

Mission and Ministry

Romans 15:14-33

November 13, 2011

Paul has described the gospel and shown us how we ought to live in light of it. Now he brings his letter to the Roman church to a close. He does so in two parts. First, he returns to the beginning in that he talks about his mission and ministry and his desire to see them. We will look at this part this morning. Second, he offers greetings and a few last instructions at which we will look next week.

As we have made our way through Paul's letter to the church in Rome we have looked at his detailed and careful description of the gospel. We have seen that salvation is based on the grace of God and has nothing to do with what we do. We have also seen that our behavior is still important, but as a response to salvation, not a cause of it. Paul walked us through, step by step, as he set before us our need for a salvation from outside ourselves and fact that the nature of sin means we cannot contribute to our salvation. It is all of God. If we are saved, then all the credit goes to God.

Yet we are saved and given freedom from sin, not to satisfy our fleshly desires, but in order that we might bring glory and praise to the God who saved us. Our behavior is to be guided by God's word and controlled by the Holy Spirit. We are to lay our freedoms, given to us by Jesus Christ, at the foot of the cross in order to help each other along. We are to help each other in our weaknesses and not cause our brothers and sisters to act against their consciences or the word of God. This is where we left Paul's message last week.

Paul was writing this letter to a church he did not found and which he had not visited. He pointed this out in the opening of the letter and added his desire to visit them when he could. There were people in the church that Paul knew, but most of them had never seen him. Paul has just explained his gospel to these strangers and

then given them detailed instructions on how to live in light of the cross of Jesus. Now he backed off a bit to express his understanding that God was at work in that congregation and Paul had nothing to worry about. Paul said, *"I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another. I have written you quite boldly on some points, as if to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit."* (vv.14-16)

Even though Paul had never visited the roman church he knew quite a bit about them. He had received reports from friends and knew people who were a part of that congregation. More importantly Paul listened to the Holy Spirit and was guided both in his ministry and in writing this letter. Even though there is no record of an apostle visiting the roman Christians yet, Paul says with confidence that they have all that they need. They had the Old Testament which points to Christ. They had the gospel message that explains who Jesus is and what He did. Now, they had Paul's letter detailing that gospel in Paul's words and including some of the truths Paul drew from that gospel about how we are to live and treat one another. They had all the knowledge they needed to teach one another the way in which they should go, and they had the Holy Spirit within them growing regenerated hearts in them. They were full of goodness because God had declared them good and was working in them to bring that goodness out in their lives.

Paul also pointed out that what he had written was rather bold at points, especially considering he had never been to that congregation. Still, Paul sought to remind them of the basics of the gospel and of his call to be the Apostle to the Gentiles. They needed to know that the message Paul preached was the message preached by the

rest of the apostles. They also needed to know that, as a mostly Gentile congregation, they fell under Paul's authority. In a sense this letter is one of introduction by a leader to those whom he expects to follow. All of it is in order that the Gentiles might be brought to God and receive a share in the blessings of Abraham.

Paul received satisfaction for his work in the mission God had given to him. *"Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done—by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ."* (vv.17-19) Paul gloried in Christ Jesus for the **work** God had given him. Paul knew how much of a sinner he was. He understood that, like the rest of us, outside of Christ he deserved nothing good from God's hand. Yet God had chosen to save him. God had decided, not only to give Paul a new heart and a new destination, but to also give him a job to do.

God's grace to Paul in this led Paul to declare that he would talk of nothing else. For all of the success of Paul's ministry of planting churches in Gentile cities, Paul would only acknowledge that it was what Jesus had done. Paul saw himself as the tool in the hands of Jesus his Master. Paul only did and said what God commanded and so, if his actions and words led to the salvation of Gentiles, the credit went to Jesus who actually saved them by dying on the cross. Paul performed miracles, but only through the power of the Holy Spirit. All over the ancient world, Paul was used by God to tell people about the salvation that God had brought through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This was Paul's mission, and he carried it out. He fulfilled to the best of his ability the task God had set before him.

Paul was hungry to do it. It was Paul's desire to carry out the mission God had given him. Paul wrote, *"It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation. Rather, as it is written: 'Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand.' This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you."* (vv.20-22) Understanding his call to be carrying the gospel to the people who were not looking for the Messiah, Paul focused on taking the message to the places it had not yet gone. If there were already people in a city celebrating Jesus' resurrection Paul did not have a need to go there. Paul wanted to do the **foundation** work rather than to build on the work already laid by someone else.

