

Main Idea: If we are to fulfill the task in front of us, it will require four things, according to Romans 15:23-29.

- I. It takes passion (23).
 - A. People were important to Paul.
 - B. Ministering to people was important to Paul.
 - II. It takes people (23b).
 - A. There are people to reach.
 - B. There are people to do the reaching.
 - III. It takes a plan (24).
 - A. Step #1: Finish my ministry here (22).
 - B. Step #2: Go to Spain (24a).
 - C. Step #3: Visit Rome on the way (24b).
 1. God wants to use me to help you.
 2. God wants to use you to help me.
 - D. Step #4: Take the offering to Jerusalem first (25).
 - IV. It takes a partnership (25-29).
 - A. Some can go (25).
 - B. All of us can give (26-28).
 1. It's a pleasure.
 2. It's need oriented.
 3. It's an obligation.
 4. It's done with accountability.
 - C. God gives the blessing (29).
- To sum it up: The task belongs to all of us.

People are starving for God's Word...
[Give examples...]

It's true. I see it all the time, and so do you. People are starving for God's Word right here in this community. Oh, many may not know that's the problem, but their desperation is plain to see. They run from experience to experience, looking for something to make the hunger pains of life subside. For some, it's drugs, sex, or money. For others, it's a job, a relationship, or a hobby. But no matter how hard they try, they never find lasting satisfaction. Drugs kill. Relationships fall apart. Jobs change. Money runs out. The hunger pains remain. In the end, what the world has to offer is as satisfying to their souls as a handful of sand to a starving man.

Isn't that true? There's only one source for true satisfaction. It's the Word of God. Jesus said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God (Mt. 4:4)."

If that's true, then we have a task to do. We need to get the Word out! If the world is starving (and it is), and if people can't live on bread (and they can't), and if we possess the only thing that can bring lasting satisfaction to the hungry souls of men and women (which is exactly what we have in the Word of God), then our task is to get the Word out!

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

How are we going to do that? We discover the answer in Romans 15. If we are to fulfill the task in front of us, it will require four things, according to Paul's example in Romans 15:23-29.

I. It takes passion (23).

In Romans 15:23 Paul says this, "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 see you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain."

What at first may seem like a rather sentimental, incidental comment is, upon close examination, not that at all. Rather, in it we see the passion that moved Paul in life. Indeed, these words reveal two passions that governed the apostle's life.

A. People were important to Paul. Paul was in Corinth when he wrote this letter. Why was he there? Because the people of Corinth were important to him (he spent nearly two years there, and wrote at least four letters to the church members in Corinth, two of those letters being preserved in our Bibles).

Open to us is a letter Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, to people he had never personally met. Yet he says he had "longed" for many years to see them. Why? Because the people of Rome were important to him. So were the people in Spain (24), and the people in Jerusalem (25). Paul had a passion for people, and that passion gave direction to his life. In addition, his words indicate a second, related passion.

B. Ministering to people was important to Paul. Paul explained how much so at the beginning of the letter (1:14-15), "I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome." Why did Paul want to go to Rome? Was he a mere sentimentalist? No. Was he on some sight-seeing kick? No. His motive was ministry. His passion was ministry.

Don't get the idea that Paul was some humanitarian, and that the reason he poured his life into people was because it made him feel good to help his fellow-mankind. No, no. He saw himself as a servant of God on a divine mission. That's what he just stated in 15:15, "I have written you quite boldly on some points, as if to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me to be a *minister* of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God."

That's where Paul got his passion. He was in the grip of grace. He never got over what God did for him. And what God did for him he wanted to see repeated in the lives of others. That was his passion.

What's your passion in life? What drives you? What do you live for? What do you think about, schedule your time for, and invest your resources in? If we are going to fulfill the task before us, the task of bringing the Word of God to a starving world, it takes passion. Secondly...

II. It takes people (23b).

There are a lot of people in this world, aren't there? In fact, the numbers are staggering. I ran across a scenario that helps bring "the world" a little closer to reality.¹

¹take from *Evangelical Baptist Missions* letter, Aug. 1997, by W. Paul Jackson.

The fact is, if we could shrink the earth's population to a village of precisely 100 people, with all existing human ratios remaining the same, it would look like this:

- There would be 57 Asians, 21 Europeans, 14 from the Western Hemisphere, including North and South America, and 8 from Africa.
- Seventy would be non-white, while 30 would be white.
- Sixty-six would be non-Christian and 33 Christian.
- Eighty would live in sub-standard housing.
- Seventy would be unable to read.
- Half would suffer from malnutrition.
- One would be near death and one would be near birth.
- Only one would have a college education.
- Half of the entire village's wealth would be in the hands of only six people.

That's one way to look at the world's population. Here's another. From Paul's perspective, from the perspective of the Word of God, you can divide the world's population into two groups.

A. There are people to reach. And group #2...

B. There are people to do the reaching. Listen to verse 23 again (AV), "But now, having no more place in these parts, and having a great desire these many years to come unto you." Chew on that first clause, "Having no more place in these parts." Place to what? Place to do my ministry.

What?! This is a staggering announcement. Paul says, "There's no more place for me to work here in the Eastern Mediterranean area." He's not saying that everyone in the east was a Christian. He is saying he wanted to take the gospel to new areas--so he set his sights on the west.

Paul was a pioneer-evangelist, a church-planter. His strategy was to reach the large, metropolitan centers of the world--Ephesus, Corinth, Thessalonica, Philippi--to penetrate Satan's turf in these cities with the gospel of Christ. He established churches there, and trained the believers how to evangelize the surrounding areas. Then he left to break new ground elsewhere, leaving the task of reaching the smaller communities up to the churches.

For some twenty years of ministry, that's what Paul did. And God blessed. So much so that Paul can now say, "There is no more place for me to work in these regions."

Can you say that? Do you view your neighborhood the way Paul viewed his? There are people to reach and there are people to do the reaching. Have you done all you can to reach your neighbors with the gospel of Christ. I stand guilty.

Let's resolve to make the necessary changes. Begin praying for open doors. Let's seek ways to build redemptive relationships with those God has placed near us. Let's be bold to share the good news of Christ with those who need to be reached.

This isn't optional. If we are going to fulfill our God-given task, it takes passion, people, and thirdly...

III. It takes a plan (24).

Verse 24 begins, "I plan to do so." Stop there and notice something. Paul planned. Planning is not unspiritual. I'm intrigued by the administrative expertise Paul exhibited.

Listen to this observation by commentator Stuart Briscoe (255), "The balance of the Apostle is particularly welcome when we are confronted with the tensions that exist in the contemporary church of the Western world--the tension between organization and inspiration and the balance in seeing the church as organism and organization. Those who think of the church as a business whose problems can all be solved by better organization need to remember that the church is an organism whose secret is life. But those who eschew organization for the reason that the church is a living body should remember that every organism is organized."

Paul believed that God is sovereign. Paul believed that God is sovereign in salvation, that He has chosen a people that He will bring to Himself (as he explained in chapters 8-11). But, that didn't excuse Paul (nor us) from responsible action. Right here in chapter 15, Paul gives us his ministry plan. We can learn from the model of Paul's plan which involved four steps.

A. Step #1: Finish my ministry here (22). For Paul, "here" was Corinth. For years Paul had desired to go to Rome (according to verse 23), but had often been "hindered" from doing so (as he shared in verse 22).

He wanted to go to Rome, but didn't. Not because there was satanic opposition. Not because there was an unexpected obstacle that was out of his control. He didn't go because of one simple reason. There was unfinished business at hand.

Paul's policy was to finish one job before he started another. Is that true of you?

You see, Paul lived with the tension of an unfulfilled desire. He wanted to go to Rome, but he had a job to do in Corinth. Here's the challenge. You can't be in Corinth and Rome at the same time! Life is full of choices. The key is to do what Paul did, to submit your choices to the Lord's will. Step one, finish my ministry here. Then what?

