

Ministry Perspectives—Romans 15:15-16—1/27/2013

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Last week in our study through Romans, we meditated upon Romans 15:14 and drew out 3 reasons that Christians can counsel one another.

Counseling, which is really just listening in love and speaking biblical truth in love, is not a special role for experts only.

Scripture is full of commands for us to care for one another in ways that would be categorized as parts of biblical counseling.

Christians have the source of truth in the Bible & the source of power in the Spirit & the source of practice in the church.

So you can counsel others, both in relationships with Christians & in outreach to those who need hope & help that only the Gospel brings.

You can do that and I pray that our study last week erased or eliminated many of the excuses that are used not to counsel.

You cannot use the excuse that you don't know how because you have a Bible & have a church where counseling happens and you can learn.

And we are all counseling one another all the time, aren't we?

Kids—do you remember what we said last week?

If you thought that counseling only happened when a person met in my office or Chris's office or when you got in trouble, then remember that we are all counselors all the time.

We are giving each other either good counsel or bad counsel, either biblical truth or the world's lies.

If you tell friends they are only cool if they are good at your hobby or sport or favorite subject, you are giving bad counsel.

But if you appreciate friends who are different, you are giving good counsel because the Bible says we can learn from our differences.

Or more clearly, if you let your friend tell lies and go along with it and don't say anything, you are giving the bad counsel that lying is ok and that telling the truth is not that important.

But if you speak up and tell your friends that they need to tell the truth and not try to hide their sins and not try to deceive or sneak around behind parents or church leaders, then you are giving good counsel.

So again, the point is that we are all counseling one another and that if you have the Bible, you can counsel biblically.

And if you have the Spirit in you as a Christian, you should want to counsel others because the fruit of the Spirit is love for others.

But last week I'm sure I did not erase all the excuses we use to stay comfortably in our selfishness & avoid serving.

And I'm sure I hardly began to overcome all the discouragements that can sap our motivation.

So today as we continue in Romans, I want to frame our study of Paul's words today as perspectives for us in ministry.

We might say that Paul had a lens through which he viewed his ministry—like his own set of biblical glasses that helped him see his life and relationships rightly—and we want to borrow those lenses.

We want to take those biblical glasses and let them shape our views today of who we are as Christian and how we should think about ministry and serving others in all of life.

What do Paul's ministry perspectives have to teach us about parenting, for example, or about you can serve if you are just a kid or you are a new Christian or if your health prevents you from most tasks?

How should you think about being in a church where many people are well-taught and seem to have right answers?

Does that mean you don't have anything to offer?

And once you've studied through the basics, does God want you to have a been-there, done-that approach to further study?

As I've meditated on Paul's words in Romans 15:15-16, I've found that these verses have a lot to teach us.

So look with me at Romans 15:15-16 today where we're going to find 4 ministry perspectives that can reframe our lives and refresh us in all we do.

Let's read the context to get back into it, so look with me at Romans 15 and let's read Romans 15:14-21. [READ]

Remember that Paul had just finished his section on how to love other Christians who are different in chapters 14-15.

And he had rebuked them somewhat and instructed them in how the Gospel applied to their diverse backgrounds and maturity levels.

That came after he had taught on love in relationships in response to God and others through chapters 12-13.

Those practical living chapters were built on the doctrinal foundations in chapters 1-5 on justification by faith alone and chapters 6-8 on sanctification and chapters 9-11 on Israel and God's sovereign plans.

So Paul had explained and exhorted and encouraged his readers with a lot of stuff and they could have felt very lacking.

But in verse 14 Paul gave his personal assessment of their readiness for ministry by affirming that he was convinced they were full of goodness and knowledge and able to counsel.

God was at work in the church at Rome and those believers had enough grasp of God and His Gospel that they could by the Spirit be fruitfully engaged in ministry to one another.

And so can you if you are a Christian today.

If you have the Spirit living in you and have God's Word to seek Him and study, then you can serve Him and His people.

But in order to explain Paul's boldness in making such a claim about his readers and in saying many of the other things he wrote, he offered some perspectives in verse 15 and following.

We find 4 ministry perspectives in verses 15-16 today.

With each one, we'll walk through the details of what Paul was saying and how it applied in his specific situation and then we'll step back and consider how that applies to us today.

We do not live when Paul did or have the gifts Paul did and we certainly do not have the special calling he did.

But once we grasp how he viewed his life and calling, we can apply those ministry perspectives to our own lives and callings.

So let's note a 1st point and then we'll dig into verse 15 to see where I get that point and think through it as a perspective that Paul brought to the ministry he did.

Point #1—all Christians need reminders of truth.

That seems very basic, but it needs to be said.

Point #1—all Christians need reminders of truth.

Read verse 15 again to find that point. [READ]

Paul wrote rather boldly to this church that he had not founded and had never visited, particularly in some parts of his letter.

Of course, as we said, he did have relationships with some in the church because of travels and reports from the church.

But since his words appeared strong in some parts, he's explaining why that was to be accepted and expected.

And the first reason he implies is that he was merely reminding them of truths that they already knew or should have known.

He uses like a mega-compound tongue-twister word to say it.

Rather than the simple word for remember or recall, the word in verse 15 is that root word with two prefixes that mean up or upon and up or again.

So the idea is that he wrote for them to recall up again, meaning these truths were nestled in their brains somewhere and they had heard them and should have agreed when they recalled them up again.

And if you go back through Romans, you can find appeals to what they knew or what we all know or questions asking did they not know this or that.

As an example, just think of the familiar Romans 8:28—it begins with those words, “and we know that God causes all things to work together for good for those who love God” and so on.

When Paul stated a truth as life-transforming and all-encompassing as Romans 8:28, he began it with a collective appeal to agreement that we all know this.

He was simply reminding his readers what is true of God since God is both good and sovereign and loves His people.

But why did Paul recall up again that truth for the Romans?

He did it because all Christians need reminders of truth, right?

Last time I checked, our memories were not perfect and we can easily forget things, can't we?

Kids—that's why it's so great to be memorizing verses while you are young and being faithful in studying God's Word and working hard to get a biblical view of science and history and all of life now.

When your minds are young, more stuff sticks in there easily.

But even people with the best of memories forget stuff.

And when we face trials or stress or we are tempted in various ways, we can also very easily forget God's truth.

We can forget, for example, that God is everywhere all the time when we are sitting at the computer all alone.

In those times and at all times, we need reminders of truths.

Paul's perspective on ministry to people while we are still battling the flesh in this fallen world was that he knew we all forget.

If you want to see another evidence of the danger of forgetting, just read Deuteronomy and count how many times Moses said to remember or not to forget.

Repeatedly as Moses prepared Israel for the Promised Land, God had him reminding them what they had seen and heard and exhorting them not to forget God and His warnings and promises.

And this basic perspective on ministry is so empowering and freeing and motivating.

It means you don't need to be intimidated if you haven't studied every counseling issue in depth as if you can't think or say anything helpful.

You can help if you know the basic truths of the Gospel & have sought to apply them to your own life.

You can minister to others simply by recalling truth up to mind again.

I often do that with others just by asking them questions.

Many of you joke me about how many times I ask why.

But if you ask why enough, you usually get to the motives and beliefs behind our decisions and then we can consider whether we acted in faith in response to what we know is true.

So much of life & counseling boils down to questions of what we were believing in that moment or what we were wanting or worshipping.

Yes, we can grow and develop and become more mature and more skilled and more caring as we minister to each other.

But at its most basic level, it's just a ministry of reminding each other of the truths that we already know and affirm.

That's why out of the mouths of babes often come some of the most obvious answers or most basic insights.

And we never grow too old for this ministry of reminding because the Apostle Paul offered this perspective as a reason for his boldness.

The Apostle Peter also gave the same basic perspective in his dying letter that we call 2nd Peter in the NT.

