

Sermon for Sunday, January 23, 2011
Dr. Dan Doriani
Mission and Purpose
Romans 15:15-29

There are many privileges in ministering in this church. It's fascinating to hear the stories of your work, your callings and passions. Military: "When I was in the navy, I was the navigator on hurricane hunter airplanes." Were you scared? "I worked so hard I didn't have time to be scared."

Construction: A simple, "That's my building... A lot of people live in the apartments I built... They're affordable and livable... I try to design environments where the space, the light, the flow of traffic make it easy to work."

Medicine: "I believe I'm a good surgeon; I *help* people... Sometimes surgery doesn't go according to plan. The human body doesn't always conform to the textbook. I have to pause, think, pray. Sometimes I really feel God's guidance."

Business: "I'm trying to build a business that would make my father proud... I want to meet the needs of my clients, to the glory of God."

The critical mind might detect pride, but it's not what I hear. I hear godly passion to do something that matters in this world. There is conviction: "I care about this, it matters, and by God's grace, I'm good at it too."

The Bible never praises pride or selfish ambition, but it does praise godly ambition or aspiration (1 Ths. 4:11, 2 Cor. 5:9). In Romans 15:20 Paul says he has an ambition or aspiration to preach the gospel where the name of Christ was unknown. No one knew Jesus and confessed faith in him.

Indeed, Paul had grand goals and bent all his energy to achieving them. Before he was a Christian, Paul's energy was misdirected. He tried to destroy the church. He threatened and intimidated Jewish Christians. If they fled to other lands, he pursued and imprisoned them.

When Paul became a Christian he found greater zeal for a greater cause. God called him to be a pioneer. He preached Christ in completely pagan places. Paul traveled down the great roads of the eastern Empire, to every major city and region, until he could say, "There is no more place for me to work in these regions." No untouched place remained (15:23). So Paul wanted to go west and told the Romans, "I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be sped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a little while" (15:24).

As Paul starts to conclude his longest letter, he aims to put it in that context. He covered a lot of doctrine and Christian ethics. As he said earlier, he wants to impart a spiritual gift (1:11-13). Now he admits that his letter might seem a bit strong. He never visited Rome; why did he write such a long, authoritative letter?

1. A priestly ministry (15:15-17)

Paul explains that his letter fits within his call as an apostle and priest of God. Yes, he says, "I have written you quite boldly on some points" but it is the apostle's task – "the grace God gave" them – to declare God's truth (15:15).

Specifically, God called apostles to "remind" the church of the truth. He says "remind" because they already knew the gospel, for the church was started by anonymous Christians some years earlier.

The apostles are eyewitnesses of the person and work of Christ. God commissioned them to interpret and declare the meaning of Jesus' words and works. These are the foundation for the Christian life. From the beginning, Jesus expected his words to be preserved as canon and authority. Jesus said, "Truly I say to you" about 100 times. He means "remember and follow this."

Jesus chose the apostles to be his "eye and ear" witnesses, who saw everything from the beginning. They even ate and drank with him (Acts 1:21-22, 10:40-41). Jesus also told the apostles what his words and deeds meant.

It's possible to witness an event and have no idea what it means. Suppose a vivacious and popular high school senior winks at an unknown junior. He thinks, "Why did she wink at me? She can't be flirting with me. Are her contacts backfiring? Does she want me to tutor her in calculus?" Our man needs to *see and understand*.

So Jesus called the apostles to see and understand, then preach and teach. He "established a formal authority structure to be the source and standard for all future preaching of the gospel."¹ Paul knew his gospel had to conform to the message of the other apostles - and it did (Gal 1:6-9, 2:6-10). Peter, Paul and John knew their message was normative as the Spirit led them to all truth (John 16:13,14).

The apostles had an essential, foundational message, from Jesus himself. Paul admits, "I have written... boldly." Indeed he did. But that was his calling, "to be a minister of Christ to the Gentiles" (15:15-16).

