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PRINCIPLES FOR YOUR MINISTRY (Part 2)

Romans 15:14-21

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December 9, 2012
Romans, Lesson 103

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Romans 15:14-21

I've told you before about a recurring dream that I've had ever since my college days. Some of you have told me that you've had the same dream. Apparently, college is stressful, since many of us have had this same anxious dream. The basic format of the dream is that I'm in college and it's near the end of the semester. Final exams are looming and I suddenly realize that there is a class that I am enrolled in, but I have not been attending. Now with the final exam staring me in the face I realize that I'm doomed. I can't possibly prepare for the exam in a class that I didn't even know that I was enrolled in. What a relief to wake up and realize that it was only a bad dream!

But what if it's true and the exam not only affects whether I pass a college class, but how I will spend all eternity? I didn't know that I was enrolled in this class, but now I'm standing before God who says, "Let's see how you did. Hmm, you never attended class! You skipped the midterm! You didn't do any of the assignments! In fact, you didn't show up for the final! I'm afraid that I can't give you a passing grade!"

You don't want the day of judgment to be that kind of nightmare come true! As I said last week, whether you know it or not, if you're a Christian, you're in the ministry just as much as Paul was in the ministry or I'm in the ministry. True, you may not get paid to allow you to devote full time to your ministry. But God has given you spiritual gifts and a certain amount of time to employ those gifts for His kingdom purposes. As Paul says (Rom. 14:10, 12), "For we all will stand before the judgment seat of God... So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God." So as a gifted member of the body of Christ, you're enrolled in the course. You'll be graded on how well you did. You don't want to get to the big final in the sky and realize that you haven't been going to class or doing the assignments. You need to realize that you are in the ministry and you need conscientiously to be doing what God has given you to do.

Last time I summed up verses 14-21:

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.

We saw:

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

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.

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).

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.

There are six more ministry principles in these verses that we need to explore. But first, let me read and explain 15:17-19:

Therefore in Christ Jesus I have found reason for boasting in things pertaining to God. For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in 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 round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ.

Paul is explaining further his ministry to the Gentiles, giving the reasons why he could write so boldly to this largely Gentile

church and why he could glory in ministering as a priest the gospel of God, offering up the Gentiles as an acceptable sacrifice (15:15, 16). So the “boast” of verse 17 refers back to verse 16 (C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* [T & T Clark], 2:757). Paul is boasting or glorying in his role of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles and in offering up the Gentile converts to God as an acceptable offering. This goes back to 12:1, where Paul said that we are to present our bodies as a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is our spiritual service of worship.

But why does Paul mention boasting at all? Back in 3:27 he said that faith excludes all boasting. Boasting or pride is the root of all sins. So why is Paul boasting here? The answer is that he’s doing here what he wrote (2 Cor. 10:17; citing Jer. 9:24), “But he who boasts is to boast in the Lord.” It’s wrong to boast in ourselves, but it’s right to boast in the Lord, so that He gets the glory for what He has done through weak human instruments, or “earthen vessels,” as Paul refers to us (2 Cor. 4:7). Paul’s boast here is “in Christ Jesus ... in things pertaining to God” (15:17). He is glorying in what God has done through him, which is all “because of the grace that was given [him] from God” (15:15). As he goes on to explain further (15:18), he is only boasting of what Christ has accomplished through him, “resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles.”

“By word and deed” (15:18) is a summary of how God used Paul to bring about the obedience of the Gentiles. “Word” refers to preaching the gospel, which is the power of God for salvation (1:16). Verse 19 shows that the deeds included “the power of signs and wonders,” which were done “in the power of the Spirit.” Paul uses “obedience” for “faith” because saving faith is obedient faith (Rom. 1:5; 16:26).

