

Sermons through

Romans

The Obedience of the Nations

Romans 15:17-21

With Study Questions

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Therefore I have reason to glory in Christ Jesus in the things which pertain to God. 18 For I will not dare to speak of any of those things which Christ has not accomplished through me, in word and deed, to make the Gentiles obedient – 19 in mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and round about to Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ. 20 And so I have made it my aim to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build on another man's foundation, 21 but as it is written: "To whom He was not announced, they shall see; And those who have not heard shall understand" (Romans 15:17-21).

Introduction

I am not a terribly gifted handy-man, but years ago I built a fence around our front yard. We had small children and live on a busy street. It was mainly for safety. Of course, I wanted it to be strong and attractive. One of the most enjoyable compliments I've ever received was when my wife and I were eating at the restaurant that then existed across the street from our house. The owner of the restaurant, when she realized where we lived, gave a very nice tribute regarding the fence I built. I was quite flattered.

To this day when I drive home I look at the fence I built and have a sense of joy and accomplishment. It was something that took months to build (someone else could have done it in a few days), it looks good and has withstood the test of time. It's nice because it's observable, measurable and practical. There is something nice about a job accomplished.

It is a bit more difficult to measure success in the ministry. One of the most challenging questions I ever answer is, "How is the church...how is the ministry?" I sometime think of numbers. How many people are attending? There is something to be said for that. Acts records the numbers of those who added to the church (Acts 2:41; 4:4).

I also consider the unity. How wonderful it is that our elders are seldom in unhealthy conflict with one another. There is that blessed unity of which the psalmist writes, **“Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity” (Psalm 133:1).**

I also take great joy in how people enjoy one another. To see people talking, praying, laughing is a wonderful thing for a pastor to behold. I advise people, when investigating whether or not to join a church, not to be overly concerned with how warmly they are greeted. Not that I think it is unimportant to greet visitors. It’s just very easy, if you have visited a church a few times, for the members to not know for certain if you’re new or if you wish to be approached.

I’ll counsel people to observe, above how they are greeted, how the church family greets one another. Is this a church where people love being with each other? This is one of the outward signs which give testimony that you belong to Christ. As Jesus taught:

By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:35).

If you notice people loving each other, it is only a matter of time before you will be part of that body of love.

But what was it that the Apostle Paul took joy in when it came to the church-his ministry?

Therefore I have reason to glory in Christ Jesus in the things which pertain to God (Romans 15:17).

A Reason to Glory

This morning’s text begins with the conjunction, **“Therefore”** *oun*, which beckons back to the previous verse. What reason does the apostle have for glorying in Christ Jesus? What did he view as his completed project? It seems that above all things Paul viewed his task as a minister who would offer up a people to God; a people **“acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:16).**

He gloried in the knowledge that he had prepared the bride, holy and without blemish (Ephesians 5:27) for the marriage feast of the Lamb. The bride can be without blemish because of...

...the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot (1 Peter 1:19b).

Prior to, and sometimes in, weddings I will tell the young groom that God has given him a bride. One day he will be asked to give that bride back. Husbands are to seek to imitate Christ, who lived and died for His bride to present her holy and blameless. I ask the young groom, "What will she look like when you give her back?" What are husbands forming in their wives? It is, and should be, a daunting, yet glorious task.

For I will not dare to speak of any of those things which Christ has not accomplished through me, in word and deed, to make the Gentiles obedient (Romans 15:18)

The Obedience of the Gentiles

Of course, it is not actually Paul who prepares the bride. It is Christ who, "**delivers the kingdom to God**" (1 Corinthians 15:24). There is only one who is able to clothe us in white. And the work of ministry is only valuable to the extent that it heralds Christ.

Paul is not writing of what others have done. And strictly speaking he is not writing of what he has accomplished. He is writing of what Christ has accomplished "**through**" *dia* him. And what has Christ accomplished through Paul? What is the great accomplishment?

The great accomplishment is "**to make the Gentiles obedient**", or the "**obedience of (the) nations**" *hypakoen ethnon*. Paul did not shrink back from the word obedience. He opens and closes this great epistle with the words "**obedience to the faith**" (Romans 1:5; 16:26). Jesus is a Prophet that we hear, a Priest in whom we trust and a King before whom we bow.

To believe is an act of obedience to the One who is worthy (Revelation 5:2) and from whom all blessings flow. Does this mean we're saved by our ability to obey? Are we saved by our work? If so, there

seems to be a great difficulty in Scripture which teaches from Genesis to Revelation that we are saved not by works but grace.

It is precisely here that we must ask ourselves, 'from whence does this faith of mine come?' Because if this obedience is the product of my own will or nature, I am truly saved by my works. But again, the Scriptures war against this aberrant notion in almost every verse! No, we must recognize (if our worship is to aimed only toward God and our peace found only in Christ) that even our faith is **"a saving grace, wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit and word of God."**¹

Some people are paid to watch movies or read books or listen to music. It is their work. But if a blind and deaf person is sitting in a theatre or at a concert, it doesn't matter how good the movie is or how beautiful the music, he must be given the ability-the power-to see and hear. And if someone is given the power to see and hear when it comes to life in Christ, they will also give evidence through the necessary fruit of obedience. The fullness of the Christian life is to trust and obey.

