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PRINCIPLES FOR YOUR MINISTRY (Part 1)

Romans 15:14-21

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December 2, 2012

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December 2, 2012
Romans, Lesson 102

Principles for Your Ministry (Part 1)
Romans 15:14-21

You may have seen the title of this message, “Principles for Your Ministry,” and thought, “Well, this message doesn’t apply to me because I’m not in the ministry.” If you thought that, you may not understand the New Testament truth that as a Christian God has given you spiritual gifts that you are to use in serving (“ministering” for) Him. There are no useless or inactive parts in the body of Christ. Every believer is a priest with a ministry to fulfill.

Or you may think that you’re not “in the ministry” because you’re not financially supported in your ministry. You work in a secular job. But so did Paul—he made tents to support his ministry. All of us are just as much “in the ministry” as Paul was. Someday we all will give an account to God of how well we fulfilled the ministry that He gave us.

The only way you can rightly say that this message doesn’t apply to you is if you are not saved. If you have not been born again, you cannot serve God. In fact, you cannot do anything for God to try to earn your salvation. If you try to earn your salvation by serving God in some way, you’re only going farther down the path away from God. You could do as many good deeds as Mother Teresa did, but if you think that those good deeds will get you into heaven, you will be shocked on the day of judgment. Good deeds can never erase the guilt of your sins. If they could, then Jesus did not need to die. It is only when you confess the pride of your self-righteousness and trust in Christ alone as your Savior from sin that you then can serve God. So if you’re not saved, the application of this message for you is, trust in Christ right now!

Since all of us who have trusted in Christ will give an account to God for how well we served Him with the gifts that He gave us, we need to know some biblical principles for how to carry out our ministries. In our text, Paul gives us at least a dozen such principles. (Don’t panic—we’ll only cover six today!) Paul has just completed the major doctrinal and practical parts of this letter. He now turns to some personal matters that extend to the end of the letter.

This is the longest closing section of any of Paul's letters, perhaps because he had not yet visited the church in Rome and he wanted to lay the groundwork for a possible future visit. In 15:14-21 he describes his past ministry. In 15:22-33 he shares his future ministry plans. In 16:1-16 he gives extended greetings to those whom he knew in Rome, followed by a final exhortation and encouragement (16:17-20), greetings from those who were with him in Corinth (16:22-24), and a final benediction (16:25-27).

It's kind of difficult to sum up verses 14-21 in a single sentence, but here's a stab at it:

Following Paul's example, we should affirm the ministries of others while serving the Lord in line with our gifts and calling, giving Him the glory for any results.

Verses 14-21 fall into two sections: In 15:14, Paul affirms the gifts and ministries of the Roman believers, while in 15:15-21 he explains why he has written to them so boldly and how God has used him in ministry to the Gentiles.

1. Following Paul's example, we should affirm the giftedness and value of others' ministries in the body (15:14).

Romans 15:14: "And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able also to admonish one another." In this verse, Paul is being sensitive about presuming to write as boldly as he just has (in 12:1-15:13) to a church that he had neither founded nor pastored (Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 887). He is aware that there may be some resistance to his ministry from some in Rome, and so he is being careful not to offend them by assuming a role over them that they would not accept (*ibid.*). At the same time, he goes on (15:15-19) to show them why they should accept his ministry, namely because God appointed him as an apostle to the Gentiles. This was confirmed by what God had accomplished through him. But in verse 14, there are at least four ministry principles that apply to us:

MINISTRY PRINCIPLE 1: IF YOU'RE A CHRISTIAN, YOU'RE IN THE MINISTRY.

Paul affirms that the entire Roman church (not just the pastors) is "full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able also to

admonish one another." In other words, they are competent to minister to one another. In 1970, Jay Adams wrote a book based on this verse, *Competent to Counsel* [Baker], arguing against psychological counseling and in favor of biblical counseling. He called this "nouthetic" counseling, based on the Greek verb that is here translated "admonish." It means to admonish, warn, or instruct, usually in a corrective sense. It implies that there is a problem, whether immaturity or sin, in the life of the other person that needs to be overcome. Several times Paul uses the word to describe his ministry. He told the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:31), "Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears." In Colossians 1:28 he wrote, "We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ."

