

Paul's Ministry to Gentiles

📖 Romans 15:14-19

👤 Pastor Jeremy Thomas

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🌐 fbgbible.org

📍 Fredericksburg Bible Church

107 East Austin Street

Fredericksburg, Texas 78624

(830) 997-8834

The theme of the Epistle to the Romans is Romans 1:16-17, the gospel of righteousness by faith. The outline of this theme is Romans 1:18-3:20, Condemnation; God is righteous and all men are sinners and therefore under His just condemnation. Romans 3:21-5:21, Justification; God's righteousness is satisfied by Christ so that through faith in Him alone the sinner is justified. Romans 6:1-8:17, Sanctification; God's righteousness is practically accessed as the believer presents himself to God such that He is walking by the Spirit and enjoying sanctification. Romans 8:18-39, Glorification; God's righteousness is acquired by the believer when He is raised in his glorified body. Romans 9:1-11:36, Explanation; God's people Israel are temporarily set aside because of their rejection of Christ but will ultimately receive Christ and be restored to their covenant promises. Romans 12-15, Exhortation; God's children are exhorted to live the Christian life by presenting themselves to Him in everyday matters of the local church, government and society.

We explained Romans 15:8-13 last time. In 15:8 Paul gives explanation for why Christ has accepted both Jews and Gentiles as they are. He came to seek and to save that which was lost, He came to serve and not to be served, and to be a ransom for many. As such He put Himself in the role of mediator on the cross between a righteous God and sinful man. Yet these two groups that He gave Himself for, Israel and Gentiles, are distinct. In verse 8 he deals with Israel distinctly, referring to them as the circumcision. Circumcision was the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant, it was a corrective surgery upon the flesh that indicated something was wrong spiritually from physical birth. It pointed to the need for the individual Jew to have faith like Abraham and receive spiritual circumcision of the heart performed by God. The basis for Christ's service on the cross for them is stated to be the truth of God which contained the promises of the coming Christ given to the fathers Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the Twelve Tribes and David. In Jesus, God had fulfilled these promises and thereby confirmed that He is the God of truth. In 15:9 he turns to the Gentiles. Christ had become a servant for the Gentiles too. He did so to glorify God. The basis of His crucifixion for Gentiles was mercy. It had to be on the basis of mercy because Gentiles had no promises from God given to them. Mercy is not receiving what one has earned. What Gentiles earned in Adam was eternal condemnation but God is merciful and out of His mercy, He sent Christ to die for Gentiles so that through faith in Him we are justified. The four passages Paul cites show that it was well-known in the OT

that Gentiles would glorify God for His mercy. All four were predictions of Gentiles glorifying God in the kingdom. These Gentiles were not in the kingdom yet since the kingdom is future but the way into the kingdom is through the cross and these Gentiles had been through the cross. The first OT passage cited in 15:9 came from the lips of David. When David was rescued from all his enemies he wrote, "Therefore I will give praise to You among the Gentiles, And I will sing to Your name." His mention of praising God among Gentiles is evidence that in the kingdom Gentiles will be present. This presupposes Gentile salvation before the kingdom. The second one in 15:10 is from Moses. When Moses sang the national anthem of Israel he said, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people." This shows Israel and Gentiles glorifying God together in the kingdom. So it too presupposes Gentile salvation before the kingdom. The third one in 15:11 is from the shortest Psalm in the OT. Here the Psalmist said, "Praise the Lord all you Gentiles, And let all the peoples praise Him." Again, Gentiles will glorify God in the kingdom and this presupposes that Gentiles are saved before the kingdom comes. And the fourth one in 15:12 is from Isaiah. Isaiah said, "There shall come the root of Jesse, And He who arises to rule over the Gentiles, In Him shall the Gentiles hope." This looks to the coming of Christ from the house of David and arising to rule over a kingdom that includes Gentiles, obviously presupposing Gentile salvation prior to the kingdom. So saved Gentiles will enter the kingdom with the saved of Israel but while Israel's salvation came about due to God's promises to them, it came to Gentiles because of His mercy to them. Therefore, Christ had come to be a servant to both Israel and the Gentiles. The practical application of this is that the Jewish and Gentile believers at Rome should now glorify God together. They should have no trouble worshipping God together even though they had cultural differences. If Christ had saved them with all their cultural differences just maybe they should accept each other and glorify God with one voice. Today those of us who are worshipping here together should allow for cultural differences and accept one another so that we can glorify God with one voice.

