

Romans 15

Romans 15:1–13

★ *In this next chapter, Paul continues his discussion contrasting how the weak and strong are to treat one another. He no longer mentions the basis for the distinction—like eating, drinking, or observing special days. Paul has given more than enough examples of things that might cause tension in the Christian community. These principles may have derived from disputes over foods or holidays, but they apply much more broadly. Thus, in this section, the breadth of application for Paul's exhortations has no stated bounds.*

In Romans 14:1, he exhorts us to accept the weaker believer without quarreling over debatable matters. He follows with commands not to judge or despise others for the exercise of their faith, be it weak or strong (14:3, 13). He also gives commands not to destroy or tear others down based on what they do or do not do (14:17, 20). God has accepted them, which is the only criterion for us to accept them as well (14:3).

*Paul's exhortations in this section shift away from a focus on corrective prohibitions to positive corollaries that should guide our judgments on these matters. **In 15:1, he calls us to do two things: to bear with the weaknesses of the weak, and not to please ourselves.** Pairing these two actions suggests that bearing with one another's weaknesses will not be all fun and games. Instead, it may mean abstaining from pleasurable and otherwise permissible things for the sole purpose of helping a weaker believer.*

In 15:2, Paul discusses shifting our goal from pleasing ourselves to pleasing others for their good and for the purpose of their edification. Paul is not calling us all to let other believers take advantage of us. He gives us qualifications that tell us that the basis for pleasing them is what is in their best inter-

est—things that would lead to their edification. These qualifiers serve as a safeguard. † Paul holds Christ Jesus up in verse 3 as our model of one who made the ultimate choice to edify others over pleasing Himself. We find a parallel picture in *Ephesians 5:25-26*, where Paul portrays Christ's sacrifice for the church as based on the goal of sanctifying and cleansing it—the very type of edification he is commanding here.

If we pause to think about weak and strong, we realize Paul has never explicitly labeled either the Gentiles or the Jews with these terms. He has referred to issues of conscience that might be a matter of derision for either group, but he wisely opted not to use labels. By being less specific about whom he has in mind as weak or strong, Paul can more broadly apply his principles.

Think back to our discussion of the human tendency to think more highly of ourselves than we should. Most of us would prefer to consider ourselves strong in faith. Instead Paul declares that strength does not entitle us to pursue our freedoms—it obligates us to use this strength for the edification of others, even to our own hurt and at the sacrifice of our own pleasure.

How does all of this relate to the church in Rome? If those who believe their faith is strong have been causing dissension by accepting weaker brothers for the purpose of correcting, judging, or despising them, then Paul's exhortations have turned the tables on them. Although they might identify themselves as strong, their self-centered and judgmental behavior toward other believers will reveal their hypocrisy.

Showing Your Strength

Romans 15:1–2



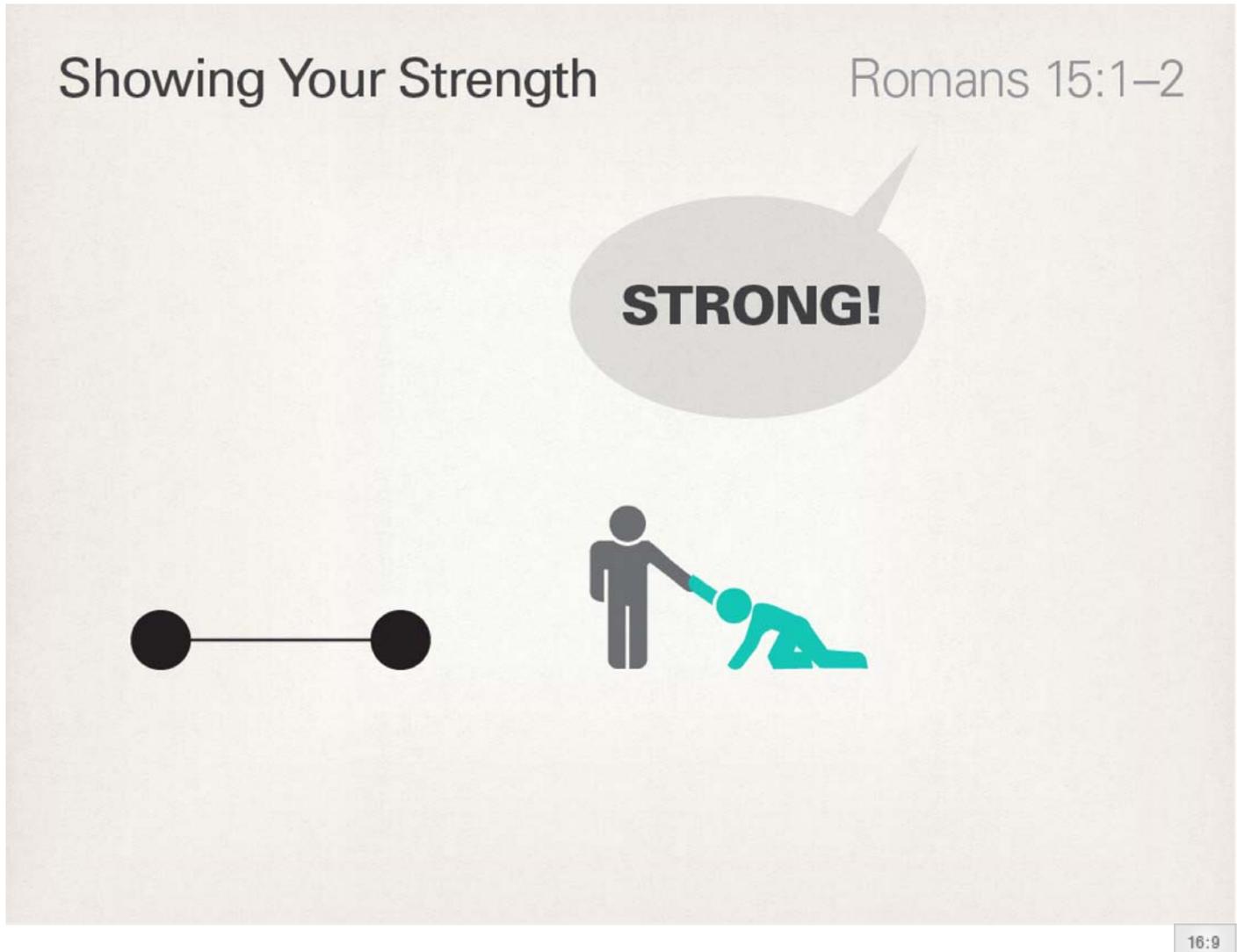
16:9

Showing Your Strength: What makes us strong, the ability to act or the discipline not to act? We may have the strength of faith to do something with a clear conscience, but Paul provides another consideration we must take into account.

As Paul declares in 6:1, God did not give us strong faith so we could fulfill our own desires any more than He set us free from sin so that we could continue sinning. He gave us freedom and spiritual gifts so that we could be instruments of His righteousness (6:13) for the building up of fellow believers. Paul sees this self-centered, self-serving view of strong faith as “conformist” thinking that must be transformed by the renewing of our minds (12:3). Such faith will not impress God. Paul says believers focused on their own pleasure at the expense of edifying those around them are themselves weak and in

need of edification.

The way Paul structures this section, including his lack of identification of the weak and the strong, allows him to extend these principles far beyond dietary laws or calendars. They present an aspirational description of a strong believer.

