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Romans 15:14-33

33rd Message

Brian Morgan

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CRITERIA FOR MINISTRY

SERIES: WHATEVER HAPPENED TO ETHICS?

One of my greatest joys as a child was having a family dog. When I was three, we bought our first dog, a French poodle named Shawny. She ruled our house. After that, we had a Pekingese. When I became the father of three little girls, my dream was to give them a puppy, a lap dog that they could love. Once, when our friends' sheltie gave birth to a litter, they gave us the pick. Lady McDuff surprised and delighted my daughters.

As the dog grew up, I found out what a Shetland sheep dog's specialty is. These dogs are bred to herd sheep, and that is what she tried to do. She responded to any noise in the back yard as if it were a sheep. If I was mowing the lawn, she would chase the mower and bark incessantly. One time she actually bit through our fence to herd our neighbor's mower! When an electrician was working on our house, she barked nonstop for two hours. I tried to discipline her to change her behavior, but I found that it was an inbred characteristic. To her credit, Lady McDuff did not change. (Now we have a cat.)

How many Christians can be commended like that? When they are born in Christ with a new nature and gifts to serve the Lord, how many understand who they are? How many serve their Master with a single eye? Like my dog, some will not deviate in their calling no matter how much anyone tries to change them.

But there are many Christians who do not even understand spiritual gifts. They remain unemployed in the body of Christ and regard church as a social institution. Others view ministry as over-commitment—being pulled in a thousand directions without any focus. Yet others perceive ministry as meeting the needs of people. As a result, they are constantly striving to meet the expectations of others and have no sense of joy or purpose.

I would like to share with you the heart of a man who knew himself and knew who he was in Christ. Before he closes his letter to the Romans, which he wrote in A.D. 56 or 57, Paul shares some personal narrative about himself—who he is and what drives him as an apostle. This material is Paul's response to two questions the Roman Christians had. He tells them why he is writing this letter and why he did not visit them personally. In sharing this with these Christians, he presents a model for ministry and answers questions like these:

What is the driving force behind what we do?

How do we set priorities in our ministry opportunities? When do we say yes and when do we say no?

How should we make plans and set goals?

How flexible ought we be?

How do we balance new opportunities, old obligations, and personal desires for ministry?

How do we handle the disappointed expectations of others?

In answering these questions, Paul will present us with his criteria for ministry. Let us look at why the apostle wrote this epistle in verses 14 and following.

I. When to Say Yes (15:14-21)

And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowl-

edge, and able also to admonish one another, but I have written very boldly to you on some points, so as to remind you again, because of the grace that was given me from God, to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the gospel of God, that my offering of the Gentiles might become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. (Rom 15:14-16 NASB)

Why did Paul write this book to the Roman Christians? He reassures them that it was not because of their lack of maturity. These Christians were very mature for he says they were *"full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to admonish one another."* He is acknowledging that they were godly and had a well-founded maturity because they gave themselves to the Scripture and were using their spiritual gifts to admonish, counsel and teach one another.

Rather than writing because of their lack of maturity, Paul says he is writing as an apostle with the freedom to express his gift. He says, "I am expressing my calling to you."

A. The Freedom to Express One's Gifts (15:14-16)

Isaiah records that during the Babylonian captivity and exile he had a vision of a new age that would be inaugurated with the coming of the Messiah. He saw a day when the earthly temple of Jerusalem would be destroyed. In its place, there would be a heavenly temple with a heavenly King who would come to earth to give birth to a heavenly kingdom. Once this happened, this heavenly reality would spread worldwide. Isaiah saw that this King would not build his temple with mortar and rocks, but with living stones, with people. He writes in chapter 66:19-21:

"And I will set a sign among them and will send survivors from them to the nations:...to the distant coastlands that have neither heard My fame nor seen My glory. And they will declare My glory among the nations. Then they shall bring all your brethren from all the nations as a grain offering to the Lord, on horses, in chariots, in litters, on mules, and on camels [brethren of every economic class and social status], to My holy mountain Jerusalem," says the Lord, "just as the sons of Israel bring their grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the Lord. I will also take some of them for priests and for Levites."

