

“Taking the Hard Road”
Romans 15:17-21
(Preached at Trinity, December 18, 2011)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. In this passage Paul has been glorying in all that God has accomplished through him.
Romans 15:17 NAU - "Therefore in Christ Jesus I have found reason for boasting in things pertaining to God."
2. Paul says, "I have found reason for boasting in things pertaining to God." What things? The word "therefore" provides us some help. Paul is referring us back to what he has just spoken. By "things" pertaining to God Paul is referring to the *work* of God. He is boasting of the marvel of God's work.
solī Deo Gloria – To God alone be all the glory.
3. All of Paul's success was in spite of his own ability, not because of it. He gave all glory to God.
 - A. Paul continually stressed his own weakness.
1 Corinthians 2:1-3 NAU - "And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. ² For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. ³ I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling,"
 - B. And what about his abilities?
 1. It would seem that his oratory skills were not superb.
2 Corinthians 10:10 NAU - "For they say, "His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive and his speech contemptible."
ESV - "his speech of no account."
 2. Most agree that Paul's eyesight was terrible.
1 Corinthians 16:21 ESV - "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand."
Galatians 4:14-15 NAU - "and that which was a trial to you in my bodily condition you did not despise or loathe, but you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus *Himself*. ¹⁵ Where then is that sense of blessing you had? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me."
 3. And don't forget his thorn in the flesh. Whatever it was it was a continued hardship and a continued reminder of God's power in spite of his weakness.

F.F. Bruce – “If his ministry was so effective despite this physical weakness, then the transcendent power was manifestly God’s not his own. They constantly reminded him not so much of his own inadequacy as of the total adequacy of Christ, in whom, when he was personally weak, he knew himself to be most strong.”

4. Because of these many weakness and infirmities Paul might have been tempted to take the easy path—to restrict his ministry to the region of Judea. This region contained people who understood the Scriptures. They were followers of God. Going to them would have been the easiest course.
5. So what did Paul do?
Romans 15:20 NAS - "And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was *already* named, that I might not build upon another man's foundation;"
6. Paul went to the Gentile region. Going to the Gentile regions would have involved great difficulty. These were pagan areas. They knew nothing of the Scriptures. They were given to idolatry, superstition and witchcraft. They would have been given over to great immorality and wickedness.
7. So why didn’t Paul restrict his ministry to the easier path?
 - I. First and foremost, because this was not his calling.
 - A. Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles
Romans 15:16 NAU - " to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the gospel of God, so that *my* offering of the Gentiles may become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit."
Romans 11:13 NAS - "But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry,"
2 Timothy 1:11-12 KJV - "Whereunto I am appointed a preacher, and an apostle, and a teacher of the Gentiles. ¹² For the which cause I also suffer these things: nevertheless I am not ashamed: for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day."
 1. This was Paul’s calling – he was under compulsion
1 Corinthians 9:16 NAS - "For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel."
 2. In carrying the Gospel to the Gentiles he was simply fulfilling the fullness of his commission
 3. Others were called to build upon the work of others. This was not Paul’s calling.
 - B. We should live our life as servants of Christ and do the work He calls us to do
 1. No man should embark upon his own plans and ideas without first seeking God. Sometimes the best laid plans are nothing more than human scheming.
 2. I’m not suggesting the position of some who sit frozen in inaction waiting for some sign from God.
 Many Christians make their grand plans, however, without prayer, without seeking God’s guidance.

3. One of the consistent principles in the Bible is that of seeking God's will
Proverbs 3:5-8 KJV - "Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. ⁶ In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths. ⁷ Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the LORD, and depart from evil. ⁸ It shall be health to thy navel, and marrow to thy bones."
4. Do you see your daily work as service to Christ? Do you understand the nature of vocation?
5. Throughout history the church has been plagued by men seeking to occupy offices that God had not placed them
2 Corinthians 11:13-15 NAU - " For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. ¹⁴ No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. ¹⁵ Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness, whose end will be according to their deeds."
 - a. This is why the Scripture gives us careful instruction regarding the acceptance of pastors into the church.
 - b. Paul is simply saying he carried the Gospel to the Gentile world because this was God's calling upon his life.

II. Second, It was an expression of Paul's confidence in the mighty power of God in the Gospel

Romans 15:18 NAS - "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,"

- A. This was Paul's point in these verses
 1. He had nothing of which to boast except in what God was doing through him
 2. With such confidence he could take the Gospel anywhere with confidence.
Romans 1:16 NAS - "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."
 3. Paul loved his fellow laborers in the Gospel, but his confidence didn't rest in them. He trusted in God alone
- B. Are you fearful with the Gospel?
 1. It is like Paul is saying, "I will take the Gospel anywhere because of the mighty power of God working me."
 2. It isn't your words, your abilities. God wants you to trust Him and glory in Him.

III. Third, because Paul was willing to do hard things for Christ

Romans 15:20 NAU - "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;"

- A. This was not a statement of independence
1. The work of the Gospel is a shared work
1 Corinthians 3:5-7 NAU - "What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave *opportunity* to each one. ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. ⁷ So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth."
 God gets all the glory
 2. Paul demonstrated consistently his willingness to work with others. He labored tirelessly in helping others labor in work of the Gospel. He was never jealous of others.
Philippians 1:15-18 NAU - "Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; ¹⁶ the latter *do it* out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel; ¹⁷ the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment. ¹⁸ What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice,"
 3. This was not a statement of pride or selfish ambition
 - a. Some would take this position out of selfish self-ambition
 They don't want to build upon the work of another because it robs them of the full glory they might receive from success
 - b. This was not Paul's heart
 4. There is a lot of jealousy and envy and the heart of competition among churches today. Part of this is due to the huge number of churches struggling for existence and seeking to feed off one another. Mostly it is the pure sinfulness of not rejoicing in the work of others and in the selfless desire for the advance of our Lord's Kingdom
 5. Paul wanted to go where no one else had gone because this is where the Gospel needed to be preached. No one else had been there!
Romans 15:21 NAU - "THEY WHO HAD NO NEWS OF HIM SHALL SEE, AND THEY WHO HAVE NOT HEARD SHALL UNDERSTAND."
 According to Leon Morris this is the last of 64 quotations Paul quoted from the OT in Romans
- B. Paul wanted to go where no one else had gone because he wanted to do great things for Christ. He knew that Christ had called him to labor among the Gentiles and no amount of difficulty would keep him from his task.
1. Paul wasn't afraid to attempt great things because he knew he served a great God. It was a hard labor. Laboring among the Gentile nations would bring much difficulty.

Matthew Henry – “He broke up the fallow ground, laid the first stone in many places, and introduced Christianity where nothing had reigned for many ages but idolatry and witchcraft, and all sorts of diabolism. Paul broke the ice, and therefore must needs meet with the more difficulties and discouragements in his work.”

“He was a bold man that made the first attack upon the palace of the strong man armed in the Gentile world, that first assaulted Satan's interest there, and Paul was that man who ventured the first onset in many places, and suffered greatly for it.”

Paul's own words:

2 Corinthians 11:26-27 NAU - "*I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; ²⁷ I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.*"

2. This doesn't mean that all Christians are called to go into such areas. It does mean that we should be willing if God so chooses to send us. This issue is a matter of the heart. Every Christian must be in the service of Christ and willing to labor continually, no matter what the hardship.
3. With regards to labor there seems to be two types of people:
 - a. There are those who want the easiest way out with the least amount of effort. They begin tasks but don't press on until they are completed. And the work they do is sub-standard. We can rightfully call them lazy.
 - b. There are those who are diligent and willing to attempt big things. They are up for the challenge and stay with a task until it is completed. They labor with excellence. They are willing to attempt that which is most difficult.
4. Paul wanted to do the best for Christ, and no amount of difficulty would hinder him from his task.

1 Corinthians 10:31 NAS - "Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

Philippians 3:14 NAS - "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

- C. Unfortunately, we find both types within the church of Christ
 1. Just like in the world, we find some who seldom exert themselves in labor.
 - a. They are content to let others do most of the work – they are quick to excuse themselves, as if they are much busier than anyone else.
 - b. They seldom involve themselves in any serious work in the ministry of the church and they are the first to complain or quit if the work becomes too difficult or demanding.
 - c. They are inconsistent in everything they do for Christ and you can't depend upon them to complete a task. Their heart is just not in it.
 - d. They are a constant discouragement to others in the church and a constant source of grief to their pastors.

2. Then there are those who labor tirelessly and joyfully
 - a. If the church begins a new labor they are first to volunteer their time.
 - b. When they begin a project they proceed with diligence and excellence.

Conclusion:

1. Our church has been blessed with an abundance of faithful laborers. But we need more. Pray that God will send us more laborers.
2. And no matter what level of faithfulness you are at, pray that you might be even more faithful. May each of us see ourselves as the dutiful servants of Christ. And may we see ourselves as mighty warriors going head to head with all the forces of evil.
3. And remember, even when we have done all that we can do we have nothing of which to boast.
 - a. First, because it is God working in us.
Romans 15:17-18 NAU - "Therefore in Christ Jesus I have found reason for boasting in things pertaining to God. ¹⁸ 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,"
 - b. Second, because this is what is expected of the servants of Christ. Even when we have done our all, we have only done that which is expected of us as the servants of Christ
Luke 17:7-10 NAU - "Which of you, having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come immediately and sit down to eat'? ⁸ "But will he not say to him, 'Prepare something for me to eat, and *properly* clothe yourself and serve me while I eat and drink; and afterward you may eat and drink'? ⁹ "He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he? ¹⁰ "So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves; we have done *only* that which we ought to have done.'"