

How To Be A Good And Faithful Servant (Part 3)

Text: Romans 15:14-33

Series: Romans [#21]

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Theme: **Good And Faithful Servants Follow God's Game Plan.**

Introduction

We have almost finished this walk through the book of Romans. Paul concluded his instruction at verse 13 in chapter 15. He has finished developing this theme of the gospel, the good news of Christ Jesus. Now he moves to some personal matters. But it would be a serious mistake to close our Bibles when we come to verse 14.

What is important about this closing section? There is a link between 15:14-33 and the first 17 verses of chapter 1. Paul once again is showing us something of *how to be a good and faithful servant of God*, and he does that giving himself as an example. In chapter 1 we saw our basic identity as a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, a messenger of God and as people who are set apart for the gospel. We also saw our service to the church of thankfulness, prayer, concern for growth and love. Paul was a clear example of the believer's service to the world of presenting Christ boldly, accurately and in love. Now in chapter 15 Paul calls us to follow God's game plan. *Good and faithful servants follow God's game plan*. To do this we need to keep *God's perspective* for our ministry.

Keeping God's Perspective For Your Ministry.

Keeping God's perspective for your ministry means that you know it is based on God's grace and blessing. In verse 15 Paul tells us he wrote boldly in parts of this letter "... because of the *grace* that was given [him] from God, to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the gospel of God ..." (15b-16a). He made the same point in verse five of the first chapter, "... we have received *grace* and apostleship *to bring about* the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for His name's sake."

Paul was not just being polite or modest. He knew, truly, deeply knew that all he was, had, had accomplished and ever would be and accomplish was by the grace of God. Yes, he had great abilities. But he knew it was not his abilities but God's *grace* that was the foundation and means for serving God.

- He experienced God's grace that stopped him in his tracks of persecuting the church.
- It was by God's grace that the ascended Christ appeared to him and set him apart as an apostle.
- It was God's grace that kept him through dangers and being persecuted.
- It was God's grace that drew many people to Christ and established many churches through him.

- It was by God’s grace that the Holy Spirit directed his writing so much of the New Testament.

It all was by God’s *grace*.

We have been saved by God’s grace,¹ and we are given God’s grace to serve Him. Back in chapter 12, verse 6, Paul wrote “Since we have gifts that differ according to the *grace given to us*, each of us is to exercise them accordingly...” All that we are, have and will accomplish is by God’s *grace*. If and when we lose focus of this truth, if and when it does not guide us, we have thrown out God’s game plan for good and faithful service.

Paul also knew that any and every aspect of his ministry depended on the blessing of God. Drop down to verse 29. “I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.” I love this phrase. Paul was walking with God in sincere faith. He didn’t know what the circumstances and outcome would be when he finally did make it to Rome. He certainly did not know he would arrive there as a prisoner, appealing his case to the Caesar. But because of God’s grace, knowing he was being obedient from the heart to God’s word and leading, he knew with certainty that God would bless that ministry in Rome, benefiting those believers and himself.

We are not apostles. We do not have the abilities, gifts, opportunities and results that Paul had. But God blesses our service on exactly the same basis: when we walk with Him in sincere faith, when we are obedient from the heart to His word and leading we can know with certainty that God will bless our service for Him. We may think of God’s blessings as the special experiences, provisions and results. Yet God’s “Well done,” His favor, His smile on us is not limited to the *special* or *big* things. We need to follow God’s game plan, to base all of our service for Him on His grace and blessing.

Secondly, God’s game plan for our ministry requires holiness. Go to the middle of verse 15.

“...because of the grace that was given me from God, to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the gospel of God, so that my offering of the Gentiles may become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.” (15b-16)

The language is similar to chapter 12 where Paul called us to present ourselves as living, holy and acceptable sacrifices to God, which is our spiritual service of worship (1). Here in chapter 15 Paul puts the emphasis on holiness. As with his, our service is acceptable when we and it are sanctified—set apart and holy—by the Holy Spirit.

Paul uses a figure, a metaphor of himself as a priest offering the sacrifice of the Gentile believers to God—both he and they are acceptable to God because they are sanctified, or holy.

