

INTRODUCTION

Jesus Christ is making disciples of all nations.

Having conquered Satan, sin, and death, through His own victorious death and resurrection, Jesus Christ is right now building His Church. Jesus is making committed disciples from every tribe, tongue, and people – and the **astonishing thing** is that He has chosen us to be His instruments for this great work.

Think of this in terms of the Great Commission:

Having triumphed over death, our risen Lord declares:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me.

Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations. Baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit; and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.

And, behold, I am with you always – even to the end of the age.

This is Christ's own mission: to make disciples of all nations. It is done in His name and in His power. Yet, by God's grace, we have been called to enter-in to this work. This morning we are going to look at our participation in Christ's mission under three headings:

1. First, we disciple the nations by encouraging one another;
2. Second, we disciple the nations by admonishing one another; and
3. Third, we disciple the nations by reframing and reforming our personal goals in light of Christ's mission in this world.

Scholars all note that with verse 13 of this chapter, the Apostle Paul has come to the end of his main theological arguments and he is now transitioning to talk about his plans to visit the church in Rome and to seek their help in his planned efforts to bring the Gospel to Spain. That's right. That is what this morning's passage - all the way through the end of this great letter - is about.

But we shouldn't imagine that in moving on to these practical matters that Paul is somehow leaving theology behind. Faith and Life don't divide like that. Any theology that doesn't change the way we that we live and pray, the way that we build up each other in the church, and the way that we seek to spread the Kingdom of God, *by discipling the*

nations, is scarcely worthy of the name “Theology.” As Alistair Begg likes to remind us: “The Learning is for Living!”

So, when Paul shifts to encouraging the saints in Rome and talking about their common task of the Great Commission – he is not adding some unimportant addendum to an otherwise helpful letter. Rather, Paul is now developing one of the central applications of the rich theology that he has been unfolding in the previous 14 chapters.

Paul begins with two of the most important things that we can **do** in our work of mutual discipleship here in our own church: **Encouragement** and **Admonition**.

BODY

We begin with encouragement.

Verse 14:

I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another.

The NIV is better here. Not “I myself am **satisfied**” but “I myself am **convinced**.” Or even better, “I myself am **fully convinced** about you.” The Greek is strong and confident. Paul is gratefully acknowledging the LORD’s profound work among the Roman Christians.

And what is Paul so fully convinced about? That you – “my **brothers** ... are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another.”

Before we look at the trees, let’s make sure that we see the forest. Paul is doing something remarkably powerful for the saints in Rome. He is **encouraging** them. This is one thing that no church ever has enough of. As William Plummer puts it:

“Whenever **truth will allow** and fit occasion shall offer, we should express favorable opinions of our Christian brethren. **Good men** need encouragement as well as warning.”

That’s so good I want to say it again:

“Whenever **truth will allow** and fit occasion shall offer, we should express favorable opinions of our Christian brethren. **Good men** need encouragement as well as warning.”

Let’s unpack that:

1. Plumber gives us an important qualification: “Whenever truth will allow.” Encouragement is not the same thing as flattery. Genuine encouragement must be grounded in the truth. But let me add – that, sometimes, we need to look for it. We ought to **go out of our way** to find those things which are **worthy of praise**, in our brothers and sisters, in order to bring **those things** to remembrance.
2. Second, encouragement is not simply for the young or for the weak. Plumber rightly says: “Good men need encouragement.” You might have a friend or an acquaintance who seems like she has it all together ... as though **her** walk with the LORD is completely smooth sailing. Beloved – **she** needs encouragement too. When we meditate upon God’s word, we discover that even the Apostles and Prophets needed regular encouragement from the LORD, and one of the neat things about encouragement is that there is no hierarchy. You can be nine years old and still give meaningful encouragement to your pastor, your Elders, and your parents. You can be a brand-new Christian and give meaningful encouragement to the most mature believers in this church. And don’t think that we don’t need it. As Plumber rightly says: “Good men need encouragement.”
3. Third, note well that Plumber doesn’t say that good men might benefit from some occasional encouragement. He says: “Good men *need* encouragement.” And, of course, he is right. In a fallen world, our physical, emotional, and spiritual batteries keep getting drained. Unless those batteries get recharged, we lose enthusiasm for work, for relationships, even for our walk with the LORD. ... But, amazingly, an encouraging note, a student telling you how much she is learning in your class, or even a simple “well done” can turn everything around. We all *need* that encouragement. And the good news is that we can all *give* that encouragement.

And here is a wonderful side benefit. Encouraging your brothers and sisters not only charges their spiritual batteries – it charges yours as well.