2nd Peter mentions it several times, but turn to 2nd Peter 1:12-15 and I just want you to see this—read 2nd Peter 1:12-15. [READ]

Peter knew his departure was soon—meaning he was going to die—and yet his perspective on ministry as he prepared to die was that he just needed to remind Christians of truth.

If you see that like Peter and Paul did, it should give you boldness.

It should give you faith that you do have something to offer, that you can show care for others simply by asking questions and graciously considering how various truths apply.

One simple question I often ask is this—“How does the Gospel apply to this situation?”.

Or to put it another way, “How would the Gospel inform or motivate your approach to this?”

If you lack boldness or even just lack faith to step out of your shell and talk with others, then take heart in this basic ministry perspective that all Christians need reminders of truth.

So others probably need to hear what you may have to share.

And on the other side, when others DO remind us of truth, let's be careful to recall that WE need reminders too.

This perspective means that we need to RECEIVE those reminders with thankfulness & humility too.

Then we can grow together as we share truth in the Christian life.

That's point #1—all Christians need reminders of truth.

Next, point #2—all Christians have gifts to serve.

I know you know that but I'm just practicing the 1st point to remind you of what you already know. 😊

Point #2—all Christians have gifts to serve.

Seeing where I get this takes a little more work, so turn back to Romans 15 with me and let's read verses 15-16 again. [READ]

Aside from writing to remind his readers, Paul wrote boldly because of the grace that was given to him by God.

There are 3 emphases there on God's gracious action of giving.

This was grace, meaning it was not something Paul deserved or earned, but what God decided to give freely.

And it was grace given, meaning God initiated this and acted.

And it was given by God, clearly again highlighting this was God's sovereign choice and merciful bestowal of grace on Paul.

But what was this grace given by God?

Verse 16 goes on to explain that it was Paul's calling as a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles.

It was Paul's commission as an apostle to the Gentiles.

In the accounts of Paul's conversion in Acts 9 and in Acts 26, the Lord Jesus mentions sending Paul to the Gentiles.

Paul mentioned that calling also in Galatians 2 & Ephesians 3.

He called himself the Apostle to the Gentiles in Romans 11:13 and referred to that apostleship as a grace in Romans 1:5.

So this was Paul's unique gifting and calling from God to go to the Gentiles and spread the Gospel among them.

And Paul viewed that as a stewardship and as a privilege.

It was not just a duty because it was God's kindness that entrusted this opportunity to him.

That gracious gifting from God emboldened him for his work.

But this is not the only time Paul wrote about grace given in reference to individual gifts and calling.

This is not the only place where Paul's talk of grace was not referring to salvation but to the special gifting by God in a Christian.

This language was also used in Romans 12:6 to describe the grace given to each Christian in God gifting us to serve.

And that's where I get our 2nd point of application that we can learn from Paul's perspective on his life and ministry.

Paul saw his giftedness as a grace from God, as a blessing and joy that gave him purpose and passion for living and serving.

He was amazed that God had work for him to do and encouraged that God gifted him for the work so he stayed engaged in that work.

His question wasn't, "Do I have to serve?"

His response was, "Wow! I GET to serve because the very God who made me and saved me has chosen to equip and empower me!"

That sense of this being about God's grace to bless him with ability and opportunity fueled his boldness in all he did.

And we need to understand our spiritual gifts today in that same light—they are GIFTS, meaning God gave them by His grace and they are evidences of His love and goodness to us.

And since God gifted us, we get the joy of serving Him.

That's the right perspective to have on ministry.

And by the way, since Paul's gift for ministry was apostleship, that explains why his reminders for the Romans could be a 16-chapter theological treatise.

When Paul reminded them, he took the truths they knew to a far deeper level and made far broader applications.

So when we say that we all need reminders, we are not saying that we do not need gifted teachers who can take us to deeper levels of understanding and application.

We need gifted teachers and counselors and pastors and leaders, but we also need Christians gifted to serve and show mercy and meet needs and do so much more of life and outreach in the local church.

And whatever your gifts are and however God has enabled you to serve, you need to view it as a wondrous grace of God.