Paul says he reminded them. Romans has magnificent depth, but it's the same gospel the church heard from the first, from anonymous Christians. So Paul boldly reminds them of what they already heard. He proclaims his gospel with vigor in Romans 3-8, for it is "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes," whether Jew or Gentile (1:15-16). The gospel explains how the church of Rome, full of Jews and Gentiles, can live in peace, equal before God.

The gospel says Jew and Gentile both begin with the same disadvantage – they have rebelled against God and become servants, or slaves, to sin. Their wage for this service is death 6.23. But we have the same advantage: we are right with God by faith in Jesus. He died for our sins and was raised for our justification (4:24).

Paul says his ministry is priestly. When Paul says he is a "minister of Christ" (15.16), he uses a term that means a public servant (13:6). In Scripture, it usually means someone who leads worship (Heb. 8:2; Lk. 1:32, Acts 13.2, Rom 15.27, Phil 2:17).

A moment later, Paul uses a rare word that means "to act as a priest." Now the New Testament says Jesus is our merciful and faithful priest, our great high priest (Heb. 2:17, 4:14). Priests, Hebrews says, "represent" people before God and "offer gifts and sacrifices for sins" (5:1, 8:3). Jesus did this by offering himself as an atoning sacrifice for sin (7:27). He offered this sacrifice once for all and sat down at the right hand of God, for his work was complete (10:12). No priest can or should attempt to offer any further sacrifice for sin.

¹ Ridderbos, Red H and New Testament Scr. 13.

In what sense then is Paul a priest? The Bible says priests do three things: 1) They sympathize with the people in their weaknesses (Heb 4:15. 2) They represent men and women "in matters related to God" (5:1 3). They "offer gifts and sacrifices" (5:1, 8:3). Paul did all three when he preached the gospel²:

First, he candidly yet tenderly recognized human weakness, our sin (Rom. 1:18-3:25). Second, he represented us before God – in prayer for us and also in describing God's remedy for our need, declaring that if we confess Christ as Lord we are justified and saved (10:9-10). Third, he offers gifts to God: By preaching the gospel he presents the Gentiles to God as acceptable sacrifices (12:1). Isaiah said God's time is coming "to gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come and shall see my glory." God will send his servants – people like Paul - to the nations, so they will see his glory. "And they shall bring all your brethren from all the nations as an offering to the LORD" (Isa. 66:18-20).

Paul's offering therefore is not a sacrifice for sin. He offers the nations to God. That offering is "acceptable to God" because it is "sanctified by the Holy Spirit." The offering is acceptable because it meets God's conditions: The Gentiles come in gospel faith, their sins forgiven by Jesus' atoning sacrifice.

So the nations are presented to God as holy, sanctified by the Spirit. To sanctify means to set apart to God. "Sanctify" has two senses; both fit here.

A definitive, final, once for all sanctification occurs when we give our life to God. We are his and he is ours from that day forward. A progressive growth in holiness, so we grow in faith, obedience, and justice occurs day by day.

Thus Jesus releases us from the penalty of sin and from the practice of sin. The first is definitive. The moment you believe, you are free from sin's penalty. The second is progressive, as we steadily break with sinful practices.

Having lived in both Philadelphia and St. Louis, let me illustrate. The day one moves to St. Louis, he or she is definitively a St. Louisan. Yet we progressively learn to live like it. We no longer make certain gestures on the road. When we go to the stadium, we no longer boo everyone. It takes time to change, to grow into our "St. Louis-ness."

What can we learn from Paul's ministry? We aren't apostles, but we are a kingdom of priests, a royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2:5, 9). We can offer acceptable sacrifices to God, as he did.

- First, we should offer ourselves to him.
- Second, parents can offer or consecrate our children to God. We can offer our unborn children to God. We can offer children we hope to have one day.
- We can offer friends and neighbors to him too, as we share the gospel.

Are you afraid to do that? Yet as we worship God and find truth, meaning and wholeness through him, we will want to share what we have found with. After we come in to worship, we go out to testify. But we're afraid of rejection, afraid someone will think we are judgmental. Nonetheless, we can offer people to God.

