

“What Christ Has Accomplished”

Sermons on Romans # 36

Texts: Romans 15:14-16:16; Isaiah 52:1-15

Having finished the main body of his letter to the church in Rome, and completed his discussion of a number of lofty doctrinal themes, Paul now turns to more mundane matters as he wraps up his epistle to the Romans. Paul informs his reader of his earnest desire to visit the church in Rome, but explains that thus far has been prevented from doing so. Then, there are some practical matters to which Paul must attend—the commendation of Phoebe, the woman who will deliver this letter to Rome, as well as personal greetings to be extended to a number of friends and acquaintances living in the city. Lest we forget Paul’s letter to the church in Rome is not a lecture on Christian doctrine, but a pastoral letter to church which Paul has never visited although, as we will see, he is certainly familiar with many of its members.

We now come to the final section of the Book of Romans—Paul’s concluding remarks—as the apostle wraps up his theological discussion and exhortations regarding some of the pressing pastoral problems facing this particular church. Having completed this discussion, Paul describes his personal situation and discusses his plans for the future, specifically as they relate to the church in Rome.¹ This final section is in many ways an expansion of the remarks made back in Romans 1:8-15 when Paul opened this epistle by expressing, in part, his reasons for writing. Now Paul goes on to express his confidence in the members of this church because the maturity of the Roman Christians will enable them to capably handle some of the difficult issues he has raised. Indeed, the very nature of this discussion requires Paul to explain his role as apostle to the Gentiles as well as offer the reason as to why it is that his apostolic duties have prevented him from visiting Rome thus far, although it is certainly his earnest desire to do so if he is able to make a future visit to Spain.

But before he can go on to Spain and stop in the city of Rome on the way, the apostle must return to Jerusalem with the proceeds of an offering for the poor Jewish Christians in that city collected from among the Gentile churches in Macedonia and Achaia. In the midst of this discussion of his future plans, we find yet another Pauline prayer-wish—a prayer in which Paul exhorts the Christians in Rome by allowing them to overhear that for which he is praying. Next, in the opening verses of chapter 16, Paul goes on to mention a woman named Phoebe, who serves as the bearer of this letter to the church in Rome. Then in verses 3-15, Paul extends his greetings to a list of individuals in the Roman church with whom he is familiar before exhorting them to great one another in the Lord. Finally, in verses 17-27 (our subject the next Lord’s Day), Paul gives one final piece of pastoral advice to the church, before warning the Roman Christians to be on their guard against false teachers and exhorting them to live up to their outstanding reputation among the churches.

And so with that brief bit of overview in mind, we now turn to our text (Romans 15:14-22), where Paul discusses his particular calling as apostle to the Gentiles.

Paul has already written that he is aware of the Roman congregation’s great faith in the promises of God and redeeming work of Christ. In Romans 1:8, Paul wrote: “*First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ*

¹ See the summary in Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, II.749-750.

for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world.” Apparently, the Roman church was thriving and news of this had spread throughout the churches. It was a significant thing after all, that a Christian church was established in the very heart of the Roman empire. And so as he wraps up this letter, Paul warmly reminds his readers (his “brothers”) of his continuing faith in God’s work in their midst. If God has begun a good work, he will certainly see it through to completion. The apostle fully expects that their current struggles will ultimately lead to a favorable outcome.² Thus Paul writes in verse 14, *“I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another.”*

Because Paul has already addressed a number of weighty and important matters with the Roman Christians, some of them may feel as though Paul is rebuking them, but this is not the case. Paul has heard of their great faith. He is confident that what he has heard is in fact true. This is why Paul speaks of the goodness (better, “fullness”) of the members of this church, who are knowledgeable of the basics of the Christian faith and who are therefore fully competent to instruct one another about any of the theological matters discussed in this letter. Paul expects that the members of this church will be able to digest and respond to the various issues which Paul has raised with them—hence his assertion of his confidence in his readers to carry out and profit from his instructions.³

Because of his confidence in the Roman Christians, Paul, as the apostle to the Gentiles, has been able to be direct and forthright with this congregation. He has not pulled any punches with the Romans. As he states in verses 15-17, *“I have written you quite boldly on some points, as if to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God.”* Paul has not minced any words, writing boldly (literally “audaciously”—τολμηρότερον) so as to remind the Romans of the truth of these various points, and while doing so, to explain some of the nuances and flesh out the ramifications of things the Romans probably already embraced. Paul has been able to instruct them as he has only because God’s grace has enabled him to do so.

