

Lesson 12 at StudyRomans.org

Romans 1:9-10

Romans 1:9-10 — 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, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you.

In these two verses, we see Paul's fervent desire to visit Rome. Paul made that request to God without ceasing. And there are many lessons that we can learn from Paul's prayer, but perhaps the first lesson is that we should be careful what we pray for!

Yes, Paul's request to visit Rome was eventually granted, but I doubt Paul's prayer was answered in the way that he anticipated.

When Paul finally arrived in Rome, he would arrive as a prisoner, and he would face incredible hardships on that long harrowing journey, as shown on the Handout for Lesson 12. But even so, I'm sure that Paul was very happy and very thankful when he was finally able to set foot in Rome.

"For God is my witness." As a lawyer, I once worked with a witness who had a very bad habit. Whenever he was questioned on any topic, about every third or fourth answer that he gave started off with the phrase, "Well, to tell you the truth..." As I explained to him repeatedly, whenever anyone uses that phrase, it can create the impression that they are not telling the truth whenever they don't use that phrase.

But, of course, as we all know (and as I hope the juries all know!), that is just an expression — “well, to tell you the truth.” It doesn’t mean that you aren’t also telling the truth at other times. It is just a figure of speech.

But what purpose does that figure of speech serve? Why do people sometimes use that figure of speech? I think we all know the answer to that question as well — it is used to emphasize the truthfulness of a statement that some might otherwise doubt.

I think we see something very similar at the start of verse 9, where Paul says, “for God is my witness.” I think we will see that it is similar in one way — it precedes something that might be surprising. But I think we will see it is different in another way — it is not just a figure of speech.

Let’s start with the similarity. Paul is about to say something here that might have been doubted by some, and so Paul stresses the truthfulness of what he is about to say — not to say that everything he wrote here isn’t also true, but only to stress the truthfulness of the surprising thing that Paul is about to say.

And this is hardly the only place where Paul does this. In fact, Paul does this so often that commentaries have a name for it — the “witness formula.”

- **2 Corinthians 1:23** — **But I call God to witness against me** — it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth.
- **Philippians 1:8** — **For God is my witness**, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.

- **1 Thessalonians 2:5** — For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed — **God is witness.**
- **1 Thessalonians 2:10** — **You are witnesses, and God also,** how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers.

And so I think we should see that opening phrase in verse 9 as Paul's way of stressing the truthfulness of something that might have seemed surprising to his readers.

And what was that surprising thing here in verse 9? We'll get to that when Paul gets to that, but first, let's notice what Paul says next in verse 9 — "For God is my witness, **whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son.**"

What does that mean? To answer that question, we need to focus first on two words: "serve" and "spirit" — "whom I serve with my spirit."

First, let's look at the word "serve" in verse 9. That English word "serve" is a common translation of the Greek word *latreuo*, but it is not a very good translation. Why not? Because the English word "serve" lacks the religious aspect of the Greek word *latreuo*.

Latreuo is not just any service; *latreuo* is *religious* service. My waiter can *serve* me my lunch, but my waiter can never *latreuo* me my lunch! *Latreuo* is service to God.

That is why the Greek word translated "serve" here in verse 9 is very often translated "worship," which (unlike "service") better conveys the religious aspect of the underlying Greek word.

The Greek word *latreia* is the noun form of *latreuo*, and we find that noun form used several times in Romans, where again it is translated “worship.”

- **Romans 9:4** — They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the **worship**, and the promises.
- **Romans 12:1** — I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your **spiritual worship**.

We will have much more to say about this word when we get to Romans 12, but for now all we need to know is what any Greek lexicon will tell us — *latreia* and *latreuo* describe the religious service or worship of God.

And so, for now, with that background about the meaning of the Greek word, what can we conclude about Paul’s use of the word “serve” in verse 9? I like how one commentary answers that question:

The word Paul uses for “serve” focuses attention on his service in its vertical aspect as an offering of worship to God.

I agree, the lexicons agree, and the usage of this same word that we find elsewhere in the Bible agrees.

