



Christ Working Through His Ministers

Romans 15:14-22

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I'd like to draw your attention this morning to the book of Romans, the fifteenth chapter. We're going to be looking this morning at the middle section of this chapter, verses 14-21. If you have your Bibles with you, I would invite you to open them there as we look together at the Word of God. For the Word of God is completely inerrant, the Word of God is completely authoritative, and the Word of God is completely sufficient. Romans, chapter 15, beginning at verse 14:

“I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another. 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. 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; 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.’

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. Heavenly Father, dear Son, O Holy Spirit, we ask this morning that you would meet us in your Word, that you would bless us and encourage us through the power of your Word, that we would see the Lord Jesus Christ contained in it, that we would know we are your children, that we would know what duty you require of us. So we ask, Lord, that you would bless us this morning and teach us. Fix our eyes upon Jesus. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

This is the last part of the letter to the church at Rome. We have spent a good deal of time in this letter, more than 68 sermons now, looking through what Paul has to say to the church at Rome and to us, and Paul has spent a good amount of this time and a good amount of his effort teaching us about the gospel and about its effects in our lives. Now in this final section he is ending where he began. He's ending on a personal note.

We have spent so much time thinking about what he has taught us we may forget a bit about the church. We might be tempted to think this church was ignorant of basic teaching and that's why Paul had to teach them. We might think they were clumsy in application of the truth and that's why Paul had to, beginning in chapter 12, closely apply the gospel. We might think they were ineffective as a church, so Paul had to call them to task.

But we have to remember at this point how Paul began. Way back in chapter 1, beginning at verse 8, Paul wrote, "First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world." Paul saw this church as a shining light for the gospel. He saw that they understood the truth, that they had grasped Jesus Christ by faith, and they were his partners in the gospel.

As he concludes here, he's going to emphasize what this church is like, but he's also going to emphasize his ministry...his ministry to them and his ministry more broadly. It is Jesus Christ who works through his ministers. Paul takes no credit for what he has done, but he *does* want to bring it to our attention. We should hear him, because we should similarly want to minister to others in the way Jesus calls us to.

This morning, I would like us to see three things from our text. First, we'll look at *Paul's encouragement*, Paul's encouragement of the church at Rome. He reminds them of his opinion of them that is grounded in their testimony. Secondly, we look at *Paul's explanation* as to why he has written this letter and why he has written it in the way that he has.

Then thirdly, we look at *Paul's evangelism*, that Paul's ministry is centered around his evangelism, his love for the lost and his desire that they hear of the Lord Jesus Christ and come to saving faith in him so that Jesus would be glorified. Paul's encouragement, Paul's explanation, and Paul's evangelism.

Paul's Encouragement

Let's begin by looking at Paul's encouragement to the Romans in verse 14. "I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another." Paul says right from the very beginning, "I am satisfied about you." He wants them to know directly what he thinks of them. He doesn't want them to try to deduce it or to come up with an explanation from his teaching earlier in the book.

He wants to tell them straight out that he's satisfied in them, and he wants them to know this is a firm opinion. Just because he's not in Rome doesn't mean he doesn't know who they are, that their testimony hasn't reached his ears. If you wonder how it is that Paul happens to know this church so well, all you need to do is look over at chapter 16 and the number of names Paul lists that they have in mutual acquaintance. Many reports have come to Paul.

The verb here to be *satisfied* means to be convinced or to be sure. Paul is fully persuaded in his own mind and has absolutely no doubts about this opinion of the church at Rome. He is sure of not some *thing*, he is sure of not some *teaching*; he is sure of *them*. This is important as we think about Paul as a minister of the gospel, because true gospel ministers are not primarily concerned about their teaching. They're not primarily concerned about organizations or even their reputation.

True gospel ministers are concerned about people, the people they minister to. So Paul has a fellowship with these believers, even though he has not been among them. Look at how he addresses them: "My brothers." They are a part of his fellowship. They are a part of his family. I think sometimes when we hear the word *brother* used as kind of Christianese or we hear it in the Bible, we don't make much of it. We really should. You have to understand

that Paul was connected to these people, that Paul was willing to risk his life for these people, that Paul loved these people. So he has a fellowship with them.

