

A Priority Passage for the Church in Scotland

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[0 : 0 0] Well, as I mentioned during the reading today, we are continuing our study on Paul's letter to the Romans, and we've come to the second half of chapter 15.

We're going to read together again from verse 15 to verse 18. But on some points, I've written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God, to be a minister of Jesus Christ 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.

In Christ Jesus then, I have reason to be proud of my work, for I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience.

This final section of Romans is very interesting, because when you read it, you see that it all starts to become quite specific to the context of the people to whom Paul is writing.

He's starting to talk about very practical matters relating to life in the early church. He refers to specific places. So when we were reading, we read about Macedonia, Achaya, Elyricum, Jerusalem.

[1 : 1 7] He talks about trying to arrange to meet people. He hopes to see these Roman Christians as he continues on what he hopes would be a journey to Spain.

And he refers to some very, very practical day-to-day issues. Right now, he's off to Jerusalem to bring some money to the church there.

So all very specific to Paul's immediate context. And of course, whenever we read a passage like that, it's easy to think, well, it's not really that relevant to us, is it?

Not even sure where some of these places are. And the needs of individual congregations across the Mediterranean seems a million miles from where we are today.

And because it seems a wee bit irrelevant, it's easy to stop listening when we come to a passage like this. And what I want to say today is that this passage in the second half of Romans 15 is possibly the most relevant passage in the New Testament to the church in Scotland today.

[2 : 3 0] And I hope that in about half an hour of time, you'll agree with me. But we're going to look at it together. We're going to notice that there's three big things in this passage that Scotland really needs.

Let's start by just reminding ourselves what Paul has said. In verse 14, you remember from last week, Paul had said that he was satisfied with the church in Rome.

There was a very interesting expression he gave. It was like he was looking at this church and said, yeah, I'm convinced, and I'm happy with the way they are. There was for three reasons, it was because they were full of goodness, because they were filled with all knowledge and because they were able to instruct one another.

And it's vital that we never forget that these are three key hallmarks of a successful church. But then in these verses that come after verse 14, and the ones that are on the screen, 15 to 18, Paul starts to speak about his own role.

And he says something that's really quite fascinating. And it's right in the middle. He says that he has been given grace 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.

[3 : 52] Now, the reason that's interesting, I think it's really interesting, because Paul uses an expression that we would not expect. He describes his work as a priestly service.

You can see it right there in the middle of that passage. And the reason that that's a wee bit of an unexpected thing is because if you look at the big picture of the Bible stretching from beginning to end, priests are really an Old Testament thing.

And when we come across this expression of Paul's, it seems a wee bit confusing. What is he talking about? You'll remember that the Bibles in two big sections, Old Testament, New Testament, or Old Covenant and New Covenant.

In the Old Testament, the worship of God was focused around the temple and around the sacrificial system. So if you go back to the Old Testament, you read through a book like Leviticus, it's full of all these details about a sacrificial system in which the priests have a key role.

They were the ones who offered these sacrifices to God as an act of worship. And so when you read the word priests in the Bible, don't think so much of the priests that we get in some churches today.

[5 : 11] We should think much more in terms of the temple, in terms of the sacrificial system, because they are the priests had a key role.

Now all of that's an Old Testament thing, because in the New Testament, everything that that sacrificial system pointed towards was fulfilled in Jesus Christ when he died on the cross.

His death on the cross means that all of these sacrifices in the Old Testament are no longer necessary. They were just our shadow pointing towards that ultimate, central once-for-all offering of Christ on the cross.

That's why the New Testament Christians like Paul and like these Romans, they stopped offering sacrifices. Those who had been Jews no longer needed to take part in that ritual system.

Those who remained within Judaism continued until the year AD 70, and then the temple was destroyed by the Romans, and everything had to change.

[6 : 12] But there is a sense in which the Old Testament priests are no longer needed, and in that sense there's no priests in the Christian church.

Instead, Jesus is our high priest because he offered himself on the cross. So what on earth does Paul mean when he describes himself and his work as a priestly service?

Well I think what he's saying here is that the people among the nations of the world like these Romans and all the others in places like Itrilecom and Dachaea and Macedonia, these nations who have come to trust in Jesus and who are now united to him, they themselves are an offering of worship to God.

So instead of these people coming to God with their offerings of animals or of grain or anything like that, they themselves are now the offering. Paul used a great phrase to describe that in chapter 12 of Romans.

He describes Christians as being a living sacrifice presented to God. And so Paul is telling us that as these people hear the good news and commit their lives to Jesus, he views his own role in that as being a bit like that of a priest.

