

Sermon 206: Romans 15:25-29: Paul the Church Ambassador

OUTLINE

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INTRODUCTION

What is driving you, when you feel tired in the morning and don't feel like getting up what do you tell yourself to get yourself going? What are you living for? Are you functioning according to a deliberate motivation or a default autopilot? Some are driven by a desire to provide for their families; some are driven by a career goal; some are fixed on their retirements; some have sinful goals, some have godly goals. All of our doing flows out of our wanting. We do what we want. Paul is a man of ambition, he has just told us that in v20. He is a man of deep desires, someone who is not just drifting along, but fixed on his goals, and his whole life reflects it. In fact Paul is driven by what he is living for that he is willing to even die in pursuing it. Where many of us get caught up in the routine of our lives forgetting the war we are in and the purposes God has called us to, Paul is deliberate and constantly planning his course on the basis of his desires. Today we come to another major motivation in Paul's life, something that is called, 'the collection' in Pauline studies. Dominating Paul's third missionary journey was Paul's coordination of the Gentile churches to give liberally to the poor Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. This concern is also revealed in his travel plans in Romans 15:25-29, 'At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints.²⁶ For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem.²⁷ For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings.²⁸ When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you.²⁹ I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.'

In our portion we see three of Paul's major motivations. He has spoken about his desire to visit Rome in order to bless the church. Paul has a deep care and concern for the local church and its health. But that is not all; we have also looked at Paul's focus on those who are unreached for the gospel and the priority that he gives to them. Here Paul reveals another thing that lies heavy on his heart; the collection of money from the Gentiles to give to the poor saints in the Jerusalem church. As we look at this section we will be dividing it in two looking firstly at why Paul was engaged in this venture seeking to understand what was driving him and how that shapes our own hearts today. Secondly, we want to look at how the Gentiles gave and what instruction we can receive from them.

Paul's motive

V25, 'At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints.' There seems to have been a large problem with poverty in Jerusalem. Acts 11:27-30 records the probable starting point of Paul's desire to help the poor saints in Jerusalem, 'Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.²⁸ And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius).²⁹ So the disciples determined, everyone according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea.³⁰ And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.' The church in Antioch took Agabus's

prophecy seriously. Today there are some who think that Agabus was a fallible prophet because they want to make space for a lower order of fallible prophecy in the church today. It is apparent by the church's response to Agabus that they saw his word as true not possibly wrong.

As you look through Paul's letters we see evidence of Paul's gathering collections from the Gentile churches and taking it to Jerusalem. There is the portion we have before us, 1 Cor. 16:1-4, as well as 2 Corinthians 8-9. As we look through the book of Acts we see that his desire to go to Jerusalem is strong, Acts 19:21, 'Now after these events Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome."' There is some disagreement among scholars whether Paul was being obedient or disobedient in going to Jerusalem. In Acts 21 while he was making his way to Jerusalem we have the situation in Tyre, v4, 'And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.' Paul wrote Romans in Acts 18 while staying at Corinth, in the letter he spoke of his need to drop off the collected money personally at Jerusalem. Here we see later on that Paul is being warned in prophecy of the danger that awaits him in Jerusalem. Paul could have given the money to someone else to deliver, why did he press on insist to deliver it personally. The closer Paul gets to Jerusalem the more the tension builds, Acts 21:10-14, 'While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, "Let the will of the Lord be done.'" It is very clear that the giving of the money collected from the Gentile churches for the needs of the saints in Jerusalem was of very high priority for Paul, so much so that he is willing to lay down his life. Some have accused him of being foolhardy and disobedient to the will of the Spirit who was forewarning Paul off from his visit. However, Paul was following the lead of the Spirit in Acts 19:21, and we must assume that the prophecies of Paul's arrest are descriptive not prescriptive and that the saints who were warning Paul off his visit were not reflecting a command of God given by prophecy but an emotional response to the content of the prophecies. Why then was it so important?

There were many goals accomplished by Paul bringing relief to Jerusalem. We must realise that the various things accomplished are a nexus, an integrated web given the specific situation in the first century. Underlying the whole issue is the tension between the Jewish and Gentile converts. Since Acts 15 we are aware of a deep rift and tension. Among the Jewish converts were those who were unable to fully shed their OT and Jewish distinctives. There were those among the Jews who thought that the Gentiles needed to be more Jewish and accept circumcision and various OT dietary laws, and observe certain days. There would have been suspicion on both sides and accusations against the other on both sides. The Jews would be tempted to view the Gentiles as antinomian; that is not respecting the law of God. The Gentiles would view the Jews as legalistic and neonomian; that is relying too heavily on the law. Paul was the man caught in the middle, he was both a Jew and the apostle to the Gentiles. He viewed his own role as critical not only in bringing about and realising the mystery of God of Gentiles and Jews coexisting as a single family in Christ. But he also hoped by his ministry to the Gentiles to provoke the Jews to jealousy and to convert.