And, I think we can add, that usage makes perfect sense in the context of verse 9 when we combine this service with the next word on our list — spirit. Paul describes God here as the one “whom I **serve** with my **spirit** in the gospel of his Son.”

Whatever service this is, it is service that Paul does with his spirit. What does that mean?

First, although some commentaries differ, I do not think this spirit is the Holy Spirit, but instead I think this spirit is Paul's spirit. Why? Because of the pronoun "my," which suggests to me that this is Paul's spirit. Paul says, "I serve" God "with **my** spirit."

But why does Paul tell us that he serves God with his spirit? Is it possible to serve God with my body? Yes, of course it is. Everything we do in the service to God in this life involves our bodies.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20 — Or do you not know that **your body** is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in **your body**.

Paul could instead have said "whom I serve with my **body** in the gospel of his Son," because that was also true of Paul. Paul served God with both his body and his spirit.

But there was a problem with Paul's body when it came to Rome — his body was not there! Paul's body was in Corinth. Paul wanted to go to Rome, but so far he had never been there.

I think this answers our question about why Paul mentions his spirit in verse 9. When it came to Rome, Paul was there in spirit, but not in body. And, of course, Paul says that exact thing elsewhere about other cities.

1 Corinthians 5:3 — For though absent in body, I am present in spirit...

Colossians 2:5 — For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit...

Likewise with Rome, Paul was present in spirit but absent in body.

But how was Paul present in spirit? What could Paul have been doing in his service to God for the sake of Rome if Paul was not actually in Rome?

Paul answers that question right here in verses 9-10 — Paul was praying for Rome. Prayer is how we can serve God in spirit for people who are physically located very far away from us. I think that Paul's service in spirit for Rome in verse 9 is Paul's constant prayer for Rome in verses 9-10.

And, of course, that confirms what we said earlier about the word "serve" and the underlying Greek word. This service is religious service, or as the ESV repeatedly translates it — worship. Paul's service in spirit in verse 9 is prayer, which is worship under anyone's definition.

And this also answers our earlier question — why did Paul say this here? Paul said, "for God is my witness" to set the stage for something surprising, but before he says that surprising thing, he says, "whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son." Why did he add that here?

Now we know why. Paul said that because it explains why and how Paul was able to do that surprising thing — which is praying for them without ceasing.

Why did you do that, Paul? Because it was Paul's service to God. How did you do that, Paul? Not by his service to God for Rome in person, but by his service to God for Rome in spirit — by prayer.

And now we also know why Paul started verse 9 by referring to God as his witness — Paul did that to convince the Christians in Rome that Paul was the real deal. Paul was not just some sort of pious imposter.

And why might some in Rome have thought that Paul was just all talk? Was it perhaps because this apostle to the Gentiles had not even set foot in Rome, the capital of the Gentile world? Didn't that prove that Paul was all talk? How could Paul convince them otherwise?

What they needed to do was to look inside Paul's heart. But there is a problem with that, as Paul explains elsewhere.

1 Corinthians 2:11 — For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him?

I know my thoughts, and God knows my thoughts, but no one else knows my thoughts. And so, if I want to convince you about something I am thinking, what witnesses can I call? There are two, and only two: I can call myself, and I can call God. No one else knows what I am thinking. And what witnesses does Paul call here? He calls himself, and he calls God.

But why was this testimony so important? Simple. Paul was trying to convince them that he was sincere, and Paul knew that if you really want to know the real person, you must look at what that person does when no one else is looking — that is, no one else but God.

And what did Paul do when he was all alone? Paul prayed to God on their behalf. No one else could see him doing that, but Paul was doing that. Rome was always in Paul's prayers.

And so now we know that Paul's opening phrase ("for God is my witness") in verse 9 is not just a figure of speech like my earlier example ("well, to tell you the truth"). Instead, Paul calls upon God here as his witness for a specific purpose. There were only two witnesses of what Paul was doing for Rome — Paul and God. And Paul calls both of those witnesses in verse 9.

