

Romans: The Good News of God

Paul's Missionary Heart – Part 1

Romans 15:14-33

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Scripture

Today we continue our study in Romans. Let's read Romans 15:14-33:

¹⁴I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another. ¹⁵But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God ¹⁶to 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. ¹⁷In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God. ¹⁸For 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, ¹⁹by 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; ²⁰and 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, ²¹but as it is written,

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

²²This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. ²³But 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, ²⁴I 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. ²⁵At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. ²⁶For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. ²⁷For

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

³⁰I 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, ³¹that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, ³²so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. ³³May the God of peace be with you all. Amen. (Romans 15:14-33)

Introduction

Paul's life is cause for amazement and reflection. In the context of the times in which he lived, his situation appeared absurd.

On the one side was Rome, metropolis of the world, heart of the Roman Empire, insufferably proud on her seven hills, shaking the earth with the march of her fabled legions.

On the other side was this little Jew, with scarred face and battered body, ostensibly impotent amidst such power, armed only with something he called the "good news." Yet he changed the history of Rome, Western civilization, and indeed our own lives.

Lesson

Obviously there was something about this little man that set him apart from the rest. What made him different is what makes our text so interesting, because now, having finished explaining the good news of God in his letter to the Romans, Paul tells why he wrote it and how he views his mission. Romans 15:14-33 is an exposition of the anatomy of the greatest missionary heart ever.

Paul's heart has fascinated even secular minds. Michael Bo-

rodin, the American Communist who disciplined Ho Chi Minh and Cho En-lai, once was heard to say in a reflective moment, “I used to read the New Testament. Again and again I read it. It is the most wonderful story ever told. That man Paul. He was a *real* revolutionary. I take my hat off to him.”

Paul must be admired by all. But to the Christian Paul’s heart is even more impressive, for it sets the ideal for the missionary heart, an ideal that perhaps few attain. Nevertheless, it is the sublime example provided for us in the pages of Scripture by the infinite wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

I. Paul’s Liturgical Heart (15:15-16)

Paul’s heart is first a heart that sees its mission as entirely sacred. Here Paul appropriates the vivid imagery of an Old Testament priest ministering at the altar in the Temple. He says in Romans 15:15-16: **“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.”**

The imagery here is remarkably forceful because the word translated **“minister”** is the same root word from which we derive the word *liturgy*. The word even sounds like it—*leitourgon*.

This is significant, because Paul could have used other words to describe himself. For example, he could have used the term *doulos* to indicate a servant of Jesus Christ, or he could have used *diakonos*, which means “servant or minister.”

But he chose *leitourgon* because he saw his missionary work like that of a priest offering sacred worship to God.

Consonant with this, he saw his priestly offering not as a lamb or a grain offering, but as Gentile converts. As he expresses it in verse 16b: **“so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.”**

Here we are exposed to Paul’s remarkable self-perception.

Though he is involved in the dusty, mundane business of traveling the ancient world on foot, suffering from exposure, threats, beatings, and rejection, in his heart he sees himself in priestly garb in the Temple, lifting up the souls of men which then ascend as a sweet-smelling fragrance to God. Fully apprehended and appreciated, this is a dazzling picture.

It is common knowledge today that how we perceive ourselves greatly determines how we live our lives. Psychologists are constantly reminding us of the importance of self-image.

Imagine, then, what this priestly self-perception did for Paul. His missionary life was to him intensely sacred. The most mundane daily occurrences were holy. However ignominious his treatment, he was garbed in imperturbable dignity as a servant of God. Everything was done to please God. All of life was a liturgy.

If only we could see our service as such, our lives would be transformed. A pie baked for a neighbor becomes an offering to God. A child held and loved is a liturgy. An employee treated with dignity is a beatitude. The gospel shared is a song in Heaven's courts. A Sunday school class well taught is a fragrance to God.

These are beautiful thoughts! Even better, they are true! This sacred view of life was a primary characteristic of the missionary heart of the Apostle Paul.

II. Paul's Glorifying Heart (15:17-19)

In verses 17-19 Paul does some sublime boasting, sublime because he is boasting about God: **“In Christ Jesus, then, 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.”**

Paul mentions three marvelous happenings in his life:

- (1) Gentiles came to believe in Christ,
- (2) signs and miracles accompanied his ministry, and
- (3) he himself preached the entire 1,400 miles from Jerusalem to Illyricum (roughly comprising what is now Albania and the former Yugoslavia).

Not bad—especially in sandals! But Paul takes no credit. Christ did it through him.

