

Great Commission People

Romans 15:14-33

We pick up our study of Romans here in chapter 15:14. Pastor Shane did a fine job working through the previous text in my absence.

- This was a very fitting text to study while away visiting our missionaries.
- For this is a missional text.
- Our missionaries are spending hours learning difficult languages, living in very difficult contexts, with little kids, as they seek to make the gospel known.
- And some are trying **to plant a church among a people group that has never had a church!** (an **emphasis in today's text**).

I **walked through this passage (through v 33) with them last week.**

- Today and next week is the “extended version.”
- Some of them have been keeping up with our Romans series.
- Adam told me that he and Amy were going to sleep to my sermons every night!
 - “Oh yeah, we listen every night to your sermon for about ten minutes, then we fall asleep — by the end of the week we finish it!” Should I be by that?
- So this two part series will give him two weeks worth of sleep, and I’m happy to serve in that way!

This passage highlights the special bond between the church and the missionary - perhaps the great missionary ever, the Apostle Paul.

- Previously, Antioch had been Paul’s home base (Acts 13) - his sending church.
- But now he wants to go to Spain, and he wants the Romans to be the new Antioch -- to support his work in pioneer regions.
- The first section (**14-21**) is about Paul’s special calling and past travels.
- The 2nd section (**22-33**) is about his future plans.

In this little window into Paul’s travels, we see the heart of the greatest missionary ever.

- We get a look at the mission of God, the mission of the apostle, and the mission of the church.
- Bird says that this text is “**all about mission, mission, mission! Romans is written from the frantic frontline of the mission field, not in the serene surroundings of a seminary’s professor’s office.**”
- That’s not a swipe at seminaries — he teaches at one! Simply a reminder Paul isn’t writing Romans from an institutional tower, but from the missional trenches.

So were looking at what I’m calling “**Great Commission People.**”

GC people take Jesus’ last command as their first priority:

to make disciples of all nations.

- All Christians will **not** cross continents and cultures to make the gospel known.
- Some will simply cross the street.
 - That too is an urgent need!

- Don't assume there's no need for gospel witness in the *suburbs*!
- JH Perry: “Why aren't there mission trips to rich suburban neighborhoods? Because those Christians mistakenly believe that impoverished = unrighteous.” (And that those in the suburbs aren't as desperate for the gospel).
- The reality is, Lostness is all around us!
- GC people may not cross continents, but they will make disciples locally, and they will support those who do cross countries and continents.
- That's GC people. We are all in it together.

Of course, this text is **not** an end-all for missions -- and we must be careful making application from it. These are *Paul's travel plans*.

- But we can learn some important principles if we consider what principles are (1) **timeless** and what principles are (2) **taught elsewhere in Scripture**.
- And there is much here that qualifies as such.

8 Directives for GC People

#1: Be part of a healthy gospel-centered church (14-15)

- Its easy to fly past these verses, but they are very significant.
- Some think Paul is flattering the church, for the sake of drawing support, but I disagree.
- He is sincerely affirming them.
- After speaking rather “**boldly**” on some points to the Romans (v. 15), by God's grace (as an apostle), he pauses to **encourage** them.
- This affirmation had to mean a lot to them.

How should you evaluate a church?

- Here are Paul's priorities.
 - They are quite different from the typical consumerism in the American church.
- Notice he is “**satisfied**” about them (14). That says something. This is Paul.
- Romans doesn't contain the kinds of rebukes that we find in Corinthians.
- This is a good collection of churches in Rome.

If Paul came to IDC, what would he be concerned about?

- A healthy church is marked by **Spiritual Maturity**
 - “**Goodness**” a word that speaks of **moral excellence**.
 - “**Full**” of goodness. They are “oozing with goodness.”
 - Barnabas: Acts 11:22ff. This comes from the H.S.
 - They know what is good (Micah 6:8) and they seek to walk in that.
 - They represent their **God who is “good...”**
 - Hate evil, and do what is good brackets the section **Rom 12:9-21**.
 - It seems the Romans were known for such character.
- A healthy church is marked by **Theological Discernment**

- They were **“filled with all knowledge.”**
- They had spiritual discernment.
- There’s a great lack of this today: **just turn on religious television!**
- Here’s an example of a prosperity sermon my friend Steve Timmis made me aware of.

“If you’re going to beat the odds, stand out in the crowd; if you’re going to reach your highest potential, you have to learn this principle: to ask big.

God said in Psalm 2, from *The Message* translation:

*“You’re my son,
And today is your birthday.
What do you want? Name it:
Nations as a present? continents as a prize?”*

Notice how big God thinks.

What do you want? Nations as a present?

Sometimes we’re praying for a \$3 hour raise, God’s talking about giving you nations!

We’re praying for a promotion, God got a business for you to own!

We’re praying to pay our bills, God is planning on blessing you so you can pay other people’s bills!” (“Ask Big” by Joel Osteen)

- **A healthy church doesn't accept such prosperity theology.**
- **They have discernment. They see the error as deadly and deceptive, even if an occasional half truth is present.**
- **Did you see what he did with Psalm 2? He made it about you!**
- **Go ahead, it’s your birthday (it’s your birthday...) This sounds more like 50 Cent than a faithful preacher. Name and claim it**
- **That’s a Psalm about the Messiah inheriting the nations as an inheritance, not you getting promotion, your own business, or getting your own continent!**
- **Paul told the Ephesians, “Don’t get swept away by every wind of doctrine.” (4:14)**

The Romans understand the Christian faith, and God’s redemptive plans. (Cf., Rom 1:8)

- Paul could go into some of these deeper issues; **he wasn’t starting from a blank slate.**
- They shared certain **hymns** and **creeds** (Rom 1:3-4; 4:25; 10:9-10)
- They had a **“standard of teaching”** they were committed to (Rom 6:17)

Christians are called to **“love God with their minds.”**

- C.S. Lewis, **“God is not fond of intellectual slackers.”**
- Some churches frown on education; that’s **stupid and dangerous!**
- **A healthy church is marked by Mutual Edification**
- They are **“able to instruct one another.”**
- **noutheteō**, “instruct, admonish, warn, counsel,”
- **Ordinary Christians (not just the clergy, and especially those who are mature and wise in the faith) should counsel, warn, encourage, and challenge one another.**

- To do this, you need the word of Christ dwelling richly in you.
“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” (Col 3:16)
- **In small groups and in conversations, instruct/exhort/counsel one another from the Scriptures.**
- **A healthy church is marked by Gospel-Centrality (15)**
 - If they were so faithful, knowledgeable, and competent to teach one another, then why did he write this long letter to them?
- **To remind them of the gospel!**
- The writers of the NT often speak of this ministry of “**reminding**” (cf., Phil 3:1; 2 Pet 3:1)
 - They wanted to saturate congregations with the gospel.
 - **Like the Eagles -- touring on one song! They keep repeating it.**
 - They didn’t have a “**method**” but a “**message**” that controlled their ministry.

There are many reasons **why we need to be reminded of the gospel:**

- It’s a matter of **first importance!** (1 Cor 15:1ff)
 - **Why do you tell your kids to put their helmet on when riding their bike? Didn’t you already tell them once? Yes, of course, but you tell them because it is important.**
- Because **we forget!** (Gal 3:1ff)
 - Our **hearts** quickly revert back to **works-based righteousness.**
 - Luther: “**The gospel is so clear that it does not need a great deal of interpretation, but it wants to be carefully looked at and deeply taken to heart.**”
 - **Sing it, hear it, talk about it, see it, pray it, speak it...**
- This is how we are **sanctified** (v. 16)
 - Paul is using the gospel as the means by which the Gentiles are **sanctified**, not just converted.
- They needed **further insight on the Messiah, the H.S., Israel, and the future.** (Ch. 11)
- They needed to be reminded of what **united** them. (Ch. 14)
- They needed to have their affections **stirred to worship** (Cf., 2 Pet 3:1)
- They needed to stay away from **false teaching** (16:17-20)
- They needed to be **strengthened** by the gospel (16:25)
- They needed to be **equipped to pass it on.** (2 Tim 2:2)
 - **The gospel is preserved by giving it away; by teaching it repeatedly; it’s lost when it’s not passed on.**
 - **It only takes one generation to lose the gospel.**
 - D.A. Carson’s on the Mennoites: One generation of Mennonites *believed* the gospel and held as well that there were certain social, economic, and political entailments. The next generation *assumed* the gospel, but identified with the entailments. The following generation *denied* the gospel: the "entailments" became everything.
 - It’s easy to abandon that which matters most.

App: No church is perfect, but look for those pursuing goodness & knowledge; who admonish one another and remind one another of the gospel.

- Students: Jump in. Be wise, but don't wait forever.
- Ex: Adam's story of researching before he moved here.

#2: See life and mission through the lens of worship (16, 18b)

Paul's ministry involved "priestly service" (16)

- Notice: "minister" *leitourgos* - a word that has **priestly connotations**, the root word from which we get *liturgy* (cf., Isa 61)
- **Paul saw himself as a priest, offering sacred worship to God.**
- **He was a worshiper/priest, as all Christians are (1 Peter 2:4ff).**
- Paul was not a priest as we think of it, but his ministry was **priestly** (16)

"He [Paul] is a priest using "the gospel" as the means by which he offers the Gentile converts as a sacrifice acceptable to God. (Moo)

"Offering of the Gentiles"

- **He wasn't offering animals to be sacrificed, but people -- spiritual sacrifices**
- **Remember Romans 12:1-2: "living sacrifices."** That's what Paul wants to see!

Verse 18

- **"to bring the Gentiles to obedience" -- living sacrifices.**
- **That is the goal of Paul's mission: the obedience that springs from faith.**
- **1:5** "to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all nations."
- **16:25-27:** "Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages 26 but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, **to bring about the obedience of faith**— 27 to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen."

So Paul is a worshiper who is seeking to make more worshippers.

App:

- **Our lives are an offering of worship.**
 - **All of life is a *liturgy* (both for believers/non-believers).**
 - **Who/what are you serving?**
 - **Hughes: "If only we could see our service as such, our lives would be transformed. A pie baked for a neighbor becomes an offering to God. A child held and loved is a liturgy, an employee treated with dignity a beatitude. The gospel shared is a song in Heaven's courts, a Sunday school class well taught a fragrance to God. These are beautiful thoughts! Even better, they are true! This sacred view of life was a primary characteristic of the missionary heart of the Apostle Paul."**
- **Our mission is an offering of worship.**
 - **We go/send to glorify God, and to see God's name magnified where it is not.**

- The sacrifices missionaries make are to the glory of God (being away from loved ones, learning a new language/culture, living in dangerous and unhealthy conditions)
- **The proclamation of the gospel is a sacred, solemn, and sacrificial act of worship.**
 - Something special is happening when the gospel is proclaimed.
- **Our aim is to see more worshippers from among the nations!!**
 - **“offering of the Gentiles”**
 - Think “nations” -- people groups. It dominates this section
 - He offers to God -- people from the nations.
 - **“Missions exists because worship doesn’t.”** (Piper)
 - People aren’t worshipping our Christ, and that’s why we go to the nations.
 - One day Jesus will be exalted from every tribe and tongue, and missions will be no more.
 - The Father will give the Son the nations as an inheritance.

#3: Remember that ministry fruitfulness is the result of divine enablement. (16-19)

Paul says that the Father, Son, and Spirit are working through Him.

This is a divine, Trinitarian enablement.

- This is true for all ministers -- not just Paul, not just all “professional ministers,” but anyone ministering in Jesus’ name. Our work is Trinitarian.
- Paul doesn’t have the special **“deluxe gold package”** reserved for special Christians.
- Every Christian bears fruit by the power of the Spirit.

15b: The Father chose Him and prepared him: “by grace given me by God”

16: His work is acceptable because of the **Holy Spirit’s** work.

- How do you turn idolatrous pagans into Christ-worshippers?
 - Not in your own power!
- Apart from God’s power, Paul’s life looks absurd.
 - **A missionary heart is a dependent heart.**
- It’s possible to go through the motions; to do ministry in the flesh.
 - That is unsatisfying and joy-less work.

17: “In Christ Jesus” he can be proud of his work.

- That is, he is not taking credit but recognizing it is “in Christ” that he is able to serve.
 - There’s a pride that says: “Look at me”
 - There’s another childlike: “Look at what God did through me! Can you believe that? What a God! What grace!”

18: He speaks of what “Christ has accomplished through me.”

- Paul knows that success in ministry is God’s doing. (Moo)
- It is through Christ, that anything is accomplished.

- If you don't realize this, you are approaching a fall.
- **“Successful ministers are prone to pride, one of the most basic of sins. It is frighteningly easy to fall into a mode in which we begin taking credit for whatever spiritual impact we are having.... Moreover, pride is not wrong in itself, it can lead to so many other sins. I am positive that many prominent ministers fall into sexual sin because they begin to think that they are immune to such ordinary temptations or, worse yet, they begin unconsciously to taking they are above the law.” (Moo)**

“By word and deed” - that is through evangelism and compassionate/powerful service.

- Christ was at work through Him to do these ministries

V. 19: He was God's point man for bringing the gospel to the Gentiles.

- Miracles were accomplished to **authenticate the message.**
- **“Signs and wonders”** is language of the Exodus.
- **God did them through Paul as a sign of a new era.**
 - **How?** By divine **“power”** “power of signs and wonders”
- **“by the power of the Spirit of God”**
 - Paul wasn't doing cool magic tricks.
 - God was working in and through Him. (E.g., Acts 14:8-18).

“Jerusalem (Acts 9:20ff) all the around to Illyricum” (near present day Albania, NW of Greece)

App:

- **So let us be humble people**
 - **Ministry is not about us.**
 - It's not our Word; it's not our power.
 - **We plant the seed and we beg God for rain.**
 - It's cool to be a church planter, but **you aren't a rock star but a farmer.**
 - **We toil, plant, and plow daily, and then beg God for rain.**
- **Let us always assign glory to God alone for any fruitfulness.**
 - “Not to us, oh Lord but to your name give the glory....”
- **Let us rely on God for fruit in ministry.**
 - Some plant, some water, but God gives the growth (1 Cor 3:7)
 - God uses ordinary people -- by His power -- to bring others to worshipful obedience.
 - **Martin Luther - small little town, unknown monk; turned the world upside down with the rediscover of the gospel of grace. Luther had many flaws, but no doubt God used this little man for his glory.**
 - The same is true for Paul and us.

#4: Have the right kind of ambition: one driven by the gospel & a heart for people (20-21)

A. Paul's Specific Ambition (20): To preach the gospel where Christ is not named.

- Paul was a **pioneer**

- Some build on another foundation; **that's perfectly fine.**
 - Not everyone will Paul's ambition.
- **One plants another waters (1 Cor 3). Each has his own gift (1 Cor 7:7). Each stands for falls before his own master (Rom 14:4).**
- **But we should all share Paul's for the unreached peoples of the world who will perish apart from the gospel (Rom 1:18-25), and do our part.**
 - There are thousand of unreached people groups.
 - How can we help spread the gospel to every nook and cranny of the world?
 - Some Christians love to debate the question, **"What happens to those who never hear of Jesus?"**
 - **But our primary concern shouldn't be to resolve the issue, but to remove the issue!**
 - It is a matter of **massive injustice** that people have yet to hear of Jesus.
 - **"We talk of the second coming, half the world hasn't heard of the first!"** (Oswald J. Smith)
 - **"The Gospel is only good news if it gets there in time."** (Carl Henry)
 - **We should pray for God to raise up more frontier evangelists!**

B. The Right Kind of Ambition: A "Holy Ambition" (as JP calls it)

Paul's ambition (*philotimeomai*) controlled his life, including his decision making (v 22).

- **This is why Paul hasn't been to Rome yet.**

That's what an ambition does - it dominates your life.

Now, you can have an **unhealthy ambition that is filled with jealousy and envy.**

- An unhealthy ambition **can destroy a person, a family, a business, a church.**
- It can cause you to turn **inward**, and to **use** people, to be **manipulative**, and **underhanded**. **Avoid that!**
- **Avoid the temptation to climb "some ladder of success."**
- **Be driven by the gospel and the Great Commission and Great Commandment.**
- **This is a great temptation for all of us, but perhaps more for those who are younger.**
 - I used to be very ambitious in my late 20's and 30's.
 - **Now I just want to live ten more years! 40 isn't 30!**
- **But with all those warnings and qualifications about unholy ambition, note that the Christian life **does involve holy, godly, gospel-driven ambition.****
 - **The Christian life is not a life devoid of passion!**
 - **Healthy churches are passionate churches!**
 - **They have a burning desire to see people come to know and worship Jesus.**

Has your passion cooled? "Fan your gifts into flame" (2 Tim 1:6)

- **Ex: Jay and I talking about family members and sports, "They had all the talent but lacked the passion."**
- **People who make much of their lives aren't necessarily the smartest or most gifted: they are extremely devoted.**

- Paul shows us a holy ambition, and value of it.
- **Most do not think that Paul ever made it to Spain** despite the planning and dreams.
- But NT. Wright reminds us that God still used Paul's longing: **"One of the most important lessons in Romans 15 might be put thus: God allowed Paul to dream of Spain in order that he might write Romans."**
- Often there are many unexpected turns and shifts with a holy ambition.
- **Sometimes God gives us a passion for something that will bless people in ways we never dream.**
- Bird, **"We dedicate ourselves to service knowing that while our ambitions may not always come to fruition the way we hope they will, God's plan to use us to achieve his purposes always succeeds."**

We should have our own holy ambition

- Do you long to do something that aligns with the mission of God for the glory of God?
- **Ex: My life pursuits.... Fonzie, Wrestling, Rap, B'ball, College (Exposition/Pastor)**
- **You kids: Right now you like legos, princesses (playing dress up), or with swords, guns, sports, wrestling; some of you like to cook, build stuff, play with trucks and cars, etc.**
- That's all good and normal.
- But one day, we pray that you will have a "holy ambition" — to do something great for the glory of God and the good of people:
 - That your love for legos may become a love to build a great church or a great sermon or a great business;
 - That your love for swords becomes a passion to take up the Word of God and proclaim it;
 - That your love for wrestling might become a passion to wrestle with God in prayer;
 - That your love for princesses may become a desire to care for girls who have been told they are dirty and worthless;
 - That your love for dolls may become a desire to care for real babies in the nursery or those in danger;
 - That your love for sports may become a passion to get the gospel to hard-to-reach places;
 - That your love to help in the kitchen may become as a passion to feed the hungry and care for the poor;
 - That your love to build cool stuff may become a desire to build bridges between various groups of people;
 - That your love for guns may become a passion to protect women and the vulnerable.
- Kids, may God give you a holy ambition.

How do you get a holy ambition? Next verse...

C. The Source of A Holy Ambition: The Scriptures. (21)

- Paul roots his ambition with a citation from **Isaiah 52:15**.
- There, Isaiah refers to the Suffering Servant (Jesus).
- Isaiah says Jesus will be proclaimed before kings and nations, and He will *startle them*.
- He will leave them speechless as they contemplate what God has done through the Messiah.

This is what Paul is doing -- leaving the nations mystified by the Messiah.

Many who have never the good news, will be astonished by the best news in the world.

It's interesting that Paul doesn't mention a personal, **experiential calling** (cf., Acts 26:18).

- He mentions a **Scripture**.
- He says I'm consumed with this holy ambition **because of what Isaiah 52 says!**

13 Behold, my servant shall act wisely;
he shall be high and lifted up,
and shall be exalted.

14 As many were astonished at you—
his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance,
and his form beyond that of the children of mankind—

15 so shall he sprinkle many nations.
Kings shall shut their mouths because of him,
for that which has not been told them they see,
and that which they have not heard they understand.

Piper: “When Jesus called Paul on the Damascus road to take the gospel to the Gentiles who had never heard, Paul went to the Old Testament and looked for a confirmation and explanation of this calling to see how it fit into God’s overall plan. And he found it. And for our sake he speaks this way. He doesn’t just refer to his experience on the Damascus road, which we will never have. He refers to God’s written word that we do have. And he roots his ambition there.”

- So then, my friends meditate on God’s Word day and night, and ask him to burn a passion within you.
- Let the Word of God inspire and shape your holy ambition.
- Let the Word of God give you a passion for this Suffering King-Servant, who Isaiah goes on to say, “poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.” (53:12b)
- Jesus completed his holy mission, and has made us His ambassadors on earth.
- He now lives and intercedes for us.
- Be astonished by Him.

It's interesting that after all this doctrine in Romans, you come to 15 and Paul is consumed with world evangelization.

If that doesn't happen to you, then there's a sense in which you've missed Romans.

- **“How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news” of this King.**

- **Who tell the world, “Our God reigns.” (Isa 52)**

That's not a wasted life. That's a beautiful life.

Let us offer up our lives to our King who is worthy of our lives.