



Together we have been on a long journey through Paul's letter to the Romans. It was great for all of us to read together the amazing truths of Romans in the worship reading we had today. This letter to the Romans is God's plan of salvation. From chapter 1 through chapter 3 verse 20 we learned the bad news that we are dead in sin, hopeless, and unable to save ourselves because we are infected by sin. Paul tells us we are like dead men walking. Then through chapter 5 we learned the good news that salvation comes through the death of Christ and is received by grace alone, through faith alone, and in Christ alone, and that we become justified before God by God's grace and given a new identity as children of God because we are now joined with Christ who brings new life.

We learned about God's faithfulness and what it means to walk in the Spirit and what it means to know that our eternal destiny is secure. Then we learned about his sovereignty and his mysterious and unsearchable ways he builds his kingdom. These first 11 chapters of Romans contain the greatest explanations of the greatest Christian doctrines.

Then in chapter 12 Paul compels us to answer this question: With what we know from chapters 1-11, what now? Well, we now know that because of God's incredible mercy to us, we are now compelled to present ourselves as a living sacrifice to God as an act of Holy Worship. We are challenged to view God's incredible outpouring of love to us that flows into us, as love that is to flow out of us to those around us.

Today we turn another corner in our study of Romans. After this long journey we reach Paul's conclusion to his letter. When I first studied these verses, I was seeing them as kind of a random collection of Paul's thoughts and greetings. But as I looked deeper I saw Paul's final words as a carefully crafted attempt to draw the Roman believers into a partnership with Paul in a plan for the future to extend the reach of the gospel even further into the western frontier of the Roman empire into places where the gospel has never been preached before.

So I want to ask you a couple of questions this morning. The first one is: "When you think of a successful partnership, who do you think of?" Partnerships make sense in the church. When we think about Paul's desire to take the gospel into new frontiers it make sense that Paul would need support for that plan. He would need a great partnership. When I think about the mission partners at CPC taking the gospel into places we are not able to go, we know that these mission partners need our support to see the vision fulfilled. At CPC we support 36 different mission partners.

Let's step back and simply ask, "What makes a great partnership?" First of all, great partnerships are rare. I read this week that successful partnerships consist of a very delicate blend of three qualities.

- Potential partners must recognize their need for someone else to supply what they do not possess in themselves. This doesn't come naturally to most people because most of us see ourselves as incredibly competent multi-talented people with no shortcomings. Great partnerships need humble achievers who naturally complement one another.
- Great partnerships need mutual trust. Partnerships, like all good relationships, grow strong when each person can fully trust and rely on the integrity and the abilities of the other.
- Great partnerships need shared vision. The two humble achievers must want to achieve common goals; otherwise, they will continually frustrate one another.

Paul understood the perils and power of partnerships. He and Barnabas accomplished much together but after a while their partnership broke up. Why? They were both competent and trustworthy and shared the same vision, but after a while their visions went in two different directions over their opinions on the value of John Mark to their team. Paul also partnered with a man named Silas, a young man named Timothy, and other guys such as Titus and Luke. Eventually he even came back around on John Mark because he changed his mind and saw him as useful again.

When we pick up the story in Romans 15 Paul was living and ministering and writing Romans in the Greek city of Corinth. He was on his third missionary journey. New churches had been founded and existing churches had been strengthened. Most would consider that this was the time for Paul to consider retirement. Not Paul! He was ready to springboard into unknown places. But he needed a new great partnership. He needed the little church in Rome. Up to this point in his letter, Paul was writing to the Romans. Now his tone changes; he writes **about** them. He affirms them. He commends them because of their spiritual maturity. Because:

Great Partnerships Value Spiritual Maturity

I myself am convinced, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with knowledge and competent to instruct one another (v. 14).

Paul addressing them as brothers and sisters not only shows their salvation, but their maturity. Remember months ago in Romans 1:8 Paul thanked God for their faithfulness and their faithfulness was being proclaimed throughout the world. Then he gives three phrases of commendation—they were overflowing in goodness, their new nature became more and more visible as God transformed them, and the fruit of this transformation was goodness: loving righteousness and hating evil. These Romans were doctrinally sound. We could say they were overflowing with virtue and truth, literally able to place something in the mind of another, to impart understanding, to set right, to not just affect the intellect, but the will and attitude.

