

Romans 15:14-33

They tell me that in the Old West, some men earned a living by offering their services as trail bosses. Basically, they would go with you on the journey as a kind of guide. If they wanted that job in life, one of the primary qualifications was that they must have been over the trail before. If they had ridden the trail once successfully, then they had earned the right to do it again—and take others with them. That's so true to life, isn't it! The Lord takes us down certain paths so that we might effectively minister to others who are on the same route. We share with them from our own experiences in life – we easily relate to them because we've walked on that same stretch of road with all its ups and downs. I put on my tee shirt that says 'been there, done that' – you see, I can empathise with you because I've been there myself.

That's what guides are for on the journey of life! That's what trail bosses spent their time doing—meeting the needs of other people! Paul lists some qualities in these verses that make a good guide, these are traits that will enhance any man's life, characteristics that will enable you to minister into the lives of others. In verse 14, he is incredibly tactful. In other words, Paul doesn't nag at the believers in Rome, he commends them when they deserve it and he challenges them when they need it: it's all about striking a balance. He warmly praised them for such wonderful qualities that they displayed—they were 'full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another'. Actually, Paul had no doubts in his mind as to their suitability for this particular role, these folks excelled; he also knew that a tactful approach would win more friends and fruit than an insensitive one—that's why he says what he does and gets away with it!

This means they tried to do their best at all times, they were incredibly well informed and had their finger on the pulse of all that was going on around them, they had a heart for others in the church community—these folks, according to Paul, were extremely capable

and 'competent', i.e. they didn't dodge the hard issues, they were unafraid to grapple with the problems and were even willing to engage with others if things were not quite right in their lives. Ministry to them wasn't one way—oh yes, they were on the receiving end, no doubt about that—but they were also there to invest their heart and life in others. Ministry, if it's going to be God blessed and successful, has to be a two way street. Thank the Lord, that's where these folks came out tops.

I think we'll take a short music break at this point, it might be a good idea for you to use these points as a spiritual checklist for your own life and ministry.

MUSIC BREAK

Most Bible scholars reckon that these closing verses in Romans are a kind of epilogue to the epistle. In other words, Paul has said all that needs to be said in terms of teaching and doctrine, now he shares with them a host of personal remarks. It seems to me that these final verses fall neatly into six divisions—if we familiarise ourselves with them, it will help us to get a better handle on their content. The first part is what we're looking at right now and it focuses on them, the believers in the church at Rome. The next section encompasses verses 17-29 where the apostle Paul zeroes in on himself, we'll examine that in a few minutes time. The last four verses of Romans 15 make up the third part and they are concerned with a prayer request from Paul.

A lengthy list of personal greetings is found in the first sixteen verses of Romans 16, they compose the fourth section. Paul delivers a final warning to the church in 16:17-24. The closing paragraph of the epistle is section number six and that is Paul's benediction. We'll look at Romans 15 in today's study and, in tomorrow's study, we'll finish the book off by reflecting on the teaching contained in Romans 16.

We'll pause for another break and, when we come back, I want us to look at Paul's missionary heart in verses 15 and 16.

MUSIC BREAK

These verses give us quite a remarkable insight into what make Paul tick, they show us how Paul views his mission and why he ventured forth into the regions beyond. They are an exposition of the anatomy of the greatest missionary heart ever.

It's worth noting that Paul's heart has fascinated even secular minds. Michael Borodin, the American Communist who spent a lot of time discipling Ho Chi Minh and Chou En-lai once was heard to say: 'I used to read the New Testament over and over again. It is the most wonderful story ever told. That man Paul. He was a *real* revolutionary. I take my hat off to him!'

That says something, doesn't it! Impressed. You have to be. I think when we take the lid off some of Paul's insights that you will be amazed and thrilled. The word Paul used to describe himself in verse 16 is the word 'minister'. That's the same root word from which we get our English word 'liturgy'. We can't underestimate the significance of this—it's a touch of genuine inspirational genius. You see, Paul could have used other words to describe himself. For example, he could have used the common term 'doulos' to indicate that he saw himself as a 'servant' of Jesus Christ, or he could have used 'diakonos' which means 'servant' or 'minister' – he didn't! He deliberately chose a different word because he compared his missionary work to that of a priest offering sacred worship to God. When we think along those lines, it means Paul saw his priestly offering not as a lamb or a grain offering or anything else—he saw it as Gentile converts. He says as much at the end of verse 16.

