

Sermons through

Romans

A Debtor to All

Romans 1:13-15

With Study Questions

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Romans 1:13-15

Now I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that I often planned to come to you (but was hindered until now), that I might have some fruit among you also, just as among the other Gentiles. ¹⁴ I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise. ¹⁵ So, as much as is in me, *I am* ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also (Romans 1:13-15).

Introduction

I will occasionally make a friendly, modest wager. The wager is generally on a sporting event and the stakes involve food and/or beverages. A couple of years ago I bet a friend a beverage that the Lakers would beat the Celtics. I won. We went double or nothing and I won again. He hasn't paid up yet. Now I'm fine with that because I can continually remind him that he lost that bet, that his team lost, and that he owes me. Sometimes he offers to settle and I'm always just be too busy.

I made a similar food bet with a couple of the members of our youth group on a volleyball match. This time I lost. It's been well over a year now since the bet and I haven't paid up either. And whereas I am sure they would accept the offer of payment, I can't help notice the pleasure which exudes from them every time they remind me that I am in their debt. I would not go so far as to say that it defines the relationship; but when the topic surfaces it is very clear that I owe them.

Review

The context of the three verses we're looking at this morning is that of a pastor who "**longs**" to visit a congregation (Romans 1:11). He wants to utilize the gifts that God has given him for the benefit of God's people in order that they might be "**established.**"

What does it mean to be established? The word means to be strengthened or solidified. Jesus uses the word to describe the "**great gulf fixed**" between heaven and hell (Luke 16:26). And whatever it means Paul seems to think that the establishing, or strengthening, is something God does according to the gospel (Romans 16:25).

We might think that to be established or strengthened or solidified means to live a righteous and pious life and it certainly would include that, but what Paul prays and what Paul will labor throughout this entire epistle is the presentation of an unadulterated understanding of God, His grace, His fulfilled promise/covenant, man's sin and desperate need for what only Christ can provide.

Christians should seek to live holy lives; the various levels that we fail in that endeavor can and will have dire consequences. But I have lived long enough and ministered in one community long enough to witness the failure of even the most stalwart Christian. So the **"establishment"** and the **"encouragement"** Paul writes of in verses eleven and twelve must include, even prioritize, the graciousness of a merciful God in the gospel of Christ over and along with the call to holy living.

Perhaps this is why John, as an older apostle, writing toward the end of his ministry penned these words:

My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous (1 John 2:1).

Now to our text:

Now I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that I often planned to come to you (but was hindered until now), that I might have some fruit among you also, just as among the other Gentiles (Romans 1:13).

Hindered

Paul wanted to visit them but was hindered. Sometimes we are to engage in ministerial efforts that are not exactly what we had in mind, but providentially we recognize God's hand. I know for me this was the case in my visit to China. To be honest, ministering in China was not something to which I ever aspired. But there was a course of events that made it quite apparent to me and others that this was to happen.

Paul wanted the Christians in Rome to know that he wanted to visit them and had frequently planned to visit them. Paul was no reluctant minister. He wanted to be there and he wanted them to know that he

wanted to be there. He didn't want them to view themselves as a burden to him. What a wonderful pastor!

I have to ask myself to what extent I share that ministerial sentiment. And as a Christian, who is called to minister to others, you must ask yourself that question as well. Are there people you're seeking to minister to and do they get the impression that this is something you're eager to do?

We were not told specifically as this point how he was hindered. It could have been by special guidance of the Holy Spirit as we read in Acts (16:6-9). But it was likely due to other ministerial duties which took priority as we read later in Romans. Paul's priority was to preach the gospel to those who had never been told. It is in that context that he writes:

This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. ²³ But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, ²⁴ 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 (Romans 15:22-24).

So by God's providence we are sometimes hindered from doing the ministry we would like to do in order to engage in the ministry that we are called to do.

Paul was hindered from one priority because of another priority. These are the types of questions that come before those who seek to serve the Lord quite often. Again, I know for me, when I'm given the opportunity to minister in some capacity – whether a Bible study, a committee at presbytery, on the board of a relief organization, etc. I must ask myself what I will give up in order to say 'yes'. Paul wasn't hindered because he was busy watching re-runs of Seinfeld. Time is a valuable commodity God has given us and we should make good use of it to the glory of God and edification of our neighbor.

Fruit

In Paul's case he was concerned to **"have some fruit among"** them. What would that be? Fruit is produce. It is what is produced by a specific tree, vine or plant of some kind. The fruit does not determine the type of

tree, vine or plant; rather, it reveals the particular phylum of the plant. The metaphor couldn't be more appropriate for the Christian faith.

