

# Living Word Small Group Study Guide

September 6-12, 2020

## Sermon Series: Who is My Neighbor?

### Week Three: “The One You’ll Never Meet”

Study groups can choose to use the daily Scripture readings and associated questions from either the current or previous week’s Daily Study Guide, or to focus on the Scripture reading from Sunday’s sermon. This study guide delves more deeply into the Scripture from the Sunday sermon.

#### **Suggested Opening Prayer:**

*Both the opening and closing prayer are offered as suggestions. Feel free to offer spontaneous prayer instead.*

*Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of Your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love You, and worthily magnify Your holy name; through Christ our Lord, Amen.*

#### **Sermon Series Theme:**

Jesus’ response to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” is to tell the story of the much unliked foreigners from Samaria. We will look at this story as the backdrop for a series about loving our neighbor in real and certain ways.

#### **This Week’s Sermon Theme:**

We have been in ministry in Ghana for ten years, and work is yet to be done. How can we be neighbors even to people we will probably never meet?

**Sunday Scripture Reading:** Romans 1:8-15 (A group member should read the passages aloud).

#### **For Group Discussion:**

##### ***What does the text actually SAY?***

*The goal of this discussion is to make sure group members understand the actual content of the passage.*

Why does Paul give thanks for the Romans? (1:8)

How is Paul serving God with his whole heart? (1:9)

What does Paul pray will finally happen for him and the Romans? (1:10)

What does Paul want to do for the Romans when he is able to visit them? (1:11)

How does Paul clarify, in verse 12, what he meant by his words in verse 11? (1:12)

What does Paul want the Romans to know about his previous plans? (1:13)

To whom does Paul feel a sense of obligation? (1:14)

What is Paul so eager to do with these Romans? (1:15)

### ***What questions does the text raise for us?***

*The goal of this discussion is to allow group members to respond to their own emotions and reactions related to the passage. Encourage participants to simply ask any questions they have about the passage. The questions below are only suggestions, representative of the kinds of questions that might be asked. The goal is not necessarily to provide answers, but to ask questions of the text! Open discussion about the questions raised below, or by the class, is encouraged.*

We might wonder if the faith of the Romans was really being talked about “all over the world.” What were the Romans doing that made their faith so “world-famous”?

We might also wonder why it sounds like Paul is feeling ashamed of the fact he has not yet visited the Romans.

We might ask if Paul has a particular kind of spiritual gift that he really wants to pass on to the Romans.

We might also wonder what kind of “mutual encouragement” Paul expects to happen by visiting the Romans.

We probably wonder just what, exactly, prevented Paul from visiting before, since he says he has tried to come “many times” before.

We might wonder who Paul is referring to in speaking of “other Gentiles” he has “had a harvest” among, and what that harvest consisted of.

We might ask if Paul is equating “Greek” with “wise” and “non-Greek” with “foolish.” Why does Paul feel an “obligation” to *either* group?

Finally, we could ask why, if the Romans faith is already so strong, is Paul so eager to go to preach to them. Is he concerned they might be basing their faith on something other than what he preaches?

### **Commentary on the text:**

*The goal of this section is to provide further background that provides context for the content of the passage.*

See also: 1 Corinthians 1:4; Ephesians 1:16; Philippians 1:3; Romans 5:11; Romans 7:25; Colossians 1:6, 1 Thessalonians 1:8; 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3; 1 Corinthians 12:7; 1 Corinthians 12:12-30; Romans 15:22

In the opening of his letter to the Romans, Paul follows the conventions of letter-writing in his day by including a thanksgiving and prayer on behalf of his readers, with the main focus of his praise being their faith. The purpose of opening a letter in this way was to make the hearer (or reader) more attentive and receptive to the content by discussing the nature of the relationship between the sender and the recipient of the letter. Paul hopes to get a sympathetic hearing from his audience through words of praise, assurance of his own deep personal concern, the expression of an eagerness to visit in person ... and the accompanying, somewhat lame-sounding excuses for not being able to do so before!

A quick look at the opening of many of Paul's letters will show that he nearly always begins his letters with a word of thanksgiving (for example, 1 Corinthians 1:4, Ephesians 1:16, and Philippians 1:3, among others). It is also very typical of Paul to give thanks to God *through Jesus Christ* (see Romans 5:11 and 7:25 for other examples of this style). This language demonstrates the early Christian understanding of the exalted Jesus as a heavenly mediator between God the Father and sinful humanity. While Paul always emphasizes the *Lordship* of Jesus, he always remembers that God the Father is over *all*, so that thanksgiving is given not *to* Christ, but *through* Christ, to the Father. It is specifically the *faith* of the Romans that Paul gives thanks for, and the exaggerated language of their faith being famous all over the world is also a typical way for Paul to win his audience's favor (see Colossians 1:6 and 1 Thessalonians 1:8, for example).

Paul continues to strive to gain a sympathetic audience by assuring the Romans of his personal concern for them, calling God Himself as witness to the fact that he prays for them constantly. Again, this is typical language for Paul (1 Thessalonians 1:2-3 uses very similar language), but this does not mean that Paul is insincere in his words of assurance. Almost certainly, Paul maintained the regular Jewish times of prayer. Early Christianity adopted the established Jewish practice of setting aside three times per day for prayer, although many early Christians, in trying to follow Jesus' own practice, prayed extensively throughout the day or whenever an occasion prompted it. It is very likely that Paul quite literally prayed for the Romans "constantly," or "at all times," as a way of expressing his Christian care for these Christ-followers he had never met. Now, of course, Paul's prayer is that "a way will be opened for me to come to you." Paul here is walking a delicate line – the more he emphasizes that he has desired to visit them for a long time, the more open he becomes to criticism about his failure to ever visit. To assuage this concern, he emphasizes the divine initiative – as God's servant, it is God's will that determines his actions, so the prayer is that, by God's will, a *way will be opened* (note the passive voice) for him to visit at last.

