

**“Gospel Transformation”**  
**Romans 15:14-21**  
**December 3, 2023**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

We begin a new section in Romans today. For the first eleven chapters Paul has presented his explanation of the good news of God’s plan to reclaim this broken world through the life and death of Jesus. That was followed by his exhortation, beginning in chapter 12, to live in a manner that is appropriate to that good news. John Stott calls these two parts the “great exposition (chapters 1-11) and the great exhortation (12:1-15:13).” We might expect Paul to end his letter with the benediction that closes the exhortation portion (15:13), but he doesn’t do so. Why not?

The book we refer to as Romans is a letter and not a treatise. A key difference is that letters are more personal. We don’t write letters so much anymore. I can still remember my father sitting down at the dining room table every Sunday night to write a letter to his mother and father, who lived several hundred miles away from us. Facetime was still in the distant future, and long-distance phone calls were very expensive at that time, so he wrote letters. He would include personal things in the letters that he knew his parents wanted to know. How were their grandchildren doing? How was work going? Where had he travelled recently for business and what were his plans for future travel? With a letter, the heart of the author comes through, and the recipient of the letter gets a sense of who the person is. Since Romans is a letter, it includes personal information about Paul and his relationship with the Christians at Rome. This personal side gives us a glimpse into the transforming power of the gospel in Paul’s life. We see in this passage two areas of Paul’s life that were transformed.

**I. The Gospel Transforms Relationships – v. 14-15**

Paul begins with an affirmation. **“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.”** It seems likely that this affirmation was motivated by some apprehension Paul may have been feeling that perhaps he had written a little too boldly and harshly in his rebuke of the Christians at Rome. He acknowledges in the next verse that he had spoken boldly to them. **“But on some points I have written to you very boldly”** (v. 15). I think many of us have had the experience of questioning whether we were too bold in bringing a word of correction. Someone you care about needs some correction and out of a concern for that person you speak up with the needed correction. Then you question yourself and wonder if perhaps you were

a little too strong. Perhaps Paul is even imagining the Romans saying to themselves, “Who is this guy? He’s never even been to Rome to see us and he has the nerve to rebuke us for our supposed judgmentalism.”

What we have in these first two verses, then, is both affirmation and correction. How is it that Paul could speak both to one group of people? Were they in need of correction or of affirmation? There’s a difference between a person who is basically on the right path but occasionally wanders off the path and needs some encouragement to get back on that path, and a person on the other hand who is walking in a direction 180 degrees from the direction needed. Paul wants the Romans to know that he thinks they are in the former category. From the reports he’s heard about them, he sees the fruit of God’s work in their lives, starting with the fruit of the Spirit called “goodness.” He also sees that they know the true God, being filled with all knowledge. And their knowledge of God is not just theoretical, but the practical knowledge that is able to instruct others.

This affirmation is needed because Paul acknowledges that he had written to them bold words. He said that he did so **“by way of reminder.”** There are other places in the New Testament that mention the need of reminders. Christians often need reminders because we are so prone to forget even the most elementary points of the gospel. Most of us wake up every day with the conviction that any good coming to me today is up to me to provide. We revert to an orphan mentality and need constant reminders that we are loved by our heavenly Father who provides richly for us. We can trust him to rule and reign in our lives for our good. We are like bootup software in a computer that has a flaw in it such that every time the computer is turned on it launches some evil malware.

How do we see gospel transformation in Paul’s life through these two verses? It is seen in the presence of both affirmation and rebuke. This is a gospel quality that is not natural to any of us. We all have a tendency to emphasize either correction over affirmation, or affirmation over correction. It’s not hard to know which one Paul leaned toward. He wrote elsewhere of his zeal for God’s law (Gal. 1:14), even to the point of persecuting Christians who he saw as threatening that law (Phil. 3:6). But now we see him emphasizing both. This is a big change. How is such a change possible? It is a change made possible only by the power of the cross and its ability to bring deep change to those who know and trust it.

Let me explain. There is a paradox at the heart of the Bible. It is expressed in the Old Testament in Number 14:18. **“The Lord is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, to the third and the fourth generation.”** Which is it? Is God a loving God who forgives the guilty, or is he a just God who punishes the guilty?

He is both, and we don't learn how this paradox is resolved until we come to the New Testament and its teaching about the crucifixion of Christ. At the cross we see both the love of God and the fury of God. Paul has explained that earlier in this letter. The first thing he taught concerning our great salvation is that through the shedding of Jesus' blood God is able to be both **“just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus”** (3:25-26). John Stott says it well in his teaching on the substitutionary death of Jesus.

The concept of substitution may be said, then, to lie at the heart of both sin and salvation. For the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives which belong to God alone; God accepts penalties which belong to man alone.

In the cross, we see that God's love is much greater than we imagined. What love would sacrifice one's own Son for sworn enemies? God's love would and did. But we also see that God's holiness and justice is much greater than we feared. If an exception to the requirements of justice would ever be made, surely when sin was laid upon God's beloved Son that would be such an occasion. But no exception was made.

When the truth of the cross is understood and embraced, it changes us in significant ways. It changed Paul into a man of great love and affirmation, while also not sacrificing his love of God's law. I think most of us lean either toward affirmation or correction, either by our personality or by the spirit of the age. The spirit of our age is clearly one of affirmation to the neglect of correction. Which of the two do you lean toward? When the gospel takes root in our lives, as it had in Paul's life, both love and justice, affirmation and correction, grow stronger. As parents, we grow in our love for our children, even when they disappoint us and bring grief to our hearts, and we also grow in our courageous resolve to do the hard work of correction. In our friendships, our love is deepened, as also our willingness to risk it all to help a friend find release from those things destroying his or her life.

