

“WHAT IT WILL TAKE”

Studies in Romans – 18

Romans 15:1-16 (p. 1102)

Today we close our study of St. Paul’s letter to the Romans. Apart from the Gospels, perhaps no other book of the Bible has had a greater impact on the spread of the Christian faith. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all introduce us to the person of Jesus Christ. But it is this letter to the Romans, perhaps more than any other, that convicts us about the implications of that relationship. It is the closest thing we have to a first century systematic theology. It addresses those great universal themes of sin, redemption, justification, the relationship between law and grace, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the ethics of the Christian life.

Paul began the letter, you’ll remember, with his great summation of the faith: *“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes; first for the Jew then for the Gentile. For in the gospel (the) righteousness of God is revealed, a righteousness that is from faith to faith – as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’”*

What followed, up through chapter 8, were the “bad news” and the “good news” along with a detailed summary of how the Christian life works. In chapters 9-11 Paul traced the relationship between Jews and Christians. And in the final chapters he has outlined a strategy for the Church in the world. And today we draw that strategy section to a close. Paul actually ends the letter with his plans for the future along with some personal greetings (all of which are a fascinating study in themselves). Unfortunately we’re going to have to save them for another time. Today we’ll focus our attention on the first sixteen verses of chapter 15.

You’ll recall that in chapter 14 Paul had addressed the relationship between the “weak” and the “strong” in the church. Chapter 15 begins on that same theme. But Paul soon expands it to a broader look at the kind of ministering mentality Christians are going to have to maintain if they want to be part of a healthy church. As a matter of fact, if the kind of ministering mentality he describes here is **not** part of the fabric (the very character) of a local church, then I have serious doubts that church will thrive. Oh, it may be going through the motions, it may have the appearance of a church; but it will just be “doing laps” and probably not going anywhere. I, for one, don’t want to be part of that kind of church.

So what will it take for a church (this church) to not just survive, but thrive? What are the elements of a ministering mentality that are indispensable in making and maintaining a healthy church? Paul focuses on four areas. In verses 1-4 he talks about the *ministry of edification*. In verses 5-12 he speaks of the *ministry of*

equanimity. In verse 13 he reminds us of the *ministry of enthusiasm*. And in verses 14-16 he shows us how the *ministry of encouragement* works. Now let's look at each one briefly.

1. First, in verses 1-4 Paul talks about the *ministry of edification*. “*We who are strong,*” he writes, “*ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.*” How do you build people up? How do you “edify” them? Paul says that one key way you can do that is by “bearing with them” in their weakness.

He then goes on to talk about Jesus as our first and best model. Think about how our Lord bore with the failings of people, and in the process built them up. Remember Simon, the headstrong loud-mouthed disciple. Jesus not only put up with his outlandish statements, and his impetuous behavior, and even his betrayal. Jesus even gave him a new name. He called him “Peter” (the “Rock”) and he told Simon Peter that on his kind of faith he intended to build his church. Talk about building him up!

Or think about Thomas, the perennial skeptic, the doubting disciple who was always asking questions, never satisfied with a simple “because I said so.” Not only did Jesus put up with his doubts, bear with him in his struggles to find the truth. It was Thomas the doubter to whom the risen Lord Jesus granted a special appearance. And it was to Thomas the skeptic that our Lord offered his final, tender beatitude, “*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.*”

The point is this: if you want to build another person up, you don't begin by telling them all the things that are wrong with them. Chances are they already know that. What they need is someone who will say to them, “*You may sometimes drive me crazy, but you are not going to drive me away. And I'll do whatever I can to help you realize what an amazing job God did when he created you.*” That is the ministry of edification. And without it, the church is going to be spinning its wheels not growing disciples, and not going anywhere.

2. Second, in verses 5-12 Paul talks about the *ministry of equanimity*. I'll admit I chose the word equanimity because it's an “e” word so it fits nicely with edification, enthusiasm and encouragement. But I wouldn't have chosen it if it didn't convey what I believe Paul was saying here. The dictionary defines equanimity as: “*Evenness of mind, especially under stress – right disposition – balance.*”

If the church is going to sustain any lasting impact on the world, it will be through its commitment to even-mindedness under stress. Paul writes: “*May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify God...*” He's speaking of a fellowship of very different people who are

discovering that, in spite of their differences, God's gifts of patience and encouragement are creating harmony. Not uniformity – harmony.

