

# Under Obligation

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[ 0 : 00 ] Good, well let's turn to the letter to the Romans. Paul to the Romans, chapter 1, and you'll find this on page 939 in our Visitor's Bibles. We have the same reading as last week, the first 17 verses of the chapter.

And we'll be looking particularly to verses 14 and 15 this afternoon. So Romans chapter 1, verse 1. Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh, and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, 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, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

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.

[ 1 : 58 ] I want you to know, 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'm under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I'm eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

And may the Lord God add his blessing to this reading from the word. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray together. Dear God, our Father, as you address us through your words in the scriptures, our hearts rise up to you and thank you.

And indeed we rejoice that you have not left us as people with no guide or principle in this world, without means of understanding what human life is for, but rather you have spoken to us and have taught us, in the words of the Bible and supremely, by sending the Lord Jesus to us, to show us what you're like, and to bear the punishment for our sins, which had to be born if we were to be reconciled to you, and adopted into your family.

You have blessed us with so many blessings, our dear Father. And as we think now of Paul the Apostle, your servant, being so eager to preach the gospel, we think of those around the world who are similarly eager for this great task of evangelization.

[ 3 : 28 ] Those who long to see the frontiers of the gospel pushed back, and to see more people, more communities, even more nations won for Christ. And therefore we pray, dear Father, that you will continue mercifully to bless the great missionary endeavor of the Christian Church, that you will help those men and women who are taking the gospel to other lands and to other peoples, to be full of boldness and dependence upon you, a trust renewed day by day, and a deep-seated conviction that the gospel is indeed the power of God for the salvation of all who believe.

We pray to you for our own friends and acquaintances who are missionaries, and ask that you will both strengthen them and add to their number for the days to come.

And we pray that here in Scotland, you will stir up many to preach the gospel and to stand by it with fresh boldness, unashamedness, being prepared to suffer for it if necessary, so that the word of God, the saving words of the gospel, may come to more and more hearts.

And please speak to our hearts today to encourage us, to teach us, to build us up for your service. And all these things we ask in Jesus Christ's name.

Amen. Last week in our study of Romans chapter 1, we were looking largely at the little passage from verses 8 to 13, and particularly to verse 13, where the Apostle Paul was speaking about the way he longed to come to Rome and to visit the Roman Christians so that he could strengthen them.

[ 5 : 14 ] So his concern in those verses was largely local and Roman. He was writing to his Roman Christian friends. He knew many of them personally, though he hadn't been to Rome, and we know about these personal links and friendships in the last chapter of the book.

But as soon as we get to verse 14, which is where we're picking things up today, we see that Paul's field of vision shifts from Rome to the whole world.

And he begins to speak here of the gospel in international and universal terms. In fact, the people that he refers to, look with me at verse 14, the people he refers to there in that verse is the whole population of the world, from Iceland to Tasmania.

Everybody. He's writing about the total population. And he divides them, you'll see, into two categories. He calls them Greeks and barbarians. Now, just as the Jew in ancient times, and I guess today as well, would divide the world population into just two categories, the Jew and the Gentile, so the ancient Greeks also thought of the world population as coming under just two categories, which they thought of as Greeks and barbarians.

So to the ancient Greek, if you weren't one of us, you were a barbarian. A slightly scornful term. The Greeks, of course, were polished and cultured and proud of their civilization, and rather proudly thought that everybody else's language simply sounded like ba-ba-ba-ba-ba.

[ 6 : 44 ] So if you were traveling, that's what it felt like. You couldn't understand it. So if you were not a Greek, you were a ba-ba-ba-ba-barbaros, a barbarian. Now let's get hold of what Paul is saying here in verse 14.

He writes, I'm under obligation. Notice that phrase. I'm under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians. I'm obliged to them. I owe them something.

I'm in their debt. So as he journeyed through the streets of cosmopolitan cities like Jerusalem and Corinth, and as he looked at men and women of all races coming and going, mixing up together, Israelis and Greeks, Italians and Egyptians, Christians, occasionally people from out-of-the-way places like Galatia, even India, parts of black Africa.

They'd have all been there in greater or smaller numbers. And as he saw all these people and mixed with all these people, he was continually overwhelmed by the thought that there was something that he owed to every one of them.

He was obliged. Now I don't know about you, friends, but when I'm under obligation to somebody, if I owe something to somebody, generally speaking, I'm a little bit unwilling to do the thing that I know that I ought to do.

[ 7 : 57 ] Aren't you like that? For example, if you owe somebody a letter, your great-aunt Agatha, the old brigand, for example, it generally means that you acknowledge you ought to write to her, but you're not very keen to do it.