Paul says this day has arrived. The heavenly King has come, and he is building a spiritual kingdom with a spiritual temple made up of people. This temple is no longer just Jewish, for the Gentiles have been grafted in. Paul says, "I am the apostle to the Gentiles. I am to bring the brethren from every nation. I am a minister, a priest who brings an offering not of things but of people. These lives are not cleansed by ceremony but by the Holy Spirit in the beautiful heavenly sanctuary. This is my calling."

What Paul is saying, and what the Scriptures teach, is that the kingdom of God is not spread by power or programs. It is spread by the supernatural gifts of the Spirit. Every person who comes to Christ receives gifts for speaking or service (1 Pet 4:10-11). It is always appropriate to be employed with your gifts in building this heavenly sanctuary. This is why Paul wrote Romans. He says, "I am an apostle and these are my gifts."

Many people have an incorrect view of ministry as limited opportunities created by the church leadership. They think a person can only minister when he is asked, duly authorized and watched. If that were the case, only one percent of our people would be ministering. Rather, it is the leadership's job to tell you that you are all equipped in this divine symphony and you all have a heavenly instrument to play. The Conductor of the symphony is not the leadership of the church, but Jesus Christ. The pastors are nothing more than music teachers telling you how to read music and how to follow the Conductor. You are always to be employed using your gifts!

Many years ago, our church had two preaching pastors who were of classic caliber—Ray Stedman and Dave Roper. At that time, there were about six men my age who all wanted to start preaching and teaching, but there was no space in the pulpit. Finally, one of our elders, Lynn Berntson, took us aside and said, “The pulpit is not the only place for preaching. If you are so gifted, go create your own ministry!” That freed us up. We no longer felt like we had to flow down this narrow funnel to one position of leadership. Rather, we went out into the highways and byways. Some went out to restaurants, others to college campuses, and others into homes. We used our gifts freely wherever we could.

This is the principle Paul is expressing. If you are a Christian, do you know your calling as Paul did? Do you know your gifts? If you do, build your life around them. It is always appropriate to use your gifts.

Paul gives a second reason for writing this letter in verses 17-19.

B. The Freedom to Share God's Grace (15:17-19)

Therefore in Christ Jesus I have found reason for boasting in things pertaining to God. 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, in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit; so that from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ.

Paul says, “I am not only expressing my gifts. I want to share with you how God's grace is working to spread the kingdom of God. The Gentiles are coming to Christ. This is exciting news and should encourage you.” He then shares how the grace of God through faithful servants spreads the kingdom. The combination of these two—God's grace and faithful servants—spreads the kingdom. Paul tells us the means by which God brought these Gentiles to the Messiah.

First, he says God used the Word in Paul's preaching to convert hearts. He also used good deeds. I think the apostle is here referring to how the apostles loved their enemies even when being persecuted for their faith. Through this, their enemies came to Christ. When the apostle went to Philippi and began preaching, both he and Silas were thrown into prison and beaten. As they languished there, bound in stocks, they loved their enemies and sang hymns instead of being angry and bitter. In the midst of their singing, an earthquake occurred, all the prison doors were opened, and their chains fell off. When the jailer who had persecuted them threatened to kill himself, Paul said, “We are all here.” By loving that man, Paul led him to Christ. His whole household was saved as a result. God not only used the Word, he used deeds of love.

He also used miracles. Dr. Luke who wrote the book of Acts is very careful to show that the same miracles Jesus performed in healing the sick and raising the dead, Peter and Paul did. This authenticated their apostolic words so that we would listen to their testimony to the living Christ who had been raised from the dead and was living through them.

Finally, Paul says God converted the Gentiles by the power of the Spirit. This phrase actually modifies the other three. The apostle is saying that the kingdom of God spread because God was faithful. He was present when the Word was preached. The Spirit was there when they were loving their enemies and when they performed miracles. God was faithful in his Spirit to use these means to bring people to Christ.

Paul also tells us about his own faithfulness as a servant. He says, “As an apostle, I methodically and faithfully preached the gospel from Illyricum to Jerusalem.” Illyricum was the province east of the Adriatic Sea which Paul probably visited between his last visit to Ephesus and his final visit to Rome. When he says he fully preached the gospel, he does not mean that he spoke to every individual but that in every single province from Jerusalem to the Adriatic Sea, he planted a new work. That is faithfulness!