How contrary this is to the way things usually happen. More often we are like the Little Leaguer who put all his sixty pounds into a ferocious swing and barely connected. The ball scraped by the bottom of the bat, jiggled straight back to the pitcher, who groped and fumbled it. There was still plenty of time to nail the batter at first, but the pitcher's throw soared high over the first baseman's head. The slugger flew on toward second base. Somebody retrieved the ball. The next throw sailed wildly into left field. The hitter swaggered into third, puffing along with a man-sized grin, then continued on to cross home plate.

“Oh boy!” he said, “I did great! My first home run!”

That is so like us! We step to the plate for Jesus, barely tap the ball, but he arranges for us to get home—and we take all the credit!

If Paul had been someone else, he could have become insufferable: “Did I tell you about my Iconium escapade? Let me tell you. . . . I was being stoned in Iconium because I stood tall for Jesus. I was always getting the stones—Barnabas always managed to save his pretty face. Well, I was really taking it, but I stood my ground and didn't flinch, and finally this guy threw a stone and put me down. It would have killed most men, but not me! So there I was, lying on a rubbish pile outside the city. Barnabas and the saints had all gone to pieces, but I was awake, and I got to laughing. . . . What's a little stoning? The Lord needs more *men*, right?”

That is just not the way Paul was. Paul made this very clear to the Galatians: “But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (6:14a).

He also told the Colossians that Christ “is the beginning, the

firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent” (1:18). God was everything to Paul.

That is the way it has been for the great missionary hearts that have followed in Paul’s footsteps as well.

Raymond Lull, the brave missionary to the Muslims, lived by this famous refrain: “I have one passion—it is He, it is He!”

Charles Wesley sang, “Thou, O Christ, art all I want, more than all in Thee I find.”

It was said by Alexander Whyte of his long Saturday walks with Marcus Dods, “Whatever we started off with in our conversations, we soon made across country, somehow, to Jesus of Nazareth.”

“We preach always Him,” said Martin Luther; “This may seem a limited and monotonous subject, likely to be soon exhausted, but we are never at the end of it.”

So it was with Paul. With Christ at the center, Paul could only boast of him.

If we are to have lives like Paul’s, our hearts must not only see our mission as entirely sacred, but they must give all glory to God. This is so fitting, so right, the way we were designed to live.

III. Paul’s Visionary Heart (15:20-29)

The third aspect of Paul’s missionary heart is that it is visionary. We must first note that Paul had dreams of incredibly large proportions. Verses 20-21 introduce them: “. . . **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’**” (cf. Isaiah 52:15).

Basic to Paul’s dream was the passion to preach where the gospel had not been preached, wherever that might be. He voices this explicitly in 2 Corinthians 10:16: “. . . so that we may preach the gospel in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already

done in another's area of influence." This was an intense passion.

Other Scriptures, such as verse 24 of our text, indicate that he even wanted to go to Spain. No one really knows why—perhaps because Spain and Britain were seen as the end of the world.

Or maybe because Spain was the western edge of the Roman Empire.

William Barclay thinks it may be because Spain was the birthplace of many contemporary geniuses such as Lucan, Martial, Quintilian, and Seneca.

Maybe it was simply the lure of "untold millions still untold."

We do not know exactly what Paul hoped to do, but our text tells us he hoped to visit Rome (to have some fellowship with the church he had never seen) and then catch a ship for Iberia and begin his Spanish campaign.

David Livingstone was cut out of the same mold as the apostle Paul. When Livingstone volunteered as a missionary with the London Missionary Society and they asked him where he wanted to go, he replied, "Anywhere, so long as it is forward."

Paul dreamed impossible dreams. This was fundamental to the greatness of Paul as a missionary, for dreams always precede action.

Verses 23-29 relate Paul's dreams to real life. The gist is this: if Paul had done as he wanted, he would have immediately set sail for Rome. However, he first had to complete the important business of taking an offering to the poor in Jerusalem, which he had collected from the Gentile churches in Macedonia and Achaia. His main motive in this was to cement the relationship between Jewish believers and new Gentile converts.

The Book of Acts tells us that things did not go as planned, however. He did deliver the offering to Jerusalem with great success, but he was almost killed by an unruly mob and escaped by night with Caesar's soldiers. Then he underwent shipwreck and deprivation before arriving in chains in Rome.

As to his vision to go to Spain, we really cannot say for sure whether he ever got there. Modern scholarship inclines to say that

he did not, though church tradition says he did.

