

Romans: The Practice of Righteousness (part 9 of 13)

The Joy of Gospel Work

Romans 15:14-21

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¹⁴ I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another. ¹⁵ But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God ¹⁶ to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. ¹⁷ In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God. ¹⁸ For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed, ¹⁹ by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God—so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ; ²⁰ and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation, ²¹ but as it is written, "Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand." (Romans 15:14–21)

One of my favorite places to walk, think and pray is cemeteries. Near our former church there was a large and beautiful cemetery where I would often go to meet with the Lord, talk with Him about the most pressing burdens on my heart, and to allow my soul time to reflect on the bigger issues in life. I loved having a place like that, but I especially loved that it was a cemetery.

I think that part of the reason why I love cemeteries in particular is because they are a very tangible reminder that life is short, and that one day, unless the Lord returns, there will be a grave with my name on it with two years representing the span of my life. I have found that environment to prompt some very important questions such as: what really matters in life? What do I want my life to count for? Why has God placed me on the earth? So, I love cemeteries because of the questions that they create in my soul.

When do you think about questions like that? In our hurried and overly-busy culture, what situations or environments cause you to stop and ask "What am I doing that is really going to count or make a difference? What is the legacy that I'm going to leave? What will be written on my tombstone?"

In Romans 15:14-21 Paul begins to close his letter to the church at Rome, and we get a window into the heart of the apostle as it relates to his driving passion and mission in life. It comes on the heels of a chapter and a half of material on how to deal with divisions, and it seems that Paul is reflecting on what really matters. These verses help us to see his joy in the work of the gospel, and they invite us to be challenged individually and corporately to do some soul-searching.

Paul's Boast in Christ

I think that to understand this text we have to start in verse 17. It appears to be the main thought of the paragraph, and then we have to work on the passages surrounding it. I think that is the case because of the word "then" in verse 17 which points back to verse 16 and the word "for" in verse 18 which points forward. The verse is, at first reading, a bit startling: ¹⁷ *In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God. (Romans 15:17)*

Now we will come back to the surrounding passages in a just a moment, but for now let's just consider what Paul is saying by starting with word "proud." Usually this is word that is negative and it is a character trait that should be shunned. Pride is normally sinful. A few examples:

- In Romans 3:27, Paul says that faith causes boasting to be excluded. If God is the one who justifies us, and if our works do not create righteousness, then there is nothing then boasting is pointless.
- In Romans 4:2 Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, had nothing to boast about because he was justified by faith not by works.
- Paul rebukes the Jews in Romans 2:17 and 23 for their boasting in the Law which was reflective of their self-made righteousness. They were using the Law wrongly.

Just from these texts alone, there is a clear anti-boasting mindset that is woven through the book of Romans (and the whole Bible). So, our first reaction to the word "proud" is rightly negative because of the focus of these texts. And I don't think that reaction is necessarily bad because you cannot understand what Paul is saying Romans 15:17 unless you start with a cautionary approach to the word "proud." Verse 17 should be surprising.

The gospel message, in its essence, is that we cannot save ourselves. Pride is eternally dangerous. Hell will be filled with people who are utterly shocked that they are there. No one comes to faith in Jesus until they have embraced the simple truth that peace with God comes because of Jesus' work not ours (Romans 5:1). The gospel saves us from ourselves, and that is humbling.

However, the gospel does not eliminate all boasting; it eliminates the wrong kind of boasting. The Bible commends boasting as long as it is boasting in the right thing! For the Christian, that right-kind-of-boasting is the joy that we have in what the gospel does to us, through us, and in others. It is a boasting in what Christ has done for us. So, if you look back at verse 17 the reason that boasting was not sinful was because it was "in Christ Jesus." In other words, as Paul looked at his life, he saw the work that Christ did for him and through him, and it brought him joy. In Christ, Paul had reason to be proud of his work for God.

This is not the only place where Paul talks like this. There are other places where we get the clear sense that

¹⁴ *But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. (Galatians 6:14)*

¹⁷ *"Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." (2 Corinthians 10:17)*

...who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh...(Philippians 3:3)

There is something really important to note in all of this. Sometimes in our good effort to downplay and be on guard for pride (which we should be) we can negate the emotional and satisfaction side of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. There are some people who think being humble means that you are never happy, never excited, or never pleased with what God does through you. And when that becomes our mind-set, we rob ourselves of joy and God of glory.

Passion, love, and happiness are core drivers within the human heart. These are God-given emotions designed to fuel actions – sometimes radical ones! The issue is not boasting or passion or love or satisfaction; it is the object connected to boasting, passion, love or satisfaction. In fact, I would argue that for many of us our problem is that we do not boast enough in what God has done in us and through us. And the effect is that the gospel is not platformed and presented as it should be.

I love being a pastor because of what I get to see God do. Last month I went back to our former church for their 50th Anniversary which included a big-tent reception afterwards. Sarah and I stood outside the tent for over three hours as we reconnected with person after person. As we heard their stories after we moved, how they were growing, and how our ministry had shaped them, it was very encouraging. When we drove away, I was exhausted but my heart was full of joy. I told Sarah something like, “Now, that’s why we got into ministry.” What was going on in my heart: I was rejoicing in the work of God.

Part of the reason that I want you to be involved in one another’s lives or be a small group leader or serve in our children’s ministry or become a lay counselor is because I want you to see the beauty of the “moment” where God shows up and you know that He is at work. If you do not get to see that on a regular basis, I really feel bad for you. Now it requires risk, sacrifice, and sometimes some pain, but the outcome is unbelievable and worth it. That also should be a real encouragement to those of you who are serving but wondering about the outcome or the effect. This text is a reminder that God is the one who is at work. Any fruit or success is because of Him. Therefore, we need to remember that God is always doing more than what we see and less than what we’ll fully know. Paul’s ministry was not “successful” everywhere he went. In fact, some called him weak and uninspiring (2 Cor. 10:10), and yet Paul boasted in the Lord (2 Cor. 10:17).

Finally, the other beautiful thing about this is that when you are on the receiving end of ministry – someone, in the name of Jesus, ministers to you – it is important for you to know that God works through the people around us. In other words, if you have ever said, “God will you help me know what to do?!” and then you get spiritual direction because through someone else’s counsel, a message or through a song, that is God at work!

Do you see how beautiful verse 17 is? Do you realize why it is so significant that Paul says that in Christ Jesus, he is proud of his work for God?

Two Specific Reasons for Boasting

Earlier I said that verse 17 was the main thought, and there were other passages surrounding it that provided more specificity into what Paul is saying. Verses 15-16 and 18-19 are the reasons why Paul is boasting in Christ. What do we learn from these verses?

¹⁵ But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God ¹⁶ to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:15–16)

In verse 15 we see that Paul strikes a very pastoral and compassionate tone. He acknowledges that he has written boldly to the church at Rome. He is not apologizing, but he is setting his words in context of the greater mission to reach the Gentiles. In other words, Paul's appeal for the church to be welcoming one another, be considerate of one another, and to follow the example of Jesus in Romans 14-15 came from a bigger passion related to the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles.

In fact, in verse 16 Paul even uses priestly and offering-type language. He sees himself in a priestly role, and the Gentiles are an offering to God. What's more, he longs to see the Gentiles as "acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit." So, he longs for Gentiles to be an offering which is pleasing to the Lord. He wants them to be acceptable and sanctified. Paul sees his ministry as the means by which God is collecting a people which are presented to God. Worship is going to happen in a new way thanks to Paul's ministry.

The second reason for his boast is found in verse 18, and it starts with the word "for." It is similar as the reason found in verse 15-16, but it is more focused on obedience.

¹⁸ For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed, ¹⁹ by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God—so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ; (Romans 15:18–19)

Remember that verse 18 immediately follows Paul's statement regarding being proud of his work for God. Now we get a very clear sense of exactly what he means. He explicitly says that he is not speaking (boast!) of anything except about how Christ has worked through him in order to bring about obedience in the Gentiles. When Paul considers what he's proud of, it is that. Paul has witnessed the Gentiles turning from disobedience to obedience. He has personally witnessed the transformation.

This is where gospel work becomes thrilling. If you are a parent, this is what brings tears to your eyes as your children put on new behaviors that seemed light-years away. If you are discipling someone, it is when you see your disciple making progress in really changing how he or she is thinking and acting. If you are a lay-counselor, it happens when a counselee begins to see how the Word of God is really relevant in his or her life. Obedience expressed in the life of another person is beautiful to behold.

Paul's original goal in Romans 1:5 was "to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all nations." According to verse 19, Paul saw this obedience happen through "word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders¹, by the power of the Spirit of God." Through his ministry he witnessed the powerful transformation of people.

He wanted to see the Gentiles embrace biblical obedience, and he sees himself and his ministry as a conduit through which God is accomplishing that plan.² As he surveys his ministry from Jerusalem, which was the epicenter of Christianity, to Illyricum, which was located in present-day Albania, Paul sees the fulfillment of his ministry. He rejoices in the sweeping scope of what God has done.

Now that doesn't mean that every person in that area had been converted. Rather, it means that Paul had brought the gospel to that area of the world, and that there was a new group of people whom he could give to the Lord as an offering. He saw his ministry as fulfilling the heart of God in Isaiah 2 and Micah 4 where Israel is the light shining to the Gentiles as they stream towards the temple.

¹ It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and it shall be lifted up above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it, ² and many nations shall come, and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. Micah 4:1–2 (ESV)

So that is what he is proud of. That's what he's boasting in. God is bringing salvation and obedience to the nations. He boasts because the Gentiles are going to be an offering to God, and his ministry has been the means by which God accomplished his plan to reach the nations.

Do you see this reality and vision in your own life? God is still at work in bringing people to himself and growing them in obedience. There is still an offering which is being presented to God – an offering which is acceptable and sanctified. My question would be simply, "Who is in your offering?" What work of ministry in the lives of people are you engaged in?

If you are married, it starts with your spouse as you labor to help him or her become everything that God wants them to be. I love how Paul pictured this in Ephesians 5.

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. ²⁸ In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. (Ephesians 5:25–28)

Did you hear the same language as Romans 15? A husband's goal should be to be a part of the divine process of the church being presented to Christ. Parents, as well, have a responsibility to see their children raised "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4). Think of the labor of raising

¹ I believe that these signs and wonders were part of Paul's apostolic ministry and are not the normative means by which the gospel or obedience is spread.

² <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/a-pastors-offering-to-god-of-holy-people>

children and speaking into their lives as the means by which they are offered to the Lord. But also consider the relationships around you: friends, small group, or discipleship group. Think of your unsaved co-workers, neighbors and family members as part of your mission to see a people presented to God.

Paul's joy in gospel work and his boasting in Christ came from what he saw God do through him. He saw his life and his travels as a conduit for the work of God, and it made him happy to see what God did through him.

Two Implications for our Church

The three verses that are left to unpack are verses 14 and 20-21. Verse 14 relates to the internal ministry of the church and the other relates to the external ministry.

Although verse 14 is placed before verse 17, I think that it is part of the overall implications of what Paul has in mind. Usually implications come at the end from an inductive perspective, but here the argument is deductive. Paul sees something in them which gives him great joy and reason to boast.

¹⁴ I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another. Romans 15:14 (ESV)

Now Paul does not mean that the church in Rome was perfect in every way. He does not mean "full" in the sense that they lack nothing. Instead he saying that he has a spiritual confidence in them that they are able minister to one another effectively. They are able to spiritually care for one another.

In other words, when Paul considered the church at Rome, he believed that they had the spiritual resources – full of goodness, filled with all knowledge – needed in order to help one another grow spiritually. This becomes especially clear with the statement "...able to instruct one another." Paul wanted them to know that he was not only one capable of giving them instruction. They could and should be doing that to one another.

This is more important than what you might realize. The word for "instruct" means pastoral admonition, correction, and rebuke. It can also mean to advise, to give counsel, or to warn. And Paul says that this is what they are able to do for one another. When it came to the work of the ministry, there were spiritual resources among them that could be used. Paul did not want the church at Rome to think that their only hope was for Paul or some other apostle to come to their church. He wanted them to embrace the fact they could engage in ministry to one another.

This is the beauty of believing while people may be involved, ministry really happens because of God. Therefore, the church could continue to grow and develop spiritually even without Paul. This verse reminds us that we all have a responsibility and the ability to spiritually help one another. We are called and empowered by Christ to minister to each other.

One of the main reasons we have a lay counseling ministry is because of this text and others like it. We want you to be equipped to be able to appropriately instruct one another. We want you to see how the Bible can be applied through your life and helped another person. We want you to see the joy of

being a part of the work of ministry in someone else's life. We want you to see that there is a level of competency that you have to help other people grow and change.

You see, if we really believe that it is God who works through us, and if we believe that it is the Holy Spirit who speaks through the Word, then we ought to be inclined to speak into one another's lives. This should be happening in our existing relationships: small groups, discipleship relationships, marriage, etc. And it is also one of the reasons that we want you in relationship with one another: so that this kind of spiritual helpfulness is happening.

There is a tragic trend to overly professionalize the ministry of the Word such that it is limited to just a few. While there is a need for those who are more skilled in certain areas to handle the most difficult and complicated situations, the life of a church will suffer and discipleship will not happen if it is only up to our staff and Elders. All of us need to see ourselves as part of the spiritual care dynamic of this church. And I would not want you to miss out on the beauty of seeing God at work.

The second implication is found in verses 20-21. Paul not only wanted to see the work of the gospel continue to grow in the church in Rome, he also wanted it to extend to those who had never heard. The joy of his heart was to see the church healthy and the mission of the gospel expanding.

²⁰ and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation, ²¹ but as it is written, "Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand." Romans 15:20-21 (ESV)

Paul has his sights set on Spain. If you skip ahead to 15:24, you will see it very clearly. Why Spain? Because it was an area where the gospel had not yet been preached. Paul was motivated to preach the gospel there because he longed for even more people to be part of the offering of the Gentiles to God. He saw unreached peoples as a field wide-open for more gospel witness.

Don't confuse Paul's statement about not building on another's foundation as if he wants all the credit. We have already seen that this is not Paul's endgame. His motivation for saying that is because he is so passionate regarding the expansion of gospel. He wants to be a part of the bigger picture plan of God, and that is why he quotes Isaiah 52:15 in verse 21.

Paul loves the gospel. He loves what God is doing in the world. And he wants to see it accomplished in the life of the church at Rome. He wants to see it expand to the entire world. And when his life is a part of that mission – he is happy, joyful and (in the right sense) proud.

Let me take you back to the cemetery. What do you want your life to count for? What do you boast in? What is the legacy and impact of your life? My prayer is that with Paul you would be able to say: "In Christ Jesus, I have reason to be proud of my work for God."

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