The “signs and wonders” refer to miracles from different points of view. “Signs” points to the spiritual significance or purpose of the miracles, to point to the truth of the gospel. “Wonders” looks at the response that miracles produce in people, who recognize that God is behind them. Paul uses the phrase “signs and wonders” just two other times. In 2 Corinthians 12:12 he says, “The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles.” The miracles that Paul did authenticated him as a true apostle. But in 2 Thessa-

Ionians 2:9, he uses the term to refer to the activity of the man of lawlessness (antichrist), “whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders . . .” He will use miracles to deceive those who perish. So we need to be discerning, because those performing signs and wonders may be from God, but they may be from Satan.

This raises the whole question of whether we should expect signs and wonders to accompany the preaching of the gospel today. Some claim that we should expect miracles as normative and if we aren’t experiencing miracles, we must not be trusting in God.

First, we need to acknowledge that God is the Almighty Creator and He can do miracles if and when He chooses to do them. So we should not limit His power by our unbelief (Mark 6:5-6). At the same time, we should recognize that in the Bible, miracles tend to be clustered around the exodus, the ministries of Elijah and Elisha, a few at the time of Daniel, and many during the ministries of Christ and the apostles. The purpose of miracles in those situations was to authenticate the truth of God’s Word at key points in history. In between these times, there are occasional miracles, but they do not seem to be the norm.

Also, as the apostolic era wound down, the number of miracles seems to have waned. In the early days of the gospel, both Peter and Paul saw frequent, extraordinary miracles (Acts 5:12-16; 9:36-42; 13:9-12; 19:11-12). But later, Paul seems to have been unable to heal Epaphroditus, although God mercifully spared him (Phil. 2:25-27). He didn’t tell Timothy to claim healing for his frequent stomach problems, but rather to drink some wine (1 Tim. 5:23). Paul didn’t heal Trophimus, but left him sick at Miletus (2 Tim. 4:20). And, writing to a second generation church, the author of Hebrews explains how the Lord testified through the apostles with signs and wonders and various gifts of the Holy Spirit as confirmation of the gospel (Heb. 2:3-4). If those things were normative in the second generation, he would have appealed to their current experience as proof of the gospel. But rather, he points them back to what God did through the apostles. Obviously the miracles that God did through Paul were genuine and well-known, or his claims would have been refuted by eyewitnesses. But those miracles did seem to be unique to authenticate the gospel in the early days.

So the application for us is that we should pray for miracles and believe that God is able to do miracles if it is His will. But to say that miracles are normative for the present day goes too far.

Before we look at the final six ministry principles, let me also comment on the last half of verse 19, where Paul says that from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum he has fully preached the gospel of Christ. Illyricum is the area presently known as Albania and the Balkan countries (former Yugoslavia). We don't know whether Paul went into that area (perhaps from Macedonia, just to the east) or whether he means to the border of Illyricum. We might say, "I traveled from Mexico to Canada," but the meaning is ambiguous. Did I travel from Chiapas (far southern Mexico) to the Northwest Territories, or did I travel from southern Texas to northern Minnesota? So we don't know exactly what Paul means, except that he had preached the gospel from its point of origin in Jerusalem to the Gentile areas far northwest of there.

Also, by "fully preaching the gospel," Paul doesn't mean that he preached in every village and city in those regions. Rather, he had planted strategic churches in those areas, so that from them the gospel could go out into the surrounding areas. For example, Paul spent two years teaching the disciples in Ephesus, with the result that "all who lived in Asia heard the gospel" (Acts 19:10).

With that explanation of verses 17-19, let's draw out some principles for your ministry:

MINISTRY PRINCIPLE 7: DEFLECT ALL GLORY IN YOUR MINISTRY TO GOD, BECAUSE ALL RESULTS COME FROM HIS GRACE (15:15, 17-18).

It is always wrong to boast in ourselves, but it is right to boast in the Lord. Paul is at pains to make it clear that his ministry was (15:15) "because of the grace that was given me from God." His boast was "in Christ Jesus," in "things pertaining to God" (15:17). In case we missed it, he clarifies (15:18), "For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me" Paul never got over the wonder that God would save and then choose to use a former persecutor and blasphemer like him (1 Tim. 1:12-16). Neither should we. If God uses you to do anything for His kingdom, it is all because of His grace.

