cause, we also since the day we heard it do not cease to pray for you and the desire--here it is--that you might be filled with the knowledge of His will and all wisdom and spiritual understanding, that you might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing being fruitful in every good work and increasing by the knowledge of God, strengthened with all might according to His glorious power unto all patience and long-suffering with joyfulness giving thanks unto the Father."

I mean, it just keeps going like this. Second Thessalonians 1, same thing, verse 11, "Wherefore also we pray always for you." And what do we pray? "That our God would count you worthy of this calling and fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness and the work of faith with power that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you and you in Him."

You look at the prayers of Paul and I've just given you some samples and the content is all spiritual. He prayed for their heart to be knit with the heart of God. He prayed for their knowledge that they might know God's will and for their obedience that they might do it. He prayed for them. We emphasize praying for individuals but there's no reason why we shouldn't be praying for groups as well, Paul did.

You can see that he served out of a true heart because he had a thankful spirit and a concerned spirit. You show me a person in a ministry who doesn't exhibit a positive affirming joyous thankful heart and who doesn't spend time in constant prayer for his people and I'll show you someone who serves in the flesh. On the other hand, you show me someone whose heart is filled with thanksgiving for what he perceives God is doing and yet whose heart is so filled with concerned that he's ever and always praying on behalf of his people and I'll show you someone who ministers in the Spirit.

Let me give you a third point, and we'll quit at this one tonight. That leaves seven for next week. A willing spirit...and this brings together the first triad, really. I thought of them in a unit of three because they tied together. This is so good, verse 10, "Now in my prayers I make a request." What is your request, Paul? "If by any means...I mean, anyway it could be done, by any means, I don't care what it is...at length I might have a prosperous journey by the will of God to come unto you. And while I'm praying for you, I'm asking the Lord somehow by any means, I don't care how He does it, just to get me there." That's a willing spirit.

You know what I love to see? I love to see somebody who prays and in his prayer--listen to this--asks if he can't also be part of the answer. Did you get that? Oh, that's so good. What a true heart. He not only prayed but he wanted to part of the answer to his prayer. It's so easy to pray for others to do it. "Lord, raise someone up to reach my neighbor." I always think of the "Gospel Blimp." You remember that film? Incredible film. A guy wanted to win his neighbor, so he hired a blimp to drop gospel bombs in his neighbor's yard. They formed the International Christian Blimp Association and flew a blimp over his neighbor's yard and bombed his house with tracts.

Boy, there are so many "gospel blimps" in the world. I'll never forget a guy, came to me after a service one time over there and he says, "I've got a great plan." He said, "I'm concerned about winning my neighbors." I said, "You are?" He says, "Yep." He said, "I'd like to know if Grace Church would give me \$25,000, I've got the plan to do it."

I said, "What do you need the \$25...." He said, "I'm going to buy a sophisticated telephone answering system and I've got an elaborate plan worked out where people can call in and get the gospel and I'm going to get the phone number to that gospel-call- in service to my neighbor when he thinks it will be for something else." He went through this whole thing. "And he'll call and he'll get the gospel."

Twenty-five thousand dollars, I said. "Why don't you go over and tell him the gospel?" How many times we're praying for gospel blimps. The key is to want to be a part of the solution. Isaiah said, "Here am I, Lord...what?...send me." It's easy to pray for missionaries we wax pious, we even wax eloquent. We pray for the missionaries to reach the people across the sea. Very difficult to pray for somebody to reach our neighbor, isn't it? Very difficult.

God knows when you're praying safely and He knows whether you have a willing spirit. You pray, "Well, Lord, I want this to be done and if need be, I'll do it." Then you've got some real teeth in your prayer. Then you're showing a pure heart.

Paul prayed with a willing heart. He prayed sacrificially. He says, "I'm not just praying for you, I'm praying that God will send me to you so that I can impart to you what it is that you need." Thankful spirit, concerned spirit, willing spirit.

Now those are marks, people...true spiritual service. And you need to examine your own heart and your own life to see if they're part of your service. That's only the beginning. Now I don't want you to get so intimidated you don't come back next time. I'm listening to this, too, you know. And it isn't easy for me either. But I think you get the message, don't you? Paul really served with a spirit. Down deep in his heart he was committed to serving Christ.

You know what happens when you serve this way? I'll just give you a little hint. You know what happens when you serve this way? All of a sudden when you serve out of your spirit and God is moving, amazing things begin to happen. I can tell you that.

There's an old story about Isadore. Isadore was believed to be the patron saint of Madrid. In fact, on the tenth of May, I think, the Roman Catholic Church still celebrates the festival related to Isadore. But there's an interesting story about this supposed individual. He was a common farm servant. And he would always go out and serve. But in all of his serving, he always thought of the Lord and he always gave all the glory to the Lord and he always had this overwhelming thankful heart. And he spent all of his time in prayer. He was just utterly plugged into God. Everything he did was spiritual service, according to the story, even when he plowed a field. It was all the Lord's work.

Now, he irritated the other farm workers because he always came late for the plowing. And they finally confronted him and they said, "Isadore, you are always late for the plowing. And we're here working long before you arrive." To which he is said to reply, "It may be true that I am later at my work than some of the other laborers but I do my utmost to make up for the lateness by diligence."

"Why are you late?"

"Well, I spend the time in prayer. And I ask you to compare my work with the others and if I have defrauded you in the least, I will make amends by paying you out of my own private store."

Well, the master to whom he was speaking was silent but not satisfied and resolved to see for himself whether Isadore made up what he lost by being late. And the next morning he hid himself in the field to which Isadore was assigned. And sure enough, everybody was working and Isadore came late. He'd been praying again. And the indignant master resolved to berate him and to cut his pay. He started to move out from his hiding place but was immediately halted by a strange vision. In the clear sunlight, he saw a pair of white oxen drawing a plow held by an angel, up the field, down the field flew this strange team creating the cleanest furrow he had ever seen. The master started toward Isadore whom he saw bowing over the plow while this other plow made its way back and forth. And as he called to Isadore, he said, "Who are your assistants?" The surprise plowman said, "Sir, I work alone. I know of no other assistant."

And the tradition came down from that story. Simply stated, the one who plows with God in his heart has God for his assistant. The story is fictitious, the principle is true. I'd rather serve out of a pure heart and have God doing the plowing. Wouldn't you? Then to do it in the flesh. Come back next time and see what else the Lord will teach us from this chapter.

Thank You, Father, for our time tonight. Good time, warms our hearts. Thank You that You've given us the privilege of service. We fail so often. We serve for the wrong reasons. We let our ego get in the way, our desire for earthly gain, prosperity, popularity, prestige. The water gets so muddy. Help us, Lord, to have a clear stream coming from our hearts of pure motives. Thank You for all these precious people who serve. Some serve within the family, some serve beyond their own family in the church family, some serve out in the world touching the lives of the lost, some serve in the classes here, Bible studies in the community, in jail teams, hospitals. Some serve in teaching and preaching, others in showing mercy and doing deeds of kindness. Some serve in giving. Lord, whatever way we serve, may it be that we can say God is my witness whom I serve with my spirit. May it be that we can say I serve my God out of a pure conscience. May it be that we can say with Paul, I wait the day when God shall manifest the secret things of the heart and then shall every man have praise of God. May our service be true hearted, wholehearted and pure. May we manifest a thankful spirit, a concerned and prayerful spirit and a willing spirit to be part of the answer. Thank You for preparing us for better service and for what lies ahead next week as we continue in this @wonderful text in Christ's name. Amen.

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