



# A Man Who Didn't Know the Meaning of Retirement

## Considering Romans 15:14-33

This is the beginning of the end of Paul's letter to the Romans. The personal style returns as Paul reflects on his own call and ministry; he talks about his work, his hopes and plans. There is much biographical material here. Here Paul is 'close-up and personal'. We see what makes him tick; what motivates him; what his aims and ambitions are.

When the Lord called Saul He said of him that he was, '*my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel*' (Acts 9:15-16). Here now, many years later, we have his 'report card.' He could say, '*I have reason to be proud of my work for God*' (17).

As we look at this passage there is obviously much that was unique about the ministry of Paul; he was an apostle; he was a pioneer missionary; he was a 'one-of'. While we cannot replicate such a unique ministry; there are however many features here that have relevance for ministry in any place at any time. Here we have the picture of a first class Christian worker. Let's note some of the characteristics of Paul's ministry that we see here:

### 1. His Pastoral Warmth and Encouragement (14 and 23-24)

He relates warmly to the Roman Christians. He calls them affectionately, '*my brothers*' (14). He thinks highly of them and tells them so. He expresses confidence in them when he states, '*you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another*' (14 ESV). He knows and appreciates their qualities. He recognises evidence of their Christian character — he sees signs of the fruit of the Spirit in their lives — especially goodness. He recognises that God has given them the gift of knowledge and an ability to teach and admonish one another. That's quite an achievement. There's nothing trickier than to admonish a friend and still remain a friend! It requires a large amount of tact — which the dictionary defines as, '*a keen sense of what to say or do, to avoid giving offence; skill in dealing with difficult or delicate situations.*' Tact is essential in all our relationships.

Paul illustrates great tactfulness and sensitivity in the way he addresses his readers. Perhaps it might appear in verse 15 that he was being a tad tactless? He states, '*on some points I have written to you very boldly*' (15). However, he was writing to them with the authority of an apostle in order to remind his readers of the foundations of the faith. He was not writing because they were terrible Christians — but to encourage them and to remind them of the fundamentals — just in case they had forgotten (15).

Paul expresses his longing and desire to visit the church in Rome that he might, '*enjoy their company for a while*' (24). He looked forward to coming, '*in the fullness of the blessing of Christ*' (29). He looked forward to being refreshed in their company (32b). He already had told them, '*I long to see you that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you that we may be mutually encouraged*' (1:11-12). He was a man who loved the fellowship of the saints. He was a 'people's person'; sociable and gregarious. He was a true friend. '*A friend loves at all times*' (Prov. 17:17). Paul was no remote academic who preferred the privacy of the study. Paul was a great encourager; and the church should be a community of encouragement. A ministry of teaching and preaching should not be continual criticising, carping or correcting — there must be

comfort and encouragement. When we exercise the authority of a teaching ministry we must not abuse the privilege of the pulpit in order to clobber people or to get at them. The honey pot is better than the big stick; the open hand is better than the clenched fist.

## **2. His Purpose in Ministry (16)**

He describes his ministry in priestly language. He describes himself as, *'a minister of Christ Jesus 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'* (16). The sacrifice he offers is not the sacrifice of the mass that the Roman priest offers. No. It is the sacrifice of the Gentiles — people who were despised; who were regarded as unclean and who were not permitted into the temple area. Now, through the gospel, they are reconciled to God and brought into God's presence. They are now a holy people — dedicated to God's service. It's a fascinating concept of ministry. Stott comments that this principle has a vital contemporary application. All evangelists are priests, because they offer their converts to God. When through our witness people are brought to Christ, we then offer them to God. M. Henry comments, *'Paul gathered in souls by his preaching, not to keep them to himself, but to offer them to God. And it is an acceptable offering being sanctified by the Holy Spirit. That which made them sacrifices to God was their sanctification'*. The purpose of ministry is not merely to see people reconciled to God — but to see them being more and more sanctified and employed in God's service 24/7. All of life is a *'living sacrifice'* (12:1).

## **3. His Pride in Ministry (17-19)**

*'In Christ Jesus I have reason to be proud of my work for God ... So that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ'* (17&19 ESV). *'This is Paul's succinct and modest summary of ten years of strenuous apostolic labour; including three missionary journeys'*. Look at a map to grasp the extent of the territory covered. Illyricum is in modern day Albania and the southern part of the former Yugoslavia. The distance from Jerusalem to Illyricum is about 1,400 miles. It's an incredible achievement. He states, *'I have fulfilled the ministry'*, or *'I have fully proclaimed the gospel'* (19). This despite all the opposition and hurdles that he had to endure.

There are some who criticise Paul here for bragging. This might be valid if he had not continued to say, *'I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me'* (18). Paul is simply being realistic. He also demonstrates humility. He could have embellished his story. He could have boasted about the numbers 'he led to Christ.' About the number of churches he planted. About the miracles he performed. But he didn't. The only thing he boasts about is what Christ has accomplished through him. He was only a spanner in the hand of God.

Matthew Henry comments: *'Whatever good we do, it is not us but Christ ... the work is His, the strength is His ... Paul takes all occasions to own this, that the whole praise might be transmitted to Christ.'* It is always wrong to boast in ourselves, but it is right to boast in the Lord. Paul has none the less, a great sense of satisfaction and achievement as he looks back and sees how the hand of God has blessed his ministry.

When we are tempted to human pride or when we receive congratulation and praise it is prudent to 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 chairperson leaned over and said, *'Doesn't it thrill you, Mr. Churchill, to see all these 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!'*

## **4. His Passion for Evangelism (20-24a)**

He states, *'I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation'* (20). He wanted to reach the unreached. He

was a pioneer evangelist. He hopes to visit Rome; and thereafter he planned to go to Spain (24). Why Spain? It was a great country. It was the home of some of the world's great intellects. Seneca, the Stoic philosopher was Spanish. Quintilian, the greatest teacher of oratory of his day was there. But more likely Spain represented 'the ends of the earth.' He saw Spain as part of God's missionary plan. It's what the prophet Isaiah prophesied would happen when the Gospel of a suffering and redeeming Saviour is preached (Isa. 52:15 quoted in verse 21). Paul saw Spain as a fulfilment of this Old Testament prophecy. For the apostle however, it was no mere duty. It was a concern for the lost. He yearned for their salvation. He had a vision for the glory of God on earth. John Piper wrote, *'Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exist because worship doesn't'*.

Paul didn't know the meaning of retirement. He had big plans. Though an 'old man' by the standards of his day — he wasn't going to rust out. In his book, *'Don't Waste Your Life,'* John Piper contrasts two stories. The first story is about two women, one over eighty, the other in her late seventies, who had given their lives to make Jesus Christ known among the unreached people of Cameroon. In April, 2000, their brakes failed, their car went over a cliff and they were both killed instantly. Piper asks, *'Was it a tragedy?'* He answers, *'No that is not a tragedy. That is a glory'*. These lives were not wasted. These lives were not lost. *'Whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it'* (Mark 8: 35).

The second story shows how to waste your life. The February, 1998, *Reader's Digest*, told of a couple who took early retirement when he was 59 and she was 51.

They moved to Florida where they cruise on their boat, play softball and collect shells. Then Piper comments; *'Come to the end of your life — your one and only precious, God given life — and let the last great work of your life, before you give an account to your Creator be this: 'I played soft ball and collected shells.'* *'That',* says Piper *'is a tragedy!'*

If anyone deserved a retirement cottage near the golf course or beside the beach it was the apostle Paul. If anyone deserved to slow down, it was Paul. Instead Paul is a gospel driven man. He says, *'I am under obligation both to Greeks and to Barbarians, both to the wise and the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome'* (1:14-15). We have many people around us. Do we care that they perish?

## **5. His Practical Concern for the Poor (25-27)**

Before visiting Rome he must however go to Jerusalem. (He is probably writing from Corinth). The purpose of this visit is to deliver a contribution (a substantial gift) for the poor saints in Jerusalem (26). Paul was a man who not only felt an obligation to take the gospel to the unbeliever, but also felt compelled to help the poor widows and orphans in Jerusalem. Perhaps he felt a measure of personal responsibility? After all he may have been the cause in his former life, of making many a wife a widow, and many children orphans? Besides, he says, *'indeed they (Gentiles) owe it to them...'* (27). It was like an outstanding debt to the Jewish mother church. (He elaborated on this debt in chapter 11). Stott comments, *'when we Gentiles are thinking of the great blessings of salvation, we are hugely in debt to the Jews, and always will be. Paul sees the offering from the Gentile churches as a humble, material and symbolic demonstration of this indebtedness.'*

Paul's religion was not only theological — but also practical. Compare 1 John 3:17 and James 1:27.

## **6. His Plea for Prayer (30-32)**

Paul appeals to the brothers in Rome to join him in striving (wrestling) with all their might in prayer to God. Why? Because he (and we) are engaged in a supernatural conflict. It's not a sign of weakness to ask for prayer. Paul was not reluctant to share his needs. He had very specific requests (31-32). Yet many of us apparently have no need for prayer? Have we no

weaknesses? Surely if the apostle needed prayer — we also need the prayer support of the church? We need to pray for one another. We ought to pray for one another. Ministry and missionary work requires co labourers in prayer. *'We are called not merely to pray for the work — but prayer is the work'*.

(P.S. His prayer request was not answered as he might have liked! He would eventually get to Rome — but not the way he expected. There was a riot in Jerusalem when Paul almost died. He faced arrest and a plot to kill him. He was delivered. Then followed an imprisonment in Caesarea; an appeal to Caesar; shipwreck; some time in Malta; and finally his entry into Rome as a prisoner of the state. There is no record that he ever reached Spain. That didn't matter. The Lord knew it was in his heart).

*'May the God of peace be with you all. Amen'* (33).

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