

## REACH

Romans 15:14-21, 30-33

Have you ever met a person who, without seeming to try, just makes the world a better place? They help without being asked and they encourage others when things are going well or not so well. These people are kind and generous and those who know them seem to trust them implicitly. It is almost as if they are unaware that they are helping. Those who live their lives this way will be like the group Jesus addresses at the “judgment” when He says “you visited Me when I was in prison, you clothed Me when I was naked, you fed Me when I was hungry” and their response is “when did that happen?” They make the world a better place without even being deliberate or conscious about it, but it happens naturally (or perhaps supernaturally).

As Paul was concluding his letter to the Christians in Rome, he wrote to them regarding their reputation. Paul had not yet visited these Christians and so he was relying on what others told him about those in Rome who were followers of Christ.

### Fulfill Your Calling – 15:14-16

<sup>14</sup> And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able also to admonish one another. <sup>15</sup> But I have written very boldly to you on some points so as to remind you again, because of the grace that was given me from God, <sup>16</sup> to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the gospel of God, so that my offering of the Gentiles may become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Romans 15:14–16 (NASB95)

At the beginning of this letter Paul complimented those to whom he writing with these words “your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world.” Paul returned to the subject of their reputation as he closed the letter. Not only had Paul heard good reports, he was convinced that the reputation was well deserved. What greater confirmation could a Christian receive than a statement that he or she is “full of goodness.” Paul added to this that they were well informed and helped one another in their Christian walk. No wonder Paul was anxious to visit this church in Rome and to experience the fellowship of these good people especially since he was dealing with contrary behavior coming from the Christian community in Corinth where he was ministering when the letter to Rome was written.

Basically, we (both individually and as a society) have expectations of behavior for people who are in certain positions and associations. When I was growing up, it was common for parents to appeal to their children to have proper behavior because to do otherwise would reflect badly on the family. I don’t hear that very much (or at all) in today’s world. If it comes up at all, it is presented as a negative, in that the child responds with “you don’t really love me, all you care about is your reputation.” If a “saint” behaves badly, does such behavior reflect poorly on anyone besides the person who is engaged in the bad behavior? Absolutely! Such behavior brings criticism on the church and upon the name of Christ. When saints behave poorly it hurts the cause of Christ and can result in a lost person failing to find salvation because the lost person could conclude that being saved does not make a difference in the lives of Christians.

Are such concerns legitimate? Should we alter or “be careful” of our behavior so that we present a good picture to those who are watching so that we do not harm reputations? As with many such questions, the answer is “yes” and “no.” The “no” part of this answer is related to the fact that all of us realize that hypocrisy is wrong and that “the right thing to do” is to “do the right thing” and not just pretend. The “yes” would apply to the fact that, in spite of our best efforts to do the right thing, our actions and motives can be misinterpreted by others. Therefore, care is needed to guard our reputations and those with whom we are associated. One of the ways

we accomplish such careful behavior is by refreshing our memory of expectations.

This need to exercise care and to be aware of what is happening around us in the world was part of the reason Paul had written so boldly to them of the foundational truths of the Gospel message of which they were already familiar. So much of the preaching and teaching we hear today in our churches are reminders of truths that we already know. Such reminders are helpful because our words and our actions are constantly proclaiming the gospel message to those who are familiar with us. In that pagan culture of the first century, the church was so radically different that its members were under constant scrutiny and inspection by those outside the church.

Paul had a keen sense of Christ's calling on his life to take the gospel to and minister to Gentiles who came into the kingdom of God by grace through faith. The ministry he had could be compared to the duties of priests in other religions with which those in the church at Rome were familiar. The priest would bring a well-prepare and well-presented offering to the deity. In this analogy applied to the church, the preparation of the offering was by the Gospel and that which was offered up to God were Gentile believers who were being transformed into the likeness of Christ.

Even a cursory examination of verse sixteen shows that it is "all about Christ." Paul was commissioned by Christ as a minister to Gentiles. The thing that was ministered was the "good news of salvation" that resulted from the actions of Christ in dying for our sins. The preparation of the sacrifice that was presented by the priest was (in this case) the sanctification process that causes those who are presented to God to be like Christ.

