

“Together for the Gospel”

Romans 15:23-33

February 14th, 2021

You’re likely familiar with the legend that has given rise to Valentine’s Day.

Saint Valentine was a priest when Emperor Claudius II was persecuting the church in Rome, around 270 AD. Claudius had issued an edict that young men were not to marry because single men made better soldiers. These fighting men would not be distracted by thoughts and care of their loved ones, and could instead focus on their call to duty. Even in the permissive society of that age, the church viewed marriage as a sacred union between one man and one woman (as it should today).

Valentinus believed those who were in love should be able to marry within the Christian church. He defied the emperor’s orders, and performed marriages in secret. Valentinus was caught, imprisoned, tortured and eventually killed for performing forbidden Christian marriages.

Legend has it that while Valentinus was in prison, he prayed with and saw the healing of the blind daughter of his jailer Asterius. Asterius and his entire household are said to have come to Christian faith through Valentinus’ ministry. It is widely believed that before his execution, Valentinus wrote a farewell letter to Asterius’ daughter signed “Your Valentinus.” This was the first “valentine.”

Just over 200 years earlier, around 56-57 AD, the Apostle Paul wrote a doctrinal treatise to the Church in Rome. We’ve been working through that treatise for nearly a year and a half on Sunday mornings - a sermon series through the New Testament book of Romans I’ve entitled, *Christianity Explored*. Today, we close out our study of Chapter 15 looking at the last 11 verses (v. 23-33). There’s just one chapter remaining. The theme of today’s passage of Scripture is the fellowship that believers in Christ have with one another.

Let’s turn to the text – **Romans 15:23-33** in the *New King James Version*. Please stand.

Romans 15:22-33:

“But now no longer having a place in these parts, and having a great desire these many years to come to you,²⁴ whenever I journey to Spain, I shall come to you. For I hope to see you on my journey, and to be helped on my way there by you, if first I may enjoy your *company* for a while.²⁵ But now I am going to Jerusalem to minister to the saints.²⁶ For it pleased those from Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor among the saints who are in Jerusalem.²⁷ It pleased them indeed, and they are their debtors. For if the Gentiles have been partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister to them in material things.²⁸ Therefore, when I have performed this and have sealed to them this fruit, I shall go by way of you to Spain.²⁹ But I know that when I come to you, I shall come in the fullness of the blessing of the gospel of Christ.

³⁰ Now I beg you, brethren, through the Lord Jesus Christ, and through the love of the Spirit, that you strive together with me in prayers to God for me,³¹ that I may be delivered from those in Judea who do not believe, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints,³² that I may come to you with joy by the will of God, and may be refreshed together with you.³³ Now the God of peace *be* with you all. Amen.”

As I study this text, I see at least 9 instances of language addressing Paul coming to or being together with the Church in Rome:

- Verse 22 closed with these words, “coming to you.”
- Verse 23 closes with Paul’s desire “to come to you,” meaning the Church in Rome.
- In verse 24 Paul says “I shall come to you.”
- In that same verse, he says, “I hope to see you.”
- Again In verse 24, Paul writes he “hopes to be helped on his way to Spain by the Church in Rome.”
- The verse closes with his hope to “enjoy (their) company for a while.”
- Verse 29 reveals again Paul’s desire to “come to (the Roman Church).”
- In verse 30, Paul commands the church to “strive together” in prayer for him.
- Verse 32 reveals Paul’s hope that “(he) may come to (the Church)” in order to “be refreshed together with (them).”

I thought of an evangelical movement called “Together for the Gospel” (thus the title for today’s message). Pastors and church leaders from over 25 evangelical Christian denominations, all 50 states, and 62 nations gather Together for the Gospel every other year. While there are many differences on issues like baptism and spiritual gifts the movement is committed to standing together for the main thing—the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The doctrine present in the verses before us today is known as the **Communion of the Saints**. Today’s text uses the word “saints” three times – once in verse 25, another in verse 26, and a third in verse 31. We should understand the word “saints” as it is in the New Testament sense. “Saint” is a title or reference to every person who is a believer in Jesus Christ. It’s not only an honor or title given to some dead leader that the church decides to honor as a saint. You are a saint if you are a believer in Jesus Christ...and you’re an Ain’t if you’re not!

This doctrine of the Communion of the Saints is so important, that the framers of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, a confession we believe to be an accurate summary of Christian doctrine and subscribe to, devoted one of their 33 chapters to it.

This is paragraph 2 in the *Confession’s* chapter *Of the Communion of the Saints*: “Saints by profession are bound to maintain a holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God and to perform other spiritual services that tend to their mutual edification, including helping each other in outward things, according to their various abilities and necessities.”

Paul was not content with merely writing the church a letter. It was important that he did so because of what this book of Romans teaches Christians of all sorts (can you imagine if we didn’t have it?). Even so, Paul wanted to see the people in the Roman Church in person; he wanted to be with them to enjoy their company, their fellowship, and to worship together.

What does Paul’s desire with the church in Rome instruct us as the church in Aledo today? Shouldn’t we harbor a similar desire that Paul had for the church in Rome in our relationship to one another? Yes! Yes! A thousand times yes! Like Paul, we must encourage one another through letters, texts, emails, and messages. But, we must also desire to be together in person

again! God has made us social beings who depend upon each other; we must long for the presence of other humans. Don't let that flicker to be together be extinguished. Look to the day, hopefully very soon, to reconnect, reunite, and reignite your love for each other.

Verse 24 of today's text reveals that Paul hoped to see the Roman Christians on his way to Spain. I often sing, whistle, and hum as I go about the typical day. Every time I think about Paul wanting to go to Spain, I think of Three Dog Night's hit song entitled, "I've Never Been to Spain." "Well I never been to Spain, but I kinda like the music."

