

In our reading for this evening, Paul is continuing his introduction to this book. And he's explaining to the Romans why he wants to come visit them, and also why he hasn't been able to visit them up to this point. Now, that might all seem kind of irrelevant to us. It might be something we would easily gloss over, because what does this have to do with us? Paul is talking to the Romans. It seems to apply really only to them. And so we might want to just move past it and get on to something else. But in reality, Christians, even this passage has something to teach us, especially about the Church of God. And we learn something about what it means to be together as the Body of Christ. So we should pay attention and listen to what Paul has to say.

Because notice that Paul says in verses 9 and 10: "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." So Paul is telling this congregation that he always prays for them. He's always constantly mentioning them and keeping them in his concerns. And if you think about it, that's kind of an amazing thing. Because he doesn't know these people. He doesn't know who the Romans are. They've never seen one another. They have no idea who each other are. So for Paul to pray for them in this way, it's kind of miraculous, if you think about it. That's why he says, "God is my witness. I'm not lying when I say this to you. I am constantly praying for you and am constantly concerned for your welfare." Which should tell us something about what the Church is. Because even though these two have never met, they are still one in Jesus Christ. And for that reason alone, Paul prays for them and keeps them in his concerns. Because being a part of the body of Christ is not limited to just the people that you know. It's not limited to this congregation. It's not even limited to the churches in this area. The Church is the whole body of those who believe in Jesus in every time and in every place. And we are united together in him. And so we have this connection with one another as Christ's body that we should not overlook. So it's only natural for Paul to pray for them and to keep them in his concerns.

So we have to ask ourselves, Christians, do we think of the Church in the same way? Do we show concern for Christians that we will never meet, that we will never get to know in this life? Because it's easy for us to care for those who are closest to us. And we should do that. That is a good thing. Because if we don't care for those closest to us, there's no way we're going to be able to care for anybody else. But we ought to show concern also for those who we will never see, because we are still united as Christians in the Lord. We are all still part of the same body. And so Paul in this reading--as short as it is--gives us an example of what it means to care for that body and to build each other up in the Lord.

So how should we show this concern, then? First of all, through prayer, to pray for the needs of the whole Church. Sometimes that's going to mean praying for people who are in trouble, people who are being persecuted, people who are going through rough times. We should pray to God that he would take those things away from them and also build them up. And of course, that's probably the easiest thing to do, because that's the kind of stuff we hear about the most through the news and through other ways, when people are having a difficult time. So we know about those concerns, and we should pray for them. But we should also pray for their daily needs, to pray that God would strengthen their faith, to pray that God would give them the things that we need. Basically, anything that we would pray for ourselves, we ought also to pray for the whole Church, so that together as the body, we are built up in the Lord.

And we can also give them help in other ways too. If there is some need where we can help them physically, we should do that. If there is some time when we can speak up for the truth, we should also do that, because they can be built up through our witness and through our example. But however it happens, Christians, we ought to do it for the sake of Jesus Christ, because the Holy Spirit has made us one body in him. And so all of this we can see already just from this little, short passage in the book of Romans.

But Paul goes on to say, verses 11 and 12: "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." So Paul tells them that he wants to visit them so that they can be both built up. Because he knows that his being there will be a help to their faith. They will be encouraged and strengthened in their walk with Christ by the fact of his visit. He will give them a spiritual gift to benefit them. But Paul also says that they will give him the same thing in return. They will both be built up in the Lord.

And if you think about it, that's also kind of an amazing thing. Because think about who Paul is. Paul is an apostle. In fact, he's one of the greatest of all of the apostles. Paul wrote most of the New Testament. Paul saw visions of heaven. He heard things there that no man can utter. He is a man to whom a lot has been given and for whom God has done much. He is a very important man in the history of the Church. So you would think that this benefit would only go one way, right? That Paul would show up, that he would give the Roman Christians some benefit, and then he would leave. You think that'd be how it would work. But he says, "No, I am also going to get a gift from you. I will be built up together with you." So that even these lowly Christians, some of whom are slaves, the very bottom of society, will be a benefit even to the apostle Paul. Because he recognizes that we as the body of Christ need each other, and we are built up together in the Lord.

And so if Paul feels this way, Christians, do we feel the same? Paul knows that it's a great benefit to be among other Christians, to even be among Christians that he's never met before. So why would we want to stay away from the Church? Why would we stay away from the body of Christ? Do we think that being a Christian is my business and nobody else's? Do we think that going to church is something that is beneficial, sure, but only when I feel like it? Only when I feel like I need to go? Christians, there is no such thing as being a Christian all by yourself. There's no such thing as a lone wolf Christian. We need each other. We are built up together. God has created us to be together. And this is why he calls us to gather together. This is why he commands us to gather together on Sunday morning, that we would be built up together in him. This is why we gather together on evenings and Wednesdays like this, so that together we would be built up in the Lord. Because the Church is more than just me. And the Church is more than just you. The Church is all those who believe in Jesus Christ. And we need each other. We build each other up. So we should not fail to gather together. We should not stay away from one another, but be joined together in the Lord.

Now, there is much more that could be said about this passage, but I think we will leave it there for this evening. But even in this short passage, Paul has shown us so much about the Church. Paul has shown us what it means to care for the whole body of Christ. Paul has shown us why we gather together as the Church, so that we would be built up as one. So let us pray for one another,

Christians, and for the whole Church. Let us care for one another and for the whole Church. Because Christ has called us together into one body. And let us give thanks to God through Christ for one another and for all believers in Christ, because we are the Church of God.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have knit us together into one in the body of your Son. Help us always to care for one another and to pray for one another at all times, so that we would be built up in Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen.