

ROMANS 1:11-12

"May Our Fellowship Be Edifying To The Body Of Christ"

When we had left Paul the last time he was writing to the Romans and explaining how much he wanted to be with them, and that until he could see them face to face he would unceasingly bring them to the throne room of God in prayer.

Paul may have been separated from them in miles, since he wrote from Corinth, but he was as close as anyone could be, without actually being in their midst, because the same God who was in Paul's presence was the same God who was now in the presence of this church. And it is God who connects us and is with us because He knows no boundaries.

He is everywhere.

That is part of what it means to be united in the Spirit or one in the Spirit. We are His body or His church, and to be in Him is to be connected to each other, and in fact to be connected to every other believer in the world.

This is what Paul meant when he rebuked the Corinthians for allowing heinous sin to continue in their church. 1Co 5:3 "Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present.

In other words, as far as the Corinthians were concerned, Paul was right there with them because God was right there with them, and Paul was able to come to God and act on His behalf in passing this judgment, which God would carry out.

In the same way when I pray for you or anyone, even though I may not be able to be there in your living room, we are actually connected and together in the Spirit, as God is in our midst, and hears our prayers.

This is a spiritual reality. But, even though this spiritual reality is there, we also live in a physical world where actual physical contact is also very important.

And this is why Paul could continue in Rom 1:11-12 "I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you

strong-- that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith."

Paul knew that nothing could hinder God's ability to bless others, despite the distance of separation, but Paul also knew that God created us for fellowship with Him and each other. God designed this into us, which is why Paul longed to see the Romans.

The Greek word for "long" implies to intensely crave. He praised God that they were united in the spirit but he intensely craved to be there in their presence where he could touch them and speak face to face and feel their touch as well.

And notice what that touch or that union was to accomplish. Verse 11 "...that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong--"

Paul loved Christian fellowship. But Christian fellowship is designed to encourage each other so that we may be better servants for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

And Christian fellowship can take place in large groups or with as little as two people. The size of the group doesn't determine Christian fellowship. What determines Christian fellowship is the motive of the heart.

Paul contrasts fellowship in the Spirit, and fellowship which is fleshly, even among Christians. The Corinthian church had lots of fellowship. They were getting together at each other's houses and having a great time. But the motive was not unity in the Spirit, the motive was to stroke each other in their divisions.

This is what Paul brings out in 1Co 11:17-22 "In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not!"

Their fellowship did not lift up Christ, it was an excuse to tear at each other and be fleshly in their behavior. But in showing us

what Christian fellowship is not to be like in the letter to the Corinthians, Paul also gives us a picture of what it should be like when writing to the Ephesians.

Eph 5:15-21 "Be very careful, then, how you live--not as unwise but as wise, 16 making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ."

In other words, let your fellowship in Christ simply be an extension of your everyday life which should be characterized by being filled with the Spirit; seeking to please God in everything we do.

There's the tendency to think that we somehow separate fellowship from spiritual things. For example, a church picnic is fellowship. A church service on Sunday morning is worship and spiritual.

No, Paul says whenever you gather, whether on a Sunday morning or a Sunday afternoon around the table with friends, Christian fellowship is to be taking place. And that fellowship involves lifting up Christ in our conversation or in our behavior.

Now, that doesn't necessarily mean that every time we gather for fellowship that we must have a bible in our hands or that we should be singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs and being heavy into prayer.

All of that can certainly be Christian fellowship. But it can also be just sitting down with others and enjoying their company. But, as Paul says, if our fellowship deteriorates into creating divisions and tearing down instead of building up then it's not Christian fellowship. It's something else.

You and I live in an evil and perverse world just as did the Christians during Paul's time. And so we need each other. But we need the kind of fellowship that will create an environment of trust and love and understanding. And in that environment spiritual gifts and encouragement abound and growth takes place.

This was Paul's motivation for coming to the Romans.

Rom 1:11-12 "I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong-- that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith."

Two words are used in the Greek for the spiritual gift Paul speaks of in verse 11. Pneumatikos is the word for our word "spiritual" and it means, non-carnal; supernatural.

The Greek word charisma is used for our word "gift" which means a divine gratuity; something which is given from God. And so when you put the two together it speaks of a supernatural God-given gift, as opposed to something which the natural man could conjure up.

Now this particular God-given gift was designed to do something specific. Paul says it was designed to make us strong, or as other translations put it; to establish us. In other words, to set our feet fast as on a rock where we become immovable. Nothing will be able to shake our faith in Christ.

