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Enjoying God Ministries

Romans #60

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The Providence of God, the Personal Paul, and his Love for the Romans

Romans 15:14-29

All of us will admit, I am sure, that Romans is the most complex biblical letter when it comes to deep theological truths. It stretches the mind and confronts and challenges our personal theological preferences more so than any other NT book.

But have you ever wondered, over the course of these past 59 sermons in Romans, what Paul thought about the believers in Rome? Have you ever paused in the midst of his doctrinal discourses to ask the question, “Did Paul love these people? Did he care about them personally? How, if at all, did his affection and concern for the Roman believers impact his decisions regarding travel and missions and ministry elsewhere?” These are important questions, and answers to them are found in the passage before us today. There are six major points of emphasis in this paragraph, most of which are related to his personal relationship with the Christians in Rome.

If you’re wondering why Paul would take time to explain his movements and the decisions behind them, the answer is not hard to find. Paul’s relationship with the church in Corinth serves to account for why he goes into such detail here in Romans 15 to explain his movements and his motivation. The Corinthians had accused Paul of deceiving them about his travel plans. His enemies in Corinth, whom he labels as “false apostles,” took advantage of this in their efforts to undermine his credibility and to cause the Corinthians to question whether he was a genuine apostle of Jesus Christ. Here is the relevant passage:

(15) Because I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a second experience of grace. (16) I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on my way to Judea. (17) Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to the flesh, ready to say “Yes, yes” and “No, no” at the same time? (18) As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No. (19) For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes. . . (23) But I call God to witness against me—it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth. (24) Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith (2 Cor. 1:15-19, 23-24).

Paul’s point here is that contrary to the accusations of his opponents, his change of itinerary was not because he was fickle or unstable, far less because he cared little for the Corinthians but only for himself; indeed, he changed his plans *for their sake*. Paul had hoped to visit the Corinthians twice: first, on his way *to* Macedonia, and second, on his way *back from* Macedonia (see vv. 15-16). This changed when Timothy arrived in Corinth bearing the letter we know as *First Corinthians* and discovered how bad things were. Upon hearing of this, Paul immediately made an urgent visit to Corinth, a visit that was confrontational,

as well as humiliating and bitter for him (cf. 2:1). Paul quickly returned to Ephesus and determined not to make another painful visit to Corinth. Therefore, he called off the double stop he had earlier planned. It was this alteration in his plans that opened him up to the charge of being fickle and unstable.

Paul's apparently arbitrary change of plans, they insisted, was motivated by self-interest and a lack of concern for the Corinthians themselves. He is charged with making plans like a worldly man, according to the mood of the moment (see vv. 17-18).

Here I want to take note of Paul's vigorous denial that he is a man given to vacillation and insensitive disregard for the people entrusted to his care. He's not the sort who says "Yes" one moment, only to reverse himself on some inexplicable, self-serving whim and then declare "No". Paul is a man of his word, as is the God whom he loves and serves (v. 18a). The Father doesn't assure us of some great blessing, only to withdraw it, without justification, to serve his own interests. When God makes a promise to his people, he fulfills it in Christ. This, says Paul, is the pattern and principle on which I've based my ministry to you Corinthians. One can almost hear him say, no doubt with great energy and passion: "How could I possibly preach to you the good news of a God who always acts with your best interests at heart and never fails to fulfill his promises, and then turn around and treat you with utter disregard by behaving in a double-minded and self-serving way?"

In the final analysis Paul cares little what they think of him so long as they put their trust wholly in Christ. It may even be that Paul is telling them here, "If you refuse to believe me, at least remember the truth and consistency of my message concerning God's gracious work in you through his Son. You may consider me untrustworthy, but you can hardly question the veracity and fidelity of God as revealed in Jesus. And ultimately it is only with the latter that I'm concerned." In any case, Paul will again insist in the remainder of this paragraph (2 Cor. 1:23-2:4) that he made his decision based on his undying love for the Corinthians, his concern for their spiritual welfare, and, above all, for the sake of their joy in Jesus (see esp. v. 24).