In fact, it is because of God’s grace that Paul has been made a minister (servant) of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. While Paul never renounced his Jewish heritage, he also saw the importance of being all things to all men for the sake of the gospel, so that by all means, Paul might be able to see as many as possible come to faith in Jesus Christ (cf 1 Corinthians 9:19 ff).⁴ Notice too, that Paul sees the proclamation of the gospel in priestly terms (“a priestly duty”). This is a rare expression in the New Testament and means something like Paul preached the gospel “at a great sacrifice.” The divine purpose which results from Paul’s own personal sacrifice is that the Gentiles (formerly strangers and aliens—according to Ephesians 2:11-22) might become an acceptable sacrifice unto God, in that they now offer themselves to God and his service, in such a way that they are sanctified—or regarded as “holy.”

This would have been a significant point in Paul’s polemic against those Jews who regarded Gentiles as

² The fact that the verb (Πέπεισμαι) is in the perfect tense, indicates that Paul is confident that the Roman Christians will endure (Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 508).

³ Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 509.

⁴ Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 511.

“unclean” and not part of God’s redemptive purposes. Through the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, even “unclean” Gentiles are transformed into people who offer themselves as a holy sacrifice unto the God of Israel.⁵ Thus Paul can truly glory in what God has done in making him—who, from a human perspective the most unlikely of candidates—into the apostle to the Gentiles. Paul has been privileged to witness the great harvest among the Gentiles, the great promise of the messianic age.

Paul clearly believes whatever success that has accompanied his ministry is due to the power of Jesus Christ. Accordingly, Paul offers the following explanation in verses 18-19: *“I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done—by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ.”* Because he has been commissioned directly by Jesus Christ, Paul is careful to speak only of those things associated with the gospel that Christ has commissioned him to preach and through which Christ has accomplished many great and wonderful things. Paul will not even venture to speak of those things not related to the gospel.

The result of this proclamation of Christ crucified is that the Gentiles obey God—they believe the gospel which God has accompanied by signs and wonders and proclaimed through the power of the Holy Spirit. Recall that throughout the Book of Acts, signs and wonders confirm the truth of the gospel. From Jerusalem to Illyricum (modern day Bosnia/Serbia/Albania), wherever Paul has been, he has proclaimed that gospel revealed to him by Jesus Christ. As a result of what Christ has accomplished through his own preaching, there are new churches throughout this entire area (Southern Europe, Asia Minor and Palestine). Thus Paul’s confidence in the success of the evangelistic enterprise lies in the fact that the Holy Spirit works through the proclamation of the word. This is why Paul regards preaching of the gospel as essential to his ministry as apostle to the Gentiles. God not only determines the ends (who will be saved). He has also ordained the means by which he will save them—the preaching of the gospel.

In verse 20, Paul writes, *“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.”* It is clear that Paul desires to preach primarily in those places where the gospel has never been proclaimed before. He views his job as planting new seed, not watering. Paul’s ministry is that of evangelism and church planting. This is Paul’s calling. Unlike his co-worker in Corinth, Apollos, whose ministry was teaching the saints how to defend the Christian faith from the Old Testament, Paul is a church-planter, one who plants, not one who stays and waters and tends the crop. And yet, when an established church like the church in Rome needs his help, as the Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul is willing to come and help out in any way possible. Thus he writes this epistle and expresses his desire to visit.

But Paul knows that all of this depends upon God’s sovereign purposes. *“Rather, as it is written: ‘Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand.’ This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you.”* Citing from Isaiah 52:15 (our Old Testament lesson), Paul sees this proclamation of the gospel to those who have not yet heard the name of Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s great prophecy about the Gentiles coming to faith in Israel’s God during the messianic age. Because Paul is determined to obey the call of God to plant churches, he has not yet been able to come to Rome. Paul has had work to do elsewhere.

⁵ Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 511-512.

In verses 23-33 of Romans 15, Paul now discusses his future missionary plans, explaining his desire to go on to Spain and visit the Roman church on the way.

Since Rome is on the way to Spain, Paul will not only be able to pass through the city on his way west, but the church in Rome will make a good base of operations for these additional missionary endeavors. According to verses 23-24, *“But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to see you, I plan to do so when I go 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.”*

Since there is no place for Paul left to go in the Eastern Mediterranean where Christ has not already been preached, the time has come for him to head west—something he’s desired to do for many years. Such a trip will take Paul into regions where the gospel has not yet been preached. But on his way to Spain, Paul will stop in Rome, where the church there, presumably, will be able to assist him in his new preaching endeavors further west. Having heard of the church’s great faith, hopefully, Paul will be able to spend some time with the Roman Christians and witness God’s work in their midst for himself. Such a trip to Spain would amount to a fourth missionary journey, something which is not documented in the pages of the New Testament, but is supported by reliable Christian tradition. If Paul actually made it to Spain as he desired, the only way this could have occurred is if Paul was able to secure his release from house arrest in Rome. Recall that the Book of Acts ends with Paul in Rome awaiting his hearing before Caesar (Acts 20:28). Indeed, a number of Pauline scholars believe that Paul did indeed make it as far as Spain, only to be arrested again after returning to Rome when he was put to death by Nero during the horrific persecution of the church which began in AD 66.

