

Fulfill Your Ministry

Romans 15:14

ABC 7/30/17

180 years ago in Scotland there was a man considered by Christians today to be a shining light. His name was Robert Murray McCheyne. A student until he was 22, an assistant pastor for a year, & pastor for 6 years as he died in a typhus epidemic when he was 29. By that time, his passion for Christ had already made its mark. His lifestyle & desire for holy living became almost legendary. Maybe you've used his Bible reading plan that takes you through the OT & twice through the NT & psalms in a year. His sermons & writings were heard & read throughout Scotland, & influenced untold thousands to give their lives to Jesus. As you read of his life you can't help but come away with the thought that he was obsessed with the things of God:

- obsessed with the glory of God;
- obsessed with the preaching of the gospel;
- obsessed with the grace of Jesus.

McCheyne wrote these words, challenging believers to be obsessed with godly priorities,

Remember, you are God's sword, His instrument – a chosen vessel unto Him to bear His name. In great measure, according to the purity of the instrument, will be the success. It is not great talent that God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus Christ. A holy Christian is an awesome weapon in the hand of God.¹

If any words best described the heart & life of the apostle Paul, I think it could be the phrase, *holy obsession*. Like McCheyne, Paul was obsessed with the glory, the gospel, & the grace of God. & he was always challenging believers with their potential & purpose as an instrument in the hand of God. In Rom 15 Paul makes a shift in his writing as he's in the process of wrapping up his letter, which doesn't mean he's finished. He has a lot more to say. He's like most preachers who say, *Now, finally...*, & you know that's usually a lie! Paul isn't finished teaching in this letter. But he begins his closing comments, which are personal & passionate & provocative.

14-21 PRAY

It's a rare thing for Paul to write a letter without even one rebuke, yet the letter to the Romans arrives without a single reprimand. This is much different from his letter to the Corinthians. He

¹ *Memoir & Remains of the Rev. Robert Murray McCheyne*, p 243

refers to them as immature babies, unable to receive even the most basic teaching of truth (1 Cor 3:1-2). It's also different than the letter by the writer of Hebrews. He refers to his scattered audience as people who are poor listeners & slow learners (Heb 5:11-13). Instead of these rebukes, Paul is able to commend these believers who are living in Rome. Would he do the same of us? You may have seen the title of this message, *Fulfill Your Ministry*, & thought this message can't apply to you because you're not "in the ministry." If you thought that, you may not understand the NT truth that there are no useless or inactive parts in the body of Christ. Every believer is a priest with a ministry to fulfill. All of us are just as much "in the ministry" as Paul was. Someday we'll will give an account to God of how well we fulfilled the ministry He gave us. The only way you can rightly say this truth doesn't apply to you is if you aren't yet saved. If you haven't put your faith in Christ alone, you cannot serve God. In fact, you can't do anything for God to try to earn your salvation. If you try to earn your salvation by serving God in some way, you're only going farther down the path away from God. You could do more good deeds than everyone combined in this room, but if you think those good deeds will get you into heaven, you'll be shocked on the day of judgment. Good deeds can never erase the guilt of your sins. If they could, then Jesus didn't need to die. It's only when you confess the pride of your self-righteousness & trust in Jesus alone as your Savior from sin that you then can serve God. So if you're not saved, the application of this message for you is, put your faith in Jesus right now!

Since all of us who've trusted in Christ will give an account to God for how well we served Him with what He's given us, we need to know some biblical principles for how to carry out our ministries. Starting in 15:14 Paul gives us several such principles. Paul has just completed the major doctrinal & practical parts of this letter. He now turns to some personal matters that extend to the end of the letter. This is the longest closing section of any of Paul's letters, perhaps because he hadn't yet visited the church in Rome & he wanted to lay the groundwork for a possible future visit. In 15:14-21 he describes his past ministry. In 15:22-33 he shares his future ministry plans. In 16:1-16 he gives extended greetings to those whom he knew in Rome, followed

by a final exhortation & encouragement (16:17-20), greetings from those who were with him in Corinth (16:21-24), & a final benediction (16:25-27).

Vss 14-21 fall into 2 sections: in vs 14 Paul affirms the gifts & ministries of the Roman believers, while in vss 15-21 he explains why he's written to them so boldly & how God has used him in ministry to the Gentiles. **14**

Paul's addressing his readers as **my brethren** not only indicates his recognition of their salvation but also their maturity. At the beginning of the letter, he thanked God for their faithfulness, which was **being proclaimed throughout the whole world** (1:8). But if they are all **full of goodness & filled with knowledge**, then why do they need to be instructed or admonished by each other? Which is it? Are they **full of goodness & knowledge**? Or do they need to be admonished by each other to grow in **goodness & knowledge**? I think Paul means is that God has given them abundant goodness & knowledge to the point where they can overflow with admonitions & exhortations & instructions & warnings & encouragements to each others, so that where one is lacking the other can provide.

Paul acknowledges that apart from his direct influence, the Roman believers **are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, & able to admonish one another**. He is saying, in effect:

In spite of all I've written to you in this letter—with strong reminders that you were saved solely by God's grace, made effective by your faith in His Son, with the admonitions for obedience to the Lord, for mortifying the flesh, for holy living, for exercising your spiritual gifts, for serving each other in love & humility, & all the other teachings—I'm fully aware of your spiritual maturity & moral virtue, & I commend you for it.²

Paul is apparently being sensitive about presuming to write as boldly as he has to a church he neither founded nor pastored. He's aware there may be some resistance to his ministry from some in Rome, & so he's being careful not to offend them by assuming a role over them they wouldn't accept. At the same time, he goes on to show them why they should accept his ministry, because God appointed him as an apostle to the Gentiles (15-19). But in vs 14, there are at least 4 ministry principles that apply to us:

² John MacArthur, *Romans*, 2:326

1. If you're a Christian, you're in the ministry. Paul states the Roman church is **full of goodness, filled with all knowledge & able also to admonish one another.** In other words, they are competent to minister to one another. Because they were **full of goodness & filled with all knowledge** they were **able to admonish one another.** Not just **able** but *powerful to instruct one another.* They had the ability, but even better, they had the power. They had everything they needed to help each other with the truth of God.

Admonish comes from 2 words meaning mind or intellect & to put or to place. It gives the idea of conveying something into someone's mind or someone's understanding which will correct them. It means to warn, instruct, encourage, or advise. Here it refers to coming alongside other Christians to help them spiritually. Paul isn't referring to some special gift but of the duty & responsibility of every Christian has for encouraging & strengthening others. We need each other to stir us up, to prod us toward holy living. Why? Because we have the tendency to settle into a rut. We're creatures of habit. We go home the same way, eat the same things, have our routines, & even sit in the same seats at church each week.³

Paul uses the word **admonish** to describe his ministry. He told the Ephesian elders, **Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night & day for a period of 3 years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears** (Acts 20:31). In Col 1:28 he wrote, **We proclaim Him, admonishing every man & teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ.** He wrote to the Thessalonian church, **We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone** (1 Thes 5:14). In our text, Paul is confident the Roman believers are capable of exercising this ministry toward one another. This is a ministry that the body is to engage in on a regular basis. We must serve others with God's truth. Admonishing is just speaking truth in love, helping others with their problems & trials in life & shedding biblical light on their issues. It's not just giving good advice, but communicating the truth of God as recorded in the Word of God. It's speaking God's Words into particular situations or circumstances. It's a thousand ways of simply bringing God's truth to bear. Sometimes this is

³ John Phillips, *Exploring Romans*, p 253

done through a sermon that calls people away from wrong behavior & toward right behavior. Far more often, though, it happens in the context of normal life, of one Christian interacting with another. It happens when a friend encourages you to carry on & keep practicing the spiritual disciplines. It happens when a church member speaks up to tell what God has been teaching from his Word. It happens when a brother sits with a brother to encourage him with a passage of Scripture. This kind of instruction is the task of every Christian. We are all called to be ministers. One of the great joys & responsibilities of the Christian life is to open your Bible with others & to show them what God says. We need you to minister the Word! Because these Roman Christians loved & knew God, they were able to minister the Word to one another in effective ways. & as they did that, they brought unity to the church & grew in maturity together.

Having the Spirit indwelling should move us to this ministry. Even in the flow of Gal 5-6 where we find **goodness** as a fruit of the Spirit in 5:22, we find in Gal 6:1 a call to counseling.

Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.

The point is if you're a Christian, if you have the Spirit, you should engage in the ministry of gently restoring those around you who are caught or snagged in sin somehow. If you're not sure how to go about it, ask someone. But your relationship with your brother or sister usually means you're the most effective member of the body to try to restore him. You *are* your brother's keeper. If you're a Christian, you're in the ministry. Through His Word & His Holy Spirit, God had provided the church at Rome, & will provide every godly congregation of believers, with everything needed to live faithfully, effectively, & joyfully for Him. All faithful Christians are divinely equipped **to admonish one another** as needs & opportunities arise among them.

Paul shows us here & in many other places there are 2 ways to look at other Christians within our church: You can look at them by where they've come from or by where they need to go. You can choose to focus on all the progress they've made, or you can choose to focus on all the progress they still need to make. Here we see Paul chooses to look at the progress people have made. He knows they have a long way to go before they perfectly reflect Jesus Christ, but he chooses to focus on their virtues. He chooses to focus on how far they have come. How about you? When

you spend time with your fellow Christians, do you find yourself easily frustrated by them? Do you find yourself dismayed by their behavior? Do you find yourself growing weary of their sin & sinfulness? Perhaps the best thing you can do is to step back to consider where they've come from & to remember who they once were. Think back to who they were when they 1st walked through those doors as unbelievers or as brand new believers. As we do that, we'll find ourselves motivated to thank God for all the evidences of His grace we see in their lives. & hopefully we'll be motivated to tell them of all the evidences of God's grace we see in their lives. Yes, we'll inevitably see plenty remaining sin. But choose to focus on grace. That will encourage you & equip you to encourage them.

As has been well said, the church isn't an art museum to display perfect masterpieces. It's not a natural museum to display perfect specimens. The church is a hospital to heal the sick, & it takes time to heal people from a deadly disease. You can't act surprised when a hospital is full of sick people & shouldn't be surprised when a church is full of messy, & sinful people. After all, it isn't those who are well who need a doctor, but those we are sick. It isn't those who are righteous who need Jesus, but sinners. We should follow Paul & make it our habit to see grace. Choose to commend others, to encourage them, to be encouraged by them, & to share evidences of God's grace with them. It will bless you to be a blessing to them.

2. To minister you must know & apply biblical truth. The reason Paul believed the Roman believers could **admonish** one another was that he was convinced they were **full of** goodness & **filled with all knowledge**. The word translated **full of** is the same word that's used of a sponge when it's full of liquid (Jn 19:29). Whatever is in the sponge will come out when the sponge gets, what? Squeezed. When the Roman Christians were squeezed, **goodness & knowledge** came out. As we've seen, **goodness** is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22) & refers to uprightness in conduct (Eph 5:9) or kindness & generosity towards others (2 Thes 1:11). **Knowledge** refers to knowing biblical truth. When Paul says that the Roman believers **are full of goodness & filled with all knowledge**, he doesn't mean they were sinless in their behavior or already knew all they needed to know of

God & their salvation. If that were so, he wouldn't have needed to write this letter to them at all. Rather, he's assuming the best about the church as a whole.

A. Goodness They are overall marked by **goodness**, high moral character & living. Keep in mind that the Roman believers were living in what Seneca, the 1st century playwright, called *the cesspool of iniquity*.⁴ The immorality of Rome was almost beyond description. Everything deviant was applauded. The highest leader of Rome was a known pedophile. Abortion was commonplace. Unwanted children were left on doorsteps to be taken & eaten by animals or worse, by human predators who would traffic them to other depraved people. Paul is saying in the midst of a *cesspool of iniquity*, these believers stood out by their **goodness**. When we as Christians surrender to the reforming work of the Holy Spirit, fruit emerges (Gal 5:22-23). Since God is entirely & essentially & absolutely good (Mt 19:17), when we grow into the likeness of Christ, **goodness** squeezes out. **Goodness** is the work of Christ in us, through the Spirit of God. This means, **goodness** isn't something you drum up; it isn't the result of self-effort. It's also not a New Year's resolution or a reward for attending church & never skipping SS. **Goodness** is the process of reformation, it's the making of a holy heart.

Where do we get the standard for **goodness**? We get it from God, partially because He's hard-wired a sense of goodness into us as creatures in His image. That's why many things even unbelievers agree are good. But God defines what is good & He ultimately is the standard of good & the source of all good. **Goodness** is a product of God's Spirit in the heart & life of a Christian, of someone who trusts & follows Jesus. **Goodness** is a fruit of the Spirit so being full of goodness requires being full of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the One who puts good desires in us to love & reach out & serve & meet needs & to do it all for God's glory.

B. Knowledge They also had a grasp of basic biblical truth. Don't misunderstand Paul in this. When he says they are **filled with all knowledge**, he doesn't mean they have all knowledge or they have nothing else to learn. He means they have all the knowledge they need in order to proceed & grow in their walk with Christ. In fact, Paul will say in the next vs they only needed to

⁴ John Meyer, *Romans*, p26

be reminded of the truths of this letter, indicating they'd already received apostolic instruction. More than likely, this came through believers who'd been taught by Paul, who now lived in Rome. Paul is commending these Roman believers for their openness & teachability & passion to learn the things of God. They were doctrinally sound. They were well on their way to...

attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom & knowledge (Col 2:2-3).

They were obsessed with the truth of God's word. Surrounded by paganism, relativism, idolatry, immorality, & corruption, they had one primary question, *What do the Scriptures say?* It's no wonder Paul would open his letter by writing this amazing compliment, **I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world (Rom 1:8).** Oh to be like the Romans!

Keep in mind, Paul isn't talking about intellectual knowledge & just biblical facts. He uses the word for **knowledge** that means to apply what you know or to know by means of application & experience. Paul wrote, **that I may know Him & the power of His resurrection & the fellowship of His sufferings** (Phil 3:10). Wasn't Paul a believer? Didn't he know Christ as his own personal Savior? Yes! But he used the same word **know**, which implies, not merely intellectual activity, but obedient application. Paul was saying, *I want to know the life of Christ, not just through propositional truth, but through personal testing.* This is the believer who looks into the Word & is among the **doers of the word, & not merely hearers who delude themselves (Js 1:22).**

They had grasped the fullness of the gospel & knowledge of who God is & what He's done in Jesus & how we relate to Him by grace through faith in Christ. They were filled with this **knowledge**, meaning it was done to them in the past with lasting effects in the present. God had filled them with knowledge in the past & it was still there. That knowledge of God & the Gospel & of how to live was still influencing them, transforming their lives increasingly day-by-day. We learn from this that we don't have to have arrived at spiritual perfection for God to use us in ministering to others. To be able to instruct or admonish, we need the Spirit's power & motivating love in our hearts so we're full of **goodness**. We also need the Bible as our

authoritative guidebook & sufficient source of wisdom. God's Word has the answers for how to respond to life.

We need to be obedient to God's Word (**goodness**) & have a basic understanding of biblical truth (**knowledge**). These 2 qualities must go together. There are morally good people who have no understanding of biblical truth, & so they cannot minister effectively to others. & there are people who know impressive amounts of biblical truth, but they don't apply it personally. Their lives are not marked by godly conduct or unselfish, loving behavior. So they aren't able to minister effectively, either. But if you know God's truth & you're applying it personally, then you're able to **admonish** others. Your life backs up your message, & both are grounded in God's Word. #1, If you're a Christian, you're in the ministry. #2, To minister you must know & apply biblical truth.

3. Principle 3: Trust God to work through others. Vs 14 probably especially relates back to the problems between the stronger & weaker believers that Paul has addressed (14:1-15:13). Paul was confident the Roman Christians could work through these issues under the guidelines he's given. He's already expressed his confidence in them. Paul didn't see ministry as a one-way street from him to others. He knew others could minister to him & to one another without him. I've heard of pastors who discouraged their flock from listening to other preachers. Some pastors feel the need to control every ministry in the church, as if they're the only one capable of teaching the truth or dealing with problems. I've also seen Christian parents who guard their children from any spiritual input from other believers. But that mentality stems from pride & cripples the ministry of the body. If another Christian can teach my children, hallelujah! If any of you learn God's truth from another pastor, praise God! I'm thrilled you can minister without me! God works through the whole body of Christ & that's each & every one of us. We can counsel or admonish each other as Christians because we share the same life by the same Spirit & the same authority in the Word. This should happen in the normal, ongoing relationships of life & ministry in the local church. As we interact with one another, we can lovingly help each other.

We can instruct or warn or admonish or counsel each other by putting God's truth found in His Word into our minds.