This was important to Paul because he knew that if our faith is shaken or is weak we are very susceptible to being deceived or going astray, which would in turn dishonor Christ. And since we have been chosen of God, redeemed by the blood of the Lamb to glorify our Savior, then a weak faith would undermine that and it would affect others within the body of Christ in a negative way.

And so he says, 'I want to be with you so that I may impart or give you the kind of spiritual gift which will make you strong and immovable.'

The question is what kind of gift from God is that? If that kind of gift is important enough for us to grow strong that we may encourage each other then it would incumbent upon us to find out what it is and seek God for it.

Now, if we only had this verse we might be tempted to speculate as to what kind of gift it is. Some could conclude that it must be the gift of prophecy, since the gift of prophecy is spoken of so highly by Paul, as it's used in the Body of Christ to strengthen and edify.

After all, Paul told the Corinthians in 1Co 14:1 "Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy."

And so we would have to put that gift high on our list. But there are other gifts.

In fact, to this same Corinthian church Paul writes in 1Co 12:4-11 "There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines."

Here Paul states that any gift from the Spirit of God is important and should be used to edify the Body of Christ, and so now you would have to consider these gifts for your list when trying to figure out what Paul is saying in Rom.1:11.

What seemed to be a rather simple statement now becomes a little confusing when trying to figure out what in fact Paul had in mind.

But, the Spirit of God who gives all good gifts, is also the one to shed light on His own word as revealed in the Holy Scriptures. This is why when we go to the word of God there is a general rule for interpreting scripture so as to get the correct meaning.

That doesn't mean that we will always get the meaning intended by God. If we could there wouldn't be hundreds of different denominations within true Christianity. But, if we have a handle on how to accurately handle God's word, we will find ourselves less susceptible to error.

We are fallible people and no one person has all the answers. But this is one reason for the gift of teaching within the church. That gift given by God allows people to dig in and enables them to understand the truths of God's word in a way which is then passed on to the flock for their edification.

I've had people ask me why there are so many different interpretations of certain passages in the bible. And of course the answer is that there are so many different people who are all prone to error. And so the next question is usually, why would God allow the possibility for differing views which seem to cause division? And it's at this point where a great truth needs to be realized.

Love covers a multitude of sins.

I think that one reason God has allowed us to see things differently is to allow us to practice love and patience toward one another. We will not always agree in some of the "gray areas" of scripture. However, we must agree on the essentials. But, again who determines what the essentials are? The answer is God.

When it comes to our salvation, and the one who purchased it, our unity must be centered on Christ. Those essentials regarding the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ are indisputable and must never be compromised.

But that leaves us with a dilemma when it comes to other teachings of the word of God, which are still very important and which seem to be seen differently by others within the Body. This is why God has given leaders within the church to feed and protect the flock. It is their job, if you will, to make sure that they have a proper understanding of what they're teaching.

Paul told pastor Timothy in 2Ti 2:15 "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth."

There is a correct way and an incorrect way to handle the word of truth. If a man of God understands the correct way to handle the word of truth so that a leader can be relied upon and trusted by his congregation to feed them properly.

That doesn't mean that that man is perfect, which is why the congregation needs to be in the word of God and depending upon the Spirit, to discern if the word is being properly taught. If someone has a question about what is being taught it is essential that they go to the teacher and ask questions and try to determine if what they see regarding that portion of God's word is true or not.

And so in that sense we must come and reason together. But the one called by God to feed the flock is ultimately responsible to God for his teaching and handling accurately His word. And if his conscience is clear before God concerning his teaching and he is seeking the leading of the Spirit then the flock is obliged to follow according to God's word.

And this brings us full circle as to why there are so many different denominations. If a person, in good conscience before God, cannot agree with the body of teaching coming from that church and they've done everything possible to reconcile it with those

teachers, then they must find a place where they can be assured that the word is being taught without compromise.

What happens all too often, however, is that someone will major on a minor in the scriptures and throw out all of the other good teaching which is coming from that church and try to find the perfect church, which is defined by them as being in accord with their perspective.

But what about this correct way and incorrect way of accurately handling the word of God? Is there a basic rule? Yes. First there must be the consensus among Christians that the bible is truly God's word.

2Ti 3:16-17 "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

But, then we must be able to rely on God's word and approach it as one book from God which tells a story, which is weaved from the beginning of time to the present, and has been given to us from the hand of God from His prophets and apostles.

You've probably heard it said that when there is any doubt about what God is teaching in His word we must let God's word do the interpreting. And so we get the expression, "Compare Scripture with Scripture", and let the context of what we're reading guide us.