And what was Paul's prayer for Rome? What was Paul asking for? Paul wanted to at last succeed in coming to Rome. Paul's prayer was that he wanted to be there in both body and spirit.

And Paul's prayer is a good example for how we can pray — not praying that God will change his will, but instead praying that whatever we are asking will happen "somehow by God's will," as Paul prays in verse 10.

And another example for us from Paul's prayer is the repetitiveness of his prayer. Paul made this same prayer without ceasing, which means it was done frequently and regularly. I think it means that Paul made this same request to God every single time he prayed.

Oh, but I thought we weren't supposed to ever repeat ourselves in our prayers. I thought we weren't supposed to say the same thing over and over. If I thought that, I was wrong.

Where repetition in prayer goes wrong is when it becomes **vain** repetition.

Matthew 6:7 — But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking.

But as for repetition in prayer, that is encouraged by God.

Luke 18:1-7 — And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought **always to pray and not lose heart**. He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city **who kept coming to him and saying**, ‘Give me justice against my adversary.’ For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet **because this widow keeps bothering me**, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.’” And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge says. **And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?**”

And we see such repetition in this example of Paul’s prayer for Rome: “**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.”

Now, I would like to move on to verse 11, but I can’t. Before we get to verse 11, I need to ask myself one of those uncomfortable questions that seems to come up again and again in this book. And maybe this uncomfortable question is a question for you as well.

Am I the real deal? Or am I just a bunch of religious blather? When I see someone hurting and I tell them I will pray for them — do I in fact pray for them? Or do I just say that because it seems like the right thing to say at the time?

The only two who know the answer to that question are myself and God. Like Paul, I can say that God is my witness. But what will my witness say? We know the answer when it comes to Paul. What is the answer when it comes to me?

Romans 1:11

Romans 1:11 — For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you -

“For I long to see you.” That word “for” at the beginning of verse 11 connects verses 11-15 with verses 9-10. And the connection is that Paul now explains in these next five verses why he was so anxious to come to Rome, and Paul gives us four reasons:

- Paul wanted to impart some spiritual gift to them (verse 11).
- Paul wanted the church and himself to be mutually encouraged (verse 12).
- Paul wanted to reap some harvest among them (verse 13).
- Paul wanted to preach the gospel (verse 15).

Let’s start with the first of those four reasons — “that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you.” What is that “spiritual gift” in verse 11?

The Greek phrase translated “spiritual gift” is *charisma pneumatikon*. We get our English words charisma and charismatic from that Greek word meaning “gift,” and we get our English words pneumonia and pneumatic from that Greek word meaning “spirit” or “breath.”

So what is this spiritual gift in verse 11? I think our first inclination would likely be to say that this spiritual gift is a miraculous gift of the sort that could be imparted only by the laying on of an apostle's hands (as we see in Acts 8:18). And that answer may be correct, but not all of the evidence points us in that direction. What is that potentially contrary evidence?

First, we have that Greek phrase *charisma pneumatikon*, which is translated "spiritual gift." This verse 11 is the only place in the New Testament where that Greek phrase is found.

The English phrase "spiritual gift" is found in two other verses (1 Corinthians 12:1; 14:1), but in those verses it is a translation of only one Greek word: *pneumatikos*. This specific combination of the Greek word for "gift" with the Greek word for "spiritual" occurs only here in Romans 1:11. That fact has caused some to conclude that Paul is talking about something different here in verse 11.

And, second, on our list of potentially contrary evidence, we have that word translated "some" in verse 11 — Paul wants to impart **some** spiritual gift to them. Again, although that Greek word occurs hundreds of times in the New Testament, it is only here in verse 11 that we find that indefinite Greek word for "some" applied to the Greek word for "gift" — this gift is "some gift."

Those two reasons have caused many and perhaps most commentaries to conclude that the spiritual gift here in verse 11 is not a miraculous gift but is instead just some indefinite spiritual blessing that will come as a result of Paul's visit to Rome.

