Introduction
Saint John Chrysostom says about Saint Paul:

…the grace of the Spirit has left written for us in the pages of the sacred writings the lives and conduct of all holy people so that we might learn all the deeds of virtue they performed, people of the same nature as ourselves, and that we might not be lazy in the practice of virtue. Was not blessed Paul of the same nature as ourselves? I mean, for this man I have an intense regard, and hence I do not cease bringing him constantly to mind; fixing my eyes on his soul as though on some exemplary model, I marvel at his control of passion, the eminence of his manly spirit, the ardor of his love for God; and the realization comes to me that one man set his mind on achieving in his person all that multitude of virtues, whereas each of us perhaps hasn’t even the inclination, let alone the achievement….Somehow when I come face to face with the wealth of achievement of this holy man, I lose control of my tongue as though swept away by an irresistible flood (Homilies on Genesis, 17:12,17)

The writings of Saint Paul give us a reflection of the holiness and virtue of this saint, as a spiritual father, a preacher, a counselor, and a teacher. In this lesson, we explore the major themes of his fourteen epistles. The practical lesson for us is simply to take up and read these epistles and begin to live according to the Christian principles that the wise apostle lays down for us.

Categories of Epistles
† Chief Epistles: Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians
† Prison Epistles: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon
† Eschatological Epistles: 1 & 2 Thessalonians
† Pastoral Epistles: 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Hebrews

The Chief Epistles

ROMANS

Saint Paul’s epistle to the Romans is the sixth book of the New Testament, after the four gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. This epistle was written to Christians in Rome, before Saint Paul went there.

How were there Christians in Rome before the apostles preached there? In Acts 2, on the day of Pentecost, there were visitors from Rome, who were witnesses of all that came to pass on that day. Having heard the preaching of the apostles and being baptized, they would go back to Rome and preach Christianity. Also, Rome was a commercial center, and Christians with their teaching and example would have preached the faith.

This epistle lays down for us the fundamental principles of Christianity and was addressed to Jews and Gentiles alike.
Saint Paul opens this epistle stating that he has a debt that must be repaid. He must preach the Gospel to all men, wherever they may live. The Jews were in need of the Gospel as much as the idol-worshiping Gentiles. Even though the Jews had the law, they had not yet found salvation. The Gentiles had the voice of conscience as their guide. Sin is the violation of the written and unwritten law. All were sinners. Sin entered into the world through the transgression of Adam and Eve. Sin received such power that all people groan under its weight. Although mankind desires to do good, he is often carried away by the rush of evil and does what is wrong.

Saint Paul declares in this epistle, “For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice… O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death” (Romans 7:19, 24)! The key, of course, to our salvation is the death and resurrection of Christ. Man could not break the bonds of sin and liberate himself on his own, but it is only through Christ’s precious blood that man is saved.

We see Saint Paul expressing heartfelt gratitude for this salvation. He expresses his awe as such, “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out” (Romans 11:33)! He reminds us that we were once wild olive trees that have now been grafted to a cultivated tree, and can now produce good fruits (Romans 11). This is a picture of the wondrous transformation that faith in Christ has brought to us and to the world. Having declared salvation through Christ, Saint Paul writes in chapters 12 to 14 about how we ought to live as Christians.

In summary, this epistle reminds us of our need to be grafted to the Gospel of Christ, so that we, who were once dead in our sins, can now be made alive and transformed in Christ.

1 & 2 CORINTHIANS

These are the seventh and eighth books of the New Testament. The city of Corinth was one of the greatest and wealthiest cities during its time. It was a center of commerce. However, because of its wealth and idolatry, it was also one of the most corrupt cities in ancient Greece.

A symbol of its corrupt life was reflected in its statute of the goddess, Venus. Prostitutes dwelled in the buildings around the temple, and Epicurean philosophy which justified all sorts of carnal deviations was popular.

Saint Paul stayed in Corinth about eighteen months arguing with both Jews and the idolatrous Gentiles. Saint Paul wrote his First Letter to the Corinthians while in Ephesus, after hearing about the moral and religious situation in the church there.