Then he moves on to the substance of his encouragement. He tells them they have three marks of a true mature Christian. First, he points out a mark of *morality*. He says they are "full of goodness." This might seem a bit odd to us, because isn't Romans a book about the gospel of grace? Hasn't Paul been telling us that Christians are not good but, rather, are the recipients of grace? As a matter of fact, in chapter 3, verse 27, Paul tells them and us that *no* one does good.

So what is Paul doing here? Is he undermining his message of the book of Romans just to simply make the church feel good? Not at all. What Paul is saying is perfectly consistent with his teaching. He is telling them that they show the fruit of the gospel. They have been changed by Jesus and by his work, and they are no longer the same. Now the practice of their lives is lining up with God's Word.

This word *goodness* has a moral quality to it. It is something you can see. It is an interest in the benefit of others. It is a moral quality, but it is a moral quality that does not come from within; it is rather a moral quality that comes from the work of the Holy Spirit. In Galatians 5:22, where Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit, one of that fruit is goodness. It's the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of a Christian. So as Paul talks about this in their lives, he's telling them it's not that it just barely shows up. It's not that it's a very small, almost imperceptible thing.

We might think of this as Paul trying to scratch and find anything he can to encourage them with, and the goodness is kind of like the way your child gets a fever on a day at school. They insist they have a fever, and you get a thermometer, and it says 98.7. Your child says, "Well, I can't go to school now, can I? Because I'm not normal. I'm above temperature." You say, "It's just barely perceptible." Paul says actually the exact opposite. He says they are *full* of goodness. It is characteristic of who they are. When others look at the Romans, they cannot help but see goodness.

The word here for *full* gives us a word picture. It's like a sponge that is soaked with liquid. Can you tell the difference between a dry and a wet sponge? Of course you can, because a wet sponge is filled with liquid. It drips along the counter as you move it. It is obvious that it is filled with water. That's the word Paul uses here. In the Gospels, when Jesus is being crucified and the sponge is being described as "full of vinegar," it's the same word. It's obvious to us.

The second mark Paul uses of them as Christians is *intellectual*. They're not just filled or full of goodness; they are "filled with all knowledge." Obviously, Paul does not mean the Roman church knows everything about everything. This is not the ancient equivalent of Alexa or Siri, that you can ask any question you want and get an answer. What he *is* saying is this is an intellectual quality. These Christians know things. They know important things. They know needful things.

So what is this knowledge they have? Well, stop and think for a moment about the context of the letter. Romans is considered Paul's greatest systematic expression of the gospel and God's grace. What Paul is saying here is that they have a knowledge of the gospel, a knowledge of what Paul has been telling them throughout this letter. They

know about the depths of our sin. They know about the greatness of Jesus' sacrificial work. They know about receiving Christ's righteousness by faith. They know about the Spirit's change in our lives.

After all, what could be more important or a better encouragement than that? Paul is giving them an assurance of their relationship with the Lord, and he reminds them that they know the gospel. The gospel is the one thing that is necessary. So let me ask. Do *you* know the gospel? I don't mean just that you have heard about the gospel. I don't mean just that you could describe the gospel to someone else. I mean do you *know* the gospel? Do you grasp it in your life such that you know it has changed who you are?

As your pastor, I can think of no more important thing, no more encouraging thing to say about you than that you know the gospel. That is essential. But even in the process of telling them that he wants to encourage them about their knowledge, he points them to the work of the Lord. He describes them as being filled with all knowledge. Now, the word here for *filled* is different than the word *full of* previously. They are related, but they're more related in English than they are in Greek.

Full is an adjective; *filled* is a verb. Well, technically, here it's a participle, and you know what a participle is. It's sort of part verb, part adjective put together. It is a way of describing someone using an action word. The idea here is that they have been filled. That's how they are described. They have been filled. They are passively filled with knowledge. The verb here is passive, not active. The emphasis is not on what the Romans *did* to gain this knowledge; the emphasis is on what God has *done* for them.

The third mark Paul describes is a *spiritual* one; that is, spiritual growth that comes from the gospel. He says they are "able to instruct one another." I think this is one of those instances where our translation could confuse us. Not because it's a bad translation, not because this word *instruct* is a bad way to render this Greek verb; it's because we bring a certain presupposition to the word *instruct*. When we think of the English word *instruct*, we think of things like a lecture or imparting information to someone.

We could even think of a formal education. Someone is an instructor. They stand up at the front of a class and convey information to us. *This* word means much more than that. Actually, the primary meaning of this word is to admonish. Now, *admonish* is kind of an old-fashioned word, but it's a good one. It means to warn. It means to counsel someone to avoid an improper action or to avoid a dangerous path they are on, a wrong path.

So it is much more than simply informing someone. It involves pleading, warning, maybe even discipline. This word is used eight times in the New Testament, seven times by Paul, and once by Luke quoting Paul in the book of Acts. It's a very Pauline word. In every other case, our translation, the ESV, translates it to *admonish* or to *warn*. So we can get a good idea about this word by quoting Paul in Acts 20:31. He says to the elders at Ephesus, "Be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears."

What was Paul doing? He was doing more than just giving out information. He was warning them about the danger that would come from inside and outside the church. He warned them or admonished them with tears. He was invested in them. Now this is a great encouragement. Paul is telling the Roman Christians they have the ability to admonish each other.

Now why is that so important? I think the first thing is that it's not an easy thing to do. It's actually one of the hardest things to do well in the church. So often, either we fail to ever warn each other because we are afraid someone might take offense or else we so major on warning we become a busybody, telling someone all the time what they should be doing.

What Paul is describing here is the ability of Christians to be honest with one another; to have each other's interests, their *best* interests, at heart; to help others in spite of the personal cost. Are you able to admonish others? Perhaps more importantly, are you able to be admonished? Do you want to be called to more and more faithfulness to Jesus Christ? That's the task of a minister, and it's often very hard. It's what Paul has been doing in this letter, so he encourages them that they are able to do it as well.

Paul's Explanation

That brings us to the second point: Paul's explanation of what he has been doing in this letter. He's going to tell us not *why* he wrote the letter. He's also not going to give us a *recap* of the letter. Instead, he's going to tell us *how* the letter was written. He says in verse 15, "But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder..."

Paul knows he has tackled some difficult subjects. He knows he has pressed home some hard and sharp commands, and he's not apologetic about that at all. He takes none of it back, but he *does* give context for why he's doing it. He had said, "First, you should be encouraged because you had the great marks of a believer. You are a blessing to me as a church, *but...*" in verse 15.

Whenever we hear a *but*, we're waiting for the criticism to come. Someone says to you, "You are a great worker, *but* you're not very efficient with your time" or someone says, "He's a great quarterback, *but* he doesn't know how to manage a game clock very well." We're looking for a criticism to come here, but Paul's language here is not like that. His *but* is not like that here. There are several Greek words that are used to translate our English word *but*, and *this* is the weakest of them.

As a matter of fact, often it is translated *and*. It's more of a continuation than an adversative. It can be translated *and*, and it often *is* translated that way. What Paul is doing is he is relating his encouragement of them with the letter he has written. What he wants them to see is that this boldness was for their building up and for their encouragement. They go together.

We've seen Paul do something like this before. He's anticipating the argument someone might make with him. Someone could easily say, "Well, Paul, if you're so encouraged by us, why all the hard words in this letter? Why did you have to beat us up over and over again if we're so encouraging to you?" This would be a legitimate concern, because Paul *has* written boldly, sharply at points. He has parts of this letter, for example, where he says, "Don't you know this already?"

You may remember in Romans 6:16 he says, "Don't you know that anyone who presents himself as an obedient slave is the slave of the one he obeys?" "Come on! Really!" You can almost hear the pointedness in Paul's voice there. Then he has other places where he challenges them. The most obvious is in chapter 14, where he discusses

the weak and the strong. We looked at that. He forthrightly told them *and* us that we are not to judge our brothers and sisters.

This steps on toes, because he is telling them not to make laws where the Bible has not spoken. Then he even goes on to tell them that he is one of the strong. Could you imagine if you were one of the people who were described by Paul as weak, how you would feel? You'd think Paul just took you out to the woodshed. That's the last majority vote *you* get in a church committee meeting. Everybody is going to say, "Well, you know, Paul says you're weak."

Now why did Paul do this? Why did he write on *some* points very boldly? There's no mistake about this. Paul is telling us he was audacious. He does not try to downplay it. He's not just bold; he says he's *very* bold. Paul wrote this way because God had given him the grace to be a minister. Do you remember all the way back at the beginning of this letter, in chapter 1, verse 5, Paul said he had received grace?