And so, under that view, what is the spiritual blessing that Paul would impart to them? There are two likely candidates:

- That spiritual blessing might be a reconciliation between the Jewish Christians and the Greek Christians. That view would tie in nicely with our idea that unity may be the unifying theme of this letter.
- The spiritual blessing might be Paul's proclamation of the gospel to them. That view ties in nicely with a similar phrase that we find later in this letter — "spiritual blessings" in Romans 15:27.

So which is it? What is this "some spiritual gift" in verse 11? Which view is correct? The first view (some miraculous gift) or the second view (some unspecified blessing)?

Again, most commentaries adopt the second view, but I disagree. I think Paul is referring to some miraculous gift here, although I should add that he may be referring to **both** some miraculous gift and some unspecified blessing. But I think it would be wrong to see this gift in verse 11 as only some sort of unspecified blessing.

Why do I think that? Several reasons.

First, although the specific Greek phrase used here in verse 11 does not occur elsewhere, the Greek words used in that phrase do occur elsewhere. In fact, Paul uses both of those words frequently in Romans and in his other letters.

And one of those places where Paul uses both of those words is particularly instructive for our questions here. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul

gives us an extended discussion of miraculous gifts, and let's note how he begins that discussion.

1 Corinthians 12:1 — Now concerning **spiritual gifts**, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed.

As we said earlier, that English phrase “spiritual gifts” is a translation of only a single Greek word: *pneumatikos*.

Verse 1 does not include the Greek word for “gift.” But 1 Corinthians 12 does include the Greek word for “gift.” In fact, that Greek word *charisma* is found five times in 1 Corinthians 12.

And how again is that discussion introduced? We just read it: “now concerning spiritual gifts” or “now concerning *pneumatikos*.” Paul tells them he is about to discuss *pneumatikos*, and then Paul talks about *charisma*.

I think that means that either the gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 are the same as the *pneumatikos* or they are an example of the *pneumatikos* — but either way, those two words are very closely tied together by Paul's discussion in 1 Corinthians 12.

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul never puts those two words next to each other like he does here in verse 11. That fact causes some to conclude that Paul must mean something entirely different here in verse 11. But I don't see how that follows at all. If those two words are closely related in 1 Corinthians 12, then why shouldn't we see that same connection here in Romans 1 even though Paul uses them in a different phrase?

And there is a second reason why I think verse 11 is discussing some miraculous gift — and that reason is the context of this verse.

Paul's entire discussion here is focused on his desire to visit Rome in person. And, as we have said, the evidence suggests that this visit by Paul would be the first apostolic visit to Rome. And what happened when an apostle showed up? Miraculous gifts were imparted by the laying on of that apostle's hands, as we see in Acts 8.

Did some people in Rome already have a miraculous gift. I think they likely did. Later, in Romans 12:6, Paul will say, "having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them," and the first gift Paul mentions is prophecy.

But if someone in Rome already had a miraculous gift, and if no apostle had ever been to Rome, then I think we must conclude that gift had been imparted to that recipient by an apostle somewhere else. If no apostle had ever visited Rome, then no miraculous gift had yet been imparted by an apostle inside Rome.

And so I think that alone would have been a big reason why Paul wanted to go to Rome. Paul wanted to be there in person so that he could lay his hands on them and impart some miraculous gift to them.

And what would that do for them? Paul tells us right here in verse 11. It would strengthen them!

And that sort of strengthening required Paul to be there **in person**, which again is precisely what Paul says here in verse 11: "**For I long to see you**, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you."

And, yes, Paul might also have had some non-miraculous blessings in mind here, such as unity or the proclamation of the gospel. Later, for example, Paul will use this same word “strengthen” in that way.

Romans 16:25 — Now to him who is able to **strengthen** you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ...

But, either way, I think Paul is including miraculous gifts here in verse 11 — miraculous gifts that Paul wanted to impart and that could only be imparted in person.

Romans 1:12

Romans 1:12 — that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine.

