

Romans 15:14-22 Fulfilling our calling

Introduction

The form of the document Paul sent to the Church in Rome was a letter. However the vast majority of its contents was comprised of a carefully worded summary of Christian doctrine followed by a description of the impact such beliefs should have on the way we live. It is certainly one of the most powerful and influential documents in Christian history with Martin Luther and John Wesley amongst others who came to faith through reading it. In the last part of Romans Paul returns to the letter format and personalises what he has to say as he did in the opening section of Romans chapter one. In the first part of the letter, in Romans 1:1-17, he had begun by stating his credentials for ministry, followed by a statement about why he wanted to visit them accompanied with a powerful declaration of his confidence in the power of the gospel to save the lives of the Jews and Gentiles he encountered. Paul declared: *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.*¹⁷ *For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’* (Romans 1:16-17) In the final sections of this letter from Romans 15:14 onwards the apostle returns to the more familiar style of letters and summarises some of the things he had wanted to say to them followed by personal greetings at the end. In the opening words of this section Paul makes some rare personal remarks in this letter.

1. Paul’s personal ministry (Romans 15:14-15)

(a) **His perception of the Christians in Rome** (Romans 15:14) ¹⁴ *I myself am convinced, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with knowledge and competent to instruct one another.* Paul was not one to hide his feelings or spare his words when he felt that blunt speaking was required. Therefore, we can be assured that when words of praise come from his lips that the recipients of them was worthy of that commendation. In Romans 15:14 it is clear how he viewed that particular congregation. We can be sure that the apostle thinks very highly of this congregation. It contrasts sharply with his words to the churches in Galatia (for example, Galatians 3:1) and Corinth (for example, I Corinthians 1:10 & 3:1-4) written within a few years of this epistle. In both the latter cases he had some very strong words to say to them about their shortcomings. Here, by contrast there is a glowing commendation of them. He wrote: *I... am convinced...* choosing the Greek perfect tense which points to a continuing state of confidence in them. Over the time that he had known them as well as at the time of writing the letter Paul’s perception of their spiritual health as a body had not changed. If only this kind of true assessment could be said of every Christian congregation around the world. If it was people would be queuing up to find out more about the life transforming gospel of Jesus! Across the Christian traditions there is a mix of congregations honouring the Lord by their witness and others that bring dishonour to Him by heterodox beliefs and ungodly practices. Not so here in the capital city of the Roman Empire! Paul has three broad statements to make about them. They were (i) full of goodness This is a rare word Paul uses that has not been noted anywhere in classical Greek but is used on occasions in the Greek Old Testament and in Paul’s writings [L.L. Morris, *Romans*, p. 509]. It is a moral term that describes someone noted for their kindness to other people; for their thoughtfulness with respect to the needs of other people; also used of people who were concerned about the needs of the poor and any others on the margins of society. A classic Christian who modelled this quality was the Cypriot Christian leader Barnabas. In Acts 11 the Church at Jerusalem was recorded as having heard about the extraordinary news from Syrian Antioch of many people of Gentile backgrounds coming to faith. Barnabas was the church leader they sent to