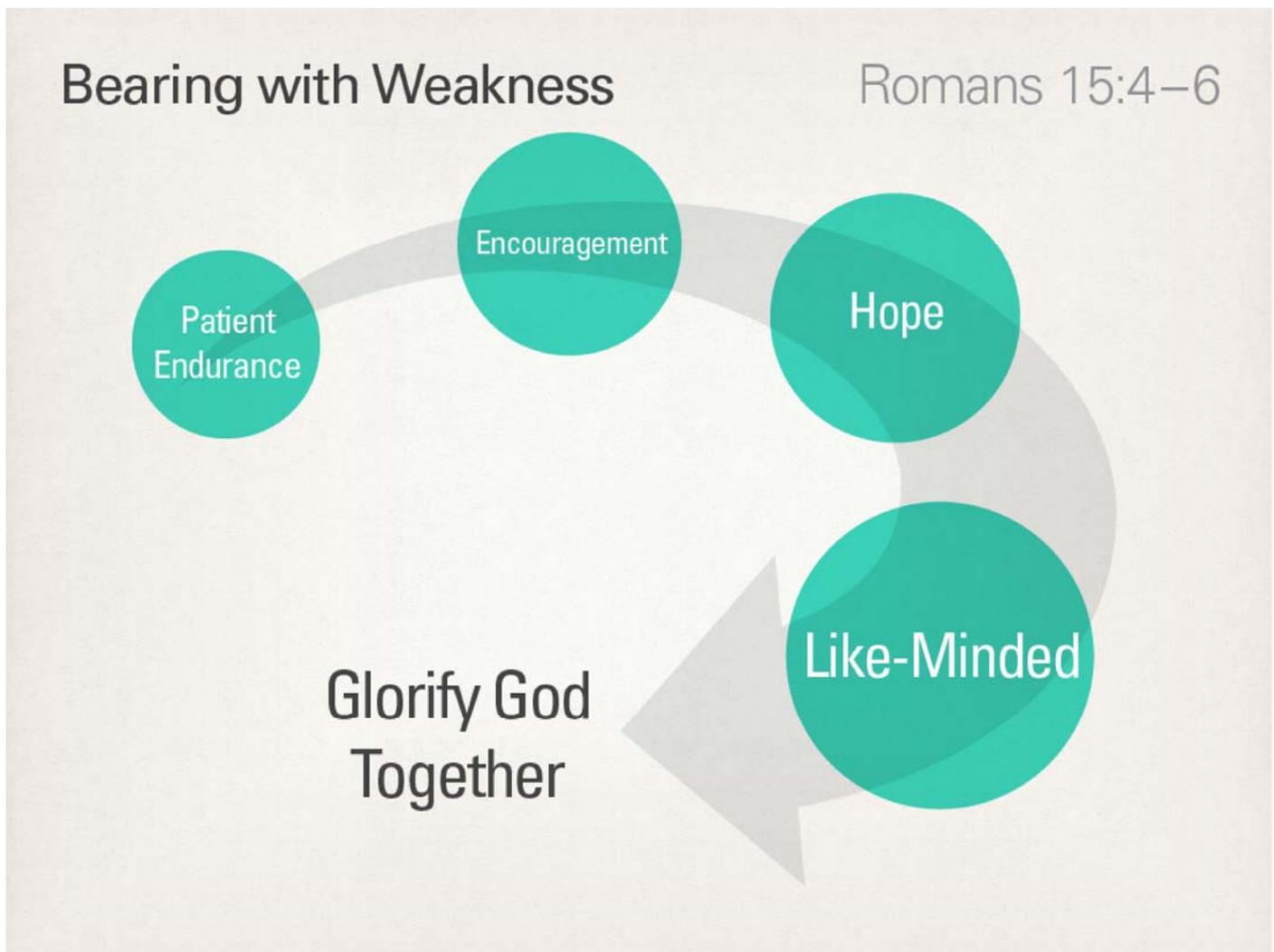


Showing Your Strength: Those who consider themselves strong demonstrate their strength by bearing with the weaknesses of the weak—not by exercising their freedom in Christ without consideration for others. From Paul’s perspective, strength is shown by pleasing our neighbor instead of ourselves.

If we claim to be strong and yet fail to edify those around us, our actions belie our words. To receive God’s affirmation of our faith—and that of believ-

ers around us—we must bear with the weaknesses of others and seek their edification rather than seeking our own pleasure.

We already learned that bearing with the weaknesses of others will likely entail unpleasantness, and Jesus' experience confirms this. God never promised a faithful life would be easy. Quite often the opposite turns out to be the case—thus we are called to patient endurance. And for those discouraging times when we wonder if our efforts are worth the cost, Paul reminds us in verse 4 that Scripture serves as the foundation of our encouragement. We cannot rely on our reasoning or experience alone.



Bearing with Weakness: Paul ties together several seemingly unrelated things to show the role each plays in achieving a larger goal.

When we choose to rely on the promises of Scripture, instead of our own understanding, as the foundation for our decisions, we find encouragement and increased hope that God is indeed working all things together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (8:28).

Paul affirms this idea by essentially renaming God in 15:5. By calling Him the God of patient endurance and encouragement, Paul is not narrowing our view of God—just the opposite. This thematically loaded expression casts Him in a very specific light, shaping our confidence in His character and motivating us to live in agreement with one another, as God desires us to do (see 12:18).

This progression leads to the fulfillment of many goals: As we seek to edify others through patient endurance, we find encouragement in Scripture, which leads us to greater hope and a sense of like-mindedness for all involved. These attitudes, in turn, lead to the end of judging and despising others—and ultimately to believers standing together, glorifying God as one body. Whatever discouragements we may face as we seek to edify others, we cannot allow those pitfalls to undermine our confidence in the joy that comes from obeying God's commands. In 15:7 Paul summarizes this call to look to Christ as our model for sacrificing for each other, with the ultimate goal of glorifying God.

As we progress through the chapter, we see Paul returning to his opening themes. Recall from the “Structure of Romans” section that Paul repeatedly digresses from the stated objective of the letter: announcing his intention to visit the church in Rome. His primary goal, of course, is to use these digressions to address key issues he intends to cover—but to do so less directly and thus avoid potentially alienating his audience. His exposition of the gospel, solidly grounded in both the Old Testament and a common-sense understanding of humanity's fallen state, establishes his rapport with this church he has likely never visited.

Paul describes God's plan of redemption as having natural consequences. Christ's death and resurrection atone for the consequences of sin. Creation should respond by patiently awaiting the final redemption that is coming (8:20-23). Likewise, as those who have received the gospel message await final redemption, they should give up their attempt to conform to this age, instead being transformed through the renewing of their minds (12:3). Freedom from slavery to sin demands us to respond by leading our lives in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ (Phil 1:27).

As we know, Paul has other reasons for writing. Here he begins to tie the strings of his argument together as he refers to specific implications of points he raised earlier in the letter. The remainder of this section acts as a hinge, connecting his exposition and exhortations to his specific apostolic calling to reach Gentiles—from Jerusalem to the northern reaches of the Roman Empire, namely Spain.

In 15:8-12 Paul once again digresses, in this case to strengthen his assertion in verse 7. He makes two points about Christ—one concerning Jews, one Gentiles. He grounds his call to accept one another in Christ's acceptance of us, but then he segues from believers accepting one another within the church to Christ's ministry to those outside the church. Christ came to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 15:24), as servant of the circumcision (see Rom 15:8), confirming God's promises to the patriarchs. At the same time Christ also came to open the way for Gentile believers to glorify God—an outcome expected from the patriarchal promises.

In connecting the Gentile mission to God's promises to Israel, Paul prepares his audience to shift gears with him, from exposition of the gospel to his hopes for spreading the gospel, in verse 14. He has just finished making the case that Jew and Gentile alike are under judgment for sin and need to

respond in faith to God's righteousness as revealed in Christ Jesus. >>In *Romans 9-11*, he highlights some important realities: The hardening of a portion of Israel to God's message of salvation provides a window of opportunity for the Gentiles (*11:25*). The Gentiles' response to the gospel will provoke jealousy in some of Paul's countrymen. Thus by following his calling as apostle to the Gentiles, Paul has helped reach both Jews and Gentiles with the gospel (*11:13-14*).<<

In *15:9b-12*, Paul quotes the Old Testament to demonstrate broader application of his claim that there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile. The quotations remind us that God's plan is intended for all of humanity—that was His goal from the very beginning. The covenant was never intended to shut some out; it was meant instead as the means to bring them in. The one in whom all—both Jews and Gentiles—could put their hope would come from Israel (*Rom 15:12* from *Isa 11:10*). In *Romans 15:13*, Paul provides a benediction for this section, painting a complementary portrait of God as the God of hope (compare with *15:5*) and reinforcing the themes of hope and encouragement we find as we seek to edify others. The key to abounding in hope, Paul says, is being filled with joy and peace made possible by the power of the Holy Spirit (see *8:26-30*).

Romans 15:14-21

Paul tackles a wide range of topics in this letter, many of which may have seemed like new information to his readers. The same likely holds true for many of us as well. I have known for years that God promised to bless all the nations through Abraham (*Gen 12:2-3*). I have also read the many Old Testament promises to Israel about a remnant being preserved (as in *Isa 10:22-23*) or of God restoring His relationship with His people (*Hos 1:10*). But I never reconciled all of this divergent information into a unified picture of God's plan for humanity. This complex letter is filled with details!

Paul presents us with a holistic view of many (not all) pieces of the puzzle, showing us how they all fit into the larger plan. Although it's good to have our incorrect or incomplete notions set straight, such revelations can lead to unintended consequences. Faced with bigger changes and corrections, we can feel unsettled and lose some of our confidence in what we know. If I was wrong about all these things, how many other things about God and His plan have I misunderstood?

In this section, Paul provides some much-needed reassurance for his shaken readers. In 15:14, his declaration that he is fully convinced grabs his readers' attention and spotlights what it is he's convinced about. The "I myself" statement fulfills the same attention-getting role, interrupting the flow of the sentence in Greek. Paul uses a device I call "thematic addition" to connect the "you yourselves" back to the preceding context. Thus far, Paul has demonstrated his knowledge and goodness to the Roman believers, along with his ability to instruct them. The sentence about his full confidence draws attention to his assurance that they too are filled with goodness and all knowledge, and that they too are able to instruct one another. In other words, as much as his instruction—filling in gaps of knowledge or correcting misinformation—may have shaken their confidence in their knowledge of God, they should trust that God will use their knowledge and their goodwill toward one another to keep moving forward. They should not stand still and wait for his next letter to tell them what to think and do.

GOODNESS
OVERFLOWS
UNDERSTANDING
CAPABLE OF
TEACHING
LOVE

16:9

Full but Forgetting: The Romans, like us, may hold to a number of facts about God and His plan for humanity, but they may still need to sort them into a unified picture of the whole.

Paul acknowledges in verse 15 that he has been quite blunt in delivering his message, but that his purpose in writing has been to remind them of things they should have already known. Now, with this deeper understanding of the gospel and God's intention for it, they should be filled with confidence that God will continue to lead them forward.

Paul justifies his direct approach, not on the basis of his apostolic authority, but on the measure of grace God has given him. God extended His grace to Paul so that he could serve as a minister of Jesus Christ to reach the Gentiles with the gospel. Paul's goal is to lift up those who believe as an offering to God, like the one described in 12:1.

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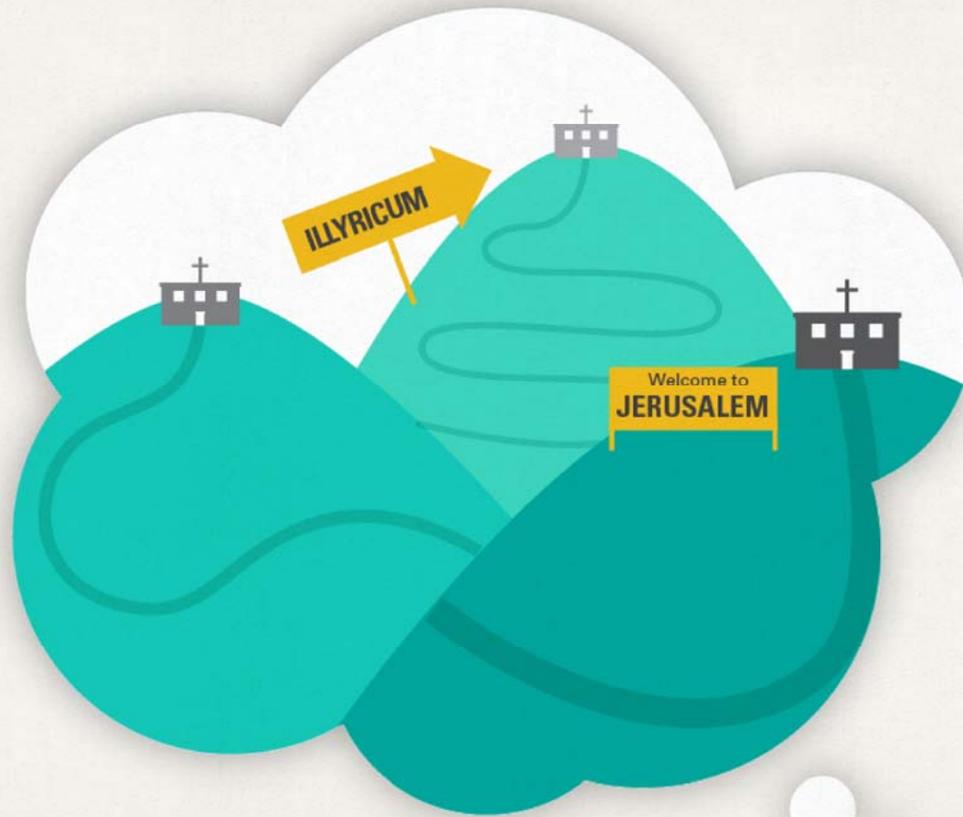
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Full but Forgetting: In Paul's exposition of the gospel, he has taken seemingly unrelated facts and ideas from Scripture and shown how they all fit together into a unified plan for redeeming all of God's creation. Instead of presenting this as a brand new plan, Paul demonstrates the gospel has been God's plan from the beginning.

