

# Real gospel partnership

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Date: 11 September 2011

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[ 0 : 00 ] And now we're going to turn to our reading for this morning. And once again, we're back in Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 15. You'll find it on page 950 if you have one of our visitor's Bibles.

And as we draw towards the end of this great epistle, we are looking particularly today at verses 25 to 33 of chapter 15.

But as last week, we'll read from verse 14 of that chapter right through to the end. So following the main exposition and the conclusion of that at chapter 13, sorry, verse 13 of chapter 15, Paul returns to what we call the letter envelope, the beginning and the end, the brackets that hold the main substance of this letter, and to many practical things that he speaks about his own ministry and the partnership he has with not only the church in Rome but with other churches.

And we mustn't miss the very important lessons that there are here for us, even though it seems to be just a rounding off of the letter. It's far more than just that.

So let's pay attention. Verse 14. I myself, says Paul, am satisfied about you, my brothers, that is the church in Rome, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled or fulfilled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another.

[ 1 : 27 ] But on some points I've written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given to me by God 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, well-pleasing, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud to boast of my work for God, 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, 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, that's modern-day Bosnia, Herzegovina, around there in the Balkans, all the way around from Jerusalem, around the eastern Mediterranean to there, all the way around there, I fulfilled, literally fulfilled, the gospel of Christ.

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, but, as it is written, those who have never been told of him will see, those who have never heard will understand.

This is the reason why I've so often been hindered from coming to you, but now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I've longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you, in passing, as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I've enjoyed your company for a while.

And then, verses we're looking particularly at today. At present, however, I'm going to Jerusalem, bringing aid, or more literally, to minister to, or to offer service to, the saints there.

[ 3 : 22 ] For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution, some share for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. 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. When, therefore, I've completed this, and have delivered to them what has been collected, or you'll see the footnote tells us there literally, when I have sealed to them this fruit, I will leave for Spain by way of you.

I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ. 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, that I may be delivered from the unbelievers, or the disobedient in Judea, and that my service, my ministry for Jerusalem, may be acceptable, well-pleasing to the

saints, so that by God's will, I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. May the God of peace be with you all. Amen. Romans 15, then, from verse 25 to the end of the chapter.

And the verse is all about what it means to be in real gospel partnership. Now, Paul the Apostle writes this wonderful letter to the church in Rome, not because this is a church with deep problems. [ 5 : 10 ] Look at verse 14 of chapter 15, and you'll see that's very clear. It's a good church, he says, fulfilled in knowledge, able to instruct one another well. But, says verse 15, he still writes, because even a good church, and would that every Christian church today could share that assessment of the Apostle Paul, even a good church, he said, needs a constant reminder of its calling, to be a people shaped by grace, who share the wonderful God-given privilege of his people in these last days of worldwide blessing.

The privilege, he says, of offering to God the only sacrifices that he takes great delight in. As verse 16 says, an offering of people, of Gentiles, of pagan outsiders, but those who now are gladly bowing the knee in faith to Jesus Christ, those who are made holy by his Spirit.

That is the great privilege that the church shares in these days. And that is the real worship that the church engages in. And which Paul's speaking about in these verses.

Offering ourselves to God, he says, as a living sacrifice, well-pleasing to God, and offering others to God as they respond to Christ in the Gospel, as they also bow the knee to him.

We share that great privilege with the Apostles. They are the foundation layers of that ministry. Paul makes that very clear. But the whole church, he is equally clear, shares in that apostolic mission.

[ 6 : 49 ] That's true for the first century churches in Rome. It's also true right through to today, to the 21st century churches. And it will be true until the Lord Jesus himself returns to this earth.

And so as we saw last time as well, because we share that great privilege of what Paul calls this priestly worship of bringing people to God, we also share, likewise with the Apostle, the priority of that pioneering witness.

That in all things, as the church, we are sharing the real Gospel passion of the Apostles as partners in this task of mission. Partners in the task that they began and have bequeathed to us.

And that's what our verses this morning in particular are reminding us. Paul writes to the church in Rome because he needs their real Gospel partnership. He wants to remind them of what that means for them.

And indeed for every church that is truly apostolic. That is a church centered on the apostolic Gospel and focused on the apostolic task. Of course, not all are called to be Apostles like Paul.

[ 8 : 01 ] The Apostles were unique. It tells us their ministry was foundational. But nor is everybody today called to what we might call pioneer frontline mission in full-time missionary work.

But what Paul is saying here is that the whole church is called always to a vital partnership in the mission of the Gospel to the world. Every church and every single Christian has a contribution.

It's a very important word in our passage as we'll see. A share in this fellowship, in this partnership of the Gospel that is an essential part of what it means to be a real follower of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And here in verses 25 to the end, Paul spells out very practically and in a down-to-earth way just what that means. What real Gospel fellowship, what real Gospel partnership looks like in practice.

Real Gospel partnership, he says, means that we all share in the mission of the Gospel to the world through a shared ministry of provision and also through a shared ministry of prayer.

[ 9 : 15 ] And both of those for both the people of the Gospel in the world and for the progress of the Gospel in the world. So let's look at verses 25 to 29 where Paul is clear that real Gospel partnership means a shared ministry of material provision.

It means that the church will take seriously its obligation to lovingly provide materially both for maintaining Gospel people, especially those who have been a channel of spiritual blessing to us, and also for maintaining Gospel progress.

Now look at verse 25. When you read verse 25, it seems rather strange, doesn't it? Because we've seen in the preceding verses just how determined Paul is to say that his whole thrust is to go forward to regions beyond, to new territories where Christ has not yet been named.

And yet here we are in verse 25 and he tells us he's now going in the opposite direction, all the way back to Jerusalem from whence he came. Now what is going on here?

Is Paul suddenly contradicting himself? Well, not likely. Of course not. He is going to Jerusalem in the opposite direction, but that's not, according to Paul, a distraction because that too, he says, is a

vital part of Gospel ministry.

[ 10 : 41 ] Verse 25 says he goes, not just, as our translation has, bringing aid. The word literally means to minister or to serve. He's going to minister to the saints in Jerusalem.

It's the same word as he uses in verse 31, translated in the service of Jerusalem. If you have an NIV, you'll see it translates it the same way in both verses. And he's using that word to emphasize that this is more than just mere poverty relief, although as we're told in verse 26, many of the believers there were poor and indeed were being persecuted.

But it's more than that. He calls it a vital ministry of the Gospel, worthy indeed of the Apostle himself. And that is so because it was an expression to Paul of this vital, real Gospel partnership, this fellowship within the one true family of faith that Paul has been at pains to emphasize all the way through this letter to the Romans.

This one family of God united by faith alone, no matter what your background, through Christ alone as the Savior of all. So Jew and Gentile alike, he has said again and again, are saved together by grace and therefore they welcome one another and must do so just as Christ has welcomed each one of them.

And they must love one another and they must share the blessings of fellowship with one another in visible and tangible ways as well. And that explains why this journey to Jerusalem to give material aid from predominantly Gentile churches in Greece to the Jewish Christians predominantly in Jerusalem, this explains why it was such a vital ministry for Paul the Apostle.

[ 12 : 28 ] You read about it actually in several places in the New Testament. From Acts 19 onwards, you read about the actual journey. But in 1 Corinthians chapter 16 and indeed in two whole chapters in 2 Corinthians chapters 8 and 9, Paul is instructing these churches there to be involved in this collection.

Those letters, by the way, were written just a couple of years before this letter to the Romans.

Romans. And he's reiterating that here in verse 26 that all those churches were involved.

That would be the churches in Philippi and Thessalonica, that's in Macedonia, and the church in Corinth, that's what he means by Achaia here down in southern Greece. Sounds rather ironic today, doesn't it, to think of Greeks giving financial bailites to somebody else.

And they did in those days, Paul says, with extraordinary generosity. Change days, perhaps. And yet, look at verse 27.

Though they did so gladly, he says, they were pleased to do it, in fact, it wasn't actually a gratuitous offering. These Greek churches, Paul says, actually were in debt. They were in debt to Jerusalem.

[ 13 : 41 ] He said, they owe it to them. What does he mean? He means that they are heavily in debt spiritually to those Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

not materially, but in terms of the wonderful spiritual blessings that they have received by coming to share in the salvation that comes only through Jesus Christ, the Messiah of the Jews.

Now, that's the reality, as again, that we've said, that Paul has spent this whole letter emphasizing. Gentile believers come to share in the promises of God to Abraham, the Jewish patriarch.

That's what chapters 3 and 4 were all about. Romans chapter 9 is very, very clear. It's to the Israelites, he says, that belong the adoption and the glory and the covenants and the law and the promises.