In other words, if you want to know what God's word teaches about the law of God then you would go to those portions of the Old and New Testament which address the law. You wouldn't rely on an answer from a portion which is addressing the gifts. And vice versa, if you wanted to know about the gifts you wouldn't pour over the law.

But, the first place you would look for assistance is in the very place you're reading. There's the tendency to come upon a hard passage and immediately go everywhere else in the bible looking for an answer when it may be right in front of you.

But, after searching in the context of where you're reading in the bible, if you still don't have the answer then you must, like the Bereans spoken of in Acts, search the scriptures diligently to see what God is speaking to us from His entire word.

Go to other portions of God's word which address that same subject. If, for example, you read of the Temple of God in the book of Revelation, and you're confused as to the imagery spoken of, then go to the Old Testament which speaks of the Temple and see if there's something there which can shed some light on it.

If you find that it's hard to see how judging someone and loving someone can be reconciled then go to other portions of scripture which show how in some cases they must work together. And then if you still don't understand any portion of scripture after seeking God come to me and I'd be more than happy to help give you an answer.

At that point I would do, what hopefully you had attempted to do, and go to God's word and search it out and see what the Lord has to say. Now you might be wondering what all this has to do with our text which we seem to have gotten completely away from, but it has everything to do with it.

What is the gift Paul speaks of in verse 11, which he wanted to impart to these Roman Christians, which would strengthen them or establish them? It's found in verse 12. Look at the context which includes verse 11.

Rom 1:11-12 "I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong-- that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith."

The gift he speaks of, in this particular case, is the faith which they both share in Christ and the fellowship they have in the spirit for mutual encouragement. If my faith is strong and I come along side you and encourage you in your faith, and you are open to receive it, then your faith will be strengthened.

But in that faith other gifts, which all of the parties share, may come into play and also be used in their faith as they come alongside each other which is why Paul adds in verse 12 that this mutual faith, and the gifts which can accompany it, is for mutual encouragement.

Now keep in mind that Paul was an apostle, personally chosen by Christ to be His witness to the world of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul was a man gifted many times over with probably all of the gifts of the Spirit. And yet, Paul can say, 'that as strong as my

faith may be for your encouragement, I need you and the strength of your faith for my encouragement.'

Faith is a gift, a supernatural gift from God. But, even men chosen by God, and equipped and tested and proven as Paul was, cannot live to God's honor and glory apart from faith in God and the encouragement we get from each other's faith in Christ.

Paul needed these Christians, in a sense, as much as they needed him. No man is an island, and I've learned that I need your encouragement which is derived from your faith as much as you need mine. This is why true Christian fellowship is vital, the kind of fellowship that exalts Christ and looks to Him for strength, which we in turn pass on to others.

Chuck Smith in his booklet on Romans called "The Gospel according to Grace" says of this verse.... "Gathering together with God's people has a two-way effect. You cannot minister to others without being ministered to yourself. That's the beauty of sharing our spiritual gifts with one another. Jesus said, "Give and it shall be given unto you" (Luk.6:38a). Sowing the truth in love always reaps the same."

You might say how can I minister to others when I'm not even sure what my spiritual gifts are or, my faith is so weak? That's the beauty of being a child of God. Our faith and our other spiritual gifts are exercised every time we're willing to simply to reach out to others in love.

In our weakness Christ makes us strong as we look to Him. Paul may have started out to just desire to minister to the Romans, but don't ever forget the reception he got when he finally arrived in Italy some three years after this letter.

They came out to meet this weary traveler who was ship-wrecked and tired from so long a journey, and now being delivered as a prisoner in chains. Two groups of Christians came out and met him in different cities, 30 and 40 miles respectively, because in their eagerness to see the one who could encourage them, they instinctively ministered to him.

God knows the need. We just need to be available to reach out in the kind of Christian fellowship, which puts Christ at the forefront as we love others in His love. No matter how weary we may be at times, God can still use us to minister to others, but just keep this

in mind; God will end up ministering to you when you take the first step in faith.

May we encourage one another. But may our encouragement stem from the truth as we walk in the Spirit and not the flesh. The apostle John put it this way 1Jo 1:7 "But if we walk in the light, as he (Jesus) is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin."

Just keep seeking to walk in the light of Christ's love and life by faith and obedience, and you'll be amazed at how God can use you to be a great encourager to those in need, and then watch how God will in turn minister to you, often through the very one you reach out to.

"Give and it shall be given unto you".

Seek the Giver of all good gifts and honor Him as you use those gifts and cultivate those gifts, being faithful to walk in obedience in the Spirit, and faithful to encourage and edify the Body of Christ with the kind of fellowship which points others to the One who will never leave us or forsake us.