

Priestly Service of the Gospel

Romans 15:14-31

We are quickly coming to the end of the book of Romans. And in this final chapter and a half it is easy to feel like we have already passed the crescendo. What remains appears to be anti-climactic. We are tempted to think, "If the book was cut off after verse 13, we may not be missing all that much." Romans is the most complete explanation of the Gospel anywhere in Scripture. But that explanation is over and now we are simply wrapping up loose ends.

But although the ending to Paul's letter cannot compare in importance to his explanation of Justification by faith alone, or his exposition of sanctification through union with Jesus Christ, or his treatise on God's faithfulness to save all Israel, or even his working out of the Gospel in the practical applications of the last few chapters... God has included this ending for our benefit.

The section of Scripture before us today has much to teach us regarding the Church. We are not told here of the nature of the Church as the body of Christ, or as his beloved Bride. We are not instructed as to the life of the Church, the communion that we have with one another in Christ. But we are told of the central mission of the Church. And we are called to participate in that mission.

I am quite certain that we need to hear what God has to say through His Word today. I believe that we are living in the gradual decay of the Church in America. And as I have tried to understand the reason for this decay, I keep coming back to one general conclusion. The Church in America is dying because Christians no longer see her as valuable. We no longer view the mission of the Church as holy.

Paul sees the mission of the Church as being analogous to a priest carrying out his priestly duties. The work of the priest in the OT was a holy calling. And Paul saw his own part in this priestly service as holy. And he extends a call to the Roman believers to give of themselves to participate in this holy calling as well.

Only when we first understand her holy mission, and second, see that we are called to participate in that mission, will the Church again thrive in our land.

Read Romans 15:14-33.

1. The Gospel is a Priestly Service

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.

15 But
on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder,
because of the grace given me by God

16 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.

In verse 16 Paul calls himself a minister. But of what exactly is he a minister? He is a minister of Christ Jesus. Much can be said about that. He is a minister to the Gentiles. We will talk about that a bit later. But it is the next phrase that I want you to see. He is a minister... in the priestly service of the Gospel of God. The mission of the Church is to be a priestly service of the Gospel of God. (2X)

Paul was one particular sort of minister in that priestly service, as we will see. But Paul's thinking is so foreign to us today that we must do a bit of explaining as to what he means.

The role of the priest was important because he served a holy purpose. The priest functioned as a bridge between God and man. He was to be a mediator for the people to God. If someone wanted to approach God, he would only do so by means of a priest. To approach God directly would result in disaster. Only the priest could correctly make use of the appointed ceremonial means such that God would not crush the worshipper when he drew near.

The priest was also to be a mediator for God to the people. The priest could mediate the law of God to the people, explaining God's holy will. And the priest could mediate the blessing of God to the people. When you understand the role of the priest, you can see why to be a priest was a holy calling. The priest was to consider his calling holy. And the people were to esteem the work of the priest as holy.

With the coming of Christ, the shadows of Temple worship fell away. The formal office of priest no longer existed. Jesus Christ becomes the one mediator between God and man. He alone is our high priest. Much of the beauty of the Reformation was a recovery of the truth that man could approach God directly through the Gospel.

So, why does Paul now speak in terms of a “priestly service of the Gospel”? He sees himself as a minister... in the priestly service of the Gospel. Through the Gospel we can enter into the very presence of God. The Gospel message functions in the same way as that of the ministry of the priests. The Gospel enables individuals to offer themselves to God in a way that God accepts. And through the Gospel God’s will and God’s blessing are given to God’s people. The priests carried offerings into the presence of God. The Gospel also exists to enable offerings to come into the presence of God. Only the offerings are not animals. The offerings are people as they lay themselves at the feet of God.

^{ESV} **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.

so that the offering of the Gentiles
may be acceptable,
sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

The offering is not something that you bring to God like the wise men brought gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. The offering is ourselves, as we lay our hearts on the altar. The Gospel exists so that people might offer themselves to God... in a way that is holy and acceptable to God. The Gospel functions like the priest in the OT. It is through the Gospel message that we can be led into the Holy of Holies in heaven and receive blessing from God. It is because of the finished work of Jesus Christ, that the Holy Spirit now cleanses our filthy hearts and makes them acceptable to a holy God.

And as the Gospel is preached people are led to give themselves to God through Jesus Christ. So, while Paul is not a formal priest. As he serves the Gospel, he ministers in the priestly service of the Gospel. And it is this understanding that Christians have either forgotten or denied.

For most American Christians, the Church no longer functions in this priestly way.

The Church might exist to promote community – which is a good thing. The Church might exist to fight against evil in the world – also a good thing. The Church might exist to help us navigate life in this world... etc. But none of these good things provide a holy mission for the Church.