Having already dealt with this sort of problem once, in his relationship with the Corinthians, Paul is now faced with it again in his relationship with the Romans. So, he slows down, as it were, here in vv. 14-29, to explain to them very clearly why he made his decisions regarding when and why he would visit them. So let's look at Paul's heart.

Paul's confidence in the spiritual maturity of the Roman church (v. 14)

Before he says a word about his ministry and travel plans, being the good pastor that he is, he wants the Romans to know what he thinks of them. So here in v. 14 he says quite clearly that he is confident of their spiritual maturity and the goodness of their hearts. He isn't trying to butter them up or flatter them. He wants them to know how blessed he is with their spiritual progress. Of course, this doesn't mean they didn't still need a loving rebuke here and there, which is what we find in vv. 15-16.

He mentions their morality: they "are full of goodness" (v. 14a); their mentality: they are "filled with all knowledge" (v. 14b); and their maturity: they are "able to instruct one another." But don't think that by his commendation of the Romans he is suggesting that they no longer need instruction or rebuke or

encouragement. He wouldn't have written this incredible letter to them if his words here in v. 14 were meant to say that they had finally arrived and were now perfect. No matter how much success we have in our Christian growth, there is always room for much, much more.

Paul's boldness in his epistle to the Romans (vv. 15-16)

There are numerous places in Romans where Paul speaks boldly and pointedly about certain theological issues. He challenges Jewish hypocrisy in chapter two and Gentile arrogance in chapter eleven. And as we saw in our study of Romans 14, he speaks directly to both the "strong" and the "weak" in the Roman church and their tendency to pass judgment on one another because of differing views on what to do with regard to secondary matters, such as what to eat and drink and whether one day is more holy than another.

In saying he wrote to them "by way of reminder" is itself a reminder to us that we must never think we have arrived theologically, that we have reached the pinnacle of understanding, that we've heard it all and know it all and no longer have any need to revisit and rehearse the great truths of the gospel. If someone were ever to say, "I've had enough of theology," my loving and gentle response would be: "No, you have not. There is never enough instruction and reminder of biblical truth." Paul wanted the Romans to know this. And lest they think that he is speaking from his own authority, he says very clearly that his approach in this letter was the result of "the grace given" to him by God. He is obviously referring to his calling as an apostle (see Rom. 1:1,5-6).

His goal in all of this is stated clearly in v. 16. His aim has not been simply or solely to see Gentiles come to saving faith in Christ. He also labored to see them sanctified, made experientially holy as well. His desire is that they be justified by faith, but also gradually transformed ever more increasingly into the very image of Jesus himself. The "offering of the Gentiles" is not something they, the Gentiles, bring to God. Paul says *he* is "offering" the Gentiles to God in fulfillment of his "priestly service". He is declaring, in no uncertain terms, that these non-Jewish Christians who were excluded from the temple in Jerusalem and had no part in the sacrifices offered there are themselves, by God's grace, an "acceptable" offering unto God by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, through the ministry of Paul. So, once again, Paul emphasizes the unity of all ethnicities, whether Jew or Gentile, in Christ by faith.

Paul's "pride" in his ministry success (vv. 17-19a)

Don't be misled by Paul's seeming "boast" in this passage. It is "in Christ Jesus" that he boasts. He makes no claims for himself. We might even render this statement, "Because of Christ Jesus" I am proud of what I've done. It is only through Christ Jesus that I've accomplished anything of value. Personal, prideful boasting is anathema to Paul. We see this several texts:

"Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord" (2 Corinthians 10:17).

"Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Galatians 6:14).

Whatever success Paul may have experienced, it is entirely because of what God has done through him by the power of the Holy Spirit. All of us should be thrilled and excited about what God has accomplished through us. We just have to be careful that he receives all the praise for what is achieved.

Look again at v. 18. Paul is more than happy to speak of the achievements of his ministry, of bringing so many Gentiles to saving faith in Christ, but only so long as everyone knows that it is Christ who has accomplished this through Paul. He doesn't speak of what "I have done through Christ" but of what "Christ has accomplished through me."