Do you know how to spot a very poor missionary? A very poor missionary is someone who just briefly steps down from his mountain-top home to teach the poor ignorant natives in the valley below without ever muddying his shoes and without ever bothering to learn anything about the people he is teaching or even to speak their language.

History is filled with examples of such people. And that sort of preaching usually results only in what has been called “rice Christians,” who don’t follow the gospel proclaimed by those missionaries but rather follow only the rice that is handed out by those missionaries.

That is no way to reach or teach anyone. And we certainly know that is not how Paul proclaimed the gospel.

1 Corinthians 9:19-23 — For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

That is how an effective missionary teaches people. That is how we can reach the entire world with the gospel. Yes, the message never changes, but the way we convey that message must change if we are to teach that unchanging message to very different types of people. Paul proclaimed the unchanging gospel by becoming “all things to all people.”

What that means is that Paul never missed an opportunity to identify with those he was teaching. Were they Jews? Paul was a Hebrew of the Hebrews. Were they Gentiles? Paul was born in Tarsus. Were they Romans? Paul was a Roman citizen. Were they sinners? Paul was the chief of sinners. Paul was always looking for a connection with someone that he could use to teach that person about Jesus.

And why do I bring that up here in verse 12? Because that is precisely what Paul is doing here in verse 12.

If all we had was verse 11, it might seem as if Paul was that missionary stepping down from his exalted mountain to give some rice to the poor ignorant savages in Rome. “I really want to come to Rome so I

can give you something, but, of course, there is nothing you can give me. After all, I am the great apostle Paul! I don't need you! You need me!"

But that was not Paul's attitude at all. And that was never how Paul proclaimed the gospel of Christ. And so, to keep anyone in Rome from thinking that way, Paul very quickly adds verse 12 to what he said in verse 11: "that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine."

And, yes, verse 12 is focused on those inside the church, but I think we know that, no matter who he was teaching, Paul always had this same loving missionary spirit. Paul told us that in 1 Corinthians 9.

Remember, Paul had not met most of these people in Rome. They had certainly heard about Paul, but they had not met Paul. They knew Paul's reputation, but they did not know Paul the man.

And Paul does not want them to see this desire of his to see them in the wrong light — as if, for example, Paul just wanted to take credit for them in some sense, as if Paul had established the church in Rome. Or as if Paul longed to see them just so he could fix all of the many things that they were doing wrong.

And, yes, Paul did have authority over the church in Rome. And, yes, Paul did need to correct some things that were wrong in Rome. And, yes, only an apostle could impart those miraculous gifts. But, no, Paul was **not** coming for only for what he could give Rome. **Paul was also coming for what Rome could give him!**

Paul's faith would be an encouragement to the church in Rome, and their faith would be an encouragement to Paul.

And we have already talked about why that was true — not necessarily that their faith was all that strong, but because their faith existed! There they were in the Gentile capital of the world, without any visit from any apostle, and yet they had faith in God. They relied upon God, and they trusted in God.

And why would that have been such an encouragement to Paul? Was it perhaps because the faith in Rome was evidence that the gospel would continue to spread and grow all around the world even after the death of Paul and the other apostles? Did Paul ever wonder what would happen to the church after he died? I think all missionaries worry about what will happen after they leave their mission field.

But doesn't Rome, even today, stand as an encouragement to all missionaries? The power of the gospel is not in the one who proclaims it. The power of the gospel is in the gospel itself. Paul will tell us that fact about the gospel just four verses from now.

And isn't Rome itself the best evidence of that fact? That there could be faith in a place like Rome without any apostle ever having set foot there? That must have been a tremendous encouragement to Paul, as he tells us here in verse 12: "that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine."

In fact, that is exactly what we see when Paul finally arrived in Rome.

Acts 28:14-15 — ...And so we came to Rome. And the brothers there, when they heard about us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God **and took courage**.

Paul was encouraged by the church in Rome. And, of course, we know that Paul's faith was a great encouragement to them as well. They could all see that Paul's faith was genuine and strong.

Galatians 2:20 — I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. **And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.**