There is only one mission of the Church that can be called a holy mission. It is the priestly service of the Gospel. The Church exists to proclaim the Gospel of God. It is in this gospel alone that people are enabled to offer themselves to God as living sacrifices.

There are many ministries in the Church. But like spokes of a wheel that are connected to the hub, they must all be joined to this central act of the soul. All of life centers around the worship of God. And only through the Gospel will God ever receive the offering of ourselves to God. The ministry of the Church is a priestly ministry. Not because individuals are themselves priests but because the Gospel itself is the mediator. And the Church proclaims the Gospel.

Do we see the Church in her priestly mission? Or do we conceive of the Gospel apart from the Church? Lose the Church in a society and you lose the Gospel. I have been to a country where the Church once thrived and then was snuffed out. Turkey was once one of the centers of Christendom. When I visited there in 1995, there were less than 500 Christians in a country of more than 50 million. O that American Christians would again see the priestly value of the Church.

2. Paul knew his Specific Role in the Priestly Service.

The various ministries in the Church are made holy by their place in the larger Priestly Service of the Gospel.

Taking a meal to another member of the church...

Keeping the nursery...

The mercy ministry...

Youth Ministry...

Prayers for the next generation...

Fellowship Dinners...

Work Days...

Building friendships with other members of the congregation...

... all find their purpose in their helping in the “priestly service of the Gospel.”

We will have a breakfast next week during the Sunday School hour. This breakfast exists in some way to encourage us in the faith so that we can better offer ourselves to God through the Gospel. Those who labor to make that breakfast happen are to see themselves as servants in the priestly service of the Gospel. We all need to know that the work in which we are engaged is connected to some larger purpose.

Paul was not working and making sacrifices simply so that he could have larger crowds listening to him. He had his eyes fixed on eternity. The Day when everyone would stand before God, and either be “acceptable” to God and given entrance into an eternity of bliss, or be declared “unacceptable” and suffer an eternity in hell. And he believed that his work was connected to the larger purpose of enabling people to offer themselves to God in a way that is acceptable to him.

Are you active in the ministry of the Church? If you are active, are you keeping in mind that your work is truly connected to the larger purpose of the Gospel?

In 1962, President John F. Kennedy visited NASA for the first time. During his tour of the facility, he met a janitor who was carrying a broom down the hallway. The President then casually asked the janitor what he did for NASA, and the janitor replied, “I’m helping put a man on the moon.” That was a man that understood how his work connected to the larger purpose.

The ministry of the Church is a priestly ministry. It has eternal value. And whatever your specific role in the Church, it too is valuable. Paul knew his specific role in the Priestly Service. What was his role? There were at least three criteria that defined Paul’s role: He was a minister of Christ Jesus. He performed this ministry to Gentiles. And he did his ministry in regions where the Gospel had not yet been proclaimed.

In verse 16, we see the first two criteria. He was...

¹⁶ to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles

Paul saw this as “his” personal calling. And just as the janitor had a good pride in his part in putting a man on the moon, so Paul had pride in his own labor in the priestly ministry of the Gospel.

¹⁷ In Christ Jesus, then,
I have reason to be proud of my work for God.

Paul is not boasting that he has the really important job, while the jobs of others are less important. His pride is not one of arrogance, but rather flowed out of his knowledge that the work that he was doing in some way enabled people to offer themselves to God.

Whether you are preaching from the pulpit or sweeping the floors, you have good reason to be proud of the specific role that you fill in the priestly ministry of the Gospel. Paul also knows that he is only an instrument in the hands of the Master. As an apostle, Paul had been enabled by Jesus Christ to preach the Gospel. And he had also been enabled to perform miraculous signs and wonders. But this power was not something that was inherent in Paul. It was joined together with God's calling him to be an apostle. The words and deeds that Paul did were given to him by God as gifts.

ESV Ephesians 2:10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

And Paul was far less concerned about his ability to perform miraculous deeds than he was about those to whom he ministered "offering themselves to God."

Only God could bring a person to trust in Jesus Christ, to turn from sin, and to live a life of sincere obedience to God the Father. Christ is the one who accomplishes true worship in the hearts of those who hear the Gospel.

18 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,
19 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;
20 and
thus I make it my ambition
to preach the gospel,

This brings us to the third aspect of Paul's specific role in the priestly service. Paul saw himself as being called to preach where Christ had not yet been preached. Paul was a pioneer missionary. He was called to plant new churches where no church existed. Paul said that he had done this from Jerusalem all the way to Illyricum. We do not have a record of Paul going to Illyricum. This is the region above Macedonia (Northern Greece; present day Albania). But it is clear that Paul is referring to the entirety of his ministry up to that point.

We know enough of Paul's 3 missionary journeys to know that there was still much work to be done in these regions. But Paul understood that his role in the larger work was largely done in these regions. Others would have to carry on the work that he began. Paul's specific role was finished. He was only called to begin the work in these regions. Like a true pioneer, Paul felt squeezed out, crowded.