B. Step #2: Go to Spain (24a). "I plan to do so when I go to Spain." Paul set his eyes on taking the gospel to Spain. By the time he wrote this, much of Spain was thoroughly romanized, but some parts (particularly in the north-west) were much less civilized. We don't know for sure if he ever made it there. Tradition says he did go to Spain and possibly to Britain, but church tradition is not always to be trusted.²

"Why Spain?" you ask. One reason, according to historian William Barclay, was that at this time Spain was experiencing a kind of blaze of genius. Many of the greatest men in the Roman Empire were Spaniards. Lucan, the epic poet, Martial, the master of the epigram, Quintilian, the greatest teacher of oratory of his day, were all Spaniards. Above all, Seneca, the great Stoic philosopher, was a Spaniard. And Seneca, was the guardian and later the prime minister of Nero. Perhaps Paul thought, "If I can touch Spain for Christ, the impact might well go far beyond Spain!"

But ultimately the ambition for Spain was rooted in Acts 1:8. Jesus' command was to be His witness unto the "uttermost" parts of the world. In Paul's day, that was Spain. Spain was at the very western end of the Roman Empire, then considered the limit of the civilized world. Why Spain? Because there were unreached people there.

So the plan went like this. #1, finish things in Corinth. #2, then head for Spain.

C. Step #3: Visit Rome on the way (24b). "I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your

²Wiersbe, 564.

company for awhile." Why a visit to Rome? Paul tells us two reasons why, and in so doing gives us two principles for ministry.

1. *God wants to use me to help you.* That's what Paul made clear in Romans 1:11, "I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong." The first reason I want to come is to minister to you. But ministry is a two-way street.

2. *God wants to use you to help me.* Notice how Paul makes his need known to the Romans in 15:24, "I hope to visit you...and to have you assist me on my journey there [the AV puts it, "to be brought on my way there by you"]."

The word "assist" indicates Paul hoped for a great deal more than a pat on the back and a well-wishing, "The Lord bless you on your efforts in Spain!" He desired their prayer support, their financial support, and quite possibly, for some Roman Christians to actually join him for the missionary trip (which would explain why he mentioned this in his letter, to "put a bug" in their ear so they could begin thinking about the opportunity).

A word of clarification. Notice how Paul didn't hesitate to make known a ministry need. But the way he did it is very different from the far-too-common abuses of televangelists in our day. Here's the difference. What Paul requested was not for himself, but for the advancement of the gospel.

Is it okay for preachers to ask people to give? Not the way it's often done. Abuse in this area has caused great harm to the testimony of Christ. But be careful lest we throw out the "baby with the bath water." Paul asked people to give (and we'll see some biblical guidelines for giving in a moment). Giving is a privilege, an act of worship, a way to please God. It's part of God's plan for spreading the gospel. Which relates to step 4.

D. Step #4: Take the offering to Jerusalem first (25). Before the trip to Spain, and before the visit to Rome, Paul had a task to complete. "Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there."

To Jerusalem? That's the opposite direction from Rome (and Spain) if you're in Corinth. What was he going to do in Jerusalem? "Service," he says. What kind of service? He was going to take a gift of money for the poverty-stricken church in Jerusalem.

Don't confuse this with an earlier offering mentioned in Acts 11-12. That offering occurred eleven years earlier, and came from the Christians in Syrian Antioch and was delivered to Jerusalem by Barnabas and Paul. This particular collection mentioned in Romans 15 is a later one, the background of which is given in Acts 24:17, 1 Corinthians 16:1-4, 2 Corinthians 8-9, and Galatians 2:10.

This offering reveals a fourth thing it takes if we're to finish the task in front of us.

IV. It takes a partnership (25-29).

You see, the task of spreading the Word belongs to all of us, but the roles we play differ. Here's how the partnership works.

A. Some can go (25). Like Paul. "I'm going to take the gospel to Spain. I'm going to visit you in Rome. I am on my way to Jerusalem (25)." This summer, Kristen leaves for China. Bob is in Papua New Guinea. Dave and Pam are in Portugal. When it comes to our task, some can go. What about the rest of us?