Paul then expresses the heart of his desire to visit – to "share some spiritual gift with you through which you will be strengthened." A primary part of Paul's theology of spiritual gifts is that they are not for personal benefit, but for sharing, for the common good (see 1 Corinthians 12:7). Spiritual gifts ("charismas" in the original Greek) are any embodiment of God's grace – concrete expressions of God's generous and powerful concern for the human creation. Thus, for Paul, the word can be used for any act, even for any utterance, through which God's grace is experienced by another person, and is not to be limited by the various lists of spiritual gifts that are given in several of Paul's letters. What Paul specifically has in mind that he wants to share with the Romans is not stated, because Paul could not be sure, without visiting, of exactly *how* God's grace would be brought to expression through him – but he is confident that God *will* use him in some way that will benefit, or strengthen, them. This should not be construed as arrogance on Paul's part – in fact, Paul assumes that *all* believers have been given God's grace, and that it naturally, almost by definition, expresses itself among others in a way that will strengthen them.

This is why Paul feels the need to provide further clarification in the next verse – "that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith." He realizes that the Romans may not be familiar with his own theology and understanding of spiritual gifts, particularly the degree of mutual interdependence that they rely upon (as in his words on the "body of Christ" in 1 Corinthians 12:12-30). Any sharing of spiritual gifts that Paul could undertake with the Romans would, by definition, involve a mutual sharing of the gifts, and the faith, that they hold in common. Paul acknowledges that these

Romans he has never met have gifts that would be enormously beneficial to his own faith. By sharing this faith together – talking about what they believe, their understanding (and lack of understanding) of it, their firm convictions and questions, and how they are applying their faith in daily life – Paul expects for the Romans and himself to be *mutually encouraged*.

Paul then returns to the subject of his failure to visit the Romans previously. He makes another personal appeal, calling them “brothers” (“brothers and sisters” in modern translations, since the appeal is to the entire church), wanting to reassure the Romans that he has tried, and tried again, to visit them. Again, this is probably not an exaggeration. Rome, as the capital of the Roman Empire, was a place Paul desperately wanted to visit, as a strategically important city for Paul’s vision of the spread of the gospel. He simply does not share exactly what it is that has “prevented” him from visiting, neither here, nor in Romans 15:22 where he again returns to the subject. It is quite possible that Paul, as a Jewish man, has in mind the expulsion of Jews from Rome that Emperor Claudius ordered during his reign, from around 49 AD to 53 AD, since the letter to the Romans was likely written shortly after that, around 57 AD. A likely scenario is that while Paul had long wanted to visit Rome, the expulsion order prevented him, and he therefore became involved with newer opportunities to spread the gospel in Greece and Asia Minor, and to maintain the churches he had already founded in those regions. Clearly, though, his self-understanding as “apostle to the Gentiles” leads him to a strong desire to fulfill his mission within the church in Rome, just as he had been doing in the churches in Greece and Asia Minor.

In fact, this self-understanding is so strong, that Paul even feels a sense of responsibility, even obligation, to fulfill his mission to the Gentiles. He makes clear to the Romans that that obligation is not only to the Greek-speaking world, but to *all* Gentiles, Greeks and non-Greeks. This was a powerful statement for Paul to make to people who were part of the Greek culture, which tended to view itself as superior to the rest of the “uncultured” world. The word Paul uses in referring to non-Greeks is actually the root of the English word “barbarians,” and the word carried the same negative connotations then as it does now. This does not mean Paul accepted those negative connotations – after all, he feels an obligation to take the gospel to them – but he uses the word that was commonplace in Rome to refer to all other races and classes in the Gentile world. Similarly, in referring to the “wise and the foolish,” Paul implies his obligation to humankind as a whole. The Greeks would consider the phrase synonymous with the phrase “Greeks and barbarians” – but Paul’s point is that Paul considers the gospel of Jesus Christ to rise above any human conception of “sophistication” or “barbarism.” Paul is eager to share the gospel with everyone – even the sophisticated Greeks in Rome.

### **Final Thoughts for Discussion:**

*The goal of this section is to get people thinking and talking about how the passage should affect their behavior after they leave the group.*

Have you ever written a letter to someone, or to a group of people, to let them know you are praying for them and to encourage them in their faith or in their ministry, even though you’ve never met them? Would you consider doing so now?

Have you ever desperately wanted to do something to help someone, but found yourself with legitimate reasons you cannot? How did that make you feel?

Are you actively praying for a way to be opened for you to do the things God is calling you to do, but for which life circumstances make fulfilling that calling difficult?

What spiritual gifts do you have that someone else needs to benefit from?

Do your actions give evidence of a belief that others you have never met may have spiritual gifts that will benefit your own spiritual life?

Can you identify times and places where reaching out to new people resulted in mutual encouragement in the Christian faith?

Do you feel an actual sense of *responsibility* or an *obligation* to share your Christian faith with others?

How can you begin to be a neighbor to people you'll likely never meet?

**Suggested Closing Prayer:**

*Holy God, help us to be neighbors even to people we will never meet. Make a way for us to fulfill the calling You have given us and give us the courage to reach out to new people so that we can be mutually encouraged in our faith. Remind us, always, that there is no one beyond Your reach, and no one who cannot help our own faith to grow. We pray in the holy name of Christ our Lord, Amen.*