

Personal Goals for Ministry (Romans 15:14-33)

Reading Romans 15:14-33 is like looking into the personal journal of the apostle Paul. In these verses he reveals his plans for future ministry. Having completed his masterful explanation of the gospel and God's righteousness as well as its application to life transformation, Paul now describes to the Christians in Rome his ministry goals, goals that would further the spread of the gospel. In these personal words to the church we're reminded that God is pleased when we prayerfully plan for growing involvement in His work.

Our work for the Lord should encourage spiritual maturity (15:14-16).

When we serve the Lord, we should plan to encourage others toward spiritual maturity. Personal spiritual growth is a primary goal for our own lives as well as for the lives of those whom we serve.

Every believer should be mature enough to minister to others (15:14).

The church in Rome had, apparently, sprung up as a grass roots movement without apostolic oversight. Nevertheless, this church was spiritually strong. Paul could state with sincerity that he was convinced regarding these "brothers" in Rome that they were spiritually mature. He describes them as full of "goodness" or "kindness," a character trait that reveals the fruit of the Holy Spirit in a person's life (Galatians 5:22). He counted them as being filled with all knowledge, that is, being well versed in the truths of God. Furthermore, Paul considered the Christians in Rome to be fully capable of "instructing" one another, a term that carries the connotation of admonition, warning, or counseling. This church had enough spiritual maturity to stand on its own, to challenge its members toward spiritual depth and faithful living.

Every believer should be mature enough to receive strong exhortations (15:15).

While the church in Rome was spiritually strong, it wasn't perfect. That's why Paul took time to write this epistle. He admits that in some matters he had written boldly in order to remind them of the truths they already held. It's easy for us to neglect the rich spiritual truths that we affirm in our minds. Paul wanted to strengthen his readers' resolve, but he did so out of the grace that God had given him. Paul's words were authoritative, bold, yet gracious. He knew that the Christians in Rome were mature enough to receive his strong exhortations.

Every believer should be mature enough to fulfill spiritual responsibilities (15:16).

Here Paul describes his sense of his own spiritual responsibilities toward God. By His grace, God had rescued Paul and commissioned him to be a “minister”—the term carries the idea of a liturgical servant—of Jesus Christ, focusing on Gentiles. This liturgical service involved, in Paul’s mind, declaring in a priest-like manner the gospel of Jesus Christ. One of Paul’s priest-like responsibilities was to present an acceptable offering to God. This offering was not an animal sacrifice, something that would have been common to the offerings in the Temple at Jerusalem. Instead, Paul’s offering to God was the Gentiles themselves. Those Gentiles who had come to faith in Jesus Christ were “sanctified” by the Holy Spirit, set aside as holy in God’s sight. They were Paul’s offering to God. Paul worked hard to fulfill his calling as an apostle to the Gentiles, bringing them to faith and spiritual maturity—an acceptable offering to God.

**Our work for the Lord
should elevate Jesus Christ (15:17-21).**

It’s easy for those in places of spiritual leadership to take their eyes off the goal of leadership, to focus on the work of ministry instead of the object of ministry—Jesus Christ. We must always be careful to elevate Jesus.

Effective ministry highlights the work of Jesus Christ (15:17-18).

Paul could sincerely state that Jesus Christ was the core of His life and ministry. His “boasting” or “confident joy” was found in Jesus. His ministry for God pointed people to Jesus Christ. In fact, Paul was careful not to get off target in his message. He spoke only that which Christ had worked into his life. This included Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles, bringing them to “obedience” to the gospel, that is, to faith in Jesus Christ. Paul’s ministry included both his words and his work—he elevated Jesus in what he said and in what he did.

Effective ministry takes place by the power of the Holy Spirit (15:19a).

Our work for the Lord includes pointing people to God the Father through the gospel of God the Son by the power of God the Holy Spirit. As an apostle, Paul was able to demonstrate the power of the Spirit of God with miracles—the power of signs and wonders. In fact, the ability to perform signs and wonders was a mark of true apostleship (2 Corinthians 12:12; compare Hebrews 2:2-4). The word “signs” refers to the purpose of miracles in authenticating the message of the gospel. The word “wonders” emphasizes the amazing, supernatural character of these miracles.

Effective ministry takes on a global perspective (15:19b-21).

Paul's ministry to the Gentiles required a global perspective. His strategy involved penetrating major population centers with the gospel so that churches could expand into outlying regions. By his own estimate, Paul had successfully fulfilled this strategy in a geographic "circle" or arc stretching from Jerusalem up to Illyricum. Although Paul's ministry in Jerusalem was limited, Jerusalem was the epicenter of the gospel. Illyricum, a region located along the Adriatic Sea northwest of Macedonia, is never mentioned in the missionary activities of Paul in Acts. However, Paul may have passed through Illyricum, or at least his influence spread through Macedonia to the borders of Illyricum. In 2 Timothy 4:10 Paul mentions that Titus had gone to Dalmatia, which was considered a part of Illyricum. Paul's point is that he had faithfully fulfilled his calling as an apostle to the Gentiles by strategically reaching a broad ring of provinces. He had done so with the stated aspiration of evangelizing only where Christ was not yet named. Paul was a pioneer. He didn't want to build on the foundation of others. His calling was to open new fields for the gospel. Isaiah 52:15, which Paul quotes, must have been a driving influence in his ministry: "Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand." Paul certainly had a global perspective in sharing the good news about Jesus Christ with those who had not yet heard.