And what does Paul encourage the Romans with? Three things:

1. First, that they are full of goodness. The language here is strikingly antithetical to the way Paul described unbelievers back in Romans chapter 1.

There, Paul said this about unbelievers:

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were

filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are **full** of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

What a sober and devastating description of human beings in rebellion against God. But now, in chapter 15, Paul rejoices that the saints in the Rome were **not like this**. Rather, they have been transformed by the LORD so dramatically that Paul could plainly describe them as being **full** of goodness. Paul is not saying that they don't still have room for further growth. We all can grow in goodness so long as we are in this life. But he is commending the Romans for the fact that goodness was not merely in a seed form – but that it had become conspicuous throughout their congregation. May the LORD grant us this fruit here in North Andover as well.

2. Second, Paul praises the Romans because they are full of all knowledge. Full of knowledge does not mean that they had become omniscient – or that if you were stuck on some tricky math problem the best thing you could do would be to present your questions to the church in Rome. Full of knowledge means that they had grasped the gospel and enough of its ramifications that Paul could send them this magnificent letter, which we call Romans, fully expecting that they would be able to largely understand and apply the great truths he is telling them to their individual lives and to their life together as the people of God.

Yes, this goodness and knowledge were gifts from the LORD. But think about how encouraging it must have been for the saints in Rome to hear the Apostle Paul speak to them in this way!

John Murray astutely connects these twin encouragements around, *goodness* and *knowledge*, with what Paul had just been teaching them about how stronger and weaker brothers are to live together in love within Christ's Church. Murray writes:

Goodness is the quality which will constrain the strong to refrain from what will injure the weak and knowledge is the attainment that will correct weakness.¹

This reminds us that biblical encouragement is not merely a piece of good advice for how we can have more successful lives. **Biblical encouragement is part of**

¹ John Murray, quoted by Michael Middendorf, Romans, Vol. 2, p. 1509.

Christ's plan for discipling the Church and the world – and each one of us is being called to embrace this work. As one early church father put it: “**Paul rouses the people to further progress by praising them.**”² By making the effort to encourage your brothers and sisters – you get to do this too!

3. Third, Paul praises the Roman Christians because they are able **to admonish** one another. Most modern translations have changed from the word “admonish” to the word “instruct” because of the negative associations that our culture has with the word **admonish**. But Paul is not saying that the Romans merely enjoyed sitting in each other's Sunday school classes. He has something far more **pointed** in mind.

So rather than abandoning the term “admonish” – I think we would do well to reclaim it ... with its proper biblical understanding. So, let me give you a careful definition of the term “admonish” that I first hear from the Reformed Baptist preacher – Al Martin:

[To admonish is to make] An appeal to the mind, seeking to help another to **see the danger** that they are in, and by warning, teaching, and reminding, **seeking to lead them out of danger and into safety.**³

Let me say that again:

[To admonish is to make] An appeal to the mind, seeking to help another to **see the danger** that they are in, and by warning, teaching, and reminding, **seeking to lead them out of danger and into safety.**

If you are taking notes, write down Acts 20 verse 31. Acts 20:31. For there, Paul summarizes his three years of ministry in Ephesus:

Therefore, be alert, remembering that **for three years** I did not cease night or day to **admonish** every one with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

What was Paul doing night and day in Ephesus? He wasn't putting the Ephesians down by telling them how bad they were. That's not what the word “admonish” means. Paul was seeking to **lead them out of danger and into safety.**

² Pelagius, quoted by Bray, as quoted by Michael Middendorf, Romans, Vol. 2, p. 1509.

³ Al Martin, from a sermon on Romans 15:14. *Sermon Audio*

Put like that we can see how valuable learning to rightly admonish one another can be; ... **but** our culture has shifted in such a way that **this virtue** is commonly thought of **as a vice** – and most modern translations have **even** abandoned the word in today's passage by substituting the more neutral word "instruct."

If we are to recapture this biblical virtue in our own church family, we will need to ask ourselves why this has happened? Why have we taken something intended for our mutual benefit and turned it into something which is almost a curse word? Let me suggest an answer:

Imagine that you are standing in quicksand but don't realize your danger. Someone comes along, sees that you are in trouble, and while standing on the solid ground, throws you a rope. He says: "Grab on to the rope and I'll pull you to safety."

How do you respond? Well, if you don't realize that you are in danger, you might think that this guy is really arrogant. "Who does he think that he is to claim that **HE** is standing on solid ground while **I'm** the one in the quicksand? And what is all this high and mighty talk about rescuing me **as though he is better than I am?**"

O.k., that might not be the way that you would respond if you were in physical quicksand – but this is exactly the way that our culture regularly responds when people are drowning in moral, emotional, and spiritual quicksand.

