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Sermon Notes

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The Plans and Priorities of Paul the Apostle

Romans 15:23-29

Introduction

Every day we make plans

From small things, like making a shopping list or planning out a work day

To larger things like vacation plans or retirement planning

Financial Planning

- Debt strategies
- Savings plans
- Planning for college
- Long-term investments
- Retirement
- Insurance

History has been made by grand plans that have come to fruition: like the Marshall Plan, made in July of 1947 to invest \$13 billion to rebuild Europe after WWII

Architects spend their whole careers planning out every detail of a building; engineers, every detail of a project

Even a recipe is a plan, so is a dinner date, so is setting your alarm for tomorrow morning

One of the ways in which we are in the image of God: the ability to anticipate the future and take action based on it

Proverbs 22:3 A prudent man sees danger and takes refuge, but the simple keep going and suffer for it.

Certainly ants have a certain kind of instinctive planning:

Proverbs 6:6-8 Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! ⁷ It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, ⁸ yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest.

But human planning is at a much higher level... including even planning for Judgment Day and eternity beyond

The Christian is trained to think in three senses: 1) the Lord may return or I may die tonight, so I must be ready for eternity right now; 2) The Lord may not return or I may not die for a long time, so I need to keep working, plan for the future, and act on wise plans; 3) But, having planned, I need to submit all my plans to God and let Him make the final decisions

Isaiah 32:8 the noble man makes noble plans, and by noble deeds he stands.

Here, we get a look at the Apostle Paul's plans... how he thinks... how he makes decisions... and how the Lord finally disposes of whatever plans Paul makes

I. Paul's Plans: To Jerusalem, then to Spain

A. Review: Paul and the Church at Rome

1. Paul's Deep Desire to Visit Rome

Romans 1:13 I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles.

Romans 15:23-24 ...I have been longing for many years to see you, ²⁴ I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while.

2. Why Paul Hadn't Visited Rome Yet

a. We saw previously that Paul made it clear his priority was on unreached peoples

i) Paul's ambition

Romans 15:20-21 It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation. ²¹ Rather, as it is written: "Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand."

ii) Led to Paul's activity: preaching constantly from Jerusalem all the way round to Ilyricum

- b. The Roman church was already planted, growing, maturing, with good strong leaders (verse 14: “full of goodness, complete in knowledge, competent to counsel each other”)
- c. Therefore Paul hadn’t been there yet

B. Paul’s Amazing Declaration: No More Place to Work

Romans 15:23-24 But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to see you, ²⁴ I plan to do so when I go to Spain.

1. Not that there was no one who hadn’t heard the gospel
2. Not that there was not significant and valuable work to do
3. Rather: He was a frontier, trailblazing apostle and the trail had been blazed
 - a. From Jerusalem to Ilyricum, a church planted in each region
 - b. Others could build on the foundations he’d laid
 - c. Paul’s kind of work was done, and there were new regions to work in
4. Spain: New horizon of fruitful ministry... a new trail to blaze (more in a moment)

C. Paul Planned, God Decided

Romans 15:23-25 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, ²⁴ 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. ²⁵ At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints.

1. First to Jerusalem, then to Spain
2. All plans subject to the final will of God

Proverbs 16:1 To man belong the plans of the heart, but from the LORD comes the reply of the tongue.

Proverbs 16:9 In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.

Proverbs 19:21 Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails.

James 4:13-15 Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." ¹⁴ Why, you do

not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. ¹⁵ *Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."*

3. Even the great Apostle Paul made plans that never came to fruition
 - a. Paul describes his plans here to the Romans... but it's not clear he ever made it to Spain, as we'll discuss more in a moment
 - b. Clearly in 2 Corinthians, however, Paul has to describe his change of plans to that local church
 - c. The issue there was very much like the one here... Paul's travel plans and whether or not he can visit the church in Corinth

2 Corinthians 1:15-18 I planned to visit you first so that you might benefit twice. ¹⁶ *I planned to visit you on my way to Macedonia and to come back to you from Macedonia, and then to have you send me on my way to Judea.* ¹⁷ *When I planned this, did I do it lightly? Or do I make my plans in a worldly manner so that in the same breath I say, "Yes, yes" and "No, no"?* ¹⁸ *But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not "Yes" and "No."*

- d. The issue is that an apostle who changes plans seems unstable, uncertain, unsure, unleaderlike, unreliable
 - e. Nothing could be further from the truth in Paul's case
 - f. It's just that God makes the final decision in all human plans
4. BUT knowledge that God makes final decisions should not close off making plans
 - a. We must understand that Christ could come back any moment
 - b. Or that death may suddenly take us from this world
 - c. YET as Stewards, we must plan for the future anyway

II. Paul's Mission to Jerusalem: Serving and Uniting the Church

A. What Was the Mission?

Romans 15:25-26 Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there. ²⁶ *For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem.*

1. The issue is a love offering... MONEY... given by Greek believers to Jewish believers

2. Paul describes it as a “koinonia”, a “fellowship” or simply a “contribution”
 - a. This word stems from the sense of sharing all things in common
 - b. We are the family of God, and whatever God gives to one of us in some sense belongs to all of us
 - c. Not like communism, in which the government coerces that shared ownership
 - d. But rather in understanding that all possessions are temporary anyway, given by God to individuals as stewards to be used for the advance of His Kingdom

