

Maximizing People, Minimizing Me, Magnifying Christ

Romans 15:14-19

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Have you ever written a letter? Recently? Letter writing has fallen on hard times. Email has undermined the art of letter writing, and text messages have further trimmed letter writing to the point where we now simply send an emoji or an abbreviation, not even spelling out the words.

It feels like going back to an ancient time to find people actually writing letters—real letters—where you put time and effort into it. This is Valentine’s Day. One of my favorite funny Valentine’s Day TV ads shows a woman weeping and carefully composing a love letter to her man. Then it shows her man in line at the gas station. He happens to see one of the gas station plastic roses and plops down a dollar for it so he can show his girl how much he loves her. Letters require effort. Text messages are like gas station roses.

Romans could never have been a text message. Romans required a master theologian paired with a godly and gifted writer. *In this long letter...*

And now we are in the section known as the Epilogue. You know it’s a long letter when it has an epilogue. The final section. Favorite commentator John Stott introduces this last section by saying, “*The great exposition (chapters 1-11) and the great exhortation (12:1-15:13) are over.*” (Stott)¹ Now Paul gets personal as he ends his masterpiece.

“I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another. But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given 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, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud 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 I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ” (Romans 15:14–19 ESV).

What follows after this is one of the greatest missions verses in the Bible and it will be our theme verse for Missions Sunday next week.

Paul says three things there that are the outline and emphasis of today’s message. He maximizes people, minimizes himself, and magnifies Christ.

Maximizing People

Were you struck at all by what Paul says about the Roman Church? “*I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another*” (Romans 15:14).

¹ John Stott, *The Message of Romans: God’s Good News for the World* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 377.

Paul, do you have a little amnesia? Weren't you just talking about their terrible disunity, condescension toward fellow Christians, and flaunting of Christian liberty? You read Romans 14 and think, *I'd never want to be a part of that church. Those people were crazy.*

Just verses later Paul says, *"I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another"* (v. 14). What gives? The Apostle provides us an example of how we must look at each other and perhaps even ourselves. While there is some diplomacy here, Paul isn't lying. *"Full of goodness"* is a moral description. They weren't perfect but they desired to do the right thing. *"Filled with all knowledge."* This is descriptive of their spiritual understanding.

"Able to instruct one another." Let's sit on this one a minute. This doesn't mean they were all PhDs but it does mean they all were ministers. They were spiritually capable. This is a little wordy but, *"The reciprocal brotherly ministry of the members exercising pastoral oversight with a sense of congregational obligation."* (J. Behm)² There was a general biblical and spiritual competence in the church. These Romans were pretty good theologically. They were competent to counsel, admonish, and encourage each other.

I like this little phrase because it counteracts many who think ministry is just for the professionals. Or that you have to have a seminary degree to share spiritual truth over coffee. God's vision is not for a professional clergy who does all the truth-speaking but a robust and biblically competent congregation that mutually learns from each other. *"None were so wise that they had nothing more to learn, and none were so inept that they had nothing of value to share."* (Mounce)³ p. 266.

This should keep us from being know-it-alls who have nothing to learn from anyone or suppose we are know-nothings with nothing valuable to contribute. *Each of us* has something that *all of us* would spiritually profit from, if nothing else, our story of God's grace in our lives. *"Able to instruct one another."* There's a golden nugget for our church.

But we come back to the question, *how can Paul speak so glowingly of them when clearly there are serious problems with these Christians?*

Christian love paints portraits, not caricatures

I'm sure you're familiar with caricatures at the county fair. An artist is there with a canvas and they will do a portrait for \$50. But it's a caricature. More a cartoon than the Mona Lisa. You'd better be ready because caricature artists are really good at identifying your slightly enlarged forehead or kind of big nose. What they paint takes your small imperfection and oversized it. The result is that your picture is totally distorted. It kind of looks like the person but it caricatures their least attractive qualities. It makes those bigger than they actually are.

On the other hand, a portrait looks like you but minimizes those imperfections. They may be there, but the way the head is tilted or the coloring they use draws attention away from your worst qualities. In fact, the portrait typically highlights your best qualities.

² J. Behm as quoted by Leon Morris, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 509.

³ Robert H. Mounce, *The New American Commentary: Romans* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 1995), 266.

Don't we all feel the tendency to caricature other people's vices? To enlarge them in our mind so that we can't see them without that negative quality protruding? The negative quality is enlarged and the qualities that would otherwise provide balance are minimized. Jesus called it seeing the speck.

Were the Roman Christians condescending, sectarian, and liberty flaunting? Yes, apparently very badly. But they were also full of goodness, knowledge, and able to instruct one another. *Beware of caricaturing a fellow Christian*. We all have regrettable flaws and none of us look very good when those are enhanced. Love looks at people like a portrait artist. How can I make them look good? Try to consider the good graces in their life—how far God has brought them—and charitably enlarge those in your consideration. How? Romans holds a key.

See others for what they will become

The same apostle that wrote Romans 14 also wrote Romans 8. "*For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son*" (Romans 8:29). Every Christian someday is going to be completely perfect. Amazing. Awesome. This is our final state of glorification in eternity. There we will be completely Christ-like versions of ourselves. That's a guarantee from God. Seeing each other as not-yet-perfect versions of what we will be is helpful in dealing with the immaturity and sinfulness we often see now.

What do you think when you walk past the very green bananas in the grocery store? Throw them away? No. What do you think when you see green tomatoes on the vine? Rip 'em up? No. Those bananas and tomatoes are going to be really good someday.