But before he can he west, Paul speaks of first going on to Jerusalem in verses 25-26. *“Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem.”* Luke makes but a brief mention of this in Acts 24:17—*“after an absence of several years, I came to Jerusalem to bring my people gifts for the poor and to present offerings”*—while Paul says it as vital (not only for the relief of those suffering great deprivation) but also to unify the churches (cf. Acts 11:27-30; 12:25). It would have been a great thing for new Gentile churches in Macedonia to come to the aid of starving Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. This would have done much not only to alleviate their horrible suffering but would also demonstrate to the Jewish Church that the Gentiles truly supported them.

In verse 27, Paul describes the attitude of the Gentiles in this regard. *“They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews’ spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings.”* Those whom the gospel sets free, will find themselves filled with gratitude and desiring to help out their brothers and sisters whenever necessary. Since the blessings of that gospel were first preached to the Jews, and then spilled over on to the Gentiles, the Gentiles are able to show their gratitude by collecting an offering for the relief of the Jewish poor. Having been given spiritual blessings from the Jews, the Gentiles can now share their material blessings with them.

But even though going to Jerusalem comes first, Paul still hopes to come to Rome. As he puts it in verse 28, *“So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they have received this fruit, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way.”* Neither will he come empty-handed. Says Paul, *“I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ.”* Christ has called Paul to his office as minister to the Gentiles, and Paul is the divinely chosen agent through which God has blessed the

many new Gentile churches begun under the ministry of Paul and others. Paul is confident not in himself, but in Jesus Christ who has called him. As Christ has blessed his people everywhere else, so Paul believes that Christ will bless the Romans through him as well.

In yet another of these so-called “wish-prayers,” in verses 30-33, Paul now asks for his brothers and sisters to pray for him. *“I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea and that my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there, so that by God’s will I may come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed.”* Paul was well-aware that there was trouble waiting for him in Judea and that the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem had a difficult time accepting the validity of the Gentile mission, much less would they be willing to take money from Gentiles—as some might have thought it a bribe to get them to accept what Paul was doing among the Gentiles.⁶ In any case, Paul asks the Romans to pray that his gift from the Gentiles would be accepted, that the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem would accept the gift, and that it would indeed be God’s will for Paul to be able to come to Rome. As we learn in Acts 21:17-25, this prayer was answered in that Paul was accepted by James and the leaders of the Jerusalem church. Furthermore, Paul made his way to Rome, only he didn’t plan on arriving in Rome in chains.

Finally, Paul ends his personal remarks to the Roman Christians with a benediction, asking the God of peace to be with all the brothers and sisters there, until Paul can come himself and speak words of blessing to them directly. *“The God of peace be with you all. Amen.”*

In the first two verses of chapter 16, Paul singles out a woman named Phoebe for commendation, before extending personal greetings to a number of people in church in verses 3-16.

Paul writes, *“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me.”* Phoebe (a female name) was clearly involved in some form of service in the church—not as an elder or minister of the word, but in a mercy-benevolence work of some sort.

There are several important points here worthy of our consideration. For one thing, such letters of commendation were common in the ancient world, since people who were traveling needed a letter of recommendation so that fellow Christians would open their homes to them and provide for the needs of travelers in an age where there were no hotels and where inns were more often than not houses of prostitution. Cenchrea is near Corinth, where Paul had lived from nearly eighteen months. Paul undoubtedly knew Phoebe (or knew of her) and, therefore, can recommend her to the churches for their hospitality.⁷ This is why in verse 2, Paul exhorts the Christians in Rome to receive her (i.e., welcome her into the church and provide for her needs) and that since she has been of help to many, including Paul, she would be a welcome addition to the church in Rome.

It is also interesting that Phoebe is called a “servant of the church.” The word that Paul uses and which is translated in the NIV as “servant” is the word “*diakonos*,” which can refer to either the general service

⁶ Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 524.

