

AN ADEQUATE MINISTRY

by Ray C. Stedman

We are drawing to a close in our study of this great epistle to the Romans, and this letter closes just as it began, with a personal word from the apostle about himself, and about the church in Rome. There are two themes in the closing section of Chapter 15 -- one is the church at Rome, and the other is the ministry of the Apostle Paul. I hope you will follow in your Bible, for this is a rather extended passage, and one that I am going to have to move rapidly through. The apostle says (Verse 14):

I myself am convinced my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another. {Rom 15:14 NIV}

When I was in Sacramento last week, I was introduced to the congregation of the Arcade Baptist Church by the pastor, Dr. Lee Toms. He not only introduced me to the congregation, but he introduced the congregation to me. He said he wanted me to meet the finest congregation in the United States, including Alaska and Hawaii. But I demurred, saying that I knew of one congregation that was finer. We had a polite little exchange over that but, since I was the speaker, I had the last word.

Those who know anything about the ancient city of Rome know that it was built on seven hills. The largest of those hills was called the Palatine, and you can still visit the Palatine, down by the Roman Forum. I have always imagined, as I read this letter to the Romans, these early Christians gathering somewhere around the foot of the Palatine hill, studying this letter and other Scriptures as well. Since they were a church that understood and knew the Scriptures, I am sure they called themselves the Palatine Bible Church -- PBC!

Now, the Scriptures do not actually teach that. You only discover that kind of information as a result of what might be called "sanctified imagination." But there are many similarities, I think, between the church at Rome and Peninsula Bible Church. You remember that this letter began with the recognition of the apostle that the faith of these people was known around the world; and even in a much bigger world than Paul knew, this is true of this church here. God has given us a very deep responsibility, in that many people around the world know of this church and its faith.

In this chapter of Romans, Paul gives us a little further insight into this church, and tells us certain things that were true of it that, again, remind me of Peninsula Bible Church. Here, in Verse 14, there are three things that he says about this church, three great qualities that they possessed.

First, he says, "I am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness." That is, their motives were right. They had come to the place where they were motivated by a sense of goodness, and I believe that this is also true here at PBC. Certainly, this church at Rome was a responsive church, a compassionate church. It reached out to people who were in need. It responded to those who had hurts and burdens and concerns. I think this is one of the qualities I have appreciated most about this congregation here. Whenever a need is shared, there is always a compassionate response. I feel it could be said of this church, as it was said of the church at Rome, that the congregation is "full of goodness."

The second thing that the apostle says is that they were complete in knowledge. Now that is rather remarkable. Here was a church to which Paul did not need to give any new theology. He acknowledges that they had it already. Though this is one of the most deeply penetrative theological treatises in the New Testament, Paul did not write it because these people did not already know the truth that he was giving them. If you think back through the letter, there were certain themes that the apostle emphasized:

One was justification by faith, i.e., the gift of worth in God's sight. This gift could not be earned: It was a gift because of the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf. It was not earned by trying to do good works before God -- this is impossible, and they understood that. They knew that though they did not deserve anything from God,

nevertheless, they were his dearly loved children, and God accepted them fully. This, I think, is one of the great truths that has always rung strong and clear throughout the Christian centuries. For it is the one truth, above almost anything else, that God wants us to know to start our Christian lives with. It is the basis for worth. If we know God loves us, then we know we can love our neighbor and we can accept others, because we ourselves have been accepted by God. There is a profound psychological reality here that these people understood.

And they understood the nature of the flesh, the need for sanctification, to use the theological term. They knew that even though they had been redeemed, they were still possessed of an old nature. The old Adam was still there, giving them trouble.

I still struggle with the old Adam, and so do you. I can see you doing it. Young Philip Melancthon, the colleague of Martin Luther, once wrote to Luther and said, "Old Adam is too strong for young Philip."

These people at Rome understood this truth and they knew that this would be the struggle of their Christian lives. Paul did not have to tell them that; they knew it before he wrote. But they knew also that God is working out a great plan, that he is creating a whole new humanity, and building a new creation. Right in the midst of the ruins of the old, he is producing a new man, and they were part of it.

They understood the great themes of glorification, and of the eternal ages to come. So Paul writes and says they were complete in knowledge, and I think in many ways we can say this about PBC. We are well taught, deeply understanding the great truths and the great themes of Scripture.

The third thing the apostle had to say about this church was that they were competent to instruct one another. (This is where Dr. Jay Adams gets the title of his well known book, *Competent to Counsel*.) What the apostle said here was, "You are able to counsel one another." I think that is a remarkable thing.

This is the answer, by the way, to all the terrible pressure that is placed upon pastors, who are expected to solve all the problems of their congregations, and to counsel everyone first-hand. That was never God's intention. The plan of God is that the whole congregation be involved in the work of counseling. The whole congregation is to be aware of what is going on with neighbors and friends and brothers and sisters, and do something about meeting their problems. And the way this is done is by the imparting of the gifts of the Spirit.

I think this is something we can rejoice in here, that so many are ministering in this area, sharing the load of counseling -- and, by the way, there are many more who could be involved.

So the church at Rome had the right motives, they had complete knowledge, and they had the full range of gifts, so that they were able to do many things within their church community and in the city of Rome. But Paul also recognized that there were three things they lacked (Verses 15-16):

I have written you quite boldly on some points, as if to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. {Rom 15:15-16 NIV}

Now, you would think that a church that was theologically knowledgeable, able to instruct and counsel one another in the deep problems of life, and filled with a spirit of goodness and compassion, would hardly need anything more said to them. Yet it is to that kind of a church that Paul addressed his letter to the Romans. And he wrote, he says, because they needed three other things that he sets forth here.

First, they needed a bold reminder of the truth. "I have written you quite boldly on some points, to remind you of them again."

I saw a man the other day with a string around his finger. The string was to remind him of something. The fact that we so easily forget things is somehow built into our humanity and I think one of the greatest proofs of the fall of man is that we have such a hard time remembering what we want to remember, yet we so easily

remember what we want to forget!

We even need to be reminded again and again of these great themes of the gospel. That is why in, Chapter 12, Paul says, "You need your mind renewed by the Holy Spirit," {cf, Rom 12:2}. That is one reason to gather together every Sunday: We need to have our minds renewed. We need to be called back to a vision of reality.

Living out in the world, as many of you are, working every day among non-Christians, it is so easy to be sucked into the attitudes of the world around. It is so easy to get the idea that life is designed to be a pleasant picnic, that we can work toward the day when we can retire and enjoy ourselves. I find that attitude prevalent among people everywhere, but that is not what the Bible says.

The Bible says we are in the midst of a battle, a battle to the death, against a keen and crafty foe. He wants to discourage us and defeat us, and to make us feel angry and hostile. He knows how to do it, and he never lets up. This life is not designed to be a time of relaxing. There are times when we need recreation and vacations, when we can slow down a bit. But you never see the Apostle Paul talking about quitting the battle. You cannot quit, as long as life is there.

So Paul tells us that we need to be reminded, day by day and week by week, that we are in a battle and that we have a crafty foe. This life is not all there is, by any means. This is school time, a training ground, where we are to learn our lessons. This life is getting us ready for the real thing that is yet to come.

The second thing the apostle said the Christians at Rome needed was a priestly ministry. He told them, "You not only need to be reminded of the truth, but you need an example to follow. You need somebody you can see doing this kind of thing. That is what God has given me the privilege of doing. I have been called of God into this ministry, not only to be an example of leadership, but also to be like a priest working in the temple, to awaken among you a sense of worship, a sense of the greatness of God."

I think we need this frequently. I know I do. Ron Ritchie was saying to me before the service this morning that he feels sort of dead inside. I get that way, and so do you. Despite all the exciting things happening, despite all the tremendous encouragement on every side, there are times when we need to lift our eyes from our circumstances and stand before the greatness of God and see who it is we have to deal with, who it is that is working through us. That is why Paul wrote the book of Romans. That is why we have in the eleventh chapter that passage dealing with how great God is (Verse 33):

**Oh, the depth of the riches, the wisdom and the knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out! {Rom 11:33 NIV}**

The third thing they needed, Paul says, is that the Gentiles "might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit." Every congregation needs this. We need to labor, to pray, to work, to counsel, to evangelize. But all of the activity of the Christian life is of no avail if it is not sanctified by the Holy Spirit, if it does not have in it that touch of God, that unction from on high, that divine wind blowing upon the dead bones and making them come to life. I think Paul is reminding them here of the ministry of prayer, and the need to remember that God himself must touch something -- otherwise it is dead and useless. So Paul calls this church at Rome back to this tremendous reality. They had so much, but they needed this as well.