**Our work for the Lord should envision
a broadening spiritual influence (15:22-29).**

While Paul was convinced that he'd fulfilled his mission to the Gentiles in the eastern region of the Roman Empire, he envisioned taking the gospel to the western limits of the Empire. He had his eyes on Spain.

An expanding ministry relies on personal partnerships (15:22-24).

It was Paul's desire to visit the Christians in Rome. However, he'd been hindered over and over again from doing so. While opposition to Paul's work may have been one form of that hindrance, the vast scope of his work may have also prevented him from going to Rome sooner. But now Paul felt that a trip to Rome was feasible. He had fulfilled his mission in the Aegean region and sensed that he had no other "place" or "opportunity" there. Since he strongly desired to meet the Christians in Rome "for many years," he sensed his time had come to firm up plans in that direction. But Rome wasn't Paul's ultimate destination. He had his sights on Spain, the extreme western extent of the Roman Empire. He planned to travel through Rome on his way to Spain. While in Rome Paul would take some time with the Christians in that city, and he anticipated that they would assist him by providing support—food, money, or any other

assistance—to help him get to Spain. Paul wanted to serve the church in Rome and anticipated that the Christians in Rome would also fulfill his needs, at least in part.

An expanding ministry values generous giving (15:25-27).

Paul's travel plans included Rome and Spain, but first he had to complete an important assignment that would require him to return to Jerusalem. The churches he'd planted in Macedonia (Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea) and in Achaia (Corinth) had "thought it good" to gather a financial contribution (literally a "fellowship") to meet the needs of the poor among the Christians in Jerusalem. Paul refers to this offering in 1 Corinthians 16:1-4 and 2 Corinthians 8:1—9:14. Again Paul emphasizes that these churches "thought it good"—this was a voluntary offering for the benefit of others. In a spiritual sense, however, these churches were "debtors" to the church in Jerusalem. After all, the gospel first radiated from Jerusalem and had eventually come to Macedonia and Achaia. The Gentiles had shared in the spiritual blessings of the Jerusalem Christians. Therefore, they had an obligation to serve their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem by meeting their physical needs. Generous giving always marks an expanding ministry.

An expanding ministry flows from the blessing of Christ (15:28-29).

Returning to his original thought, Paul indicates that he must first accompany this financial gift to Jerusalem before making his way to Rome. He needed to "seal" the "fruit" to the Christians in Jerusalem, that is, safely deliver this financial gift and underscore its unifying purpose. Only then would Paul be free to travel through Rome on his way to Spain. Paul expressed his confidence in the full blessing of Christ that would take him to Rome. Later, the Lord would reassure Paul that he would testify to Jesus Christ in Rome (Acts 23:11). Paul enjoyed a broadening spiritual influence throughout his lifetime, even during periods of physical confinement.

**Our work for the Lord should be
energized by the power of prayer (15:30-33).**

Prayer is essential to ministry effectiveness. In typical fashion, Paul includes a request for prayer in this concluding section of his epistle.

Because ministry is a struggle, prayer is essential (15:30-32).

While Paul had goals for his ministry, he knew that his plans were subject to God's will. He also knew by experience that ministry is a struggle. Therefore, prayer is essential. For this

reason he exhorted his Christian brothers in Rome to pray. His exhortation rested on their shared relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ and on the love of the Holy Spirit—possibly the love which the Spirit has for us as believers or the love that the Spirit engenders in our lives as an expression of spiritual fruit (Galatians 5:22). Paul asked the church in Rome to “agonize together” with him in prayer. Prayer is hard work and the struggles of ministry demand intensive, cooperative prayer. We pray to God on behalf of one another, trusting God to protect and bless our ministry efforts. Paul specifically asked for prayer that he might be delivered from the disobedient ones in Judea, that is, the unbelievers. He recognized that his life would be in danger when he went to Jerusalem. Paul also asked for prayer that his ministry to the saints, the believers in Jerusalem, would be acceptable. This ministry would include the financial gift Paul would deliver, but also his message of a grace-based gospel. After accomplishing his mission in Jerusalem, Paul anticipated visiting the Christians in Rome with joy, according to the will of God. Paul hoped that he would experience a period of rest and refreshment in Rome.

Subsequent events would prove that God did indeed answer Paul’s prayers, but not in the way he might have hoped. Paul did travel to Jerusalem. There, he was arrested (which protected him from being killed by an angry mob). He was imprisoned for two years in Caesarea, and then sent as a prisoner to Rome. God does answer our prayers, but not always in the way we ask. Nevertheless, God protected Paul and helped him achieve his goal of reaching Rome. Once in Rome, Paul’s story is less clear. We assume that he faced trial and was acquitted, giving him the opportunity to minister to the church in Rome and, possibly, fulfill his goal of reaching Spain. Later, as antagonism toward Christianity grew, Paul was again arrested and eventually executed as a martyr in Rome. In all of this Paul would have still counted it a privilege to serve Jesus Christ.

Because ministry is a privilege, God’s peace is available (15:33).

“The God of peace be with you all. Amen.” With this simple blessing Paul concludes his description of his ministry plans and his expression of love for the church in Rome. Our God is a God of peace. He is with us through faith in Jesus Christ. We can experience His peace even in the middle of life’s most difficult circumstances. Our work for the Lord—spreading the good news of Jesus Christ—is a lifelong vocation. It points people to Jesus Christ and relies on prayer. It’s a work that brings glory to God. God is pleased when we prayerfully plan for growing involvement in His work.