“Building on a New Foundation,” Romans 15:14-33 (Second Sunday after Pentecost, June 2, 2024)

**14**I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another. **15**But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God **16**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. **17**In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God. **18**For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed, **19**by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God—so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ; **20**and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else’s foundation, **21**but as it is written, “Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.”

**22**This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. **23**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. **26**For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. **27**For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. **28**When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you. **29**I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.

**30**I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, **31**that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, **32**so that by God’s will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. **33**May the God of peace be with you all. Amen.

PRAY

One question that I get a lot because of my position is, “How is your church doing?” I got it on Friday as a matter of fact, but I never know how to answer that.

A lot of people in asking that question simply want to know how many people are attending. The assumption is that the church is doing better when more people attend. But it doesn’t feel right answer that question with a number. Other numbers like the size of our budget or how many baptisms we had last year also don’t seem to be the most helpful measures of how our church is doing. I don’t think it’s wise to assume the largest church in town is doing the best while the smaller churches are automatically doing the worst.

Nor are the range of programs offered or the size and condition of buildings necessarily tell you how a church is doing. A few months ago, someone said to me “Your church don’t own the building you just renovated, does it?” I answered, “No,” and I could tell that answer made him think our church was doing a little less well than he did previously.

But “good” might not be the best adjective to describe this evaluation process, because a church is a living organism. It’s made up of a group of people who have covenanted together to live as a community under the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. We don’t evaluate living organisms in terms of “good” and “bad,” at least it’s not helpful if we do.

We evaluate organisms in terms of “healthy” or “well” or “sick” or “diseased.” You don’t go to the doctor for a checkup and ask him if you are a good person. You go to the doctor to find out if you’re healthy and get his counsel on the things you can do to keep you healthy.

So, what makes a church “healthy”? We are about to wrap up our study in the book of Romans, we’re at the end of Romans 15, and in our text for this morning we read Paul’s closing exhortations to the church at Rome. Paul gives these exhortations in several of his New Testament letters, and if you read them closely, you can see some of Paul’s priorities for a local church.

If anyone is qualified to tell us about church health, it’s Paul. By understanding the priorities Paul has for the church at Rome, we’ll learn what makes for a healthy church

What we will do this morning in the sermon is ask three questions: *first, what makes a church healthy?* *Second, we’ll apply it to ourselves and ask, “Is Grace Bible Church healthy?”* In this second point, I’ll give what some pastors call a “State of the Church” address. You’ve heard of the “State of the Union” address the president gives each January. In the second point I’ll try to give you an idea of how Grace Bible is doing in some key areas. *Third, we’ll ask, “What can we do to get healthier?”*

*First, what makes a church healthy?* As you read our text for today, you’ll see that Paul points out three facets of church health. The first facet is what I’ll call *maturity*. “I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are ***full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another.***” Romans 15:14.

That’s an amazing set of compliments. Paul, we know, did not found the church at Rome. In fact, he’d never even visited it before. But Paul says, “I know enough about you Christians at Rome to say that you can care for yourselves. You know the Word of God and you put it into practice. You have all the knowledge you need. You can teach one another. You are mature.”

It’s the biggest compliment Paul can give a church. It’s his goal for every congregation. To the Thessalonian church Paul wrote, “And ***we urge you***, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.” 1 Thessalonians 5:14. But the Roman church doesn’t need urging by Paul to do these things; they already are.

Put another way, Paul is saying, “I’m an apostle. I have met the Lord Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus (we read about that in Acts 9). I have been carried up to the third heaven and heard things man is not permitted to tell (that’s 2 Corinthians 12). I’m an important man, but you Romans don’t need me. You have the Word of God, you’ve digested it, and you’re using it because you can instruct one another and build each other up in the faith without my help.”

A healthy church is mature in the faith, and *second it supports missions.* Paul was known as the missionary to the Gentiles. By the time he wrote the book of Romans, Paul argues that he had preached the gospel to everyone “from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum” (verse 19). That means Paul had, in his opinion, covered all the territory around the northeastern Mediterranean basin, which would include the modern-day countries of Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Greece, Albania, and several of the nations that make up what used to be known as Yugoslavia. It’s not that every single person in those regions was now a Christian, but each region had the witness of a growing church in it.

