

Title: The Blessing of Christ
Biblical Text: Romans 15:22-29
Teaching Series: Justified by Love
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Romans 15:22-29

This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while. At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. 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. When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you. I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.

What we're given today is picture. It's a window into a community which is nearly alien in our contemporary world. We're going to see different churches not only getting along, but crossing lines of economics, ethnicity, and culture to take care of each other. This picture should compel us to ask, *how? Why? How could these*

spiritual communities overcome barriers which seem nearly impossible for us to navigate today? Why would they be motivated to seek unity and reject isolation and segregation?

Perhaps more than ever the Christian Church is severely divided; the rich are regularly unwilling to care for the poor, republicans and democrats seem increasingly unable to disentangle spiritual and political allegiances, and those in power seem blind or numb or dispassionate about the implications of wielding their power over the vulnerable. We might sing songs about about the poor and powerless ... about our love and worship of Jesus ... about the heavens invading the far reaches of this world ... yet it seems our deepest affections are bound in the common gods of consumerism and materialism and individualism. In their book, the *Tangible Kingdom*, Hugh Halter and Matt Smay see these three idols as barriers which prevent church communities from experiencing the flourishing and holiness that God desires.

Halter and Smay see church as life with God, each other, and those around us. And in order to enjoy this type of community we have to deal with and heal from the powers of consumerism (the barrier between life with others and life with God), materialism (the barrier between life with each other and life with others), and individualism (the barrier between life with God and life with each other). This is what captured Paul's imagination. This so called *Tangible Kingdom*, or what Dr. Martin Luther King called *the Beloved Community*. That's what I want to talk about. I want to talk about how and why we should become a people unburdened

by consumerism, materialism, and individualism. What's it look like to become a church that shows up as what Paul says, **"in the fullness of the blessing of Christ."** In a word, this brand of community is deeply grounded in *generosity*.

Here's how we'll organize our time together ...

- The *conditions* of generosity.
- The *nature* of generosity.
- The *blessing* of generosity.

[Prayer]

Movement 1: The Conditions of Generosity (vv.22-24, Romans 1:11)

The second half of Romans 15 is all about Paul's travel plans. So, let's get some context. Paul is writing the book of Romans from the city of Corinth. That's in Greece. He's never been to Rome before. The Roman movement of Christianity was founded by another person. But Paul has always wanted to go to Rome. If you remember, early in his letter he told his Roman readers, ***Read Romans 1:11 ... For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you.*** That word *longing* is affectionate and intimate. Though he hasn't met them he loves them, and loves what God is doing in their lives. And so he wants to be with

them to encourage and help them continue to build strong churches and communities in their urban context.

Paul reiterates his affection for his brothers and sisters again in chapter 15. That's where we pick things up today. ***Read Romans 15:22-24 ... This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while.*** Because of Paul's work through the eastern coastline of the Mediterranean Sea, specifically in urban centers with non-Jewish people he hasn't been able to go to Rome yet. Throughout Paul's writings, it's clear he has focused on these two things, which capture the nature of his ministry:

1. He's focused on cities.
2. He's focused on new works with Gentiles. That is, *the nations*.

This ought to be deeply encouraging and familiar to us. God has called each of us (whether we realize it or not), he's called us in this particular season to be part of this new work—Church in the Square. We're a diverse people in a dynamic urban center. Chicago is not far removed from the likes of Rome and Corinth. And like Paul, this is where and to whom God has called you and me.

Now, Rome was a city. Rome was certainly filled with diverse people. But the gospel work there wasn't new. So, it hasn't been Paul's top priority. But what Paul is saying in vv.22-24 is that ... having established gospel churches in the major cities in the region along the eastern Mediterranean coast ... he's making plans to go to Rome. He's plan is to pass through Rome on his way to Spain—no doubt to reach more non-Jewish people in a major city and start a new church. Perhaps Madrid. He's planning on stopping in Rome to both enjoy the company of his Christian brothers and sisters but also to ask for their help. After all, travel in the ancient world was expensive, dangerous, and physically challenging. He'd need their help to make it to Spain.

But here's where things get a bit odd. Greece is just a short trip across the Adriatic Sea to Italy. When he's writing from Corinth he's not far off from visiting those with whom he has "*longed for many years*" to be with. And so, it would make sense for Paul to end his letter with something like, *see you soon, I'm almost there!*

But ... he doesn't. He's going somewhere else first.