And from their race, says Paul, is the Christ who is God over all and therefore the Savior of the Gentiles too. It's also from the life-giving sap, from their olive tree, he says in chapter 11, that you have drawn the milk of salvation.

[ 14 : 52 ] The gospel, which is the power of God for salvation to all who believe, is first the gospel to the Jew and also to the Gentiles when they believe.

And so you see, these Gentile Christians have shared greatly in these marvelous eternal blessings that come from the Jewish people. And Paul says, therefore, they owe it.

they owe it to the churches in Jerusalem, mainly of Jewish believers, to share their lives with them likewise in every single way. Not just spiritually, but also in material, tangible ways.

Because that is what real fellowship in faith means, according to Paul. It's the expression of genuine family, of sharing.

And that sharing language is the language that is repeatedly used here. Look at verse 27. The Gentiles have shared in the spiritual blessings of the Jews.

[ 15 : 52 ] It's that word *koinonia*, which we get our word fellowship from, or communion, or partnership. It's sometimes translated. That's why in verse 26 it says, likewise, they were pleased, likewise, to share, to make a contribution.

Same word. To have fellowship in material blessings. blessings. And noticing that the sharing, the contributing, this fellowshipping, this partnering in material ways, Paul says, is a real spiritual ministry.

It's a ministry, verse 25, a *diakonia*, a ministry to the saints in Jerusalem. It's a priestly service, indeed, he says, in material blessings.

The same word there in verse 27 that he used in verse 16 of his priestly service of the gospel. In other words, he speaks of this material provision to helping these real gospel people as just another aspect of the real privilege of true Christian worship.

And so this committed ministry of material provision to those who are our true family in Christ, with whom we're united by the life-changing gospel of grace, that is an inevitable fruit of a real work of grace in our lives.

[ 17 : 16 ] Open hearts towards Christ's people, just because they are Christ's people, and especially when they're in need, especially when they're in poverty and in persecution because of their testimony to Christ, open hearts towards them is an inevitable mark of hearts that have been truly open to Christ himself.

Remember what Jesus himself said in Matthew chapter 25, inasmuch as you did it to the least of these my brothers, you did it to me. And they were pleased to do it, says Paul.

Indeed, they owed it to them. And their action was the visible, tangible fruit of the grace of God that humbles all of us and unites us all together as one in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now that perhaps explains the rather odd phrase there in verse 28 that reads literally as our footnote shows you. Paul says, When therefore I have sealed to them this fruit, I'll leave for Spain by way of you.

As Paul sees this act as validating to everybody, a sign that God really is bringing together his one family of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The gospel fruit that really proves the gospel root, if you like, of transformed hearts and lives and wills in Jesus.

[ 18 : 42 ] He speaks about fruit several times in this letter. Back in chapter 6, he speaks of those who once bore the fruit for death now bearing fruit for eternal life. In chapter 7, he speaks about bearing fruit from God himself.

Right back at the very beginning in chapter 1, Paul said, I desire to reap some harvest, to bear some fruit among you in Rome also. So he's telling the Roman church here about this evident tangible fruit from these Greek churches in their aid to Jerusalem so that they in Rome also likewise will see that they too have an obligation tangibly that they have a calling shaped by grace to this real gospel partnership including this shared ministry of material provision both for maintaining real gospel people their true family in Christ and especially those that they owe a spiritual debt to and also for maintaining the real gospel progress that was so close to Paul's heart.

Verse 28, you see, he's reminding them again of that. I will leave for Spain by way of you. That means by way of your material provision for me and my journey. See, this time the church in Rome, their material provision wouldn't be part of the mission of mercy to Jerusalem but it would be needed for the mission of the gospel to Spain.

And so all true gospel churches and gospel people are involved together. It's a real priestly surface. It's a real worship of God.

It's a shared communion. It's a fellowshipping. It's a partnering in a shared ministry of material provision both in ministering mercy to real gospel people and mission for real gospel progress.

[ 20 : 43 ] And that's what Paul is engaged in. And that's why he can say, you see, with such confidence in verse 29 that when he comes at last to Rome he knows he'll do so in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.

Christ. That's not some grandiose claim. That's not some sort of pious claim that Christians are often tempted to make. You know, I just know that God is really going to bless this venture.

Or I just know that God is really about to do this great thing or that great thing to bring revival or to bring some great new movement or some great healing or whatever it might be.

Sadly, often when people say those things with such conviction, really, it's just wishful thinking. It's just enthusiastic self-delusion. But that is not what Paul is saying here when he says, I know I will

come in the blessing of Christ.

He's simply saying this, that I know that when the church's heart is really set on a ministry of love for God's people and a ministry of love for gospel progress and when it gives itself to a real partnership in that ministry by providing for these things, then you know, as somebody's put it, that that church's heart beats with the gospel heartbeat of Christ.

[ 22 : 04 ] And then that must be, however difficult, however dangerous it is, that must be the way of fullest blessing in Christ, mustn't it? Do you want to be as sure as Paul that your life is walking in the fullness of the blessing of Christ?

Christ? Well, the answer to that, you see, lies not in desperately seeking some sort of mystical experience of blessing, rather it lies simply, according to Paul, in a determined sharing in this ministry of material provision that we're all called to together by God's grace.

That's the true gospel partnership of providing loving mercy to gospel people and loving mission to those yet to receive the gospel and become gospel people.

And that's real ministry, says Paul. That's real priestly service to God. That's real worship that delights the heart of God. But notice how practical, notice how down to earth it all is.

And notice how costly it is. See, Paul is saying that real gospel partnership cannot happen without an impact on the church's pocket. Simple as that. Real fellowship involves real finance.

[ 23 : 18 ] And that's so clear all through the New Testament. If you just read the last few paragraphs of Philippians chapter four, for example, you'll see how Paul explains so explicitly that real partnership means real payment.

We share with the people, with the things, with the ventures that we support financially. That's why it's equally clear in the New Testament that we're not to support financially people and practices that deny the gospel.

Do not, says Paul, share partnership. Do not share in the sins of others, he says to Timothy. But we must support gospel people and gospel progress if we are to walk in the blessings of Christ.

We have a debt, says Paul. We have an obligation in Christ to do so. And nor must we forget, Gentiles, almost all of us are here today, nor must we forget, like the Gentile Christians of the first century, that we too have a debt to Jews, because we also are saved only by being engrafted into the tree of their salvation by grace through their Messiah.

We've come to share, like the Greek churches, in the blessings of the Christ. And we must never forget that. Every true Christian surely must have a deep gratitude in their hearts and a love towards Jewish believers, a desire to help them, a desire to see their numbers grow as more and more of the Jewish people become Christians as they hear the gospel of Christ and come to buy the knee to their own Messiah.

[ 24 : 53 ] It's important, isn't it, that we say that as Christians, because that's not always been so among the Christian church in the West, alas. And in fact, anti-Semitism is very much on the rise today in Europe and in our own country.

It's very hip and trendy, isn't it, now, to pour scorn at every opportunity on anything to do with the Jewish people or to do with Israel. So that just last week in the protests at the proms.

But Christians must take Paul's words seriously. We owe our salvation in a very real sense to the Jews. Salvation, says Jesus, is of the Jews.

Don't be arrogant towards the branches, says Paul in Romans 11. Now, don't misunderstand. Of course, that doesn't mean, as some people think, doesn't mean we are all bound to only one political view about the modern-day state of Israel, as though that state as an entity could never do any wrong.

That would be completely to misapply Paul's words here. Paul's actually here speaking specifically about Christian Jews in Jerusalem. And he's only to be aware, also, of the hostility of unbelieving Jews.

[ 26 : 05 ] He's praying that he'll be protected from them. Just as today, many Christian Jews in Israel are persecuted far more by their Jewish compatriots than by anybody else. We mustn't be naive and simplistic.

But, nevertheless, Christians, true Christians, can never be arrogant towards the Jewish people. Far less hateful towards unbelieving Jews.

Or even hostile Jews. Because we have shared the very spiritual blessings that they have rejected. And even though they are, Paul is very clear, enemies for the sake of the gospel, he tells us that

they remain, in some strange way, they remain beloved for the sake of the forefathers. And so it's right, I believe, as the larger catechism teaches us in its exposition of what it means to pray the Lord's prayer. It's right that part of our Christian daily duty should be praying for the calling of Jews and Jewish people to faith in Christ.

And it was right and good, wasn't it? And commendable, surely, when during the 1930s and the 1940s across Europe, many Christians risked their lives to shelter Jews from the murdering Nazis. [ 27 : 22 ] It's right and good today when Christian people have a burden and a desire on their heart to pray for and to support financially. Real gospel ministry among Jewish people all over the world, including Israel itself.

