Romans 15:14-33 Sermon Manuscript

“Evangelism Through the Local Church”

Well we have come to the final part of this amazing epistle. Next week we will conclude our series in the book of Romans in chapter 16. Some of the greatest and well known verses and doctrines come from the book of Romans. And Romans usually is treated like a systematic theology where we turn to find key passages on the doctrine of election or of sanctification and eternal security and the like. And while those doctrines are there and God designed Scriptures like Romans to be there to sharpen our theology and doctrine, yet sometimes we forget that Romans didn’t just drop out of heaven onto our laps. (I mean in a sense it did because God is the ultimate author of the Bible) but Romans was written by a real man to real people addressing real issues, both practical and theological, in the church.

Now it was a bit difficult for me to nail down the one main point that Paul is trying to get across to us because he mentions several aspects of the Christian life like giving to the poor in the church and meeting practical needs, evangelism, resting and recouping, travel plans, etc. But one thing that’s for sure that’s emphasized in this section is the need to reach unreached people groups and nations with the gospel. The need to evangelize the lost is stressed here, but it is stressed not apart from the local church. I hope that you will see that whether you are evangelizing in a foreign country or evangelizing the neighborhood right across from Bethel Baptist, it cannot be done apart from the local church. And I think it’s timely that we come to this passage today because this Saturday happens to be our VBS day where we not only invite kids to attend VBS but also that we invite them to trust in the Savior who died for their sins.

Before Paul brings up evangelism and reaching the unreached Gentiles of the known world, we get a little bit of his pastoral heart revealed for the sheep. Verse 14 says, “*But I myself am also convinced about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, having been filled with all knowledge and being able also to admonish one another.*” Now throughout this entire letter Paul has written some pretty heavy exhortations and in some instances rebuke to the Christians in Rome. He said things like in Romans 2“*Therefore you are without excuse O man, everyone who passes judgment*” Or in Romans chapter 9 with “*who are you O man to answer back to God*?” He has written some serious things and warnings about not boasting about yourself. All of that has the potential of the Roman Christians being discouraged and seeing themselves as those who know little to nothing and comes with the danger of potentially doubting their salvation.

However, in an effort to counteract that potential notion and so that they would know that Paul was saying that to ultimately build them up and not tear them down, Paul says in a warm affectionate way that he is convinced of the believers in Rome that they are full of goodness, filled with knowledge and able also to admonish one another. That description reveals several things about the believers in Rome to whom Paul was writing to. They were first “full of goodness” which means they were filled with the goodness of God. They were full of good works from God. It’s not a reference to their OWN inherent goodness in themselves, as we know from Romans 3 that there is no one who is good, no not one. No one by themselves are inherently good in the eyes of a holy God. But BECAUSE of God’s goodness living in them, they are able to manifest that goodness to others. And they are also filled with all knowledge. What knowledge? The knowledge of Scripture. They are more saturated with the knowledge of Scripture than they realize. And furthermore, they are more mature in the faith than they realize because they are able to admonish one another. It’s very hard to admonish one another if you yourself as struggling with the very thing that you are admonishing people about.

But why did Paul heavily admonish and rebuke the Roman believers at certain points in the letter? Here’s why: Verses 15 and 16 “*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 by God for me 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, having been sanctified by the Holy Spirit.*” It goes back to the reason why God inspired Paul to write this letter in the first place. The Jewish and Gentile believers were not getting along with each in the churches of Rome. They were not unified as one body as they should have been. So Paul writes boldly in certain points of this letter to remind them of where they all were at before salvation, that they were all the mercy of Jesus Christ, both Jew and Gentile…and also reminding them that Paul’s primary mission is to be an apostle to the Gentiles, to reach even the Gentiles who were at the farthest reaches of the known earth at that time, which was Spain. Paul saw himself like a priest in the Old Testament who offered an acceptable sacrifice to the Lord, which in Paul’s case was his entire ministry to the Gentiles for the Gospel was an act of worship and sacrifice unto God.