## **II. The Gospel Transforms Work – v. 16-21**

Paul next says that what he has written to the Romans was done as part of his calling as an apostle. He wrote as he did **“because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles.”** Paul had a clear sense of God's calling in his life, and that calling was to preach the gospel and plant churches among the Gentiles. He sharpened his grasp of that calling even more by saying that his ambition was **“to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation”**

(v. 20). In other words, his call from God was to be a pioneer missionary, taking the gospel where it had not been previously heard and planting churches where there were none.

Was Paul unique in having a call from God, or is that something that we should expect too? While the specifics of Paul's call were very unique (very few Christians are called to plant churches to previously unreached people), the fact of a calling is not. All Christians are called by God to serve him in a way that he has appointed for us. Do you know what God has called you to do? Is your daily life marked by a sense of God-given purpose? The gospel doesn't just transform our relationships, but our daily life as well. Let me point out four features of the transformation it brought to Paul's life.

First, Paul viewed his work as an act of worship. Listen to the way he describes his calling to reach the Gentiles with the gospel. He is called **“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”** (v. 16). He is clearly using the worship language of the Old Testament in describing his work. It's a priestly service, and just like priests offered sacrifices pleasing to God, so Paul was doing the same in offering converted Gentiles to God. What was true for Paul is also true for us. All of life is now worship, including our daily work. Would your work be different if this truth could sink deep into your soul? Imagine if everything you did in your work could be offered to God as a joyful act of worship. What if God were viewed as the ultimate audience for all your work and the principle beneficiary of that work! If you're a stay-at-home mom changing two dozen diapers every day, present that clean baby bottom to God as your offering. If you're a salesman, serve that client's needs as if you are serving God. Medical professionals treat every patient as if they are treating Jesus. This is not just a mind game we play, but it is actually true that our work can be an act of joyful worship.

The next thing I see in the way the gospel had transformed Paul's work life is that he took pride in his work. **“In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God”** (v. 17). The literal word he uses is the word “boasting,” which has been a negative word in Romans prior to this. The gospel excludes boasting in our works (4:2) and boasting in one's ethnic heritage (3:27; 11:18). But there is a kind of boasting that the Bible approves of here. It is the healthy pride one can take in the fulfillment of God's calling in our lives. It is a source of joyful satisfaction when we have put forth our best effort and produced something of value for others. We can be rightfully proud of something like that. We want to do work that we can be proud of. According to early Christian tradition, some of the wooden plows made by Jesus in the early part of the first century were still in use well into the second century.

Paul reports next that his work was successful, though he is zealous to give the credit for his success to the Lord Jesus. **“For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience”** (v. 18). He then proceeds to speak of what Jesus had done through him to bring about this successful outcome. Paul summarizes his work with the category of word and deed ministry. He then reports that it was marked by **“the power of signs and wonders,”** a phrase used when God does a special work, like at the exodus of Israel from Egypt. And it was marked too by the power of the Spirit of God. Paul viewed himself as simply an instrument God was using to bring about his purposes. This is the view of success we need to have for our work. Success is not to be reduced to such shallow metrics as finances or popularity. Rather, success is simply whether or not God has accomplished his good purposes through us. As a pastor, I am often reminding myself that success is not the three B’s of bodies, bucks and buildings. Rather, it is the slow work of God to change people’s lives through the power of the gospel. It is the vision statement of our church, to be that community of Christ’s coming kingdom that brings hope to a broken world.

Finally, we see in Paul’s transformed view of work that his focus was narrowed even further. It wasn’t just preaching to Gentiles, but preaching to Gentiles in areas where no preaching had previously taken place. **“I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else’s foundation”** (v. 20). Something that usually happens as we mature in Christ is that we gain a sharper focus on what God has called us to do and what he has called us not to do. Our determination to do it grows too, even if it involves some suffering. Paul’s narrowed focus certainly involved him in suffering. His preaching was hugely disruptive to people because it included a call to change that was fiercely opposed.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Let me close with something I’ve found helpful in the area of discerning what God may be calling you to do. It is to see calling as the alignment of our desires, abilities and opportunities. So we ask the question, “What do I want to do?” (desire), “What am I able to do?” (ability), and “Has God provided me the opportunity to do this?” It is the gospel of Jesus that frees us to be honest about these things. We no longer have to make decisions to validate our identity or to feel good about ourselves, because all of that has been given to us in the gospel. Now we are free to be honest and to serve God joyfully and meaningfully every day of our lives.

**Discussion Questions**  
**Romans 15:14-21**

1. What do you think it would have been like to know the Apostle Paul at a personal level? Describe what you think he was like, based on what you know of him from the New Testament.
2. We see in the first two verses (14-15) that Paul was both affirming in his relationships with others, as well as being willing to correct. Which of those two do you lean toward?
3. How does the gospel help us be more balanced?
4. Paul describes his apostolic work in terms of worship. What are some of the differences it would make in your work if you viewed your work life similarly?
5. How did God lead you to pursue the work you are currently undertaking?
6. Paul also speaks of being proud of his work. What's the difference between a sinful pride in our work and a good pride? Can you think of some examples of what a good pride in your work might look like?
7. Paul's definition of success in his work was very Christ-centered. Read verses 18-19 and note what these verses teach us about true success. Are there any applications that come to mind in your own life?