Among Corinth’s problems were divisions. The Church, which is supposed to be united with Christ as her head, was divided into various parties and factions. Some boasted that Paul was their leader, others Apollo, others Peter, and still others Christ.
Saint Paul challenges their behavior by asking, “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul” (1 Corinthians 1:13).

Saint Paul also declares the salvation through the cross. The Jews had a difficult time accepting the fact that God became man and was crucified. To the Greeks, this was foolishness. In spite of all the opposition, Saint Paul continues to preach the crucified Christ (1 Corinthians 2:2).

Saint Paul also speaks out against carnal sins and a serious incident of immorality that had occurred in Corinth, namely that a man’s son was living with his stepmother. Saint Paul speaks out against sexual immorality and states the correct teaching about marriage and virginity (1 Corinthians 7).

Saint Paul also urges them in his first epistle to not participate in the pagan ceremonies and to flee from the worship of idols (1 Corinthians 10:14). The only sacrifice that moves us deeply is not that which is offered to idols, but the sacrifice of Christ – the one true sacrifice – for the salvation of the world.

Another problem that arose in the Church in Corinth was a distorted view of spiritual gifts. Saint Paul teaches them that love is the greatest of all gifts (1 Corinthians 13).

Because of the materialistic philosophy of the Epicureans, who taught that life does not extend beyond the grave, Saint Paul offers a wonderful exposition on the truth of the resurrection of our Lord. He emphasizes that the resurrection is the cornerstone of our faith and that without it our faith is futile (1 Corinthians 15).

We learn from this first epistle to flee idolatry and immorality and to cling to the life-giving cross and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We also learn that love is the greatest gift, and to all strive for unity in the body of Christ – the Church.

Saint Titus was sent to Corinth and reported to Saint Paul, who is Macedonia, about the effect Saint Paul’s first letter had on the Corinthians. The news was good and Saint Paul was joyful.

Saint Paul glorifies God as he begins his second epistle to the Corinthians. The spirit is one of triumph over the powers and authorities of darkness. In this epistle, Saint Paul continues to exhort the believers to imitate Christ. Saint Paul defends his apostolic work, because many had started to criticize his status as an apostle. In this epistle, we see the sufferings that Saint Paul undergone and how he was rewarded, namely that he was caught up to the third heaven and beheld Paradise (2 Corinthians 12). We too ought to glorify God in our sufferings, and to examine ourselves and test whether we are in the faith. Then, we will gain eternal life.
The Galatians originated from Germany. From there, they invaded many lands and plundered towns and cities until they came to Macedonia. From there they went to Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). With respect to their religion, they had lived in the darkness of idolatry until the sun of the Gospel shone upon them. Saint Paul preached in Galatia, baptizing and establishing the church there. This wild warlike race was now producing saints. Unfortunately, some fanatic Jews who were enemies of Saint Paul began to spread their teachings in Galatia. They slandered and made false statements against the apostle and began to shake the faith of the Galatians, telling them that in order to be saved, it was not enough to believe in Christ, but that they had to be circumcised and to keep all the commandments of the Mosaic Law.

When Saint Paul heard that the Judaizers were spreading their false doctrines, he wrote to the Galatians. Saint Paul expresses his deep sorry because the Galatians were carried away by these false teachers and believed in a gospel that he did not preach to them. Saint Paul even goes so far to say, “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed” (Galatians 1:8-9).

Saint Paul emphasizes the universal and eternal character of the Gospel of Christ. This teaching and Christ’s salvation is for all people, and does not discriminate among the nations. He emphasizes the fundamental truth of our faith that we are not saved by our own natural powers or by laws and orders by faith in the crucified and resurrected Christ. He gives the example of Abraham who was not saved by the Mosaic Law which came about 500 years after him, but by faith. The bonds of sin have now been broken. We who were once slaves are now freed beneath the cross of Christ. “But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Galatians 6:14).

While we may not see Judaizers threatening our church today, we see many carried away by other false teachings and following philosophies that are contrary to the Gospel of Christ. Let the words of Saint Paul ring in your ears, “Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.”