It was this desire to carry the gospel to new areas that prevented Paul from getting to Rome sooner. He wanted to visit the roman church, but there were still areas of Asia Minor where the gospel had not reached. His larger mission outweighed his smaller desire. Christians had made it to Rome carrying the gospel with them. There was already a church there. As much as Paul wanted to see it, he felt called by God to work in areas where there were people to be saved, but nobody had yet taken the message of salvation.

Paul had good news on this front, however. He had completed his work in Asia Minor and was looking for a new place to share the gospel of salvation. *"But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to see you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while."* (vv.23,24) Every part of the region in which he had worked had a church sharing the gospel. Now, Paul wanted to go to **Spain**, and the way to Spain went past Rome. The time had finally arrived to consider a

trip to this congregation he had wanted to visit, but even then, only as a layover on his way to his next mission field.

There was only one thing holding Paul back. He had one task to accomplish before he could begin his journey to Spain by way of Rome. He needed to return to Jerusalem. *“Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them.”* (vv.25,26) The first phase of Paul’s mission work was done and he had one item of ministry to complete before he felt free to work on his mission again. Throughout his third missionary journey, Paul had collected an offering for the church in Jerusalem. While the Christians in Jerusalem were under great persecution and were generally poor and in need of help. Paul had another motive for encouraging this offering among the churches he planted, and had planted earlier.

Paul said that the Gentile churches he founded **owed** the money to the Jerusalem church. What did he mean by this? It’s not as if the churches Paul planted were started with seed money from the Jerusalem congregation. Paul explained, *“For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews’ spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings.”* (v.27) It is appropriate for those who enjoy spiritual blessings to share material blessings with the ones who blessed them first. God gives to us, and He expects us to be generous in return. Paul actually said this is a debt.

The gospel came to the world through the Jerusalem church, headed by the apostles and Jesus’ brother, James. They were the community of faith that first received the good news of salvation, and they were the first ones to share it. It is because of their faithful witness and sharing the truth that they witnessed and that

was passed down to them that we still worship Jesus today.

This is one of the many reasons to give regularly and generously to the church. If we are receiving spiritual blessings, if we are being taught, encouraged, strengthened, challenged, stretched, and molded through a community of faith, then we owe it to God to **support** that community with our money as well as our prayers and effort. It’s not that God needs the money. It’s not even that the church needs the money. It’s that those who are blessed need to give the money by way of gratitude and in recognition that they have benefitted from the faithfulness of that community of God’s people. This is true even if you are not a member of the church. If the church is helping you and you are receiving spiritual blessings, then material contributions are appropriate and called for.

Paul had collected this offering for the church in Jerusalem and he wanted to see the gift through to completion. *“So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they have received this fruit, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way. I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ.”* (vv.28,29) Paul not only wanted to make sure the offering got to Jerusalem, he wanted to be certain the church there understood it and tell them about how eager many of the Gentile congregations, especially in Macedonia, were to give to it. After having done all this, Paul was certain he would carry Jesus’ blessing to Rome, and receive a blessing from the roman church.

Paul took a break between his mission endeavors to engage in **ministry**. Mission is carrying the gospel to those who need it. It is one of the primary tasks of the church. It is reaching out with the good news that there is salvation and it is paid for and provided through Jesus Christ and Him alone. Mission involves meeting the needs of those around us. Jesus called us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick, and visit those

who are in prison. All of these things show that the love of Christ is not just some idea we talk about in this room on Sundays, but is real and something Jesus has shared with us.

Ministry is also done in light of the love of Christ, though it is done primarily within the church. It is the meeting of needs, through teaching and sharing of resources, within the body of Christ. As church members help each other, and as congregations support one another, ministry takes place.

As Paul drew his letter to an end he had one last request of the church in Rome. *“I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea and that my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there, so that by God’s will I may come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed. The God of peace be with you all. Amen.”* (vv.30-33) Paul asked the roman Christians to support and join him through prayer. We often forget how important prayer is. It is the fuel that keeps the church going. It is through prayer that God has chosen to form our hearts directly by the power of His Holy Spirit working in us. Prayer changes things, beginning with **us**. Paul wanted the people to pray for him and his ministry. We ought to pray for each other as well.

Mission and ministry are what we are called to do. We must be involved in telling others about Jesus, helping those in need, supporting and encouraging one another in the church, and keeping all of this and each other in prayer. It is a large task and cannot be done by just a few. That is why we must all work together to get it done. It is why the church constitution calls us to these things and makes active membership in this body dependant upon them. Paul ends his letter to the roman church with a reminder of his activity and a call to join him in it. May we celebrate what Jesus has done and be

so transformed by it that we, too, join in the mission and ministry of the church.