

SIGNS OF MATURITY
ROMANS 15:14-33

By Pastor John Carlini, D.Mn

M.I. MATURE BELIEVERS HAVE DEDICATED THEIR LIVES TO JESUS THROUGH MINISTRY, GIVING, AND PRAYER.

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SIGNS OF MATURITY ROMANS 15:14-33

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We have now come to the last section of Romans. Paul uses the last part of Romans 15 and chapter 16 to make his closing remarks to the church at Rome. A lot of this section deals with Paul's itinerary, his plans, and personal notes.

It is important for us to remember some key points: First, Paul did not start this church at Rome. There is almost no doubt that they had heard of the Apostle Paul, but they never met him in person nor did they have any sort of personal relationship with him.

Paul has written this letter with some pretty strong language and dealt with some very sensitive issues. So it would have been easy for the Christians in Rome to say something like, "Who does this guy think he is?"

Several times, Paul expresses that he would like to come and spend some time with the church in Rome. He will get to Rome, but not as he planned or expected; he comes to Rome as a prisoner, and his life will end in Rome by execution.

Now even though this is the closing part of the letter, I think there are several things we can learn from this morning's passage. I think that Paul gives us some qualities that are characteristic of mature believers. He pictures mature believers as people who are dedicated to pleasing God; and as he has said before, mature believers are those who dedicate their lives to God as holy, living, pleasing sacrifices. Mature believers are dedicated to ministry, giving, and prayer.

I want us to hear this morning's message for several reasons, but one reason is that Paul says that if we want to be mature believers, we must be dedicated to ministering

to one another. When I mention to people that if you are a Christian, then you are a minister, a frequent response is that they don't feel comfortable with that. You see, people would rather just come to church on Sundays, try to be good during the week, and try not to commit any major sins.

However, if that is the regiment we are following, we can never mature in Christ. Paul says that we are commanded to minister, and further, we have been given the tools to minister.

I think the problem with ministering is that some people are not willing to be ministered to. Listen, I know that counseling can be tricky and frustrating. Let me give you an example: You remember the church that I used to pastor. The one that was so tough. (How tough was it?) It was so tough that it was almost impossible to counsel even the board members.

One of our deaconesses came into my office one day and announced, "Pastor, I want to divorce my husband."

I asked her, "Do you have any grounds?"

She replied, "Why yes. We have almost an acre."

Now I'm really confused. I said, "No, you don't understand. What I want to know is do you and your husband have a grudge?"

The deaconess answered, "Actually, we don't, but we do have a nice carport."

All I could do is shake my head and say, "I can't see any biblical reason for you to divorce your husband."

The deaconess looked at me with contempt and said, "You're just like my husband. Neither one of you can carry on an intelligent conversation."

Paul wants us to know that we are competent to counsel one another. Hopefully we are able to receive counsel from one another.

Even though Paul has finished with the main teaching portion of this letter, and we are in the conclusion portion of the letter, we can still gain some insights into what it means to be mature in Christ. Maturity is described in terms of attitude: **MATURE BELIEVERS HAVE DEDICATED THEIR LIVES TO JESUS THROUGH MINISTRY, GIVING, AND PRAYER.** The key sign of maturity in the believer's life is dedication. I think that for me personally, it's my lack of focus that keeps me from being more mature. I am interested in so many different things; however, if I could just focus on serving God as first and foremost, I would mature more quickly. Let's examine these attitudes one by one. As I examine what keeps me from maturing more quickly, I would invite you to examine your attitudes as well.

I. DEDICATED TO MINISTRY (Vs. 14-24)
EACH BELIEVER HAS BEEN PERSONALLY COMMISSIONED BY GOD TO BE A MINISTER. EACH BELIEVER HAS BEEN GIVEN SPIRITUAL GIFTS, TALENTS, RESOURCES AND ABILITIES TO ACCOMPLISH THE MINISTRY THEY HAVE BEEN CALLED TO.

In verses 14-24 we can see that mature believers are dedicated to ministry. To put it more graphically: **EACH BELIEVER HAS BEEN PERSONALLY COMMISSIONED BY GOD TO BE A MINISTER. EACH BELIEVER HAS BEEN GIVEN SPIRITUAL GIFTS, TALENTS, RESOURCES AND ABILITIES TO ACCOMPLISH THE MINISTRY THEY HAVE BEEN CALLED TO.**

I think this is a very important concept: God has a plan for each one of us. Most of us think of this plan in terms of who we marry, where we go to school, where we will

live, what kind of job we will pursue, and things like that. I think that stuff may or may not be important; at any rate, that stuff is all secondary to God's plan for you to minister. The Holy Spirit has given each of us a gift and the gift is meant for us to be used in building up the church. God has given all of us natural talents and abilities. God has provided all of us with money and other resources. But I'm pretty sure we don't spend an awful lot of time trying to explore what God's plan is for us with regards to how He wants us to use our gifts, talents, abilities, money and resources as ministers, but the fact is, we are all called to be ministers.