Faithful service for God requires holiness. The Bible tells us that God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to “be holy and blameless before Him.”² As well, it tells

us that when we accepted Christ we were washed clean and “sanctified in Christ Jesus.”³ This is the reality of who we are in Christ before God. God sees us as holy in Christ.

We also know from the Bible and our experience that we still sin and that God calls us to be holy in all our behavior.⁴ In 1 Timothy chapter 2 Paul wrote that

“...Everyone who names the name of the Lord is to abstain from wickedness. Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and of earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor. Therefore [here is his point], *if anyone cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work.* Now flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.” (19b-22)

We are “useful” to God and “prepared for every good work” when we live separated to God as a holy sacrifice, being holy in all our behavior.

Now, all of this does not mean we have to get our act together perfectly, or close to it, before we can serve God.

- It does mean that our commitment to God must be to be holy as He is.
- It does mean that we are to ask God to keep our thoughts, motives and behavior pure.
- It does mean that we are to ask God to have the Holy Spirit bring to our attention anything and everything that is not holy, and then to thank Him for this and deal with it. We are to have a zero tolerance for casual attitudes toward or excuses for any sin in our own lives.
- It does mean we are to keep growing in holiness, in being like Christ.

To be a good and faithful servant of God requires holiness.

Next, God’s game plan for our ministry includes our understanding that every step and result is God’s accomplishment. In verse 17 Paul states he boasts in Christ Jesus about the things of God. He explains this in verse 18 as boasting only about what “Christ has accomplished through [him].”

Both Paul and Peter wrote that all the spiritual abilities we have are God’s gifts to us.⁵ So, we cannot take credit for them, or give credit for them to our parents, grandparents or anyone in our family tree. The spiritual abilities we have for serving God and others are gifts of God’s grace. In 1 Corinthians 4 Paul reminds us that we are servants of Christ who are to be responsible, to be trustworthy. We are not to think we or the accomplishments of our service for God are better than others. Why not? He explains in verse 7, “For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why

do you boast as if you had not received it?" All our gifts and accomplishments are God's work.

A non-negotiable starting point for thinking and living this is humility. Yes, Paul reminded the believers in Rome of the kinds of things Christ accomplished through him, but he gave credit to Christ alone, and wanted them to know and do that. As he wrote in Galatians 6:14,

“... may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”

We are to have humility about ourselves and our service, and also about others we respect. A representative of a ministry presented a proposal to a ministerial association I was part of for that organization's leader to come to the area. When we asked for some questions and concerns to be clarified the representative dismissed the concerns and said that they had such a large following that even if Billy Graham criticized their leader or organization, he would feel the effects in loss of financial support. There was not even a hint of humility in that man's demeanor or words. There was a clear consensus in the ministerial not to proceed any farther with their proposal.

So we should watch our own hearts and minds and be discerning about our humility or lack of it. I am not suggesting the kind of *language policing* where any time we or someone else speaks of “my ministry”, “my church”, or “what we have accomplished”, that the pride alarm is automatically triggered. But when we or others have a pattern of thinking and speaking of what we have accomplished or elevating ourselves above others, then we need to reflect and be cautious. No matter what the *results*, all service that is infected with pride has departed from God's game plan. God stands in opposition to the proud⁶ and will not share His glory with anyone.⁷

God's perspective for your ministry includes it being based on His grace and blessing, flowing from a holy life and knowing that every step and result is God's accomplishment, not yours. As well, it always looks ahead. Paul shows us this by example as he was looking for new places for ministry. Go to verse 20, “And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named, so that I would not build on another man's foundation.” Paul's call was different from most in that God wanted him to break new ground, to preach the gospel where it was not known. But this statement also shows us he was looking ahead for places for future ministry.

He also was looking forward to going to Rome. In verse 23 he tells us this had been in his plans “for many years.” He kept this in his plans even though it took many years to come about. It was a goal, a dream which God placed in his heart, and he kept looking forward to it.

Then verses 24 and 28 show us that he was looking forward to doing pioneer work in Spain. The Bible doesn't tell if that he reached Spain or not. The letter of 1 Clement, written

at the close of the first century, implies that he did.⁸ The first listing and description of the New Testament canon, written around 170 states that he did.⁹ But we do not have concrete proof that he did. We do know it was his deep desire for a long time.

