



The Unity of Jesus’ Church

Romans 15:23-33

Rev. Fred Greco

I would like to draw your attention to the book of Romans, the fifteenth chapter. We're going to be looking this morning at the last section of chapter 15. We are rapidly approaching the end of our journey in the book of Romans. We have just this week and then two more weeks in chapter 16, and then we will move on from this marvelous book. Before we take up a new book in the new year, we'll be doing a short series during the time of Advent on the coming of the Messiah, looking specifically at several of the Old Testament prophecies that predict the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ as the Messiah.

For this morning, our text is Romans 15:22-33. If you have your Bibles with you, I would invite you to join me and give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, and the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative. Romans 15, beginning at verse 22:

“This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while. At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints.

For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you. I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.

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. May the God of peace be with you all. Amen.”

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. Heavenly Father, we ask that you would, by the power of your Spirit, impress your Word upon our hearts. As we study your Word, Lord, open our eyes. Open our eyes so that we might see the Lord Jesus Christ, that we might see his worth, that we might be blessed, that we might understand that we are his people and that he has called us to himself. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

As we come now to the end portion of the book of Romans, you will notice that this part of the book does not have as much substantive teaching as the rest of it, but the end of the book *does* help us to understand why the book was written in the first place. Now, we might have expected or we might have even *wanted* Paul to write an independent dissertation on the teaching of the gospel, but that's not Paul's way.

Paul was not just a student or a teacher of the gospel; he was an active proponent of the gospel. He was constantly at work to see the gospel spread and take root in the lives of people. So Paul here describes aspects of the unity of the church that Jesus has formed. He wanted the Roman believers to know the true gospel so they would know they were indeed a part of Jesus' church.

So this morning, we see three things about the unity of Jesus' church. First, we see *unity in mission*. The people of God are united by the mission God has given to them. Secondly, we see *unity in assistance*. The people of God show their unity by supporting each other and assisting each other. Then thirdly, we see *unity in prayer*. Prayer brings us not only to God but brings us closer to each other. Unity in mission, unity in assistance, and unity in prayer.

Unity in Mission

Let's begin, then, by looking at Paul's first point: *unity in mission*. As Paul begins this section in verse 22, he repeats what he has already told us way back at the beginning of the book in chapter 1, verse 13. He had wanted to come and visit the church at Rome, but he had been hindered from doing so. Now, arriving at Rome is not a passing thought for Paul. He had never been to Rome, but he had a deep connection to that church there.

There is a strong word he uses to describe his desire to come to them. He *longed* to come to them. It was a deep desire. It was something that gripped him. It was something that also had staying power. He had longed for many years to go to them, but over and over again, Paul had been prevented from going to Rome. So, we might ask the question... *What hindered him?* What stopped him from fulfilling his plan and his desire?

We might think about opposition from his enemies. Perhaps they stood in his way, but there's actually no indication of that in the accounts of Acts. Paul pretty much went where he wanted to go. He had difficulties, but he was not stopped. We might think, instead, that he may not have believed himself up to the task, that he couldn't take on such a monumental mission, but there's not even the slightest indication of that in anything Paul writes.

The difficulty is when we think of hindrances, we think of negatives, we think of problems, we think of things that are in the way, but that's actually not the case here. Paul tells us in verse 23 what hindered him. It was the priority of the mission of the gospel. It came first, even above Paul's strong desire to be at Rome. He says in verse 23, "But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain."

Now the situation has changed. Paul highlights that for us. He says that *was* the case. "I've been hindered, but now things are different." What has changed, Paul tells us, is that he no longer has any room. He no longer has any needful opportunity in these regions; that is, the regions we see in verse 19 of Jerusalem and Illyricum... basically, all of eastern Europe and Asia. He has been freed from that by God, so now he is free to go to the saints at Rome.

God has given him a resolution with the task he was appointed to, and now he can move on. He couldn't do that before. As much as he wanted to go to Rome, the gospel came first. Do you view *your* life like that? What comes first in *your* life? Is it the acquiring of things? We're about to enter a season in which one of the great challenges we have is coming up with a list of things to tell others to buy us. Is it that you want your skills or your accomplishments to be recognized by others? Or perhaps what you desire is peace and comfort. Maybe that's what motivates you and you think about first.