investigate what was going on. Acts 11:22-24 states: *News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.*²³ *When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.*²⁴ **He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.** What a contrast this is to the description Paul gave in Romans 3:10-12 to describe the sinful human being who has no time for God. *There is no one righteous, not even one;*¹¹ *there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God.*¹² *All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.* Both these two Scriptural quotations describe the character and conduct of human beings. On what basis can a person be described as Paul does here as *full of goodness*? The secret is that when the Holy Spirit indwells and empowers us we have the potential and power to live in this way –if we choose to do so. In Paul’s list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23, one of the qualities listed is *goodness*; Paul later in Ephesians 2:8-10 reminded his readers that although we are saved by grace alone received by faith alone, we are saved for a purpose. *For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do* (Ephesians 2:10). What is particularly wonderful here is that Paul is not highlighting a few individuals in this congregation as exceptionally good people. Instead he declares that the whole congregation is modelling this quality in their daily lives. No wonder it made an impact on the wider community. It raises for us personally and collectively how are we viewed by the people around us in this community? If a survey was done by an independent agency what terms might people use to describe our contribution to the wider community? What a joy it would be if they were to use this phrase used by Paul of the church in Rome. (ii) *filled with knowledge* Paul here is not suggesting that this congregation had an advanced knowledge of abstract theology that could be regurgitated at will at a church quiz night. He is speaking about something more practical than that. What he is saying is that these people are well grounded in the foundational teaching of the faith and know how to apply it to their daily lives. In other words there are individuals who profess Christian faith but don’t seem to have gone beyond assent to information. It has not impacted their daily lives. There are churches that proclaim orthodox theological teaching from their pulpits and in verbal conversations, but the way in which individuals speak to one another; the choices they make in daily life reveal priorities that are closer to the secular world than biblical ones. In other words are you and I living out our faith in practice? If I believe, for example, that people who die without Christ face a lost eternity then it must mean that I will invest time in prayer for people who need Jesus; I will seek to find ways of sharing my faith in word or deed with other people. I may be on the lookout for suitable literature or evangelistic event or course like Christianity Explored to which I could invite my friend or colleague or family member. Paul is thrilled that these Christians were not only possessing information about the faith, they were also applying it to their lives so as to gain instruction as to how to become a more effective disciple of Jesus Christ. How are you getting on just now? Are there any areas of your Christian life where you recognise you need to work on? (iii) *competent to instruct one another* Paul was also thrilled to note a third quality visible amongst the members of this congregation. The word translated *competent* is the Greek word for ‘dynamite’ or ‘power’; that is they had the ability to guide one another in the next steps of their Christian discipleship. The word translated *instruct* here is rarely used in Paul’s writings but is found in Acts 20:31: *So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.* The context there was Paul’s final and emotional address to the elders of the Church at Ephesus in a meeting at Miletus in Turkey. He had reminded them that he had faithfully proclaimed the truth of the Gospel in their midst in the context of many voices proclaiming values and teachings that contradicted the biblical Gospel. So in this context this word has the idea of clear guidance about the way someone should live their life.

These Christians could help each other know how to live out their daily lives. If a brother or sister was in danger of weakening in their faith or making wrong choices about their lives they loved one another enough to take the time to instruct each other about what it means to live a Christ-centred God-honouring life. In order to be able to do this these Christians had to know what they believed about the basic principles of their faith; they had to be self-disciplined so as to be modelling a credible way of life; they then had to have a real love and concern for the welfare of fellow believers so that they noticed when someone was missing from church and wanted to get in touch to see if they were okay; they noticed if someone was struggling in some way and asked if they needed help –with a willingness to make some time to assist them when that was appropriate. Does this describe you and me just now? If not how can we progress in our faith in the near future so that it does describe each and everyone of us as followers of Jesus? This is a most extraordinary commendation of this Christian community – may it increasingly be true of our congregation, living out our faith in this particular social context.

(b) **His perception of the approach taken in this letter** (Romans 15:15) ¹⁵ *Yet I have written to you quite boldly on some points to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me.* Paul is conscious that unlike most of the churches to whom he has written letters this one in Rome was founded by other unknown Christian missionaries. Whereas he can be very bold, for example, in addressing Philemon, the wealthy church leader whom he had led to faith, concerning the return home of his now converted former runaway slave Onesimus. See Philemon verses 17-21: *So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.* ¹⁸ *If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me.* ¹⁹ *I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back – **not to mention that you owe me your very self.*** ²⁰ *I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.* ²¹ ***Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.*** It is altogether different to speak or write in this way to people whom you might not even have met or only know of through mutual friends. Why does Paul have this boldness in proclaiming the message? His ministry is based on his calling which he will mention in Romans 15:16-17.

2. **Paul's priestly ministry** (Romans 15:16-17)

(a) **His calling** (Romans 15:16a) ¹⁶ *to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles.* Romans 1:1-6 is the best explanation of it. It states: *Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, **called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God** –² *the gospel He promised beforehand through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures*³ *regarding His Son, who as to His earthly life was a descendant of David,*⁴ *and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by His resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.*⁵ *Through Him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for His name's sake.*⁶ *And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.* It is in fulfilment of this calling that Paul has this confidence in calling people to walk with him in following Jesus. Why can you and I with confidence but also humility tell people of the love of God for sinners? Why can we let people know they have sinned and fallen short of His standards? Why can we tell someone that Jesus died on the cross to save them from their sins, and if they put their faith and trust in Him tell them that their sins have been forgiven? Why can we pray for such a person to receive the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit and so much more besides? It is because of the calling given to each child of God who through faith in Jesus is commissioned to be His ambassador to a world that needs to hear the good news of Jesus. It is not a job; we honour God with our lives in obedience to His calling upon us for the work He has commissioned us to do in His service. The king of kings has called you to serve Him in whatever ministry or vocational context it may be. Never forget that! Paul certainly never did while he drew breath. What you and another Christian nearby may be called to do in practice could be quite*

different, but we do what we do for Him because we have been called into His service. May we always keep that central in our minds, especially when we may be struggling or feeling discouraged or thinking that we are not accomplishing very much in the Lord's service.