Why Spain? Paul may have been drawn to go there as it was then known to be the westernmost area of the ancient world; a place where no churches had yet been planted. But, more immediately, Paul had plans first to go to Jerusalem because he had an offering to deliver to the poor among the Church there. The offering was from Gentile believers – verse 26 identifies them as those from Macedonia and Achaia (Greece). And they had taken up a collection to minister to Jewish Christians in the holy city.

Paul uses the example of the Grecian Christians to issue a principal we find in verse 27, "For if the Gentiles have been partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister to them in material things." I like the New Living Translation here – "They were glad to do this because they feel they owe a real debt to them. Since the Gentiles received the spiritual blessings of the Good News from the believers in Jerusalem, they feel the least they can do in return is to help them financially."

"It is a simple principal: A Bible teacher ought to be supported. He should never have to do secular work to support himself or his family, though good ministers are usually happy to do it if that should prove necessary. Paul himself worked as a tentmaker at Corinth, when his support funds were low or slow in coming" (Boice, 1881).

Turning now to the last 4 verses of **Romans Chapter 15**, note Paul's mention of the first three fruit of the Spirit, as he lists them in his New Testament letter to the churches in Galatia (**Galatians 5:22**). You should know them by heart – they are love, joy, and peace:

³⁰ Now I beg you, brethren, through the Lord Jesus Christ, and through the love of the Spirit, that you strive together with me in prayers to God for me, ³¹ that I may be delivered from those in Judea who do not believe, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, ³² that I may come to you with joy by the will of God, and may be refreshed together with you. ³³ Now the God of peace be with you all. Amen."

Love, joy, and peace are three of the benefits of being yoked with one another by God the Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus Christ.

Paul urges the church in Rome (v. 30) – through the love of the Spirit – to strive with him in prayer. To pray for another person is surely to love him/her. *Have you noticed how easy it is to pray with and for those whom you love?* Paul asks for prayer from fellow Christians so he would be delivered from unbelievers he'll likely encounter when he arrives in Jerusalem with the

offering. He also asks for prayer that his service would take care of the needs of the needy in Jerusalem.

Earlier in the service we sang the hymn, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” Three times it intersects with today’s text. *Remember the first two lines of the first stanza?*

“What a Friend we have in Jesus; all our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry, everything to God in prayer!”

And, the first two lines of the final stanza:

“Are we weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Savior, still our refuge – take it to the Lord in prayer!”

Because God is a prayer hearing and prayer answering God, we can expect He’ll hear and answer our prayers on behalf of one another. Since God has loved us to the extent that He became man to live, die, and be raised again from the grave on our behalf, we can love others to great extents, too. We can love to the extent that God has loved us, in the words of another hymn from today’s service – we are loved with an everlasting love.

In verse 32, Paul writes of his joy for the Roman Christians. “That I may come to you with joy by the will of God, and may be refreshed together with you.” How great our joy when we refresh one another through our fellowship with each other in the church! Aside from our families, the people we have the most in common with, and who we should develop the closest bonds with, are fellow Christians, especially those within the same congregation.

Oh, how much the lone ranger Christian misses from not settling in with a particular congregation! *How can you get to know someone you don’t spend any time with?* I was so encouraged that Rachel B. wanted to join the congregation late last year even though she knew she’d be moving away a couple of months later. I encouraged her to make her profession of faith public here; in that sense, we’re her church home no matter where else she moves and becomes a member of the church where she presently lives.

Even as little children squeal in delight and run into the open arms of their parents when they (parents) return home from time away from each other, God’s children - the Church - ought to delight to welcome one another with open arms. What joy there is when that happens!

Verse 33 closes out the passage; it’s a benediction. “Now the God of peace be with you all. Amen.” Peace is the greatest need of sinful men and women. We live in a world at war with itself. We live in a world with God. The chief message of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that God has made peace with us by the blood of Jesus shed on the cross at Calvary.

This is the third time where Joseph Scriven’s hymn, “What a Friend we have in Jesus” intersects with today’s text:

“O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.”

So, love, joy, and peace are fruits of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

God has loved us as **John 3:16** reminds us, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.’ (NIV) We are therefore equipped to love each other in the gospel.

God delights with joy over us. **Zephaniah 3:17** instructs, “The LORD your God in your midst, The Mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet *you* with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing.” (NKJV) We are freed from the bonds of selfishness in order to rejoice over each other with singing!

Because Jesus reconciled us to God, we have peace with God and each other. **Philippians 4:7** explains that “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”

Thousands of people each year visit the Winchester Mansion in San Jose, California. This massive structure was built by Sarah Winchester, the widow of the gun company owner. For 38 years, from 1884 until her death in 1922, the house was under constant construction. Teams of carpenters, masons and other workers were employed around the clock. Various stories have been told about the reason for this unusual practice. Most center on Mrs. Winchester’s belief that she either was haunted or would be haunted by the ghosts of those killed by her husband’s weapons unless she kept building her house. Others claim that she thought she would not die as long as building continued.

Whatever the reason, she continued ordering more renovations and construction as long as she lived. There are more than 10,000 windows in the Winchester Mansion, doorways and stairs that lead to blank walls, and some 160 rooms in total. The size of the mansion is 24,000 square feet! The home has 950 doors, 40 stairways, 52 skylights, 47 fireplaces, six kitchens, and a trio of elevators. It is estimated that she spent more than \$70,000,000 in today’s money on largely pointless construction—all in a desperate search for peace that was ultimately doomed to fail.

Sarah Winchester may have seemed to have the world by its tail, but she was alone, she was lost, and she was a kingdom of one. She had no one to be together with, the very antithesis of the Church. Jesus has brought us together, brothers and sisters in Christ, by the unifying gospel!