You'd rather be doing something else. But with Paul, the striking thing is that he is both obliged and eager. He's not only conscious of the debt he needs to discharge, he actually wants to do it and can't wait to it.

So he says here in verse 14, I'm under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish, so I'm eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

So preaching the gospel to the cosmopolitan population of Rome is this thing that he's not only obliged to do, he can't wait to do it. Now that's not what most people are like, is it?

People are eager for many things. Recognition, money making, success in sport or social life, but the average modern British person is not fired up to preach the gospel.

[ 9 : 03 ] Perhaps it's true even that the average modern British Christian is to a large extent not very well fired up to share the gospel and preach it. Now why is that?

How is it that Paul the Apostle can say in verse 15, I'm so eager to preach this gospel, but many an honest modern British person would have to say, I'm rather reluctant to preach the gospel speaking for myself.

What is it then that fires up a person's heart like Paul's heart to preach the gospel? Well, Paul goes on immediately to tell us the answer in verse 16. He says, I'm not ashamed of the gospel.

In other words, I'm full of confidence and joy in the gospel because, to give you a free translation, it is the dynamite of God for the rescue of every person who believes.

Paul was so eager to preach the gospel because he knew its power. And if we can begin to see what Paul saw about the gospel, we too will begin to burst with eagerness to declare it.

[10:06] Those who have most wanted to declare the gospel have always been those who have most deeply grasped its range and its power. So let's look at verse 14.

Here is my obligation to all categories of people, to Greeks and barbarians, to the wise and the foolish. Now that is a big vision. It takes us back to the story of the Tower of Babel.

Do you remember how in Genesis chapter 11 verse 1 we're told that the whole global population had simply one language. Everybody could understand everybody else. Of course sin had entered the world by that stage and people were killing each other and telling lies and cheating and stealing and so on.

But at least they could understand each other's talk. If you travelled around from one country to another you didn't have to have a pocket dictionary with you for going into cafes and saying things like please may I have a cup of tea.

We wouldn't actually say it like that, would we? We'd assume that the person can understand English if we speak loud enough. So we'd say please can I have a cup of tea. So communication in those days was far easier because everybody spoke exactly the same language.

[11:17] But after the Tower of Babel or Babel the Lord confused the languages of everybody. It was an inevitable consequence of sin and pride and therefore division and disunity between nations deepened.

Communication became much harder because from that moment onward every time a foreigner opened his mouth he didn't say good morning how pleasant it is to see you.

All he could say was babel babel babel babel it sounded like nonsense. It made sense to him but it didn't to you. Now what's the result of all this this division of the languages and races since Babel? Well simply this that most people in the world regard most other people as foreigners very different from themselves. The English regard the French as foreigners.

There's only 22 miles of English channel that separates Dover from Calais but that is the case I speak from experience. the Russians and the Chinese are poles apart from each other and yet their two enormous countries share the same border for thousands of miles.

[12:29] There's a pretty solid border between Yorkshire and Lancashire. There's even a bit of a border between Northumberland and Berwickshire. Isn't that right? And all this leads to nationalism tribalism clannishness classism and sayings like blood is thicker than water.

So most people have a strong tie and a strong sense of obligation but it's obligation simply to a very limited group. The immediate family first then the people of one's own class or trade or profession and then perhaps in a diluted form to the national interest.

But for most people most other people are fundamentally foreign and different and impossible to identify with. A threat perhaps to one's own security always a potential enemy.

How different Paul the Apostle was when he saw a strange face in the street an Egyptian an Italian a Greek a black African his thought was not how strange how foreign how threatening his thought was I'm under obligation to this man I owe him something I'm really eager to give it to him something precious and I must pass it on.

Now isn't this a magnificent vision? It's the vision of the Lord Jesus as well of course he says to his to his disciples at the beginning you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

[14:02] You're not serious Lord are you? The ends of the earth? Yes that's what I said but don't you remember we're Jews you're the Messiah of the Jewish people promised to the Jewish in the Jewish scriptures yes yes I know but this good news is for everybody of all races nobody is outside its reach but Lord might that mean we have to go to those terrible barbarian races up in the frozen north people like the Germans and the French the Scots even the English let me repeat myself says the Lord in case you didn't understand first time you will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth now I suspect that part of our problem is that we don't quite believe that the gospel in practice is powerful to convert men and women of all nations to Christ precisely because we suspect that the Inuit or the Chinese or the Australian Aborigines are so different from us and we might say well

most of us we're British we're English we're Scots the gospel has had a grip in these islands for 17 or 18 centuries it's moulded our whole culture and our way of thought and therefore