Once we know our calling and gifts, we must use them methodically and faithfully all our days. We are never to be unemployed. Paul was constantly planting new churches by going to key cities with the gospel. Once the foundation was laid, he would move on in freedom. But though he had a method, the book of Acts shows how he was open to the Spirit's creativity. As a result, the gospel was spread worldwide. For example, on his second missionary journey, he wanted to go into Asia, which was probably Ephesus, but the Holy Spirit prevented him. Then he tried to go north to Bithynia where there was a Jewish synagogue, but the Spirit prevented him again. He only had one way left, to Troas, where there was nothing but a seaport. When he went there in obedience to the Spirit, he had a vision in which a man from Macedonia asked him for help. Paul then went to Philippi and other cities. This is when the gospel first touched European soil. This one change of his travel plans altered the course of Western civilization! After Paul planted churches in a semi-circle around Asia, the Lord had him come back to Ephesus at the center of that great circle for two and a half years. Luke recorded that from the center of the hub “*all of Asia heard the word of God.*”

Paul is methodical and is making plans. He is constantly open to the Holy Spirit to direct him. Again, the principle is that it is always correct and appropriate to share about how God is spreading the kingdom through his grace, using faithful servants.

This is why we had some Argentine pastors in our area last summer. If there is a revival going in Argentina, we Christians in the Bay Area need to know about it. From them, we heard how the Spirit of God is moving by his grace through faithful servants. We need to know what is happening in Timor with our friend Eli Fangidae. We also need to know what is happening with Don Burgess' ministry in Mexico and what is happening in Eastern Europe. This text tells us that we must have a world view. It is always edifying to see what God is doing around the world.

Our elders have decided upon a new missions policy in order to accomplish this. Marty Mathieson is going to be the Director of Missions. Instead of assigning one pastor to the task, the board of elders has determined that each pastor will adopt one missionary family. In this way, he will be responsible for shepherding them, visiting them, and for encouraging our body to be involved so that we might know what God is doing by his grace worldwide. If the pastors are excited about it, you will be too. Pack your bags!

This is why Paul wrote this letter. He says, “I am writing because I am gifted and because I am sharing with you the grace of God.” This is always appropriate. The Romans then ask, “Why haven't you visited us yet?” In the next part of Romans 15, Paul tells us how to say no—how to set priorities in our ministry obligations and how to handle disappointing the expectations of others.

II. When to Say No (15:20-33)

And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named, that I might not build upon another man's foundation; but as it is written,

"They who had no news of Him shall see,

And they who have not heard shall understand."

For this reason I have often been hindered from coming to you; but now, with no further place for me in these regions, and since I have had for many years a longing to come to you whenever I go to Spain—for I hope to see you in passing, and to be helped on my way there by you, when I have first enjoyed your company for awhile... (15:20-24)

Why had he not visited the Christians in Rome? He tells them that he had longed to see them for years. It was not due to a lack of desire on his part. In fact, even though Paul was a Roman citizen, he had never been to this glorious city. It was probably his lifelong desire to see it, especially after the church was planted there. But he tells us that his personal desires are subservient to his calling.

A. Personal Desires Are Subservient to Calling (15:20-24)

Paul's calling as an apostle limited him as far as what he could do and where he could go. His policy was to not build on another man's foundation. His job was to pioneer new works. He took this vision from the great passage in Isaiah 52 which describes the suffering servant Jesus. Verses 13-15 say:

Behold, My servant will prosper,

He will be high and lifted up, and greatly exalted.

Just as many were astonished at you,

So His appearance was marred more than any man,

And His form more than the sons of men,

Thus He will sprinkle many nations,

Kings will shut their mouths on account of Him;

For what had not been told them they will see,

And what they had not heard they will understand.

Isaiah predicted the coming of Jesus and how he would be lifted up on a cross and marred more than any man on earth. He saw that Jesus would be made unrecognizable in taking the wrath of God for our sins. But then God would lift him up and exalt him in the resurrection and the ascension. When that happened, the floodgate would be opened and a new work begun. The gospel would go out to kings (representatives of Gentile nations). What they had never been told before, they would see and understand. From that text, Paul determined to be a pioneer in starting new works.