But what was distinctive about Paul’s ministry is found in verse 20, where he writes, “[T]hus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else’s foundation.” Paul always wanted to go into virgin territory, places where the name of Jesus had never been heard before. Now that Paul is finished with the northeast part of the Roman Empire, he wants to head west, to Spain, to the end of what was then the known world and preach to the people in the northwest part of the Roman Empire.

This is what missiologists today call “pioneer” or “frontier missions.” In the church today the word “missions” can refer to a lot of different activities, and very few of them have anything to do with taking the gospel to a group of people that have never heard it before. That’s not to say that these other activities aren’t worthy of support; it’s just that they aren’t what Paul is writing to the Romans about, and Paul expects the church there to support him as he goes into these new places. To him, it’s just what a healthy church does. That’s why he writes in verse 24, “I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and ***to be helped*** (that’s means financial help) on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while.”

*Third, a healthy church is generous with money, especially to the poor.* Not only does Paul expect the church at Rome to help fund his trip to Spain, but he expects them to care for the poor. We read in verses 25-27 about an offering Paul is collecting for the impoverished Christians back in Jerusalem. This is the same offering Paul writes about in 2 Corinthians 8-9. was the first church in the world, but now they were on the verge of starvation. Not only were the underlying economic conditions back in Jerusalem bad, but the Christians there were for the most part cut off from the ability to make money by the larger Jewish population who resented them for what they considered to be the heresy of worshiping this man called Jesus.

Now, like with missions, there’s a lot of worthwhile religious activity around the word “generosity.” You have offerings that support the work of the church itself, that pay for the salaries of the staff and keep the lights on in the buildings and buy supplies. You have gifts to other Christian institutions, like universities and publishing houses and thinktanks. But only a small percentage of the money goes to providing for the poor, especially poor Christian brothers and sisters in another part of the world. But, again, for Paul, it’s what a healthy church does. Paul writes in verse 27, “For if the Gentiles have come to share in their [the Jewish Christians’] spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings.”

Maturity, missions, and money for the poor: Paul’s priorities that reflect his convictions on what makes up a healthy church. But when you and your family sit down and think about your church, or if you’re new to town and looking to join a church, are Paul’s priorities the things you look for?  
  
I haven’t always been a pastor. I had a different career before I became a pastor, so I have been in the position of being an adult, a professing Christian with a wife and a child, moving to a new town and looking for a church, and I would be lying if I said that what I wanted out of a church for me and my family back then was what Paul was looking for.

Because when most Christians in our part of the world look for a church today, few of them are looking for what Paul was talking about. For example, when we start looking for a church we tend to look at the preacher and say, “Is he a good speaker? Does he have charisma? Can he hold my attention?” We look to the children’s activities and the youth program and say, “Is there something for my kids?” We listen to the music and say, “Do we like it?” We look at the church building and say, “Is it nice? Can it help inspire me to worship?”

There’s nothing wrong with any of those things. We aspire to have them in our church. It’s just that you can read the New Testament a thousand times and you will see none of them mentioned.

*Second, in light of the first point, how are we doing? Is Grace Bible Church a “healthy” church?* And all I know to do is to give you my opinion of how we’re doing as a church. I hope it’s an informed opinion, though I’m sure it’s biased (how could it not be?). But hopefully it will give you some insight into what our church is like and why we do some of the things we do, which will be helpful for both those who are already a part of our church and for those who might consider joining.

*First, maturity.* I am continually encouraged by how seriously the members of Grace Bible Church take their Christianity. I regularly learn of a Bible study going on that I didn’t know about and that no staff person started. I hear stories from you about how you were encouraged or challenged or convicted by something said by another member at Grace, and in my experience that’s just not all that common! My pastor friends certainly don’t have the same kinds of stories, or the same number of them.

So, I am thankful for you. I think there are a lot of mature Christians here. In fact, my feeling for a while has been there are many members of our church more mature than I am. You are an easy church to pastor. In many ways, Grace Bible runs itself.

*Second, support for missions.* In my opinion this is a mixed bag. In some ways I’ve been greatly encouraged by the work our people have done in missions. Our church has taken hundreds on mission trips over the years, and many people have gone out from Grace to serve as pastors or missionaries or to go to seminary to get trained in those areas.

But we haven’t been able to increase our support like we’ve wanted. Our goal over the years has been to give a higher percentage of money away to causes outside of Grace Bible than we did the year before. Yet for the past several years, the percentage of money that we give away has remained basically flat. We give away more money than we did seven or eight years ago, but the percentage we give hasn’t changed that much. Our church operates on about 90% of what we bring in and donates the remaining 10%. We’d love for that number to get to 80/20, but we haven’t made much progress. There’s always been another need, such as the renovation of the building or the demand of a growing area of ministry for another staff person.

