

Think, Pray, and Long Like an Apostle

Romans 1:8-15

February 25, 2018
Steve DeWitt

I'm sure most of us heard the news this week that Billy Graham died at age 99. There is always the danger of putting people on too high of a pedestal. It gets safer once they have died because now their life's story is complete. We should be thankful for the life and ministry of Billy Graham. He was the most influential evangelical Christian of the 20th century. His simple message of the gospel combined with a remarkable life of integrity is a legacy worth admiring.

My own salvation has Billy Graham in the story. My dad grew up in a strict version of the Dutch Reformed church in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. They were formal and hard core and somehow in spite of religious instruction, my dad never understood a personal faith in Jesus Christ. He thought he was going to heaven because he was Dutch and Reformed. What more does a sinner need?

He attended a Youth for Christ rally in Washington DC where Billy Graham spoke. God used that event for my dad to personalize his faith in Christ. He went home and shared this with his girlfriend, my mom, and she received Christ. They shared Christ with me.

So when you see the masses of people responding to Billy's preaching, they are a fraction of the multiplying effect of his ministry. We give thanks for him and how God used him today. I read Billy's autobiography many years ago. Autobiographies have something biographies don't—the inner thoughts of the person. A biographer describes a life. An autobiographer can describe his or her inner life. What was he thinking? Feeling? Longing for?

Romans 1:8-15 is an autobiographical glimpse into the heart of the Apostle Paul. What was he thinking? Praying? Longing for?

This is known as the "salutation" of Romans. All his letters (except perhaps Galatians) include this type of introduction. Last week we saw his greetings and gospel. This week we delve into the mind and heart of the Apostle which provides a model for how we should be thinking, praying, and longing.

"First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. 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. 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. 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."
(Romans 1:8–15 ESV)

For most of Romans, Paul refrains from self-reference. In the beginning and the end of the letter he shares personal thoughts. In this section, I count 11 uses of "I" as well as a few uses of "my" and "mine." This is autobiography, yet when taken as a whole, Romans can

hardly be called Paul talking about himself. But he does here and we should be glad he did. Why? I've never met an apostle. Have you? I'm going to guess none of us ever met or interacted with one of the 12 apostles.

Yet the mature Christians among us probably recognize how influential being around a great Christian can be. You are inspired by their example. You are humbled by their humility. You are challenged by their passion for God. One of the best ways to grow as a Christian is to get personal time with a Christian who is further down the path than you are. My own spiritual life has been greatly blessed by being around men and women like this.

Other than being with Jesus himself, here we have the ultimate Christian example in the Apostle Paul. How great to get in his head and heart and see how an apostle thinks, prays, and desires.

How does a godly Christian think?

Thinking Marked by Thanksgiving

"First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world." (Romans 1:8)

If we could crawl into the Apostle's brain I think we would be surprised at all the thankfulness we would see. Why do I say that? Here and in many other writings he is so profoundly thankful. This may seem obvious, but what does it mean to be thankful or to give thanks?

Thanksgiving is a recognition and appreciation for someone or something for which we are grateful. The opposite of thankfulness is to take things for granted; to be entitled or presumptuous. Paul gives an example of how thankfulness should work in us. He says here that he thanks *"God through Jesus Christ."* Christian thanksgiving is vertical. It sees every good and perfect gift coming down from the Father (James 1:17). He thanks God for them.

Paul rejoices in the Roman Christians' faith, which he describes as being *"proclaimed in all the world."* This is a bit of hyperbole but apparently this church was very well known for the quality of their faith and Christian lives. Why was Paul thankful? Remember verse 5, *"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."* This verse is a summary mission verse for Paul. He viewed his apostleship as a call to *"bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations."*

"The obedience of faith." What does that mean? Genuine saving faith displays itself in a transformed life. Obedience. Obedience doesn't produce faith. That's works-based righteousness and millions are trying that by going to church today hoping their obedience will produce faith. Rather, saving faith is a gift from God which produces obedience. A changed life. A new life. Paul's whole life mission is for this true faith to be brought to all the nations of the earth, *"for the sake of his name."* With the goal of Jesus being glorified, the gospel of Jesus is proclaimed to every nation so that saving faith bears its fruit of transformed lives. That is what Paul was all about. So whenever he saw that happening, like in Rome, he rejoiced and gave thanks.

Here's the point. **Think like an apostle and you will thank like an apostle.** Are you thankful today? *Sure.* For what? If the answer to that is basically the same thing that the non-Christian may say, you can be sure you are not thinking or thanking like an apostle.

You can say, I'm thankful for my job. My home. My family. My church. All good. You should be thankful for all that. But any human being is naturally grateful for these things. Mature Christian thanksgiving goes beyond those to indicators of God's grace and gospel at work in others. Paul doesn't say, "I'm thankful to hear the Roman soccer team is having a good season," or "I'm thankful to hear the Roman stock market is up," or "I'm thankful to hear that Nero is enacting political policies I agree with." No. His eye is on the kingdom of God and gospel ministry. Therefore, he affirms them for these spiritual qualities.

Think like an apostle and you will thank like an apostle. What are you thankful for? The local pro team having a great year or your church family serving the spiritual needs of Gary, Indiana? Reaching into the Chinese community? Folks being baptized? What gets your thanksgiving on? Train your mind to think with kingdom values and your heart will be thankful for them wherever they appear.

Praying Marked by Persistence

"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." (Romans 1:9-10)

"For God is my witness." Paul invokes the witness of God who alone could know Paul's inner thoughts and prayers. That's strong, isn't it? Most of us, myself included, would be embarrassed if God was called as a witness to the content of our prayers. But Paul isn't talking content, he is talking frequency. *"Without ceasing...always in my prayers."* This reminds us of the admonition in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 to *"pray without ceasing."* It seems impossible to pray without ceasing unless we see Paul here fulfilling his own command. Praying without ceasing is not praying 24 hours a day. It is calling us to persistence in prayer. Don't give up. Don't lose heart. Keep praying!

Jesus told a similar truth in a parable in Luke 18 of a widow going to a judge persistently with a request. I won't tell the story because Luke gives the point, *"And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart."* (Luke 18:1)

Do you have any prayer request that you have prayed for without ceasing? I prayed for a wife nearly every week for 28 years. I prayed without ceasing for a wife and now I pray for my wife. God answered that prayer, but it took a long time.

Do you have a long-term prayer item? An as-yet unanswered prayer? You think, *if I was godlier then God would surely answer my prayer immediately.* Yet here is the Apostle Paul, praying without ceasing to see the Romans and yet God had not yet answered it. Apostles understood prayer and they were persistent in them. We should do the same.

Longings Marked by Love

"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." (Romans 1:11-13)

"For I long to see you." Paul has never met them. He doesn't know any of them personally. Yet he has prayed for them ceaselessly and the desire of his heart is to see them. This is Christian brotherhood and love. He has heard so much about their faith and obedience. He

realizes the challenges they face doing ministry in the imperial city of Rome. His heart is with them and he can't wait to see them.

Notice that Paul has at least three unfulfilled longings for the Roman Christians: To see them, to bless them, and to be blessed by them. The language he uses is to *"impart...some spiritual gift."* What gift? Is it a spiritual gift specifically like knowledge or service or a more general spiritual encouragement? I think the latter. Among the best spiritual graces that go with being a Christian is to be with other like-minded Christians!

You mean for immature Christians that is helpful. I'm mature and I don't really need other Christians. Please see what Paul says, *"...that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine."* (Romans 1:12)

"Mutually encouraged by each other's faith." Even apostles need the refreshment that God's people uniquely provide when the grace we are giving each other is on the faith level. So watching the ball game together is probably not what Paul has in mind, even though there is nothing wrong with social times together. We are mutually encouraged by each other's *faith*. When relationships and conversations can get to the spiritual level with authenticity, then we are strengthened by each other.