About ten years ago, Dave Roper announced to our staff that he was leaving Peninsula Bible Church. Everyone was shocked. When we asked him why, he replied, "This church is too fat and too rich with good teachers. It is wrong for me to stay." By faith, he went out, not having a place to go but trusting his God to open doors. Years later, I visited him in a church in Boise, Idaho. I was amazed at what I found. This man not only had a vision for Boise, he cared about the entire state. He started an intern program at his church that now has 25 interns. When he went out in the backwoods to fly-fish, he found pastors who had no training and very little knowledge about Christ. He has now organized the Idaho Mountain Ministry which gathers these pastors for conferences. And he meets with government officials and writes a column in a local newspaper. The man is ministering to the entire state! Woe to us if he had stayed here! We lost, but God's kingdom gained.

Paul saw himself as a pioneer. He says, "It is now possible for me to see you because the foundations have been laid. I have finished what I came to do in these places. Now I am free to move on to a

new vision—Spain." He was not going into retirement, he was going to Spain. He intended to continue what he had always been doing. He says, "I can visit you on the way, but I cannot stay because you already have a church. My vision is for Spain."

What strikes me about the apostle is that he does not move on to new things until he has completed the old. This is very important. Many of you are young parents. If you have children, they are to be your main ministry. Woe to you if you take on more ministry than the raising of those children will allow. There will come a day when those children will be gone. Now is such a short window in time. Later, you will be able to do all kinds of ministry. I hope that when we get older we can enter into those ministries with joy because we completed what God gave us to do with our children.

Here again I think the principle is marvelous: Once we understand our gift we are to do it for life. Don't rust out, wear out! Paul never retired. He always saw new things to be done.

Last week, we sent out Barney Brogan who has served at our church as an elder for 22 years. By the world's standards, it was time for him to retire with a nice white picket fence. But Barney Brogan is going to Atlanta, Georgia, to work with the Fellowship of Christian Airline Personnel. He is going to use his gifts and all that he has learned here to send the gospel worldwide.

This is what I appreciate about the first generation of elders at our church. Some of them are in their seventies, but they do not quit. I cannot even keep up with Ray Stedman's pace! It is wonderful to see how they stay involved. They serve until they die.

This is why Paul had not come to see the Romans. His personal desires were subservient to his calling. There is a second reason found in verses 25-32.

B. Personal Desires Are Subservient to Unity (15:25-32)

...but now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. Yes, they were pleased to do so, and they are indebted to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things. Therefore, when I have finished this, and have put my seal on this fruit of theirs, I will go on by way of you to Spain. And I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ. (15:25-29)

Paul says, "Not only did I have the obligation of my calling. My personal desires are subservient to unity in the body of Christ. I have a contribution to take to Jerusalem."

If you have ever done any construction in your home, you know that you cannot do anything you want. There are certain stages of construction where you have to call for the building inspector. He then inspects the work and signs it off. Why do we have inspectors? It is so that we will not do shoddy work and to ensure that the new work is not independent of the old. The two should be properly connected so that we do not burn our house down. When the work is done, we then get a seal of approval and we can file our notice of completion.

When God builds his spiritual temple with Jews and Gentiles, he is very concerned about shoddy workmanship. The new additions are not to be independent of the old. How was he going to get the Gentiles to love the Jews? How was he going to get the Jews to love the Gentiles in the one body of Christ? God came up with a plan. He had a famine occur in Judea so that all the Jewish brothers experienced great need. They needed money and food. All the Gentile churches in Asia Minor were filled with the riches of the gospel of the Jewish Messiah. Since they received this spiritual benefit from the

Jews, they could now humble themselves and give out of their riches. When they sent a Gentile representative with Paul to Jerusalem, he saw this as a fulfillment of Isaiah 66. Zechariah predicted that on that day ten men would grab the garment of a Jew and say, “Let’s go to Jerusalem, for the Lord is with you.” This pictures that in this heavenly temple all the stones must be cemented together with love.

The point is that any new work we build independently of old foundations is worthless. When anyone comes in the body of Christ, there is to be a tremendous sense of appreciation and love for those who came before. Paul wrote Romans 9 through 11 just to tell these Gentiles, “I hope you appreciate the Jewish heritage into which you have been grafted. You need to love Israel so that you make them zealous and they come back. Thus, the gospel will come full circle—Jew-Gentile-Jew.”