Paul isn't at all hesitant to draw attention to what he calls "my work for God" (v. 17b). But he is equally emphatic that he deserves no credit for this since it was Christ working through him. He says much the same thing in 1 Corinthians 15:10 – "I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me."

May I also say that this has always been my desire and reason for ministry here at Bridgeway. I am no less confident in you than Paul was in the Romans. I, too, am "satisfied" about you, as Paul says in v. 14. I am confident in your goodness and your growth in knowledge and that you can successfully instruct one another. And although I am by no means an apostle, like Paul, my aim for you is the same as his for the Romans: to prepare you as an acceptable offering unto the Lord.

Paul's holy "ambition" and missionary strategy in making the gospel known (vv. 19b-21)

The reason Paul goes into such detail to explain his movements is that he wants the Christians in Rome to understand why he has not come to them sooner. He doesn't want them to draw the unwarranted conclusion that the Corinthians did, namely, that Paul was allegedly unconcerned with them and was making selfish decisions for his own welfare rather than theirs. So let's look at what he says about his ministry ambitions.

But before I do that, I need to say something about ambition and our plans in life. As you know, it is good and wise to plan for the future, but the Lord is always sovereign over each step we take. This is theme we find everywhere in Paul's letters, and the lesson is one we all need to learn.

"But on taking leave of them [Christians in the church at Ephesus] he said, 'I will return to you if God wills,' and he set sail from Ephesus" (Acts 18:21).

"For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you" (Romans 1:9-10).

"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" (Rom. 15:30-32).

“But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills” (1 Cor. 4:19a).

“For I do not want to see you now just in passing. I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits” (1 Cor. 16:7).

“And I trust in the Lord that shortly I will come also” (Phil. 2:24).

Perhaps a story may help illustrate what Paul is saying. My all-time favorite basketball player was Pete Maravich. He played his collegiate ball at LSU where he led the nation in scoring three consecutive years. He then went on to play in the NBA for 10 years and was eventually inducted in the Hall of Fame. However, his early life was a disaster. He rejected the gospel and immersed himself in virtually every other religion available at the time. He tried Hinduism, Buddhism, astrology, reincarnation, and astral projection, just to mention a few. He experimented with drugs and became an alcoholic.

Then one evening in 1982, while lying quietly in bed, God visited Pete Maravich in sovereign, saving grace. Pete fell to his knees in repentance and embraced Christ in faith. From that moment on, Pete devoted himself to proclaiming the gospel. In January of 1988, six years after his conversion, he was playing in a pick-up basketball game with James Dobson, of Focus on the Family. At one point, he turned to Dr. Dobson and said, “Boy, I feel great.” He turned again, took one step, and fell to the floor, dead. Doctors were later to report that it was medically inexplicable how Maravich lived to the age of 40. He suffered from a rare heart disease, in addition to which he lacked a left coronary artery. Almost no one, they said, lived beyond the age of 20 with that condition. Far less are they able to play basketball as Pete Maravich did.

I share this story with you because of something we read in Proverbs 16:9 – “The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.” Just like Paul, Pete Maravich had planned out his life. He had planned on traveling the world and sharing his faith in Christ. He had planned on speaking to high school students about the dangers of drug and alcohol. He had planned on spending time with his wife and two young sons. He had planned to have a movie made about his life. He had planned to conduct a promotional tour for his book, *Heir to a Dream*, that had only recently been published. And he had planned later that very day to appear on James Dobson’s radio program, Focus on the Family. But God had another plan.

No one knew this better than the apostle Paul. And that is why he wrote what he did to the Corinthians and what he now writes to the Romans. I’ve many times planned on visiting you, he said. I’ve wanted desperately to come to be in your presence. But until now the Lord has not allowed it. Soon, however, by God’s grace and in accordance with God’s will, says Paul, I hope to arrive in Rome.

