

"PRINCIPLES FROM THE TEXT"

(Romans 15:14-33)

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What principles can we isolate from Paul's travel plans in 15:14-33 that are significant for the church today? I think three principles emerge clearly, and one other more tangentially.

Successful Ministry. One clear principle is this: Successful ministry is always God's doing. Paul implicitly gives himself a significant role in salvation history as he describes his ministry in verses 16-22. Yet he gives all the credit for his ministry to the Lord, to "the grace God gave me." His role as apostle to the Gentiles is not one he has earned through hard study or by virtue of intrinsic talent. God chose him, prepared him, gave him the ministry, and empowers it. All is of grace. The Gentile converts he offers as a sacrifice to God are acceptable only because they are "sanctified by the Holy Spirit" (v.16). What Paul does is no more than what "Christ has accomplished through me" (v.18), as the "power of the Spirit" enabled both his deeds and his words (v. 19).

"Successful ministers are prone to pride, one of the most basic of all sins. It is frighteningly easy to fall into a mode in which we begin taking credit for whatever positive spiritual impact we are having. The people with whom we minister will often be the innocent inducers to this pride. In an effort to be supportive and encouraging, they will often flatter us about the sermon preached, book written, or life changed. Our dutiful response, "Glory to God, it was his doing," can become both formulaic and insincere.

God, of course, has his own ways of humbling our pride. For every parishioner who flatters us, God sends two others to ask, after we preach, "Was you week particularly busy?" Or "Did you lose your watch?" Yet the natural inclination for many of us is to listen to the flatterers far too much. Moreover, pride is not only wrong in itself, it can lead to so many other sins. I am positive that many prominent ministers fall into sexual sin precisely because they begin to think that they are immune to such ordinary temptations or, worse yet, they begin unconsciously thinking they are above the law.

How can one fight the temptation to pride and imitate Paul in giving all the glory to God? I have no magic formula, but I am convinced that interaction in a small group of peers to whom we are accountable can be a great help. Many ministers tend to be isolated, spending all their time with people to whom they minister and never developing any genuine peer relationships. Any isolated Christian is in a dangerous situation. That situation is doubly dangerous for the pastor who may be a special target of the evil one. All of us in ministry need at least one peer (in addition, of course, to our spouse!) Who will feel free to "tell us off" when necessary.

Balancing Spontaneity and Obligation. A second principle we can validly derive from this text is the need to balance spontaneity and obligation in giving to the Lord and to his people. As Paul describes the collection for the saints in Jerusalem, he emphasizes that those who gave "were pleased" to do so (vv.26-27). This verb (*eudekeo*) has the idea of a free decision (c.f. TEV, "their decision was their own"). Yet Paul can say, in the same verse, that the gentiles "owe it to the Jews to share with them."

Paul combines these same points in 2 Corinthians 8-9 when he talks about giving. In the famous words of 9:7, God loves "a cheerful giver," who does not give by compulsion (9:7; cf. also 8:2; 9:5). Yet the Corinthians' giving is also a matter of "obedience" (9:13). Of course both Romans 15 and 2 Corinthians 8-9 are about the collection for the saints in Jerusalem, and that collection, as we pointed out above, has certain unique



dimensions. But the motivation for giving is not attached to any unique feature of that collection, and 2 Corinthians 9:7 expresses a general truth about God's attitude toward the giver.

Each of us, then, must recognize that we are under a certain obligation to give back to the Lord a portion of what he has given us. We owe it to him in repayment for his grace, and we owe it to other believers who need our help. Yet, at the same time, our giving should be free and unconstrained.

How can these both be true at the same time? Perhaps an analogy will help. I know I am under obligation to be a good father to my children, I owe it to them. Yet I also delight in being a good father to them (most of the time). The key is the personal relationship. Because I love my children, my fathering is not an onerous obligation but a glad responsibility. I discharge the obligation with delight and gratitude. Our giving to the Lord must arise from the joy of our relationship with him so that it is also a glad obligation. The same can be said about our Christian giving. The more I get to know other believers who are in need, the more sincerely motivated I will be to share with them from the good things God has given to me.

Praying for People in Ministry. Prayer for people involved in ministry is a third principle we can isolate in this text. Paul typically asks his churches to pray for him at the end of his letters. Romans is no exception. After informing the Christians in Rome about the collection he is bringing to Jerusalem (15:25-27), he asks them to pray for him and for the success of this venture. As we indicated in the Original Meaning section, the collection held great significance for Paul. He hoped it would become an important means of healing the growing rift between Gentile and Jewish Christians. The unity of the church was at stake. No wonder he asks for prayer.

Yet we should not miss the significance of this request. (1) It illustrates the humility and sense of need Paul has. Though he has a divinely given mission, unique in salvation history, he still needs other believers to pray for him. How much more, then, do the rest of us, engaged in far humbler tasks and with far less biblical confirmation, need the prayers of God's people. Pride can be an obstacle here as we can subtly begin depending on our own skills, talents, or resources rather than on the Lord, who empowers through the prayers of his people.

(2) Paul's call for prayer also illustrates the biblical tension between God's determination of events and the situation-changing power of prayer. Paul undoubtedly sensed that God himself had inaugurated and was empowering this collection. Yet he still asks people to pray for it. To be sure, we have no evidence Paul saw the collection in terms of a divine prophecy, sure to succeed because God had said it would. But even if this were the case, evidence from other texts shows that he would still have asked prayer for it.

Our own enterprises come with no more (and usually considerably less) divine mandate than Paul's collection. We can fall into the error of assuming our own ministries or projects are so important for the cause of Christ that God, as it were, is bound to prosper them. We can fail to pray for them or to enlist others in prayer. No matter how hard we try to avoid it, the anti-supernaturalism of our culture exerts a strong pull on us. Particularly at a time when the business world is becoming more and more a paradigm for ministry, it is easy for us in ministry to put our projects in the same category as a business enterprise and assume that the keys to success are the same: hard work, careful planning, effective execution. Prayer can get left out.