Well, Paul tells us what drove *him* was the priority of Jesus' mission. Nothing else got in the way of that. Now, what would church be like if we all lived like that? I don't mean that we all would have to pack our bags and go off on a foreign missions trip. That's not what I mean. I mean, what if the most important thing in your life was to know and share the gospel with your children, with your family, with your friends? What if that weren't just a good thing to do but a burden you could not put down? That's what a true priority looks like.

The priority of this mission was not just for Paul, however. Paul could have easily taken that burden upon himself, and he could have excused the Romans and that church from their involvement in this mission. He could have said something like, "You'll have to forgive me for not coming, but after all, I'm the one who's an apostle, and I'm called to a higher calling. Because Jesus met me on the road to Damascus and gifted me to teach, I have to prioritize my life in accordance with his mission, but I don't need to burden *you* with that."

The amazing thing is that Paul *doesn't* do that. In fact, he does the opposite. He draws the Roman church into partnership with him. Paul gets this across in a fascinating way. Look at verse 24. "I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while."

What we expect Paul to say is, "Now I'm freed from my obligations in Greece and Asia, and now I'm going to come to Rome, and I'm going to be with you," but he doesn't say exactly that, does he? He says he has hopes to come to them, but he is coming with a purpose. There's a very instructive phrase he uses to describe himself as he is seeing them. He says that it will be "in passing."

This word is used a few times in the New Testament by Luke, and it is a verb that means to pass through a place. The whole idea here is that there is no intention to stay. One example of this is when Jesus is described as passing through the villages on his way to Jerusalem. He is going through the villages, he is seeing the villages, he is meeting people, but he has no intention of staying there. His purpose is to go to Jerusalem. They are on the way. They are a way station, as it were.

There's no doubt that although Paul wants to see the Romans... He's very clear about that. He has mentioned it several times. He wants to enjoy their company. He wants to be filled with joy by being around them. This is no obligatory visit. You know what an obligatory visit is, don't you? You plan to take some in the next month and a half. Some of us, perhaps, have three Thanksgiving dinners, because you have Thanksgiving, but you have to go to Uncle Joe's house. You just have to. Then you have to go to Grandma's house, and then you just have to go to Aunt Mary's house. Why? Because you *have* to. It's obligatory. That's not what Paul is saying here about his trip to Rome. It's not "Check the box. If we don't do this, we'll get in trouble." That's not what he means here.

But the enjoyment, Paul says, will only be for a while. It's in part. It's not permanent. That's because Paul has something else to do. This is where he draws the believers at Rome into partnership with him in mission. The way he phrases it is very subtle. It's not over the top at all. He actually sandwiches it between his hope and his enjoyment in verse 24. It's the phrase "...and to be helped on my journey there by you."

He's going to see them. It's going to be in passing, because he has somewhere else to go. He is going to Spain, and he needs their help for that mission. He wants that mission to be *their* mission. He wants them to partner with him. This is not unlike the way the missionaries of Christ Church partner with our church. We have missionaries. You see their names in the bulletin. We highlight them on Sunday evenings. We send out prayer requests regarding them.

The substance of our mission work is much more than the session voting to send a certain amount of funds to them and handing it over to the treasurer and the bookkeeper to cut the checks. We partner with them *in* their mission. We get updates from them so we can pray particularly for them. We send teams to go visit and assist them. Our missions committee (you may or may not know this) sends greetings to all of our missionaries on all of their birthdays and all of their anniversaries to let them know we're thinking particularly of them.

When they are home in the United States, we invite them to come to us and share what the Lord is doing and to fellowship with us, because we want to partner *with* them. That's what Paul is describing here. The verb he uses is translated by several words: *helped on my journey*. That's actually only one Greek word. It means more than just to help. It *does* mean to help, but it means *more* than that.