[7 : 39] He is offering these gentle converts to God as an act of worship to him. Now that's a very important point to note here because here it's easy to miss the significance of this because we are way, way, way past this in terms of time and in terms of what life was like back then.

But these verses here are highlighting to us the absolutely extraordinary change that has taken place through the gospel of Jesus Christ because in the Old Testament days, the Gentiles, the people who weren't Jews, they were barred from even entering the temple, let alone offering a sacrifice to God.

And yet now in the gospel of Jesus Christ, it's not simply that the Gentiles are able to make an offering. They are an offering. They are an offering to God in whom he delights.

And this should not surprise us because the Old Testament prophesied that this would take place in Isaiah 66. They shall bring all your brothers from all the nations as an offering to the Lord.

All is simply saying, this has now happened in and through Jesus Christ. In other words, all of this is reminding us that the goal of the gospel is that all the nations of the world are to live for God.

[9 : 14] And that should make perfect sense to us because God is our Creator. That's a theme that runs right through Scripture. It runs right through the letter to the Romans. We are all made by him, so we are all made to live for him.

The lives of every single person in every single nation, that life is to be lived for God. And the amazing thing about Christianity is that living for God does not mean living as a slave to a brutal taskmaster.

It actually means glorifying and enjoying God forever as we fulfill our destiny to live out our lives as His people, the most precious and wonderful part of His creation.

And that's really what that book, *Enjoying God*, emphasizes so clearly that God wants us not to just obey Him and serve Him like a slave, God wants us to really, really enjoy Him.

Now, all of this is raising a very important question. Paul says that he views these Gentiles as an offering to God and he views his role as a priestly service in the fact that he's helped them to make that amazing transition from Godless Gentiles to followers of Jesus Christ.

[10 : 50] But for us today, it raises a very important question. Who can make the claim of priestly offering over your life?

Now, that maybe sounds like a really weird question, but I'll just say it again because we need to think about it. Who can make the claim of priestly offering over your life?

You might say, nobody. What are you on about? Well, please think about it for a moment. Another way of asking that question is, who is your life being offered to?

And who can claim ownership of that? So, for example, think about your job. Are you pouring your life out as an offering to your employer?

Or if you're self-employed, are you pouring your life out as an offering to your business? Or maybe even your hobby, are you pouring out your life into sport or music or nature or fitness?

[11 : 56] Could your boss say, oh, here's so-and-so. Their life is an offering to my business or my department.

Could your friends say, oh, here's such-and-such. Their life is an offering for hearts or for hybbs. And even your family, could your family say, oh, here's so-and-so.

Their life is an offering to the Davis dynasty or whatever your family name is. Now, I'm not saying that any of these things are bad. They're not bad. Like in sport and hobbies are absolutely brilliant.

Family is such an amazing, precious thing. But you have to ask yourself the question, is that everything I'm living for? Am I going to pour my life out for this?

And the answer to that question will tell you who your God is. Because whatever your life has been offered to is functionally revealing to you who your God really is.

[13 : 07] And we have to ask ourselves, are you really sure that you want to make work or sport or even family your God?

Because the great message of the Bible and the great message that Scotland needs to hear today is that only God is God. And we find meaning and purpose and fulfillment and hope in our lives only when we live for Him.

Because you can offer your life out to your work, but work will forget you pretty quickly. You can offer your life out to sport, but sport will move on from you very quickly.

Sometimes when you're watching football matches, which I should say, I love football. I'm not a big negative about football. But sometimes you watch football matches and occasionally, very occasionally, you'll maybe find that the crowd will applaud at a certain minute or they'll maybe be silent for a certain minute because somebody who's maybe been a lifelong supporter has died.

And there's something very nice about that. You think, oh, it's really nice that the crowd has acknowledged that this person has died. But whenever I see that, there's a sense in which it breaks my heart because they clap for about 30 seconds and then that's it.

[14 : 35] And you think to yourself, did that man or woman go to that terrace of that stadium every day for 60 years just for that?

You will move on from us so quickly. And even your family, family is so, so important, something that we should value so highly.

But you can offer your life to your family. But even though your family may really value you, even that won't last forever.

We can test that. How much do you know about your great, great, great, great grandfather? Because one day that's what you will be.

Just a name in a genealogy. We can offer our life to all of these things.

[15 : 41] But what they offer us cannot compare to what God offers us. Because you offer your life to God and He will give you eternal life.

He will take you to be with Himself and with all others who trust in Jesus and that will last forever.

God will never, ever move on from the fact that He loves you so much. And His care towards you and your value in His family will never, ever fade.

And committing yourself to God in that way does not for one second mean abandoning work or giving up on sport or neglecting your family.