And when it comes to pioneer missions, the kind of missionary work Paul did, efforts to take the gospel to people who have never heard it, now we’re talking about much less than 10% of the church budget. I know there are many current and former Grace members who, like Paul, don’t want to build on someone else’s foundation. They want to work among those people who live “where Christ has not already been named.” And I’m thankful for you. C.J. has brought tremendous wisdom, organization, and drive to all our church’s missions efforts, that we’ve never had before. But there’s room to grow.

In our defense, in some ways it’s much harder to do pioneer missions today than it was for Paul. All Paul had to do to be a pioneer missionary was to get on one of the many well-maintained, safe Roman highways of the first century and walk twenty miles to the next town. Just go to the next town over, start preaching the gospel in the local synagogue, and you’re a pioneer missionary! He didn’t have to worry about passports. He didn’t have to learn a new language (they all spoke Greek). He didn’t have to book flights. He didn’t have to worry about getting a visa because he was a Roman citizen so he could work anywhere.

In the same vein, while it’s easy for Christians and churches to give their money away to mission efforts, it’s hard to know if those mission organizations are good stewards of that money. It’s hard to know how effective the missionaries really are, because unless you know them personally and see them work in their contexts you have to take their word for it. And unless you see a detailed financial accounting, you don’t know how many cents of every dollar even get to the missionaries instead of being absorbed into administrative costs.

*Third, money for the poor.* I’ll be blunt: right now, very little Grace Bible Church money goes to help the poor. But, as with missions, in some ways Paul had it easier. He was collecting this offering from Christians in Rome and Greece for other Christians in Jerusalem, Christians he knew personally, who were facing starvation. There was no middleman, no overhead, no administrative costs. Paul was collecting the money, and he would personally distribute 100% of it to people he’d known for years who were in desperate need.

Christians in the United States are rarely positioned to care for the poor like that. Our church has given hundreds of thousands of dollars away to the poor in Oxford over the years, but few if any were in danger of starving. It’s usually more of a first world problem we address, like paying a utility bill or helping provide transportation. And while there have been some wonderful exceptions where our aid to someone going through a difficult time has turned the table and enabled them to get on their feet and get out of poverty, the overwhelming rule has been that we have helped people who have only come back a month later wanted precisely the same help. And that’s true not only of our church but of every other church in town I know of. I can tell you it’s a continual subject of conversation among the pastors in Oxford.

As with missions, it’s easy to give money away, but it’s hard to be wise in doing it. There are lots of organizations out there that say they help the poor in other parts of the world, but unless you go to where they are and see with your own eyes it’s hard to be sure. For example, how much money have been donated by Christians to care for the poor in Haiti? Hundreds of millions, if not billions of dollars. Yet if anything that nation is worse off than it was before.

So, what do we do? Third, what a church can do to get healthier? As a pastor, it’s easy to feel guilty. It’s easy to look at your church, see what other churches are doing, and see all the stuff you’re not doing that you need to. The way I’m wired, the shortfalls are glaring, the successes are muted. I’m sure a lot of you are that way, if not with the church, then with your business, or your school, or your family.

Let me tell you what we’re not going to do. I’m not going to ***preach at you*** about these areas in which we need to improve. We’re not going to berate you week in and week out about how we need to do more in missions or giving money to the poor. We’re not going to put a thermometer in the corner of this room and say, “Our goal is to give X number of dollars away or reach this many new people groups with the gospel, and we’re not going to rest until we do.” That would be motivating you with guilt, and God doesn’t use guilt to do his work.

We won’t preach at you. But we can do two other things: *first, we can pray.* Paul doesn’t ask the Roman church to set goals. But he does ask for prayer. He writes in verses 30-32, “I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, ***to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf,*** **31**that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, **32**so that by God’s will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company.”

We can pray for wisdom in how to care for the poor. We can pray for missionaries by name. We can pray for unreached people groups by name. Did you know there is a distinct group of people in Louisiana, around Baton Rouge, that is unreached by the gospel? You say, “Sure! Known about them for years. They’re LSU fans.” No. It’s the group I prayed for this morning in the pastoral prayer: the Chitimacha people group. They are native Americans who speak English and live on a reservation on their traditional land, but there is apparently little gospel work among them.