⁷ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 913.

that all Christians render to the church, or, depending upon the context, may refer to the more formalized office of “deacon.” Since the requirements for the office of deacon enumerated by Paul in 1 Timothy 3:8-12, limit the office to males, it may be that the church in Cenchrrea had another office of “deaconess” in which women carried out works of mercy and charity. It is also highly likely that the office of deacon was more fluid in the early church than it is now—when Paul wrote Romans, he had not yet written the instructions found in 1 Timothy. There is evidence throughout the New Testament that deacons visited the sick, provided meals and helped the poor.⁸ Once the office of deacon is formalized as churches becomes more established and organized, women seem to be excluded from this office. And yet the apostolic church clearly found ways for woman to serve the churches through works of charity and compassion. It seems to me that churches ought to be doing something similar today.

In any case, in verses 3-16 we find a list of names and every preacher preaching through Romans faces a similar dilemma: “what do you do with such a list?” My feeling is that if God saw fit to incorporate the names of these people into the pages of the New Testament, then we ought to at least read them. Not only does this remind us that the church in Rome was a real church with real people, but these are our brothers and sisters in Christ who even now are part of that great cloud of witnesses who watch us worship the living God they have seen face to face.

Beginning in verse 3, Paul mentions a number of their names. Some of these people we know from elsewhere in the New Testament. *“Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. Greet also the church that meets at their house.”* Paul had served with this husband and wife team in Corinth. They had been forced to leave Rome because of the edict of Claudius when all Jews were required to leave the city (Acts 18:2). Like Paul, there were tent-makers by trade (Acts 18:3) and traveled with Paul to Ephesus, where, apparently, they stayed together for a time (Acts 18:18, 26; cf. 1 Corinthians 16:19). We don’t know when they returned to Rome, but Paul had learned of that they were there and singles them out first for personal greetings. As people of means, they were hosting one of the groups of believers in their home for worship.

“Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia. The fact that Paul calls Epenetus a dear friend, indicates he knows this man quite well. *Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you. Greet Andronicus and Junias, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.* Andronicus and Junias (another husband and wife team) were imprisoned with Paul, came to faith before he did, and were also Hellenistic Jews, hence the familial term “kindred” or “relative.” They were probably traveling missionaries, like Priscilla and Aquila, which is why they were well known among the apostles.

Based upon what we know about the Roman world, the next few names were probably freedmen. *Greet Ampliatus, whom I love in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys. Greet Apelles, tested and approved in Christ.* This man was probably widely known throughout the churches for having undergone a significant time of testing while remaining faithful. *Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus. Greet Herodion, my relative. Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord.* Based upon archeological evidence, the names Herodion and Narcissus are possibly connected with the service of the household of Herod. *Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord. Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who*

⁸ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 913.

has worked very hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too. According to Mark 15:21, Rufus may be the son of Simon the Cyrene, who carried the cross for Jesus. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the brothers with them. Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all the saints with them. Little, if anything is known of these latter individuals, except their mention here in Romans.

Finally in verse 16, having extended personal greetings to everyone he knows in the church, Paul exhorts the members of the church to “*Greet one another with a holy kiss.*” This was a common practice in the Roman world and especially common among Jews. This is why the “kiss of peace” became commonplace in early Christian liturgies and which has made its way into German and Dutch liturgies as the “holy handshake.” Paul also extends greetings from the other churches to the Roman Christians, since they are all one in Christ, despite the fact that most of these folks had never met each other. Says Paul simply but sincerely “*All the churches of Christ send greetings.*”

And so as we wrap up this, what is truly remarkable in all of this is what Christ has accomplished. Through the preaching of the gospel—a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles—God has created a thriving church in the very heart of the pagan Roman empire. The church in Rome is made up of Christians well-known throughout the churches (Priscilla and Aquila, Apelles), friends of Paul (Epenetus, Ampliatus, Stachys), people who were probably legendary in the early church for their association with people who heard and saw Jesus (Rufus), members of Herod’s own household (Herodion and Narcissus) and then a whole bunch of others known only to us because Paul mentions their names in this letter. It is truly marvelous what Christ has accomplished in Rome.

But this wonderful letter from Paul didn’t find its way into the church secretary’s drawer. It is recorded in the New Testament, where it continues to speak audaciously and boldly to God’s people about God’s free gift of a justifying righteousness in the person of his son. And it is truly marvelous when we consider what Christ has accomplished here in Anaheim, through that very same gospel contained in Paul’s letter to the church in Rome. This letter speaks as much to us as it did to Paul’s intended audience. Indeed, all those whose names we have read this morning are among that great cloud of witnesses who watch as God continues to accomplish many wonderful things through the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout all the churches this very day, just as he did in the church in Rome. Amen!