

Daily Bread with Brother Hwa-Chi (Not reviewed by the speaker, for personal use only)

Romans 15: 20-24

Brothers and sisters, peace be with you, this is Hwa-Chi. Thank the Lord, it's time to read the bible again. We'll continue to read Romans Chapter 15 and today we will read verses 20 to 24.

Paul valued his ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles. The way he carried out his ministry was through his words and deeds, through God's confirmation of his work by signs and wonders, and through the power of the Holy Spirit working in people's hearts in coordination with him. In this way, he was able to bring the Gentiles into obedience to the gospel. Beginning from Jerusalem, through his three missionary journeys, he spread the gospel throughout the regions along the Mediterranean coast, even as far north as Illyricum. Through Paul's ministry, many Gentiles were saved by grace, and many Gentile churches were established.

Verse 20: "And so I have made it my aim to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build on another man's foundation."

Paul set his ambition not to preach the gospel where the name of Christ had already been proclaimed. Here we see Paul's boldness: before God he established a lofty aspiration—to preach the gospel where Christ's name had not been named. First, we must establish that this is not a general principle, but a specific leading God gave to Paul.

To labor in places where others have already preached the gospel is, in principle, not wrong; however, in practice, one must respect the work that God has already raised up through other saints. It is best to have fellowship first and to cooperate together, rather than to create a relationship of competition. For ultimately the church must develop into the kingdom, and every church must submit to the

headship of Christ. Paul had a clear understanding of his own ministry, knowing that God had called him to do pioneering, frontier-opening work.

In 1 Corinthians 3:6, Paul says this: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.” Paul’s ministry was that of planting—that is, in places where no one had preached the gospel before, he first sowed the seed and then carried out the work of planting, until the church was established. Paul also understood that, in addition to planting, watering was needed. Apollos had the ministry of watering, which was to go into churches established by others and help nurture the saints.

In fact, it was not only Apollos. Another close co-worker of Paul—Barnabas—also had gifts for serving in the church. Therefore, after Barnabas and Paul parted ways, Paul continued his second missionary journey and, under the leading of the Holy Spirit, stepped onto European soil. In contrast, Barnabas went only to Cyprus, where he helped the churches that had already been established after the first missionary journey. Later, as Paul’s work expanded among the Gentiles, Barnabas also went to churches established by Paul to help with the work of nurturing and training. Thus, there are those who plant and those who water, and the church needs both kinds of ministries. But it is God who gives the growth, because God is the source of life.

Of course, if someone serves in an already established church, they must cooperate with the existing ministries; otherwise, difficulties will arise in the church. It is very possible that Apollos did not properly grasp the appropriate measure in this matter, which resulted in divisions in the Corinthian church. Some said, “I am of Paul,” and others said, “I am of Apollos.” In 1 Corinthians chapters 1–3, Paul deals very seriously with the issue of division. Paul also clearly pointed out that the problem was not Apollos himself, but that the saints in the Corinthian church were fleshly. Nevertheless, this reminds us that building on another person’s foundation must be done with great care.

The commission Paul received from the Lord was to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth. At that time, the work of the gospel had only just begun to unfold, and everywhere was undeveloped territory where the gospel had not yet been heard.

Therefore, Paul set his ambition not to build on another person's foundation. Today, however, the gospel has already spread to all inhabited regions of the earth. If we were to have the same ambition as Paul today, we could only go into the Amazon rainforest or to completely uncivilized wilderness areas. Therefore, this principle is no longer applicable to most saints today.

However, the principle Paul speaks of here—not building on another person's foundation—is a very difficult matter in practice today. Therefore, we especially need to pay attention to what we should be careful about if we are building on another person's foundation. Let us unfold this verse and look at it more closely.

In Paul's time, besides Paul himself, there were many other apostles. An apostle is one who is sent by God to preach the gospel and establish churches. Among those apostles, some are familiar to us, and many more are probably unfamiliar. For example, in Romans 16:7, Paul mentions Andronicus and Junia, two apostles who were well known. Yet even though Paul especially commends these two, we do not really know their specific ministries, nor do we understand the work they did.

