

## Marks of a Servant Romans 15:15-16

Last time we were together, we pointed out, with the beginning of this new paragraph Paul is winding down his letter to the Romans. He is coming to one of the main points of the letter and that is his plan to visit the church at Rome, not to stay but be aided to take the gospel onward. He truly wants their support and help in this gospel venture. And Paul has been bold, especially in the last section that we have just gone through to touch on some what could be very touchy issues in the church. But Paul wants them to know that he does this not as an affront or somehow think that the church is lacking but because of his calling in Jesus Christ.

In fact he sees a mature and spiritually thriving church at Rome. And last time we were together we looked at verse 14 and saw three marks of a thriving and spiritually healthy church. And if you were moving to a new area for a job or whatever and were looking for a new church to join, what would you be looking for in a church? Would you be looking for these qualities - these spiritual characteristics? Because they are absolutely essential. One is that this church was **“full of goodness.”** And it is ethical goodness. The truth of the modern church is that it looks and behaves so much like the world. Terms like holiness, righteousness and even sin are missing from the pulpit and the people. Full of goodness means that there is not only a preaching of the gospel but a living out of that gospel where believers are being more and more changed into the image of Christ. Is this church I am looking to join marked by goodness or righteousness?

Also, is it marked by knowledge of God’s word. We see these believers were **“filled with all knowledge.”** Again, this is the knowledge of God and of the gospel - many of the truths that Paul had been teaching throughout this letter. It is not that they knew everything but this was a mature church that knew truth. And the church can be filled with all sorts of things. One church might emphasize experiences, and you need to be filled with some sort of encounter with God. Or another might be filled with correcting social ills through programs or through political movements. But is this congregation filled with the knowledge of the gospel? Is there a joy in knowing Christ and a desire even to know him better? Is there an understanding of biblical truth of God and the gospel?

And the third mark was that of **“able to instruct one another.”** The word is to counsel one another. The word is sufficient. The Roman believers were able to enter one another’s lives and apply the truths of God’s word. They had teachable hearts and a hunger to be conformed to the image of Christ. If the goal of the church is to glorify God by proclaiming his Word to make and mature disciples, then all three of these element are necessary. If we were looking for a church are these the elements that we would look for?

As we look at the marks, Paul goes on and talks about himself as a servant of Jesus Christ and his ministry. And as we look at this passage we learn also what we need to be as servants of Christ. It is easy to look at the marks of the church and say, “yes, this is what I want out of the church,” but who are you in the church? Fewer and fewer of those in the church are really active in the church. They come out to maybe a service a week, and with Covid they learned to be more of a spectator rather than a

participant. They look at what the church can give and do for them but to give of their time, assets and effort is asking too much. Church is not a living entity that they belong to, but an activity they do for an hour on Sunday. But we realize it is not suppose to be this way. After going over the great hope we have in Christ, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:58, **“Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”** He didn’t write that just to the select few in the church at Corinth, but to all those who are in Corinth. We are always to be abounding in the work of the Lord. The church, and our life and labour in the church are always to be bound together as believers. We seek to live for Christ, and our great hope to be with him.

But let me ask you: are you? Do you even recognize that God has saved you not just to get but to give - to serve for the glory of Christ? We know this, and it is really easy to make excuses, but this is the life he called you and me to - we are disciples of Christ and servants of Christ. And if that is true then there are certain marks of those who are his servants in the church of Jesus Christ. And with that in mind, I want us to look at verses 15-16 this morning and see that God has equipped us to serve and then look at the whole goal in serving others.

1. We are equipped to serve. V.15.

One of the glorious realities of our salvation is the ongoing grace that God gives us. We often talk about the grace of God that is given us to sanctify us or change us into the image of Christ, to overcome many of the struggles and sins in our lives. He gives us Word, believers, the church, his presence, the Holy Spirit, illumination, his peace, new life, hope, his mercy and ongoing forgiveness, prayer, his love, just to name a few. But that grace is not just given to be spent on ourselves and for our own spiritual benefit, but that we would be equipped to minister, serve and benefit others spiritually. And really we are so blessed by the church. This entity that God has given us has been a conduit of his grace to help us to grow. We have been blessed by that outflowing of grace into our lives and families. But has that grace flowed from your life into the lives of others? God gives grace that we change but with that grace given and received God wants us now to give that grace to others. We are all commissioned to serve one another in the church of Jesus Christ. And our God equips us to serve.