I personally think it does not matter, and here is why: First, God knew Spain was in Paul's heart, just as much as it was in David's heart to build the Temple, though that king never saw a stone of it laid.

Second, the value of a dream is not whether we achieve it or not, but in setting out to achieve it. God is not so much interested in whether we reach our destination as in how we try to get there. To us arrival is everything, but to God the journey is most important, for it is in the journey that we are perfected, and it is in hardships that he is glorified as we trust him.

Third, knowing Paul, I think we can safely surmise that in making his detour to Jerusalem and Rome Paul never felt that God had mocked him, or that if he never reached Spain his dream was misspent.

It is of greatest importance that we have hearts with dreams, great visions of what God can do with us. We need our "castles in the sky"—our Spains. We need to see "spires away on the world's rim," to dream of victories and accomplishments for God.

Not all of us will meet our dream's end, but that is all right because God is more interested in the process than the prize, in the journey than the road's end.

May we learn to travel as Paul did. Someday we will stand before God and will possibly say, "God, this is the dream you gave me. I did not make it. I'm sorry."

And he will say, "Yes, but that was in my hands. You were a magnificent traveler. Enter the joy that I have prepared for you before the foundation of the world!"

Paul concludes this section on a remarkably positive note: **"I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ"** (15:29). Such optimism!

Paul was sure he would go to Rome in blessing. Little did he know his arrival would be in chains, and yet it was indeed in joy. What a way to go—**"in the fullness of the blessing of Christ"**!

IV. Paul's Praying Heart (15:30-33)

The final aspect of Paul's missionary heart is that he believes in prayer. Verses 30-32 contain his poignant call: **“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.”**

He asked for two things:

- (1) **“that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea”** and,
- (2) that his **“service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints.”**

Both prayers were answered.

Acts 21:17-20 records his offering's joyous reception and the resulting solidarity of the churches. In addition, Paul was granted a spectacular deliverance that could only be attributed to God, as Acts 21-23 makes so clear.

The prayers of the Roman church brought great power to bear in Paul's life! Paul had called them **“to strive together with me”** in prayer—literally “to agonize together with me”—and that is what they did.

To those with Pauline hearts, the request, “Brother, pray for me,” is not a cliché, and neither is the response, “I will pray for you.” The missionary heart is, indeed, a heart that believes in prayer.

Conclusion

Now let us bring the pieces together. A missionary heart is *a heart that sees its mission as entirely sacred*. The sacredness of the work comes from seeing oneself as a priest offering up his or her service as a fragrant offering to Christ. Therefore, it regards its

own life, however prosaic and mundane, as a liturgy. Let us ask God to help us see all of life as glorifying him.

A missionary heart is *a heart that gives God the credit for everything*. All home runs are God's home runs. Let us give God the glory for what is happening through us.

A missionary heart is *a heart that is visionary*. Do we have a dream—a Spain? If not, let us ask God for one.

A missionary heart is *a heart that prays passionately*. Today it is not “in” to be passionate about anything except our favorite professional sports team. But in God's Kingdom the great heart passionately strives in prayer.

It is impossible to think of history without Paul. Nothing would be the same for any of us were it not for Paul's remarkable heart for God. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAYER:

This prayer is taken from Ray Ortlund's *A Passion for God*:

O Lord God, we modern Christians can be so self-absorbed. We look with condescension and boredom on the missionary enterprise—when we think of it at all. God, forgive us. We worship your Son in church on Sunday morning, we sing our songs with a euphoric joy, and we think we have honored him. But what do we know of honoring Christ, when we remain content to let whole nations and peoples and tribes around the world live and die without ever bowing to the One whose name is above every other name? We have a privatized faith. We have trivialized it as a merely personal benefit, like a favorite television show or a hobby. We do not hear the gospel as a war cry, as a summons to risk-taking, as a command to see the Lord Jesus Christ honored in our own hearts as we exert ourselves toward his being honored in others' hearts. O God, your gospel spawns missionary effort as the sun radiates light. The two are always found together. What then does our lack of interest in missions reveal about our grasp of love for the gospel? O Lord, give fresh power to the gospel among *us*. Revive in us the passion for Christian missions that thrust St. Patrick and William Carey and David Livingstone and Hudson Taylor and Amy Carmichael and thousands of others out to the four winds, for the honor and glory of the Son of God. Dear Lord, deliver us from our convenience Christianity and lift us up to the infinite joy of kingdom-advancing missionary Christianity.

And all of this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.