It is a pleasure to be enjoyed and a passion to be employed.

Don't let your gifts sit unused collecting dust while your soul wastes away in selfishness or worldliness.

Realize that all Christians have gifts to serve and get serving.

If you don't know how you are gifted, just look for needs and opportunities and start doing what you can to help.

As you do so, God will direct and together we will watch God work.

So #1— all Christians need reminders of truth; and #2, all Christians have gifts to serve.

Now #3—all Christians serve God by serving people.

Again that may sound simple but we need to say it.

Point #3—all Christians serve God by serving others.

We can't assume we can serve God all alone away from people

That's what this next basic perspective on ministry from Paul corrects.

Serving God even when we are alone in prayer is often focused on expressing our heart for other people.

Our love for our invisible God is shown by serving visible people.

Paul gives us this ministry perspective by the language he uses to describe his ministry calling to the Gentiles in verse 16.

That word for minister is the word we get the English word 'liturgy' from and it's often used of religious servants like the priests and Levites in the tabernacle or Temple in the OT.

It can refer to a public servant like a governing official in Romans 13:6, but in verse 16 it is coupled with a word for serving as a priest or performing holy service.

Paul's religious service was focused on the Gospel—he was presenting and modeling and explaining and applying the Gospel of God.

God originated and owned the Gospel and Paul was just a servant to pass it on to others.

This ceremonial language presents that as his sacred duty.

The same ritual language is continued in the second half of verse 16 by referring to the Gentiles as an offering Paul would present as acceptable to God.

Read verse 16 again to be sure you see that. [READ]

It's easy to pass over how strange that picture is—Paul was serving the Gospel to Gentiles so that he might offer them up to God.

Obviously he was not going to kill Gentiles them and burn them like OT priests did with animals as offerings.

But he says that the Gentile people saved through his ministry would be his sacrificial offering on God's altar.

And the Gospel is what would make them acceptable.

The Gospel is the Good News that Jesus has already made the sacrifice necessary to pay for our sins and make us acceptable.

Only in the life of Jesus as our perfection and the death of Jesus as our payment for sin can we be accepted by God.

Only with Jesus as our true high priest can we get to God.

But through faith in that wondrous Gospel of Jesus, we can be an offering that is accepted by God.

We can enter new life by the power of Jesus' resurrection and become living sacrifices worshipping God by all we do.

We learned that in Romans 12:1.

Romans 12:1 says "to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is* your spiritual service of worship."

And Paul's perspective on his ministry was that he was also offering up to God all those saved through his ministry.

Paul's service of God was focused on reaching people, teaching people, and preparing people as holy offerings to God.

His efforts as an apostle and evangelist and pastor and teacher were given to transforming and training souls to offer to God.

Do you think that way about your worship of God?

I think we can be so self-absorbed in our talk about a personal relationship with God that we forget His purpose for us especially on this earth is to represent Him to other people.

As 2nd Corinthians 5:18 puts it, we are His ambassadors, sent out to plead with others to be reconciled to God.

1st Peter 2:5 & 9 call believers a holy & royal priesthood.

And then our calling in the church is not to sit back and assume everyone is ok, but to warn against being a fake and against falling away and to encourage each other to press on & be real.

Yes, God does promise to keep all those who are His.

But He keeps us by our efforts as leaders & parents & prayer warriors and teachers and as a church body in caring for each other's souls.

So our God-centered passions should drive us to other-centered serving to reach people and train them for heaven.

We must remember that we serve God by serving people.

Yet as we do so, we must also remember that we also always depend upon the Spirit of God to accomplish every good work.

And that's our last point that we get from the end of verse 16.

The end of verse 16 says these saved Gentiles that Paul pictures as an offering are sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

So we say as a 4th point today that all Christians depend on the Spirit.

Point #4—all Christians depend on the Spirit.

We depend on the Spirit to sanctify us and to sanctify others.

So we depend on the Spirit to grow us & to grow others.

To be sanctified is to be set apart as holy, to be separated from other, common things to be specially used in serving God.