That must be so. We owe it, says Paul. But of course, Paul's words about debt and about owing this also apply to us, I suppose, in a much more direct way, personally and individually, when we think about the obligations that many of us have to those from whom we receive the gospel, through whom we have shared such great spiritual blessings.

We sometimes forget, don't we, a proper attitude of gratitude and of care to some who have greatly influenced our lives for good for all eternity.

Read 1 Corinthians 9 for Paul's challenge to the church in Corinth about their failure to do that. Often those who have shared great, great spiritual blessings with us, with great generosity, often they can find themselves very needy in material terms.

While those that they have blessed have materially prospered and become very, very comfortable. According to Paul in verse 27, their proper priestly service to them and to God is to share a ministry of material provision when that's needed.

[ 28 : 51 ] And that's something we all ought to take seriously and think about. Because, says Paul, real gospel partnership means we are all called, all of us, to share in a ministry of material provision.

And I suppose it's just natural, isn't it, that the more God has given to us, the greater is that calling upon us. But secondly, look at verse 30 to 33, which emphasizes likewise that we are all called together to a shared ministry of mutual prayer.

Real gospel partnership means that the church will take seriously its obligation to loving prayer together. For real gospel progress and for real gospel people.

Verse 30, I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, he means the whole church, I appeal to you by our Lord Jesus. That is, it's an authoritative direction by Christ's apostle with the full weight of a command from Christ himself.

I appeal by the Lord Jesus and, he says, by the love of the Spirit. That is, the love in which the Holy Spirit truly binds together those who are the true family of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[ 30 : 09 ] Binds us in love and in affection and in obligation to one another. I call you strongly and urgently, it could be translated, I call you urgently and strongly to pray, says Paul.

To mutual prayer, which is just as real and just as necessary an expression of love and unity in the gospel as material provision is. Notice again his partnership language about you and me.

I'll be helped on my way to Spain, he says, by your provision and likewise I'll be helped on my way to Jerusalem by your prayers. It's a shared work, says Paul. And look, it really is work.

Note the language. Strive together with me in your prayers, he says. Ministry for Paul, you see, is a striving. It's a battle. We toil and strive, he says to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4.

We labor in preaching and teaching. He urges Timothy likewise to fight the good fight. It's an agonizing toil doing the work of the gospel, Paul says, even when God is powerfully at work through him doing it.

[ 31 : 22 ] Paul writes in Colossians 1 and 29, I toil, I struggle, agonizing with all his energy, which is powerfully at work through me. See, God's power at work through you means not soaring heroically on a crowd as the spirit sort of wafts effortlessly the work.

Not at all, says Paul. It means struggling hard here on earth, agonizing. That's how the spirit is powerfully at work through the ministry of the Lord's people.

At least if we believe the apostle Paul. But you see, Paul says to the whole church here in verse 30, Strive. Agonize together with me.

Enter the real conflict with me in your prayers to God for me. Join in that hard, that demanding, that energy sapping work.

Join it in your prayers. He's not just saying pray for the work. He's saying that prayer is part of the work. It's part of the partnership in that real gospel fellowship.

[ 32 : 30 ] Mutual prayer for gospel progress. Through the people that God has specially called to various frontline ministry all over the world. Now you see how Paul asks here for specific things for his labors.

He asks for two things particularly, and it just shows how down to earth and real and human his ministry was. First of all, he asks for prayer for rescue. For deliverance from the unbelievers. Literally, the disobedient. That's the way that word's translated all through Romans. It emphasizes the hostility of those who reject the gospel. The disobedient and contrary people that God has held out his hands to day in and day out.

The very opposite of the Gentiles who had come to obedience in Christ. Now Paul is no naive idealist. He knows full well that he is going to face great hostility in his ministry.

If you read Acts 20, you'll see he told the Ephesian elders that God had made it very plain to him that all that waited for him in Jerusalem when he went there was affliction and imprisonments. And so, notice what he does not say here.

[ 33 : 41 ] He doesn't ask for avoidance of conflict in his ministry, but deliverance in it. It's a very different thing, isn't it? Indeed, if you read Acts chapter 21 and following, you'll see how those prayers were answered and how Paul was delivered, but only through beatings and imprisonments and death threats and only by being rescued to become a prisoner of the Roman Empire.