It means the absolute opposite. Because when we dedicate our lives first and foremost to God, that's what brings real meaning and purpose to work and to hobbies and to family and to life.

[16 : 41] Following God and putting Him first makes all of these things a million times better. The gospel never, ever devalues these parts of life. A God-honoring life is a life that is lived to the absolute full.

But the danger we face is that we can allow these things to devalue God. And our commitment to these things in our lives can lead us to push God to one side.

And ultimately, that will devalue ourselves. Because if you think about it, if you live entirely for work, you might do really well.

But the best you can be is an immensely valuable asset to your employer and to the people with whom you come in contact with.

That's a great thing. But compare it with this. You live for God and you will never, ever be anything less than an immensely treasured, valued and utterly loved child of God Himself.

[17 : 57] And nothing can make you more precious and nothing can make your life more valuable. Because you're made by God, you're made for God, and life in Him and life for Him is what life is really meant to be.

And that's why we're being reminded by Paul that the church of which you are part is not just a gift from God, it's a gift to God.

That's why Paul calls us to be living sacrifices. And that's why the New Testament uses a beautiful image to describe the church. What do you think could be the most beautiful image to imagine a precious gift to God?

It's the image of a bride, a perfect gift, a perfect bride for Him.

So Paul wants us to think of our lives in the church as an offering to God. And that's something, that's the first thing that Scotland in 2019 urgently needs to think about, what our lives are being offered to.

[19 : 18] Our true goal as a nation is to live our lives as an offering to God. Now at the heart of that life for Him is a key word that is absolutely fundamental to the Christian life.

It's a crucial word and it's found in verse 18. So which one do you think it is?

Obedience. Now there's a word that's often misunderstood and there's a word that's maybe like, oh, what does this mean?

The word obedience is at the very center of Christianity, but it is often misunderstood and there's two big mistakes that people make concerning the word obedience.

Number one, people think that obedience is a requirement in order to be saved. So people think that if we do this or if we do that, if we're more good than we're bad, if we can keep God's commandments, then we will be saved through our obedience.

[20 : 31] That is not the gospel and that is not Christianity. The whole of Christianity is grounded on the fact that we can never, ever be obedient enough ourselves to earn our salvation.

It is impossible and because we cannot be obedient enough, the only way that we can be saved is because Christ has been obedient in our place.

He has fulfilled all the requirements of the law. He's taken on himself all the implications of our failures. He stood in our place, he died on our behalf and the only way we can be saved is through trusting in him.

We're never, ever saved through works of our own obedience. Salvation is a gift and it's received through faith in Christ.

So obedience is not a requirement in order to be saved. That's the first mistake that people make. The second mistake that people make is that people think that obedience is not a requirement once you are saved.

[21 : 39] So people think because Jesus has done everything and because we're saved through his free gift and because our works contribute nothing to our salvation, then now that we are saved, we can do what we like.

And a lot of people think like that, that how they live their life doesn't really matter because Jesus has done it all. We can do what we want.

But that is a tragic and really quite horrible distortion and misunderstanding of the gospel. And it's a distortion that arises from a failure to recognize that God's goal for humanity is to make life outstandingly good.

God's goal is to make life outstandingly good. That's always been his goal, that life would be brilliant. He has created us in his image. He's placed us in an incredible universe as our home and he's ready to pour his love and kindness out into us over and over again.

He wants life to be outstandingly good for us. And the question is, how do we make life outstandingly good for humanity?

[22 : 56] And the answer is so simple. We follow the instructions of our maker. And that of course makes perfect sense.

If you pick up a violin, so you take a violin, you pick it up and you think, okay, I am going to make outstandingly good music with this. So how do you make outstandingly good music with a violin?

Have you ever tied one? You pick one up and you give it a wee rub. It sounds horrific. Awful. So how do you make outstanding music with a violin?

You follow the instructions that are required in accordance with how it's been made. You can't just do what you like. You have to learn to do it in a very particular, careful, specific way.

And then if you conform to how it's been designed, you can fulfill its potential. Same with a football team. How do you play brilliant football? You just jump onto the pitch and do whatever you like. No.

[23 : 52] You follow the laws of the game and you follow the instructions of people who really know how to play good football. How do we make life outstandingly good?

We follow the instructions of the one who made us and then we will fulfill our potential. And this is what makes sin such a hideous intrusion into life because life is meant to be outstandingly good for humanity and sin pulls us away from our potential and it diverts us away from God and from His instructions and is constantly seeking to destroy us.

That's why obedience is so crucial in the Christian life. We are not saved by your obedience, but as those who are saved, we're absolutely committed to obeying God.