Paul *does* want their assistance. That's the pattern of his ministry. The church in Antioch, for example, sponsored him and helped him in his mission to Greece, but now that he's going farther away, all the way over to Spain, he wants the help of the Romans. He wants them to be his sending agency, to use a modern term. He wants them to be involved in the mission.

Now it makes sense why Paul is writing this letter. Have you ever wondered about that? Why does Paul write this comprehensive theological masterpiece about the gospel? There were no controversies in Rome like there were in Galatia. There were no moral troubles in Rome like there were in Corinth. There were no false teachings coming in from outside like there were in Colossae. Paul just simply takes up the topic of a systematic exposition of the gospel.

So why does Paul sit down to write all this? It's not like he had a lot of time on his hands. The reason he wrote all this was to explain "my gospel," Paul says in chapter 2, verse 16. He wanted to explain "my gospel" to them so they would know what he was bringing to Spain. He wanted them to get onboard to see that it was not only *his* gospel but it was also *their* gospel that they needed to be on a mission for.

This is a challenge for us. Do you love to study the Bible? Do you love to study theology? Do you enjoy hearing about the gospel and its power? If so, what do you do with that? Do you read and listen only so you will be built up? Paul reminds us when we hear and love the gospel we are to remember to take it to others. Paul had a passion

for the mission of world missions. He wanted that passion to be found in the Romans, and he wants it for *you*, today.

Unity in Assistance

Are you eager to join in that partnership, to know that the gospel is not just for *you* but for the whole world? Well, that is the first show of unity: unity in mission. Paul then moves on to a second show of unity: *unity in assistance*. He writes that he hopes to see the Romans soon and to be helped by them, but it is not going to happen just yet. We say, "Wait a minute, Paul. I thought we just heard you say God had set you free from the work in Greece and Asia. Why aren't you going on to Rome?"

Well, he explains this in verse 25. "At present, however, [right now,] I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints." This seems very odd. He wants to go ultimately to Spain, with Rome being on the way, and he says, "I'm on my way to Jerusalem." It's in completely the other direction. Look at a map. Spain is on the very west of the known world. Beyond Spain, all there is is a vast ocean. The citizens of the Roman Empire would not have known about America or any of our continent. Jerusalem is on the far *eastern* side of the empire. Paul is going backward. If he wanted to go to Spain, he's going in the wrong direction.

You have to remember that travel in the ancient world was hard and long. There was no equivalent of what we have in our modern air travel of going from Houston to Virginia by way of Chicago, just because that's the way the airlines are flying today. No. Paul is headed to Jerusalem. Why? He tells us. He is bringing aid to the saints. He is ministering to the saints there. More literally, we might translate this word, he is "deaconing" to the saints.

The churches in Greece had taken up a contribution, we read in verse 26, for the poor saints in Jerusalem, so Paul is going to deliver it. That is another way in which we see the unity of Jesus' church as they serve each other. Those saints in Macedonia and Achaia would not have known the poor people in Jerusalem. They would likely have never even have been to Jerusalem or even to that part of the world. They also would have known of their *own* needs. It's not as if this was easy assistance for them to give.

We know from 2 Corinthians, chapter 8, that Paul describes the churches in Macedonia as being in severe test of affliction and being in extreme poverty, yet these churches gave according to their means, Paul says, which he describes as overflowing in a wealth of generosity on their part. These churches are serving saints they've never met, and the only reason they do this is the commonality they have in Jesus. Is service on *your* mind? When you are blessed materially, does it come into your mind about how you can help others?

We talk about giving a tithe and applying that to our ordinary income and perhaps even, over the top, applying it to unusual blessings that come our way, whether they be bonuses or a business success, but is that at the forefront of your mind or is it something you think about *after* the fact? God is calling you not to make it an afterthought to help others. He wants you to seek out opportunities...with your treasure, yes, but also with your time and your talent. Are you ready to show the unity you have with other believers by serving them?

Then we may ask, "Why is *Paul* bringing this gift?" Does Paul not trust others to bring this contribution to Jerusalem? Is he afraid that it will be wasted or lost? Surely there have to be other competent people who can handle

this. We know Paul has planted these churches, so we know they are good Presbyterian churches. They have elders and they have deacons. They have people who are in charge of this. Here at Christ Church, we have our own mercy fund. It is under the control of our deacons.