3. The money was for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem... Jewish believers
 - a. Almost certainly these poor Jewish Christians had been impoverished by their allegiance to Christ
 - b. They had probably been evicted from the synagogue, unable to worship in the temple
 - c. Therefore they were social outcasts, and also probably economic outcasts as well
 - d. Jewish-Christian shopkeepers would find their shops legally boycotted or confiscated
 - e. Jewish-Christian tradesmen were unable to ply their trades
 - f. Jewish-Christian merchants would find their goods unwelcome, their caravans unprofitable
 - g. Jewish-Christian farmers would be unable to sell their grain or fruit
 - h. Official Jewish hostility to the gospel meant almost guaranteed poverty for the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem
 - i. So, they were the “poor among the saints in Jerusalem”
 - j. These were the very people the leaders of the church at Jerusalem had asked Paul never to forget when he did his ministry among the Gentiles

Galatians 2:9-10 James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews. ¹⁰ All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

4. The money was given by the churches in Macedonia and Achaia:
 - a. Paul wrote at length to the church in Corinth (that's in Achaia) about how generously the Macedonian church had been in this offering
 - b. The extended treatment is found in 2 Corinthians 8-9

2 Corinthians 8:1-4 And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. ² Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. ³ For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, ⁴ they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.

- c. Apparently Paul's appeal to Achaia was as effective as that among the Macedonians, for they were included among those who were PLEASED to give
- d. The joyful attitude of the Gentile givers in both places is highlighted

vs. 26 For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution... they were pleased to do it..."

- i) Paul uses the same word twice to emphasize that this was a cheerful and unforced gift
 - ii) He is highlighting the attitude among the Gentile churches
5. It was undoubtedly a significant offering; therefore it would have been very heavy if it were in gold or silver coins
 - a. Paper money was unknown then
 - b. Still less internet banking... transferring large sums by computer to a private numbered account in the Grand Caymans can be done now... but certainly not then
 - c. The offering would have to be carried by hand on animals or ships until it reached Jerusalem
 - d. Dangerous journey, in constant danger from highway robbery
 - e. Also open to suspicion as to whether Paul himself could be trusted with the money

B. What Was Paul's Motive in the Mission?

1. Service to the Saints

- a. The word is related to the word for “deacon”
- b. It has to do with serving to meet a physical need
- c. The desire is to care for the physical needs of the poor among the Jewish saints in Jerusalem

2. Unity in the Church

- a. Paul desires to draw the church together, especially across Jew-Gentile lines as we’ll see in a moment
- b. Paul wants one part of the body of Christ to share in the needs of the other

2 Corinthians 8:13-15 Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. ¹⁴ At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, ¹⁵ as it is written: "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little."

C. What Was Paul’s Attitude toward the Mission?

- 1. Paul deeply desires to see the power of the Gospel in drawing together former enemies
- 2. The power of the Gospel in uniting Jews and Gentiles is constantly on his mind
 - a. Paul, the excellent Jew, the Hebrew of Hebrews, the Pharisee excelling in Judaism beyond any of his countrymen
 - b. Now made “Apostle to the Gentiles”... with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of Christ to these unwashed Gentiles so that, through faith in Christ, they might become an offering acceptable to God sanctified by the Holy Spirit
 - c. He wanted to see LIVED OUT IN THE CHURCH what he wrote was already true spiritually:

Ephesians 2:14-17 For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵ by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. ¹⁷ He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.

- d. One very open, obvious, tangible way to display this unity is for GREEK Christians (Macedonia is the northern province of Greece, where

Alexander the Great was born; Achaia is the southern region of Greece) to come to the aid of poor JEWISH Christians in Jerusalem

3. So he displays a remarkable attitude about this offering:
 - a. He certainly describes how gladly willing the Greeks were to give
 - b. But he goes beyond and says they really OWED it to the Jews

Vs. 27 They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings

- c. Paul's logic here is amazing
- d. The Gentiles owe their salvation to the Jews
 - i) Jesus said so openly to the Samaritan woman

John 4:22 You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews.

- ii) Paul had said so earlier in this letter

Romans 11:17-18 If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, ¹⁸ do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you.

- iii) Why? Jesus was Jewish and the Scripture is Jewish

- e. Paul's attitude is: since you Gentiles have received so much from the Jews spiritually: forgiveness of sins, adoption into the family of God, a place at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven... "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus"... YOU OWE IT TO THE JEWS to share your material blessings with them

D. What Was Paul's Reason for Telling the Church at Rome about the Mission?

1. Obviously he wants to add more and more weight to the total unity of the church: Jew and Gentile are truly ONE in Christ
2. Secondly, he wants to teach them how to think about material possessions and sacrificial giving... he wants them to learn how to give to God's work cheerfully
3. Thirdly, he's about to ask them for help in his own mission to Spain... so he wants to prepare them for that

