

Title: Sermon guide for Romans 15.14-21

“The Message of Accomplishment”

Old Testament text: Isaiah 66.18-21

Illustration for Little Theologians: Think about anyone who is working. Work can be typing (which is what I am doing now, and which is not fun to draw) or work can be more active. Draw an active worker. Busy. Sweating. This passage is about Paul working very hard, but feeling very good about all of the work he has to do.

### *Introduction*

We know that Christianity is the one, true religion. And we know that Jesus is the one true King and that nothing happens without His will. And we know that there is no poverty or disease or world catastrophe that will take away the fact that I will live for all eternity, with Jesus.

Knowing all of these things, why is our life still so hard?

Of course, the things that we know are filled with a few intellectual vulnerabilities. For instance, we know all of this because of event that took part centuries ago in the Middle East, in a place that most of us have never visited, centered upon a humble Middle Eastern carpenter. But these kinds of intellectual vulnerabilities are true for everyone’s knowledge as well. (Beware if science is your religion; very good scientists have died believing something about science that was in stark contradiction to things that other very good scientists believed. All of us have vulnerability in the things that we know!)

Returning to that confidence in the things that we know as Christian people, shouldn’t the Christian conscience be nothing but serene calmness in any and every circumstance? We know that our conscience is often not quite as settled as it should be. We know that we are saved by God’s grace through Jesus Christ, but the *work* of daily life still destabilizes us just a bit.

**A good conscience in life comes not from the success of our work, but from the success of God’s work in and through us.**

### *Exposition*

A. The conscience of Paul (Romans 15.14-15a)

1. First, Paul says something about his own conscience. He says, “I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers [and sisters].” I want to talk about this more later, but to be *satisfied* is to be *persuaded*, *convinced*. All of us have had times where we’ve sat back to observe our work with sense of satisfaction. We’ll return to this verse later, but let’s look at what seems to be some evidence for why Paul is satisfied.

2. He adds a beautiful three-fold description of who Roman Christians are, which is really proof of why he feels the way he does. Imagine this: the apostle Paul, hero of the faith, one used by God to bring the gospel to so many, the one visited by Jesus, this Paul assesses the Roman Christians like this:

a. They are “full of goodness.” This is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5.22; also Eph. 5.9). Of the four times that this word is used in the New Testament, only here is it not something hoped for (as in 2 Thes. 1.11), but something obtained. They are *full of goodness*.

b. They are also “filled with *all* knowledge.” Not just a little, but they are *complete* in knowledge, *completely filled-up*. In fact, they are completely filled-up in *every* knowledge.

c. Finally, they are also “able to instruct one another.” Of course, they are able to do this if they are “full of goodness” and “filled with all knowledge;” we wouldn’t expect otherwise. Paul is saying is that they are not merely able to instruct as in a Sunday School lesson, they can handle the full spectrum of instruction, from instruction all the way to admonishing (like Ac. 20.31) and even to hotly warning others in spiritual danger (see the same word in 2 Thes. 3.15). These Roman Christians can do it all.

*Discussion questions:*

a. Very quickly, think about how these three qualities work together. How do goodness, knowledge, and instruction integrate? (Keep in mind that *instruction* is not a classroom word.)

b. What do you think of this statement: You’re only as strong as your weakest quality?

3. I want you to listen to me very carefully: I believe that these words of Paul to the Roman Christians also apply to us here at Covenant Presbyterian Church.

a. But not for the reason that you might think. Not because we are just as mature as they are. They may be actually a little more spiritually mature than we are. What I mean is that, by virtue of being united to Jesus, having a reconciled relationship with God through Him, and by virtue of being known by God from before the foundations of the world, and by virtue of being indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we are all of these three descriptions of Paul. We are “full of goodness” in that, unlike the world, we know what good is and have the author of goodness, the Holy Spirit, dwelling in us. We are “filled with all knowledge” in that we are not like the world, wandering for truth; we know who Created all of this, we know His purpose (not exhaustively, of course), we know Him *personally*.

