

Romans 15:14-33 “The Character and Purpose of the Gospel Ministry” January 18, 2009
Isaiah 52
Psalm 96

Introduction (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. (14)*

Paul says that he believes that the church in Rome is “full of goodness.”

Whatever happened to what he said in Romans 3?

None is righteous, no, not one...

No one does good....

Remember what we saw when we looked at that passage:

Paul is showing us that there is no one righteous *apart from Christ*.

But *you* are no longer apart from Christ!

You have been justified!

That means that your sins have been forgiven.

If your sins are forgiven, and you have been cleansed from all unrighteousness,
then you are righteous.

But not only that!

You have also been given new life in Christ.

You are no longer a slave to sin, you are now a slave to righteousness.

You walk no longer according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.

You are filled with the Spirit of God – therefore you are full of goodness.

Let me put it a different way:

Are you a sinner?

Note that I did *not* ask, “do you sin?”

I asked, are you a *sinner*.

What characterizes you?

What is your identity?

I realize that in a sense we can still call ourselves “sinners.”

We do not live up to what we are.

Too often we act like sinners!

But the Scriptures *never* refer to the holy people of God as *sinners*.

Sometimes in our prayer of confession we may identify ourselves as sinners,
as we consider what we were (and would be) apart from Christ,
but having been forgiven for our sins,
we *cannot* consider ourselves apart from Christ!

After all, *he* is our life!

That is why Paul says to the church in Rome,
you are full of goodness.

And indeed, I say to you as the church in Michiana,
*that you yourselves are full of goodness,
filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another.* (14)

If your response to that is to say,

“But I am filled with sin and misery!”
then I can say only two things to you:

- 1) if that is true, and you are filled with sin and misery,
then you need to repent and believe in Jesus
for the forgiveness of your sins;
you need to “arise and be baptized,
and wash away your sins, calling on his name” (Acts 22:16)
- 2) and if you have repented and if you do believe in Jesus,
then you need to believe what God says about you!

I am satisfied – I am persuaded, brothers,
that you yourselves are full of goodness.

Why are you full of goodness?

Because you have been filled with the Spirit of God.
Because you have been united to Christ by faith.
Because you have received the Spirit of adoption.
Because you are *no longer* what you once were!

You have been delivered from the estate of sin and misery.
You have been brought into an estate of salvation by the Redeemer,
our Lord Jesus Christ.

Do you believe the word of God, or not?

Do you believe what God says about you, or not?

Okay.

So it's settled.

You are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another.

1. The Priestly Ministry of the Gospel of God (15:15-21)

*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. (15-16)*

Paul uses two different words that have priestly connotations:
he calls himself a leitourgist (from which we get our word “liturgy”)
and he says that his is a ierourgist (which means “priestly worker”).

Paul’s ministry has a priestly function.
In our catechism quiz we have been talking about Christ’s offices
as prophet, priest and king.
We have been seeing that as Christ is prophet, priest and king,
so also his people share in his prophetic, priestly, and kingly functions.
And not surprisingly, the ministry that Christ established –
the ministry of the gospel –
includes prophet, priestly, and kingly aspects.

The prophetic is perhaps the most obvious:
after all, what you see me do most often is preach!
The preaching of the gospel is the prophetic work of the ministry.

The kingly is fairly easy to see as well:
the pastor, together with all the elders, is engaged in ruling the church,
according to the instructions of our glorious King Jesus.

But how is the gospel ministry a priestly service?

Sometimes Protestants talk as though there is nothing priestly about the gospel ministry.
But Paul says that there is something priestly about the gospel ministry.
And so we need to humble ourselves and listen to the word of God.

So how is the gospel ministry a priestly service?
Paul says that he is a *minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles*
in the priestly service of the gospel of God,

A priest offers sacrifices.
What sacrifice does Paul offer?
*so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable,
sanctified by the Holy Spirit. (15-16)*

Paul is the apostle to the Gentiles.
His calling was to offer the Gentiles to God.

Throughout the OT it is clear that a sacrifice had to be blameless and pure.
Do you remember what Paul said back in 12:1?

Present your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God.

Paul thinks of himself as the priest who is offering this sacrifice.

(Think of Philippians 2:17 –

“Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering
upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad...”)

And remember – as we saw in Romans 12,

that there is a difference between a burnt offering and a sacrifice.

Burnt offerings (and sin offerings) are the ones that deal with sin.