III. Paul's Mission to Spain: Advancing the Church

A. Why Did Paul Want to Go to Spain?

1. Simply put, for the glory of God and of His Christ
2. AND for the harvest there
3. Spain represented "the ends of the earth"
 - a. There is some good evidence that the Old Testament "Tarshish" where Jonah was sailing to was in Spain... maybe Tartessos or some other ancient port along the Mediterranean coastline of southern Spain
 - b. The Roman Empire had occupied Spain since 200 B.C., but only in Paul's lifetime had the Romans settled and organized the country
 - c. Spain represented the westernmost extent of human civilization as far as Paul knew... it was the ENDS OF THE EARTH to Paul

B. Paul's Life Plotted in the Prophecies... a Command to be Obeyed

1. Paul's command from Isaiah 49

Isaiah 49:1-6 Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations: Before I was born the LORD called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name... ⁵ And now the LORD says-- he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength-- ⁶ he says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."

What God said to Christ in the Old Testament "I will make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth"

Paul took as his personal life verse, the command for the movement of his life:

Acts 13:46-47 Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. ⁴⁷ For this is what the Lord has commanded us: "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth."

2. Similarly, Isaiah 66

Isaiah 66:19 "I will set a sign among them, and I will send some of those who survive to the nations-- to Tarshish, to the Libyans and Lydians (famous as archers), to

Tubal and Greece, and to the distant islands that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory. They will proclaim my glory among the nations.

Tarshish was probably distant Spain!!!

C. Many Prophecies: The “Ends of the Earth” Are Christ’s

a. Psalm 2 gives the “ends of the earth to Christ”

Psalm 2:8 Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.

b. Many prophecies claiming the distant regions for Christ

Psalm 22:27 All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him

Psalm 67:5-7 May the peoples praise you, O God; may all the peoples praise you. ⁶ Then the land will yield its harvest, and God, our God, will bless us. ⁷ God will bless us, and all the ends of the earth will fear him.

Isaiah 45:22 "Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other.

c. Paul knows the gospel must extend to the distant parts of the earth before Christ returns

d. So, Paul wanted to “speed the day of the Lord” by preaching as far from Jerusalem as possible... claiming the distant coastlands for Christ

D. What Did Paul Want to Do in Spain?

1. Simply put, he wanted to preach the gospel, reap a harvest of souls for Christ, plant healthy churches

Romans 1:13 in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles.

2. He did not want to build on someone else’s foundation

3. Rather, he wanted to plant healthy churches that could evangelize the whole region

4. He wanted to CLAIM that region for Christ!!! To stick a banner in it for the Lord, just as Christopher Columbus did for Christ and for King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain when he landed in the New World

E. Did Paul Ever Make It to Spain?

1. No New Testament evidence that Paul ever made it to Spain
2. The exact chronology of Paul's life is very difficult to determine, but it is quite possible that Paul's trip to Jerusalem to bring the Gentile offering was the one described in Acts 20-21 in which he was arrested and eventually brought in chains to Rome
3. However, some scholars believe that Paul was eventually released in Rome and DID go west to Spain, and was later re-arrested, tried before Caesar, and executed in Rome
4. Either way, we see the heart of Paul AND the sovereign plan of God ultimately fulfilled... the distant coastlands have ALL been claimed for Christ; now all that is needed is every tribe and language and people and nation hearing the gospel

IV. How Rome Fit In: Understanding and Helping These Missions

A. What Did Paul Want from the Roman Church?

1. He clearly had a motive in writing all this
2. Some believe he is finally getting to his real reason for writing the entire epistle of Romans
3. The WHOLE THING they say is the most glorious support letter ever written by someone raising support for a mission trip

B. Understanding the Missions

1. Paul wanted the church in Rome to understand his perspective of Jew-Gentile unity
 - a. He wanted them to see the spiritual wisdom in Gentiles OWING IT to the Jews to help them
 - b. He wanted them to be ready to assist Jewish believers financially as they also had opportunity
2. He also wanted them to understand his passion for the unreached people groups of the world... his drive to preach the gospel where Christ hadn't been named

C. Helping the Missions

Romans 15:24 I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while.

Romans 15:28 So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they have received this fruit, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way.

1. He wanted them most of all to support him on his way through
2. The Greek word “assist” in the NIV is a technical term for mission support
3. Financial support and perhaps personnel support
4. On his way through, he wants the church at Rome to be a replenishing waystation for his mission

D. Reducing Their Expectations

1. Finally, he doesn’t want them to think he’s going to settle down and be their pastor
2. He says very plainly that he’s just passing through
3. Remember, he says they’re

“full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to counsel one another”

And he doesn’t want to

“build on someone else’s foundation”

4. They don’t really need him and pastoring an established church is not his calling anyway
5. So, he wants them to know he’s just passing through
6. BUT he does promise a rich blessing of fellowship when they are together:

Vs. 29 I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ.

What an awesome thing to say! Our time together will be so rich, I will come in the name of the Lord and leave in the name of the Lord... and when I do I and you will BOTH be blessed with the full measure of the blessing of Christ!!

V. Application

- A. Making Plans in a Godly Way
- B. Investing Wisely in God’s Work
- C. Understanding our Debt to the Jews

D. Commitment to Reaching the Ends of the Earth