To me, that is quite fantastic! That's what ministry is all about, that's what Christian service is all about—it's an offering to the living God.

In spite of all the hassles and hurts of constantly being on the road for Jesus, in spite of all the physical and emotional knocks he endured, Paul sees himself as a priest in the temple lifting up the souls of men as a sweet smelling aroma to the living God. A dazzling picture of authentic ministry—that's ministry from a different

perspective, isn't it! His life was a liturgy, his daily round of ministry was a liturgy—everything he did was seen as an offering to the Lord. If only you and I could see our service as such, our lives would be transformed. Radically transformed! An apple pie baked for a neighbour becomes an offering to God. A child held and loved is a liturgy, an employee treated with dignity a beatitude. The gospel shared is a song in heaven's courts, a Sunday school class well taught a fragrance to God. To me, these are beautiful thoughts. Even better, they are fabulously true.

I'm sure it's something we could well do with taking on board in our lives; think of the sheer impact your ministry would have if you saw it as a spiritual offering. That mindset puts ministry on a whole new level. It should give us an added impetus to do it. It wouldn't only influence others, it would have a profound effect on us as well.

I believe it would bring you and me into a place of refreshing and renewal, a place where we are saturated with the power and presence of a God who revives and rejuvenates his people, a place where we meet a God who is keen to shower us with his blessing, a God who wants nothing but the best for us—when it comes to our service and ministry, therefore, I firmly believe we should seize the day with both hands and give it all to God as a love offering!

MUSIC BREAK

Paul's insights into ministry make a lot of good sense when we read them in Romans 15. He's not talking out of the top of his head, this man has a proven track record, and it shows. Really shows! You can see the logic behind his thinking and theology when he writes in verse 17: 'therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God.'

In other words, when it comes to his daily round of ministry, Paul's boast is in the goodness of the Lord. He doesn't brag about his many achievements, he doesn't say too much about his unbelievable successes on the gospel trail, all he says is a moving tribute to the God who saved him. And that's the way it should be!

The next three verses are highly significant for they show us the ability of Paul to keep on going, even when the going was tough. In

spite of many hurdles to overcome and obstacles to get past, he plodded on—he kept his eye on the finishing line. He never lost sight of the big picture—he anticipated a day in the purpose of God when the Gentiles would say ‘yes’ to the message of Jesus. And that’s exactly what happened!

He tells us himself in verse 19 that he preached his socks off ‘from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum’ [that’s in modern day Yugoslavia]. It’s the best part of 1,400 miles! If Paul had been referring to the United States, he could have communicated the same idea by stating that he had preached all the way from Miami, Florida to Seattle, Washington. I reckon that’s fairly good going, especially when you do it in a pair of sandals.

Again, we see Paul in his true colours; again, he gives all the credit to Jesus. Paul didn’t have an inflated ego, far from it. You know, folks, when it comes to ministry, that’s the noblest attitude to adopt—the fact is, God is more impressed with a big heart than he is with a big head!

There’s no doubt about it, this man has fire in his bones, he has passion, and lots of it! We read all about it in verse 20 where he says: ‘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.’

That’s what motivated him, that’s what drove him on, that’s the reason why Paul jumped out of bed every morning—all around him there were hundreds of people who needed the Lord and he wanted to tell them about Jesus. He reckoned it was pointless in him reinventing the wheel, so he saw himself as a pioneer on virgin soil. He reached out into the regions beyond, he took the gospel message where man had never taken it before. He was deep in enemy territory, he was lighting a candle in the middle of inky black darkness! But that’s what mission is all about—it is going where the people are!

Paul was enthusiastically keen to share the Jesus story with the unreached peoples of his day, he wanted to give those who had

never heard the gospel message at least one opportunity to hear of Jesus. It seems to me that Paul's vision for evangelism was as big as the world he knew. In fact, we'll see in a few minutes that Paul planned to go to Spain which, in his day, was the end of the then known world.