You may recall from Romans 1 that Paul there said: “I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented)” (Rom. 1:13). Paul now explains beginning with v. 22 the “reason” for his failure to come to Rome earlier: he had a ministry to fulfill (v. 19). And that ministry, that holy ambition of his, was to preach the gospel where it had not yet been made known. And that region of ministry was “from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum [modern day Albania]” (v. 19). I have for quite some time wanted to come to you, he says, but there was something else that I was bound to accomplish first. It wasn’t because I didn’t care for you Romans. It was because Christ had called me to preach the gospel in regions that had never heard the good news. He will then say in v. 23 that his work in that area is complete and he will soon make his way to Rome.

The word “ambition” has often been misunderstood. Some have taken it to mean that a person is consumed with a selfish goal of promoting their own name or gaining some monetary advantage. But Paul redeems the word. He is not ashamed to say that he was ambitious, but his ambition, his passion, his goal toward which he felt driven, was related to the spread of the gospel. His ambition was to reach the unreached!

Your ambition doesn't have to align with mine. Nor does mine have to align with Paul's. But all of us should be ambitious to accomplish great things for Jesus, but only through the power that Jesus supplies us by means of the Holy Spirit. So Paul makes it clear that he was ambitious to achieve a goal that made it impossible for him to achieve yet another goal. His goal was to get to Rome as soon as possible. But his ambition to preach Christ where the gospel was unknown was more important than his desire to visit Rome.

To make his point, Paul quotes Isaiah 52:15 – “Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.” This raises an important question. If these people had not heard the gospel and knew nothing of the name of Jesus, were they hopelessly doomed and damned? Are they responsible to believe in the name of someone about whom they never heard so much as a word? Paul's answer to this question was given back in Romans 1:18-23.

In v. 19 Paul describes his journey: “from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ.” That's from Jerusalem north through Syria, then farther north and west through the provinces of Asia Minor (Turkey). He would then cross the Aegean Sea and enter Greece on the east side and up the west to northern Italy where Albania is today. He then says in v. 23 that he “no longer” has “any room for work” in those regions. This calls for some explanation.

Paul could hardly mean that he preached to every living soul in those regions, far less that all of them came to saving faith in Jesus. We know from 2 Timothy 4:5 that he exhorts his spiritual son, Timothy, to continue to do the work of an evangelist in Ephesus. I think what Paul is saying is that his work is that of what we might call a “frontier missionary” or perhaps a “pioneer” missionary. He is not primarily a local evangelist. Once churches had been planted in these regions, his work was done. He would now depart and let the believers in those regions continue the work that he initially established.

Paul's explanation for his delay in making his way to Rome (vv. 22-24)

Paul does not specify what “hindered” him from coming to Rome, but it was likely imposed by God and pertained to the call on Paul's life to take the gospel to heretofore unreached people. That seems to be clear from v. 23 where says his work in those regions is now complete and he is finally free to fulfill his desire of many years to visit Rome. But he also wants them to know that Rome is not his final destination. He feels the urge to pass through Rome on his way to Spain. We don't know if Paul ever made it to Spain, but it seems unlikely. However, some point to the words of Clement of Rome, who wrote this in the early years of the 2nd century:

“Paul, having taught righteousness to the whole world, having gone to the limits of the West, and having given testimony before the rulers, thus was removed from the world and taken up into the Holy Place, having become the outstanding model of endurance.”

Some believe Clement’s reference to “the limits of the West” has in view the western part of Europe, Spain in particular. However, before making his way to Rome he has yet another detour along the way. He must first go to Jerusalem.

Paul’s passion to minister to the poor in Jerusalem (vv. 25-29)

But why? This is an incredibly arduous task. If Paul wrote Romans while in Corinth, it would entail a 1,000-mile detour, east, in the opposite direction of Rome. In other words, before traveling to Rome, Paul says he must first travel 1,000 miles to Jerusalem, then 1,000 miles back to Corinth, and then on to Rome. This is simply staggering. What could possibly have happened in Paul’s heart to prompt him to make such an indescribably long, demanding, and dangerous journey of an additional 2,000 miles?