When the spheres of labor of apostles overlap, conflicts are almost unavoidable. This happened in the church in Corinth, to the extent that Paul had to write Second Corinthians to clarify his apostolic authority. In 2 Corinthians 10:12–14, Paul says: “For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise. We, however, will not boast beyond measure, but within the limits of the sphere which God appointed us—a sphere which especially includes you. For we are not overextending ourselves (as though our authority did not extend to you), for it was to you that we came with the gospel of Christ.”

Some self-commended people had come to the Corinthian church preaching a different message, causing difficulties in the church and damaging the relationship between Paul and the Corinthian believers. Therefore, Paul put forward a most important principle: the boundary that God has measured out. Paul always carried out his work within the boundary measured to him by God. This principle tells us

that we must not seize the results of other people's labor, nor boast in what others have worked for. That is why Paul said he was willing to work only in places where the gospel had not been heard, so that he would not build on another person's foundation.

In 1 Corinthians 3:10–11, Paul says: "According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ."

Paul compares himself to a wise master builder. When establishing churches, he had already laid the foundation, and others could build upon it. Paul could lay a foundation, and other apostles could also lay foundations. So what exactly is the foundation? Paul tells us very plainly: the foundation is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the only foundation; there is no other foundation.

If Christ is the only foundation, then why does Paul say that he does not build on another person's foundation? The reason is that, in practical operation, there is another aspect to consider. In Ephesians 2:19–20 it says: "Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord." Here Paul tells us that the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.

Of course, Christ is the only foundation of the church; however, when people rise up to lay a foundation, they do so according to their knowledge of Christ. Therefore, at the practical level, when apostles establish churches, they do so based on their understanding of Christ—preaching the gospel, leading people to salvation, and gathering the saved ones together to form a church. The establishment of that church is based on the apostle's knowledge of Christ. When prophets nurture the saints, they also build the church according to their knowledge of Christ. Thus, the apostles' and prophets' knowledge of Christ becomes the foundation upon which they build the church.

Christ Himself is all-inclusive, all-sufficient, and infinitely rich, and He Himself is the complete truth; however, each apostle's and prophet's knowledge may not be complete. Therefore, Paul adds that Christ Himself is the cornerstone.

This also indicates that every church that is built manifests only a portion of Christ's riches and glory. Only when Christ returns, and all the buildings are properly joined together in Him, will they grow into the holy temple of the Lord. For this reason, Paul was very careful. He was unwilling to build on another person's foundation, lest he interfere with the work that God had established through the labor of other apostles.

As we have mentioned before, in the New Testament ministry—apart from the ministry of Jesus Christ Himself—there are mainly three apostolic ministries. Christ's ministry accomplished redemption, enabling people to receive salvation by believing in Jesus Christ.

Christ entrusted the mission of building the church to His apostles: among them, Peter had the ministry of opening the door, or the ministry of gaining people; Paul had the ministry of building; and John had the ministry of completion, or the ministry of mending the nets. Paul's building ministry was built upon Peter's door-opening ministry, yet the building ministry was not completed in Paul's lifetime. Paul was martyred in A.D. 67, and it was more than twenty years after his martyrdom that God raised up John to carry out his ministry. John rose up to mend what was lacking and to prophesy that the development of the church would continue until Christ's return.

Thus, this completing ministry was entrusted to John. In Revelation chapters 2 and 3, John reveals seven kinds of churches, four of which will continue until Christ's return. Therefore, the fact that today's churches have different forms and must overcome different difficulties is something God has permitted. Consequently, Paul's word about not building on another person's foundation is also something that saints must carefully observe when serving the church today.

Verse 21: “but as it is written: “To whom He was not announced, they shall see; And those who have not heard shall understand.”

Paul here is quoting Isaiah 52:15: “So shall He sprinkle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths at Him. For what had not been told them they shall see, and what they had not heard they shall understand.” The prophet Isaiah foretold that the gospel of Christ would be proclaimed among the nations and all peoples. Paul cites this verse to express his own aspiration. He desired to proclaim Christ as the gospel to the nations and peoples who had never heard the gospel, so that they might see, hear, and understand it. Paul’s boldness is admirable, and his determination to open up new territory for the sake of the gospel is something worthy of admiration.