And do you remember we said that was not just the grace he received of salvation; that was the grace he received to be a minister of the gospel, to bring the gospel to the world, to be a preacher, to be a church planter, to be a missionary? He was who he was by the grace of God. So what Paul is saying here is he has the boldness to do what he is doing because God has called him to do it.

This is what we might term a *holy boldness*. He comes as a servant of the Lord. He comes with humility, and that's because if you don't have that attitude of humility, your boldness will not be holy, but your ministers must be able to speak with boldness. They must be able to call you to repentance. They must be able to point out where God's Word says what is true is true. That's why they're ministers, after all.

There are also two sides to every discussion. I don't mean the pro and the con; I mean the one who speaks and the one who hears. The hearer is just as important as the speaker. Paul's explanation takes up both these parts: not only why he was bold to speak but how he could speak boldly to those who were hearing. The listener must be willing to hear. If the ears are closed up, the volume of the mouth doesn't matter. Even more, if the heart is closed up, the number of words and the volume of words matters even less.

Paul reminds the Romans *and* us that he could speak boldly because not only of the grace given to *him* but the grace *they* had. He does this in an interesting and stark, we might even say *bold* way. He says he is a "minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God." This is very unusual language. Paul doesn't normally use this, but there's no mistaking it. The word actually means the work of a priest. That's what *priestly service* is.

Now, as good Presbyterians, we might think it's wrong to talk about priests. After all, we have pastors, not priests. Right? There's only one mediator between God and man, and that is Jesus Christ. There is no human priest who stands between a sinner and God. So we might say, "Paul, what on earth are you talking about?" What we need to do is keep reading on in verse 16 to understand.

Paul says his priestly service is to the end that the Gentiles might be brought to God, that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. He says that the Gentiles might be brought acceptable

and sanctified to God. Where have we heard that language before...*acceptable to God, sanctified*? In Romans 12:1-2 where Paul tells us we are to commit ourselves as living sacrifices, that we would be holy and acceptable to God.

What Paul is saying here is that the work of God in our lives, the manifestation of his grace in our lives, the consummation of the salvation we have that has been brought to us has brought us to God as acceptable and sanctified, and it comes about in part through God's work through his ministers. Paul is saying he knows God is at work in them, and because of that, they can hear and *will* hear what he says so boldly to them. Why? Because it comes from God, and they know what comes from God is for their good, even if it's hard for them to hear at times.

Do you have the grace to hear hard things? Hard things from your pastors. Are you willing to love boldness even when it exposes *your* sinfulness, not just the sinfulness of others? Are you willing to hear hard things from your spouse, to listen and to work on improving your marriage by God's grace? Or are you ready to give up? Are you done with hard things because, after all, they're hard?

Well, here is a bold statement: God does not let his children give up. They have no need to. He is at work in them. It does not depend on you; it depends on God. That is the hope you have when bold, difficult matters come to you. Trust the Lord and listen to him.

Paul's Evangelism

Well, we have seen Paul's encouragement of the church at Rome, and we've seen his explanation of why he has written boldly to them. Now we see Paul wrap up this section by pointing to the bigger picture of his ministry. He does this again by making a bold statement in verse 17. He says, "In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God."

You can see the boldness of this statement if we were to translate the word *proud* by the word *boast*. That's another way to translate this word. It's a perfectly fine translation. That might be confusing to you, and that confusion may be the reason the authors of the ESV translated it as *proud* rather than *boast*, to avoid confusion, but I want to make the point here.

After all, Paul had written in chapter 3 using this exact same word. He said that all boasting is done away with. It is excluded, he says in Romans 3:27. Boasting is excluded by what kind of law? By the law of grace. So has Paul now changed his mind? Is boasting now okay when it wasn't before? Or is it okay maybe for ministers to boast, just not other Christians? Well, if we look closely, we'll see that Paul is boasting in a very particular way.

He starts out by saying, "In Christ Jesus..." This confirms he is not taking credit for himself. His boast comes in the context of being in Christ, being dependent on Christ. Then in verse 18, he makes it crystal clear. He says, "I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me..." He will not dare to talk about a single thing in his ministry except that which gives glory to Jesus. *That* is the glory of the ministry. It is Jesus' glory.

Now think about that for a moment. Are you involved in ministry...ministry in the church, ministry in your home, ministry in your neighborhood? Who gets the glory for that ministry? That is, why do you do what you do?