For the gospel message to continue to go forth in a powerful way, partnerships are needed that value spiritual maturity. Paul is excited to partner with the Roman church because they are committed to life transformation. I can't think of a better way for him to commend this church. Paul is saying, "You guys are committed to grow and growth is hard."

You and I need to remember that those seasons of personal spiritual growth in our lives were not necessarily fun times. Chiseling hurts but it's necessary. A heart to grow spiritually is necessary for the gospel to go out from us in a powerful way in the world. When it boils right down to it, which one of us would naturally want to grow spiritually knowing that it will likely change our relationships as well as change how we use our time, our talents, and our money? A commitment to grow spiritually will change our habits, our priorities, how we talk, walk and work. God calls for everything to be put on the table. What was once acceptable to us will be called into question. What we once overlooked as guilty pleasures are to be examined for what is beneficial about it.

This is the growth adventure that Paul is commending here. Spiritual maturity makes us useful partners to advance the plans of God into dark corners here on the peninsula and beyond. Great partnerships also encourage accountability.

Great Partnerships Encourage Accountability

Yet I have written you quite boldly on some points to remind you of them again (v. 15a).

I don't know about you, but when I read the Bible I see over and over again our propensity to forget. God is continually reminding his people of what they had already known so when things get hard they wouldn't go wobbly and forget who God is and what he has done and why we can trust him right in the midst of it.

So isn't good accountability more a matter of just showing up and reminding each other of what we already know? We see here that Paul wrote this letter not to provide these Romans with new information they had never heard. He wrote Romans to remind them of the steps of their own spiritual journey, to help them appreciate the grace that they have received, confirm their security of their salvation, and prompt them to action. And really isn't good accountability choosing to not become isolated from other Christians? Isn't good accountability choosing to connect in a genuine and intimate way with other trusted Christians?

Paul wrote this letter so that the Romans would read it and re-read it; that they would flesh out the truths of this letter in their smaller communities; so they wouldn't be come isolated from one another; that they wouldn't be come isolated from the world around them that needed the gospel. Generally people don't do well in isolation. Think about those in isolation such as prisoners, hospital patients, full-time mothers of small children, lonely retirees. People in isolation will struggle over time not to lose their identity and connection in the world. People in isolation forget that the world is much larger than their little isolated world.

We thrive when we are able to participate in something greater than ourselves. When we isolate we lose the vision, we turn inward, we serve self, we wonder why things are not working right. We begin to suspect others, to blame, to doubt, to attempt to control others. We get overly concerned with self protection and we forget about the desperate needs of people in our surrounding community.

Without accountability we forget. We forget why we are here. We forget why God gives us a special place to worship, a special place to launch ministry, a special place to use our gifts, a special purpose to reach our corner of the peninsula and the world beyond. Great partnerships in the local church encourage accountability to work together to bring the gospel message into the world in a powerful way.

Great Partnerships Encourage Complementation

In verses 16 through 22 Paul opens up wide and reveals his unique calling as an apostle. Once he explains this it will make sense why he really values the local church. He sees the local church as necessary to complement his uniqueness as a messenger of the gospel.

The first thing we see about Paul's unique calling is his motive. It's to share the gospel with others. It's not just a duty, it's his passion to share the gospel. Up in verse 17 he goes on to say, "*Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God.*"

...because of the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles. He gave me 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 (verses 15b-16).

Paul describes his service to God as being a priestly service. What does that mean? First of all the Bible tells us that Jesus Christ is our perfect and eternal High Priest. He is the one mediator between God and man. Jesus is the one high priest who offered himself as a sin offering for the sins of people. In contrast to Jesus' priesthood, Paul saw himself in terms of carrying out the priestly duties of making the offerings in the temple.

What were his offerings? Priests would regularly offer thanksgiving offerings out of gratitude, giving service and honor to God. What were Paul's thanksgiving offerings? They were people. They were the Gentiles that he proclaimed the gospel to that became believers. He saw his ministry as offering believing Gentiles as acceptable sacrifices to God set apart by the Holy Spirit as acceptable to God. So Paul's act of worship was to bring those he evangelized to God.

Have you ever considered that when we leave our worship service at the end of the hour, we will be entering into a new kind of service? We will all become witnesses for Christ in our own unique mission field. We go from worshipping to witnessing. It makes total sense. Our purpose when we leave this place is to go out into our communities and share Christ through our words and deeds so that people we know and love have a chance to become believers through our witness.