Sacrifices (or peace offerings) are the ones that express communion with God.

When he talks about presenting the Gentiles as an offering,
he uses the word “offering” – which is the word used for burnt offerings.

Think about the picture here.

With a “sacrifice” – a peace offering – the worshiper offers it and participates in the meal.

With an “offering” – a burnt or sin offering – the priest offers it.

In the sacrifice, the peace offering, the worshiper is active.

In the offering, the burnt or sin offering, the worshiper is passive.

That is why Paul uses the language of “offering” here.

His priestly service is found in cleansing the people of God

(by water and the word, to use the language of Ephesians 5).

Origen explained that the one who preaches the Word of God

“must ensure that there is no blemish in his preaching,
nor fault in his teaching which might make him blameworthy at the judgment.

Rather, he ought first of all to sacrifice himself

[think of Paul’s language of “pouring himself out as a drink offering
on the sacrifice of your faith”],

to strangle his own faults and to put to death the sins in his members,
so that not only by his teaching but also by the example of his life
he may make his sacrifice,

which is the salvation of his disciples,
acceptable to God.

The Holy Spirit is the source of sanctification,
and therefore the offering of the Gentiles

which is made by Paul, in the role of priest,
is said to be made acceptable to God by the Holy Spirit
and not by the observance of the law.”

Think back to the burnt offering in the OT.

In the burnt offering, the whole animal was consumed in the fire.
It was a demonstration that *only God can save*.

Now Paul says that his priestly service – the priestly service of the gospel of God –
consists in the offering of the Gentiles,
as the Gentiles are put to death by the sword of the Spirit
(or perhaps we should say the priestly knife of the Spirit!)
and pass through the purifying fire of the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Or as Augustine put it, “The Gentiles are offered to God as an acceptable sacrifice
when they believe in Christ and are sanctified through the gospel.”

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

The key to this is again “in Christ Jesus.”
Paul will not boast in himself.
He will speak resolutely against pride and ambition.
But in the Lord,
in Christ Jesus, I have reason to be proud of my work for God.

*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; (17-19)*

We have seen from the beginning of Romans
that Paul’s ministry was to bring about the obedience of faith –
in other words, to make disciples –
among the Gentiles.

And this is what Christ has accomplished through Paul.
After all, the book of Acts, as it describes the apostles’ ministry,
is the continuation of what Jesus did and taught through them.

The Holy Spirit was poured out upon the church
so that the power of the resurrection –
the power of the age to come –
might bring the nations (Jews and Gentiles)
to the obedience of faith.

And Paul's ministry was a ministry of word *and* deed,
a demonstration of the word through action.
Some people today claim that an apostolic ministry must have signs and wonders.
If they had genuine signs and wonders, I might be impressed.
If the blind received sight,
if the lame walked,
if the dead were raised,
that would be impressive
(so long as their teaching matched up to the apostolic teaching!)
Anything less, and it is *not* what the apostles did!

(Besides, it is often forgotten that signs and wonders are particularly signs of judgment!
Faith does not come from seeing signs.
As Paul has already said,
Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ!)

But a ministry of word and deed is still important.
The power of the Spirit of God has not diminished!
The power of the age to come continues to work in the hearts and lives of God's people,
in order to sanctify the offering of the Gentiles –
in order to make us holy, to make us an acceptable offering.

In order to fill us with goodness and knowledge.

You can see that Paul would not be satisfied with a ministry
that consisted of going from town to town, converting people and walking away.

As we saw in the book of Acts,
Paul stayed in a city for months – even years –
in order to disciple the believers – to bring about the obedience of faith.
Part of the reason why it only took a few years is because he started with the synagogue.
He started with Jews and God-fearing Gentiles who already knew the scriptures.
Most of his early converts were already familiar with the Law and the Prophets.
They already believed in Yahweh,
and they already believed in Israel's Messiah.

But as the gospel spread throughout the Mediterranean world,

Paul realized that he needed to keep going.

He says:

*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." (20-21)*

Paul was an apostle.

He was sent by Christ Jesus to make disciples of the nations,
to bring about the obedience of faith among the Gentiles.

He had no business building on someone else's foundation!

2. Paul's Plan for Ministry: From Jerusalem to Rome to Spain (15:22-29)

*This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you.
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,
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. (22-24)*

This is a somewhat remarkable statement.