4. Be sensitive towards others. Paul was sensitive as to how the Roman believers would take the bold admonitions he's just written. So he expresses his confidence in their ability to minister to one another & he goes on to explain why he'd written as boldly as he had. His sensitivity didn't mean he held back in his boldness, as we'll see as we move along in this chapter. But it did mean he was aware of how his boldness might affect his readers. So he doesn't blast them or assume they'd welcome his admonition. He was careful to explain things in a sensitive manner. We must do the same. One way to be sensitive in ministering to others, especially if you need to admonish or correct them, is to stop & think, *If I were in their place, how would I want to be treated & talked to?* If someone is in sin, he needs to be corrected, but with sensitivity & gentleness (Gal 6:1; 2 Tim 2:24-26). Don't come down on him as if you're the righteous one & you can't understand how he could do what he's doing. Rather, come alongside as a fellow sinner who has found mercy from the Lord, as one prone to temptation, & express your concern that his sin is going to destroy his joy if he doesn't gain victory over it. Minister sensitively!

In his book, *Finishing Well in Life & Ministry*,⁵ Bill Mills tells of a time several years ago when he taught a seminar on *The Ministry of God's Word* at a Wycliffe center in South America. He had a wonderful time, but he didn't realize the significance of what God was doing until his last evening there. As he ate dinner with the director & his wife, she said,

I have to tell you what God has done in my heart during these days. When we came to South America many years ago, we were assigned an Indian tribe & began translating the Scriptures into their language.

Mills explains the difficult process that this entails, of 1st learning the spoken language, then developing an alphabet & a written language, translating the Scriptures, & teaching the people to read. Although it's somewhat quicker today with the use of computers, it used to take about 20 years. It's a long & tedious job. The director's wife continued,

We lived at the Indian village & spent as much time with the people as we could. We were teaching the Scriptures to them as we were translating. A church was being born in their midst.

⁵ *Leadership Resources*, 1997, written with Craig Parro, pp 189-190

As we came toward the end of the project, the people were becoming more & more involved in the production of drugs & less & less interested in the Scriptures. When we finished the translation of the NT in their language & scheduled the dedication service, not one person even came! I have been so angry & bitter. We gave our lives so that they could have the Word of God in their language. When we concluded what was almost a life's work, they did not even want it! I have not been able to handle the bitterness of this disappointment in my heart.

Then she said this with regard to Bill's ministry of the Word that week:

God has been speaking to me in these days by His Word & His Spirit. He has been doing something beautiful in my heart. It is as though God has been washing His Word over my soul & healing me, & He has opened my eyes to see this all from His perspective. I am just beginning to realize now that we did it for Him! That is the only thing that makes any sense in all of this. We did it for God!

Mills rightly concludes, *That is the only thing that makes any sense in ministry. We do it for Him.*

If you're not involved in ministry, 1st make sure you know Jesus as your Savior & Lord through faith in Him alone. Then, ask Him where & how He wants you to serve Him. You don't have to be perfect, just growing in **goodness & knowledge**. Whatever He gives you to do, whether it's rearing your children or serving your family or working in a mundane job or being a witness in your neighborhood or at work by your life & words or serving in some capacity at church, do it for Him. If you're saying to yourself, *I'm not sure I can be of any service to God or others*, then you need to submit to the Spirit & pray for love for others & step out in faith & try anyway. Or if you're saying, *I don't know enough doctrine or how to deal with issues*, then you need to get in the Word & grow in truth. You should be ashamed if you say the Bible is God's Word & our only authority & you aren't faithfully growing in its truths. If you don't feel equipped, don't make excuses, get equipped. & if you're saying, *But I'm scared I'll mess up*, then you need to know I feel that way every Sunday. The only way to overcome that is to step out in faith & prayerfully try to love others by sharing truth.

What Robert Murray McCheyne once wrote is still true. *It is not great talent that God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus Christ. A holy Christian is an awesome weapon in the hand of God.*⁶ A healthy Christian is full of **goodness** & has a strong understanding & grace of biblical **knowledge** & cares so much for the brethren that he instructs them & he's wise enough to do it lovingly. Would Paul write of you the way he's written of the Romans? Can you imagine Paul, or

⁶ *The Works of Rev. Robert Murray McCheyne: Complete in One Volume*, p 211

anyone, saying that of you? God expects you to lovingly admonish those believers who He's placed in your life. This isn't a job for the pastor; it's a job for you. Often, you'll be able to have a greater impact on individuals in the body than I will. You have unique gifts, experiences, & passions that God will use in our church. But you must step out in faith & do your part. Don't wait for someone else. God calls you to serve Him & He'll give you the strength to fulfill what He calls you to perform.