No one person is called to do all of the ministry in a church. But God does call each of us to fill some role in the overall priestly service of the Gospel. Our task is not to fix everything that is broken in a church. It is certainly not to stand back and criticize where the Church falls short. Our task is to roll of our sleeves and pitch in.

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat." ~Theodore Roosevelt~

Paul spent himself in a worthy cause, a holy cause. He fulfilled the specific role that God had for him.

3. We are all called to participate in the priestly service.

When I was in seminary, Dr. Cara taught the book of Romans to us. He would say that a strong case can be made that the main reason that Paul wrote Romans was to gain the trust of the Romans so that they would support him in his mission in Spain. We

all laughed at him, because we all looked at Paul's travel plans as a footnote in the overall book. I now realize that Dr. Cara was right.

If you follow the arc from Jerusalem to Illyricum, the next stop on the journey should be Rome. But Rome already had received the Gospel. A church already existed there. And so, a ministry in Rome did not fit into Paul's specific calling. It is not that Paul did not want to go to Rome. He had wanted to visit there for some time. But he was constrained by the work that he was doing in Greece and Macedonia.

Now, he felt like his work in these regions was done. But instead of starting a new work in Rome, he intended only to have a brief visit there as he journeyed on to Spain, where no Gospel work yet existed.

23 But now,
 since I no longer have any room for work in these regions,
 and
 since I have longed for many years to come to you,
24 I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain,
 and
 to be helped on my journey there by you,
 once I have enjoyed your company for a while.

Paul was convinced that the Church in Italy was already established.

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.

15 But
 on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder,

Paul tells the Romans that they do not need him.

He believes that not only do they already possess the fruit of the Spirit – goodness is a fruit of the Spirit – but that they also possess enough knowledge that they are able to instruct one another. So, why did Paul take all this time to write such a detailed

explanation of the Gospel, if he believed that the Romans already knew the Gospel well enough to teach one another?

I believe that there are two reasons in Paul's heart. The first is that we are always in need of hearing the truths of the Gospel. We leak. We need to be reminded of the truth. I preach the Scriptures as a living. I cannot tell you how many times I need to be brought back to the Gospel. We need to be reminded over and over again of the truth of the Gospel. The second reason is that I believe Paul wanted the Roman Christians to be able to trust him as an apostle, and to trust the message that he preached.

But why would Paul need the Romans to trust him? Because Paul wanted the Romans to support him in his work. He wanted them to participate with him in his priestly service.

24 I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain,
 and
 to be helped on my journey there by you,
 once I have enjoyed your company for a while.

The word "helped" is full of meaning. It literally means to "send forward".

prope,mpw (1) to *accompany or escort* (2) to furnish things necessary for someone's travel *help on one's journey, send on one's way*

Paul needed the Roman Christians to participate in his ministry by sending him on to Spain. If they were going to support Paul, they would need to trust Paul. They needed to have confidence that Paul preached the same message that they had come to love.

As a Church, we have to know certain things about the missionaries that we support. There are many good works that we do not support. We have developed some criteria that helps us to narrow down who we will support.

At a basic level, we need to trust that the missionaries understand the Gospel, even that they have a healthy understanding and are embracing of the Reformed Faith. The Church is larger than the Reformed Church. But as a Reformed Church, we largely support Reformed Missionaries. We have other criteria that are important to us, but the understanding of the Gospel is paramount.

In order to discern a missionaries commitment to the Gospel, we usually have them come in an interview with the elders. We want to make sure that we are on the same team. To a large degree, the whole book of Romans is Paul's helping the Roman Christians to trust that they are on the same team. Paul is not teaching a Gospel that is

contrary to what the Roman Christians had themselves already embraced. He wanted them to trust him enough that they would be willing to partner with him in the Gospel.

Paul had not had to do this previously because that Churches that supported him in the past were churches that he had planted. They knew Paul already. But now Paul would need support from a Church that did not know him except through the testimony of others.

Paul would need financial support. He may have needed new guides to go with him on his journeys. He may have needed translators to overcome the language barrier. He may have simply needed companions to handle all sorts of logistical issues. Paul wanted the Romans to participate with him in his specific ministry.

And even more basic than all of these ways of helping, Paul needed the Roman Christians to pray.

30 I appeal to you, brothers,
by our Lord Jesus Christ
and
by the love of the Spirit,
to strive together with me
in your prayers to God
on my behalf,

The prayers of the Romans were necessary to overcome the spiritual forces that bound people in unbelief. Paul was praying for God to change hearts through his ministry. And he wanted the Roman believers to “strive together with him”. We can learn so much about prayer in these verses.

