

Michael McGowan

Romans 15:14-25 – *Paul’s Vocation, Our Vocation*

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Romans 15:14-25

¹⁴ I myself am convinced, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with knowledge and competent to instruct one another. ¹⁵ Yet I have written you quite boldly on some points to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me ¹⁶ to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles. He gave me the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

¹⁷ Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. ¹⁸ I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done— ¹⁹ by the power of signs and wonders, through the power of the Spirit of God. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ. ²⁰ 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.”

²² This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you.

²³ 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 visit you, ²⁴ I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to see you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while. ²⁵ Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the Lord’s people there.

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

“Paul’s Vocation, Our Vocation.”

That’s the title of our sermon today.

But before we talk about *Paul’s* vocation...

We should probably talk about the word “vocation”...

And make sure we’re on the same page.

When I say the word “vocation” what comes to mind?

Is it what you do to make money...?

Maybe a vocational school where you went to learn how to be an electrician or carpenter...?

Maybe it's that level you're hoping to get to eventually...?

Right now you have a *job*—

That you see as a stepping stone—

But you're working towards a *vocation*.

In this sense vocation = career.

We're going to try reclaiming the word “vocation” this morning...

Because it covers a lot more than paid work or a career.

Vocation comes from a Latin word, *vocare*...

Which means, “to call.”

So, at the heart of our word “vocation” ...

Is the sense of being summoned by someone to do something.

If you're a Christian—

If you've been claimed by God and belong to Jesus Christ—

Then you've been called.

You've been called in a *general* sense to belong to God's family...

To belong to the covenant people of God...

And to live as Christ's disciple in worship and obedience to God.

But there are also our particular callings:

Special tasks and duties or places of responsibility within the covenant community and society. (Schuurman)

Vocation then is not just a job where you receive pay...

But vocation is anything we've been tasked with by God.

Let's take this narrow focus we have of vocation as paid work or an established career...

And expand it.

Vocation is *anything* God is calling us to.

I am called to be a pastor...

But I am also called to be a husband, father, son, friend, and neighbor.

These are my callings...

My tasks from God.

Maybe you're retired...

You think you're done with this "vocation" stuff.

But, if we think of vocation as being called to something...

You're called to being a grandparent, maybe a mentor, a spouse, a friend, a small group leader...

Maybe it's your calling to care for your aging mom or dad;

Maybe it's you're calling to care for your sick spouse;

Maybe it's your calling to be the best neighbor possible to the people around you in the Emmanuel Home.

We do not age out of God's particular callings in our life.

Maybe you're a student and you're waiting for this concept of vocation to apply to you...

You've been itching to have a vocation.

But again, if we think of vocation as something God is calling us to...

Then your vocation right now—

Your calling from God—

Is to be a student;

Your calling is to be a son or daughter;

Your calling is to be a brother or sister or friend.

Maybe you've been staying at home with the kids just waiting to begin your vocation again...

Your vocation right now—

Your call from God...

Your task from God—

Is to be a mom or a dad...

To change diapers, take care of fussy kids...

To help kids transition from in-person to online schooling and back again.

To raise your kids to be faithful disciples...

And upstanding members of society.

On top of that you're also called to be a spouse, friend, and neighbor.

Do you see what we are getting at here?

All of life is a calling.

There is no part of your life that God is unconcerned with.

All of it matters to God...

All of it is your vocation...

All of it is your calling.

God cares about how you live every aspect of your life...

Because he's using it for his purposes.

God is summoning you to do his work in your sphere of life.

That's vocation.

Now, let's talk about Paul's vocation and our vocation.

First, vocation fits into God's purposes.

Paul's particular calling from God is to minister to the Gentiles.

“God gave me the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God” to the Gentiles.
(15:16)

Paul's main focus was the Gentiles.

And this goes hand in hand with God's purposes for the world.

God's intention has always been to save Jews *and* Gentiles.

As early on as Genesis, God tells Abraham:

“All people on earth will be blessed through you.” (Gen 12:3)

This is a thread woven throughout all of Scripture.

God's purpose is to call Gentiles into his family...

And he uses Paul to do this.

Paul's vocation—

The calling from God to Paul—

Is to carry out this aspect of God's plan.

We most likely do/will not have the vocation of an itinerant preacher...

But, as God's people, our vocations will align with God's purposes for this world.

By nature of how we defined vocation—

A call from someone to do something—

All of our work—paid and unpaid—fits into God's purposes for the world...

Because it is God calling us to it.

God's overarching mission for the world is:

Redeeming his people, and restoring everything he has created.

All of our work will somehow participate in God's work of redeeming or restoring.

It may be easier for us to point out how some vocations do this...

And harder for others.

For instance, we see how nurses, doctors, fire fighters and similar vocations...

Work at bringing restoration.

They skillfully attend to patients—

See them as people created in God's image—

And work at healing their broken bodies.

This sounds like something God does, right?

But what about other vocations...

Those not as easy to align their purpose with God's:

Janitors;

Sanitation workers;

House cleaners;

Administrators.

Are these callings from God?

You bet!

Imagine what life would be like without them:

Garbage would pile up;

Illness and stink would fill our lives;

Messiness and disorganization would rule... (Van Sloten, *Every Job a Parable*, 49)

God's purpose of order and health and his attention to detail are imaged in these vocations...

God us using them to bring restoration to the world.

In a way that is just as important as the glamorous vocations...

These vocations too are participating in what God is doing:

Redeeming and restoring.

Second, vocation is service to God and neighbor.