And as a result of being a vessel for the gospel, Paul has a reason to boast. Verse 17 “*Therefore in Christ Jesus I have reason for boasting in things pertaining to God*. *For I will not be bold to speak of anything except what Christ has brought about through me, leading to the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed, in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit; so that from Jerusalem and all around as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ.*” Paul has done some extraordinary things for the gospel and as a result he might have reason to boast about “HIS” accomplishments. He might have reason to say “listen up guys, I am the apostle Paul and you must listen to me!” Yet, the only boast he has is in Christ Jesus. The only way he could speak with authority and boldness to the Roman believers was because of Christ Jesus. Yeah he did his ministry accompanied by signs and wonders and in the power of the Holy Spirit, but that was all given to him by God as a way to authenticate his apostolic mission to preach Christ to the Gentiles. Paul successfully completed his mission to fully preach the gospel, which I believes includes not only the gospel message of salvation itself, but all of what that entails. He didn’t fail to preach the whole counsel of God as he says in another Scripture. But that’s a huge geographical area he reached. Illyricum today is modern day Albania, which is right above Greece. That’s almost 2000 miles by land of walking from East to West!

Verse 20 “*And in this way I make it my ambition to proclaim the gospel, not where Christ was already named, so that I would not build on another man’s foundation but as it is written, “They who had no declaration of Him shall see, And they who have not heard shall understand*.” As the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul’s mission was to go to all the places of the world where it was not yet reached with the gospel. That’s what he’s talking about in verse 20 about not building on another man’s foundation. He’s not saying it’s wrong to disciple or to water the seed of the gospel that’s already been planted by another minister or pastor. 1 Corinthians 3:6 acknowledges the legitimacy of building on another person’s foundation where it says, “*I planted and Apollos watered, but God gives the growth.”* It doesn’t really matter who is the seed planter versus who is the waterer of that seed, as long as God causes it to grow, then it’s all the same. But His point is that *“hey look if I see that another believers or believers have proclaimed the gospel in a city, but I see that the next city over has not been reached with the gospel, then I am going to make unreached city my priority and mission*.” And even here we see Paul’s principles and understanding that any form of missions or evangelism is not a solo mission or a task for one man to complete and see all the way through by himself. He understood and trusted in the work of the local churches in that city that’s already been reached to continue to disciple believers so that those disciples can make and multiple more disciples.

When I was attending Grace Community Church in Los Angeles, CA working as a custodian and attending seminary there I remember talking to my custodial supervisor, who was a seminary student about to graduate from seminary, and asking him whether he would consider staying at Grace and get a pastoral position or whether he would want to get a pastoral position elsewhere. And I remember him saying something like “*you know as nice as that would be to stay at Grace with all these godly professors and students and pastors, and the great resources that Grace has to offer and being under the preaching of John MacArthur” there are other places and other churches that are more in spiritual need than here. You could say there are too many eggs in one basket*.” Like Paul my brother understood that there are so many other places that need the gospel and other churches that need to be built up in sound doctrine more than other established areas that have churches like Grace Community Church.

And because of knowing that need in other places, that was why Paul couldn’t come when he wanted to, to see the believers face to face in Rome. He says starting in verse 22 “*For this reason I have often been prevented from coming to you; but now, with no further place for me in these regions, and since I have had for many years a longing to come to you whenever I go to Spain – for I hope, passing through, to see you, and to be helped on my way there by you, when I have first enjoyed your company for a while*.” As I mentioned before in some of my sermons, it was very crucial for the Jewish and Gentile believers to remain united for the Gospel’s sake. They needed to remain united because the gospel has broken down the dividing wall of hostility as Ephesians 2 says bringing both groups, Jews and Gentiles, as one people under Christ’s lordship. But also practically for the sake of Paul’s mission to reach Spain with the gospel, he needed the spiritual, emotional, and physical support of the churches in Rome to send him on his way to Spain for his final frontier mission. But how can a divided and splintering church be successful in sending off a missionary? But it’s not only that Paul wants to make the churches of Rome his launching pad off into Spain but also he genuinely wants to enjoy their company first because that will help prevent burnout in ministry when you can rest and enjoy fellowship with other believers that you know and love.