A. COMPETENT TO MINISTER (Vs. 14-16)

In verses 14-16 we are reminded that we are competent to minister. I am amazed at how many Christians use the excuse that they can't minister because they feel inadequate. Look at how Paul approaches the church in Rome, even though he has never met them. I also want to point out that Paul views them as fellow ministers; he does not talk down to them, he does not try to control them and he does not presume to have authority over them. He views them as partners in ministry. I know a lot of you respectfully address me as pastor. I appreciate your sentiment, but it is a bit misguided unless you also view yourselves as a pastor. You and I are coworkers for the cause of Christ.

Paul starts verse 14 by stating how certain he is about their ability to minister. He says, "I myself am convinced, brothers and sisters." He is positive about this. As I stand here this morning, I can look out at you with this same positive attitude concerning all of you who have given your lives to Christ. If you are a Christian, then I am as convinced about your calling and your competence as Paul is about the church in Rome.

Paul is certain about their competence for three reasons. First, they are full of goodness. Please do not miss this: During Jesus' ministry, a young man once addressed Him as good teacher. Jesus responded by saying, "Why do you call me good? Only God is good." Now Jesus was actually claiming to be God by that statement. The young man addressed Jesus as good and since only God is good, Jesus is God.

Here Paul says that believers are full of goodness. He doesn't say we are good, he says that we are full of goodness. Before we gave our lives to Christ, there was nothing good in us; however, on that day when we gave our lives to Jesus ... on that day when we confessed our sins to Him and asked Him for forgiveness ... on that day we asked Jesus to come into our hearts and live in us ... Jesus came into our lives and we were filled with goodness. I want us to hear this loud and clear. Even though we don't always act like it, the fact is, if we are believers, we are filled with goodness, therefore we should live, think, and act on that goodness. If we have received Christ, He lives in us and if He lives in us, then we are filled with goodness.

Second, we are complete in knowledge. God has revealed everything we need to know in the Bible. Brave men and women throughout history have given their lives so we could have the Bible readily available to us. I think that the saddest thing in the Christian church today is that people neglect the reading of their Bibles. Many Christians bring their Bibles to church on Sunday, and then put them down the rest of the week where they gather dust. We are full of excuses why we don't read and study our Bibles and what's really sad is that there are so many opportunities to read and study the Bible. There are many good modern translations and study Bibles on the market. We have many opportunities to study the Bible here at church; at every Friday night at prayer

meeting, we study the Bible. We have small groups to study the Bible. Beth is going to teach a seminar here on how to read and study the Bible. There is no good reason not to read and study the Bible and for those who can't read for whatever reason, there is the Bible on tape. God has given us the Bible and the people who can teach the Bible.

The church people in Paul's day knew the Bible. He could quote from it and they would immediately know where the quote came from and what the context was. Today, in the modern church, people who have been Christians for decades have never read through the Bible. How can that be? Paul's confidence is found in God's Word. I want to challenge all of us to dedicating ourselves to reading, studying, memorizing, and meditating on God's Word. Start soaking up your Bibles; then we will all be complete in knowledge.

And third, Paul says that he is confident because we are competent to counsel one another. We are able to minister to one another. Why? Because if we are believers, then we have God's Holy Spirit living in us. Further, the Holy Spirit has given each of us a spiritual gift. He has given us talents, abilities, and resources as well. He has given us passions, personalities, and life experiences to go along with our spiritual gifts. Under the power, direction, and gifting of the Spirit, we are all competent to minister to each other. That is our calling.

In verses 15-16 Paul describes his particular calling and ministry. First, look carefully at verse 15 where he addresses them as colleagues of his. He says in essence, "Even though I have written to you passionately about some things, I wasn't writing as if you are not doing these things already nor was I writing you to teach you something new

or to rebuke you. I was simply emphasizing some important points that you already know to reinforce some things that are in my special area of ministry.”

Then Paul described a part of his particular calling. Paul was called out of his comfort and talent zone. Paul knew his way around Jewish circles; he had a passion for the Jewish people and he was highly educated, talented, and knowledgeable in Jewish culture, religion, and social settings. Yet God called him to minister to Gentiles. Paul had no knowledge of Gentiles. He had no desire to be with Gentiles. In fact, he was prejudiced against Gentiles, yet God called and commissioned Paul to minister to the Gentiles.