British people are much more able and ready to receive it and to see its relevance but is that true? just think back over those 17 or 18 centuries imagine yourself as the very first Christian missionary ever to have set foot on British soil in about 170 AD or 200 whenever it was there you are on the beach at Dover or Folkestone and with fear and trembling and after some pretty hefty prayer meetings you and your companions you set off and you make your way up to the very first Kentish village that you see little houses with smoke coming out of the chimney and there they are these wild hairy barbarians our ancestors my ancestors at least and you know a bit about them of course don't you because the country Britannia it's been part of the Roman Empire for some generations but all the same you turn to your Christian friends and you say look at these people can the gospel possibly reach them they're utter barbarians pagans they worship the gods of trees and streams and rocks look at them they're so different from us clothed in these wild skins and staring at us with their blue eyes and bushy beards but those first missionaries probably cultivated Italian Christians they did boldly preach the gospel to the Kentish pagans and then the gospel began to take root and quickly it spread both north and west and certainly by 250 or 300 AD there was a vigorous Celtic church in these islands Jesus knew that it was no wild goose chase to send his followers to the ends of the earth he knew what the gospel would do and could do well you may say that was a long time ago and changing circumstances alter things it isn't the same in modern times well isn't it look at black Africa today one of the strongholds of the Christian faith with millions of Christians and rapidly growing churches the evangelization of black Africa did not get underway until the second half of the 19th century less than 200 years ago a vast continent in the spiritual grip of witch doctors and ancestor worship and every pagan practice if you'd been a British Victorian say in about 1840 halfway through the 19th century and if somebody had asked you whether you thought that the gospel could ever penetrate to the heart of black Africa you'd have probably said that such an idea was ludicrous and impossible you might have said well think of it the gospel has been in this world now for 1800 years it's made no impression on black Africa yet so it's hardly likely to at this late stage but how wrong you would have been well let's bring this up to much more modern times who in 1945 could possibly have predicted that between 1950 and 2000 the membership of the Chinese Christian church would grow from less than one million Christians to something like 60 or 70 or 80 million and without the aid of western missionaries now of course Paul the Apostle couldn't know all these historical details from his point in time when he wrote Romans but his words have been vindicated a thousand times over the gospel is the dynamite of God it's for Greeks and non-Greeks no group of people no race or nation is beyond its power to be a Christian therefore is to be under obligation to be obliged to everybody in the world and all missionary and evangelistic work reveals that the gospel is tailor made not for British hearts or American hearts or African hearts to the exclusion of Inuit hearts or Japanese hearts it's tailor made for the heart of man all men and women of every culture are in equal need of what the gospel alone can bring to them now that's not all the other thing that is emphasized in verse 14 in the last phrase of the verse is that education and mental ability mean nothing to the power of the gospel either I'm under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians but also both to the wise and to the foolish Paul meant to the clever and to the simple now if it's a magnificent vision for Paul to see his obligation to people of all nations and races isn't it equally magnificent to see his obligation to people of all different backgrounds and abilities and just as we don't always quite dare to believe that the Chinaman or the Inuit is as reachable by the gospel as the British person we don't always dare to believe that people of all mental or educational abilities are equally reachable I think we can come unstuck on two counts here first of all we can think of some people as being simply too clever we say oh I just think of so and so that I know he's hardly likely to become a Christian because whatever I say to him he's going to argue me speechless and tie me up in knots with his clever words have you ever thought that about somebody maybe you could think of somebody that you might write off as a non-starter for that kind of reason perhaps a brainy school teacher who seems to know everything about philosophy and politics

[ 20 : 57 ] I can remember being introduced to a young student at Oxford University when I was a young minister and this young student was said by his friends to be the top student of philosophy in his year and I was introduced to him to try and convert him try and bring him to Christ well I tell you I was terrified I talked to this young man for about an hour he didn't become a Christian linguistically

he had me hung drawn and quartered half a dozen times during that conversation philosophically I was no match for him at all I didn't speak the same language he was streets ahead of me but I could see that inside he was a frightened boy who was trying to ward off a truth that was bigger than his own mind if he would but admit it now the point I'm making is that we can all be tempted to think that some people are simply too clever for the gospel and therefore we shy away from giving it to them we feel that their defences are too strong for it and that it will never penetrate them but then there's the opposite temptation to think of some folk as being too simple for the gospel as if perhaps they haven't got enough education to grasp it