b. If you look at verse 14 you see that Paul is “satisfied.” In Greek this is a word that has some similarity to legal or scientific evidence. Paul seems to be saying that the evidence necessary for his satisfaction, the evidence that persuades him, is the goodness, knowledge, and teaching ability of the Roman Christians. However, this is not true. The evidence that Paul has in mind is not these specific features of their life. We know that these three qualities will always vacillate for even the most mature Christian. As those who belong to a large church, we know that these three will always vacillate in the life of a complex church body. No, the real reason for Paul’s satisfaction is the grace of God operating in these three areas as a component of the heart of each individual, and as a component of the corporate life of the church body in Rome. Paul is satisfied not by the strength of men and women, but by the strength of God. Here are two reasons why:

i. If they are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and trustworthy teachers, why then do they need a bold “reminder?” Scholars debate what Paul is referring to with this word, “reminder.” It only appears here in the Bible (a form of it is used by Jesus to describe communion: Lk. 22.19; 1 Cor. 11.24). What do you think Paul understands to be his “way of reminder?” Is it the corporate unity of the body in Romans 14? Is it submission to authorities in Romans 13? Is it Christian holiness in Romans 12? Is it the ministry to Jewish Christians in the church in Romans 9-11? Is it the role of the Holy Spirit in Romans 8? Is it the role of sin in Romans 6-7? The doctrine of the law in Romans 4-5? God’s judgment on sin in Romans 2-3? You see, Paul is sure that the normal Christian walk is one that needs many reminders, of basic truths about the Christian life. Paul is not satisfied by the strength of men and women in goodness, knowledge, and in their ability to instruct others. He is satisfied by the strength of the gospel, preached for the first time to a Christian, and reminded of throughout the Christian’s life.

ii. In addition to offering the strength of the gospel by reminder, Paul knows that they depend upon grace for their holiness because, guess what, the only reason he has any reminders of the gospel to offer them is because of the grace given *to him already*. Paul offers gospel reminders because He is a walking reminder of gospel strength. As Paul begins to tell about His work, he cannot avoid talking about the grace of God in the strong gospel.

4. The conscience of Paul is satisfied because He knows that God’s grace is real. These Roman Christians need help. They have real problems as a church body, hence, all of the gospel reminders. This is true for us here, as well. But our conscience will never be settled because we achieve some level of success. Instead, **a good conscience in life comes not from the success of our work, but from the success of God’s work in and through us.** Let’s turn to see if this is true even in a spiritual great like the apostle Paul.

*Discussion questions:*

a. Each of us need reminders of the gospel. Think about a season in your life in which you needed to be reminded of key aspects of the gospel (assurance, the work of the Holy Spirit, God’s sovereignty, etc.).

b. How did you receive those reminders? A friend or family member? Personal study? The church body?

c. If you are a person who should be available to provide gospel reminders to others, are you putting yourself in situations where you are likely to know which gospel reminders to share?

B. The work of Paul (Romans 15.15b-21)

1. As we turn from the *conscience* of Paul to the *work* of Paul, notice that Paul is a walking testimony of the grace of God. None of Paul’s work or efforts would be possible without the strong gospel working in and through him. While it may seem simplistic, the greatest evidence for this is right before our eyes in the text of Holy Scripture. Scan each verse from verse 15 to 21. What do you see? In each

verse Paul describes his work, but he also mentions a person of the Trinity (I'm cheating just a little because verse 21 is actually God speaking through Isaiah; in this way, one could argue that God is in every verse of the Bible because the Holy Spirit speaks every verse!). Notice how impossible it is for Paul to describe his work of gospel ministry without describing God. God does not make a cameo appearance in Paul's life, He produces and directs and plays the leading role in Paul's life.