That's what it means to have Jesus as Lord. We say that Jesus is Lord. Well, that means we obey Him. If He's Lord, we want to follow what He tells us to do.

Verse 12 in this chapter tells us that He's risen to rule all peoples. He is our ruler. He is our Lord who we want to obey. And that's not to make our lives a misery.

[25 : 06] It's to give us joy and peace and hope as verse 12 says. And you can test that. You can test it.

So think of the Ten Commandments. Think of the New City Catechism. You recited some of the implications of the teaching. I think Commandments was at 6, 7 and 8. Let me find the page.

The sixth, seventh and eighth Commandments, which are do not steal, do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal. The ninth Commandment is do not bear false witness.

The tenth Commandment do not covet. You look through the details of the stuff it talks about there, about being patient, about avoiding hate, about being faithful, living pure lives, about not taking stuff that belongs to other people.

When you read that, how could you possibly conclude that disobedience will make for a better life?

[26 : 03] And the same is true of the ethical instructions of the New Testament. So the New Testament tells us, don't gossip, don't take revenge, don't be bitter, don't be heartless, don't be greedy, is ignoring that kind of instruction going to make life better?

Never. Obedience to God does not make life worse. It makes life so much better. And for everyone who's a Christian or for everyone who becomes one, now that God dwells in their hearts by His Spirit, we are empowered to obey Him in a way that we never were before.

So obedience is not an initial requirement of the gospel, but it is absolutely a goal of the gospel.

And that is because God wants life to be outstandingly good. The way we achieve that is to listen to Him.

Now, ultimately, that restoration of human life to being outstandingly good will only come in the future.

[27 : 13] It belongs to that age to come where there will be a new creation, a new heavens and a new earth where there will be no more sin, no more of the horrible damage that sin's curse has caused.

And instead, there will only be the very best of life here. So there will be the best friendship, the best music, the best scenery, the best work, the best laughter, the best joy, the best fulfillment, the best relationship with God and with each other.

Human life in the new creation will be outstandingly good. That's what eternal life is. It's not just about it going on and on and on and on forever in terms of length. It's about it being at the highest, highest level in terms of quality.

Life that is outstandingly good. But the New Testament also makes clear that although that's going to be fully realized in the future, it begins right now.

And that's why we obey Him now. That's why we live for Him now. That's why human life starts getting better right now through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[28 : 23] And that's why the church is so incredibly important because that's the place where the quality of the life of the age to come can be seen now.

And that's why Paul told us in verse 14 that the church is a place that should be full of goodness. And that's why Scotland desperately, desperately needs the influence and impact of Christians who are living in obedience to God.

Because by doing that, you and I can make life better. You can make your home better. You can make your school better. You can make your workplace better. You can make your community better.

You can't make it perfect and you will get bruised and battered along the way, but you can still make it better by living in obedience to all that God instructs.

So where there's harshness in your office, you can bring patience, where there's selfishness all around you, you can bring generosity, where there's exploitation in the world that we live in, you can bring kindness, where there's tension, you can bring peace, where there's weariness, you can bring joy, where there's bitterness, you can bring forgiveness.

[29 : 48] And it all makes sense if we live our lives like that this week and every week in closer obedience to Jesus, it will make life better for Scotland.

And that's why this is not an obscure passage about a relic of Macedonia and Achaia. It's a priority passage for Scotland today. This is what our nation needs.

It needs people living in obedience to God. It needs people obeying the one who made us. And so that's another thing that we urgently need to think about as a nation.

The more we live in obedience to God, the better it'll be for Scotland. And then last of all, and briefly, there's a final point that Paul wants us to think about.

It's challenging us to think about what we're living for. And as a nation, we need to think, well, what are we offering our lives to? We need to think about that. We've been challenged to obedience, called to recognize the fact that obedience to God will make life better for ourselves, for our communities, for our nations.

[30 : 56] And then finally, Paul says that in order for all of this to happen, two crucial things are needed. And he identifies them in the closing verses of the chapter.

What are the two crucial things that Scotland needs? Church planting and church revitalizing.

And that's what he speaks about in the last section of chapter 15. Remember Paul said that he was satisfied with the church in Rome. He's reached the point of maturity where he's convinced by their status.

So what now for Paul? Is he going to just retire and just relax? No way. He is going to crack on and plant new churches and revitalize the ones that are struggling.

And it's a key point for us to remember that we do not aim to plant churches and we do not aim to revitalize them in order to make the church stronger.

[32 : 02] We plant and revitalize churches in order to make Scotland better. Because what does Scotland need? It needs the transforming power of the gospel.