Who gets the credit? Who is front and center? If we're honest, we often want it to be ourselves. We want to be front and center. We want to be the ones who are congratulated, who are thanked, but Paul is telling us... Now this is Paul, perhaps the greatest minister in all of history. Paul is telling us that all of the glory has to go to Jesus. He won't speak of anything else.

Do you long to glorify Jesus? That is the only way you will ever have an effective ministry. Ministry exists to glorify Jesus. It should not surprise us, then, that because the glory of ministry is *for* God that the power of ministry comes *from* God. Look at how Paul describes this in verse 19. "...by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God..." All that Christ has accomplished through Paul, in word and deed, comes by the power of God, and he describes it first in the context of his day: by signs and wonders.

Now, these are technical words that are used in the Bible. They are used to describe the confirming works of God, confirming his messenger, that his servants are working in his power, and the place where this phrase is used most often is in the time of the exodus. Over and over again, this phrase is used to describe how God *did* that, but the exodus was accomplished through the work of Moses and Aaron.

Now why was it done that way? It was done that way, through signs and wonders performed by Moses and Aaron, so the people would see that Moses and Aaron had a ministry committed to them by God. They were marked out as ministers of God's grace. Paul carries it now, then, into *our* day by a more generic phrase that applies, where he says "by the power of the Holy Spirit."

I wonder here. That is the power of ministry today. That is the manifestation of God's power, the work of the Holy Spirit, yet it is far too often, in our day and age, where people downplay the power of the Spirit in favor of signs and wonders. It's as if somehow, unless there are signs and wonders, God is absent and the Holy Spirit is sitting this one out. We need to understand it is the power of the Holy Spirit that makes *any* ministry work.

The Spirit gives power to preaching. The Spirit gives power to witnessing. The Spirit gives power to encouraging. It is the work of the Spirit in your life as you minister to others that is true power. God is at work in our ministry. Never think it is up to you. Never think that God is on the sidelines. It is *his* power that accomplishes the ministry of the gospel.

Lastly, Paul tells us what the goal of ministry is. This is the reason he has written to the Roman believers. It's the reason he has strained in the ministry. It's what he hopes for in all of his work. He says, "I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I should build on someone else's foundation..."

What Paul is saying here is that he wants to preach the gospel where it has not been, where it has never been heard. He wants the lost to hear about the work and person of Jesus. Paul is *not* saying here that the only real ministry is to go to a place where they've never heard the gospel and share it with them. If I thought that, I wouldn't be standing up here right now. After all, Paul also told us in 1 Corinthians 3, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase."

So we know, broadly speaking, there are those who plant, there are those who water, and Jesus in the gospel tells us there are those who reap. There are different aspects of this ministry. Paul is saying that is *his* calling. He was called to bring the gospel to a people who had not heard it. Now, if you stop for a moment and think about it, this is remarkable. You see, God took a Pharisee, a Jew of the Jews, and he sent him to Gentiles.

Paul knew the Bible in and out. He was a Hebrew master, and God sent him to people who had never held a Bible, who didn't know any Hebrew. Paul knew all of the ritual washings. He knew all of the days of observance. He knew everything about the history of Israel, and God sent him to people who not only didn't know; they didn't care. That's where God sent him.

Do you see what God does, *why* he does this? It shows that the power is of God. If the book of Acts were full of Paul teaching Hebrew lessons and leading people to a pharisaical understanding of the law, then we would say, "You know, Paul is pretty equipped for this," but instead, the book of Acts is about Paul talking to Gentiles, to pagans who know nothing about God, and planting churches and raising up people for the glory of Jesus Christ.

So who can get the credit for that? It's only God. Why does Paul do this? It's so Jesus would be named and so those who had never heard would understand. The goal of Paul's ministry is that sinners would be redeemed so they would worship Jesus. That's the goal of *all* ministry: that God's people would be called to himself and they would give glory to Jesus.

The goal of ministry is that sinners would come to know and worship Jesus Christ. Do you know this? Is that *your* goal? Do you see God working in *your* life to bring others to know Jesus? Is your life a testimony to God's grace? May the Lord bless us with *this*, that others would see Jesus in us and come to know him, to trust him, to be forgiven, and to worship him, because Jesus is worthy of worship.