He wrote to the Thessalonian church (1 Thess. 5:14), "We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone." They were all to exercise this ministry of admonishing fellow believers who were "unruly" or "out of step."

In our text, Paul says that he is confident that the Roman believers are capable of exercising this ministry toward one another. While the elders may need to get involved at times, this is a ministry that the body is to engage in on a regular basis. If you know of a Christian who is drifting or going astray, it's your responsibility to try to restore him to the Lord (Gal. 6:1). If you're not sure how to go about it, ask an elder to coach you. But your relationship with the straying brother usually means that you are the most effective member of the body to try to restore him. You *are* your brother's keeper. If you're a Christian, you're in the ministry.

MINISTRY PRINCIPLE 2: TO MINISTER EFFECTIVELY TO OTHERS, YOU MUST KNOW AND PERSONALLY APPLY BIBLICAL TRUTH IN YOUR WALK WITH THE LORD.

The reason Paul believed that the Roman believers could admonish one another was that he was convinced that they were "full of goodness" and "filled with all knowledge." Paul is not using flattery here, but he is being courteous (C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* [T & T Clark], 2:752) by assuming that the Roman

believers were relatively mature both in their knowledge of Christian truth and in their practice of that truth. "Goodness" is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22) and denotes uprightness in conduct (Eph. 5:9) or kindness and generosity towards others (2 Thess. 1:11; Moo, p. 888). "Knowledge" refers to knowing biblical truth.

When Paul says that the Roman believers are full of goodness and all knowledge, he does not mean that they were sinless in their behavior and qualified to teach at the seminary level in their knowledge of biblical truth. If that were so, he wouldn't have needed to write all of the doctrinal and practical sections of Romans! Rather, he is assuming the best about the church as a whole. They are overall marked by moral virtue and they have a grasp of basic biblical truth. You don't have to have arrived at spiritual perfection for God to use you in ministering to others. But you do need to be obedient to God's Word ("goodness") and you need to have a basic understanding of biblical truth ("knowledge").

The two qualities must go together. There are morally good people who have no understanding of biblical truth, and so they cannot minister effectively to others. And there are people who know impressive amounts of biblical truth, but they don't apply it personally. Their lives are not marked by godly conduct or unselfish, loving behavior. So they are not able to minister effectively, either. But if you know God's truth and you're applying it personally, then you're able to admonish others. Your life backs up your message, and both are grounded in God's Word.

MINISTRY PRINCIPLE 3: TRUST GOD TO WORK THROUGH OTHERS IN THE BODY AND AFFIRM THEIR MINISTRIES.

Verse 14 probably especially relates back to the problems between the stronger and weaker believers that Paul has addressed (14:1-15:13). Paul was confident that the Roman Christians could work through these issues under the guidelines that he has given. He has already expressed his confidence in them in Romans 1:8, where he mentioned that their faith was being proclaimed throughout the whole world. Also, in 1:12 he expressed that when he came to see them, he would be encouraged by their faith, just as they would be encouraged by Paul's ministry. In other words, although Paul was an apostle with unusual gifts and ministry experience, he did not see ministry as a one-way street from him to oth-

ers. He also affirmed that others could minister to him and that they could minister to one another without him.

I've heard of pastors who were threatened if their flock listened to other preachers. Some pastors feel the need to control every ministry in the church, as if they are the only one in the church capable of teaching the truth or dealing with problems. I've also seen Christian parents who jealously guard their children from any spiritual input from other believers. But that mentality stems from pride and cripples the ministry of the body. If another Christian can teach my children, Hallelujah! If any of you learn God's truth from another pastor, Praise God! If you can minister without me, wonderful! God works through the gifted body of Christ, not just through one leader. If you see someone in the body who is having an effective ministry, encourage him by telling him that you appreciate his ministry.

MINISTRY PRINCIPLE 4: BE SENSITIVE TOWARDS OTHERS.

Paul was sensitive as to how the Roman believers may have taken his bold admonitions that he has just written. So he expresses his confidence in their ability to minister to one another and he goes on to explain why he had written as boldly as he had. His sensitivity did not mean that he held back in his boldness, as we'll see in the next principle. But it did mean that he was aware of how his boldness might affect his readers. So he does not blast them or assume that they would welcome his admonition. He was careful to explain things in a sensitive, affirming manner.