Today at Peninsula Bible Church we have so much, but we need the same thing; we need daily reminders of the truth. We need our minds renewed, or else we are going to slip right back into thinking like everybody else. We need a model, and there are models among us that we can follow, men and women who are exercising this kind of ministry. And we need the touch of God above all else, that sense that God himself must make it go.

Now that brings us to the theme that the apostle develops here on his own ministry. Here is a fantastic passage, where, for the first time in this letter, we get a close look at this mighty apostle himself.

Did you ever stop to ask yourself what influence the Apostle Paul has had in your own life? He lived two

thousand years ago, and yet there is not a man or woman, boy or girl among us, who has not had their life drastically affected by this man. The whole course of history has been changed by the truths he taught. In fact, for the most part, history itself has been built around the letters and teachings and doctrine and ministry of the Apostle Paul. We would not even be here, for America as a nation would not exist if this man had never lived. Even today we feel the freshness of his spirit, the greatness of his mind, and the fullness of his heart. He touches us all.

Paul tells us three things about his own ministry in this last section: The principles that he worked under; the practice by which he carried them out; and finally, a word about the power that he relied upon (Verses 17-20):

Therefore, I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done -- by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ. It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation. {Rom 15:17-20 NIV}

Concerning the principles of his ministry, Paul tells us five things:

First, everywhere he went he found himself rejoicing. He said, "I rejoice, I glory in Christ Jesus, in my service to God." Why? Because when this man came into a city, he usually found it in the grip of Roman authority, and ruled with an iron hand. He would find the people in widespread despair, empty and longing for something they could not find, and fallen into terribly degrading habits that were destroying homes and the very fabric of society itself. He would find them in the grip of superstitious fears. No church existed where he went, but after he had been there a while, and had begun to preach these tremendous themes, light began to spring up in the darkness. People were changed; they began to live for the first time. They discovered why they were made, and excitement appeared in their lives.

So Paul just spent his life rejoicing over what was happening. That is the kind of ministry he had, and he gives us the secret of it in Verse 18: "I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done." That is the greatest secret God has to teach man -- that man was designed, not to do something to make God happy, but to let God work through the man. God would do the work -- that is what Paul said, "... Christ has accomplished through me."

Not a week goes by but half a dozen posters and pamphlets across my desk promoting the work of some man, telling me how much he has done for God. I get them all the time, and so do you, these boasting, promotional pieces trying to convince you they are God's gift to earth. I have learned to throw most of them into the waste basket unopened. In fact, I recognize them from their titles by now, and I just throw them away. You never hear that from Paul. You never hear him telling how much he has done for God. Everywhere it is how much God has done through him, and that is the secret of a truly effective life. It took the apostle ten years to learn that secret.

Like many young Christians, he started out with a great amount of zeal and desire to turn the world upside down, and he thought he had the equipment and the gifts to do it. It took God ten years to show him that his brilliant mind, his mighty gifts and great personality and influence and contacts were of no value in the service of God. All God wanted was the man himself; he would work through him. And when Paul learned that secret, he launched upon this great ministry that changed the history of the world.

A young man asked me this week, "Why did God punish King David for numbering Israel?" That is one of the puzzles of the Old Testament. Why did God severely punish the king and his people when he took a census of Israel? That does not sound like a very serious aim, does it? But that represented David's departure from the principle of dependence upon God to be his resource, and a shift to the world's resource of numbers. Nothing has contributed more to the weakness of the church than this dependence upon numbers, as though a great crowd of people can do something. When you meet a man or a woman who is willing to trust God to work through them, there is no limit to what God can do. This is the secret of Paul's ministry.

Then its manifestation, which is power (Verse 19): "by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit." These signs and miracles were the signs of an apostle. Paul tells us in Second Corinthians that wherever he went he performed signs and wonders. People say today, "Well, why can't we do them?" The answer is because they were the mark of an apostle, and only apostles did these things. Today we do not need any more apostles; we have the original ones, and their writings are available to us. What we have is what Paul mentions, the power of the Spirit, and its impact on human lives. Remember he wrote to the Corinthians, who had the nerve to write him and say, "The next time you show up in Corinth, how about bringing a letter of recommendation from Peter and James and John?" Paul wrote back and said, "Do you mean that? Could you really mean that? Why, don't you understand that you are my letter of recommendation? Look at what's happened in your lives: You used to be drunkards and homosexuals and thieves and murders -- such were some of you! But what are you now? Look at the change! You are all the letter of recommendation I need," {cf, 2 Cor 3:1-3}. Paul's life and ministry were constantly characterized by the display of the power of God to change lives.