I think we've gone through a slightly bad patch in Britain over the last 50 to 100 years in this sort of way whereby the Christian faith has begun to be thought of as a rather middle class business as though it's lost its power to penetrate the working class communities in Britain now this is really a very modern thing you've only got to think back a couple of hundred years or so to the time of John Wesley to see vast hordes of working men and women coming to Christ that led to the start of the Methodist Church very vigorous it was in its early days and you've only got to look around today at places where the church is growing rapidly China for example or South Korea parts of Africa or South America and we see again that the vast majority of new Christians are ordinary working people we're going through a bad patch in this country and a certain loss of nerve which we need to repent of but the deficiency is not in the gospel it's in us the gospel has always since the beginning been predominantly what you might call a peasant movement a working people's movement remember how

Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 1 when you were called my Corinthian friends not many of you were wise by human standards not many were influential not many were of noble birth a few were including Paul himself but there's always been a significant number of intellectuals amongst Christ's followers but the great majority of Christian people have always been drawn from amongst the ranks of ordinary working folk now if Paul's obligation is equally to the wise and the foolish to the clever and the simple what is it going to mean for us I think it will mean first that we never need to adapt the gospel in order to make it more intellectual or reasonable when we're talking to clever people the gospel is not primarily an intellectual matter it's a spiritual matter now that's not to say that it bypasses the processes of our minds or that it's unreasonable or incoherent far from it but it does mean that the truth of the gospel is discerned by a person's spirit and not just by his mind it's a matter of obedience as well as of understanding

I remember hearing a tale of Martin Lloyd Jones going to speak to a group of intellectuals at one of our universities and at the end of the service at the end of his evangelistic sermon somebody one of these intellectuals expressed astonishment and said do you know that man spoke to us as if we were sinners quite right too that group of people normally heard sermons designed to amuse them and to entertain them by their intellectual cleverness then along comes this little Welshman who spoke to them as sinners under the judgment of God who desperately needed to be rescued they hadn't heard preaching like that before but it was what they needed other preachers had come to tickle the intellects of these people and show off their cleverness but Lloyd Jones cared more about these folk than to do that now by the same token let's not think that we've got to dress the gospel up with glamour or gimmicks in order to reach ordinary people working people

I've mentioned already how since 33 AD the gospel has always been most penetrating in the ordinary humble levels of society that's hardly surprising when you remember that Jesus said the spirit of the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor he has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind to release the oppressed and Jesus himself came preaching and teaching amongst the ordinary people of Palestine it was they who flocked around him he didn't spend his time in palaces and centres of learning they'd have soon kicked him out if he'd tried he spoke his message simple and strong and unadorned to the working people of Israel and they responded at least some of them and Paul although he was a great intellectual who had been to the universities and had studied Jewish culture and Greek culture he still followed his master's example and felt an equal obligation to the foolish as he did to the wise so just to sum up where we've been today the principle here is one of eager obligation it was one of the driving forces behind the apostle Paul's life

[ 26 : 36 ] I know that he was an apostle and we're not I know that because he was an apostle he had a particular and special calling to be an international evangelist and most of us are never likely to be that but he's expressing a gospel principle here which is every bit as true for us as it was for

him namely that this gospel is for men and women of every race of every intellectual ability of every social position and that we folk who possess this precious treasure we're obliged to pass it on to as many people as we can we are under obligation we're indebted so to take an interest in gospel work overseas is not some optional extra for a handful of Christians it is part and parcel of the normal Christian life to deny that is to deny Paul's vision of his obligation to everybody and equally we're under obligation to our neighbours near at hand whatever their social standing whatever their intellectual ability to say

I can only speak to working people because intellectuals would ridicule me is to deny the power of the gospel and to say I couldn't tell the gospel to working folk because their values and outlook are different from mine equally that would be to lack confidence in the gospel and to be ashamed of it Paul says I'm not ashamed of the gospel I'm not ashamed to tell it to anybody why? because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes it still is friends it is even here today maybe there are some here who are not yet believers don't hang back the time to come to Christ is now the gospel is God's power to bring salvation not simply for this life but for eternity let's bow our heads and we'll pray how we praise you our gracious God for Paul the apostle and this vision that you yourself put into his heart that he was under obligation to people of all types and races and we think of the way in which the gospel has made such progress through the world bringing many millions indeed billions of people over the generations to Christ and our prayer is that you will put fresh confidence into our hearts today in the power of the gospel give us opportunities dear father even today to say a word or two for Christ even to sit down with somebody this evening and explain in simple terms what it means to be rescued by you and why we need to be rescued and we pray that you will therefore strengthen and fill our churches with a fresh sense of eager obligation so that these wonderful saving words your power will go forth afresh in our own days and we ask it in Jesus name  
Amen