

Characteristics of Godly Spiritual Leadership

Romans 1:8-15

To Paul, the gospel message was the heart of the faith. A right understanding of the fundamental truths as presented in Scripture was essential to possessing the assurance of salvation promised to all believers. That was why, after introducing himself to the church at Rome, he immediately entered into a concise explanation of the faith. He reminded his readers that the gospel was ancient in its conception, that it centered on the person of Jesus Christ Who was fully God and fully man, that it gave its recipients both a new position in the family of God as well as the new occupation of spreading the gospel, that it was intended to bring about obedience in the life of the believer, and that it assured the child of God both grace to obey what God commanded and peace with God in this world and in the next.

So, having explained his understanding of the basics of the faith, Paul next turned his attention to his desire to visit the church at Rome and his expectation of the benefits such a visit would bring to both himself and the congregants of the church there. In doing so, Paul outlined some of the characteristics of a godly spiritual leader. But before we dismiss this section too quickly, as being relevant only for those who have been called to the leadership of the local church, we ought to pause and consider that we are all, in some ways, required to be spiritual leaders.

For example, if you are a husband, you are commanded to be the spiritual leader of your family. As Scripture states, “²⁵husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, ²⁶so that He might sanctify her” (Ephesians 5:25-26). If you are a parent, you must lead your children. Again, “fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). And even if you are single or childless, certainly you have in your acquaintance some believers that are less spiritually mature than yourself, and you must lead them. As Paul reminded Timothy when he encouraged him to continue to shepherd his flock, “in pointing out these things [the truths of Scripture] to the brothers and sisters, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the good doctrine which you have been following” (1 Timothy 4:6). Therefore, these qualities are relevant to all believers, whether called as leaders in the local church or not.

However, I do not mean to suggest that Paul is laying out all the characteristics of spiritual leadership in this passage. His intent is not to give an exhaustive list. Indeed, Paul does not seem to be directly informing the church at Rome about spiritual leadership at all, but rather that is the use the Holy Spirit made of his description of himself and his intentions. Nor am I suggesting that there are not other passages in Scripture that also talk much more about the qualities of a spiritual leader (for example, 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). But in this passage, we can find that Paul, in talking about himself and his hopes, gives us some insight into the qualities of a spiritual leader.

A Spiritual Leader is Thankful

In introducing himself, Paul understood that the members of the church at Rome might have wondered who this person was that was addressing such a lengthy and straightforward letter to them. He may also have considered that those that did know him might have wondered why he had never made his way to see them yet. So, to let them know that they had been in his thoughts for some time, Paul began “⁸first, I

thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world. ⁹For God, whom I serve in my spirit in the preaching of the gospel of His Son, is my witness as to how unceasingly I make mention of you” (v. 8-9).

Paul begins with thanks. One of the most obvious characteristics of Paul, and one that all godly spiritual leaders ought to strive for, is to possess a thankful heart. In each of his letters but one (that to the Galatians, who had significant issues and needed rebuke rather than encouragement), Paul begins with a statement of gratitude for the believers to whom he wrote. In some cases (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon), Paul was imprisoned at the time of his writing. Yet even from a jail cell, Paul found a reason to be thankful. As the early fourth century Archbishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom wrote, “it is fitting that we render thanks not only when we are rich, but also when poor, not when in health only, but when sick, not when we thrive only, but when we have to bear the reverse” Chrysostom, *The Epistle to the Romans*.

Paul understood this. He appreciated the fact that he ought to give thanks for the believers in these small and tenuous congregations simply because they were God’s children doing their best to live out the faith. And we know that his thankfulness was not because these churches were without fault. As we have seen from our study of 1 Corinthians, the churches to whom Paul wrote were full of all varieties of sin and spiritual foolishness. So, Paul was not thankful because these churches were perfect, but because in each of these churches, there was something for which he could be thankful.

And that is a good place for us to pause and reflect. It is easy, in almost any circumstance, to find something in which we can be thankful. A phrase we ought to keep in mind, even in the most troubling of times, is that “it could always be worse.” Instead, though, too often our sinful nature compels us to focus on the negative. We see only that which we do not like or that we wish were different. We do not find things exactly as we want them, so we are discontented. We resent that we do not have all that we desire. When we are not thankful for the circumstance in which we find ourselves and for what we have, then we are claiming that God’s plan is wrong and that His provision is insufficient. Such self-centeredness is not a characteristic of a godly spiritual leader.

We should also note that Paul’s gratitude for those in the church at Rome was not a way of praising himself. That is, Paul was not praising them because they had responded well to his evangelistic message. He had not founded the church. He did not lay the foundations for their faith. Paul was simply grateful for what God had done in the lives of these believers. His rejoicing and thankfulness was not conditional upon his own self-esteem. Paul simply thanked and praised them for their faith, as he later would thank and praise them for their obedience (Romans 16:19).

This faith was “being proclaimed throughout the whole world”(v. 8). News of the expulsion of the Jews from Rome by the emperor Claudius was known throughout the empire. His motive in taking this action may have been because the Jewish Christians who had returned from Jerusalem to start the church at Rome were making great progress in evangelizing others and turning them away from pagan idolatry. Therefore, Claudius felt the best way to stop this new, and disruptive, movement was to rid the city of its followers. We can see that the humble church in Rome was off to a promising beginning. Indeed eventually Paul, writing from a prison in Rome, could celebrate that “all the saints greet you, especially

those of Caesar's household" (Philippians 4:22). The faith of those in Rome would eventually reach the inner circle of the imperial family itself.

A Spiritual Leader is Prayerful

Paul's thankfulness for the church at Rome was not a matter of routine. "For God, whom I serve in my spirit in the preaching of the gospel of His Son, is my witness as to how unceasingly I make mention of you" (v. 9). Paul served God, we have seen that he considered himself His slave, and so Paul wanted to serve the church at Rome. So, until he could see them in person, he lifted them up in prayer regularly. Though Paul saw his primary spiritual gift as "preaching the gospel of His Son" (v. 9), he nevertheless was vigorous in his prayers for the saints. And again we must remember that Paul did not pray for those at Rome because he knew them all and they were *his* converts. He prayed for them simply because they were his brothers and sisters in the Lord.

Since many of the members of the church at Rome did not know Paul personally, he called upon the Lord as his witness that he was 'unceasing' in his prayers for them. Paul knew that even though the faith of the church in Rome was applauded throughout the empire, they still needed prayer. This, too, can be a reminder for us. We need not only lift up in prayer those who have obvious spiritual needs. We ought also to pray for those who are doing well in the faith, so that they might continue to receive God's blessing of grace that leads to obedience.

And though we do not know the particulars of Paul's prayer for the church in Rome, I think we can infer from his prayers to other churches that are recorded in Scripture that his focus was always on the spiritual, rather than the physical. Consider,

"¹⁵For this reason I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you and your love for all the saints, ¹⁶do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers; ¹⁷that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him. ¹⁸I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe" (Ephesians 1:14-19).

"¹⁴For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, ¹⁶that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, ¹⁷so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:14-19).

"⁹And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; ¹¹having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God" (Philippians 1:9-11).

“⁹For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; ¹¹strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience” (Colossians 1:9-11).

Paul’s prayers in gratitude for what God was doing in the lives of those in the church at Rome were likely reflective of these other prayers. Paul wanted all these believers to grow in their knowledge of the Lord, to be filled with understanding of His ways and purposes, and to be equipped to serve His kingdom. Such are the prayers of a thankful and godly spiritual leader.

A Spiritual Leader is Submissive

But Paul not only prayed for the church in Rome, he wanted to serve them practically as well. This, too, is worth taking time to reflect upon. He continued that he was “¹⁰always in my prayers making request, if perhaps now, at last by the will of God, I may succeed in coming to you. ¹¹For I long to see you in order that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established” (v. 10-11). Too often, for believers it is easier to simply pray or even give money than to actually do something. For example, we can contribute to overseas missions with relative ease, but be reluctant to go across the street to talk to our neighbor or share the gospel with a coworker.

But we must notice that Paul’s enthusiasm to go to Rome was circumscribed by God’s sovereign will. Though Paul was very eager to see those at Rome, and had even tried to do so on many occasions (v. 13), he did not choose to subvert the will of God for his own purposes. Paul was submissive to God’s will. He knew what he wanted to do, but he also took the time to prayerfully discern what God wanted him to do. Paul wanted to go where he was sent, not where he wanted to go. And since it had been made clear to Paul that he was not yet to go to Rome, Paul did not take it upon himself to go.

Submission to the will of God is an essential quality for a godly spiritual leader. We must learn, and practice, the skill of distinguishing God’s will from our own. We must recognize when *our* ideas for a particular ministry are part of God’s plan and when they are simply our own good ideas. Sometimes God clearly shows His leaders what to do next. At other times people assume that what they want to do next is God’s sovereign plan. We need to remember that we cannot try to align God’s will with our own. Instead we must discover His will and bring our own life into conformity with that. Rather than ask God to bless what we want to do, we ought to prayerfully ask what God is going to bless, and then do it.