Increasingly, our culture is insisting that you are obligated to affirm everything about the person who is drowning in the moral quicksand – and that if you were really "loving" you would jump into the quicksand with her – apparently missing the fact that this just means that both of you are going to drown.

That's the problem for us right here in this church: Although we know that "seeking to lead our brothers and sisters out of danger and into safety" is the right and loving thing to do – we also don't want to get our heads bit off – and so we frequently avoid admonishing each other even when it is clearly the right thing to do.

The LORD gives us a better way:

1. First, we recognize that the only reason why any of us ever has any solid ground to stand on is through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Rightly admonishing a brother or sister does not flow out of our own personal strength or superiority. Rather it flows from the fact that we ourselves have first been rescued.

2. Second, we need to seek God's grace in becoming more receptive to the well-intended admonition of our brothers and sisters in Christ. When we talk about "our culture," it is easy to imagine that we are talking about **those people out there**. But we live in *this* broader culture and it affects **all of us**. As any Pastor or Ruling Elder will tell you, it is not uncommon to work with people *in the church* who want to be affirmed all the time. And as soon as you admonish them, they seem to focus almost entirely on vindicating themselves – as though they would rather drown than acknowledge that they need to be rescued or **to change the way that they are living**. Needless to say, such an attitude really doesn't fit with claiming to be saved **by grace** and **by grace alone**. Beloved, if you are drowning in quicksand and someone throws you a rope - **don't** try to explain why it's not your fault that you're drowning. Grab onto the rope and say, "Thank you!"
3. Third, our ministry of mutual admonishment will only flourish in a soil that is well watered by a growing knowledge of God and by loving encouragement. As we increasingly make it our practice **to encourage one another in love** we will be creating the bonds which will make fruitful warnings and corrections possible. So,

... "Whenever **truth will allow** and fit occasion shall offer, we should express favorable opinions of our Christian brethren. **Good men** need encouragement as well as warning."

Paul continues in verses 15 and 16:

But on some points I have written to you **very boldly** by way of reminder, **because of the grace given me** by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

I have to laugh a bit when Paul mentions that he has written "very boldly" on a few points. From the time that the LORD met him on the Damascus road, Paul's life has been marked out by sanctified boldness. ... Why stop now?

A few commentators suggest that Paul might be feeling a bit tentative, here, as though he were concerned that he had written a bit *too* boldly. Surely such an assessment is simply wrong. Rather, Paul was writing boldly out of the confidence that he declared all the way back in Romans 1:16: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes"! Paul has been very bold because God is very good. Paul recognizes, and joyfully confesses, that his own role as an Apostle is **entirely** a work of God's free grace – to introduce one of the boldest metaphors for his ministry that he will ever use. Listen closely again to verse 16. Paul writes ...

... to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the **priestly service** of the gospel of God, so that **the offering of the Gentiles** may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

Do you grasp what Paul is claiming? Paul is describing his own Apostolic ministry in priestly language – but instead of offering up sacrifices to the LORD ... Paul is offering up the Gentiles. Isn't that daring? And notice what this means about his work with the Gentiles: Just as sacrifices in the old testament had to be without any blemish – Paul is seeking to offer up **sanctified** Gentiles. On the one hand, the only reason why either Jews or Gentiles would ever be an acceptable offering up to God is because we are in Christ Jesus. It is Christ's atoning blood and Christ's righteousness that makes us acceptable in the Beloved. Nevertheless, Paul explicitly links this offering of the Gentiles with sanctification. And, as he adds in verse 18, this priestly work involves Christ working through Paul "to bring the Gentiles to obedience." That is, Paul is not simply trying to get a big crowd. He is not merely seeking to get people to raise their hands or to walk an aisle. The Apostle Paul is seeking **to disciple** the Gentiles by teaching them **to believe** and **to obey** every word that comes forth from the mouth of God ... and so ... should ... we.

Verse 17:

In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God.

I feel like I'm picking on the ESV today – which in many ways is such a fine translation – but I have no idea why they avoided the more literal rendering "Therefore, I have this **boast in Christ Jesus** with reference to the things pertaining to God."

First, the Greek word that they translate "pride" clearly means **to boast** and it has very important echoes of what Paul said early in this letter. In Romans 1, 2, and 3, Paul put a decisive end to all human boasting in ourselves.