In fact, Paul views himself here as a priest. His job is to bring the Gospel message of Jesus to non-Jews all over the world. He was to be God’s ambassador to them, and then as they received Christ, Paul then would present them to God as holy, living and pleasing sacrifices, ready to serve God. So as a priest, Paul would present Jesus to the Gentiles and the converted Gentiles back to Jesus.

I want to mention two things here. First, each one of us has some sort of ministry and that ministry will in some way bring some aspect of God to people and assist people coming into the presence of God.

Second, God often gives us ministries and gifts that take us way out of our comfort zone. Paul was way out of his comfort and competence zone; nevertheless, that’s exactly where God sent him.

B. SOURCE OF COMPETENCE TO MINISTER (Vs. 17-19)

Verses 17-19 give us some insight into why He does that as He ensures there will be no confusion as to the source of our competence to minister.

Think about this for a moment: Paul was educated in the best Jewish schools. He was trained in Jewish religion and philosophy. He was trained at the most prestigious school under the most prestigious professor. He was on the fast track religiously and politically. He knew every in and out in Jewish life. He moved around comfortably in the system. If God had sent him to the Jews, and if many Jews had come to know Jesus through his ministry, there would always have been some confusion in Paul's mind as to who accomplished the task. Even though he would religiously know that God accomplished the work, the thought that Paul had a great deal to do with his own success would always creep in.

However, since God sent him to the Gentiles, Paul was never confused as to the source of his success in ministry. He says that all the glory, all the credit, all the praise and all the attention goes to God. Paul's work with Gentiles was famous. He covered territory from Jerusalem throughout Israel, Syria, Turkey, Greece Yugoslavia, Albania Bosnia, and Macedonia, and back again. People all over this region were giving their lives to Christ through Paul's ministry.

But Paul makes it very clear that it is by the power of God working through Him in the persons of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Many miracles were done through the hands of Paul but he was absolutely clear that the success of the ministry had nothing to do with him.

Please keep this in mind: The source of our ability to minister lies in God alone. If you are proud about your ministry, don't be and if you are proud, then it's not from God. In that case, it's useless. On the other hand, don't ever say, "I can't do ministry; I'm not talented or smart enough." That's just as egotistical because God is the One who

does ministry from us. Please don't be confused either way. The truth is that we must submit to and obey God. Jesus will accomplish through us all that God has planned for us through the power of His Holy Spirit.

C. GIFTED AND COMMISSIONED TO MINISTER (Vs. 20-24)

God has wonderfully designed it this way so that there will be no confusion as to who the glory goes to. And verses 20-24 remind us that we have all been gifted and commissioned to minister. I think this is really neat. Paul realizes that he has been commissioned and gifted as an apostle and an evangelist. His target is unbelievers who have never heard the Gospel. Paul's desire is not to be a pastor, prophet, leader, or anything that has to do with an already established church, he wants to focus on the calling and gifting that God gave him. Look at verse 22 where that focus on ministry has prevented him from coming to Rome. The church at Rome was already established.

However, now that he planted several churches throughout those other areas, he has his attention focused on Spain. On his way to Spain, he hopes to stop over in Rome for two reasons, first, to spend some time with them, get to know them, and minister together with them. And second, to raise some missionary support to help him with the expenses. He has no desire to stay there and take up some official position in the church.

Paul knows what he has been gifted and commissioned for. Here is where I want to encourage us as a church: Each one of us needs to identify God's commission and gifting in our lives. It doesn't matter what we would like to think we are good or bad at, we must discover God's ministry will for our lives.

Now having said that, part of the fault of us not doing this has been that I have not had the tools necessary to help us accomplish that. This year however, I have gone to

some seminars that have given us the tools to discover these gifts and callings. We are in the process of training facilitators in using these tools. In October, the board and key leaders will be trained, and then in 2004, we will start the training process for all in the congregation who are interested. Please pray for the success of this plan because it will hopefully encourage us, enlighten us, and empower us to dedicate ourselves to ministry.

The truth is: **EACH BELIEVER HAS BEEN PERSONALLY COMMISSIONED BY GOD TO BE A MINISTER. EACH BELIEVER HAS BEEN GIVEN SPIRITUAL GIFTS, TALENTS, RESOURCES AND ABILITIES TO ACCOMPLISH THE MINISTRY THEY HAVE BEEN CALLED TO.**

II. DEDICATED TO GIVING (Vs. 25-29)
GIVING IS BOTH A DUTY AND A PRIVILEGE FOR CHRISTIANS. GOD LOVES TO BLESS CHEERFUL GIVERS.