In 15:13 Paul summarizes how we can all do this, it is a fifth class condition, something of a prayer-wish of Paul, Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. The core of the prayer-wish is that we will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. This, of course, is enjoyed only as we live by faith which is what introduces us into living by the power of the Holy Spirit. The only means of living the Christian life is to live by the Spirit. The condition for the Christian to meet in order to live by the Spirit is faith, faith in the word of God. Therefore, in order to be filled with joy and peace and hope you have to live by faith.

Observe that Paul does not want us to just have joy and peace and hope but he wants us to be filled with joy and peace and abound in hope. To be filled is from the word *πληρωω* which means "to fill up space" so that there is no room left. When we are living by faith the Holy Spirit fills up our entire being with joy and peace so that there is no room left for despair and anxiety. Nor does he simply want us filled with joy and peace but also to abound in hope. Abound is from the word *περισσευω* and which means "to have an abundance". When we are living by faith the Holy Spirit gives us an abundance of hope. What is the Bible usually referring to when it uses the word hope? Something we do not yet have. Earlier in Romans 8:24-25 Paul said, "For in hope we have been saved, but

hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one also hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it." Hope always looks to something we don't have yet but something we are going to have. What is it in Romans 8 that he is referring back to here that we are going to have? Resurrection bodies so we can dwell in a new creation in the kingdom. This is our hope, and yet many Christians, the amillennial's for example, say there is no more millennium than we are experiencing now. They just say Jesus will come back, there will be a general resurrection and judgment and believers will go to heaven and unbelievers to hell. That is short-ending the promises of God that we hope for. Why would I need a resurrected body in that view anyway? That view has never made much sense to me. But to go into a kingdom where we will rule with Christ, that is all through the Bible. That is what I am hoping for. That is promised to me by God. I hope for that. I don't have that but that's my hope. I, like you presently live in a fallen body that is subject to sickness, decay and death. We also live in a very dark world. Jesus referred to this world not as a form of His kingdom but as "the times of the Gentiles." This is a time of world history dominated by Gentile kingdoms that rule by the sinful means of fractional reserve economics, globalist mentality, human rationalism and military might. The kingdom of God, when it comes, will not be structured after these sinful practices. My point is to say that we live in bodies that are falling apart and we tire of living in these oppressive structures. But verse 13 is saying that we have hope for the future and as we live by faith the Holy Spirit gives us joy and peace as He reminds us of our hope of the resurrection and the kingdom to come. Are you living that way? Are you looking daily to the kingdom to come? Are you having joy in the anticipation of the revealing of the sons of God and their positions of rule in the kingdom? Or are you living in the muck and mire of your daily circumstances? Are you banking on this world and this place? I feel sorry for you if you are because the NT paints a great hope out there, it is the hope of the soon resurrection and the kingdom to come, not this world. This world is going to destruction. I pray you will start living by faith and have hope for the future.¹

Verse 13 is the end of the formal exposition and so beginning with verse 14 we come to the parting words of the apostle Paul which are considerably lengthy. This guy said a lot in one breath. And concerning you, my brethren, note the touch of concern. These are Jewish and Gentile believers Paul had never met before and yet he refers to them as his brethren. That is because all believers are literally spiritual siblings and we ought to consider one another as spiritual siblings in the family of God. Paul says I myself also am convinced. The verb convinced is in the perfect tense which means past completed action with ongoing results. From the reports Paul received about the believers at Rome He had become convinced that they were full of goodness. The word full here means "thoroughly characterized." Paul was convinced that they were thoroughly characterized by goodness. Isn't that a good thing to be characterized by? Goodness. I think so. And to have the apostle Paul who said it. Even better.