"I no longer have any room for work in these regions."
By this time (around 25 years after the resurrection of Jesus)
there are probably fewer than 100,000 Christians
in a population of many millions in the Roman empire.
And yet Paul has no room for work!

But Paul, what about the vast stretches of Turkey – outside the major cities?
What about the villages of Greece and Italy, where no one had ever yet heard of Jesus?
What about Syria and Persia, Egypt and Arabia,
where the gospel had only just begun to take root in tiny communities?

Such is Paul's confidence in the work of the Holy Spirit –
and his confidence that others would continue to build on what he had begun.

In Syria, Asia Minor, Macedonia, Greece, Italy,
the church had been planted.

Paul's task was not to evangelize every village, or every street.

Paul's task was to lay the foundation –
and to train those who would build upon it.

Timothy, Titus, Silas, Barnabas, Mark, Epaphras, Syzygus, Aquila & Priscilla,
Stephanas, Fortunatus, Achaicus –
these are only a few of those whom Paul trained to continue his work.

And Paul will leave them behind, with full confidence that they will prosper –
because he knows that the same Spirit who empowered him will empower them as well.

*At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints.
For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution
for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. (25-26)*

In several of Paul's epistles we hear about the need in Jerusalem.
This may well be the same episode referred to at the end of the book of Acts,
when Paul brought relief from the churches of Macedonia and Achaia
to the church in Jerusalem.

It is an example of how wealthier churches ought to care for poorer churches.

But notice that Paul highlights another aspect of this:

*For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them.
For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings,
they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. (27)*

The Gentiles *owe* Jewish Christians.
We are indebted to Jewish believers.

Why?

Because we have been grafted into *their* olive tree.
The Gentiles have “come to share in *their* spiritual blessings.”
The spiritual blessings that have come to you
are the spiritual blessings that God promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
All that God promised the patriarchs has come to us Gentiles –
insofar as we share in the promises made to the Jews!

Some have taken this to say that therefore Gentile Christians must support the nation of Israel.
But this does not follow from Paul's logic!
Paul is not taking a gift from Gentile Christians
in order to give it to the priests in the temple,
or the rabbis in the synagogue!

No, he is taking this gift to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem,
as a payment of this debt of gratitude.

What you think about the modern state of Israel is a political question
that scripture does not address.

*When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected,
I will leave for Spain by way of you.
I know that when I come to you
I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ. (28-29)*

So then what place do you have in this ministry?

3. Your Place in Paul's Ministry (15:30-33)

*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,
that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea,
and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints,
so that by God's will I may come to you with joy
and be refreshed in your company. (30-32)*

There are two ways in which the Roman church shared in Paul's ministry –
and these are also the way in which *we* share in Paul's ministry:

- 1) Pray
- 2) Refresh

Paul asks the Roman church to “strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf.”

This is a common theme in Paul's letters.

Pray for the preaching of the word –

but even more, pray for the *preachers* of the word.

Pray for me.

After all, the same ministry that Paul began

has continued throughout the last 50-60 generations,

and today I stand before you and appeal to you,

by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit,

that you would strive together with me in your prayers on my behalf.

For Paul there were two things in particular:

that he would be delivered from the unbelievers in Jerusalem,

and that his service for Jerusalem would be acceptable to the saints.

The latter item went well.

His service was acceptable –

and Acts tells us that the church in Jerusalem welcomed him joyfully.
And yes, Paul was rescued from the unbelievers in Jerusalem,
 though perhaps not in the way he expected!
The mob attacked –
 and he was rescued by a Roman centurion.
And the only way that he finally escaped from the unbelievers in Jerusalem (the Sanhedrin)
 was through appealing to Caesar!

So Paul did come to Rome, as he had hoped!
 But it was not on his way to Spain.
 It was on his way to court to stand before the Emperor, Nero.

But not only do you share in Paul's ministry (the apostolic ministry) through prayer –
 you also share in it through the joy and refreshment of fellowship with the saints.

When I use the word "fellowship"
 I don't mean a social time for "hanging out."
Refreshment is rooted in the Word and Spirit of God.
 Refreshment is what revitalizes and rejuvenates you in love toward God and others.

We ought to be a place where people find refreshment.
 Our company ought to bring life and joy to others.
 When missionaries visit with us, they should come away refreshed
 (how can we be a place where tired pastors/missionaries can be refreshed?).

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