In our body, any need involving sickness, death or finances should be top priority. This is when the saints can give of themselves in love. As we love one another and our bonds grow—as we weep, laugh and share together—we are developing a stronger base for outreach. This is why Paul says, “I am not coming to see you, for there is a higher priority. I must complete this work and put a seal on it.”

His work is so important that he tells these Christians they need to contribute. He says in verses 30-32:

Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me, that I may be delivered from those who are disobedient in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints; so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God and find refreshing rest in your company. (15:30-32)

Instead of caving in to the wrong expectations of others and feeling guilty for not going to Jerusalem, Paul says, “My calling and work are holy. You need to be involved in what I am doing. You need to pray for me.” Holy work cannot be treated frivolously. Again he is saying that love is the greatest witness in the body of Christ. He could not plant a new work until the present work was finished so that the Jews and Gentiles could be built up together in love.

The apostle made his personal desires subservient to his calling and to unity in the body of Christ. He gives a benediction in verse 33 that expresses another aspect of ministry.

C. The Saint Is Subservient to the Lord (15:33)

Now the God of peace be with you all. Amen.

I think this is rather humorous. When these Christians are impatient and frustrated because Paul has not come, he commends them to God, saying, “God is with you. I am not the Messiah; I am not indispensable.” It always intrigues me how often counseling is solved if you just put off returning the phone call for a few days. In that time, the Lord usually answers the problem. Then the Christian finds out that the Lord is far more adequate to solve the problem than any pastor. Paul is saying the same thing, “The Lord is with you. Because I am not indispensable, I am free to say no.”

Paul’s heart is driven by his gifts, his calling, and the unity of the body. He is single-eyed and has a clear focus. In looking at what Paul has already said and done, think of the rewards he gained by maintaining these priorities in ministry.

III. The Rewards of Proper Priorities

A. Sense of Focus: Single-eyed

Paul refused to be pulled in one hundred directions. He was like my sheltie. He could not be beaten into submission, and he would not change his focus.

B. Sense of Completion, Faithfulness, Order

There was a method to his life and order. Paul was not pressured by the tyranny of the urgent or driven by guilt to get involved in things that were not appropriate. When he focused on the necessary things, he experienced freedom. After he completed the old work, he could freely pursue something new.

My wife and I decided that our ministry outside of church should be in the school our children attend. Since that is where they spend much of their time, that is where we wanted to be. Emily, with her gifts of wisdom and helps, has served there for six years in one capacity or another. Because of that, she created a highway for me to get involved with an AIDS committee to help write a curriculum. It means quite a bit of work, but I knew this was just for a season. Now that this project is done, I can go on to something new.

C. Sense of Value: Built on Love

What we now build in this heavenly temple is built in love. This saves us from being shallow, independent, isolated, or unaccountable. That Christian work which is unaccountable and independent will be burned up. All new work has to be related to the old with appreciation and love.

D. Sense of Fulfillment

This was probably the greatest benefit for the apostle. God finally did give Paul his personal desires. He did get to Rome, but in a manner he did not expect. He travelled at the expense of the government—in prisoner’s chains. Rather than going to visit the Christians, he was sent to be chained to Roman soldiers. As a result, he led many of those soldiers, the Green Berets of the Empire, to Christ. He was always faithful to his calling and was fulfilled even in his personal desires.

What impresses me about this text is that because Paul said *no* to an immediate ministry to a few Christians he was able to write this letter. What a far greater impact this has had on the world. I imagine God is going to show Paul a table spreading from East to West, as far as the horizon, with all the people seated there whose lives have been affected by this book—generations of people yet unborn in Paul’s day. I think of Martin Luther who struggled with legalism. When he preached Romans, he came to Christ. Luther will not only be sitting at Paul’s table. He will have just as long a table set for all the lives he influenced. At Luther’s table will be John Wesley. Two hundred years after Luther, he was moved by reading Luther’s preface to his commentary on Romans. This book warmed Wesley’s heart, and he led many thousands to Christ. He too will have a table spread before him. All of this is the result of Paul saying *no* to a ministry and giving himself instead to this text. That one decision led to the spiritual birth of millions yet unborn.

I’m sure Paul has heard those wonderful words which I long to hear. I hope you do too: “Well done, good and faithful servant.” May that be our legacy. Be like my sheltie—find your gifts and build your life around them.

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