

Sermon 202: Romans 15:14-16: Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles

OUTLINE

Paul's view of the church
Paul's ministry to the Gentiles

INTRODUCTION

You might think now that we have finished the doctrinal part of the letter to the Romans the last chapter and a half are unimportant and will be a let-down. You could not be more wrong. This last section of Romans gives us a tremendous window into the nature of Paul's ministry helping us to think about our own ministry as a church. As well as a window into the life of the early church. In this closing section of the letter Paul reverts to personal comments as he did in the introduction of this letter. And just as Romans has the longest introduction to any of Paul's letters so it also has the longest conclusion in all his letters. Paul has never met the Roman church yet he is wanting to include them in his plans as he goes to preach in places where Christ has not yet been preached. So Paul includes in this final part a deeper look into his ministry so the Romans would be willing partners with him. Paul describes himself as a minister to the Gentiles, as an apostle, as a church planter, as a missionary, as a church ambassador and a persecuted Christian in v14-33. All of this information is because Paul wants to make a stop in Rome to be helped on his way by them, v24.

'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 God¹⁶ 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.'

So today we are going to look at v14-16 where Paul tries to encourage the Roman church lest they be discouraged by some of his strong exhortations, v14-15. Then he outlines the basis for his liberty with them by explaining his ministry as the apostle to the Gentiles. These then are our two headings, Paul's view of the church and Paul's ministry to the Gentiles.

Paul's view of the church

Imagine the apostle Paul himself writing to our church, and in his writing he exposed the big sins in our congregation. We would probably feel discouraged. Some might even be offended and ask what gives him the right to say such things when he has never even been here. This is probably how the Romans felt and Paul knows it. He has written to them about some very serious things. We can glean from chapter 11 and 14 that there were some real tensions between Jewish and Gentile Christians, perhaps from chapter 13 we could assume that there was some unhappiness against the government. Paul had reliable information about the state of the church and there can be no doubt that the church would have been red faced as this letter was first read out loud in the public worship service. So Paul in concluding his letter writes to assure them of his confidence in them.

V14, '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.' Paul is not writing empty flattery but hopes to communicate his genuine confidence in them when he says, 'I myself am

satisfied about you.' Added to this is the familial term, 'brothers' which is an inclusive term you can read as 'brothers and sisters.'

Paul then puts forward three things which he outlines as a church that 'satisfies' him. This you could take a kind of definition for a good church, 'you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another.' Goodness, all knowledge, and the ability to instruct/exhort one another. The word for goodness is a rare one. You would know it best from the list of the fruits of the Spirit in Gal. 5:22. What is this goodness? A helpful way to understand it is by comparing it with righteousness. Righteousness is holiness, purity, lawfulness. In one sense a person can be righteous without being good. What I mean is they can be without obvious sin but not be full of tenderness and kindness and a generous and servant-hearted service towards others. This is what goodness means, it means generous, kindness, or an older equivalent, beneficence. One author uses the story of Joseph planning to divorce his fiancé Mary when he discovered she was pregnant as an illustration. The fact he wanted to divorce her was because he was righteous, the fact he wanted to do it quietly is because he was full of goodness. A scrupulous or legalistic spirit lacks this goodness, but the Romans were filled with this goodness.

Secondly, Paul says that they are filled with all knowledge. The all here refers not to knowing every single thing being omniscient, but all kinds of knowledge. Today you will find churches that pride themselves on despising knowledge, doctrine, theology, preaching, teachers, books written by men, and so on. This is not Paul's system of evaluation. When he wants to commend the Roman church for something good, he commends them on the breadth of their knowledge.

Now we must note the important of these two things together. This is a picture of well-balanced Christianity, a good heart and a good head. We cannot afford to sacrifice either. Some might think well as long as I have the truth I have the more important part, don't kid yourself. Remember Jesus exhortation to the church at Ephesus. Rev. 1:2-6, "'I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false.³ I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary.⁴ But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.⁵ Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.⁶ Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.' Here is a church who had Timothy and the apostle John as their pastors for a while. They had excellent doctrine but they had lost their first love. Is this their love for God or for one another. Most commentators agree that it is love in general towards God and man. They had their heads screwed on straight but their hearts were cold, and for this Christ Christ threatened to remove their lamp stand. That is remove them as a church to witness for Him. Salt that is no longer salty is useless and a church that is loveless is not a true church. We need to have both goodness and knowledge.