You see, Paul wasn't like so many of us, he definitely wasn't guilty of dreaming too small! He knew that he served a great God, who could do great things through him, if he would be at God's disposal.

Paul dreamed impossible dreams. He's a man of tremendous vision. Oh that God would open our eyes and hearts to think big, to catch a glimpse of what God can do when our lives are yielded to him. He wasn't just a guy with great ideas, or big ideas—no, he trusted and served an awesome God.

MUSIC BREAK

The next few verses in Romans 15 give us some insight into Paul's schedule for ministry. This man is restless, he can't sit at peace for one minute as it were—he has to be on the trail for Jesus. There are three main places featured on his itinerary—Jerusalem, Rome, and Spain. We'll look at them in a slightly different order for fairly obvious reasons!

The first place I want to focus on is Jerusalem, and we read all about it in verses 25-27. A very important centre indeed. You will recall it was the birthplace of Christianity. It was there that Christ died on the cross and rose from the dead. This city also witnessed the beginnings of Christ's church. However, since those halcyon days, tough times had fallen on the believers who lived there. So Paul had taken the opportunity on his extensive travels in Macedonia and Achaia to raise financial support for the 'poor among the saints in Jerusalem' - Paul knew that every shekel helped! That's what we see in verse 26.

There's a remarkable implication in verse 27 where Paul hints if we have been blessed by someone then we owe it to them to show our gratitude and appreciation in one way or another. In their hour of

greatest need, it was only right that the churches in other parts should rally round and lend a helping hand.

Paul talks about Rome in verses 23 and 24. He shares with the believers his long time desire to visit with them. It's a visit he has looked forward to for many a year and, at last, it's on the horizon. Remember, Paul wanted to go there as a preacher of the gospel, he ended up there as a prisoner! Well, God has his own way of doing things and that's all that matters. It's clear that Paul was keen to enjoy their company, we know that from verse 24; he was also keen for them to share in his travel expenses of going from there to Spain. That's what fellowship and partnership in the gospel is all about. We have an obligation to each other, we have a certain responsibility to those in ministry. Someone has to pay the bills, someone has to pick up the tab!

There's a lovely touch in verse 29 where it shows us the spirit of Paul, this guy is brimming with optimism. He has a buoyant faith, he exudes confidence in the character of an unchanging God. He is totally assured that when he visits them he will do so 'in the full measure of the blessing of Christ.' Wow! What a statement for any man to make. In other words, when he met them, God would use him to be a channel of blessing to them. Little did he know his arrival would be in chains, and yet it was indeed with joy.

So far as Spain is concerned, Paul's dream in verses 24 and 28 may or may not have come true—the fact is, we don't know if he ever made it there or not! Scholars are divided on the issue, some say he did, others say the opposite. Whether he did or if he didn't isn't really the issue, all that matters is that this man was fanatically keen for the gospel to reach the uttermost ends of the earth. And so should we!

The closing verses in Romans 15 are a wonderful benediction cum prayer. They show us the aspiration of Paul's heart, they also convey to us a measure of realism in Paul's prayers. He is facing considerable opposition from 'unbelievers in Judea' and he is

obviously struggling with other issues as well. It wasn't all plain sailing for Paul.

I'm just so encouraged when I read verse 30 for it gives me a glimpse of the heart of this man – he's in the thick of it, and he's big enough to ask people to surround him in prayer. He's the man who has been mightily used by God and yet he knows only too well his personal sense of reliance for prayer support from others. He needs them to uphold him, to strengthen him, to get alongside him. What a macro difference that makes to a man in the frontline of ministry! Paul's supreme desire is that God will be glorified in him at all times, he just wants to be a blessing to the people; he is all too aware of the multiple challenges they face, their stresses and strains, that's why he commends them to the 'God of peace'—I reckon that's also why he senses they will be a means of uplift and real encouragement to each other. He knows he can't do it on his own, he knows they can't do it either, hence his hearty 'amen' at the end of the chapter—he knows God can do it!