Movement 2: The Nature of Generosity (vv.25-26, Philippians 2:6b-7a, Deuteronomy 6:5, 1 Corinthians 12:26)

Look what Paul says next about his plans to visit Rome. *Read Romans 15:25-26 ... At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. For*

Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. Okay, so instead of going to Rome, Paul is going to Jerusalem. Now, this is odd for two reasons. First it's odd because demographically, Jerusalem is the exact opposite of Paul's primary calling and apostolic ministry. Jerusalem is highly Jewish. It is a major city, but it's also the very center of the gospel's original proclamation. It's not new. Secondly, it's odd because geographically, Jerusalem is on the complete opposite side of the Mediterranean Sea. It will take him far away from Rome, increasing his travel by months of much peril.

So, *why?*

Why does he plan to go to Jerusalem first?

Well, before we answer that, let's keep something in mind. According to scholar N.T. Wright the book of Romans ***“is one of the most ecstatic and exhilarating, dense and difficult, intellectually and spiritually challenging, and rewarding writings from any period of church history, and some might argue, from anybody else's history as well”*** (Paul, 337). There's nothing like Romans. And Paul's not an idiot. As he winds down his letter he knows he's crushed it. He knows he has just been used by God to produce the jewel of the New Testament . The 16th century German theologian and monk Martin Luther said that the book of Romans is ***“the chief part of the New Testament, and is truly the purest gospel. It is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but also that he should occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul”*** (Luther

1972: 365). Not only did Luther memorize Romans but he also spent two years lecturing on the letter (from 1515-1516). Both John Calvin (an influential French theologian) and William Tyndale (essentially the father of the English translation of the Bible) claimed that to know the book of Romans well was to shed light in and through the whole of the Bible.

There's nothing quite like Romans.

I hope you've sensed and experienced this in our time in this book.

The letter Paul is nearly done writing is one of the most precious and powerful articulations of the good news of Jesus ever heard. Yet, like many of Paul's letters he will not deliver it himself. Instead, he gives Romans to a woman named Phoebe who was a deacon at the church in Corinth (see Romans 16:1). She personally carries the letter west to Rome and Paul will go east to Jerusalem. Surely, he's got incredibly important business in Jerusalem. So, *why? Why isn't he going to Rome now? Why isn't he delivering this great letter himself?* Look again at vv.25-26. He's going to Jerusalem to *deliver aid to the poor* there from the churches in Macedonia and Achaia (see vv.25,26). *See it there twice in two verses?* He's delivering money. Instead of delivering Romans, he's making a bank transfer— from one church to another.

Now, *does this not seem beneath the great Apostle? Or at least off task?* He's a preacher, not be a banker! Yet, Paul sees in this gift the very substance of his gospel ministry. You see, through this gift we see three barriers broken down. The

breaking of these barriers give this gift such vibrant gospel implications that in Paul's mind it was more important to hand deliver this money than the book of Romans ...

- The gift broke the barrier of consumerism. Giving is the great counterpoint to consumption. Consumerism is the belief that we become by taking and collecting and accumulating. It's not really about the stuff (that's materialism), it's about the ceaseless appetite to consume things. We see barrier broken down in the life of Christ. Instead of remaining in the hallow halls of heavens, the book of Philippians tells us that Jesus, *Read Philippians 2:6b-7a ... "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself"*. Jesus forgoes eternally grasping or holding on to divine commodities and powers and luxuries, and he empties himself by generously giving himself. Jesus could do this because he knows that he is more than what he consumes. He could empty himself and still be himself. Halter and Smay explain, "*Consumerism is based on the belief that I can't help others until I help myself*" (151). Jesus shows us that in not helping himself, he eternally helped us. *Are you with me?* And the generosity of Macedonia and Achaia perfectly captured this principle. They were a pair wealthy churches in vibrant Grecian cities. Instead of continuing to take and collect and accumulate and consume, they heard their brothers and sisters were in need ... so, like Christ, they gave.

- The gift also broke the barrier of materialism. Giving is also a counterpoint to materialism. Materialism is the belief that we become through tasting, touching, seeing, hearing, and smelling. When we activate the senses, we are truly alive. But in Christ we learn to see ourselves in the fullness of God's creative design. We are not merely physical beings. In the ancient Jewish consciousness, being fully human was about learning to, ***Read Deuteronomy 6:5 ... love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.*** Jesus adds "mind" to this picture in Matthew 22:27. Being human is very much about our bodies. But it's also about our hearts (passions and affections) ... it's about our minds (thoughts) ... it's about our souls (spirit). Therefore when we are entangled with materialism we are minimizing our nature and the humanity of others. We're belittling our design to the latest pair of shoes, jeans, bacon burger, and iPhone. We fail to nurture our hearts, minds, and souls in their fullness and wholeness. Halter and Smay explain, "***Whereas consumerism holds some aspect of entitlement ... materialism is simply about wanting more stuff***" (154). When Macedonia and Achaia sent money through Paul and his team, they were saying people matter more than stuff.
- The gift also broke the barrier of individualism. Giving is a great counterpoint to individualism. Individualism is a way of understanding our identity in isolation; without the need of other people, whether that be family, friendship, or community. You see, not only had Christians in Macedonia and Achaia learned to construct a communal identity, but the