There is one more part of his plans which we see in verse 25, “but now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints.” Paul had received contributions to help the poor believers in Jerusalem. He was determined to go there to put his seal on this tangible expression of fellowship and to minister despite the risks of persecution from the Jewish religious leaders.

Are you looking ahead to find and plan things to do in God’s service? This isn’t limited to those in what we call full time vocational ministry. It doesn’t have to include moving to different and dangerous places. It is insightful that many Christians in Canada look ahead to, plan for a whole bunch of different things, to buying a new car or home, advancing in their education and career, going on the next or a special vacation, and what they will do in retirement, but don’t give much thought about how they will serve God in the future. Not all of us are big vision kind of people. But all of us can and should be alert to, looking for ways to serve God.

There are some who plan ahead, but who seem to rely more on their dreams and plans than God’s directions. James addressed that in his letter, telling us

“... you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.’ But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil.”¹⁰

We are to look ahead, move forward in faith, consciously depending on God to lead us. *Good and faithful servants follow God’s game plan for their ministry.*

Maintaining God’s Perspective On Other Believers.

Looking beyond our own ministry, we also need to maintain God’s perspective on other believers. Part of that is recognizing the gifts, maturity and ministry that they have. Paul was spiritually mature, had many gifts, had a long track record of effective and fruitful ministry, was unmatched in intellect in the first century church, and had a clear and great vision for the future. He easily could have looked down on others.

That is a very natural tendency. You may recall that this even happened to Jesus. Early in His public ministry when He called Philip to follow Him, Philip went out and found Nathaniel. Philip told Nathaniel that they had found the Messiah, who is “Jesus of Nazareth.” Nathaniel’s response? “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?”¹¹ Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but was raised in Nazareth. Nazareth was a beautiful place, but it had a terrible reputation. Nathaniel was saying, “How can the Messiah, or anything good come from *that place?*”

Paul did not look down on others because he had greater abilities and experience, because their station in society or the church was lower than his, or because of their background. Notice again what he tells the believers in Rome as he begins this section in

verse 14. “And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able also to admonish one another.” He recognized their growing and mature character, their gifts and ability to minister to each other.

Later, in verses 26-27, he notes how the newer, mostly Gentile believers of Macedonia and Achaia were “pleased” to help the poor Jewish believers in Jerusalem. He said this was a fitting partnership because the gospel had come to them through the Jewish people and now these Gentile believers could help support these poor Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul recognized differences, but accepted the unique situation and value of each one.

It is easier for some people to point out the weaknesses and flaws in others and their ministries, the things they don’t do, the things they wish they would do, than their gifts, maturity and what God is doing through them.

God’s game plan for good and faithful service includes recognizing each others’ gifts, maturity and ministry. It also includes our responsibilities to others. As an apostle and pastor-teacher, Paul had certain responsibilities to the churches. For example, in verse 15 he writes, “I have written very boldly to you on some points so as to remind you again, because of the grace that was given me from God.” Then later in chapter 16 he wrote

“Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting.” (17-18).

In addition to encouraging them, Paul knew he had the responsibility to stress, clarify and repeat God’s truth and to urge them to be alert to and turn away from those who cause problems and teach things that are not true.

What are our responsibilities to each other? There certainly are many found in Scripture. For example, consider the “one another” statements just here in the book of Romans.

- 12:5, we are “members of one another”—we belong to and are to preserve and experience unity.
- 12:10, “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor.”
- 12:16, “Be of the same mind to one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly.” Paul states this again in 15:15.
- In 13:8, we owe each other, we have the responsibility “to love one another.”

- Then in 14:19, we are to “pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.”
- And 15:7, “accept one another” and to show that, as 16:16 states, in greeting one another.

Yes, God’s game plan for good and faithful service includes recognizing our responsibilities to others.

Finally, we are to recognize the importance of others to us and our ministry. Paul knew he needed other believers and did not see that as a weakness or something he called for only in desperate times. He knew he needed and asked for the prayers of the believers in Rome even though they had never met. Look at verse 30.

“Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me, that I may be rescued from those who are disobedient in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints.”

He also asked them to pray that he would be refreshed and encouraged by them. Verse 32, “so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God and find refreshing rest in your company.” Earlier in verse 24 he asked them to help him in his planned ministry to Spain. He doesn’t give details, but it may well have included Rome being his new home church base as well as his prayer and financial supporters. Paul saw others not as competitors but coworkers, and said so. He refers to Priscilla and Aquila in 16:3 as “my fellow workers in Christ Jesus.”

Is this true of you, of us? Do we really know and count on others for prayer, encouragement, instruction by word and example, to work along side of us and to do things we are not gifted or able to do? We can and should use discernment in what we share with and ask of others, but my clear sense is that believers in our culture live too independently and see relying on others as a sign of immaturity and weakness rather than maturity and strength that it really is. God’s plan for you to be His good and faithful servant includes recognizing the importance of others to you and your service for Him.

Conclusion.

Good and faithful servants follow God’s game plan. We know a good game plan is important in many areas of life. Sometimes we have one, sometimes we don’t. At other times we have one but don’t follow it, at least as we should. I remember my first major half mile race—yes, it was a few years ago when it was still the half mile or 880 yards and not the 800 metres. And, yes, I was young. I knew I usually had a good kick or sprint at the end. So I planned not to go out too fast and set a reasonable pace before making my move with about 200 yards to go. At the 200 yard mark I made my move. I had more kick left than anyone else. I passed one, another, others. I passed them all... but one. I needed another 5-10 years to pass him. My game plan was good, but I did not execute it as well as I should

have. The good thing out of that race was that in the future, win or lose, I did not have to learn that lesson again.

Are you following God's game plan? Are you following it carefully, daily, in all situations? We know God gives all of us new beginnings and opportunities. This is part of His grace for which we are so thankful. It is never too soon, it is never too late to start following His game plan.

At the same time, it is dangerous to presume on that grace. Many opportunities come to us once and never again. You, like me, may be able to recall opportunities that God gave you for specific ministries that you either passed on, failed to pick up that never came back. God used others then to accomplish His will. We cannot presume there will be more opportunities to do what is front of us right now. As well, the character and pattern of good and faithful service is built and displayed over time. So is the character and pattern of not being a good faithful servant.

As you spend time with God in the next quiet moments, begin, or continue to evaluate the plan and quality of your service for Christ in light of the truth we have seen today. Ask the Holy Spirit to both convict and encourage you.

Thank God that He is faithful. He will forgive and establish you, regardless of how careless or self-centered you have been. He will keep on working in you to make you His good and faithful servant, to make you more like Jesus.

Determine to be faithful to Him, to learn and follow His ways, to trust and follow in all circumstances, to step forward in faith to serve Him where you are right now regardless of your circumstances, and then each day until the journey is done, until you see Him face to face.

¹ Ephesians 2:8.

² Ephesians 1:14.

³ 1 Corinthians 1:2; 6:11.

⁴ cf. 1 Peter 1:15-16.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 12:7; Ephesians 4:7; 1 Peter 4:10.

⁶ cf. James 4:6.

⁷ cf. Isaiah 42:8.

⁸ *1 Clement 5:5-6*. ca. 96 A.D.

“By reason of jealousy and strife Paul by his example pointed out the prize of patient endurance. After that he had been seven times in bonds, had been driven into exile, had been stoned, had preached in the East and in the West, he won the noble renown which was the reward of his faith, having taught righteousness unto the whole world and having reached the farthest bounds of the West; and when he had borne his testimony before the rulers, so he departed from the world and went unto the holy place, having been found a notable pattern of patient endurance.”

“the farthest bounds of the West” is generally taken to indicate Spain.

<<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/1clement-lightfoot.html>>.

Accessed 08 April 2010.

⁹ *Muratorian Canon*, or *Muratorian Fragment*, lines 38-39. ca. 170 A.D.

“departure of Paul from the city [of Rome] when he journeyed to Spain.”

<<http://www.bible-researcher.com/muratorian.html>>. Accessed 08 April 2010.

¹⁰ James 4:15-16.

¹¹ John 1:43-51.

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