As many of you know, basketball was a big part of my younger days. My teen years were during the ascendancy of Michael Jordan. To this day, I'm a sucker for those videos that pop up on social media: *The Greatest Dunks of Michael Jordan*; *Top Ten Moves by Michael Jordan*. I've seen them all before, but I watch them over and over. I also watch old videos of his days as a freshman at North Carolina. He was skinny. Made rookie mistakes. But I watch in awe because I know what he will become. I'm watching the early version of the greatest to ever play the game.

This is a helpful discipline in many categories of life. Are you in the early years of marriage? Your husband is like Jordan in his freshman year. Your wife is like Simone Biles at her second gymnastics lesson. You both are going to mature into better spouses for each other. Happy Valentine's Day. How about parenting? When your 3-year-old is throwing a hissy fit in the checkout at Walmart, what do you think? Actually, don't answer that. All parents have to look to the future with hope that the future version will be much more mature than the present hissy one.

This life skill is called Christian charity. 1 Corinthians 13 says, "*Love is patient and kind... Bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things*" (v. 4, 7). In this life, every one of us is disappointing on one level or another. But we need to see each other like Paul saw the Romans—works in progress. Progressively sanctified. And someday we are all going to be awesome like Christ.

In this way, we maximize people by mentally highlighting their strengths, as Paul highlighted the strengths of the Roman congregation.

Minimizing Me

"But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given 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, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God. For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me" (Romans 15:15-18).

This is biographical Paul. He compares his work to that of a priest and his offering to God is the Gentile church. Using the same language in Romans 12:1, he delights that the Gentile church is *an acceptable offering to God*, made holy by the Holy Spirit. The analogy is one that all pastors can relate to; our offering to God is the growing godliness and maturity of our flock. You, Bethel Church, are my offering to God—a work in progress, but I'm very hopeful. Remember, I'm a work in progress too.

What stands out here is both Paul's conviction that all that he has done is actually Jesus doing the work through him.

Magnifying Christ is the final point today, but in order to make much of Christ, we can't make much of us. Remember John the Baptist's response to everyone leaving his ministry to follow Jesus, *"He must increase, but I must decrease"* (John 3:30). This is counterintuitive to the human heart and especially dangerous when we make ministry the means to our own magnification.

This past week, I was at the dentist. On the TV monitor was a Christian cable station. I had to listen as a man on the program described a vision/dream he had in which God was calling him to bring a revival to the whole world. Like Whitefield in the first Great Awakening and others in later revivals, his dream told him he was THE MAN and on and on he bragged about how special he was. His amazing prayer life. His this, his that. I'm not sure if I was gagging because of what I was hearing or what the dentist was putting in my mouth.

Speaking of George Whitefield. Whitefield's posture was far different from a Christian TV star. Whitefield was quite the Christian celebrity, like Billy Graham in our day and even more. Whitefield was asked, *"When you die, what do you want on your gravestone?"* People waited to hear what the great Whitefield would say. He said, *"After I am dead, I desire no other epitaph but this, 'Here lies GW, what sort of man he was the great day will discover.'"*⁴ My dear flock, please do not be caught up by charlatans trying to draw you to them. Charlatans draw you to them, faithful pastors draw you to Christ. They take a minimal position so that in your heart Christ can be magnified.

Magnifying Christ

"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" (Romans 15:18-19).

⁴ George Whitefield as quoted by Andy Naselli, "George Whitefield: 'I am content to wait till the judgement day for the clearing up of my reputation,'" AndyNaselli.com, January 10, 2013. <https://andynaselli.com/george-whitefield-i-am-content-to-wait-till-the-judgement-day-for-the-clearing-up-of-my-reputation>.

Word and deed. Signs and wonders—the book of Acts tells us that Paul did many from healings to casting out demons to raising one boy from the dead (Acts 20). These miracles served as authentications of the gospel the Apostles declared.

"The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works" (2 Corinthians 12:12).

Paul notes that supernatural power and wonders from the Holy Spirit were a mark of his ministry. But to whom does he attribute the glory for these things? If you and I had on our spiritual resume a healing, and raising someone from the dead, we'd find a way to work it into conversations. *You know this reminds me of when I raised that young boy from the dead the other day.* How do I know this? Because we do it with lesser things. *This reminds me of the missions trip to Africa I did once. I was reading a systematic theology the other day when I noticed... As I was filling out my tithe check I was struck by so many zeros....* We're ready to pump ourselves up and none of us have raised anyone from the dead.

I'm urging us to take this to heart. When I minimize me, I'm free to maximize others. Celebrate their wins. Be happy for their spiritual successes. When I'm small in my own eyes, I'm OK with other Christians being big. This is called humility.

It also frees us to celebrate what Christ does through us without it being pride. Here's Paul in Romans 15. *I'm an apostle because Christ choose me. I'm the Apostle to the Gentiles by Christ's commission. I've planted churches from Jerusalem to Yugoslavia by the grace of Christ. I've done miracles and wonders by the power of Christ.*

Do you see the theme? As Charles Spurgeon said, *"We cannot at the same time show how great Christ is and how clever we are."* It is a zero-sum game. Like a scale, as he increases, I decrease. That's not to say I'm not blessed, or growing into Christlikeness, or being a part of a wonderful church, or doing ministry that is incredibly gratifying. All that is true and fantastic. But to whom am I giving the credit?

"Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord" (2 Corinthians 10:17).

Christians are glory pointers. We don't clutch the glory; we point to the glory. God forgive us for using our faith to *maximize us, minimize others, and magnify me.* God help us to embrace this example this week of *maximizing others, minimizing me, and magnifying Christ.*

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