B. All of us can give (26-28). It costs to do missions. Not everyone can *go*, but everyone can participate. We can "assist," as Paul puts it in verse 24. We can give.

Well-known author Warren Wiersbe offers this remark (564), "When the life of the Spirit flows through a church, giving is no problem." We learn four lessons about giving in verses 26-28.

1. *It's a pleasure.* Verse 26, "For Macedonia and Achaia [that's the churches in Asia Minor, *Gentile* Christians] were *pleased* to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem [*Jewish* Christians]. They were *pleased* to do it." Don't miss that. People who had never met each other were giving. And they were pleased to do it.

2. *It's need oriented.* Why was the collection sent in the first place? It wasn't easy to be a Christian in Jerusalem. In a city like Jerusalem, much of the available employment was connected with the Jewish Temple. No doubt many people, when they became Christians in Jerusalem, lost their jobs. They lost their livelihood.

We are a blessed people, aren't we. We have jobs. We live well. We have more than we need. Why does God give us a surplus? The believers in Macedonia and Achaia knew the answer. It's so we can give to meet needs.

3. *It's an obligation.* Indeed, giving is both a pleasure and an obligation as verse 27 makes clear, "They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings." They *owe* it.

Paul saw himself as a "debtor" to the whole world, as stated in Romans 1:14. Here he says he considered Gentiles as debtors to the Jews. Why? It was the Jews who gave to the Gentiles both the Word of God and the Son of God.

As Gentile Christians, we are indebted to Israel and owe a debt of gratitude to God for Israel. Frankly (and it should go without saying), there's no place for a trace of anti-Semitism in the life of a Christian.

There's no better way to demonstrate unity than giving. In Paul's day, the Jew/Gentile barrier was high. But Christ brought it down. And a love gift was a tangible way to show it.

In verse 27, the verb "share with" ("minister" in the AV) appears in the noun form in 2 Corinthians 9:12. There Paul calls the collection a *leitourgia*, the word from which we derive the English word "liturgy." Giving is an act of worship. That's why it's an obligation.

Have you learned the joy of giving to the Lord's work? Frankly, if I'm struggling with giving, it's because I haven't grasped how much I've received. The joy of giving is linked to seeing how much was given to us. "For you know the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through His poverty might be made rich." Christ gave Himself for us. He died in our place. He paid the price to obtain our forgiveness.

"But I can't afford to give!" you say. Randy Patten tells the story of a couple who said that after hearing what God's Word teaches about giving. "We can't afford to give." He knew them well and lovingly responded, "Yes, you can afford to give, but you must change your life and spending habits." They asked how. He knew this couple loved pizza and Pepsi, and reminded them of it. "How about choosing by faith to change your spending habits for a month (starting with pizza and Pepsi) so you can honor God by tithing to the local church?" Randy says they took the challenge. A year later they came to him and thanked him for helping them to discover the joy of giving.

4. *It's done with accountability.* Verse 28, "So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they have received this fruit, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way." Notice that *Paul* himself was going to deliver the gift. The believers gave with confidence knowing that the gift would be used as intended. Paul, their spiritual father, would make sure of that.

Giving is a vital part of the task before us. Giving forces us to look beyond ourselves, beyond these four walls, and have a part in making Christ known to this world. Some here may not realize what happens when we give.

[Give some examples of how recent giving has resulted in changed lives...]

The point is, if we are to fulfill the task in front of us of getting out the Word, not only will it take passion, people, and a plan, but also a partnership. Some can go, but all of us can give. One final thing about the partnership. What makes the fulfillment of this task possible, anyway?

C. God gives the blessing (29). "I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ." Paul says, "I know." He was confident God would bless his plan. Why? Because it wasn't a self-promoting plan, but a Christ-promoting plan. And know this. The Lord loves to bless plans that promote Him.

To sum it up: There's a task in front of us, and *the task belongs to all of us.*