The following verb filled with all knowledge gives the reason that convinced Paul they were thoroughly characterized by goodness. These people were filled with all knowledge. Knowledge is not bad. Some people think so but Paul disagreed with them. They're always misusing 1 Cor 8, knowledge puffs up. That is false

knowledge. Do-do's can't read. The verb filled is in the perfect passive and so should be translated, "having been filled with all knowledge." Paul knew that they were very knowledgeable of Christian doctrine. Of course, when he says all knowledge he does not mean all in the absolute sense but in the sense that they were knowledgeable in the full scope of Christian doctrine. They knew about bibliology, theology, pneumatology, hamartiology, Christology, et. al. This knowledge equipped them to be able to admonish one another. Do you have this kind of knowledge? Are you equipped for this? What is admonishing? The word admonish is from *νουθετεω* and means "to instruct." They were knowledgeable enough in Christian doctrine to instruct one another. We would say they were discipling one another. Are you able to do this? Well, it was because they were knowledgeable and imparting this knowledge to others through instruction that Paul knew they were thoroughly characterized by goodness.

All of this shows that Paul was well-informed about the spiritual condition of the believers at Rome and that they were spiritually mature. Why then does he write on the basic doctrines of the gospel like condemnation, justification, sanctification, glorification and the nation Israel? Because they needed reminding. That is what Paul says in 15:15, But I have written very boldly to you on some points so as to remind you again. Everyone needs to be reminded of basic doctrine. Not in the least because we aren't applying those doctrines in practical everyday life. That was their problem and that is often our problem. They knew the doctrines but they weren't applying them between Jew and Gentile. They were dividing over scrupulous things. They needed to get back on track and apply the basic doctrines of condemnation, justification, sanctification and so forth. When we keep these in mind we find there is not much room left for criticism of our brethren on minor issues. So Paul is reminding them.

Paul continues in verse 15 by giving the reason he was the one who reminded them of these things, because of the grace that was given me from God, to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles. Paul was a minister...to the Gentiles...and because of that he had to deal with a lot of flack from the Jews. Paul never caught flack from Gentiles, it was always Jews. He received that ministry because of the grace of God. Grace means unmerited favor. It's undeserved favor. You can't earn it. Paul of all people did not earn this ministry to Gentiles. Paul hated Jesus Christ. Paul hated the Jewish disciples of Jesus Christ. Paul set out to destroy the Jewish disciples of Jesus Christ. But on his way along the Damascus Road he came to faith in Jesus Christ and that changed the whole ballgame. Here is one of the grace gifts that was bestowed on Paul on that day was that He would be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles. Early on it was not noticed that he was to be a minister to the Gentiles but it became apparent after his early failures among the Jews and his successes among the Gentiles that he had a particular grace to minister to Gentiles (cf Rom 11:13; Acts 9:15). He and Peter decided that they would split up the ministry and Peter would go to Jews and Paul to Gentiles. That is the way the body of Christ should function. God gives grace gifts to certain individuals in certain areas and those are the areas they should discover and function in and let other people function in their area. So it came to Paul to minister to the Church at Rome because even though the makeup was both Jew and Gentile it was certainly Gentile territory and predominately

the believers there were Gentile. So that is why he is saying in verse 15, I wrote to you very boldly on some points because of the grace that was given me from God, to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles.