Then for Paul we see that it comes full circle. He goes from worship to witness and then back to worship. Paul sees himself as returning to the temple those who accepted Christ in tow as an offering to God as an acceptable sacrifice of praise. For us to just become a little like Paul, it's a great reminder to walk out of church today as if we see a sign in the parking lot that says, "You are about to enter your mission field." He described his unique priestly ministry; now he describes his unique preaching ministry.

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 wonders, through the power of the Spirit of God. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ (verses 17-19).

To Paul saving faith in Christ was more than a confession of faith, it's a changed life. Paul measured saving faith as leading the Gentiles to obey God. Notice that Paul doesn't boast about his accomplishments; it's what Christ accomplished through me, he says. We have been talking about partnerships, but Paul's relationship to God is no partnership. God was not his co-star. Paul saw himself as God's instrument, God's servant. Looking deeper, we see what Christ accomplished was not just through what Paul said but what Paul did. I read this week that we learn more through our eyes than through our ears. That is important for us to think about as we see ourselves as representatives of God in our mission field this week.

Here is another example of Paul's uniqueness. God used Paul the apostle by allowing his ministry to have powerful signs of God's power at specific times. Miracles still happen today, but there were more miracles in Paul's day specific to his ministry as an apostle. This special and specific power was a power over nature, which manifest as miracle signs that the Kingdom of God was alive and well and that Paul was an authentic spokesperson of that kingdom. And the word "wonders" means that people who saw these miraculous signs were amazed by what they saw and they listened to Paul.

In the next phrase, Paul uses the word power again, but this is a different kind of power, a power more commonly available to us today. It's the power of God that works in anyone who opens and reads the Word of God, who seeks God in prayer, who hears the Word of God and loves the gospel of Jesus Christ, and opens themselves up to the truth to enter and renew their minds, and then enter and change their heart.

So Paul saw his unique role to be a priest, a preacher, and then we see his passion for unreached people. Paul was a pioneer. His missionary journeys took him from Jerusalem in the far south-east, north and west through Asia Minor, Macedonia, Greece and even Illyricum, which is modern-day Croatia, Serbia, Albania on the eastern shore of the Adriatic. That term "fully proclaimed" means that he has ministered faithfully in every place that the Lord has sent him. Now look at verses 20-22.

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. Rather, as it is written: "Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand." This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you.

Apparently the Romans had been waiting patiently, asking for Paul to come see them, maybe even complaining that the apostle hasn't made time for them. Then Paul offers this explanation. "I haven't been able to come to you yet because there are still unreached places on this side of the Mediterranean. Once I'm finished here I will come to you."

"Hindered"—the idea is to be stopped by an army. Paul uses it in a passive which means that the hindering came from somewhere other than him, that God had prevented Paul from coming because his work wasn't done where he was yet. But we are about to find out that Paul has already given considerable

thought to his future visit to Rome. He had figured out a way to help the Roman church and for the Roman church to help him. Paul had in mind a beautiful partnership for a future plan that would glorify God.

Great Partnerships Rely on One Another for a Preferred Future

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 visit you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to see you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while. Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the Lord's people there. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the Lord's people 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 (verses 23-27).

We learn here that the Jewish Christians down in Jerusalem were in tough shape. They were facing famine. They needed help. So Paul saw this as an awesome opportunity to feed the poor church in Jerusalem and hopefully unify the Jewish and the Gentile Christians. If the wealthy Gentile Christians could help out the poorer Jewish Christians and the Jewish Christians would take the help, it would unite the church like nothing had before. And he boasted to the Romans about the generosity and gratitude of the churches making the contributions. He told the Romans that the gentile churches felt privileged to pay back in a sense because the same gospel that saved the Jews saved them too.

So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they have received this contribution, 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 (verses 28-29).

We see for partnerships to become great they must value spiritual maturity, they must encourage accountability, they must encourage complementation, they must rely on one another for a preferred future, and finally they must understand the power of praying for one another in order to see the gospel message go out into the world in a powerful way.

Great Partnerships Pray for One Another

I urge you, brothers and sisters, 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 kept safe from the unbelievers in Judea and that the contribution I take to Jerusalem may be favorably received by the Lord's people there, so that I may come to you with joy, by God's will, and in your company be refreshed. The God of peace be with you all. Amen (verses 30-33).