Paul indicates that the means by which Christ accomplished these things was through **"word and deed"**. He elaborates in the next verse.

...in mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and round about to Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ (Romans 15:19).

Signs and Wonders

Paul alludes to **"mighty signs and wonders"** *dynamis semeion kai teras* which testify to his genuine apostolic office.

The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works (2 Corinthians 12:12).

Paul's signs and wonders attested to the truth of the word which proceeded from his lips and his pen. Of Paul and Barnabas we read that they spoke...

¹ Westminster Larger Catechism, Q.72.

...boldly in the Lord, who was bearing witness to the word of His grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands (Acts 14:3b).

These words God has graciously preserved in the Scriptures. And it is the heralding of these words (literally-evangelizing *evangelion*) that was the heart of Paul's mission. The entire region, from Jerusalem and round about to Illyricum, Paul preached the gospel.

Whatever good works are done, whatever aid or help is given to those in need, it is done with an eye toward preaching the gospel.

And so I have made it my aim to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build on another man's foundation (Romans 15:20),

Preach the Gospel

It was Paul's aim, it should be our aim, to preach the gospel. We are to care for the material. If someone is naked and destitute of daily food, we are to **"give them the things which are needed for the body" (James 2:15, 16)**. This is almost universally held as virtuous. Seldom will someone argue against relief organizations. What can be less popular is Paul's principle **"aim"**, which is to preach the gospel. Everyone wants and, at some level, will appreciate food for their physical body. But the greater gift is the food for their spirit. And that food is not always as well received.

In the sixth chapter of John we read of Jesus feeding 5000 hungry people. On the following day He began to preach, saying things like...

Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life (John 6:27).

He then began to teach how He was **"the bread of life" (John 6:35)** and how we are to eat His flesh and drink his blood (John 6:53), references to the Lord's Table and our faith and dependence upon Him. But when the conversation turned from material food to spiritual food (and election), we finally read toward the end of the chapter:

From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more (John 6:66).

It is easy to be popular when we do good deeds and care for the material well-being of others. It is not quite as easy when we care for the well-being of souls.

He takes a little turn here in his comment on not building on another's foundation. Not that there is anything wrong with building on another's foundation. Elsewhere we read of building on the foundation of another-recognizing that the only true foundation is Christ (as presented by Scripture-Ephesians 2:20). But here we see a focus on the scope-the far-reaching power of the kingdom of God.

The international, worldwide blessing of the gospel, had now begun. This was no new plan. It was not a plan b or an afterthought. It was always God's plan to bless the world. Here we see this wonderful quote from Isaiah.

...but as it is written: "To whom He was not announced, they shall see; And those who have not heard shall understand" (Romans 15:21).

See and Understand

When he writes of those to whom He was not announced and those have not heard, he writes of the nations. It is the fulfillment of the Great Commission. He doesn't mean that people believe without hearing. He speaks of those to whom Christ had not yet been announced. And Paul viewed his ministry-we should to this day view our ministry as those who continue to make this announcement.

Let us enjoy the beauty of the fuller portion of the quotation:

Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted. 14 As many were astonished at you – his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind – 15 so shall he sprinkle many nations. Kings shall shut their mouths because of him, for that which has not been

told them they see, and that which they have not heard they understand (Isaiah 52:13-15).

The great promise attached to this is the sprinkling of the nations, which speaks of the sprinkled blood of Christ for the cleansing of sins. Kings shall shut their mouths. Reminiscent of the warning in Psalm 2 this is.

Now therefore, be wise, O kings; Be instructed, you judges of the earth. 11 Serve the LORD with fear, And rejoice with trembling. 12 Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, And you perish in the way, When His wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him (Psalm 2:10-12).

Perhaps some of you recall in a recent debate I was asked to share one postmillennial verse or passage-one passage indicating that the gospel will have a positive effect upon lives, cultures, governments. There are so many. Yet every time we speak of the gospel changing the world, people will either consign it merely to things immaterial or to the way things will be after the Second Coming.

In regard to this passage in Isaiah the acclaimed scholars from Dallas Seminary state:

They will be appalled that they had miscalculated the situation so badly. Realizing their great mistake, they will have nothing to say. Eventually, when they see Him exalted in His Second Advent, they will finally understand and see clearly.²

But there is no mention either in Isaiah or in Romans of this happening after the Second Advent. Paul viewed his ministry as a fulfillment of this Isaiah passage. We should do the same.

² Martin, J. A. (1985). Isaiah. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 1, p. 1107). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

Questions for Study

1. What are some ways you would answer the question, “How is the ministry?” or “How is the church” (pages 2, 3)?
2. What has to happen in order for us to be an acceptable sacrifice to God, holy and without blemish (pages 3, 4)?
3. Does the “obedience of the nations” mean we’re saved by being obedience? Explain (pages 4, 5).
4. What was accomplished by signs and wonders (pages 5, 6)?
5. What was Paul’s main “aim” in his ministry (pages 6, 7)?
6. What effect will the gospel have upon the world (pages 7, 8)?