When a saint needs the kind of assistance Paul is describing, they meet with the deacons. It's possible that a pastor could sit in on the meeting, especially if there's pastoral counsel that's needed, but it's not required, and very often, the deacons handle this alone. They are competent and gifted in this area, and they are called to that work by the church. So why is Paul taking this on, especially when he has other important work to do? He has just told us, "I want to get to Rome and to Spain." Why is he headed in the wrong direction?

After all, isn't the establishment of new churches in a mission field (that is, Spain) more important than handing out some assistance to poor people? Wouldn't strengthening the church in the capital of the Roman Empire be more important than counting out dollars for widows? Why is Paul doing this? Paul tells us why he's undertaking this personally. He's doing it because it shows the unity of the body of Christ.

There is something more than money and relief at stake here. It goes beyond the giving of material assistance. Now, no mistake. The assistance *is* needed, and the Greek churches are glad to help in that. Paul tells us not once but twice that they are pleased to do it. The word *pleased* here implies a satisfaction of heart, a readiness to take this on. It's the same word that's used by the Father when he says, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." There's a satisfaction of soul involved here.

The first way Paul's ministry here shows the unity of the body is it shows the connection made by the gospel ministry. Paul says these Gentile Christians owe it to the Jewish Christians. Now what does he mean by that? How can someone owe someone else assistance? Paul explains it in verse 27. He says, "For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings." The Gentiles have received spiritual blessings from these Jewish Christians.

You remember that Paul said there were many advantages to the Jew. They had the promises. They had the patriarchs. They had the worship. The gospel went forth out of Jerusalem. The very first church was in Jerusalem. All of the other Christians around the world are only Christians because the Christians in Jerusalem took the faith out to the world. Because they are blessed in this way, Paul says, it makes sense to take every opportunity to repay that debt, and the most obvious way at the moment is by meeting a material need.

The second way is by showing the results of gospel ministry, that the gospel is about more than the forgiveness of individual sinners. The gospel, that gospel Paul has been writing about, is about Jesus gathering for himself a people... a people who have been forgiven of their sins, but a gathered people. In the gathering of that people, Jesus has broken down all barriers.

He has broken down the barrier of sin. He has broken down the barrier of ethnic division. He has broken down the barrier of suspicion and hatred. He has brought together both Jew and Gentile into one new race: the Christian. What better way to acknowledge the unity of the body of Christ than to show the joy and love of previously divided people for each other?

Unity in Prayer

We now come to the final way Paul shows us the unity of Jesus' church: prayer. He begins in verse 30 with a request...actually, more of an appeal for prayer. "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..." The language he uses is striking. He *appeals* to them. That means he begs them. He pleads with them. He implores them. The idea is almost one of desperation, of earnest asking.

The first thing that should strike us about this is that Paul knows an awful lot about prayer. He has been teaching us a lot about prayer in this letter. It is very significant when someone who knows so much about prayer asks so directly and so forcefully *for* prayer. He asks them for a very personal and very practical request. He says in verse 31, "...that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints."

We know, because we have the book of Acts, that Paul needed these prayers. We know that he did indeed face dangers from unbelievers in Judea. Acts recounts that. If the unbelievers had had their way, they would have murdered him. They tried several times. Paul also knew he was doing something dangerous. You may recall in Acts, chapter 20, he tells the church at Ephesus that he has been given a sense by the Holy Spirit that in every city imprisonment and afflictions await him.

It is in this instance we see why prayer is very important. You see, our first thought about prayer is that it's important so the thing will turn out okay, so that Paul will not have problems. That's how we think about prayer, often. We ask people to pray for our health because we want to get better. We ask people to pray for our relationships because we want them to be restored, but there is more to prayer than that. Prayer binds us together as Jesus' people.