So did God answer his prayer that the contribution would be well received in Jerusalem? We actually don't know. Nowhere in Acts does Luke refer to any response in Jerusalem to this offering being delivered. How about the prayer to be kept safe from unbelievers in and around Jerusalem or in Judea? God answered yes and no. We can say God answered yes because we learn from the Book of Acts that Paul escaped a lynching, a flogging and a plot to

kill him. But we can also say no because while in Jerusalem Paul was arrested, tried and imprisoned. He was probably thinking, "Why God? How am I going to get to Rome if I am under arrest?"

Was Paul's dream of getting to Rome ever answered? Yes it was. He got to Rome. And the government paid for it. He just got there on a very long and treacherous boat ride, shipwreck, and almost drowning while under arrest. But he made it to Rome.

Was Paul's dream of reaching the wild west of Spain every realized? Likely not. There is no evidence that he made it to Spain. He remained in Rome under house arrest where he ministered and wrote his famous prison letters. It's possible there was a gap of time after he was released from house arrest in Rome where he could have gone to Rome or up into Europe, but we have no conclusive evidence to support that. Eventually he was arrested again, sentenced to death for preaching the gospel. Historians record that Paul was likely held up as the scapegoat because Emperor Nero conveniently blamed Christians for the problems in his empire.

I've come to learn that God has a revealed will—which we see—and a hidden will that sometimes looking back at our lives, looks like an invisible hand leading and shaping events, and we don't see the reason for the twists and turns; the visible doesn't always make sense to us. I believe this is what theologians call God's Divine Providence. God's invisible hand guiding God's perfect plan. It was God's will that Paul get to Rome, but it wasn't Paul's prayer to get there while under arrest, almost drowning and then ministering to the Romans while under arrest.

Paul closes by praying for the Romans, that they would have peace, that they would have unity. I want to encourage you to not be afraid to link up with others, to be open to partnerships. God loves partnerships and teams in his church. He reminds us that we are a body and that all parts are useful and that we must all do our part for the body to be healthy.

Several years ago, when Julie and I were newly called to a church, we got some good advice: spend a few months assessing what changes will be needed and take your time making these changes. Learn their history, what their values were, and build trust. So we patiently waited, knowing that we needed to eventually make major changes in our worship style. The worship was good but it was the same worship they had in the 1950's. I learned a lot of Fanny Crosby hymns in those first few years!

We prayed for change, but I wasn't able to lead the worship change. I wasn't a worship leader. I could sing a melody, and play trumpet, and it is virtually impossible to play the trumpet and sing at the same time! So we got a couple of nervous guitarists and a piano player who only played sheet music together and we began to slowly make changes. And we prayed for someone

to come and lead. We had no money to hire, but we prayed for someone who understood our vision for worship to come and help us implement it.

One Sunday a young woman stopped me in the greeting line after the service and said, "I think I know where you want to go and I can help you get there." She had just moved to town and her husband became our kid's orthodontist and my golf buddy, and she became Julie's best friend. She and I became partners, and she brought about a worship change that saw many come to our church and many come to faith in Jesus Christ. It was a special and rare partnership that God used this young mother of two in a powerful way to bring the gospel message into our local mission field.

I'll leave you with these final thoughts: Life's greatest achievements in ministry are accomplished through a joint effort. If you personally haven't found a partnership yet, you are called to find out who you should partner with that will help you bring the gospel message of Christ into your particular world in a powerful way. Someone to pray with, talk to, hold you accountable, be strong where you are weak.

Great achievements are never achieved without overcoming hindrances. I could fill a book with the hindrances we encountered while updating worship in that church. And I am easy going and move slowly anyway and pretty easy to get along with. It was amazing. Someone once wrote, "If I'm told that the road to my glorious destination is marred by loose rocks and potholes, every jolt along the way reminds me that I'm on the right road." And you know what, these older folks got on board, because they saw God working. One Sunday a guy who was a skeptic of the music came to church and said, "I saw Bill come to church today. I've known Bill for many years. If a guy like Bill shows up to church then I have nothing I can complain about. It's not about us." And over and over again I found myself able to repeat that phrase "it's not about us" to rally us to the cause to reach the next generation.

CPC has a destiny to make and mature more followers of Christ. Of course there will be rocks and potholes and jolts along the way. But our destiny is clear. Struggle is not a sign of God's disapproval. Struggle strengthens our faith. Ask yourself, "Who can complement me and my weak areas?" "Who can I complement in their weak areas?" I encourage you to remain determined to work together in partnerships to get the message of the gospel out into the world in and around Redwood City in a powerful way.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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