

ROMANS 12-16: Putting Your Faith into Action

Marks of a Healthy “Sending Church”

Rough Transcript

Jim Davis

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And it is a real privilege to be able to be here to step in for my friend, Pat. It is a privilege to count Pat as a friend and I think about this ministry has been going on since I was six-years-old. I'm curious, was anybody here back when this whole thing started? Okay. Yeah, we got one back there. Okay. So I was thinking this morning, I was six-years-old when y'all started this, I have a six-year-old who has this interesting love for Man in the Mirror. Every time we drive to the Geneva School, we drive right by a Man in the Mirror. And every morning he's just, "There's Man in the Mirror, dad. There it is."

And I don't know where he got it or how he got interested, but he is going to be thrilled that when I go home and tell him who I got to spend time with this morning. And I will say this morning is a little bit of an experiment. My Orlando Grace brothers are used to me moving around a little more, but because we're experimenting with filming this in a fairly tight shot, I will do my best to resist all of my nature to walk around as I talk.

All right, so we've been, you've been in a Roman series. We're in Romans 15. And I'm curious how many of y'all have been to Rome? Raise your hand. Oh, wow. Okay. It seems like half of y'all have been to Rome. So I lived, as you heard, I lived in Italy for five years and I have been to Rome more times than I could count. It is my favorite city in the world. And you walk around Rome and I don't think you can go one block without seeing the impact that Christianity has had in that city.

Every block you will see a church, you might see a cross, you might see a mural up on a wall somewhere. I mean, the impact that Christianity has had on that city is incredible. And not just the impact that Christianity has had on Rome, but the impact that Rome has had on the world. I mean, the way that Rome exported Christianity in the beginning of really the first five centuries is I don't think it would be unreasonable to compare it to the impact of say Great Britain in the 17th and 18th centuries in the way that they exported the gospel to the world. Or the way that God has used the United States in the 19th, 20th, and now 21st centuries.

So the impact of Rome over the course of Christian history, it's hard to overstate it. And it's really sad now honestly. If you go back to Italy and the churches or museums, and I think the last stat I saw only 2% of the country goes to any kind of church more than twice a year. But nevertheless, you can't walk around Rome without asking the question how is it that this small little church because when Paul wrote the letter that we're reading, he's writing to probably no more than 100 people. So how did that small little group of about 100 people become this international global force for the faith? And that's exactly what Paul is telling us in this passage here today.

So Romans 15, Paul has officially finished his great explanation and application of the doctrine of justification. There's more of a personal feel here. You're going to see a different side of Paul as we walk into the next part of this letter to the Romans. And we have to remember that up until now, Paul's sending church has been who? What church has kind of owned Paul and sent Paul all around the world?

Antioch. I think I heard it over there. Antioch is his sending church. But now according to verse 24, Paul has his sights set on somewhere else. Do you remember where that is? Spain.

So verse 24 so nobody thinks I'm making this up. "I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain and to be helped on my journey there by you once I have enjoyed your company for a while." So he's not just wanting to pass through Rome. He says, "I want to be helped in my way to the far reaches of the western known world by you. Rome, I want you to be my new sending church. You're more uniquely positioned to be able to do that. You're in a more strategic place than Antioch." But there's one major problem. Rome has some problems and you heard about these problems two weeks ago if you were listening to Jeremy Schurke.

And Paul's main point in the whole Book of Romans is to see if he can get this small church to a place where it can be a healthy church, healthy enough to be able to send him to the far western reaches of the known world. That's the point of the whole Book of Romans. So with that in mind, let's read these verses starting in 14.

"I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another. But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God. So that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit."

"In Christ Jesus then I have reason to be proud of my work for I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to the obedience by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders by the power of the spirit of God so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum, I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ. And thus, I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named lest I build on someone else's foundation, but as it is written those who have never been told of him will see. And those who have never heard will understand this is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you."