work of Christ was at the center of their self-concept. Their personal identity was so wrapped up in their brothers and sisters that they saw the need of Christians on the other side of the world as their need. They must have read Paul's first letter to Corinth when Paul said, *Read 1 Corinthians 12:26 ... If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.* This was particularly potent when we consider that these were two Greek churches sending a gift to Hebrew churches; rich Christians sending money to poor Christians; progressives (modernists) to conservatives (moralists). When we talk about reconciliation we talk about it in two ways. Because of Jesus, we've been reconciled or reunited or brought back into relationship with God. But we've also been reconciled with each other. We call this vertical and horizontal reconciliation. Paul has spent a great deal of time in Romans explaining this horizontal aspect of reconciliation—that diverse peoples have been made one in Christ. Mother Teresa once said, "*If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other*" (*Spiritual Gems from Mother Teresa*, 10). This Greek gift typified the gospel message Paul had been writing about ... precisely because it was going to their Jewish brothers and sisters.

This is why Paul chose to deliver this gift rather than deliver Romans. This gift represented everything he'd been writing about. *Did you know our giving could carry such meaning and power?* Paul now makes it plain. Look at v.27. *Read Romans 15:27 ... 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. You see, this gift embodied the gospel reality these communities had experienced. Paul understood this gift, this *material blessing* as a response or overflow of another gift, a *spiritual blessing*. The Jewish people had welcomed Gentiles into the Christian faith therefore it only makes sense that Gentiles would take care of their Jewish brothers and sisters like family. Because they are.

Gospel generosity breaks down barriers.

Gospel generosity crushes consumerism, materialism, and individualism.

Gospel generosity invites us to become a people God is calling us to be; a tangible kingdom, a beloved community.

Movement 3: The Blessing of Generosity (vv.28-29, Romans 1:12, Mark 10:29-31)

So, the *conditions* of generosity are seen in Paul's choice to deliver this money rather than his letter. The *nature* of generosity breaks down the walls of consumerism, materialism, and individualism. All of this leads Paul to demonstrate to his readers the *blessing* of generosity. Namely, that generosity is generative.

Generosity has an effect on everyone who hears and participates with the gift.

Look how Paul explains this experience will have an effect on him. ***Read Romans 15:28-29 ... When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you. I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.*** He says, after he

brings Jerusalem the money he'll head to Spain through Rome. But notice, he will come "*in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.*" *What's that mean?*

Again, Paul has been longing to be with the Roman Christians since the beginning of his letter. Back at the start he says that when he visits them they will, ***Read Romans 1:12 ... "be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine."*** Having delivered the money, seeing the improvement and encouragement of the poor in Jerusalem Paul will be able to breath a sigh of relief and settle into the experience of friendship and celebration and love for his brothers and sisters in Rome. This is the blessing of generosity ... it blesses everyone. We believe a number of lies about giving, especially giving away our money. These often prevent us from acting with generosity. You see, we often believe giving is about what we lose (money, stuff, time, and so on). But what gospel generosity teach us is that giving fills us up. Gospel generosity always returns infinitely more than it requires.

This is Jesus' point when Peter complains about all the sacrifices the disciples have made to follow Jesus. ***Read Mark 10:29-31 ... Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first."*** You see, this is why consumerism, materialism, and individualism can be so alluring. These promise

that we won't be forgotten if we look out for ourselves. They promise we'll have more enough stuff if we hold tightly. These promise we won't be consumed if we keep consuming. Yet, each of these always require more than they return. *Why?* Because what we consume, soon consumes us. The material things we collect, soon belittle us into merely physical creatures. And individualism always leads to loneliness. They always require more than they return. These idols always destroy. And so one of the primary ways we can cultivate a community that breaks down these barriers is through a brand of generosity that boasts the good news of Jesus. Generosity that crosses lines of economic, ethnicity, and culture. This is the cosmic example and power wielded on the cross of Jesus Christ.

What resources has God given you?

What resources does your neighbor need?

What pain are you able to alleviate?

What burden can you help carry?

What gift can you give?

You see, when we give like God in Christ has given to us we too are able to show up with the *fullness of the blessing of Christ*. We too live lives that are more valuable than the book of Romans.