#### Boast About Jesus – 15:17-19

<sup>17</sup> Therefore in Christ Jesus I have found reason for boasting in things pertaining to God. <sup>18</sup> For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed, <sup>19</sup> in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit; so that from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ. Romans 15:17–19 (NASB95)

Before Paul met Christ on the Road to Damascus, he had many things related to religion (pertaining to God) about which he could boast. He had studied under the most elite rabbis of his day and he was a Hebrew of the Hebrews and a Pharisee with zeal and passion for the law. All of such sources for boasting were trivial in comparison to Christ Jesus. Nothing mattered except what Christ was accomplishing through him. Paul realized that since his salvation that what was happening in his life was a result of Christ in him. The proclamation of the gospel was in the power of the Spirit and there were miracles that had happened to confirm the messages that the Holy Spirit was giving through Paul. The result of the ministry (of Christ through Paul) by word and deed was that many Gentiles had believed the gospel message (of Christ) and were followers of Christ.

A significant portion of the world around the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea had been impacted by the ministry of Paul. He mentioned Illyricum which was northwest of Macedonia as the farthest west he had gone in reaching the Gentiles with the gospel message.

#### Seek the Lost – 15:20-21

<sup>20</sup> And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named, so that I would not build on another man's foundation; <sup>21</sup> but as it is written, "THEY WHO HAD NO NEWS OF HIM SHALL SEE, AND THEY WHO HAVE NOT HEARD SHALL UNDERSTAND." Romans 15:20–21 (NASB95)

Apparently, Paul realized that the most effective ministry for the Kingdom of God was to proclaim the gospel in areas where the message had never been heard and this realization influenced where he went and what he did. That ministry objective seems to be much more

difficult than just going into areas that already had an established church. Paul was experienced in initiating “churches” in such areas and apparently realized that the most effect way to expand the influence of the Kingdom of God was in breaking new ground and establishing a group of believers that could carry on the work of sharing the good news with people living in the area.

Part of the inspiration for this focus of his ministry was a passage from Isaiah 52 which predicted the coming of the Messiah and the abuse He would receive associated with the crucifixion. Isaiah went on to say that the nations would then be “startled” (supposedly at the news of what God had done) and those who had no awareness of God would have an opportunity to participate in God’s salvation plan.

One of the reasons that Paul had not visited the Christians in Rome was tied to this emphasis of going into areas where the message of salvation had not been proclaimed. After all, there was already an established and well-respected Christian presence in Rome. As it turned out, Paul saw that he had done all that he needed to do in the areas around the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea and thought his next mission would be to go beyond Rome to Spain. His plans were to make a brief visit in Rome on his way to Spain. However, before that was to happen, he wanted to help the suffering Jewish Christians in Jerusalem with financial contributions from the Gentile churches that had been established since God called him to take the gospel to the Gentiles.

#### Partner with Others – 15:30-33

<sup>30</sup> Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me, <sup>31</sup> that I may be rescued from those who are disobedient in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints; <sup>32</sup> so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God and find refreshing rest in your company. <sup>33</sup> Now the God of peace be with you all. Amen. Romans 15:30–33 (NASB95)

Paul realized that taking the contribution to the church in Jerusalem was a dangerous thing to do. Paul wanted the Christians in Rome to prayer for his safety when he made the trip to Jerusalem. The non-believing Jews in Jerusalem saw Paul as a traitor and thought that he should be killed. We know from the account (recorded in Acts) of what eventually happened when Paul was in Jerusalem that Paul’s concern was well founded. Paul was “rescued” from these Jews and God used the Roman Army to carry out the rescue.

Another concern that Paul had was with regard to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. It was because of their suffering and poverty (brought on by persecution of the Jewish establishment) that Paul was making this risky trip. Most of these Christians struggled with the ministry that Paul had been doing in taking the gospel to the Gentiles. It is thought (by several commentators) that Paul hoped that the sacrificial contributions made by the Gentile Christians would help to make these Gentiles acceptable to the Jewish Christians. The fear was that they would see this money as a bribe to get them to change their minds and would, therefore, reject the help.

Paul’s plan was to carry out his objective in Jerusalem and then start another mission trip that would take him to Spain by way of Rome. As we know from the historical accounts in Acts that did not happen. Apparently, there was unfinished work that was not part of Paul’s plan. If we look at Paul’s commission that God related to Ananias (Acts 9:15) we see “Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel” we see that a third of that commission was yet to be fulfilled. Paul had certainly taken the Lord’s name before Gentiles and on occasions before the Jews but he had not yet presented the Lord’s name before kings.

We started these notes with comments about reputations and what people were saying

about the Christians in Rome. We then learned more about Paul's response to God's call on his life and what motivated him since his encounter with Christ. We can conclude with giving some time and consideration regarding questions such as "what is God's call for my life, what motivates me and what would people who know me say regarding who they recognize me to be?" Would the same things be said of us that was said of the Christians in Rome that they were "full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able also to admonish one another?"