One way to be sensitive in ministering to others, especially if you need to admonish or correct them, is to stop and think, "If I were in their place, how would I want to be treated?" If someone is in sin, he needs to be corrected, but with sensitivity and gentleness (Gal. 6:1; 2 Tim. 2:24-26). Don't come down on him as if you're the righteous one and you can't understand how he could do what he's doing. Rather, come alongside as a fellow sinner who has found mercy from the Lord, as one prone to temptation, and express your concern that his sin is going to destroy his life if he doesn't gain victory over it. Minister sensitively!

To sum up the next section:

2. Following Paul's example, we should pursue our ministries as offerings of worship to God, giving Him all the glory for any results (15:15-21).

Romans 15:15-16: "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 from God, 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, sanctified by the Holy Spirit."

Paul goes on to explain that his reason for writing so boldly on some points was to remind the Romans of the grace that God had given to him as a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles. He uses an illustration or analogy that the Jewish believers would have understood: Paul pictures himself as a Jewish priest, offering up the Gentiles as an acceptable sacrifice to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit (see Isa. 66:18-20). This last phrase, "sanctified by the Holy Spirit," would have countered some of Paul's Jewish critics, who would have argued that the Gentiles were unclean. Rather, Paul says, when the Gentiles become obedient to the gospel (15:18), it shows that God has cleansed them.

Paul is not negating the priesthood of all believers or setting up a special class of Christian priests, who are intermediaries between the "common" people and God. That would negate what he says in Ephesians 2:18, "for through Him [Christ] we both [Jewish and Gentile believers] have our access in one Spirit to the Father." Jesus alone is our high priest. We all have direct access to God's throne through Him (Heb. 4:14-16). Rather, Paul is giving us an illustration of how we all should serve the Lord: as believer priests, we should offer up as worship to Him any results or fruit of our ministries that God gives us through the gospel.

These verses give us two more ministry principles:

MINISTRY PRINCIPLE 5: DON'T HESITATE TO BE BOLD IN CHALLENGING OTHERS OR IN REMINDING THEM OF WHAT THEY ALREADY KNOW.

Although Paul was sensitive (15:14), he also could be bold (15:15). Even though he assumed that the Romans were "full of goodness," Paul was bold to confront a number of problems that

existed in the church there. Although he knew that they had “all knowledge,” he didn’t assume that they always remembered what they knew, and so he reminded them of it again and again.

At a couple of points in my life, the Lord has used someone who was bold and direct to change my direction. When I was 18, a Christian friend who was 23 asked me what Christian books I was reading. I told him that I only read what I had to read to get through college. He looked at me and bluntly said, “If you don’t read, you won’t grow as a Christian.” God used that bold comment to get me going as a reader, and reading has been the main way that I have grown in my walk with God.

About a year later, I was debating about whether to go to a 10-day training conference at Campus Crusade’s Arrowhead Springs headquarters. A staff member challenged me to go, but I told him that I needed to work to earn money for school the next year. He countered, “If you don’t step out and trust God for the funds now, when are you going to start trusting Him?” Wham! His bold challenge prompted me to go and the training I received there redirected my spiritual life. So be sensitive in ministering to others, but sometimes be bold to challenge them to change!

MINISTRY PRINCIPLE 6: OFFER YOUR MINISTRY TO GOD AS AN ACT OF WORSHIP, PLEASING TO HIM.

While ministry helps others either to get saved or to grow in Christ, your primary aim in ministry should not be to help others, but to minister to the Lord (see Acts 13:2; 2 Sam. 6:14-21). You want your service to be an offering that is acceptable to Him, “sanctified by the Holy Spirit.” You don’t serve for the praise that you get from others or even primarily for the satisfaction of seeing others helped. You do it as an act of worship to God.