2. The work of God in and through Paul. It is good for us to notice how exactly Paul frames his discussion of his work, but first let's admit a few things:

a. Paul's work is a bit different than our own work. This is not just because most of us have secular employment where Paul is, clearly, a religious worker (as strange as that sounds to say). It is also because Paul is uniquely called to perform a unique task. Recall what Jesus said to Ananias of Damascus: Saul "is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel" (Ac. 9.15). Well, we should read this, along with the strange circumstances of his conversion, as a unique role that none of us have been called to perform. Even those called to religious employment rather than secular employment are not working in exactly the same capacity as Paul. His task is unique.

b. Along these same lines, Paul's work is accompanied by testimonies of the power of God that are quite unusual even for his own time period among his own fellow religious workers. Notice that Paul's work is accompanied in verse 19 "by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God" (Rom. 15.19). These are special markers of God that signify His special work through special men called, *apostles* (2 Cor. 12.12). Even if we are called to a spiritual employment, like myself, Paul's work as an apostle is performed in an official manner. That is, while one employed in religious ministry today is a *messenger* of the good news, which is what the word, apostle, means, no religious leader today exercises the task of messenger in the official capacity of Paul. Paul's function as an Apostle is different than apostles today, as testified by God's markers of "signs and wonders" that accompanied Paul's apostleship.

c. Finally, Paul's work here is described, partly, to express his interest in relocating his base of operations to Rome so that he might penetrate the furthest reaches of the Roman Empire. Paul wants to reach Spain (Rom. 15.24, 28). As such, Paul's self-description in these verses has a particular emphasis to encourage Roman Christians in their support for him. When we think of Paul describing his work in a biographical way, Paul is not here trying to be the objective writer of his own autobiography. He has a purpose.

d. All of these aside, however, there are still things that we can discern in Paul's employment that we can apply to our own employments and, above everything else, we see here that Paul's work is really the work of God in and through him.

*Discussion questions:*

a. This is not an easy question, but read Romans 1.1-6 and try to discern if Paul here is speaking about his unique role as Apostle (like of the of the 12 disciples), or the kind of apostolic role that any Christian may have.

b. Of the majority of instances in the New Testament, this word refers to a unique, technical role of apostle. Our participation hinges on the word, gospel, in the first verse ([Rom. 1.1](#)). Why is this?

3. Beginning in the latter part of verse 15, we learn a lot about the work of God in and through Paul. It seems helpful to break this down into four small pictures: God is the origin of his work, the purpose of his work, the accomplishment of his work, and the goal of his work.

a. At the beginning of this section at the close of verse 15, Paul says “because of the grace given me by God.” Paul summarizes his work as originating not in his planning or strategizing, and not even in his many talents and abilities. Instead, his work originates with God. God cannot be compelled or persuaded or even impressed. God’s grace gives birth to the work that Paul has to do.

b. Paul describes his work as not only originating with God, but also serving God’s purposes (v. 16). Paul, as much as he wants to travel to Spain for gospel ministry, does not get to define the purposes of God’s work. He says his work is a “priestly service of the gospel of God so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit” ([Rom. 15.16](#)). Paul seems to be saying two things here.

i. First, because a priest is someone attending to the will of another. The priest can do no more than God will allow. Paul is but a priest who is only given permission to function at the pleasure of the One whom he serves. In this service, he follows the purpose of God for him.

ii. Second, while it may be challenging to discern God’s purposes with regard to Gentile conversions that follow His work in Jewish history, Paul performs his ministry for Gentile people. However, Paul is not allowed to care for Gentiles as he sees fit. Again, he is a priest and despite whatever advice he might have for Gentile people, all he is given permission to do is to help Gentile people be acceptable before the God he serves. To put it brazenly, Paul cannot cater to the whims and wishes of the Gentiles. He must help them use their lives as an offering before God.