Prayer is effectual. In other words, prayers are used by God to accomplish things. It is important to state this clearly because so often the things for which we pray do not come to pass. We can begin to think that prayer is not really powerful to alter the world in which we live. Although we must acknowledge that prayer does not function like a credit card, we must also resist the temptation to think that all that prayer does is change the attitude of the one praying. Prayer is effectual. In our prayers we strive with God to see God accomplish things in this world. This is why the heart of all of our prayers ought to be that people would offer themselves to God as a living sacrifice through the blood of Jesus Christ and the working of the Holy Spirit.

Nothing wrong with praying for physical healing or daily bread, but those things must serve the greater purpose of the priestly service of the Gospel.

Paul does not go into the specifics of how they might pray for him as he heads off to Spain, but he does give two specifics of how they might pray for him now, before he gets to Rome.

Please pray for me:

³¹ that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea,
and
that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints,

As Paul writes the book of Romans, he is collecting money to be taken to the poor saints in Jerusalem. There are a couple of reasons for doing this. First, the saints in Jerusalem were poor. And there was a famine in the region that made things even more challenging for them. But the other reason was that Paul wanted all believers to be united in Jesus Christ. He wanted the Gentile Churches to give honor to the believing Jews. And he wanted the believing Jews to acknowledge the Gentile Christians as having received the fullness of the blessings of Christ. And he saw this gift as a means to that end.

With that in mind, Paul asks for prayer in two ways. First, he asks for safety. Pray that I might be delivered from unbelievers in Judea. And second, he asks that the purpose for his going would be successful. The Jewish believers would indeed accept the Gentile offering. We know from the book of Acts that the gift was indeed accepted by the Church in Jerusalem. We are to conclude that the prayers of the Romans had some part to play in this gift being accepted. Paul asked for prayer, the Romans responded by praying, and the intention of the prayer was accomplished.

But I also want to go back and focus on the issue of safety for a moment. We live in a world in which safety has become the behemoth that rules our lives. Who can argue against safety? But while safety has its place, it must be kept in its place. This is very clear in Paul's situation. Paul believed that the taking of the gift of the Gentiles to the Jerusalem Church was extremely important. We can even say that Paul considered it to be "worth the risk" of his own life.

Paul knew that the unbelieving Jews in Jerusalem were seeking his life. Somewhere on his way to Jerusalem, he is even told through prophecy that he would be

arrested and handed over to the Romans. But even though Paul knows these risks, he is willing to go to Jerusalem anyway. The activity in which he was engaged was “worth the risk.” For instance, he did not say, “when there is no risk, I will deliver the gift.”

That being said, it was not as if Paul was throwing himself off the Temple for the angels to keep him from striking his foot against the stones. He did not see himself as tempting God in going to Jerusalem. He was not being reckless. Part of the reason that we know this is that Paul asked the Romans to pray for his safety. Pray that I would be delivered from the hands of the unbelievers in Jerusalem. Ask God to keep me safe.

How do you determine if an activity is worthwhile to take risks? And does the level of risk matter? These are questions that do not have simple answers. Over the past two years with the Covid virus, we have struggled to know what activities are “essential” and “what level of risk” is acceptable. Without getting bogged down in the details right now, I simply want us to see that safety was not the only concern for Paul. And it was not even his highest concern. He was willing to accept risk while asking for prayer for safety.

Even though Paul knew that danger awaited him in Jerusalem, his hope was that he would be delivered out of that danger and would arrive in Rome to be refreshed by the Roman Christians before being sent on to Spain. Paul’s hopes work out, just not in the way he expected. He does get to Rome, but only after 2 years of sitting in Roman prisons. He gets to Rome as a prisoner under house arrest. He is able to be refreshed by the Roman Christians. And we do think that Paul was able upon release to go on to Spain.

The prayers of the saints rarely accomplish God’s will in the way that we think it should be accomplished. But the prayers of the saints always are used by God to accomplish his will. Prayer is effectual.

Conclusion:

Paul saw himself as a minister in the priestly service of the Gospel. Paul’s specific role as a pioneer church planter is not the role that most of us will have. But we are all called to support the Church in her priestly service. Our purpose in life is not simply to enjoy life or to be safe or even to live as long as we possibly can.

Our purpose is to offer ourselves to God as a living sacrifice through Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of God. We do this every day of our lives in our homes and in the workplace. But as we personally offer ourselves to God in our daily lives, we are also called to support the Church in her priestly service to God.

We can do this by initiating some particular ministry ourselves and encouraging others to serve alongside of us. Or we can support some ministry that already exists. And we are all called to pray.

In 1962 a janitor found purpose in helping put a man on the moon. Good for him. But as valuable as putting a man on the moon may have been, it pales in comparison to the priestly service of the Gospel. The world will never laud you for the sacrifices that you make for the welfare of the Church. But Jesus will not forget. And is it not his voice that we long to hear, “Well done, my good and faithful servant”?

Blessing:

33 May the God of peace be with you all. Amen.