He prayed for rescue for his ministry. And second, you'll see he prayed also for a response to his ministry from the church in Jerusalem. He prayed that his service would be acceptable, that it would be a well-pleasing offering.

It's the same word as verse 16. In other words, he's praying that the Jewish church would really grasp the significance of it. That they would see the wonder of a gospel that does truly have the power to unite sworn enemies in Christ.

and turn them into fellow heirs through the Lord Jesus Christ. Heirs by his humbling grace. He wants them to see through this gift of the fruit of the gospel, the marvelous reality of the truth of the gospel's power.

Often it is that, isn't it? Often it is when people see the real fruit of grace in a Christian's life, in a church fellowship's life, that draws them to open their eyes to see fully for the first time the real truth and the wonder of the gospel of grace.

[ 35 : 09 ] That's why Paul speaks to Titus about adorning the gospel, living out the beauty of the fruit of the gospel that people might see the beauty of its saving truth.

Again, there's great realism there, isn't there? Paul knows that sinful human beings are full of prejudices and pride. He knows that churches don't always welcome and recognize genuine gospel fellowship.

And so he says, pray, pray for God to work in their hearts for a reception for my ministry. And it is the goal of these prayers, verse 32. It's all, he says, so that by God's will, in other words, in God's perfect time and his way, Paul's desire for his apostolic calling would go on.

They would reach Rome. And that ultimately, from there, he would go onward to Spain, to regions beyond perhaps, to the new horizons for the gospel. That's his great passion.

Yet again, in the midst of that, there's realism and humanity. He knows how hard, how dangerous, how draining that mission will be. So he prays that he might look forward to their company and refreshment, both spiritually and bodily, to help him on his way.

[ 36 : 25 ] Paul's not superhuman. And neither is any person in any Christian mission. And it's good, isn't it? And wise for us to pray for and also, when it's necessary, to pay for times of refreshment and for recovery for them after grueling stints of service.

The responsibility on us as a church, isn't it, for our missionaries serving in hard and difficult places, to pray towards their refreshment and recuperation, their ability to go on with the desire of their heart where God has called them.

Do you see how clear all of this is for Paul? The whole church is called to a partnership of mutual prayer, just as it's called to a partnership of material provision.

And so it is still today. We are to strive to agonize with all of those who are called and commanded to specific tasks in frontline ministry and mission.

And it's a partnership, friends, that belongs to everyone in the church. Every single command, by the way, in the New Testament, every single command to pray assumes mutual prayer, corporate prayer, prayer together.

[ 37 : 42 ] That's why, of course, we take our own corporate prayer meeting as a church fortnightly on Wednesday nights so seriously. It's not that individual prayer isn't important, but it's just that the whole of the New Testament is primarily focused on the shared life, the mutual life of prayer in the church, the partnering together in prayer that is our corporate calling.

And the New Testament simply assumes that that prayer will be together. that is, as Paul puts it in chapter 15, verse 6, that together with one voice we will glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ as we give one united voice to God in corporate prayer.

As we pray together. Yes, in twos and threes, in home groups, in Bible study groups. And above all in our meeting where we gather together as a church, striving together to share in the struggles of gospel work as we support and love and partner in real gospel ministry.

Notice three things as we close about the partnership of prayer here. First, the obvious one, it is commanded by Christ's apostle and therefore by Christ himself. We must pray.

Why must we pray, you might say, when God is sovereign and God will do what he wills to do?

Well, ultimately, of course, the answer to that is one of great mystery. But as we've seen all through this passage, God tells us that he delights to share the privilege of his work with us, his people.

[ 39 : 16 ] We share the priestly duty of offering people to God through gospel ministry and evangelism. And in just the same way, we share the privilege of prayer that moves the sovereign hand of God.

How could we think that being involved so marvelously in that extraordinary calling is anything other than a privilege to rejoice in and be involved in? But of course, also in another sense, prayer together protects us and enables God, as it were, to keep working through us without the danger that we somehow become proud and think that actually it's all our cleverness or it's all our methods that are giving us success.

You see, when we pray together for something and God so clearly answers that prayer publicly for us, it's plain to us, isn't it? That it's God's sovereign power alone that is at work to change lives, to build His church.

And we're careful to give God all the glory. We can have none for ourselves. Unless we do that, God won't bless our ministry because He won't yield His glory to another.

He won't let any think that they can do the work of God. So prayer is commanded. But second, notice prayer is costly.