Then Paul also lists, 'able to instruct one another.' No doubt he was convinced that the Roman church was mature. What is interesting here is this word instruct. At the end of the twentieth century there was a revival in Christian Counselling. One of the main architects of the movement was a man by the name of Jay Adams. He was a Reformed Presbyterian who was convinced of the sufficiency of Scripture to address and correct psychological problems. It was his conviction that the Spirit uses the word of God to change and shape a person. Since most psychological problems derive from sin, the Scripture confronting our sins and instructing us in the proper way was seen as the foundation for biblical counselling.

He called this method of counselling, 'nouthetic' counselling. Noutheteo is the verb that we find here in the word instruct. Adams in his book competent to counsel points out that there is no exact English equivalent to this word.¹ As well as the fact that it can have three main uses. Firstly, it means something like exhort, which is more than mere instruction, but instructing for change. Secondly, it has a harder meaning more like rebuke which is willing to confront another in their sin. The third use is more like admonish where you edify someone else.

So when Paul commends the Roman church for their ability to instruct one another he is not merely saying they are good teachers, but rather that they are faithful in ministering to one another's souls with exhortation, rebuke when necessary, and admonition. It is a word that implies the full orb of activities of counselling. And yes Paul does not view this counselling as the job of office holders or professionals but the whole church. Col. 3:16, 'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.' Paul's view of a healthy church is not one where everyone meddles and imposes their will and opinion on each other, but where each one faithfully serves the other with the truth to see them go on in their walk with the Lord. Sometimes it will be a word of encouragement, sometimes a word of rebuke, but this is more than the polite casual acquaintances and shallow relationships we are used to. If the church did more of this then it would need to do less church discipline.

Paul recognises that some in the Roman church might feel that he is being too bold so he goes in v15, 'But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God.' Paul is an apostle appointed by God, this is what he means by 'the grace given me by God.' Paul therefore has the right to intrude himself in this fashion into the affairs of this local church. He is not meddling he is doing his apostolic duty. But please notice the word reminder. Most of what the Romans had heard from Paul would not necessarily have been new. They had heard the apostolic gospel, they knew that they should be loving towards one another. But Paul tells us here that we need reminding. Have you ever gone to church and felt that you learnt nothing new? Some have even made this an argument for why they don't need church anymore because they can learn new things better on the internet. Please appreciate that reminder is a key thing that we need. Even those who are excelling in goodness and knowledge because of a sinful heart that forgets needs reminding. The Christian life is more often than not a return to the basics the basics of the gospel and a holy life.

Paul's ministry to the Gentiles

V16, '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.' Five words in this verse give us the impression that Paul's apostolic ministry has a priestly cast. The word 'minister' occurs only here in the NT and ordinarily refers to the priests in the Greek translation of the OT. Paul talks about his 'priestly service.' The Gentiles we are told is the 'offering.' The word 'acceptable' is used of sacrifices in other places, e.g. 1 Peter 2:5. And 'sanctified' is the OT language for setting something apart in a ceremonial fashion for God.

This is the only place where Paul alludes to himself as a priest but we can see that this is only in a metaphorical sense. For Paul is no more a priest than we are a sacrifice. It is very

¹ P41-50.

important to stress that the ministers of any church are not priests. Priests are those who offer sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins. We only have one true priest in the New Covenant who pays for our sins and that is Jesus Christ who is our High priest. A priest is also a mediator who is a bridge or go-between between God and man. Jesus is the only mediator of the New Covenant, 1 Tim. 2:5, 'For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.'