But then Paul says something a little but shocking in terms of his travel plans. Verse 25 “*But now I am going to Jerusalem to serve the saints*.” Wait a minute did Paul say he is now going to Jerusalem? Isn’t he writing the letter to the Romans from Corinth? That’s going 1000 miles away in the wrong direction away from Spain! What’s so important that he finds it necessary to go backwards in his journey back to Jerusalem? Verses 26 reveals why Paul wanted to go back: “*For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to share with the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. Yes, they were pleased to do so, and they are indebted to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things. Therefore, when I have completed this and have put my seal on this fruit of theirs, I will go on by way of you to Spain. And I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ*.” There were many poor Jewish believers in Jerusalem and in Galatians 2:10, Paul says that before he was confirmed in his mission to be an apostle to the Gentiles, the apostle Peter encouraged the apostle Paul to “remember the poor” in Jerusalem. And Paul responded that he would remember. And here he is years later, and he has not broken that promise. The Gentiles churches owed and were indebted to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem for the sending forth of the gospel, that if it weren’t for them, the gospel would be more unclear to everyone if it weren’t for the Jerusalem council determining whether a person was saved by grace alone or needed to also be circumcised and follow the laws of Moses in addition to that. So the salvation of the Gentiles is thanks to the Jews and from the nation of Israel from which the Messiah came from. Yet, notice in verse 27 they were “pleased” to gather and give of their money to the Jerusalem church. Yes it was an obligation but it was a delightful obligation. “God loves a cheerful giver.” He is pleased when we view service not primarily as a duty but as a delight. And I know I need to hear more than anyone else. Do I view whatever is asked of me as not only a duty but a delight?

And finally, verses 30-33: “*Now I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me, that I may be rescued from those who are disobedient in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints; so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God and find rest in your company.Now may the God of peace be with you all. Amen.”* In the book of Acts, Paul was discouraged by other believers from going back to Jerusalem because of the many people who wanted to kill the apostle Paul and the intense persecution that the apostles faced there. And thus, Paul is asking for the prayers from the believers in the churches of Rome for safety and that the gospel will go unhindered throughout Jerusalem, and so that he would make it safely to Rome to finally see them and be refreshed by their company. But isn’t all of this encouraging when it comes to evangelism that really evangelism can’t be done apart from the local church? That evangelism is not a solo effort in the sense that once someone comes to saving faith, you will need the help of other brothers and sisters in Christ in the local church to teach them to observe everything that Jesus commands of them? That even for the “apostle Paul,” he couldn’t do it all by himself either? Evangelism is not just for those people out there like Ray Comfort who are “gifted” in the area of evangelism. Evangelism is not for those who are these super missionaries who leave everything behind to go live in a poor, destitute country proclaiming the gospel. No, even those that we consider “super missionaries” are those who were at the very least financially supported by their home churches and I would hope were themselves a part of a local church in that foreign country. Evangelism, reaching the unreached, is an ordinary task for every believer, regardless of how gifted or not gifted that person might be.

Maybe you might think of a “famous missionary” that did his entire ministry solo in his evangelism and maybe got a lot of “converts” to Christ, but if he did not really belong to a local church, God would not see that as successful evangelism or successful missions. (And just as a side note, be suspicious of any prominent or famous Christian leader, evangelist, or speaker that is not a part of and committed to a local church). I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with going up to strangers on the streets and sharing the gospel and never seeing that person again or that it’s wrong to open air preach or anything like that. But ultimately at the end of the day, the local church is where you will find the process of discipleship happening. We believers can’t make disciples without the local church, but unbelievers also cannot be disciples without first believing in the gospel. You need both. And one without the other is not faithful and biblical Christianity, but an anemic Christianity.

Notice that in verses 30-33 that the word “love” and “joy” are used. The only way that Paul can feel that way genuinely towards a people that he has never met in person is through the God of peace that fills the one who trusts in Him with the love and joy of God. Ephesians 2:12 says this, that those who have not trusted in Christ are those who have no hope and are without God in the world. But if you trust that Jesus by His grace can pay the penalty for your sins, forgiving you of your sins and grant you the gift of everlasting life and to live forever for Him, this is what the rest of Ephesians 2 says will happen: that in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off will be brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace. And that having made peace, he might reconcile you to God through the cross, having in Himself put to death the enmity. Maybe you are one of those that is needing to hear the full gospel of God that Paul preached from Jerusalem all the way to Illyricum because you are not right with God, and are still condemned in your sins. Jesus Christ can you make right with God. He can give you a righteous standing before Him. Trust and obey Him for there is no other way… to be happy in Jesus than to trust and obey.