I think in one sense, I have done a real disservice to Devon Church. Since I preach through books of the Bible, the topic of giving doesn't come up much. However, one of the signs of maturity as described in verses 25-29 is a dedication to giving:
GIVING IS BOTH A DUTY AND A PRIVILEGE FOR CHRISTIANS. GOD LOVES TO BLESS CHEERFUL GIVERS.

A. FREEDOM TO GIVE (Vs. 25-26)

Verses 25-26 remind us that there is freedom to give, and that there is no religious requirement to give, in fact, we almost never mention money here. Oftentimes we invite visitors and non-Christians to not give. I think, and many surveys back this up, that people don't come to church because churches are always asking for money. We here at Devon Church don't want money to come between anyone and God. If you don't feel comfortable giving money, please feel free not to give.

However, people who walk closely with God don't hold onto money very tightly. Mature Christians tend to be very generous with their money. In Paul's day, the Christians in Jerusalem faced tough times; they were being persecuted for their faith. Oftentimes that persecution took the form of losing jobs and assets. There were many poor people coming to faith and the community supported them. There were also hard times and famine that hit Jerusalem.

So touched by the plight of their Christian brothers and sisters in Jerusalem that the churches in Greece, Macedonia, and southern Albania took up a relief collection and sent it to them through Paul.

Let me address those who view us as mature believers. Usually people think that the religious guideline of giving is 10% of our income. Mature believers usually give way beyond 10% because money means nothing to them in comparison to ministry. Mature believers don't even count 10% because they are so far beyond it. Why is extravagant giving a sign of a mature believer? Because first of all, she is focused primarily on advancing the Kingdom of God and ministering to God's people. Secondly, she lives by faith. She is not worried that God will continue to supply her with, and meet all her needs.

But again, let me emphasize this: Nobody is watching and nobody cares here how much you give ... or for that matter whether or not you give. That is completely between you and God.

B. OBLIGED TO GIVE (V. 27)

So in one sense we give freely. But if you think about it, we who have become Christians are in one sense obliged to give as described in verse 27. These Gentiles

realized that Jesus came as the Jewish Messiah and now that the Jews have shared their Savior with them, they owe a debt of gratitude to their Jewish brothers and sisters.

If you think about it, all of us came to know Christ because of the ministry of the church. Even if a classmate or coworker led us to Christ, the chances are that they were trained and empowered by a church ministry. We can never repay any one or any church for the wonderful salvation we received in Jesus. I think that Christians who understand the magnificence of their salvation feel obligated to give in order to keep the ministries of the church going.

C. BLESSED TO GIVE (Vs. 28-29)

Christians give freely and not from some religious compulsion. Christians feel obliged to give out of a sense of deep gratitude and thankfulness to God and to His church. And as verses 28-29 point out, mature Christians feel blessed to give. Paul wants the Christians to know that as soon as he delivers this love offering to the Christians in Jerusalem, he plans to come and visit them. He will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ. Think about how blessed Paul will feel to deliver this love offering from Gentile believers to Jewish believers. If you have ever given money and seen how people's attitude towards God has been touched, you are hooked on giving. I can think back and see how moved I am when I see God touch people's heart through some money that I gave. I'm blessed. I want to challenge you this morning to start giving extravagantly, not because we're asking for money, and certainly not because we need anyone's money, because God has provided abundantly for Devon Church, but because you will be blessed as you let go of money and spend it on ministry to see lives

changed for God. You see: **GIVING IS BOTH A DUTY AND A PRIVILEGE FOR CHRISTIANS. GOD LOVES TO BLESS CHEERFUL GIVERS.**

III. DEDICATED TO PRAYER (Vs. 30-33)
PRAYER IS THE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECT OF A MATURE BELIEVER BECAUSE IT ACCESSES THE POWER OF GOD.

It's almost sad that we have to be reminded of this last point, but I would say it is where personally I am the weakest. Verses 30-33 remind us that mature believers are dedicated to prayer. The fact is **PRAYER IS THE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECT OF A MATURE BELIEVER BECAUSE IT ACCESSES THE POWER OF GOD.**

A. THE POWER OF PRAYER (V. 30)

Paul clearly understands the power of prayer in verse 30 where Paul, again using strong language says, "I urge you; I beg of you, I plead with you, pray with me and for me." Paul knows the power of prayer. I know in my life prayer often takes the form of some formal ritual to be performed; I'll pray at a meal as a formality. Rarely do I think of how grateful I am for the food I'm about to eat, the breath of life that God gives me, and the ability to eat the food. When I do my work, I pray that God would speak and minister through me, but I'm not sure if it is with complete dependence on Him to accomplish everything. At board meetings, I give devotion and pray; then we conduct our business and then close in a short prayer.