In 15:17, Paul closes with confidence in God's ability to bring about His plans. He spotlights God in verse 18 as the one who will accomplish these plans and declares that he will speak of nothing but what Christ has accomplished through him in leading the Gentiles to obedience to God. Paul can confidently boast that he has fully proclaimed the gospel from Jerusalem to Illyricum, attesting God's faithfulness in every city and town. His declaration raises an obvious question: What's next for Paul?

To Illyricum and Beyond

Romans 15:17–22



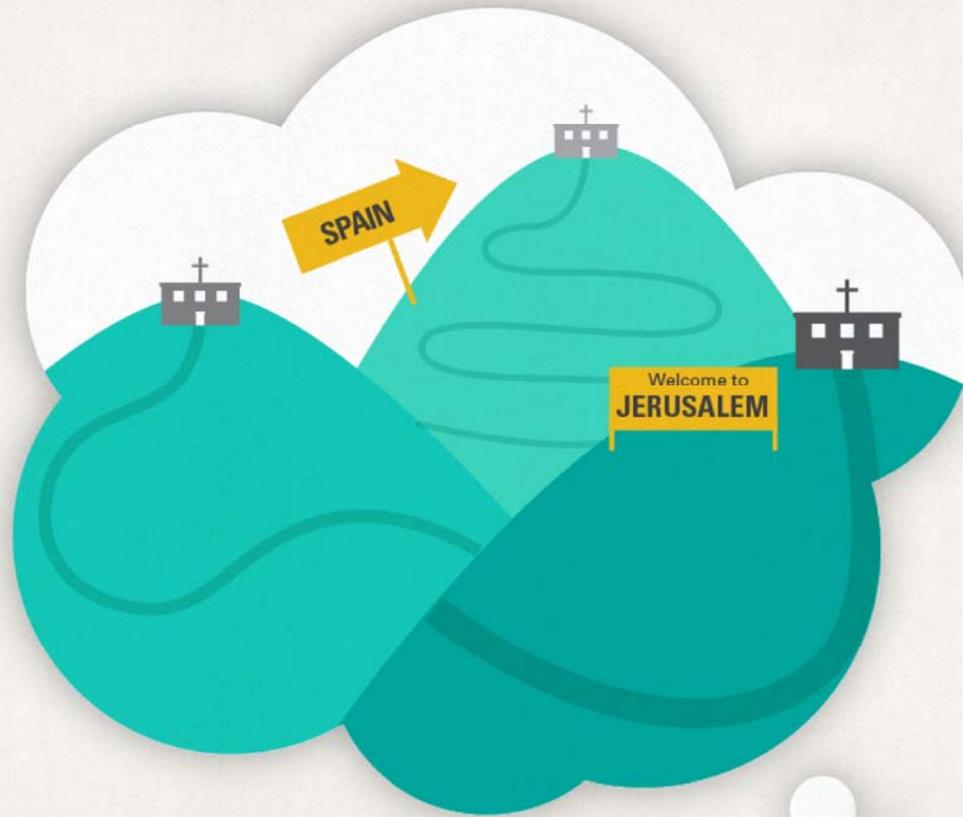
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To Illyricum and Beyond: By describing how fully he has preached the gospel in Jerusalem, Illyricum, and the surrounding areas, Paul paves the way for mentioning his intent to take the gospel to Spain.