However, two thousand years later, in our own day, it is very difficult to find cities that have never heard the gospel. Yet Christ has not returned, which indicates that the building up of the church has not yet reached God’s intention. Personally, I believe that the deficiency in the building of the church lies not in quantity but in quality. The Book of Romans, as the gospel book for Christians, therefore appears especially important. What the church lacks is not the number of people who are saved, but the growth in life and the testimony in daily living of the saved saints. We need to have Paul’s boldness and determination, helping the saints around us to understand the full gospel presented in Romans, in order to bring about the return of Christ.

Verse 22-23: “For this reason I also have been much hindered from coming to you. But now no longer having a place in these parts, and having a great desire these many years to come to you.”

Paul had many coworkers serving in the church in Rome, and he also greatly longed to visit the Roman church. At the beginning of the book of Romans, in 1:10–13, Paul mentioned that he often prayed about this matter: “making request, if by any means now at last I may find a way in the will of God to come to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift, so that you may be established— that is, that I may be encouraged together with you by the mutual

faith both of you and me. Now I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that I often planned to come to you (but was hindered until now), that I might have some fruit among you also, just as among the other Gentiles."

When Paul carried out his ministry, where he went to pioneer the gospel was entirely according to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Although in his heart he wanted to go to Rome, he would not go against the Spirit's leading; therefore he said that he had been hindered many times and could not go to Rome. Paul truly was a slave of Christ Jesus. His actions were completely submissive to the Lord's arrangements; he was extremely "unfree." In his three missionary journeys, the Lord led him throughout the regions along the Mediterranean coast. Eventually Paul said that there was no longer any place for him to preach here.

In Paul's understanding, preaching the gospel was a matter of sowing and planting. He did not need to preach the gospel to every individual person; rather, he preached the gospel to bring people to salvation and to establish churches. After that, the responsibility of spreading the gospel in that region was entrusted to the churches. When the saints in the churches grew in life and were perfected in their gifts, they were able to bear the commission of the gospel and preach to those around them. Paul himself would then continue to move forward.

By working in this way, in just over ten years Paul was able to declare that there was no longer any place for him to preach in that region. Paul also always remembered the Lord's command before His ascension—to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth. In the understanding of people at that time, the end of the earth was Spain. Therefore, for several years Paul desired to go to Spain to preach the gospel, in accordance with the Lord's commission, to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth. However, to go to Spain he would have to pass through Rome, so Paul told the saints in Rome that he wished to visit them.

Verse 24: "whenever I journey to Spain, I shall come to you. For I hope to see you on my journey, and to be helped on my way there by you, if first I may enjoy your company for a while."

Paul hoped to pass through Rome, because in order to take the gospel to the ends of the earth—that is, to Spain—he had to go through Rome. Paul hoped to stay in Rome for a period of time, to meet with the saints of the church in Rome, to fellowship with them, and to have open communication and sharing with them; in this way, his heart would be somewhat satisfied. Paul’s choice of words is very particular. “Satisfied” refers to a person who has experienced something pleasant and joyful, and whose heart feels filled—no longer empty, no longer lacking anything. That is a genuine satisfaction.

Earthly things, no matter how wonderful they are, may feel pleasant while we are experiencing them, but once the experience is over, a sense of emptiness quickly returns. However, Paul says that the satisfaction that comes from fellowship and sharing together with the saints is eternal; it is something God Himself will preserve for us. Paul was very confident that after he had such satisfying fellowship and sharing with the saints, he would be able to be sent by the church in Rome to continue pioneering the gospel in Spain, and that the Roman church would send him on his way. We might naturally be curious where Paul got such confidence—that a church he had just visited would rise up to support his ministry.

Paul seems to have had a confidence that came from God. He knew that when he went to Rome, he would be able to supply the needs of the saints there. He would be able to bring the saints into the same burden that he carried, and thus he could be sent and commended by the saints to go on to Spain. This kind of confidence and assurance far exceeds what people can understand.

Let us pray together: Dear Lord Jesus, thank You for setting Paul’s example before us. In his service to the churches, he was full of faith toward God and full of respect toward his fellow co-workers. He was unwilling to build on the foundation laid by others; this was a special commission and mission You gave him. In today’s church, the work of those who serve can easily overlap. We ask that You grant us wisdom and help us learn from Paul’s attitude—to respect the work You have done through other saints, and to learn to coordinate and cooperate with other co-workers to accomplish together the commission You have entrusted to the church. Bless the

church I am part of and our church life. We pray in the holy name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen!