



*“THE BIBLE: LETTERS”

Biblical Text: Romans 1:1-12

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Well, it has been quite a week. *Our every-four-year political dogfight is in full swing. *Civility, sexual assault, the language we use and how we treat women are all at center stage in our national conversation. And they should be. They should be.

*On another front, Bob Dylan won the Nobel prize in literature, who expected that? My parents are among those now living in the Kingdom of Heaven with a shocked expression on their faces. Well, mom and dad, **“The times they are a-changin’...”*

It’s true, whether we like it or not. And what can we say as people of faith, except to keep on echoing Paul’s words, **“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”*¹ I can’t imagine a week in which we needed it more.

Grace and peace, that is. Thirteen times in the letter of Paul, we read those words for Christians to whom he was writing. For the Church in *Rome, his home city, as in the seventh verse of our text today. For the Gentile Church in *Antioch where Christians were first called *“Christians.”*

They were his first words to the bitter and contentious *Church in Corinth to whom he had to write again and again. For the Christians in *Philippi founded by one of the leading businesswomen of that city, Lydia. For the Church at *Ephesus with whom he was particularly close. **It was always grace and peace!**

Next to Jesus, the person in the *Bible we know more about than any other is Saul of Tarsus, who became the Apostle Paul, the great lion of God. In fact, after Jesus, we know more about *St. Paul than we know about all other people in the Bible put together. His life, travels, and thinking are well documented the Acts of the Apostles but also in Paul’s own letters, which make up about 2/3 of the New Testament. *

Our focus this week is on the letters, sometimes called “epistles.” Most are known by the names of the cities in which the Churches were located - Corinthians, Romans, etc. In addition, he wrote “pastoral” epistles, to Timothy, his young protégé, to Titus, and to Philemon. You’ll find them too in the *daily Bible reading plan this week.

*Paul is a larger-than-life figure in the New Testament, our doctrine, and the life of the early church. But what I like most about him is that he is undeniably ... human.

¹ Romans 1:7 and twelve other times in the letters of Paul, *New Revised Standard Version Bible*. Copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

His writings are filled with his humanity, his struggles, his frustrations, his hopes, his dreams for the Church, his love for people, and always his deep faith in the grace of Christ and the love of God. **He had a pastor's heart.**

Somehow I lost track of that in his doctrines, exhortations and instructions to Christians, scattered all over *Asia Minor. But more than anything else this week, as I re-read the words of this fascinating man, **I came to see his heart.** Listen to how it comes through our text today in verses 9-10.

**“...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.”²*

He had such love for the people of God. And you know what stinkers we human beings can be! Fred Craddock, one of my mentors, once said that there are two inflections of the human voice that are just hard to find a way to attune our ears to hear without cringing. One is a shout and the other, even harder to take, is a whine!

*Paul heard plenty of both. He, like every pastor, saw the best and worst of humanity. And though his world was long ago - his world was so much like ours! He dealt with sexual immorality, lies, mean-ness, and bigotry, all that we see today.

***And yet, he never gave up on people, God's word, and in the grace of God.** And neither should we. Whatever you hear on the news, Jesus is still Lord! Through everything, Paul loved being with the people of God. I do too! Life is too short to be in a bad mood - spend some time with the * Good News and the people of God!

Look at what Paul said in verses 11-12 of our text, **“I am longing to see you ... so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.”³*

Paul, always with love, was often quite direct, to whomever he wrote. Of course not everyone welcomed his message gladly. *A prominent English Bishop, N.T. Wright said recently, **“Everywhere Paul went, there was either a riot or a revival. Every where I go, they just serve tea.”* Maybe the same could be said of you and me.

Maybe our faith is too complacent and comfortable. Maybe taking a look at some of Paul's most famous words, can help us find a deeper faith in these troubled times.

*His words are powerful. They include the first Christian hymn – Philippians 2. They identify the first Christian creed – Romans 10. Paul authored the oldest words in the New Testament – I Corinthians 11. And he wrote the 2nd best loved passage of Scripture, after John 3:16, I Corinthians 13. And he has a message for us today.

² Ibid. Romans 1:9-10, *New Revised Standard Version Bible.*

³ Ibid. Romans 1:11-12, *New Revised Standard Version Bible.*

To those of us overly worried about our personal economic forecast to the exclusion of also being concerned about the poor, look at what Paul said in Philippians 4:12-13: ** “I have learned the secret of being content ... well-fed or hungry ... living in plenty or in want. I can do all things through him who gives me strength.”*⁴

This was not just some generic advice about happiness for the Christians of his day. Paul knew the personal dimensions of how hard it is to trust in God. We know from II Corinthians, that he had a disability, he called his *“thorn in the flesh.”* We know he was criticized by leaders like Apollos. We know that he endured shipwrecks and imprisonment. Still he did not give up hope! Neither should we!

If we are ever tempted to surrender to the lesser voices in our culture which denigrate people because they are immigrant, Mexican, African American, disabled, or female, or work at manual labor for a living. Read Paul’s Letter to Philemon.

It is the shortest of Paul’s letters, only twenty-five verses long, yet it is one of the most powerful in the whole New Testament. He is writing to Philemon on behalf Onesimus, a runaway slave, has been converted under Paul’s ministry. Listen:

** “I am sending Onesimus back to you, he is my heart. He is no longer a slave, but a brother. Receive him as you would receive me.”*⁵ (Philemon 12-16)

How dare can we today do less! How dare we see anyone as less than a precious child of God? Whatever our walk of life, or circumstance, whatever our income or ethnic background, whatever our age or neighborhood, we are one in Christ!

Listen to Galatians 3:28: *“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”*⁶

Whatever our background, political party, gender, income, race, we are one people in Christ! We are united at the points of our strength - we all have something to contribute! And it is all because of God’s amazing grace in Christ. Paul knew that!

** Once we are free of the chains of bigotry, free from the power of politics and greed, free from some else’s sense of our worth or value, we are free to live differently, to think differently and to build a brighter future! God help us start today.*

** (Let us pray.) (underscore of last hymn begins)*

⁴ Ibid. Philippians 4:12-13, *New Revised Standard Version Bible*.

⁵ Philemon 12-16, paraphrased and condensed by the author from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*.

⁶ Op. Cit. Galatians 3:28, *New Revised Standard Version Bible*.