(b) **His understanding of his calling** (Romans 15:16b) *He gave me 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.* When you read these words it naturally leads us back to the words of Romans 12:1: *Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship.* Paul can offer to God his Gentile converts as living sacrifices to God. He can present them in his prayers to God. These believers who came to faith from non-Jewish backgrounds had been excluded from the Temple in Jerusalem and were not permitted to join in the religious sacrifices there. Yet through the Gospel proclaimed in the name of Jesus they were as welcome as Jews to claim a share in the inheritance God has provided for His people through Jesus. The wonderful mystery of how this came about was explained in Romans 11:11-24. It was not, though, something that happened by chance. On the contrary, it was the fulfilment of prophecy of Isaiah that diaspora Jews like Paul would proclaim the Gospel to Gentiles and lead them to faith in the God of Israel. *They will proclaim My glory among the nations.²⁰ And they will bring all your people, from all the nations, to My holy mountain in Jerusalem as an offering to the Lord* (Isaiah 66:19b-20). But was Paul and some other select Jews alone engaged in this priestly ministry? No it is for all God's people. In Exodus 19:5b-6 God told Moses to pass on these words to the whole nation of Israel. *Now if you obey Me fully and keep My covenant, then out of all nations you will be My treasured possession. Although the whole earth is Mine,⁶ you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.* "These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites." Yet overwhelmingly the majority declined to exercise such a calling. In the New Testament Peter reminds us that the followers of Jesus, both Jews and Gentiles have received this calling. I Peter 2:9-10 states: *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light.¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.* Will you and I exercise our priestly calling? The responsibility for carrying out such a vocation was not just for first century AD believers, but each and every believer in all generations prior to Christ's return.

(c) **The purpose of his calling** (Romans 15:17)¹⁷ *Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God.* It's never about me but about Him. Our church mission statement encapsulates so well what Paul is saying here. We are Building a Christ centred Church: looking to Christ – growing in Christ – sharing Christ. Our wonder and worship leads to witness so that others too may then join us in worship and witness until the day when we glory together in the presence of our Lord in eternity. Revelation 7:9-12 part of John the Apostle's amazing vision of the future provides a glimpse of what this might ultimately look like beyond this life. *After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.¹⁰ And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'*¹¹ *All the angels were standing round the throne and round the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshipped God,¹ saying: 'Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!'* Seeing how the future will turn out should excite us with a vision and passion to play our part in extending His kingdom and giving glory to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Are you excited at the privilege of playing your part in bringing glory to His holy and blessed name?

3. Paul's powerful ministry (Romans 15:18-19a)

(a) A focussed ministry (Romans 15:18) ¹⁸ *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* – How does Paul summarise his ministry in a few words? He cannot so it without immediately referencing Jesus! ¹⁸ *I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me...* Here we can see an echo of the more explicit vocabulary of his testimony explained to the Greek Christians in Philippi. In Philippians 1:20-26 Paul wrote: *I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.* ²¹ **For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.** ²² *If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know!* ²³ *I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far;* ²⁴ *but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.* ²⁵ *Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith,* ²⁶ *so that through my being with you again **your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.*** Jesus is genuinely and naturally central in his motivation for service. The old chorus declares: ‘Turn your eyes upon Jesus’ – Paul did that as well as anyone did in his lifetime. If having a Christ-centred perspective is a liberating and motivating guide for our ministries then it will keep us from turning aside to pursuing lesser priorities in His service. What was Jesus empowering him to engage in? ...*in leading the Gentiles to obey God.* This was Paul's specific mission. The opportunities he had for Christian work had to be viewed through this lens. Would this opportunity for service enable more Gentiles to obey God? If not then maybe that was a mission responsibility for other believers. He accomplished as much as he did for the Lord because he had a focussed ministry. In a local church we do not all do exactly the same work for the Lord. Different people will minister in complementary ways! Yet together all the work that needs to be done will be accomplished. The image of the body with many parts all working together is something Paul was convinced of throughout his ministry. This was why he always sought to build mission teams to work together in various places where new churches were being planted. Paul mentions this imagery in Romans 12:4-6a: *For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function,* ⁵ *so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.* ⁶ *We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us.* He also makes this point in more detail in I Corinthians 12:12-27. How focussed are you and me in our ministries for God? It is so easy to become distracted and do either too much or too little for God because we have taken our eye off what God has asked us to focus on in our ministries.