So, what should you do when someone comes up and gushes about something that you did that helped him spiritually? It comes across as false humility if you say, "Please, it wasn't me—it was the Lord!" I think you should say, "Thank you! It's encouraging to hear how the Lord worked in your life through what I did. Thanks for encouraging me." If they keep gushing, however, it may be time to interject, "Really, I appreciate your encouragement, but it was the Lord. I was just the imperfect instrument that He used, so give Him the glory."

And in your heart, no matter how much people may praise you, remember the wit and wisdom of Winston Churchill. He was once sitting on an outside platform waiting to speak to crowds who had packed the streets to hear him. The chairlady of the proceedings leaned over and said, "Doesn't it thrill you, Mr. Churchill, to see all those people out there who came just to see you?" Churchill replied, "It is quite flattering, but whenever I feel this way I always remember that if instead of making a political speech I was being hanged, the crowd would be twice as big." (James Humes, *Churchill: Speaker of the Century* [Stein and Day], p. 289)

MINISTRY PRINCIPLE 8: THERE IS A LEGITIMATE SENSE OF SATISFACTION THAT COMES FROM REALIZING THAT GOD HAS USED YOU (15:17).

Paul knew that he was merely a servant of God by His grace. When the Corinthians were dividing into camps following Apollos or Paul, Paul wrote (1 Cor. 3:5-6), "What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave *opportunity* to each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth." He always knew that he was just a servant by God's grace.

And yet, he also felt a sense of satisfaction at what God by His grace had accomplished through him. In 1 Corinthians 15:9-10, he wrote, "For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me." And in our text (v. 18), Paul has a sense of satisfaction that God has used him to bring the pagan Gentiles into obedience to Jesus Christ.

The older I get and the longer I'm in ministry, the more I have to battle discouragement and a sense of failure. I often feel like quitting because I think, "I am not seeing anywhere near the results that men like John MacArthur and John Piper and R. C. Sproul see." But then the Lord graciously gives me an encouraging email from someone who has been reading my sermons online or someone in the church tells me how God is changing them through His Word, and it revives me to keep going.

MINISTRY PRINCIPLE 9: THE GOAL IN YOUR MINISTRY SHOULD BE TO PROCLAIM THE GOSPEL SO AS TO PRODUCE GENUINELY CONVERTED, OBEDIENT DISCIPLES (15:18).

Romans is all about "the gospel of God" (1:1; 15:16; "gospel of Christ," 15:19; "gospel," 15:20), which results in obedience to God in the hearts of those who respond in faith. The gospel "is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (1:16). So the gospel is central to all ministry.

This means that you need to be able to give the gospel in a clear, succinct manner: "The bad news is, we all have sinned and are under God's righteous judgment (Rom. 3:23; 6:23). We cannot be reconciled to a holy God by our good deeds. The penalty for our sins must be paid. The good news is, God sent His own Son to pay the penalty that we deserved. Jesus' death on the cross satisfied God's justice. But He didn't pay the penalty for everyone, but only for those who will believe in Him (John 3:16). If you will turn from your sin and self-righteousness and trust in Christ alone, God will be merciful to forgive all your sins and freely give you eternal life (Eph. 2:8-9). Will you trust in Christ right now?"

Also, when you're dealing with someone, do not assume that he is clear about the gospel or that he has trusted in Christ, even if he professes to be a Christian. Ask him, "If you were to die and stand before God and He asked you why He should let you into heaven, what would you say?" His answer will tell you what he's trusting in for eternal life. Some give the right answer, but their lives contradict their profession. They need to know that saving faith is obedient faith. If someone isn't growing in obedience, his claim to believe is suspect (1 John 2:4; 3:4-10).