One cannot help but think that Paul is making mention of this collection for those in Jerusalem to the Romans on purpose. Here was a church split along the same lines, they too were having issues with racial harmony between Jew and Gentile. Paul does not make an appeal to the Romans to give money but he does parade his own desires before them and asks them to pray for the success of his trip and 'that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints,' v31.

Firstly, we see Paul's concern for the poor. Now we must not think that Paul's modus operandi was to fixate on the poor to the neglect of the gospel. This is certainly not the case. There is more going on than simply meeting the needs of the poor. However, it must not be overlooked that Paul was motivated by the needs of other believers. Acts 15 was the great church assembly where those in Jerusalem discussed the growing issue of Gentile converts and address the question whether the Gentile converts should convert to Judaism when they became Christian. The conclusion was no, Paul reveals in Gal. 2:9-10 that there was a call from the Jerusalem church to remember the poor, 'and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.¹⁰ Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.' Paul was eager to remember the poor, and in the name of Jewish and Gentile relations he is now hoping to serve the poor while reconciling these different groups.

The NT gives a very strong message to Christians about looking after the poor in the church. We see in Acts 2 and 4 the radical practice of selling properties to help people out of their poverty. On the basis of this early practice by the Church John Calvin writes about what should occur at every church service, 'Thus we ought always to provide that no meeting of the Church is held without the word, prayer, the dispensation of the supper, and alms,' (Book 3; ch. xvii). We see in Acts 6 the appointing of deacons to ensure that all the poor are properly attended to in the Jerusalem church. There is a ubiquitous message to care for the poor throughout the NT. 1 John 3:16-17, 'By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.¹⁷ But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?' James 2:14-17, 'What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?¹⁵ If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food,¹⁶ and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?¹⁷ So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.' Gal. 6:10, 'So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.'

This must be a concern that we do not lose sight of. Friends we have been saved because of the selflessness of Christ, and so how can we not love others in response. This is vital not only for the good of those who have need, but for a witness as well. Our hearts are naturally selfish, all know this. We are naturally bent in on ourselves. When we have a burning love for others and a willingness to sacrificially give to others who have need, this puts on display the fact that our God has supernaturally changed us, that we have been so well loved and taught by God that we cannot help but love others.

We must also appreciate the racial reconciliation that Paul is hoping for. The church is one body in Christ. We are individually members of each other Jew or Gentile, black or white, Maori or Pakea, Asian or European. Not only is Paul hoping for one part of the body of Christ to serve another in need, but in particular to overcome traditional prejudices. He is praying and asking the Romans to pray for a good reception for the gift that the Jews heart

towards the Gentiles would be softened and more accepting. And no doubt Paul is also hoping that the Gentiles would stop being so proud and include the believing Jews as well.

But there is probably something more going on here. We know from Romans 9 that Paul would exchange his own salvation for those of his fellow Jews. And even though he sees himself as an apostle to the Gentiles he realises that God has hardened the Jews, in order to save Gentiles, that the Jews might be made jealous and come to Christ. This was his argument in Romans 11. If these Gentile converts put on display their love for Christ by serving Jewish believers other will hear about it. And perhaps some will be provoked to consider Christ. More than that the gospel has been looked down on by Jewish Christians as being gelded, that the Gentiles do not care about holiness and are antinomian because they do not keep all the laws their OT informed consciences compel them to keep. Paul wants the Jews to see that the Gentiles are truly saved and full of good works that the gospel might be held in high regard.

So here is Paul on his way to Jerusalem. He is warned that he might die if he continues his journey. These priorities of serving the poor, uniting the church, provoking Israel to belief and defending the gospel are important enough to pursue and die for. Here is the lesson for. Here are some ambitions for us to take for our own. These are the same selfless motives that Christ had and brought Him to die in serving us, how can we do any less.

Gentile giving

We see what was driving Paul as he sought to serve the needy saints in Jerusalem, Paul now turns our attention to how the Gentiles gave, v26-27, 'For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem.²⁷ For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings.' Paul makes reference here to those in Macedonia and Achaia, this would have been the church at Philippi; Thessalonica and Corinth. Lets consider those portions where Paul encourages these to give to the needy in Jerusalem.