But before discussing his next geographic objective, Paul outlines in 15:20 the principle that guides his ministry of proclaiming the gospel: He preaches where Christ has not yet been named. Paul feels called to establish new congregations in areas the gospel has not yet reached, not for his own glory but for the spreading of the gospel. We know that he didn't simply plant a church and walk away. As he says in Acts 15:36, he desires to visit and encourage the churches he and Barnabas planted. Nor has he been seeking to avoid addressing problems another preacher left behind: His letters to the Galatians and the Corinthians make clear that churches Paul planted are not immune to problems or dissention.

To Spain and Beyond

Romans 15:17–22



16:9

To Spain and Beyond: After fully preaching the gospel in Palestine and Asia, Paul felt called to preach where others had not yet gone: Spain. Part of Paul's desire to visit the church in Rome is his hope that they would support his mission efforts to Spain.

But having begun a new work in a place, Paul would train up leaders before moving on to new territory. His letters to Titus and Timothy illustrate how he delegated some of his leadership tasks, such as appointing qualified elders and ensuring sound doctrine was being taught (Titus 1:5; 1 Tim 1:3-4).

Paul bolsters his calling to boldly proclaim the gospel where it had not yet been heard by citing a passage from Isa 52:15 in which the Suffering Servant has been exalted and lifted up, his influence reaching many nations. Through this revelation of the Lord, kings are silenced because they have seen something they were never told, and they understand what they had not heard.

Paul quotes this passage to present the image of the gospel—a new message—being revealed to and understood by a new audience.

Romans 15:22–33

As Paul explains his faithful proclamation of the gospel from Jerusalem to Illyricum and his call to preach where others have not, he sets the stage for circling back to the beginning of his letter: his stated intention to visit Rome. Remember how Paul opens his letter, describing his desire to come and visit the believers in Rome? Now, however, he discloses in greater detail exactly what is bringing him to Rome. He has something more in mind than just mutual encouragement and edification. The great city is a stopover on a much longer missionary journey to unreached parts of the known world.

In Romans 1:10, Paul tells us he hopes to succeed “at last” in visiting the church in Rome. He picks up this same idea in 15:22, where we learn that Paul has been hindered many times from visiting. One of the reasons he wishes to travel now is that he is looking for new places to preach the gospel.
In 15:24, Paul states another reason for visiting: his hope that the Roman church will support him in going to Spain. But before he can visit, he must deliver the offering from Gentile believers in Macedonia and Achaia to the poor believers in Jerusalem.

As I Was Saying...

Romans 15:22

1:13

...so that's why I haven't visited!

15:22

16:9

As I Was Saying: The letter to the Romans began with a clearly stated purpose: Paul's desire to visit the church in Rome. But Paul carefully structured his letter around this formal purpose so he could go on to address important issues regarding how these believers understood the gospel. Finished with his exposition of the gospel and all its implications, Paul resumes the formal purpose of the letter by reiterating his desire to visit.

Why does Paul mention the Gentile origins of the gift? He is offering a practical implication of the principle outlined in 11:17-18. Since the Gentiles have shared in the spiritual blessings bestowed on them through Israel, they ought to share their financial blessings with the believers in Jerusalem (15:27). Why does Paul mention this offering here? By providing a rationale for believers in one area to financially support believers elsewhere, based on their shared spiritual bond in Christ, it would be natural for the Roman believers to prac-

tice this principle by sending Paul on his way to Spain with their own gift of support.

Paul closes this section by exhorting the Romans to pray on his behalf, that he would be rescued from “those who are disobedient” in Judaea, and that the offering he is delivering to Jerusalem would be acceptable to the saints (15:30-31). “The disobedient ones” may be a cryptic reference to Jews who oppose Paul’s proclamation of the gospel. Remember from [Romans 11:28](#) that although the Jews are loved based on God’s promises, their opposition to the gospel makes them seem like enemies. Paul requests prayer for a safe and successful completion of his mission to Jerusalem so that he might come to Rome and rest (15:30).