[ 40 : 38 ] We struggle. We strive in prayer. It's work. And work doesn't happen by accident unless you're very different to me. It needs determination and it costs time, it costs energy.

Something else will not happen because you determine to make sure prayer does happen. There are lots of things that we could do every second Wednesday evening. Lots of things that I could do if we chose not to struggle together in prayer.

A time of concerted work. That's true for all of us. Prayer is work and it costs. But it's a cost, says Paul, that the whole church is called to share in and partner in.

Friends, we must take that seriously, mustn't we? I know that not everybody is able to make it to our main prayer meetings for all kinds of reasons. Some people are very physically frail and they're just simply unable to come out in the evening.

But let me say this, by the way, it is some of our oldest and rather frail members who are most committed to our times of corporate prayer and bear it very gladly. Some people also are not able to join in for these reasons but they ensure that they get the prayer news sent to them every week so that even in their own homes when they're unable to get to us they can share in it together as a church.

[ 41 : 56 ] You don't have to be physically together to be mentally and spiritually praying at one with the whole church. But here's a fact and let me say this again, it's my observation if I go by the evidence of what I see in front of me, it's my observation that by and large younger members of our church are not sharing equally with older members of our church in this partnership of prayer.

It makes me wonder if we perhaps don't share the same willingness as our older saints for costly, costly gospel partnership.

For younger Christians today meetings to sing together in praise are very, very popular. But meetings to strive together in prayer don't seem to be nearly as popular. That may just be my observation. You just have a think about it. I won't say any more but just see which of those two things Paul speaks about here in verse 31. Prayer is commanded and prayer is costly.

And third, real gospel prayer is concentrated. It's concentrated and focused on the main task of the church which is the ministry and mission of the gospel.

[ 43 : 13 ] That is the great struggle that Paul was taken up with and that's the great struggle that he wants us to join in with by our prayers. Not just being distracted by being self-absorbed and self-focused in our prayers into all kinds of trivial things, all kinds of side issues.

Listen to Christopher Ashe from his book on Romans as he imagines Satan briefing a junior devil about how to get Christians to do exactly that. It's rather in the genre of C.S.

Lewis' Screwtape Letters. Satan says this, I'm afraid we can't stop them praying altogether. Some of them have got into the habit. But let's divert them from the jugular.

Let's get them aiming at my little toe instead. See if you can get them to spend all their time in prayer about physical illness. When their circumstances are difficult, get them to focus on all the things that would make their circumstances easier.

Don't whatever you do, let them pray for courage and faithfulness in Christ in the midst of their difficult circumstances. I don't mind at all if their health returns or things get easier, but I mind very much if they are loyal witnesses to Christ and servants of the gospel.

[ 44 : 32 ] Real prayer is concentrated on the real heart of the struggle, which is the mission of the gospel of the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. Christ. But we are so easily tempted away, aren't we, from real costly and concentrated, mission focused prayer, the prayer that we are commanded to.

Friends, that's why we have the message of these verses in our Bibles. That's why they are real and present for us today, just as they were for the first readers in Rome. They are there to remind us, just as to remind them, that we too are called to real gospel partnership in an ongoing mission that is built upon those apostolic foundations.

It's that real partnership evident in a real commitment to shared ministry of material provision and a shared ministry of mutual prayer, both for real gospel people and for real gospel progress.

It's that real fruit that proves that the gospel really has taken root in a church's heart and soul and in a believer's heart and soul.

But does that real gospel partnership describe your heart and mind, your life and mine, your priorities and mine? Does that describe the fellowship, the partnership that is St. George's Tron?

[ 46 : 02 ] Well, verse 33, may the God of peace who alone can unite hearts and minds in shared harmonious partnership by his grace.

May he indeed be with us all more and more, shaping us to that end for the glory of Christ. May the God of peace be with us all.

Amen. Let's pray. Dear Heavenly Father, how we thank you for the privilege that we should be called partners, sharers, in the greatest story of all eternity, the gathering together of a multitude that no man can number, to be conformed to the image of your glorious Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, forever and ever, that your name should be glorified.

Help us, we pray, to rejoice in that partnership and to give ourselves in prayer and in provision to strive together with all who have gone before, with all your people throughout the world, that on that great day of his coming, we, with Paul, might be proud heart of what Christ, your Son, alone has done, even through our humble and feeble lives.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.