If you would, let me pause and say a brief prayer that God would bless His reading in this time we have together. God, we thank you for this time to be able to be up early in the word and we ask a very simple prayer. Would you give us eyes to see what you want us to see? Would you give us ears to hear? Would you give us a mind to comprehend? And then God, would you do the most miraculous work of all? Would you give us a will to obey? We love you and we ask this in the power of the Holy Spirit in the name of your son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

So in this more personal part of Paul's message, we see three marks of a healthy sending church. And I would go so far to push a little bit and say these are characteristics that we as leaders in our churches have to embody and embrace if we're going to be a part of a healthy sending church. And when I say healthy sending church, sending in all its fashions from right down the road all the way to the other side of the world. That's what Paul is trying to do here. So these three things, these three marks are what I want to point out from this passage. And the first is that a healthy sending church able to hear bold reminders.

A HEALTHY SENDING CHURCH IS ABLE TO HEAR BOLD REMINDERS

So in verse 15, Paul almost sounds apologetic for the way that he's been talking. He says, "But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder." And this idea of reminding people of aspects of the faith. This isn't just here in Romans. You actually see it all over the New Testament. Jude says something similar in verse five. He says, "Now I want to remind you, although you once fully knew it." Paul says to the Corinthians, "That is why I sent Timothy my beloved and faithful child in the Lord to remind you of my ways in Christ as I teach them everywhere in every church." And then Peter wrote,

"Therefore, I intend always to remind you of these qualities though you know them and are established in the truth that you have."

So this reminding that Paul and Peter are doing and Jude, he's not reminding them of these secondary doctrines say doctrines like baptism or ecclesiology or election. What the reminding is about is the primary central core aspects of the gospel and how this applies to our lives. And so I was thinking about this this week and it made me think about a few weeks ago, I had a really neat privilege. I got to interview the great theologian, D.A. Carson it was at a conference and he was going to be speaking from the Book of Hebrews. He was going to be giving a message.

And in my interview, I was thinking, "You have literally taught what you're preaching today. You've taught this for over 40 years in the seminary context. So my question is did God tell you anything new this time when you were preparing this message?" And in his kind of Canadian accent, he just looked at me very stoically and said, "No, nothing new, but I don't need anything new. I need reminders." And so if that's true of D.A. Carson if Paul and Peter and Jude are saying that's true for the early church, then 100% that's true of us as well. We need as men in the church, we need to be able to hear these kinds of reminders.

And that's not an easy thing because it takes a lot of humility to be able to say every day I need to be reminded of the most basic and foundational aspects of our faith. Pride is going to want to tell us that we've grown beyond the gospel and now we're mainly interested in the deeper theology, and we want to go and talk and argue about secondary and tertiary things. Pride is going to give us a sense that we know a gospel that's good for other people, but it doesn't necessarily have a lot of impact in my life today. And all of these gospel writers and our own D.A. Carson are telling us that isn't the case at all.

We as believers and leaders in our churches, we have to have the humility to acknowledge that every day, every day, we need to be reminded of the basic gospel and how it applies to our life. Every day we need to be reminded that we can do nothing apart from Jesus Christ. So that's the first thing that Paul is saying. "Church in Rome, you needed the reminder that I just gave you," but what was that reminder? And that brings us to the second part, the second Mark of a healthy sending church. A healthy sending church is unified.

A HEALTHY SENDING CHURCH IS UNIFIED

How many of y'all heard Jeremy two weeks ago? Okay. So he did a really good job of explaining the context, but by way of reminder, I'll quickly say the same thing. So the emperor Claudius when he was reigning he decreed that all Jews were banished from Rome. So this included Christian Jews as well. So imagine you have this church made up of Jews and Gentiles. And for a period of about three years, if memory serves, the Jewish Christians were gone and only the Gentile Christians were there in Rome. And so you can imagine like culturally there was a big change that went on. The church over that period of time began to feel more Gentile and less Jewish in its culture.

So after Claudius died, the Jews were allowed back in. Then they come into this church, it felt very differently. And I think that the attitude of the Jews was, "Hey, Gentile brothers, thank you. Thank you for what you've done, but we're back. So we're here to lead again. Remember this whole thing started with us, the Jews. So we're back to take our proper place in the church." And the Gentiles of the way I read Romans we're kind of like, "No thanks. We're glad to have you back, brothers, but we like things the way they are."