We do not seek to construct apples in an effort to convince God that we are in fact an apple tree. Regeneration or being born again or finding peace with God is not the result of pinning apples to a dead tumbleweed. Regeneration (being born again) is an act of God's grace which is evidenced by faith which produces true fruit.

Now that fruit is such a necessary component to saving faith that the lack of it should be viewed as warning signs on a road to hell. In case it's unclear, the fruit involves an accurate understanding of the gospel along with seeking to lead a life of obedience – obedience to God's law – loving God and loving our neighbor. In chapter six Paul will elaborate. He will both inform us that the opposite of fruit is lawlessness and that the clear destination of this lawlessness is death.

I speak in human *terms* because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members *as* slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness *leading to more* lawlessness, so now present your members *as* slaves of righteousness for holiness. ²⁰ For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ²¹ What fruit did you have then in the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things *is* death. ²² But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life. ²³ For the wages of sin *is* death, but the gift of God *is* eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:19-23).

We should not read this passage as if one road merits (earns) life and the other merits death. If we viewed it that way all would merit death. It would appear that Paul had a concern for this church, and all churches, that they would believe the one true God, the true gospel and evidence that belief with an effort to walk in obedience.

Self examination in this area can be highly valuable, as is our loving observing and correcting of each other when necessary (Galatians 6:1).

I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise (Romans 1:14).

Greeks, Barbarians, Wise and Unwise

Toward that end of producing fruit, Paul viewed himself as a debtor to all people – even people who might be frustrating to work with. Having been raised in a strictly Jewish culture, it was likely somewhat of a challenge for Paul to be the apostle to the gentiles (Romans 11:13); it certainly was for Peter (Galatians 2:12). But Paul doesn't mention merely gentiles or non-Jews (he certainly ministered to Jews as well), he mentions Greeks and barbarians – that would be those who operated within what might be considered the Greco-Roman culture and those who were outside of that culture – perhaps slaves or foreigners.

Paul also mentions the wise and the unwise. It might be of interest to note that the word “**unwise**” *anoia* (without the mind) does not mean simple or those lacking intellectual acuity. It rather refers to people who refuse to use their capacity for understanding – an unwillingness to use one's mental faculties in order to understand. One can't help but conclude that these might have been frustrating people for a person's of Paul's intellect to work with.

Whether calculated and malicious I cannot say with certainty, but there are high profile personalities in our culture who have mastered the art of winning people's opinions that have little to do with sound argumentation. Whether politicians, movie-makers, motivational speakers or even clergy we often find ourselves waiting for them to actually say something of content. Votes, tickets and donations are not always the result of a sound presentation as much as it is the ability to appeal to passions.

There are two sculptures outside Ronald Reagan building in Washington D.C. that represent justice and reason. The one heralding reason has the inscription:

*The voice of reason is more to be regarded than the bent of any present inclination*¹

Not to belabor the subject, but the point that I see in these words of Paul is that we have an obligation to bring the gospel to everyone. There are numerous ways this may play out in our actions, but here's the trick,

¹ Interestingly the one for justice reads: “Our liberty of worship is not a concession or a privilege but an inherent right.”

we are called to minister to all to the extent that we view ourselves as owing it to them.

Paul understood himself to be entrusted with a stewardship (taking care of something that belongs to someone else).

For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! ¹⁷ For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship (1 Corinthians 9:16-17).

And even though Paul was an apostle and the Bible teaches of prophets, teachers, evangelists, elders, deacons and pastors I think it would be negligent for any of us to somehow exclude ourselves from the responsibility of that stewardship.

So, as much as is in me, *I am* ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also (Romans 1:15).

I am not sure how we all might respond to this challenge—to go through life with a sense that we are in debt to others and what we owe them is the gospel. But I think it would behoove us and honor Christ to seek to imitate Paul (1 Corinthians 4:16; 11:1) in this disposition. He writes that he's "**ready to preach.**" Some of your versions read "**eager to preach.**" R. H. Mounce observes:

Paul's sense of obligation to carry the message of Christ was not a burden. To the contrary, he was "eager to preach" to those who were in Rome. "Obligation to him who died produces obligation to those for whom he died."²

² Mounce, R. H. (2001). *Vol. 27: Romans* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (70). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

Questions for Study

1. The Apostle Paul desires that Christians be “established.” What does that mean and how is it achieved (pages 2, 3)?
2. Discuss Paul’s disposition toward the Christians in Rome (pages 3, 4).
3. How do you think Paul was hindered from going to Rome? How does God hinder you and how do you respond to these hindrances (pages 3, 4)?
4. What is “fruit” for the Christian and from where does it come (pages 4, 5)?
5. Does fruit merit (earn) salvation? Is it necessary to salvation? Explain your answers (pages 4, 5).
6. In terms of the gospel, how did Paul define his relationship with all people (pages 6, 7)?