Then look at how widespread his ministry was (verse 19): "So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ." You really have to have a map to see that. Jerusalem is way down on the eastern corner of the Mediterranean Sea, in Asia. Paul had traveled up and down that coast, on into what we call Turkey, in Asia Minor, up and across the Dardanelles, into Europe, then into Macedonia and Greece. He had gone, as he tells us here, into what we call Yugoslavia. Illyricum is Yugoslavia, now dominated by the Communists, but the Apostle Paul preached there, and the nature of his ministry was pioneering (Verse 20): "It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known." He never wanted to build on another man's work.

Some weeks ago I shared with you a little booklet I ran across that described the difference between "Settler" theology and "Pioneering" theology -- a very interesting and humorous little booklet. This book says there are two kinds of Christians: Some want to be Settlers, to live around the courthouse and let the mayor run everything. They have lost all desire to reach out. But then there are the Pioneers, like Paul. They want to be getting into new areas that have never been touched adequately. I believe this is characteristic of the Spirit of God. He loves to thrust out into new areas.

Some of us are praying for a thrust into East Palo Alto, to touch folks who have never been touched much. We ask you to pray with us that we may reach into these areas, that something will develop that will have the touch of God upon it. And this is Paul's great hunger. (Did you ever notice that the word for news, as in good news, is made up of the first letters of north, east, west, and south?) We are to reach out with the good news, as Paul did.

Now for a paragraph on how he practiced this ministry (Verses 22-23),

This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you. But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to see you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you aid me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while. {Rom 15:22-24 NIV}

There is Paul's word about how practical his ministry was. It always involved three things.

First, it involved planning for the future. I am always running into Christians who think that God gives his orders directly to them while they are moving. They think of the Christian life as going on automatic pilot, where they just float around, waiting for orders as they go. They never think of planning or looking ahead. But Paul did not live like that.

For many years he had longed to go to Spain, and he planned to do so. But notice something about his planning.

1. First, it was flexible; he did not have a timetable. He went according to the way God opened the door, but he planned to go in a certain direction; he had it clearly in mind. He did not tell God how or when

it had to be. Now that is Christian planning.

2. Second, he was persistent; he did not give up. He had set his heart on Rome and Spain, and that is where he was going. It did not matter how long it took, he just kept plodding steadily toward that goal. There is no record that Paul ever got to Spain, although there are some hints in Scripture that he undertook a fourth missionary journey after he wrote the letters to Timothy. Perhaps he did get to Spain. That was the direction he had set his heart on.
3. The third thing about Paul's planning was that it always involved a team. He never went alone, and he says to these Romans, "When I come to Rome, I expect you to help me to go on." Perhaps to supply some assistants, and some money, and to pray as he went, Paul never worked independently, as a prima donna; he always involved others.

The second factor about his planning is found in verse 25 and on:

Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there. For Macedonia and Achaia [Greece] were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings. So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they received this fruit, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way. I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ. {Rom 15:25-29 NIV}

Now, not only was Paul practical in that he planned, but also he fulfilled past commitments. Some Christians, I find, are always jumping into new things before finishing the old. But Paul did not do that. Many years before this, in the fifteenth chapter of Acts, which tells about the council of the church, Paul and Barnabas were sent to Antioch with a letter to the church, settling the question of circumcision for the Gentiles. In that letter, Paul was specifically asked that he be careful to remember the poor in Jerusalem. Now, many years later, he is fulfilling that requirement. He has taken up an offering every place he has gone, and now he wants to deliver it personally to the famine-stricken saints in Jerusalem. And notice that it is not beneath the apostle to give material help. He is not going up there to preach to these people; he is going to help them with material things. Christianity involves that as well.

I read the other day that Charles Spurgeon, the great English preacher, was once invited by a wealthy man to come down and preach in a country church in order to help them raise funds to pay a debt. The man told Spurgeon he was free to use his country house, his town house, or his seaside home. Spurgeon wrote back and said, "Sell one of the places and pay the debt yourself." That is how practical he was.

Paul was willing to take up offerings and personally carry the money to those in need. But here he gives us the principle of sharing (Verse 27): "for if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings." If somebody blesses you spiritually, and the only way you can thank him is with material things, then do it, Paul says. That is God's program, to give back in material things for the spiritual blessings you have received. Notice it says, "After I have completed this task..." He is not going to quit until he is through. He will wrap it up well and do it right. "When I have made sure that they have received this fruit, then I will go to Spain and visit you on the way."