Why then do other Christian traditions still talk about ministers as priests? We think that this is unbiblical. At the time of the Reformation it was believed that the grace of God came through the Pope through the various offices of the church and finally to the priest who dispensed God's saving and sanctifying grace. They would claim that if you don't have a priest you can't have a church. That priests are the conduits through which all God's blessings come to the church. In this way they made a barrier between Christ and the sinner. Where Christ invites all sinners to come directly to Himself for forgiveness, grace and the Holy Spirit, the RCC interposed the priesthood. It is true that we need someone who stand before God on our behalf as sinners and make a pure offering to make atonement for our crimes against God. But only Christ can fulfill this role and no other man.

How does Christ fulfil the role of priest? Firstly, he is God who has become man in order to represent human beings, Hebrews 2:14 (ESV) "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil,". Secondly, he was perfectly sinless in order to be not only a qualified offerer, but offering for sin. Thirdly, his priesthood has two parts, the role he played in being offerer and offering during His humiliation, but in His exaltation he continues to intercede on behalf of, and pronounce benedictive blessings upon the church.

Since Christ is our only High Priest how can Paul speak of Himself as offering priestly service and Peter refer to Christians as a 'royal priesthood'? The central function of the priesthood which was to offer sin offerings on behalf of sinners to a holy God has been fulfilled by Christ but other minor aspects of their function continue in the NT. Firstly, just as priests in the OT were set apart, so the believer is set apart by the Holy Spirit and is to be holy to the Lord. Secondly, where the OT prophets offered bloody sacrifices to God we offer the sacrifice of praise which includes offering our whole selves to God in obedience and holy love. Thirdly, we pray to God on behalf of the needy. Since Paul ordinarily speaks of elders, or ministers, and only here of himself as a type of priest it is wrong that the RCC took up the notion of a minister as a priest and imbued it with wrong notions like sacrificing the mass. Turning the Lord's table into an altar, and other deviations.

Paul tells us in the first place whose minister he is: 'a minister of Jesus Christ.' Paul did not appoint himself but was called by Christ on the Damascus road to be an apostle. Secondly, he tells us whom he is a minister to: 'to the Gentiles.' In particular Paul was set apart to take the good news that a Saviour for sin in Jesus Christ has come to save people from all nations to the ends of the earth. Thirdly, Paul tells us what he is a minister of: 'in the priestly service of the gospel of God.' He is a preacher of the gospel of God. The word gospel you will remember means good news. Paul is giving his life to make a message known. The message is this. Bad news you are a sinner, you are worthy of judgement and you cannot save yourself. Good news God is gracious and compassionate and has given His Son to pay for the sins you have committed so that you can be saved, adopted and the whole world will be made new. Fourthly, Paul tells us to what end he serves: 'so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable.' Paul has been so bold with the Romans because of his desire to ensure that the Roman church is holy and acceptable to God.

Fifthly, Paul tells us how this ministry is fulfilled: 'sanctified by the Holy Spirit.' A sinner can only be saved and made holy by the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul was not relying on his intellectual powers or a magnetic personality but the Spirit to bless the truth.

There is a lot that we can draw out of this very descriptive verse, but I want us to focus on just one thing. Paul is in earnest to present a sanctified and acceptable church to God. He is willing to upset the Romans and get specific about their sins because he has a calling and is committed to present a pure virgin bride to Christ. His difficult and direct statements which might at times include names, and speak directly to hot topics that will make known people look bad are all coming from a desire for the glory of God in a holy church. Some pastors might say things to a church in order to control them but many say hard things because they too have this desire to see a holy people presented to the Lord.

Titus 2:11-14, 'For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people,¹² training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age,¹³ waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ,¹⁴ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.' Were Paul to come and preach to us or write to us today would he be pleased? Would there be things he would have to spell out in love because we are not a people who are committed to good works? Let me close by reminding you of the things Paul says to the Romans. Christ has paid the high price to save us out of our enslavement to sin. The liberty we have is a liberty in order to serve God not to go back to our old entrapments. Let the world see that you love God more than you love sin; that He is worth your obedience because He is real and as lovely as the bible says. Let it be seen in your goodness where you overflow in kindness and generosity towards one another; let it be seen in your commitment to the truth of God; and let it be seen in the way as family we can speak the truth to one another in love.