But Second, Paul put a decisive end to all human boasting in ourselves - not so that we would give up all boasting – but so that we would learn to boast **entirely** in the LORD. ... And this is exactly what Paul is doing here. Listen to my more literal rendering of the verse again: "Therefore, I have this **boast in Christ Jesus** with reference to the things pertaining to God." Where is Paul's boast? **It is in Christ Jesus**. And Paul emphasizes this fact in verse 18 when he writes:

For I will not venture to speak of anything **except what Christ has accomplished through me** ...

Paul is giving all the glory to God. “The critical matter does not involve whether one boasts or not, but on what basis.”⁴ Paul made his boast in the LORD ... and so should we.

And yet Paul also speaks about himself. Part of growing together as the people of God is sharing our lives. So Paul shares not only his past, but also his hopes and dreams for the future with the saints in Rome. Verses 18 through 21:

For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed, by the power of **signs and wonders**, by the power of the Spirit of God—so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ; and thus **I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named**, lest I build on someone else's foundation, but as it is written,

“Those who have never been told of him will see,
and those who have never heard will understand.”

Intriguingly, that expression “signs and wonders” is closely associated with the Exodus when the LORD dramatically delivered His people out of the House of Bondage which Egypt had become. One Lutheran scholar suggests:

In all this Paul is declaring that there is a similarity between what transpired at the Exodus – and implicitly in the ministries of Jesus and [the Apostles]. The history of God’s saving activity is being carried out as Gentile peoples are being incorporated into the people of the God of Israel, the god of the whole world.⁵

And Paul is emphatic that, in his case, that this was all accomplished “by the power of the Spirit of God.”

The reference to Illyricum is interesting, because that region was north of Macedonia in what is now Bosnia and Serbia. This shows just how wide-ranging Paul’s Apostolic mission had already been – but Paul wants to break new ground for the gospel in Spain. ... It is hard for us to imagine what people in Jerusalem would have thought about traveling to Spain in the first century – but I suspect that it is comparable to the way Europeans would have viewed missionaries traveling to the New World in the 17th century. You wouldn’t expect to see them again this side of glory.

⁴ Michael Middendorf, *Romans*, Vol. II, p. 1514.

⁵ Hultgren, quoted by Middendorf, *Romans*, Vol. II, p. 1515.

Why did Paul want to keep pressing on to such a remote region? He tells us: “I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named.”

Now, we should be clear, there is nothing wrong with building on a foundation which has been laid by other Christians. That is normal way that Christian ministry takes place. Paul, however, had a unique calling as the Apostle called to bring the gospel to the Gentiles – and therefore he felt constrained to keep pressing on to new mission fields until the LORD called Him home.

And while Paul’s calling was different from ours, I want you to see that it is based on something that ought to frame and reform our own personal goals and sense of mission as well.

Verse 21:

As it is written,

“Those who have never been told of him will see,
and those who have never heard will understand.”

Paul quotes Isaiah 52 which speaks of what the LORD is going to do when He sends His Messiah.

“Those who have never been told of him will see,
and those who have never heard will understand.”

So Paul looks at the timeline of redemptive history, and he says: “I ... am here!” The **Messiah has come** ... which means that the LORD is now sending out His people to announce the good news to the multitudes who are still in darkness. And there is no doubt that the LORD through Isaiah was speaking about the Gentiles – for in the very same verse from Isaiah the LORD says that He “will sprinkle many nations.” Naturally, as the Apostle to the Gentiles – Paul sees this verse as directly speaking to the LORD’s call upon His life. Paul’s life is not an effort to get the LORD to bless Paul’s plans. Paul’s passion is that his life would be reframed and reformed so that He would be a useful instrument **in fulfilling God’s plans**.

And this is the third and final thing that we learn this morning about how we are to go about discipling the nations. We disciple the nations by reframing and reforming our personal goals in light of Christ’s mission in this world. Beloved, don’t seek to discover **God’s place** in *your* plans. Rather, seek to discover **your place** in *God’s* plans.

This is why we pray: “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” And when we pray like this, let’s begin by praying that His will would be done in our

lives. I think of Calvin's famous coat of arms which displayed a heart being offered in outstretched hands – with the slogan “promptly and sincerely in the service of the LORD.”

CONCLUSION

But don't make this too abstract. It won't do any good to have a glorious coat of arms, or beautiful dreams of how you will serve Jesus ... “some day ... way off in the future,” if your hands, feet, and lips are not being used to disciple the nations right now. And the most immediate way that we can put the truth of today's passage into practice is by working to encourage one another in the LORD in the week ahead.

For ... “Whenever **truth will allow** and fit occasion shall offer, we should express favorable opinions of our Christian brethren. **Good men** need encouragement as well as warning.”

May the LORD make **each one of** us an instrument of this grace in the week ahead. *Amen*