And for that reason it needs the church of Jesus Christ everywhere, absolutely everywhere. And that's why we need to plant new churches. That's why we need to revitalize the struggling ones.

Because if all of our communities are filled with people living in obedience to Jesus Christ, in other words when the church is what it really should be, then we're going to take huge steps towards returning our nation to what God has always intended us to be, to our God commanded destiny.

So Scotland desperately needs more church plans and it desperately needs struggling congregations to be revitalized. And through these more and more people will live lives that instead of being offered out to the gods of work or sport or entertainment or sex, they're going to be poured out as offerings to the God who made us.

And in the midst of a hideously broken world, that will show people, show people who are bruised and battered by that brokenness, it will show people that in Jesus Christ there really is good news.

[33 : 24] And that human life really can be outstandingly good again. And I want us just to notice very quickly, I'm just going to pull out two or three points about church planting and church revitalizing that Paul mentions here.

Verse 20, he says, I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named lest I build on someone else's foundation. There he's reminding us we need to think strategically.

We want to identify areas of need. We do not want to duplicate our efforts. If there's a brilliant church somewhere, we don't need to plant another one next door. We want to work together as one church across the denominations in order to reach out to our nation.

Verse 21 says it must be that it's written, those who have never been told of him will see and those who have never heard will understand. That's reminding us that at the heart of our vision for planting churches needs to be the plight of the lost.

So yes, we may think in terms of places. So we would love maybe to plant a church west of Edinburgh, south of Edinburgh. We love to think in terms of places, but the goal is not the place.

[34 : 39] The goal is the people. And God forbid that we are ever numb to the fact that people are going to hell in the suburbs of Edinburgh and on the islands of Scotland.

Those who have never been told desperately need to hear about him. And then verse 23 and 24 reminds us that all of this can come at a cost. Paul wanted to go to Rome.

He's been wanting to go to Rome for ages, but we don't always get to do what we want to do when we want. Sometimes we have to put these things to one side. It's a cost to these things, but it's worth it.

And then he starts talking about church revitalizing because he says, I want to plant new churches. I want to go to all these new places, but right now I can't because I'm going to go and help a congregation that's struggling.

I'm off back to Jerusalem to help the saints there. And he's emphasizing for us here that there's a collective responsibility. So Macedonia and Achaia, they've made a collection in order to help the poor amongst the church in Jerusalem.

[35 : 45] That shared burden and responsibility for one another where we want to help and support one another. So he makes a really interesting point in verse 27. He emphasizes the fact that we must never forget the debts of the past.

So the church in Rome and the church in Macedonia and in Achaia, they owed a debt to the church in Jerusalem because they had sent people out.

And we must never, ever forget that ourselves. Even in Scotland, you look back over history, there's times where the highlands are indebted to the lowlands. There's times when the lowlands are indebted to the highlands.

We're all indebted to each other and that unites us to help one another. And then in verse 30, which is not on the screen, we're being reminded that we are all, whether it's planting or revitalizing, we are to strive together in prayer.

Because this passage is pressing home to us what Scotland as a nation needs and what the church in Scotland needs to do. We need to plant new churches.

[36 : 52] We need to revitalize existing ones. That's what Paul had to do 2,000 years ago. That's what we still have to do today.

And all of this is reminding us that the people of Scotland are too precious to be lost to godlessness.

God has got something far better for us as a nation. God's goal is that we will be a nation offered to him in worship, that we will be a people who live in obedience to him and through that, that life would be so much better for everyone.

And in order to do that, we want to strive towards planting and revitalizing churches. Wouldn't it be just brilliant? Wouldn't it be just brilliant if people could look at Scotland and instead of saying, oh, well, that's a godless nation?

They could look at Scotland and say, there's a nation that is an acceptable offering to God.

[37 : 57] Now you're probably thinking, Thomas, that'll never happen. Well, if you are thinking that, then you need to go and learn your Scottish history because it happened before in Scotland.

God has transformed this nation through the power of the gospel. He has done it before. God forbid that we forget he can do it again.

Amen. Let's pray. Dear God, our Father, we pray for our nation and we acknowledge that our nation's greatest and most urgent need is to know you and to return to you and to live for you.

And we know, God, that the nations sit in the palm of your hand and we pray that you would just be doing a mighty work across the cities, towns, and villages of Scotland.

From here in the lowlands to the highlands and islands, we pray that you would once again turn people back to you and please give us our vision and our confidence to do all that we can to plant new churches, to revitalize struggling ones, to live out our own lives in obedience to you so that we can look at our lives and say, this is an offering to God.

[39 : 55] May that be true of us all. In Jesus' name, amen.