So we have this Jew, Paul, ministering to these Gentiles and he clarifies with a participial phrase the particular thing that He ministered. Ministering as a priest the gospel of God. He ministered the gospel. Notice that he's using the language of the priesthood as a picture of this ministry. The priests served in sacred things, things set apart unto God and the gospel is something sacred, set apart unto God. It's what brings a person into a relationship with God. What is the gospel of God? Paul used this exact expression in 1:1 and this might help in understanding how to share the gospel. There he explains it as that which was promised beforehand through the OT prophets concerning God's Son who was born a descendant of David according to the flesh and who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead. So you might think about rooting the gospel in history when you share it with Gentiles and not talking abstractly about heaven. Talk about the OT promises fulfilled in the literal descendant of David and take it all the way to the resurrection. Paul was sent to minister that message, and in particular to Gentiles.

In the middle of verse 16 Paul uses the purpose clause, so that, to explain the purpose of his ministering the gospel of God. It was so that my offering of the Gentiles may become acceptable. Paul had a vested interest in the Gentiles who believed through his ministry. They were his offering to God; the fruits of his labor. Since the verb sanctified is in the perfect tense it means that they had been sanctified or set apart by the Holy Spirit and would therefore be acceptable to God. When Paul preached the gospel and a Gentile believed, the Holy Spirit set that Gentile apart unto God making that Gentile acceptable to God. Since the perfect tense refers not only to a past completed action but to the ongoing results of that action then any Gentile who believes is eternally acceptable to God. It is the Holy Spirit who has set them apart and made them acceptable. There is no one or no thing that can undo the Spirit's work. Thus, the believer is eternally secure. There are 1,001 ways you can get eternal security from the Scriptures and we still have people saying you can lose your salvation. Friend, you have been justified in God's court of law in heaven, who is going to go up there and undo that? You are regenerate, born again, who is going to stick you back in the womb of slavery? You have been baptized into Christ, who is going to put you back in Adam? You have been sealed until the day of redemption, who is going to unseal you? The list goes on and on. I don't know why people so badly want to believe they can lose their salvation. That is nonsense.

Therefore, verse 17, in Christ Jesus, and by the way, note the Trinity woven into verses 15, 16 and 17, God...Christ Jesus...the Holy Spirit. You have to do some pretty unusual exegetical gymnastics to deny the Trinity. I think these groups like the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses and Unitarians don't read the Bible. I really think that. I keep reading it and seeing it all over the place because it says it. And I wonder every time, how could anyone be duped into denying the Trinity? What are these people smoking? It's really sad because all you have to do is read this book and this stuff comes flying off the page. But hardly anyone reads anything anymore,

much less the Bible. Verse 17, Therefore in Christ Jesus I have found reason for boasting. Let's put it this way, if no creature is to be boasted in and Paul says I have found reason for boasting in Christ Jesus then is Christ Jesus the Creator or a creature? He's the Creator. No creature is to be boasted in. I mean, that's the end of it. This is not hard stuff. I like the way the Greek reads here, Therefore, I have reason for boasting in Christ Jesus with reference to the things of God. The reason is because Gentiles came to God through Christ Jesus. In other words, his ministry of the gospel was successful. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation. It's not up to you, relax and preach the gospel. He will make it accessible to people. He will use it. All you have to do is tell it. That is why Paul boasted not in himself but in Christ... These things have to do with... God, it is the power of God through the gospel of Christ that Gentiles come into a relationship with the Creator of the universe. It doesn't get any bigger than that.

In 15:18 Paul uses the Greek word *γὰρ* to signal he is giving an explanation. For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me. In other words, I'm not boasting in myself and my ministry. I hear a lot of people in ministry and some of them are all about themselves. Look at my ministry. Look at all that it is doing. They have the opposite attitude of Paul. They boast in themselves. Paul boasted in Christ. Paul was not interested in what he accomplished any more than you should be interested in what you accomplish. What we accomplish is always the work of the flesh, and there are a lot of ministries making it on the flesh. What God accomplishes is always the work of the Spirit. It is not about what you can do for Jesus; it is about what He can do through you. Are you available for that or are you trying to make a name for yourself? God makes a person's name great, not you, not me. The Christian life is the exchanged life. It is His life in place of ours. Only when we live by faith is Christ's life exchanged for ours. All you can do is live by faith.