God’s purpose is to bring Gentiles into relationship with Him, to adopt them as His children ([Rom. 8.15](#)). This purpose of God’s is as old as the promises to Abraham in which God promises to use Abraham to bless the nations. At the very end of our passage, in verse 21, Paul quotes a passage in which the Prophet Isaiah preaches this same promise: God will “sprinkle many nations” ([Isa. 52.15](#)). Paul then must set aside his own purposes for the purpose of God as a priest helping Gentiles to serve God appropriately.

c. Third, in addition to having God as the origin of his work and defining the purpose of his work, Paul goes to great length showing that Christ is the accomplishment of his work (vv. 17-19). He says “in Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work in God” ([Rom. 15.17](#)). Further on he says, “I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ” ([Rom. 15.19](#)). This is rather complex imagery in that virtually the entire congregation at Rome would grant that Paul is an astounding

apostle. His work and ministry are readily known by all. He does not have to introduce himself to the Roman Christians the way you or I would. He is well-known (skim [Romans 16](#) to see all of the names of people who know him!). Even though he is well known, he believes that he has conducted himself in such a way that Christ is what everyone knows about him. When he says that he has reason to be “proud of my work,” he is really saying that his work has been single mindedly focused on Jesus. He says, “I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me” ([Rom. 15.18](#)).

i. Work can bring pride. Pride in work is defined by those things which serve to make Jesus known. The word that Paul uses in verse 18, “accomplished,” means *work*. You’ll notice that this is the work of Jesus. However, when you look at verse 17 in the English Bible you see the word, “work.” It isn’t there in the Greek. Paul says that Jesus is at work, accomplishing great things (v. 18) and that whatever Paul is called to do (v. 17), it is to show forth the work of Jesus.

ii. Pride or no pride, work is always hard. Everything that Paul does, he does to show the accomplishment of Jesus. But he does this in two ways in verse 18. He does this in word. This is not just preaching, but every word that comes from his mouth. He does this in deed. But not just religious, churchy deeds. The word here is, literally, work. Every action is meant to show the accomplishments of Jesus. How exhausting it must have been for Paul to devote every word and every action to making Jesus known.

So, Paul’s work generates a sense of pride, and Paul’s work is tremendously hard. Without getting lost in these details remember again that God is not just the origin and purpose of our work, He is the Accomplisher of that work. No amount of effort will enable Paul to do for the Gentiles what he would like to see happen. He will strenuously employ his words and deeds to the best of his ability, and he will even boast about having done so (so to speak), but the true accomplishment of Paul’s work belongs to the great Accomplisher. Jesus has come to the world as God’s gracious promise to save. Jesus has satisfied God completely and entirely, and secured for us not only a declaration of innocence, but assurance that comes through the indwelling Spirit. But none of this will be praised unless “the Spirit of God” converts the hearts of hearers. Paul can work himself to death, but without the accomplishments of Jesus that work will mean nothing.

d. Finally, God is the origin, purpose, and ultimate accomplisher of Paul’s work, but God is also the object of that work (vv. 20-21). Very quickly, notice that Paul is a man of ambition: he says “I make it my ambition to preach the gospel” ([Rom. 15.20](#)). While the word refers to *loving to receive acclaim*, it is probably closer to an intense striving after something. Paul is not about to fly through life without goals. He is focused on preaching the gospel. Here we can admit that Paul has a specialization in mind; he is an official apostle who goes to places where no other official apostle is ministering that he might not “build on someone else’s foundation” ([Rom. 15.20](#)). Aside from this, however, the work of the gospel is a work that all of us are engaged in. Our lives are a living sacrifice to God, after all ([Rom. 12.1-2](#)), and all that we do must display His glory ([1 Cor. 10.31](#)), including our words and deeds, just like Paul (see [Col. 3.17](#)). The point that Paul makes is a point by way of illustration; each us are to ambitiously seek that people would see God through our work of living life.

## Conclusion

There are a few loose ends to tidy up along the way as we explore a few applications for our life today.

1. We began by looking at the good, or satisfied, conscience of Paul. Paul, of course, does not have such a comfortable conscience because the Roman Christians are full of goodness and knowledge and able to teach. He is satisfied because God has graciously done this in their lives of these men and women through His own work. Paul knows that God is at work not just in the church at Rome with all of her problems, but in the church here in Chattanooga with all of her own problems, including those problems here at Covenant Presbyterian.