What will God do with our prayers for the Chitimacha? Maybe he’ll use our prayers to work in the heart of someone who will drive to their reservation and try to build relationships with them to tell them the gospel. Maybe it will be someone in this room. Or maybe by praying for them publicly we simply build awareness about the cause of missions around the world, and over time all over us will long to do more because it’s on our minds. Who knows how God will use our prayers? But he will use them, so we will pray.

*Second, we can preach peace.* Paul closes this section of his letter to the Roman church with these words in verse 33: “May the God of peace be with you all.”

One of our biggest problems when we think of peace is that we immediately think of the subjective experience of peace. We think of being calm, not being anxious. We think, “I want that calmness in the storm. I want to be like those people who don’t get distracted, who are placid, who when everyone else is losing their heads are at rest.” That’s the whole point behind New Age and Buddhist thought and it is why people practice Transcendental meditation, which has started influencing Christianity through the contemplative movement and centering prayer.

But that’s not what Paul is talking about. He’s not talking subjective peace, but ***objective peace.*** The Bible always says before you can get subjective peace you can feel from God, you first have to peace with God.

Only the gospel gives you peace with God. Romans 5:1: “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith [since we’ve been saved], we have peace with God …” Romans 5:10 says, “When we were yet enemies, Christ died for us.”

Friends, you were at war with God. In your sins you were waging a war against God and were one of his enemies, and the most foundational, most basic peace you must have is the end of that war. But Jesus on the cross ended the war, and now you have objective peace with God. He paid for your sins and reconciled you to God. No matter how you feel, God loves you and you are at peace with him, and you are his child, and he will care for you.

And the more you live out of that peace, the more the cause of the gospel around the world will be on your mind (because you’ll want other people to know this peace, too) and the more you’ll want to give your money away to those who need it because you know you don’t. God will provide!

I don’t know a better example of that peace than a woman named Oseola McCarty. In the summer of 1995, she made headlines all over the country. She lived in Hattiesburg and was a Christian. After dropping out of school in the sixth grade to care for an invalid aunt, she began a career as a washerwoman. For more than seventy years she picked up dirty clothes from people in town, cleaned them, then took them back to people she worked for.

She lived very frugally. She never owned a car (she walked everywhere) and she didn’t get air-conditioning until 1992 (in Hattiesburg!). She had a black-and-white television but she never got cable. She didn’t even use a washer and dryer. She tried one in the 1960s, but she said, “the washing machine didn’t rinse enough, and the dryer turned the whites yellow.” After years of boiling clothes and then doing four fresh-water rinses, that wasn’t good enough to meet her standards. The machine was retired, and she went back to her Maid Rite scrub board, water drawn from a nearby fire hydrant, and 100 feet of open-air clothesline.

With that lifestyle and work ethic, she was able to save money. When she retired in 1995 at **86**, after washing clothes by hand for more than **seventy years**, she had $280,000 in the bank. That’s more than a half million in today’s dollars. Now, if anyone had the right to say, “This is my money and now I’m going to splurge and enjoy myself and buy what I want,” it was her.

Instead, do you know what she did? After all that hard work, she gave it all away. She gave ten percent to her church, she set aside 30% to her relatives, and she gave the majority, $150,000, to the University of Southern Mississippi to set up a scholarship fund for poor students go to school. She saw her life as a gift and now she wants to give to others.

When all this came out it was a huge story. That was the summer before I started college, and it seemed like that was all we heard about in Mississippi. President Clinton received her in the White House. Barbara Walters interviewed her. She went on David Letterman’s show. Finally, someone from *People* magazine got an interview and asked her, “In all those years, didn’t you ever want to spend that money on yourself?” And she smiled and said, “Honey, *I am* spending it on myself.”

She didn’t need a preacher to berate her to give. She didn’t need a thermometer in church. Why? Because she knew she had peace with God. I want to invite all who acknowledge their sins and trust in Jesus Christ to the Lord’s Supper. You’re invited no matter your church membership, no matter how you’ve been baptized, no matter even if you started trusting in Jesus during this sermon: come and welcome to the Lord’s table. But take this bread and cup and say to yourself, “Because of what Jesus has done for me, I know I have peace with God.” Then keep coming back and learn to walk in that peace, and if we’ll all do that we’ll find we are a healthy church. PRAY