Focusing on ministry as worship guards you from becoming a people-pleaser and it helps you to process criticism. I’ve seen people in ministry devastated because people didn’t like them or criticized them. Of course if the criticism is legitimate, you need to thank the critic and make appropriate changes. But if you’re being disliked or criticized because you confronted sin or tried to correct a problem (Gal. 4:16), and your focus is on doing it as an act of worship to God, then you can absorb the rejection and criticism

from people, knowing that you pleased the Lord. Some day you will hear Him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Conclusion

There are six more ministry principles in these verses that will have to wait until next time. You will be doing well to absorb these six principles that we have covered, let alone piling on six more! I hope that you will think through and apply these as the Lord impresses them on your heart. To review, they are:

MINISTRY PRINCIPLE 1: IF YOU'RE A CHRISTIAN, YOU'RE IN THE MINISTRY.

MINISTRY PRINCIPLE 2: TO MINISTER EFFECTIVELY TO OTHERS, YOU MUST KNOW AND PERSONALLY APPLY BIBLICAL TRUTH IN YOUR WALK WITH THE LORD.

MINISTRY PRINCIPLE 3: TRUST GOD TO WORK THROUGH OTHERS IN THE BODY AND AFFIRM THEIR MINISTRIES.

MINISTRY PRINCIPLE 4: BE SENSITIVE TOWARDS OTHERS.

MINISTRY PRINCIPLE 5: DON'T HESITATE TO BE BOLD IN CHALLENGING OTHERS OR IN REMINDING THEM OF WHAT THEY ALREADY KNOW.

MINISTRY PRINCIPLE 6: OFFER YOUR MINISTRY TO GOD AS AN ACT OF WORSHIP, PLEASING TO HIM.

In his book, *Finishing Well in Life and Ministry* [Leadership Resources, 1997], written with Craig Parro, pp. 189-190), Bill Mills tells of a time several years ago when he taught a seminar on "The Ministry of God's Word" at a Wycliffe Bible Translators center in South America. He had a wonderful time, but he didn't realize the significance of what God was doing until his last evening there. As he ate dinner with the director and his wife, she said, "I have to tell you what God has done in my heart during these days. When we came to South America many years ago, we were assigned an Indian tribe and began translating the Scriptures into their language."

Mills explains the difficult process that this entails, of first learning the spoken language, then developing an alphabet and a written language, translating the Scriptures, and teaching the people

to read. Although it's somewhat quicker today with the use of computers, it used to take about 20 years. It's a long and tedious job.

The director's wife continued, "We lived at the Indian village and spent as much time with the people as we could. We were teaching the Scriptures to them as we were translating. A church was being born in their midst. As we came toward the end of the project, the people were becoming more and more involved in the production of drugs and less and less interested in the Scriptures. When we finished the translation of the New Testament in their language and scheduled the dedication service, not one person even came! I have been so angry and bitter. We gave our lives so that they could have the Word of God in their language. When we concluded what was almost a life's work, they did not even want it! I have not been able to handle the bitterness of this disappointment in my heart."

Then she said this with regard to Bill's ministry of the Word that week: "God has been speaking to me in these days by His Word and His Spirit. He has been doing something beautiful in my heart. It is as though God has been washing His Word over my soul and healing me, and He has opened my eyes to see this all from His perspective. I am just beginning to realize now that we did it for Him! That is the only thing that makes any sense in all of this. We did it for God!"

Mills rightly concludes, "That is the only thing that makes any sense in ministry. We do it for Him."

If you're not involved in any ministry, first make sure that you know Christ as your Savior and Lord through faith in Him alone. Then, ask Him where and how He wants you serve Him. You don't have to be perfect—just growing in goodness and knowledge. Whatever He gives you to do, whether it's rearing your children or serving your family or working in a mundane job or being a witness in your neighborhood or at work by your life and words or serving in some capacity at church—do it as worship for Him.

Application Questions

1. Do you view yourself as “a minister of Christ Jesus”? If not, why not? How would this perspective change your life?
2. Is “ministry” restricted to “spiritual” activities, such as evangelism or church ministry, or does it apply to doing laundry or mowing the yard or working at your job? Discuss in light of 1 Cor. 10:31 & Col. 3:22-24.
3. How do you know whether to admonish someone who seems to be in sin or drifting from the Lord? What can you learn from Gal. 6:1, 1 Thess. 5:14, & 2 Tim. 2:24-26?
4. How does viewing your ministry as an act of worship to God guard you from being a people-pleaser? How does it help you to process criticism in your ministry?

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