And so the best way I know to bring this into our context, what this would be like, imagine in your church if you go to a predominantly white church, imagine that all white people had to leave for three years. And the people of color, whatever that means in your context, they continued the mission of the church, the mission of your church. So over the course, let's say three years, that church is going to look culturally different. Probably the leadership is going to change. Maybe the preaching style changes,

maybe the music changes. And then what happens if all white people are allowed back in three years later?

I could imagine that in some churches, white people would come back and say, "Thank you, brothers. Thank you for what you've done. We're back. We're back to take our leadership positions. We want the music to go back, the preaching. We want everything to go back. Because after all, again, we're thankful for you, but this church was founded by white culture, funded by white culture and led by white culture up until three years ago." That would be a serious division in the church. I think that really is at least as serious as what the Romans are experiencing, if not more.

So this is Paul is trying to address. Really all of Romans is addressing this problem. He's applying the basic doctrine of justification, this is the core gospel, this issue of division, this unity. And so this is what he has been doing the whole time. This is what he's saying by way of reminder. For 15 chapters, I've been telling you by way of reminder that the gospel should unify you in your culture. And so this is what he's continuing to do in our passage in verses 15 and 16 when he says, "Because of the grace given me to be a minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God. So that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit."

And he hit an undercurrent. So you accept them, Jews. Then he continues in verse 18 and 19. "For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience by word indeed by the power of signs and wonders by the spirit of God so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum, I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Jesus Christ."

If you read the Book of Romans every few chapters he's saying, "Now to you, Jews. Now to you, Gentiles. Now to you, Jews. Now to you, Gentiles." I have four little kids. I've had conversations like this. "Now to you. Now to you. Now to you" and trying to bring them back together. This is how the Book of Romans feel. This is the gospel reminder that they needed and it's the gospel reminder that we need today. The same gospel reminder that we will never be a church that impacts our city in this world if we don't have a gospel that overcomes the cultures in our church. Not a gospel that flattens the cultures, but a gospel that brings them together. This is exactly what Jesus prayed.

Jesus prayed, "I do not ask for these only," the disciples, "But also for those who will believe through the word." And here it is. "That they may all be one." This is what Jesus is praying for. This is what Paul is reinforcing. And there are, I think 100 ways that I could think to apply this. Now I have 20 minutes. So I'll do one. If you kind of look around, I don't think this is going to be a surprise. We're experiencing a fracturing in the evangelical church that we have not seen since the 1940s. They have evangelical churches fracturing into four different pieces. And it really is sad to see people that I've considered to be spiritual heroes in my life all arguing with each other and throwing shots at each other online.

I know a lot of pastors and I don't know a single pastor that is not experiencing this fracturing in their context, but I do believe that those churches, there's precious few churches who are able to find this kind of gospel-centered unity around culture. They are going to have an impact in our city, in our state, in our nation, in this world. Because a lot of the division that we're experiencing is actually culturally-related. It's just fueled by this political polarization that we have that we experienced today.

So as leaders in churches, if you want your church to be the kind of church that Jesus prayed for and the kind of church that Paul is wanting to be his sending church to the west, then the spirit of unity, gospel-centered unity has to be in you as well. It has to be in me as well.

A HEALTHY SENDING CHURCH GOES WHERE THE GOSPEL IS NOT

And then thirdly, a healthy sending church goes where the gospel is not. This brings us to the end of our text in verses 20 and 21. "And thus, I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christianity has already been named lest I build on someone else's foundation, but as it is written." And he's quoting

Isaiah here. "Those who have never been told of him will see and those who have never heard will understand."

Now, I don't take this to be a missional restriction on any place. The gospel has been. Paul has this unique call, this unique context to the Gentiles is different than Peter's call, it's different than my call. As I said, I spent years investing in Italy where clearly the gospel has been, the gospel has thrived at one time, but the principle that Paul is communicating still holds true to all of us. Because we have to as churches have on our radar, where is the gospel not? Where has the gospel never been? And that is going to have both global and local implications in our ministries.

