

I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another. ¹⁵ I have written you quite boldly on some points, as if to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me ¹⁶ to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with 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 miracles, through the power of the Spirit. 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. (Romans 15:14-20)

Glory in This

When you look back on the school year that just ended, what will you think about? What were the highlights? What did we accomplish? The flood we had last winter comes to my mind. On a Friday, we learned the school was flooded. On Saturday, we learned that there was no heat in the sanctuary and we had to scramble to set up for church in the MPR – and so many people showed up that we didn't have enough work to go around. It was a joy to see our congregation rise to the occasion. Another high point came last Thursday when we graduated 15 students, one of our larger classes. I could probably think of others things. Your list might be different from mine, but I hope we all have things from this past year that we're happy about. I hope we all have stories that we can tell about the good things we saw this year. Some people might call telling those stories bragging and we certainly don't want to be guilty of sinful pride. But in our lesson for today, St. Paul talks about "glorying" in his service to God. It's not wrong to be happy for what God does in our lives and what he accomplishes through us – as long as we remember who gets the real credit. My friends, **glory in this: what God accomplishes through us and what God calls us to do.**

I.

That's what St. Paul did. He was a very accomplished man. He wasn't a fisherman like Peter and John. His was well educated. And before he became a Christian, he was on the fast track in the world of the Pharisees. He probably could have become a member of the Jewish ruling council and a respected rabbi. He certainly had an amazing capacity for work and self-sacrifice. He is such an important figure in the history of the church that some people claim that Christianity really had two founders: Jesus and Paul. We would never go that far, but you can't dispute the fact that God used Paul to make a little Jewish sect into one of the most important religions in the Roman Empire in just a couple of decades. When Paul himself talks about those things, he always points back to God as the true author of all that he accomplished. He shows us the proper attitude to have. My friends, **glory in this: what God accomplishes through us.**

Paul's letter to the Romans is unusual for him – it was written to a congregation he had never visited personally. Most of his letters were to churches he founded. And Romans was not written because there were problems in the congregation – which was the reason for several of his other letters. So, in many ways, the letter to the Romans was a letter to people like us, Gentiles who heard the gospel from someone other than Paul, but who could benefit from the special gifts God had given him to teach and write.

The book of Romans is a gem. It's the fullest explanation of what Christ did for us and how we respond to it. But Paul did a lot more than write letters. He says, **"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."** He goes on to say, **"So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ."** You probably have a mental picture of where Jerusalem is, done in the southeast corner of the Mediterranean Sea. But what about Illyricum? It's what we used to call Yugoslavia – so Montenegro, Bosnia and Croatia. St. Paul started in Jerusalem and he covered hundreds of miles of the most populated part of the Roman Empire – without having a car or an airplane or even a horse most of the time.

Why did he cover all that ground? So that he could proclaim the gospel and God could work through the message he preached. Without a doubt, it was God's work. Again and again, people who had never met

him and who knew nothing about Jesus came to faith in their Savior. Not only that, but in city after city, Paul organized congregations so that the people could continue to hear God's word. He trained and appointed pastors to continue the work after he left. He wrote all these epistles, these letters, so that the church could spend the next two thousand years studying his message and growing in faith in Jesus. None of that would have happened if it had been up to Paul to convert those people or figure out how best to meet their spiritual needs. He was just as much a sinner as we are. But God used him. Paul himself wondered at the miracles God did through him.

That is the point for us. It takes a miracle for a sinner to come to faith. But God is working. Every time we hear about Jesus, God is working. A week or two ago, I got to baptize a young mother and her two children. She's been taking my class and when we got to the baptism lesson, I asked if she was baptized. She said no. So, I asked if she wanted to be. She said yes. That wasn't me being a great teacher. That was God working through the gospel and filling her heart with faith. On Wednesday, after our preschool graduation, I spoke with the mother of one of those kids. She told me that she and her husband are just so happy about what their daughter has experienced in our preschool. She wants to take my class and they want their daughter to be in kindergarten here next year. That's not because Deanna is such a great teacher – although she absolutely is. It's because Deanna knows that the heart of her work is the good news about Jesus and she teaches that to the kids in our preschool every single day and she shares it with their parents. And God works. At the beginning of this week, I visited one of our elderly members who's been going through chemo and has had a terrible time of it and has decided to stop. She doesn't know what's coming next. When I told her that Jesus would do what is best. She said, "I know it. He always has." That was God working for seven or eight decades through pastors and teachers and Christian parents who shared the gospel with her.