Now when Paul says I will not presume he uses the word for "dare." He is saying I will not dare to speak of anything except what Christ had accomplished through me. Paul would not dare to do such a thing but I hear Christians doing it all the time. They are patting themselves on the back for what they have done for Jesus. That is a shame. I would like to tell them that. Paul would not dare to say such things. Those are tragedies, failures and lost opportunities for reward. Why talk about those things? But the things that Christ had accomplished through him, those he wanted to speak of because that brings Him glory And that is worthy of reward.

The final phrase in 15:18 is not really a separate phrase as the NASB indicates with the comma. Instead it is a continuation and should simply read, through me to the obedience of the Gentiles, by word and deed. What Christ accomplished through Paul was bringing Gentiles to obedience. This is true obedience, not fleshly obedience. Obedience by the Spirit. This was a startling testimony when one considers that the Gentiles of Paul's day were steeped in worship of the gods and goddesses of Greece and Rome. But God can really change your life. The word obedience is *υποκοη* and means "to be in compliance with God's commands." Their lives were characterized by compliance with God's commands. Since Romans 6-8 teaches clearly that the flesh cannot produce compliance to God's commands it is assumed that they had learned to live by the Spirit. The obedience

produced by the Spirit through these believers was expressed in both word and deed. What we speak, words and what we do, deeds, are both of interest to God. The Gentile believers at Rome had become obedient in both what they spoke and what they did. This was a mighty change from their previous lifestyle.

Verse 19 describes what Christ had accomplished through Paul that resulted in this obedience. These things relate to signs and wonders that Paul says in the next phrase were done in or better by the power of the Spirit. Paul did not do them in his own strength but in the strength of the Holy Spirit. Signs and wonders are two key terms that refer to a miracle. The word signs emphasizes that the event is caused by transcendent powers and the word wonders emphasizes the response of astonishment by the audience. The transcendent power is the Holy Spirit and the audience were Gentiles. Since signs and wonders were given to attest to the authenticity of the messenger and his message, when Paul did them they were authenticating him and his message as being from God. The message that Paul was sharing in conjunction with the miracles is stated at the end of verse 19 to be the gospel of Christ. So we're back to the gospel; the death and resurrection of Christ. As Paul shared the gospel of Christ in conjunction with signs and wonders the Gentiles understood that the gospel was true and they believed unto salvation. This was a necessary part of the early transition years of the Church to introduce Gentiles. The miracles did two things; first, they convinced the Gentiles that the gospel was from God, none of their pagan gods did that, and second, they authenticated that salvation for Gentiles was by grace alone through faith alone in the same way as a Jew.

The middle of verse 19 uses a result clause. The results of Paul's ministry empowered by the Spirit to do signs and wonders is that from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum he fully preached the gospel of Christ. By the word fully Paul means "completed." Paul had completed preaching the gospel of Christ in this region going out from Jerusalem...as far as Illyricum and from this you can see that Paul had a strategy in ministry. He did not just go from town to town but he was strategically trying to cover regions starting in and around Jerusalem and expanding out so that he could cover the whole world. So what Paul is doing here is stating the extent of his ministry so far. This was over the period of about 23 years, though we know a number of those years were spent in training and obscurity prior to the first missionary journey. Training is absolutely essential. If Paul needed training and someone in the 21st century wants to go into ministry, training is an essential. I can help you with that, just let me know. Now probably at this time he was about finished with this third missionary journey. So he mentions the base camp of Jerusalem which is well-known to most Bible students since it is the most common city mentioned in the Bible.² The location of Illyricum is less well-known. It was located to the NW of Macedonia on the eastern shores of the Adriatic Sea, just across from Italy. Paul says he had preached the gospel this far but we have no explicit mention of Paul frequenting Illyricum. So when did this happen? If you turn to Acts 20 you'll see that there is a space of about three months when he could easily have gone to Illyricum. Paul was at Ephesus in verse 1. This was when the gospel had started to reach into the pocketbooks of certain businessmen and they raised a riot and had the whole town converged on the theatre to accuse Paul. After that fiasco Luke says in verse 1, "After the uproar had ceased, Paul sent for the disciples, and when he had exhorted them and taken his