² Indeed, every word in Romans 15:15 – minister, priestly, offering or sacrifice, acceptable, and sanctified – fits the world of Old Testament priests and sacrifices.

A pastor is spoiled by his position. When people talk to pastors, they conversation about God or scripture. But a light touch, a question or suggestion, can lead to something deeper in almost any conversation:

“So, what's happening with you these days?”

“Well, I met someone.”

“That's great. You like her a lot?”

“Yeah, it's pretty serious. We're thinking about moving in together.”

“Really. I read some interesting statistics about cohabitation the other day. It's typical now but sociologists have found some surprises.”

“Like what?”

“No matter how you study it, people who cohabit before marriage are more likely to divorce. They are trying to find out why; what do you think?”

Some will push you away; others will be interested. If you talk about the human genome, justice and opportunity for the poor, the discovery of planets like earth, it can go anywhere. One day you may offer someone to God.

2. A powerful ministry (15:18-19)

Paul had a powerful ministry. As we said, some might think Paul is boasting, but I think he's excited about his calling, his God-given work. Great things have happened. He names them, but he's quick to praise God for them. He says "I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God" (15:17). He glories in three things:

15:18a First, his power is from Christ: "I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ accomplished through me." Wise physicians know they never heal or save anyone. They treat wounds or diseases and the body, by God's design, heals itself. So too, no apostle or agent of God accomplishes anything. We are God's ambassadors and God makes his appeal through us (2 Cor. 5:20).

15:18b Second, through him, Jesus led the Gentiles obey God. We "obey God," according to Scripture, when we believe the gospel Rom 10:16, 1 Pet. 4:17-18.

15:18c Third, Paul speaks and acts. He has a ministry of word and deed. This follows Jesus, whose ministry perfectly matched word and deed. Jesus spoke with unparalleled authority. When he had something important to say, he didn't cite authorities or research, he said, "Truly **I** (myself) say to you." He knew he had authority and people noticed Jesus unparalleled manner. Later they asked, "Who gave you this authority?" (Matt. 7:29, 21:23). Jesus answered indirectly. After he taught with powerful words, he healed by his powerful word. He performed several miracles by a mere word (Matt. 8-9).

- 8:1-4 He says a word "be clean" and a leper is cleansed.
- 8: 5-13 A centurion asks Jesus to heal his servant, "Just say a word, and my servant will be healed" (8:8). Jesus spoke and he was healed.
- He stills seas (8:26), expels demons (8:32), forgives sin (9:6), by his word (8:29).

Jesus was more than a teacher. In a lesser way, Paul was too. God authenticated his call as an apostle (literally) "by the power of signs and wonders" (15:19a English Standard Version). A wonder makes people pay attention; they are amazed. A sign is a wonder that points to God and has clear significance.

By his words and deeds, by signs and wonders, Jesus accomplished things through Paul. Paul proclaimed the gospel and people obeyed it as the Spirit persuaded them (Rom. 15:18-19).

Our words and works should go together too. If we say we love, we should act in love. John says, "Let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth" (1 John 3:18). The gospel is more compelling when the man or woman who speaks is kind and sincere, just and generous.

We can still expect God to verify his words with works. He answers prayer in powerful ways. In this church, we pray over the sick, as James 5:14 says, "Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord."

I've seen radical physical healing and slow physical healing through doctors. We've seen striking spiritual healing, while physical problems continue. We see atheists, agnostics, and legalists come to faith. We see shattered relationships restored. Some of this is public, some private. But God joins word and deed today, too. If you are sick, consider asking the elders to pray over you, for healing.

No one has power that is identical to the apostles. We can't tell a lame man, "Rise, walk" with absolute confidence that he will rise, as they did. God empowered them to heal to establish the truth of the gospel. Now that the gospel is established, God generally acts quietly. Yet not always. God still does wonders when and where he pleases. All this is by the power of the Spirit (Rom. 15:19).

Let's learn from this, too. God gives us words to say and deeds to perform. People listen best when God's Spirit gives them eyes to see and ears to hear. But it helps when good words and good deeds go together.