So globally, we have to think when we send missionaries, when we send our money, where is the gospel not? That doesn't have to define the whole of our global ministries, but that has to be a part of it because there are people who do not have any access to the gospel whatsoever and they have to be on our radar if we're a church that is funding any kind of missions around the world. But it's not only globally important, it's locally important as well. I'm third generation Orlando. My grandparents moved here in the '30s and the '40s respectively. And when they moved here, Orlando was really nothing more than a cow town.

They would talk of every lake in the city being crystal clear, undeveloped. The only way to get to the Keys back then was by rail. But if you wanted, you were allowed to drive your car on the railroad, which is crazy. And when I was growing up one of my grandmothers would remind me often, "Jim, you're old Orlando." You don't forget that. You're old Orlando, which basically means we were here before Disney and I was real proud of that when I was growing up. And then one day it hit me. "Wait, what you're really saying is we were here before there was a good reason to be here."

I'm not sure how old Orlando is much of a compliment, but now we live in a city of millions of people. We have Walt Disney World. We have the largest undergrad university in the United States. We're the entertainment capital of the world and the world is now coming to us. I did a little research on this. As best I can tell, every single nation is represented in the city. Now, not every ethnos, the way that Bible breaks up ethnicity, but every known nation is here. And so we have the gospel-less coming to us. And so that should, that needs to be on our radar when we think about where God has placed us in our own context.

But we also need to realize we're not just receiving the gospel-less. We are now creating the gospel-less. So 48% of Orlando is now de-churched. That means 48% of the city used to go to church and no longer does. I mean, you think about how was half of the city in our lifetime has decided, "I'm not going to go to church anymore." This is an epidemic. It has mind-blowing unstudied implications for the fabric of our society. If you've been to Europe, you've seen a little bit of the future of that, but we are creating the unchurched because the children of the de-churched will be the unchurched, and they will be gospel-less people.

And so as a church and as leaders in the church, we need to be thinking, "What are we doing about this watershed of people leaving the church and the reality that their children and grandchildren will be gospel-less people?" We need to heed Paul's and pray to that end and work to that end, the gospel would go where it is not or we will become insular, shrinking, dying churches. So how can we practically grow the way Paul wants the church in Rome to grow? I would suggest that we prayerfully consider three questions.

The first question is what would make us want gospel reminders in our life? It's not fun to be reminded of things. What would make us want gospel reminders? And these are different questions, by the way, then you're going to talk about. Well, I think we want gospel reminders when we really know that we're sinners and we can do nothing apart from Jesus Christ. And that word nothing has gotten bigger to me over the years. I mean, when I was new to the faith, nothing meant I can do most everything apart from

Jesus except for like healing and miracles. Now, I cannot even be patient with my wife and kids without Jesus Christ so that nothing grows. When you really believe you can do nothing apart from Jesus and His gospel, then you're going to be okay with gospel reminders.

Second question. What would make us want to go through all the difficulties involved in being united in our church across cultural barriers? That's not an easy thing. And the answer is really realizing that Jesus died for all types of people. All types of people are made in God's image and that demands that all types of people have dignity, empathy, and love directed to them.

And then lastly, thirdly, what would make us want to care about going where the gospel is not? Well, because we know that we are saved because God pursued us when we did not have the gospel, when we did not care about Him and when we deserved it the least. I think what Paul is saying at the core is that as Christians and as a church called to be on mission that the gospel is our fuel, that Jesus is our only hope and that the Holy Spirit is our power. And the more that that sinks inside of us, the more impactful we will be as leaders in our churches, and the more impactful our churches will be in this city and beyond.

Let me pray for us as we enter into our discussion time. God, thank you so much for your word. Thank you for your grace. Thank you for the Apostle Paul who is lovingly, yet boldly saying things that the church doesn't naturally want to hear. And may these things be true, increasingly true in lives as leaders in our churches and in our churches as we desire to impact this city and this world. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.