Paul believes that **a good conscience in life comes not from the success of our work, but from the success of God's work in and through us.** This is a beautiful testimony of the life of the church. Many people today suspect that the church, the diverse body of people gathering together around the teaching and hearing of the gospel of Jesus, gathering to admonish and discipline one another according to God's holy demands, gathering to baptize and be baptized, gathering to fellowship at a table with symbols of the body and blood of Jesus, that all of this this is sheer foolishness, even madness. But we believe that the church is the place where goodness and knowledge flourishes.

2. After considering the satisfied conscience of Paul, we considered the nature of his work, day by day. There we learned four small pictures of Paul's work, that God is the origin of his work, the purpose of his work, the accomplishment of his work, and the goal of his work.

In one sense, Paul is engaged in a kind of *apostolic* work unique to him alone and, in this way, none of us are apostolic workers. On the same token, while Paul's vocation is as a missionary, very few of us are engaged in Christian work vocationally and, so, there is some distance between Paul's work and ours. But there is some similarity as well.

Each of us are called to do all of our labors for the Lord. For some of us that may be in the form of employment for an employer. We work for a paycheck, but that work can never be so common that the paycheck justifies the effort. Similarly, all of us have work within our callings that is not understood as, employment. Using myself as an example, I work as an employee before my employers, but I also work as a husband and a father and a son and a brother and a friend.

Understood very broadly, then, is there something that we can take from Paul about our own work? I think so.

a. God is the origin of Paul's work in that He is the one who has appointed us for our work. One of the hardest things to do is to thank God for our work. Many of us get lost in the hard experiences of our work. There are hard things about our work as employees, but there are hard things about work as husband, father, son, and friend. Do we truly thank God for our work?

b. In a strange way, God is the purpose of Paul's work and our own in that everything we do, we do unto the Lord. This includes both my work as an employee and my work as a husband and father and friend. This is the priestly imagery of our work. I am always a saint before God who is to live out my life on the altar of God, to be intrinsically a living sacrifice so that my ultimate

purpose is weighed not by me, or my employer, or my wife, but by my God. Do I understand that God weighs my every work?

c. Paul understands his work in light of the accomplished work of Jesus. Not everything about Paul's work is contingent upon his own success. Success is left to Jesus. My lack of success before an employer may actually be my greatest success if I am doing my work not for my own purposes, but the purpose of God. When I boast, am I boasting of my good work, or am I boasting of God working in me? Again, my employer may fire me, but as a Christian I know that Christ accomplished His work perfectly, on my behalf, and I can be assured that my being fired is a part of His continuing work in me. If the accomplishment of Jesus is ever before me, I am sanctified in the good workplace events and the bad workplace events. The one perfect work has already been done.

d. Finally, Paul had aspirations in his work. Let's notice that the goal of our work is never to earn more money or to build a large retirement. These are not bad things, even as they motivate us, but they cannot be the goal, not if we are servants of God. His glory is the one great ambition that must drive all of my other ambitions for them to truly be good ambitions.

3. Returning to that confidence in the things that we know as Christian people, shouldn't the Christian conscience be nothing but serene calmness in any and every circumstance? We know that our conscience is often not quite as settled as it should be. We know that we are saved by God's grace in Jesus Christ, but the *work* of daily life still destabilizes us just a bit. May we know that **a good conscience in life comes not from the success of our work, but from the success of God's work in and through us.**

*Discussion questions:*

a. Reflecting on work, is it uncomfortable imagining that we might be called to an employment that is filled with hardship? We tend to allow that a certain percentage of our work can be undesirable or unfulfilling. Can you take joy in that percentage of your work?

b. Think of prior generations when a person "chose" an occupation simply because it is what their family had done for generations. This person may be in a vocation that gives them very little fulfillment. Can it still be done with a good conscience?

c. Is your vocation one in which, no matter how it is done, it can never be done to the glory of God? Dan Doriani talks about this in his book, *Work: It's Purpose, Dignity, and Transformation*.