Look at what Paul says here first of all, **“But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder.”** “On some points” Paul is probably talking about this section about the need to love and welcome individuals that differ from you on secondary matters such as meat and vegetables. Paul was very bold. And boldness is very often needed in the pulpit. God wants us to present truths that might not be popular but what people need to hear. It comes with the mandate or calling to preach the Word. It is not talking about being ignorant and taking out your frustrations in the pulpit but giving the unadulterated truth of the gospel. And when that happens in the church, when the word is preached and it is not about itching our ears then we should be thankful. We are hearing what God wants us to hear.

But the things that Paul says with boldness is not something they did not know or have not heard, but Paul says, **“by way of reminder.”** In other words, they knew these truths. And isn’t that the way with the presentation of biblical truth? We need to

be reminded again and again. It is so easy to let truth become one of two things. One is that we simply forget. We let other things take precedence over the gospel, or we forget our need of God, or we forget our hope in Christ. We need to be constantly be reminded because we forget, and we need to remember, remember, remember. But the other thing is that truth heard or known becomes normalized. If you look at a beautiful landscape the first time it will take your breath away. If you look at it for the two hundredth time it might seem normal. You might not even notice the beauty of it. And here is where we have to be reminded of the stunning beauty of divine grace. God in human flesh, or the beauty that such a one would die for such unworthy individuals. It used to leave us in awe. Remember the beauty - God really did come in human flesh to live that life that you could never live and die that death as your substitute so you could live with him eternally. And that message has to be preached with boldness and passion and conviction. This is not something to yawn at but something to remember and celebrate and let us control your life.

But here is the question: how did Paul ever accomplish that task? How could he with boldness preach to people he never knew, or go to places of such danger not knowing how people would respond? Well, look at what the verse says here, **“because of the grace given to me by God.”** This is absolutely amazing. We could say amazing grace! And we could ask: what is so amazing about grace? And we would say that grace can save a sinner like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see. And we would be absolutely right but that is not what Paul is talking about here. What he is talking about is not saving grace but serving grace. Look at the word “because.” It is explaining something. What is it explaining? It is explaining why Paul was able to write with boldness and clarity to the Roman believers. And the reason why is because grace was given to him by God to carry out the task and ministry that God had given him. And we might say that is all fine and dandy - this is the apostle Paul. He has so much natural ability and strength and bravery to carry out anything God wanted him to carry out. But is that true? Listen to 1 Corinthians 2:3, **“And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling.”** That does not sound like someone who is naturally bold and can stand in front of people and just talk or give them hard and difficult truths.

Listen to how Paul continues to describe his ministry in 1 Corinthians 2:4-5, **“and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”** Paul’s speech did not come with fancy arguments or eye popping illustrations or funny stories, but what was his ministry? It was a **“demonstration of the Spirit and of power.”** It was a demonstration of God’s glorious grace in ministry.

Now here is my point - God has not only graced us with salvation but he has grace us with the ability to serve one another. That frightens so many people - that thought of getting active in the lives of others. It might mean teaching Sunday school or it might mean coming out on Wednesday and being involved in Bible study. It might mean working in the nursery or in the sight and sound booth. It might mean having people over to you home from the church just to befriend and encourage them in the Lord. It might mean a hodge podge of many of these ministries in your life. But God

has graced you not only to receive grace but to give grace. Listen to 1 Peter 4:10, **“As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.”** This verse is not asking us to find a particular gift in your life but to use whatever capacities to serve one another - to serve those in your local church. God has graced you to serve. Are you serving? Are you looking for opportunities to serve? Are you just waiting for something to happen or are you being intentional realizing God has called to loving service in the body of Christ? And this leads us to our next point.

## 2. The purpose for serving. V.16.

We do well with purpose in our lives. We are people of purpose. We get up in the morning with goals and expectations for the day. There are things that we want to accomplish. Why? Because we are people of purpose. And it would be easy to guilt people into serving. Look at all the effort that others are doing to serve others but you are doing nothing. But we do better and have a greater motivation when we understand purpose and reason why God wants us to serve. And one of the glorious and gracious aspects of our calling to serve is to realize that God does not need our service. He does not need me or he does not you. God is the all-sufficient God needing no one and nothing. He is boundless in resources. And whatever he has ordained to come to pass will come to pass. But here is the glory: he has decided to grace us with reason and purpose in the here and now, and given us the task that has eternal bounty and eternal fruit. He has graced us with ultimate and the highest purpose in the here and now.

Now that is that purpose? What is the reason why we should serve? Well we just read about it in this verse. Look at what Paul says again, and think through what he is saying, **“to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.”** Paul was called to be a minister of Christ Jesus. And often we say, “well God has not called me into the ministry,” and we look at this as some vocational calling. But the word for “ministry” is just the word “servant.” It means to be under someone and to be ministering or serving someone.

So Paul is a servant of Christ Jesus, but look at how he is a minister or servant of Christ - **“to the Gentiles.”** Now the Gentiles means that as verticals servants of God there is a horizontal ministry to others. And here it is to the Gentiles, which were basically non-Jews. They knew very little or nothing about the God of the Old Testament. They were unclean and foreigners. This is the reason why Paul is coming to Rome - because of this particular calling in his life. Now how does he serve God and those who are the Gentiles? Look how the verse continues, **“in the priestly service of the gospel of God.”** Now Paul says that he is involved in priestly service. And we realize what a priest is. Where a prophet is God’s representative before man, the priest is man’s representative before God. He was the one that would bring the appropriate sacrifice on the sinner’s behalf before God. We have religious people today who have taken the title priest, and if you want to confess your sins before God or offer any sacrifice it is through them.

Now this seems to be a strange designation of Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles who do not know God. We would even say today that we do not need a priest because

Jesus is our great high priest. We come through his self-sacrifice into the very presence of God. There is also a sense since we do not need to come through any other human mediator that we are all priest before God. 1 Peter 2:5, **“you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”** We can bring a spiritual work and sacrifices to God directly because through Christ, we are priests.

But Paul says that he is a priest for others, in other words, he is the access to God for the Gentiles or these non-believers. So here is the question: how is Paul a priest? And the key is right at the end of that phrase. Listen to it again, **“to be a a minister of the Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God.”** Notice those three words through which his priestly service comes through - “the gospel of God.” It is through the preaching not of some sacrifice or mediation that Paul is bringing but through the sacrifice of Christ through God’s gospel - through the good news of his one time sacrifice for sin. It is the application of the gospel to the hearts and lives of the gospel of God. That is the central focus of all of our ministries whether corporate as a church or individuals believers serving in the church.

Now look how this turns to an offering to God when the gospel is applied to hearts and lives of individuals, this is the outcome, **“so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.”** Through the ministry of Paul this is what takes place. Now where have we heard that language before of individuals being an offering that is acceptable to God? Right after Paul writes 11 chapters of this glorious gospel we are challenged to respond to that gospel as believers in Christ in 12:1, **“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”** Offering needed to be without blemish in the Old Testament. It spoke of absolute righteousness. Those who trust in Christ are absolutely righteous. They are sanctified or set apart exclusively to God. But the calling here is to live in light of who we are. To become those living sacrifices before God. In other words, the whole goal of the here and now is that our state (who we are) might match more and more our standing - how we are before God in Christ.

Well how is that accomplished in your life and my life in the here and now? We could say that it is the Spirit of God working through the Word of God to change us into the image of Christ. And if you gave that answer you would be absolutely right. But the instrument the Spirit of God uses to mediate and make known truth and bring people to Christ and mature the saints is servant believers. Think of it: how you came to Christ and the greatest growth in your life did not come through you staring at the night sky wondering of there is a God, and then you find him on your own, or the greatest growth did not come because you buckled down and studied on your own. No, God has used people - his children to help, guide, train and mature you.

So I said all that and tried to explain the meaning of this verse to get to right here: why should I serve? Why should I ever give of my time and effort in the lives of others in the church of Christ? And it is because of the purpose: the purpose why Emmanuel Baptist Church exists or any other church is for the making and maturing of the disciples through his pure word for Christ’s ultimate glory. We want others who are not glorifying him to be living sacrifices to God for the eternal praise and glory of

Christ. We want other believers to be so conformed to Christ that they will reproduce others. So let me ask you: is that something that you want to be involved in? Does that give your servanthood purpose and meaning? This is not the calling of the few but all members. And it might look different in one another's lives but the goal is the same - the making and maturing of disciples for the glory of God. May all of us be living sacrifices who help produce living sacrifices.