Look at how Paul describes this request: "That you would strive together with me in your prayers." This verb *strive together* is a verb that is often used of athletes, and as soon as I tell you what it is in Greek, you'll understand it. It is to agonize. It is to put forth all effort. It's that kind of exercise that after you're done doing it, your muscles are sore and you just want to sit, put your feet up, and get something cold to drink, because it seems like every part of your body hurts. You pushed yourself to the limit, and then some. That's how Paul wants them to pray with him.

He wants them to partner with him in prayer, to be united with him in prayer. Not just cursorily, not just put it down on a list and pray for 10 or 15 seconds in a morning; he wants them to struggle in prayer that this would come about, to feel about this mission and to pray with him like *he* is praying. That kind of prayer binds us together. If we know that kind of prayer, if we pray for people in that kind of way, we do more than just bring a request to God. We're committed to them. We're in community with them. We know we are a family with them.

Do you think about prayer that way? When you pray for others, do you understand that the specific requests actually reflect the greater relationship you have with other Christians? When you ask others to pray for you, does it deepen your relationship with them? Or are you, instead, just trying to gather together resources so things will help you in times of trouble? This is why prayer is so powerful. Prayer reminds us of our connection with God but even also our connection with each other. Even the apostle Paul was not afraid to acknowledge he needed other believers. Prayer reminds us that we are not alone.

There is also a second type of prayer request, one that Paul makes beyond the personal. He shares kingdom requests with them. Paul was not just thinking about his personal safety in his request. You may recall that over and over again Paul says he's willing to suffer, be beaten, even die for the gospel. Now he's praying that he would be kept safe from the unbelievers, that he would be delivered from unbelievers in Judea. Why does Paul ask for this? There's a reason he wants to be delivered from the unbelievers, and that's so he would be free to minister in Jerusalem.

Paul wants his service to be acceptable to the saints. Think about that for a moment. Why would he ask them to pray for *that*? What poor person would turn down assistance? There's more to it than that. Paul doesn't want them just to receive it; he wants them to receive it in the right way so that his purpose in bringing it would be fulfilled. Remember, Paul is concerned about more here than just material assistance. He wants to bring together in a show of unity Gentile and Jewish believers, so he asks for prayer, that this kingdom purpose would be fulfilled.

Then he comes back around to his visit to Rome. He wants them to pray for his success in Jerusalem so that then, after he's successful, he can come to Rome and then, remember, go on to Spain. He wants to keep that kingdom purpose in front of believers. He prays that as a result of this fulfillment he would know the joy, the fellowship, and the peace of being with the believers at Rome, both in specific and in general.

Now, it should not be lost on you the irony of how Paul's prayer is answered. Paul's prayer *is* answered. He's delivered from the unbelievers. He makes his way to Rome after a shipwreck, after attack by poisonous snakes, and in chains. For two years he's imprisoned. God answers his prayer, just not exactly the way Paul or the believers at Rome would have drawn it up.

You see, prayer is not about God giving us what we want; prayer is about our communion with God and our laboring with each other, the unity of Christ's church gathering together and knowing that God's will is supreme. That's what Paul says in verse 32: "...so that by God's will..." Paul is as much as saying, "I hope God does it *this* way, but whatever his will is, that's what I'm for." We see that in the book of Acts.

There's a very interesting thing about this that I picked up this week from Sinclair Ferguson. Paul begins this passage by saying he was hindered in going to Rome. Do you know when Paul arrives at Rome what the very last words of the book of Acts are? Paul is there at Rome, living two whole years at his own expense, "proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance."

That's not a coincidence. God answered his prayer in a way that would build up the church at Rome, that would build up the body of Christ, and that would unite Paul with others. Paul reminds the Romans and us that the gospel is about more than personal forgiveness; it is about the Lord Jesus Christ redeeming a people for himself. When we understand this, we understand that we are to work for the unity of Jesus' church. Paul has given us a great reminder to work for that unity.

Do you have a desire, like Paul's, to see the gospel spread throughout the world? That is the church's mission. Are you willing to serve others for the furtherance of the gospel? Do you pray and ask for prayer for this mission, that it would go forward? Fix your eyes on Jesus. Seek *his* glory, and labor so that more and more in our community would come to know and worship Jesus.