Remember the greatest commandment, and the second one like it?

“Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, and strength?”

“Love your neighbor as yourself?”

All of our vocations bear this responsibility.

In all of our vocations we are called to value relationships...

God is a relational God (Trinity)—

A God concerned with people—

So this becomes part of all of our vocations...

Service to God and neighbor.

We know through the Apostle Paul's example...

That his vocation was one of self-denial...

Putting others before himself.

He often went without food and sleep...

He was thrown in prison, stoned, and beaten.

And it was all in response to living out his vocation.

Paul could have avoided this...

If he made the vocation all about him.

But Paul's focus was not on self...

It was on God and neighbor...

Boasting about the work God did through him.

Today, we have a tendency to see vocation—

Anything to which we've been called...paid and unpaid—

As a means to self-fulfillment.

“How does this job benefit me?”

“How does this move me toward my career goals?”

“What does my work say about me?”

(It becomes a marker of identity)

“What will people think of me at my 5/10/20 year reunion when I tell them what I do?”

We have a tendency to make vocation about us...

But we are not at the center of our vocations.

As Christians, it is about God and other people.

The question shouldn't be: “How does this vocation benefit me?”

But, “What can I do in my work to serve others?”

“How can I serve the community around me using my talents?”

Sacrifice and self-denial is not easy.

One of the most underrated vocations out there today is raising children.

Is there any vocation/calling out there that demands more self-denial and sacrifice?

And for some in the midst of it—

Not looking back on it years later—

Is there any vocation that at times seems to bear more frustration than fruit?

Our vocations are a call to self-denial and sacrifice.

If you're frustrated in your vocation/callings—

If you're frustrated because you're not fulfilling your dreams—

Don't jump ship.

Remember, the goal of vocation/calling is not self-service.

Vocation is a calling from God to do something *for him*.

Vocation is about serving God...

And that most often happens serving those around us.

Through this he shapes us more and more into Christ...

But it doesn't always feel good...

Or seem like something beneficial to us at the time.

Vocation is service to God and neighbor.

Third, God equips us for our vocations.

I was talking to someone the other day.

They were telling me about a management position they'd been promoted to.

And they were worried they were unqualified and ill-equipped.

As we talked, they started reflecting on the last several years...

The hardships:

Trouble with extended family;

Moving away from friends and a place they loved;

Working through job changes and raising kids;

Working through destructive personal habits.

The more they reflected...

The more they realized that they had *exactly* what they needed to lead a team:

To empathize with others;

To have tough conversations;

To be self-reflective;

God prepared them for this new vocation that they were stepping into.

We see this with Paul too.

God didn't just say:

“Paul, minister to the Gentiles.”

“Figure out how you're going to do this.”

No, Paul was raised as a Pharisee...

Comfortable with and able to handle the word of God.

Paul was a Roman citizen with rights and freedoms to travel throughout the Empire...

This is where the Gentiles were!

God surrounded Paul with encouragers like Barnabas...

Who believed in his call and walked with Paul through it.

God enabled Paul to do signs and wonders as evidence of God's presence with him.

But most of all God gave him the Holy Spirit...

The power of God himself working through Paul.

As God's people—

As people united to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ—

We have the Holy Spirit working in and through us.

This is why we have the blessing at the end of the service.

In part it reminds us that we don't go out of here alone.

That God has put his Spirit in you and me to empower us to do his work.

God gives us exactly what we need for the vocations he calls us to:

Our previous experiences;

Our gifts and talents;

The people around us;

Our ability to learn and trust in him;

The Spirit of Christ living in us!

We may not feel it at the time...

But God will and does equip his people for their callings.

Fourth, we have plans for our vocations, but ultimately God is in control.

Maybe this is the single-most important thing that Paul's story teaches us.

Paul's plan is to make a quick stop in Jerusalem—

To bring an offering from the Gentile churches to the church in Jerusalem—

And then go to Spain through Rome.

It was Paul's ambition to plant churches in strategic areas...

And then to move on.

As Paul saw it, he completed his task:

He planted churches from Jerusalem all the way up to Greece.

His plan then was to go to the far reaches of the Mediterranean...

To spread the news of Christ to Spain in the west.

Paul was a church planter...

And he knew there were areas unreached.

Good plan...

But God had other ideas.

Paul's "quick trip" to Jerusalem lasts longer than he plans:

After being arrested in Jerusalem;

Sent to trial before Felix at Caesarea;

And ship-wrecked at Malta;

Paul finally makes it to Rome...in chains...a couple of years later!

And there is no evidence to suggest that Paul ever made to Spain.

Such a godly plan...

A plan that fit Paul's aspirations and strategy...

But a plan that God didn't allow to happen.

Instead, what we have is the letter to the Church at Rome...

A letter that has impacted the faith of millions and millions of people.

Paul probably thought his greatest accomplishment was still yet to happen—

His evangelizing Spain—

But God used Paul in ways that Paul probably never saw...

Ways that we are still benefiting from today.

What are your plans for your life?

Where has God called you?

What kind of passions and talents has he given you?

What kind of experiences have you had where God can use you?

Where can you best be of service to God and others?

Come up with a strategy—

Come up with a plan—

But hold it loosely.

God knows exactly how he wants to use you.

God has a plan for your life...

But it might not be the way you have it figured it out.

He is the God who rescued us from sin and death...

And he is the God who tasks us to participate in his work.

May we readily join him—

Faithfully following where he leads...

Serving others wherever he puts us...

Holding our own plans loosely...

And giving him all glory along the way.

Amen.