I think many of us are inclined to pray in two ways. We pray because it's a religious ritual, it's a habit. It's something we do that somehow gives legitimacy to what we're doing. Or it's just a habit we've gotten into, yet not much thought goes into what we're doing.

Or when the situation seems beyond our control, we pray. We say those horrible, insulting words to God, “I guess all I can do is pray.” Prayer is not all we can do; it is everything we can do. Prayer accesses all the power and presence of God. Prayer hooks us up to ministry gifts, calling and commission. Prayer hooks us up to giving resources and opportunities. Prayer is that discipline that conforms our thinking to God’s thinking. Prayer is everything in our lives, and yet we treat it as some religious ritual or some last desperate measure. I know this is something that I want to get better at as my life goes on.

B. PRAY FOR ME (Vs. 31-32)

In verses 31-32 Paul asks the church in Rome, and I’m asking you here at Devon Church to pray for me. Paul is going to face two difficult situations in Rome. The first is the unbelieving Jews in Jerusalem; since they tried to kill Paul several times before. He asks that the church in Rome pray for his safety. In fact, it was a good thing the church was praying because when Paul got to Jerusalem, the Roman soldiers had to step in and rescue Paul from the Jewish mob.

Second, Paul asked that they pray that the Jewish believers would be humble enough to receive this gift from Gentile believers. We can see this theme was dominant in Paul’s psyche. He was a Jew. He came to know Christ as a Jew. He loved the Jews because they were his people. But he was called to minister to the Gentiles. His deep desire was that Jews and Gentiles could live in harmony. But even more than that, that in love they may be able to minister to one another.

I want to say this in the strongest possible way because there are many of you who are too proud to ask for or receive help. I know many of you who would do

anything for someone else, but you will never allow anyone to help you. If you are unwilling to ask for help then you are not only hurting yourself, you are hurting the body of Christ. Paul asked for prayer to complete his mission. As far as we know, the Jewish believers accepted the gift he brought them from the Gentile believers.

Finally, Paul asks them to pray so he could come and visit them in Rome. Well Paul's prayer was answered, he did make it to Rome, but not the way he planned. He came to Rome as a prisoner, and eventually he was executed in Rome.

Just as Paul needed the prayers of the church in Rome, I need your prayers. I know there are many of you that pray for me and my family; but I need you to pray that God bless my ministry here at Devon. Pray for all my preaching, teaching, counseling, and all other ministries. Pray that God give me vision and empowerment to fulfill His vision for this church. Pray that God keep me away from all temptations. Pray for the physical, emotional, and spiritual health of me and my family. I beg you to continue to pray for me.

C. AND I'LL PRAY FOR YOU (V. 33)

And I'll pray for you as described in verse 33: Paul blesses them with this benediction, "May the God of peace be with you all." I pray for you regularly. In fact sometimes I'll wake up at night and God will move me to pray for you. I think one of the greatest privileges I have is each Sunday when I get to pray the blessing, the benediction over you. I take that prayer very seriously. I feel most like a pastor at that time when I can pray God's blessing on all of you. I pray that all of us would come to know the power of prayer. I pray it would be part of who we are as believers because: **PRAYER**

IS THE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECT OF A MATURE BELIEVER BECAUSE IT ACCESSES THE POWER OF GOD.

God commands us all to move towards maturity in our Christian walk with Him. Maturity comes from understanding and living the command to be conformed to the image of our Lord Jesus. We do this by wholly dedicating our lives to Him as holy, living, and pleasing sacrifices: **MATURE BELIEVERS HAVE DEDICATED THEIR LIVES TO JESUS THROUGH MINISTRY, GIVING, AND PRAYER.**

Listen, it doesn't matter how good or talented you are. It doesn't even matter how incompetent or untalented you think you are. This is all about God working through you.

All of Me

Dr. Donald Hubbard, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in New York City, told of spending a very difficult week at a youth camp some years ago. The teenagers from his church were at that time very cool and hardened toward the gospel. On the final night, they had a campfire where the idea was to toss a stick into the fire, symbolic of one's life and commitment to Christ. The evangelist spoke and the offer was made, and no one responded. There was a girl with a disability there who had been shunned by the group all week because she was so hard to talk to --- not that the kids were mean to her, they simply ignored her. Finally, she stood and faced the group, looking at each one, and said, "I don't know why God made me this way, but he can have all of me." And with that, she threw her stick on the fire.