Notice also, that Paul did not pry into the motives of his Master. He simply obeyed. He might have questioned why God would not allow him to go to the center of the empire to encourage those believers there. Paul might have reckoned that such a mission would be of great benefit to the Christian Church. Paul might have reasoned that if the faith of the church in Rome was already being spoken of throughout the empire, further growth of that church might change the course of the empire itself. Such is the way our minds can work. Yet, Paul understood that it was not his plans that were of importance. God had His own plan and He would see it done.

But some might also wonder why, if God is going to bring about His sovereign will, we ought to do anything at all. The answer, of course, is twofold. First, as believers we are commanded to work for His Kingdom. We have been spiritually gifted in some way and God expects us to use that gift. As Paul will write later in this same letter, “we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to use them properly” (Romans 12:6). Second, by using our spiritual gifts, we partner with the Holy Spirit in moving forward His sovereign plan. If we sit on the sideline, so to speak, we not only act in disobedience, but we miss out on the blessings that come from watching God work. Like Paul, a godly spiritual leader ought to pray, but we also ought to do God’s will, in God’s way, in God’s perfect time.

In addition to being submissive to the will of God, a second way in which Paul’s spiritual leadership was submissive was that he wanted to *serve* the church at Rome. His desire to visit them was not that he might receive their praise, but rather that “I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established” (v. 11). Paul wanted to go to Rome to give of himself for the believers there. He did not go for himself, but for them. Again, a point to consider as godly spiritual leaders. We ought not to engage in acts of service for our own benefit. We ought to serve for the benefit of those we have been called to serve. We might want to say something, but it may not be what others need to hear. We might want to perform some service to the church, but it might not be what is necessary for ministry to proceed most effectively. It is God’s will alone that ought to be consulted in these matters. And God’s will can be discerned by godly spiritual leaders.

Further, Paul was willing to give generously of himself. As he wrote in another letter, “I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls” (2 Corinthians 12:15). To use a modern phrase, Paul was willing to “empty the tank” for those at Rome. A journey from Corinth to Rome in the ancient world was no easy task. It was dangerous and full of hardship. Nevertheless, Paul had often tried to go. He knew the risks and the difficulties he would face. Indeed, he had spent the last several years traveling around the Roman empire preaching and establishing churches. Paul was no stranger to adversity. Paul did not choose the easy and safe path of ministry. He did not seek what was most convenient. Physical suffering was nothing if he could serve the Kingdom of God by serving the church in Rome.

Finally, we see that the spiritual gift to which Paul referred is not necessarily the same as the spiritual gifts mentioned in several places in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 12:1-11, for example). The reference here is more general. In keeping with Paul’s motive, he wanted to go to Rome to give the flock there what they needed most. If that was encouragement, then he would encourage them. If it was rebuke, he was willing to do that as well. Since he was not eager to go to Rome for his own advantage, it would be simple for him to arrive there, get to know the members of the church personally, see what spiritual help they needed, and then seek to provide it. His goal was simply that the body of Christ in Rome “be established” (v. 11). That is the goal of a godly spiritual leader.

A Spiritual Leader is Humble

Another quality of a godly spiritual leader that we see in this passage is humility. To be sure, Paul desired to serve the church in Rome by visiting them and encouraging them in the faith. But he also wanted the church there to know that he was not coming to them with a sense of superiority and arrogance. Paul knew that he would get as much as he gave. So he continued “that is, that I may be encouraged together with you while among you, each of us by the other’s faith, both yours and mine” (v. 12).

Paul was not being falsely modest here. He knew his own spiritual gifts and his own accomplishments for the Kingdom of God. He knew his intellect was likely far superior to most of those he was to meet in Rome. He knew he had probably studied more, traveled farther, and was more spiritually mature than the believers he hoped to visit. But that did not mean that those believers could not be a blessing to Paul by encouraging him in the faith as well. Paul was humble, and he realized that he was not so far superior in his faith that he could not be edified by other believers.

John Calvin wrote that “there is none so void of gifts in the Church of Christ who cannot in some measure contribute to our spiritual progress. Ill will and pride, however, prevent our deriving such benefit from one another” Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*. Our arrogance often prohibits our spiritual growth as we ignore or dismiss the counsel and encouragement of those we consider less spiritually mature than ourselves. We must remember that “God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise” (1 Corinthians 1:27).

Paul understood this because he realized that God was not finished with him yet, and therefore he had much to learn. Yes, he was the greatest theologian of his day, but that did not mean he could not benefit from another’s wisdom. Paul knew that he had not “already obtained it or have already become perfect,” so he continued to “press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:12). If we think that we have reached such a state of sanctification that we can only learn from certain people, then we have limited the people through whom God can work in us.

To be sure, there are those who are more spiritually mature than we, and we ought to seek them out and spend time with them learning what God would teach us through them. We ought also, to make ourselves available to those not quite as far along the path of sanctification as we find ourselves blessed to be. But while we ought intentionally to put ourselves in the way of each of these, we ought also to recognize that there is great blessing in the fellowship of believers and that God will use whom He will to further His Kingdom. Humility, particularly in the sense of not considering ourselves above other believers, is an essential characteristic of a godly spiritual leader.

A Spiritual Leader is Persevering

Though he knew that God had not yet allowed him to go to Rome, Paul had not given up. ¹³“And I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that often I have planned to come to you (and have been prevented thus far) in order that I might obtain some fruit among you also, even as among the rest of the Gentiles. ¹⁴I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. ¹⁵Thus, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome” (v. 13-15).

Another characteristic of a godly spiritual leader is that they are persevering in their service. Paul’s unending goal was spiritual growth, both in himself and in those whom he encountered. All his work of preaching and planting churches were not intended to be ends in themselves. They were to result in spiritual fruit. So, after again reminding the church in Rome that he had often tried to visit them, he restated that his purpose in wanting to see them so badly, was that he “might obtain some fruit among you” (v. 13).

The word used as ‘fruit’ can have many meanings. It can refer specifically to the fruit of the Spirit enumerated in Galatians 5:22-23. But in its more general sense, as I think it is used here, the term refers to the ongoing sanctification of the people at the church in Rome. That is, the fruit Paul hoped to cultivate among those at Rome was the spiritual growth of believers already there, and the addition of other converts to the faith through evangelism.

We also see here Paul’s tenacity in accomplishing the task he had been assigned. He was “under obligation” (v. 14) to preach the gospel. As we discussed in our introduction to Romans, Paul understood himself to be a slave of Christ and, therefore, he was entirely at Christ’s disposal. We also saw that this was what Paul meant by the believer’s call to apostleship upon receiving the gospel. To Paul, “if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast about, for I am under compulsion; for woe to me if I do not preach the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9:16). While it was an honor and a privilege for Paul to be able to preach the gospel, he realized that he had a job to do, and like a godly spiritual leader, he performed his duty. And yet he did so not out of obligation, but out of gratitude.

And we know that Paul was not dissuaded from his mission by circumstances. As he explained to the church in Corinth, he was

“²³in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. ²⁴Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. ²⁵Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent adrift at sea. ²⁶I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers at sea, dangers among false brothers; ²⁷I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure” (2 Corinthians 11:23-27).

Clearly, Paul was not easily discouraged. And it is humbling to think how easily we abandon some ministry God has called us to because of some trifling inconvenience.

Finally, Paul did not discriminate among those to whom he presented the gospel. The phrase “both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish” (v. 14) is meant to encompass all of humanity. As Jews consider anyone who is not Jewish to be a Gentile, so those of the ancient world considered anyone who was not Greco-Roman to be a barbarian. In fact, this was something the Romans had inherited from the Greeks as they spread throughout the Mediterranean during the Hellenistic Age, after the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC. As the Greeks had considered anyone who did not speak Greek to be a barbarian, so now the Romans applied the same definition. To Paul, however, it made no difference. Paul was willing, indeed “eager to preach the gospel” (v. 15), regardless of the language spoken by his hearers. This, too, is a characteristic of a godly spiritual leader.

Takeaways

All of us are called to be spiritual leaders in some way. Yet, there can be many reasons why people fulfill this obligation. Some do so out of fear they will lose their salvation if they do not. Others do so out of hopes for attention and praise. Some out of mere peer pressure. But we must remember that our actions

as spiritual leaders, like all of our service to God and His kingdom must be done out of the right motives; we are to “do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Having the right understanding of some of the characteristics of a godly spiritual leader will help us. We will be less inclined to bitterness and self-pity if we do not receive the attention we think we deserve. We will be less inclined to seek the ‘better’ ministries that draw more notice. We will be less inclined to give up and stop serving when we grow weary.

Paul’s spiritual leadership was thankful, prayerful, submissive, humble, and persevering. Let us pray for the grace to follow his example as we serve those whom God calls us to serve as spiritual leaders.