Here are some good starter questions:

- *What has God been teaching you lately?*
- *What is a key season of spiritual growth in your story?*
- *How can I pray for you?*
- *Who has God used to grow you as a Christian?*
- *What are you reading for spiritual growth?*

For all our talk about the Bears and the weather, moving our relationships to these categories is how we are mutually encouraged in our faith.

For so many, one reason our faith is not strong is that for fear or awkwardness or avoidance, we rarely get to the spiritual level with other Christians. Worship services won't provide this. It requires time spent outside the worship service and relationships. Do you have that? We strive to provide those contexts with our small groups, Celebrate Recovery, and Bible studies; intentionally spiritually-directed relationships that strengthen us. Even apostles need it. This pastor needs it.

Paul's love extends beyond the Roman Christians. *"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."* (Romans 1:14-15) These words translate awkwardly to us. Greeks and barbarians. Wise and foolish. He is not disparaging. He is merely being inclusive. Barbarians were non-Greeks. Wise and foolish could mean educated or not. Civilized or not. He is describing the scope of God's love and salvation. It includes the cultured and educated class like that found in Rome. It also includes those without access to education or modern culture; the haves and the have-nots and everyone in between. One of the main themes of Romans is that the gospel is for everyone, not just religious Jews, but pagan Gentiles as well.

Paul says he is under obligation. Paul felt a debt of obligation to preach the gospel to all. John Stott makes the point that there are two kinds of debt. If you take out a loan, you are obligated to pay it back. Another kind of debt is if I give you \$1,000 to give to someone else; you are obligated to get it to them. The latter is how Paul means it. His ministry was a

debt from Jesus. Jesus gave him the gospel, which is worth far more than money can buy. Paul was obligated to share it.

If we viewed evangelism and sharing our faith this way, we would be much more evangelistic. For us it isn't an obligation, it's more if opportunity allows. If I get around to it. What about our church's obligation to the people of Northwest Indiana? Are we obligated or not? Would you be OK if we didn't do *Mission Them* or *More + Better* as long as your needs were being met and your kids were being told about Jesus?

How many of us would be totally OK going to a church as long as it was really good at ministering to us? I know one person who wouldn't go to a church like that. The Apostle Paul. May God forgive us for not acting on the debt we have to minister the gospel to the lost community around us.

Application - God's Heart and Gospel is for All People

Paul's heart and God's love are all-inclusive. So much of Romans will be on this theme. What a comfort this should be for us. Why? Who are we on the list? Greeks? High society? No. We are the barbarians. Non-Greek culture, non-Greek speaking, non-Jewish, plain, old Gentiles. But that's OK; the gospel is for barbarians too.

This theme is hugely important in Romans. Next week it is said so powerfully in Paul's summary verse for all of Romans, "*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.*" (Romans 1:16)

I read two interesting things about Billy Graham's ministry this week. When Martin Luther King Jr. was arrested during the Birmingham civil rights protests, guess who posted bail for him to get out of jail? Billy Graham. Guess who refused to preach to segregated crowds? Billy Graham. He once noticed a rope in one of his rallies segregating the crowd and he asked an usher to remove it. When he refused, Billy took it down himself. Billy said, "*Christianity is not a white man's religion, and don't let anybody ever tell you that it's white or black. Christ belongs to all people!*"¹¹

I wonder if we could have gotten into the mind, heart, and prayers of Billy Graham, what we might we have seen in his heart that would convict us of how we think, pray, and desire?

Even better than Billy Graham is the Apostle Paul. He was the apostle chosen by God to go to the Gentiles. His thanksgivings, prayers, and longings are an example to us of what a godly man or woman thinks about, prays about, and cares about. What do we see in our hearts? Thinking marked by thanksgiving? Praying marked by persistence? Longing marked by love?

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¹¹ Billy Graham, *Just as I Am*, p. 431.