Notice the way Paul talks about his ministry. He hates to boast about himself, but he has to boast. Great things *have happened*. Churches have sprouted up in city after city. Paul, almost incredibly, is still alive. So he boasts. By God's power, to Jesus' glory, something happened – through him.

I hope that make sense to you. It's award season: Emmy's, Grammys, All Stars and All Pros. The Business Journal needs new faces too – masters and disasters. We long for the right kind of attention. How hard we work to get it. Paul knows his skills, his labor, was vital, yet he says "Jesus accomplished it through me." Let's think of our work that way – whether it's a huge success or not.

3. A pioneering ministry (15:19-23)

Paul was a trailblazer; not many people are. He founded new churches and built up churches he established. Most people work in teams, to strengthen existing churches. Not Paul. God called him to be a pioneer and he pursued it with vigor and endurance. He took the hardest work: "It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation" (15:20).

Paul "fully proclaimed the gospel" from Jerusalem, birthplace of Christianity, in the southeast to Illyricum east of Rome. That's more or less 2,000 miles on foot or slow boats over 100 days travel time. Paul didn't preach in every town. He went to the great cities, raised up leaders, and let the word radiate outward.

He did not saturate these cities. His metaphors: He planted seeds, others watered, and God gave the increase. He laid a foundation; others built on it.

His work almost defies comprehension. In some cities, he found synagogues, wrangled invitations to speak and said: "The long-awaited Messiah has arrived. Our own people killed him, but he rose from the dead." Not an easy message.

Yet it was much harder in cities that had no synagogue: "I see idols to many gods. Sorry, but they're deaf and mute. You're missing the one who is alive. Let me tell you about him."

Yet what results! They fulfilled the word of the prophet *Isaiah*. "Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand" (Isa. 52:15, Rom. 15:21). Isaiah said this of His Servant Jesus, whom the Lord would send to the nations.

Paul barely hints at his labor. He traveled an estimated 10,000, in three long journeys, over ten plus years. Yes, God *sometimes* gave him powerful signs and miracles. But he also endured mockery, slander, threats, beatings and imprisonment. Even the travel was brutal: hunger, storms, shipwreck.

It seems unthinkable, but so do many things when we watch someone else do it. How does a mother care for twin babies? Unimaginable! The St. Louis Federal courthouse is 557 feet high, with over one million square feet. It cost \$190,000,000 to build. How do you do that? If it's your calling, you know. The same is the all the more true when the Lord has work for us. Consider some heroes of the faith:

- Luther, a frightened, self-critical monk with a propensity to depression.
- Calvin, a bookish man whose personality shone so dimly that we have naught but his work.
- Wilberforce was crippled and perpetually unsuccessful, until he saw the end of the slave trade as an aged legislator.

Paul was wholly dedicated to this work. Dedication to that task kept him from going to Rome, all these years, because the church was established. "This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you" (15:22). As long as pioneering work remained to be done, east of Rome, he would not leave. Then one day he realized, "There is no more place for me to work in these regions" (15:23). Then Paul could visit Rome on the way to Spain. "I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while" (15:24). So he will stop by, minister, and receive help for his pioneering work to the west.

I hope this is more than a travelogue. You can enter the story in two ways. First, I hope you hear this story as yours. Paul brought the gospel to the world, to *you*. I hope his preaching of the gospel has led you to offer yourself to God. If so, give thanks. If not yet, then think and pray, that God will grant you faith to tell the Lord Jesus that you own him as Lord and sacrifice.

Second, as we marvel at what God did through Paul, let us realize that he can do great things through us, when we work in our mission, for our purpose. We raise twins, heal the sick, construct buildings, and teach topics that terrify others.

What joy to know God's call. Then the hours fly. The struggles while real, but not crushing. It's easy to endure strange tasks. Hey, I never planned to raise money for a parking lot. But if it advances God's work, I'm willing. You have strange tasks, too. But if God gave them, see what the Lord will do through you.

When it's done, may we say with Paul, "I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me." We speak with passion and enthusiasm and we say, "To God be the glory."