Then Paul continues (15:20-21), “And thus I aspired to preach 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 news of Him shall see, and they who have not heard shall understand.’” Paul’s aim in his mission was to preach the gospel where Christ had not yet been named, as Isaiah 52:15 prophesied.

Paul’s ambition to preach where Christ was not yet known so that he would not build on another man’s foundation did not prevent him from ministering to the church in Rome, which he had not founded. Rather, it reflects Paul’s overall calling and his general philosophy of ministry. He was called to plant new churches and move on. He was a pioneer evangelist, who felt “crowded” by too many Christians (Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 896). Others were called to stay with those new churches and shepherd them. Both are needed. These verses lead to three final ministry principles:

MINISTRY PRINCIPLE 10: UNDERSTAND HOW YOUR MINISTRY FITS INTO THE BIG PICTURE OF WHAT GOD IS DOING (10:20).

Some are called to pioneer, but others need to stay long term in one location to build the church there. Some are gifted evangelists who can’t rest at night if they haven’t given the gospel to someone that day. Others see God use them more in encouraging and building up believers who are struggling. This doesn’t mean that the evangelist doesn’t disciple Christians or that the guy who focuses on discipling Christians doesn’t evangelize. It only helps you to know where to focus. You can’t do it all and you’re most effective when you’re doing what God has gifted you to do.

MINISTRY PRINCIPLE 11: UNTIL THE GOSPEL HAS GONE OUT TO ALL PEOPLE, WE ALL SHOULD PRAY, SUPPORT, AND WORK TOWARD COMPLETING THE GREAT COMMISSION (10:21).

John Piper wrote (*Let the Nations be Glad* [Baker, 2nd ed.], p. 17), “Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn’t.” Our passion should be that God’s glory be known so that He is worshipped around the globe. Piper also has said, “You’re either a goer, a sender, or disobedient.” If you’re not passionate about missions, it may be because you’re not passionate about God.

MINISTRY PRINCIPLE 12: BASE YOUR PHILOSOPHY OF MINISTRY ON SCRIPTURE, NOT ON MODERN BUSINESS OR MARKETING TECHNIQUES (15:21).

Paul cites Isaiah 52:15 to back his philosophy of taking the gospel to those who have yet to hear. That text comes out of Isaiah's fourth "servant" passage, which points to Christ, the suffering servant. Paul saw his ministry to the Gentiles as a part of fulfilling the Old Testament prediction about the Gentiles coming to see and understand the good news about the Servant of the Lord (Moo, pp. 897-898). Paul based his ministry on Scripture.

In our day, there is a strong appeal to build your ministry on the latest business or marketing techniques. After all, these are "proven" principles that work. Successful pastors vouch for them. But you have to ask, "But are they biblical methods? Is it a philosophy of ministry based on Scripture?" If not, we should not follow it, even if it "works." One example that I gave when we were studying chapters 14 & 15 is that the church growth movement urges pastors to utilize what they call the "homogeneous unit principle." This is based on the philosophy that people want to be a part of a larger group that is just like they are. So you tailor one service for the older folks and another that appeals to the younger crowd. In other words, you design a product that appeals to your target audience. The only problem is, it isn't biblical!

Conclusion

As I said, if you know Christ, you are enrolled in the lifelong class called "Ministry." You will be graded on your performance. The final exam is coming. I pray that we all will take these ministry principles to heart so that we will hear one day (Matt. 25:21), "Well done, good and faithful slave.... Enter into the joy of your master."

Application Questions

1. How can a Christian figure out what his or her ministry should be? Does our main ministry change as we move through the stages of life?
2. God's glory should be our aim because it is *God's* aim. How would you answer someone who said, "If God seeks His own glory, He must be an egotist"?
3. Why must the gospel be central to all ministry? What does this mean practically?
4. Is there a legitimate way to use business or marketing techniques in ministry? When are such techniques neutral and when are they harmful?

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