I could go on and talk about the rest of the people in my Thursday night class or the ones who will be starting on Wednesdays in a few weeks. I could talk about all the ways that I've seen the kids in our school express their faith over the last twelve years. I could talk about the people I've sat next to in the hospital or as they lay dying. Every time we share the gospel, the Holy Spirit works in that message. He takes sinners like us who deserve nothing but death and hell and he gives us faith. He strengthens that faith. That faith carries us all the way to heaven. That gospel message can conquer fear and hurt and despair. It can ease our hearts when they're troubled and silence our consciences when they accuse us. It does all that because it's more than just a logical argument. It's more than just a really moving story. The testimony that Jesus lived and died and rose in our place is the very power of God. It takes hearts that are in total rebellion against God or that are sinking into despair, and it brings them to Jesus. God did that for you and for me and for our children. He will continue to do that for as long as we proclaim that message here and in our homes and in the streets of suburban Detroit and around the world. Glory in what God does through us, my friends!

II.

We call that gospel in word and sacrament the means of grace. It's what made Paul such a tremendous missionary. He knew exactly what he was called to do. And he didn't hesitate to glory in doing that because he was doing God's work. Let it be the same for us. My friends, **glory in this: what God calls us to do.**

Paul says, **"I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ."** God gives us two tools, the law and the gospel. We need them both to fully proclaim that gospel. The law accuses us. Every time I tell you what God calls sin, it strikes your heart and mine. We feel guilty. But then, if I do my job, I tell you how Jesus lived in our place and conquered that sin. I tell you how he died and rose and God forgave that specific sin. I repeat his promise that you are holy in his sight and that you will live with him forever, because Jesus has washed all our sin away. That's the gospel, the power of God.

But Paul did not simply parrot the same words over and over again. If you study his ministry in the book of Acts, you'll see that he was a master of listening to people and getting to know them so that he knew how to proclaim Jesus to them. We need to do the same thing. One of the issues I wrestle with every Sunday is whether you actually hear your own lives in the examples I choose. Do I manage to prick your consciences over the sinful attitudes that infect your heart or am I talking about someone you don't recognize? That's also what it means to fully proclaim the gospel. We understand the ways that the devil tries to trick God's people into believing that they don't need the gospel or that the gospel won't do them any good. Then we confront those sinful attitudes with the law and we bring that incredible good news of Jesus' forgiveness.

It's hard to do that if you don't know a person and what's going on in their mind and heart. Even if you make a good guess, most people want you to earn the right to talk about their lives. St. Paul understood that.

So again and again, we see him listening to other people, meeting them where they were, so that he could lead them back to Jesus. That's our job, too. So surprisingly, the first part of sharing the gospel is not talking. It's listening. It's asking questions that help us understand how life in a sinful world is weighing someone down. Then when we do speak, we gently and carefully lead those people to the Savior who loves them.

So obviously, to do that well, we do have to understand our Savior well. I fear that that might be the greatest place where we fail. When I talk to WELS members about sharing their faith, the attitude that I encounter most is fear – fear of embarrassment, fear of not doing it right, fear of not knowing what to say. What's the solution to all that fear? That very gospel that Jesus came to proclaim to us. It conquers our fear. It changes our hearts. It gives us the gifts we need to speak the words of God in a way that helps people hear and understand what God is saying. So personal study of the Scripture is an absolute necessity if we're going to be faithful witnesses of Christ.

Are we willing to do that work? Are we willing to commit to regular study of God's word, here and at home? Are we willing to commit to listening to people, not just so that we can come up with an argument against what they're saying, but so that we can understand what hurts in their lives so we can help them? Are we willing to love them that much? Or are we so in love with ourselves that we're not willing to commit the time or the effort to do that? This is where that law and gospel come in, right? Being too selfish to study God's word so that my faith grows and so that I can serve my Lord and so that other people can hear the good news and come to faith is obviously a horrible sin. If that is our attitude, we are unworthy of the Lord who loves us so much. And who can claim to be worthy? I'm certainly not. But Jesus was worthy. And he lived the life of perfect love that God demands from us. He died and paid for all the times we loved ourselves too much to do the hard work at home and at church to be ready to share the gospel and for all the times we messed up when we tried. He died and paid for all the times we put ourselves first. His blood washed all that sin away. He rose to tell us we are forgiven, now and forever. He rose to tell us that Jesus will love us for all eternity. He rose to tell us that in God's eyes, we are all even greater missionaries than St. Paul, because God sees as being just as holy as Jesus was.

That message works in our hearts. That is the message God calls us to share. And God tells us to glory in what he calls us to do. Don't feel bad because we don't have anything else to offer here at Peace. We have the best news anyone can ever hear. We have the good news about Jesus. And God is working here. Glory every time you see the evidence! Amen.