(b) An empowered ministry (Romans 15:19)¹⁹ *by the power of signs and wonders, through the power of the Spirit of God.* It is not about me and my powerful exertions for God. We need to remember our weakness to live for God as we should do. Paul again reminded the church in Philippi in Philippians 4:13: *I can do all this through Him who gives me strength.* Remember this is how it all began in Jerusalem when a group of fearful and weak followers of Jesus were asked to pray and seek God until empowered by His Holy Spirit for service. Jesus told them before He ascended back into heaven: *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.* (Acts 1:8) It is no different for us; we too need the empowering of the Holy Spirit to empower us for service. A verse that I have quoted many times that is so apt to remind us as often as we need it is Zechariah 4:6: *So he said to me, ‘This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: “Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,” says the Lord Almighty.* In its initial context it was a message of encouragement to a leader of God's people in Israel amongst the tiny group that returned from exile in Babylon. How could the few thousand returnees make any difference in even attempting to rebuild their city and their nation? The

same question might be asked by us personally and collectively today. What difference does it make if I or we are faithful servants of Jesus Christ? If we walk away and do nothing will it be missed? The key to a fruitful and effective ministry for Jesus is to seek and receive the constant empowering of the Holy Spirit. This is why Paul urged his readers in Ephesians 5:18b literally to: *Go on being filled with the Holy Spirit* - a present continuous tense. It is not a first or second or third or fourth blessing, but ideally a daily blessing as we ask for it from the Lord. Are you feeling like you are 'running on empty' for the Lord today? Right where you are, you can ask Him to empower you afresh for the work to which He has called you. In addition, if you would like it members of the prayer team will be very willing to pray for you for a fresh filling of God's Spirit on your life today? Don't miss out on the resources God has for you to use in ministering in the name of Jesus.

4. Paul's pioneering ministry (Romans 15:19b-22)

(a) The extent of his ministry (Romans 15:19b) *So from Jerusalem all the way round to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ.* This is an extraordinary accomplishment of this faithful servant of God both on his own and in a mission team of planting churches in the major towns and cities from Jerusalem in Israel to Illyricum on the border of the country today called Albania and the southern part of the former Yugoslavia. [show a map in the powerpoint slides] The missionary journeys of Paul briefly described in the book of Acts do not include references to all the places Paul visited but are summary statements at best to illustrate the advance of the Gospel from Jerusalem into Judea, Samaria and then as far as Rome, the capital city of the Roman Empire. When did Paul preach in Illyricum? We cannot be certain but there was certainly enough time in his schedule, for example, for him while in Macedonia to have walked west along the Egnatan Way from Thessalonica, at least to the borders of Illyricum. Paul has a particular calling and he completed it. In his last known letter written to Timothy near the end of his life he wrote: *For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. ⁷ I have fought the good fight, **I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.** ⁸ Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.* (II Timothy 4:6-8) Your calling and mine in its details will be different to Paul's –but at the end of the day will we too with a good conscience be able to say similar words? I trust so!

(b) The vision for his ministry (Romans 15:20-22) ²⁰ *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. ²¹ Rather, as it is written: 'Those who were not told about Him will see, and those who have not heard will understand.'* ²² *This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you.* His calling was to pioneer new works in places where no churches had ever before been planted. In I Corinthians chapter 3 he sought to explain to some immature Christians that we all have different gifts, but what matters is that we use them as He directs us *What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe – **as the Lord has assigned to each his task.** ⁶ I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. ⁷ So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. ⁸ The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labour. ⁹ **For we are fellow workers in God's service;** (I Corinthians 3:5-9). One vocation is not superior to another. All are vitally important. The question we must answer is this: Am I fulfilling the calling entrusted to me? Am I a faithful servant for the Lord Jesus? I hope and pray that this is indeed the case for each one of us, for Jesus' sake, Amen*