1 Cor. 16:1-4, 'Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do.² On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come.³ And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem.⁴ If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me.' Paul is applying the principle of the church being a body, so that if one part is hurting the other parts attend it. Note that Paul encourages all to give 'each of you', not just the rich. There is the story of a village doctor who was retiring, the town people suggested that as a retirement present everyone should put one pitcher of their wine into a barrel for the doctor. The day of the doctor's retirement came and when the time came for him to sample the wine, he was surprised, because it was all water. Everyone else had thought that they would give a pitcher of water, that would not be noticed when mixed with the rest of the wine. This often happens when it comes to giving in the Church, we reason that everyone else will give so that I don't have to or have to make much of an effort. Paul encourages everyone to give.

Paul encourages everyone to give within their means. Paul does not expect people to impoverish themselves in order to give, but that each one give what they can afford 'as each may prosper', if someone is poor then let them give a little, if someone is better off let

them give more. Many people can feel manipulated into impoverishing themselves in order to give, this is not what Paul is advising.

Notice also that although Paul wants to get the money to Jerusalem, that he has other people involved in the money handling. In verse 3 he mentions the others that could take the money that he would possibly accompany. This is very important for transparency and accountability. Money is an issue where people are suspicious and many have fallen. Paul does not want his own integrity to be questioned so he has the money handled by people that the Corinthians approve. At every members meeting we talk about finances, and the finances of the church are publicly displayed on the notice board. This is all in aid of this necessary transparency.

Another issue that we wouldn't appreciate is the one of robbers. When money was transported it would have been converted to as few valuable coins as possible, so that it could be lighter and more easily concealed. However, this was common practice, so highway robbery was a common thing on the roads around Asia. Paul and his companions would have been suspected of carrying gold, and have been in danger of robbers. This sense of danger and the willingness to risk life and limb to help the Jerusalem Church highlights the level of commitment that we should be willing to imitate.

In our verses Paul makes a strange set of assertions, 'for they were pleased to do it' and also 'they ought also to be of service to them in spiritual things.' How does that sound to you. They wanted to give and they had to give. Can you be obliged and to do something and eager to do it at the same time? Some have wrongly pitted duty against delight as if having to do something and wanting to do it cannot coexist. This can be a cover up for our sinful nature rebelling against God's will. We must realise that we have been made for God's laws, they are right and there is blessing and delight in obeying them. For example, I am commanded to love to my wife and I delight to love my wife. To assume that duty and delight cannot coexist is to assume that our desires and God's ways are not made for one another.

2 Cor. 8:1-4 Paul talks about how the Philippians gave. Though they were poor they gave out of their poverty, they gave because of God's grace moving their hearts. Even though they were severely afflicted themselves they gave. They even begged for the opportunity to give.

Paul talks here about how these 'owe it' to the Jews. He talks about how the Jews gave spiritual benefits to the Gentiles and so the least the Gentiles can do is give them material aid. This principle is applied by Paul to paying those who minister in the church. It is like the principle of parenthood. One day when your parents are not able to look after themselves the children must look after the parents. In 2 Cor 8:9 Paul urges the Corinthians who had promised to give to fulfil their promise. Instead of using this principle of giving material things to the Jews he holds up the example of Christ, 'For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.'

Why must we be generous to the needy? We could come up with all sorts of reasons why it is right to give to the poor. We could apply the principle of stewardship saying that God gives us much so that out of our extra we can give to those in need, so that things are more equal. We could talk about the principle of love saying that love seeks another's good and is even willing to sacrifice its own good to see another provided for. We could like Paul talk about the principle of giving to those who we have gained from in some way. But the

highest principle of all is this one in 2 Cor. 8:9. Because He who was rich, and who had every right to judge us gave out of His fullness, and become poor so that His unworthy enemies could be made adopted royalty, we can do no less for those in need. The reason this principle is the highest is because there it is all grace. Christ gave to those who would abuse His grace, reject His grace, and never fully appreciate the lengths to which He has gone for them. Yet He still gave. This is our highest motivation in giving. We can never outdo the one who gave us this example. We are never poor because of what He has given for us. We have riches untold, an inheritance, a kingdom, all things are ours in Him. And just as He gave so do we.

Paul was a man who had deep drives. He was driven by a desire to serve the church, he was driven by a desire to see the lost reached, he was driven by a desire to see Jews and Gentiles reconciled, he was driven by a desire to serve the needy poor in the church, he was driven by these desires unto death risking life and limb to serve in love because he had been so well served by God. What drives you? What are you living for? Are your ambitions self-centred?