

A VISION FOR THE WHOLE WORLD

Romans 15:14-16:27

Lesson 15

Key Verse: 15:16

“...to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.”

The small Christian community in Rome had been pioneered by immigrants to Rome from all parts of the Empire. Many of them had co-worked with Paul to proclaim the gospel in Ephesus or Corinth or Antioch or in some other place. Paul also knew and respected them. Verse 14 says, 'I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another.' But they had one spiritual problem: In their struggle to maintain their faith in the vortex of the Empire, their world mission vision had become weak. So Paul wrote to remind them of what they already knew--God's great world mission purpose. “I have written you quite boldly on some points, as if to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.” (15,16)

1. A priestly duty (15:14-22)

Who were the Gentiles? From the Jewish point of view, everyone who was not a Jew was a Gentile. The Jews considered themselves to be descendants of Abraham and inheritors of God's covenant and promises. The Gentiles, on the other hand, were rebels against God. They were idol worshipers. They were destined for destruction. Jews did not associate with Gentiles. From our point of view, in a general sense, the Gentile world stands for the non-Christian world.

Paul was a Jew. He grew up in Tarsus, a small city in one corner of the Empire. He had been educated in Jerusalem, and trained as Pharisee. He was a part of a narrow-minded and exclusive group of men who were adamantly opposed to Christianity. Then, one day the Risen Jesus met him. Paul repented. He accepted Jesus' call to be an apostle or a missionary to the Gentiles. He regarded his forgiveness and his missionary calling as God's great grace in his life.

In verse 16 he describes his ministry as a priestly duty. A priest is a mediator between God and man. He brings men to God and God to men. He prays for others. He studies God's word and teaches it to the people. In the old Testament, the priest offered sacrifices for the sins of the people. The Holy God provided a way for sinners to come to him and be forgiven so that he might come and dwell in their midst.

Paul says that proclaiming the gospel of God to the Gentiles is a priestly duty. The gospel is the good news that Jesus died for our sins and was raised from the dead by the power of God. Through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross we are forgiven. When we accept this gospel for ourselves, our sins are washed away and we are made new. Our relationship with God is made right. We have peace with God and God's peace in our hearts.

When the nation of Israel was born in the desert of Sinai, just after the Exodus from Egypt, God told them his purpose for them. He said, "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Ex 19:5,6a)

God chose Israel because he wanted them to be a kingdom of priests. This meant that they should be a missionary people. He wanted them to grow from a nation of slaves into a holy people. He wanted them to be trained in obedience to God's word and to reach out to all the nations of the world to bring them back to God. The people of Israel received God's blessings and privileges, but they kept them and enjoyed them for themselves and their families. They didn't become a nation of priests for the whole world. Instead, they became proud and they despised the Gentiles. Furthermore, they envied the pagan peoples and adopted many of their ways and could not be a holy nation. God disciplined them until a remnant survived spiritually. Through this remnant God continued to work.

God raised up a new people of God through Jesus. Peter writes about the Church. I Peter 2:9: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." The Risen Jesus met Paul and appointed him to be a missionary to the Gentiles so that he might fulfill God's purpose for Israel and for the Church to be a kingdom of priests. He proclaimed the gospel of God to the Gentiles so that they might repent and be forgiven, be sanctified by the Holy Spirit and become God's treasured possession. So Paul saw his calling and work as a priestly duty.

Many people criticized Paul and actively opposed his ministry. But nothing discouraged him or made him give up his vision for the whole world. Why? It was because he knew that his ministry among the Gentiles was not something he had invented. It was God's command and God's work. Scripture supported it; the Spirit of God himself confirmed it. See verses 17-19. God had blessed his ministry and made it fruitful. Paul saw men's lives changed. He saw men full of hatred and bitterness become shepherds and fathers of faith. He saw men whose eyes were dull with despair become bright and full of hope and life. He saw Samaritan women become beautiful mothers of prayer. He knew that this was not because of his skill or ability--it was

because God had worked in men's hearts. In verses 19b-22, Paul gives his missionary principle. He is a pioneer. He laid the foundation of gospel faith by teaching men to repent of sins and accept Jesus forgiveness through his death and resurrection. Forgiveness is by God's grace alone. Paul taught men and women to obey the word of God just as Jesus had commanded. (Mt 28:19,20) By proclaiming the gospel and training disciples in obedience to the word of God he laid a solid foundation.

2. Paul's plan (23-33)

Because Rome was the center of the Gentile world, Paul wanted to visit Rome. First, he wanted to encourage the faith and world mission vision of the Christians there. Second, he wanted to practically act out that vision by going on from Rome to Spain and to the ends of the earth. He wanted the Christians in Rome to participate in this mission.

Before going to Rome, he had one important job to do. He wanted to visit Jerusalem, taking with him an offering from the Gentile churches. This also came from his world mission vision. He wanted to plant missionary faith in the narrow-minded church in Jerusalem. His work as a missionary among the Gentiles was not popular in Jerusalem. Non-Christian Jews hated him; Christian Jews just barely tolerated what he was doing. Paul loved his people. He didn't want them to miss God's blessing. He also loved his Gentile sheep and he wanted them to have a sense of history. He wanted them to be humbly grateful for God's grace to them.

It was dangerous for Paul to visit Jerusalem, so he asked the Romans to pray for him (30). He asked them to pray that God might deliver him from the hands of the unbelieving Jews; he asked prayer for the church in Jerusalem, that they might accept the offering he brought and thank God for his amazing work among the Gentiles.

3. Personal greetings (16:1-27)

From these personal greetings, we realize that Paul was no stranger to the Christians in Rome. Even though he had not been there, he had worked with many of the leaders in pioneering churches throughout the Empire. There were many great women who had encouraged Paul during his pioneering days. The church in Rome was evidently scattered--perhaps because of persecution. They seem to meet in various houses.

Paul closes his letter with an assurance of victory based on Genesis 3:15: "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet." He concludes with a benediction. (25-27) "Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the

eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him--to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ Amen." The mystery that has now been revealed is God's great desire for all the nations of the world to believe and obey him and be saved. God longs to see creation order restored. So he wants his people to be a missionary people.