The third aspect of the practical character of Paul's ministry is his trust in the power of God (Verse 29): "I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ." He counted on God to come through.

That brings us to the last paragraph, where you have his touch on the power of his ministry (Verses 30-33):

I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea and that my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there. Then by God's will I can come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed. The God of peace be with you all. Amen. {Rom 15:30-33 NIV}

What was behind this mighty apostle's ministry? Why has it lasted for two thousand years? What was it that opened the doors and gave him access even into Caesar's household, and before the throne of the emperor himself? Paul would tell you it was because of the prayers of God's people for him. He was well aware of the ministry of prayer, and he urges them to pray.

You get a brief word on the nature of prayer. What is the basis of it? "I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit..." Prayer is born of the Spirit of God within us, awakening a desire to help, a sense of love and compassion. We pray to honor the Lord Jesus.

This is what will stir people to pray more than anything else -- not beating them with a whip. I learned that long ago. It is when people begin to see that the honor of Christ is involved, and the love of the Spirit is fulfilled when you pray, that they will really begin to pray. That is what the apostle appeals to here.

"Join me in my struggle." Life is a struggle, as we have seen already, and Paul sees prayer as a way of fighting in that combat. It is a great weapon which can batter down doors and open others. It can remove obstacles, withstand tremendous pressure and forces, and uphold people and sustain them. So Paul seeks this kind of prayer.

I would say that if there is one thing we need more than anything else at PBC, it is this kind of prayer. This is a critical hour in our church's history. We are making changes in various directions within the staff. We have great opportunities before us. But what we need above all else is people who will pray that we can lay hold of the need of the hour.

Notice what Paul requested of them: "Pray for protection from the unbelievers, and for acceptance from the saints." The reason he asked that is that these are the two areas that Satan loves to attack. If he can lay a person low with physical illness, or spiritual attack, this is what he will do. Prayer is particularly powerful at this point. It can protect someone in danger. When Paul arrived in Jerusalem, as we learn from the book of Acts, there came a moment when he was set upon by a mob in the temple courts. They were out to kill him, right on the spot. They had rocks in their hands, and were going to stone him to death. But it just so happened that at the critical moment, the commander of the Roman legion on the other side of the wall, in the castle of Antonia, looked over into the temple court and saw what was going on. He came down with a band of soldiers and rescued the apostle in the nick of time. So that prayer was answered, and Paul was protected from the unbelievers.

Earlier in Acts, Luke tells us, when Paul came with his gift, there were many Christians there of Jewish background, who did not want to accept Paul. They regarded him as a renegade, a traitor to the Jewish cause. They were turning their backs to him. But James, in answer to prayer, interfered, and asked Paul to show that he was not an enemy of the Law, and to take on a certain commitment in order to demonstrate to the people that he was not against the Law. That turned the tide, and Paul's ministry was accepted.

Then, the results (Verse 32): "Then by God's will I can come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed." The book of Acts closes three years from this time, with the Apostle Paul finally in Rome, after being shipwrecked, and after arduous travels. Now he is on his way toward the capital city, and he is met by a delegation of Christians from the church of Rome. There in a place called the Three Taverns, they sat down and had joy and refreshment together. What an encouragement to the apostle's heart, that these Christians were able to come out and meet him. He was coming as a prisoner chained to a Roman guard, on trial for his life, and sentenced to appear before the emperor. But they encouraged his heart and refreshed his spirit.

That brings us to the final chapter in this letter to the Romans. Chapter 16 is, for the most part, a list of names of Paul's friends, but there are some interesting things about it.

I hope that this review of Paul's ministry will remind us that we are in a battle and we cannot take time out. We have to maintain the task, and we have to be faithful to what God has called us to do. Above everything else, we must seek that mighty unction of the Holy Spirit on all that happens, that it may not be just a mechanical process, but the power of God released among us.

Prayer

Our Father, we thank you so much for the many things to rejoice over among us today -- the many changed lives; the many homes that have been made right and happy, where once they were sad and hostile; the many lives that have been filled with joy and peace and thanksgiving. But Lord, we pray that we may not forget that we are still in the battle, and we are still to be your instruments. Help us to partake of the apostle's spirit and press on, until you are ready to call us home. We thank you for the privilege of it, in the name of Jesus our Lord, Amen.

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