leave of them, he left to go to Macedonia." So he's going to head through various districts to get to Macedonia. Macedonia is the region named after Philip of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great. So we're talking about Greece. We read in verse 2, "When he had gone through those districts and had given them much exhortation, he came to Greece." And note how much time he spent there. "And *there* he spent three months, and when a plot was formed against him by the Jews as he was about to set sail for Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia." Paul had a lot of problems with the Jews. That was mainly because he was an apostle to the Gentiles and they didn't like that so much. So he was in Greece for three months and we're not told where he went but Illyricum was on the NW coast of Greece and he must have been on the west coast of Greece because at the end of the three months it says "he decided to return through Macedonia." He was on his way to Jerusalem and so to return through Macedonia he probably took the famous Egnatian Way. So this is the most likely time that Paul visited Illyricum. Constable says, "Paul's arena of ministry when he wrote this epistle stretched about 1,400 miles from Jerusalem to the Roman province of Illyricum. Illyricum lay on the east side of the Adriatic Sea opposite Italy. This is modern northern Albania, much of Yugoslavia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina."³ So we see Paul had a strategy to spread the gospel and after this the next territory is Italy (Rome) so that is why he says in verses 23 and 24 he hoped to visit them on his way to Spain.

The point is Paul had a strategy and he was constantly on the move. We should think of him as an itinerant minister more than a long-term pastor-teacher. The longest time he spent anywhere was Ephesus and that was for a little over 2 ½ years teaching in the school of Tyrannus. But in the main he was itinerant. He had been commissioned to take the gospel out to Gentiles and Kings and Jews but mainly we see Gentiles responding to him. When he went into a region he would evangelize the locals, form a base of believers in a house church and start training them to be powerhouse believers so they could go out into the community and surrounding rural towns and spread the gospel. He would move on to another area and repeat that procedure over and over, often returning to check on the churches he had previously established. In this way he set a pattern for itinerant missionary work as emphasizing evangelism followed up quickly by discipleship. This was part of the outworking of the Great Commission which is to make disciples of all nations. Next time we'll see more of Paul's hopes for the future which didn't precipitate exactly as he imagined.

In summary, in 15:13 Paul expresses a prayer-wish that is fulfilled as they are living by faith which enacts the power of the Holy Spirit, resulting in being filled up with joy and peace and abounding in hope of the future resurrection and kingdom to come. In 15:14 Paul, with concern for his fellow siblings, was convinced that they were full of goodness since they had been filled with the whole scope of Christian doctrine so that they were able to instruct one another. In 15:15 Paul had been very daring writing to them to remind them of basic doctrines since they already knew these doctrines but they were not applying them and so needed a reminder. He was the one who reminded them because of the unmerited favor given to him from God that set him apart in 15:16 to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering to them as a priest the gospel of God, to the end that the Gentiles who responded by faith would be acceptable, having been set apart by the Holy Spirit. In 15:17,

Paul found reason for boasting in Christ Jesus with reference to the things of God since through Christ, Gentiles came to be right with God. In 15:18 Paul did not boast in his success in ministering to Gentiles but only in what Christ did through him, which resulted in Gentiles walking in obedience by the Spirit in both word and deed. The accomplishment of Gentile salvation in 15:19 came by miracles done by the power of the Spirit with the result that from Jerusalem all the way to Illyricum Paul had completely preached the gospel of Christ.

¹ John A. Witmer, "Romans," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 496.

² Ironically, Jerusalem is not mentioned even once in the Quran.

³ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ro 15:19.