Vessels like cups were sanctified in that way for use in the Tabernacle and Temple in the OT in Israel.

But the idea of being sanctified also meant being morally set apart as holy in lifestyle and choices and heart and actions.

So to be sanctified meant both a new purpose and place in life and a new pattern and practice for life.

And what Paul referred to here in verse 16 was that sanctified lifestyle that starts with the sanctified position of being in Christ by faith.

We know the transformed, holy life of sanctification is what Paul was seeking in the Gentiles because he has a parallel goal in verse 18 of the obedience of the Gentiles.

That obedience starts with obeying the Gospel by trusting Christ and then it grows in a life of obedience to Christ.

So when a person comes to Christ by faith, we begin an ever-increasing transformation to greater holiness.

We become more and more like Jesus as we grow in sanctification.

That's a word you need to know, kids, even if you can't spell it

Sanctification—s-a-n-c-t-i-f-i-c-a-t-i-o-n—it is the process of God changing us to be more and more like Jesus.

It only starts when we quit trying to be good on our own and trust Jesus as the only One who could be good for us enough to get us to God.

But when we trust Him as our only hope, as the One who saves us from sin and whom we follow as our Lord, then we begin to change.

We begin to be more and more sanctified or holy.

Since we can't do that on our own either, we trust God to change us.

We begin to change because we begin to be changed by the Holy Spirit working in us.

That growing process is often called sanctification.

And that's what Paul was longing for with the Gentiles so that they would be an offering to God that was acceptable.

We as Christians depend on the Holy Spirit for that work in us.

And we depend on Holy Spirit to do that same work in others.

We do all those things in faith, trusting God to use them as He wishes.

Then we pray, telling God what He's promised and asking Him for work for His glory.

We pray fervently because we depend on God to work and we pray submissively because ultimately it is His work.

That ministry perspective kept Paul going when things were going well and when things were NOT going well.

It kept him faithful when people were responding to the Gospel as he preached and when people were hating him for what he preached.

Leaving results in God's hands as we depend on the Spirit is so freeing to make us bold and to keep us from despair.

If God's Spirit is the One who must work, we just want to be faithful to what the Spirit has said in His Word and leave the results to Him.

We don't have to worry or get angry or depressed or have all those other reactions we're tempted to have as we serve.

We can rest as we depend on the Spirit.

And by the way, note the mention of the Trinity in these verses.

God the Father gave grace so that Paul became a minister of Christ Jesus for people to be sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

All 3 Persons of the Godhead are involved in all that God does with all Christians.

And all Christians (1) need reminders of truth, (2) have gifts to serve, (3) serve God by serving others, and (4) depend on the Spirit.

I pray those are helpful ministry perspectives as we get into the mind of the Apostle Paul to learn how God framed his life and approach to serving.

Think of the ministry opportunities you have and think through these ministry perspectives to gain some help and hope.

God has graciously given us roles and responsibilities, relationships and opportunities.

It is a grace from God to teach a Sunday School class or serve in AWANA or with youth or to keep the nursery or to clean a room or mow a lawn or make a meal or meet another need.

Do you view it that way and embrace it as seeking an offering you want to give to God for His glory?

It is a privilege for God to give us the chance to enjoy His gifting and power through us in serving others.

Do you think that way about opportunities you have?

And that's true not merely in church ministries, but also in our homes and at our jobs and in other relationships.

Parents, God has entrusted you with children.

Do you see your role with them as a grace from God in which you long to offer them up to God as sanctified by the Spirit.

We serve God by serving the people He puts in our paths and those people can be our offering to God as we lead them toward faithfully following Christ.

Do you pray for those in your home and family and Sunday School class and Care Group with that heart of wanting to worship God by giving others to God sanctified by the Spirit?

How are you viewing your interaction with those around you and your places to serve others?

I thank God for the ways I see many of you living and flourishing in these perspectives in the areas of life and ministry where you serve.

Don't give up and don't lose heart.

I pray these ministry perspectives bring some fresh biblical light to renew you in all that you do.

Pray with me as we close.