Think of a symphony orchestra. Imagine how monotonous their performance would be if everyone played the same notes at the same time and in the same way? Paul is talking about unity, not uniformity. When all the musicians play their own very different parts at the right times and in their own unique ways, they can make glorious music together. That's unity. And when the Church shows that kind of even-mindedness – when everyone's part, although different from the rest, is valued and important – the world sits up and takes note. Do you know why? It's because in the world the law of the jungle (“It's my way or the highway”) is the dominant rule. Caring as much for the other as for yourself is the exception. And the church can have a vital impact on the world when we exercise that ministry of equanimity. Without it we'll be little more than a baptized replica of the world's values.

3. Third, in verse 13 Paul talks about the *ministry of enthusiasm*. He writes, “*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*” The joy, peace and hope he talks about there – those are all gifts of the Holy Spirit. They don't just “happen” to you. Nor are you able to generate them on your own. They come and then overflow into the lives of others, Paul says, as a direct result of trusting in God.

Do you know the root of the word, enthusiasm? It comes from the Greek “en theos.” It means to be inspired – literally to be “possessed by God.” In other words, enthusiasm isn't so much a feeling you generate as it is a decision you make to be “in God.” And when you decide to let your life be filled with God, those “feelings” of excitement and a hunger for the very best that life has to offer can't help but spill over into the lives of others. That's Paul's prayer: that we would know the ministry of enthusiasm as we open our lives to God's indwelling Spirit. That is a key part of what it takes to make a vibrant, healthy church.

4. So there you have ministries of edification and equanimity and enthusiasm. Finally, in verses 14-16, Paul demonstrates how the *ministry of encouragement* works. He writes, “*I myself am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge, and competent to instruct one another. I have written to you quite boldly on some points, as if to remind you of them again...*”

A community of faith that wants to have a lasting impact for Jesus Christ on the society around them not only has to have the necessary gifts. There has to be a level of spiritual maturity to be able to put those gifts to work. Paul assures them that they already have what it takes. It's obvious that you have the “right stuff.” And so this letter, he says, should be taken as a reminder of what you already know. What a gracious way for him to put it! Instead of instructing them on the

need to develop a ministry of encouragement, Paul models it for them here in this letter.

That's the kind of instruction you don't easily forget. One of my favorite authors, Tim Hansel, received a letter one day. It read:

Dear Tim,

I've just finished reading an interesting little book called "When I Relax I Feel Guilty." It's not bad for a former gym teacher. What amazes me, though, is I'm still learning and being encouraged by that same gym teacher ten years after I graduated from high school. I may not be burned deeply into your memory, Tim, but you are in mine. And now that you've surfaced once again in my life, I thought I'd let you know that.

I remember the first day I had you for P.E. when I was a freshman. We all had to run the 600-yard dash and I didn't want to. I was always coming in last, no matter how hard I ran (and I always ran as hard as I could). But this one was different.

Oh, I still came in last – by about 150 yards, as I remember. But I remember you running along side of me that last 100 yards, yelling "Good effort, Lou! Great effort! Absolutely magnificent..." I felt like I'd won the Olympic Gold Medal for the marathon. And I became totally devoted to you because no one had ever encouraged me like you.

The next year I was your manager for the soccer team, a position I took (again the following year) despite the fact that you had left to circumnavigate the globe; but left the next year to play fullback for the JVs when you returned. And I would never have had the courage to do it, if it had not been for your example.

Well, that was more than a decade ago. I went to college and majored in journalism because my senior English teacher told me I had no ability as a writer. (I never liked him much, and I had become fascinated by things I supposedly could not do.) All through those four years I held your example in my mind, looked for possibilities and wondered – often – how you always managed to be so positive all the time. Five years ago I met Jesus and figured you out.

That, folks, is the fruit of the ministry of encouragement.

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What will it take for this church (or any church for that matter) to thrive – to grow into it's own as the unique expression of the gospel that God intends it to be? It will certainly take the ministries of edification and equanimity and enthusiasm and encouragement. But none of those is the last word. The last word about what it will take is "amen."

Paul closes this letter with a doxology: *“Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ... to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.”* For all our talk about the importance of keeping the faith – and it **is** important, Paul reminds us once more with that word “amen” that the central issue is not our faith, but God’s faithfulness. In spite of all our successes and all our failures at trying to live a life of faith, God remains faithful.

And so Paul ends this letter with the Hebrew word for “faithful” – “amen” (a word that literally means “fixed” – “reliable”). God is our rock. So this letter to the church in Rome (and the church in Medford) really comes down to one thing. This amazing letter is a call to stake everything we are, everything we have, and everything we hope to be on God’s faithfulness, because, in the end, that is what it will take for the church to thrive.

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