He gives us the answer in v. 25. It was to bring “aid to the saints” in Jerusalem. We don’t know what caused the poverty of the Christians in Jerusalem, but it may be that the church had greatly increased in size, and with increasing numbers of people to feed and widows to care for, their resources were running low. We know that elderly Jewish families migrated to Jerusalem to spend their last days and eventually to be buried there in expectation of the resurrection of the dead. In addition to overpopulation, there was the social and economic ostracism and disinheritance that believers would have suffered. The famine of 46 a.d. also undoubtedly put pressure on everyone (see Acts 11:27-30).

It does raise the question, “Does Paul really want to travel to Rome or not?” He says in v. 23 that for many years he “longed” to visit the church there, so we should take Paul at his word. So, what could possibly be so important that Paul put off his visit to Rome and his visit to Spain? He tells us in vv. 25-28.

The churches in Macedonia and Achaia (both the northern and southern parts of Greece, primarily Philippi and Corinth, where he had planted churches) were determined to do their part in sending money to their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. You can read Paul’s appeal to the church in Corinth in 2 Corinthians 8-9. But why did they feel this pressing burden? He tells us in v. 27. The Gentile Christians in Macedonia and Achaia were spiritually indebted to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. It was from Jerusalem and the Jewish believers there that the gospel had spread to the Gentiles. So, says Paul, “if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings” (v. 27).

So, why doesn’t Paul commission someone else to take the money to Jerusalem? There are several possible reasons. Remember that Paul himself had raised this money from the churches in Philippi and Corinth and his reputation was at stake if all of it didn’t arrive. In 2 Corinthians 9:13 Paul connects this offering to the Jerusalem church with the gospel itself: “By their approval of this service, they [the poor saints in Jerusalem] will glorify God because of your [the Gentiles’] submission flowing from your confession of the gospel of Christ.” As Piper says,

“one of the things at stake in this collection for the poor is the demonstration of what the gospel does to people—it makes them generous. It frees them from the love of money. And so if this collection were to be embezzled by Christians on the way to Jerusalem, it would contradict the very nature of the gospel. Paul is jealous that this not happen. So jealous that for the love of the gospel he puts his own integrity on the line and takes it himself.”

You may also recall what Peter, James, and John said to Paul as recorded in Galatians 2:9-10. He says, “They gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.” It may be that Paul is honoring the request of the other apostles and felt an obligation to see it through personally.

Then there is the issue of Jewish and Gentile unity. By personally taking the money from Gentile Christians to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem, Paul was making a statement about the unity and oneness of the two in the gospel. It was his way of reminding every Gentile believer that their salvation is due to their being grafted into the one olive tree, the covenant God made with Abraham. And Paul wanted every Gentile Christian never to forget this.

Finally, note the two-fold reference to what “pleased” these Gentile churches (in both v. 26 and v. 27). Paul didn’t have to threaten them to give or twist their arms or heap guilt on their heads. They gave spontaneously and joyfully and out of love for their brothers and sisters. And I suspect that Paul wanted the saints in Jerusalem to clearly see and know that he too was “pleased” to participate in their relief, that it wasn’t a perfunctory gesture that for the sake of his own safety he authorized a secondary party to fulfill.

So, on his way to Spain, he will stop in Rome. His purpose for doing so is three-fold. Back in Romans 1:11 he said he hoped to “impart” to them “some spiritual gift to strengthen” them. He also wanted to “be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith” (1:12). Finally, he says in 15:24 that he hopes “to be helped” on his journey by the Roman believers. This undoubtedly means he was hoping that they would provide not only spiritual sustenance but also financial support for his continued missionary efforts.

Conclusion

There are so many practical lessons and takeaways in this passage that I hardly know where to begin. But here are five.

- First, you, like the Romans, are sufficiently equipped to be able to instruct others? Do you? Will you?
- Second, when you speak of your accomplishments for the kingdom of God, do you make it clear that it is what Christ has done through you, rather than what you have done for Christ?
- Third, what is your “ambition” in the Christian life? Yours may well be different from mine and from Paul’s, but you must still have a holy and Christ-exalting ambition.
- Fourth, are you committed to helping pioneer missionaries with your financial support?

➤ Fifth, are you “pleased” and filled with joy when you give to the work of the ministry?