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*“Paul’s Gospel Ambition”*

ROMANS 15:14-21

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## AT A GLANCE

Imagine standing before the throne of God, holding out an offering—not of gold or silver, nor of goats or bulls, but of lives transformed by the gospel; people who have been brought from darkness into light. This is the heart of Paul’s gospel ambition, and it should be the heartbeat of every believer.

## INTRODUCTION

Imagine standing before the throne of God, holding out an offering—not of gold or silver, nor of goats or bulls, but of lives transformed by the gospel; people who have been brought from darkness into light. This is the heart of Paul’s gospel ambition, and it should be the heartbeat of every believer.

Today’s passage isn’t just a reflection on Paul’s ministry; it’s a bold call to embrace his gospel ambition. It’s a reminder that we are not saved to sit still.

Paul reminds the Roman believers of his purpose: to proclaim Christ where He has not yet been named, to offer them up as a sacrifice of worship to God. Paul’s ambition was not for his own glory—it was for the glory of Christ among the nations.

So as we open this passage, let me ask you: What is your ambition? What are you giving your life to? Are you content to live a comfortable Christian life, or does your heart burn with a desire to see the lost come to Christ? Today, may the Spirit awaken in us a passion for the gospel, a willingness to be used, and a boldness to say, “Lord, here I am—send me.”

## ROMANS 15:14-21

**<sup>14</sup>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. <sup>15</sup>But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God. <sup>18</sup>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, <sup>19</sup>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; <sup>20</sup>and 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, <sup>21</sup>but as it is written, “Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.”**

## NO OFFENSE

**Verse 14-15a 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,**

I hear Paul saying, “I don’t mean to speak down to you. I don’t mean to undermine your maturity in Christ. You’re **my brothers** in Christ. You are **full of goodness**, you have the fruit of the Spirit in you...

You want to do right. You are **filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another**. You don’t need me to tell you these things. I did, however, have to bring a few things to your memory by speaking **boldly**.”

Paul understood that like his salvation, his calling to serve Christ in this way, was nothing he deserved. It was all grace. **Verse 15b – 16 because of the grace given me by God<sup>16</sup> 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.**

There were some among the Jewish converts who still questioned whether Gentile believers were really part of the family. Did their conversion count? Paul is reiterating here that believing Gentiles are **acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit**.

To be sanctified by the Holy Spirit is to be made holy, made clean, acceptable to God and because of this we are given access to the Father in Heaven, *“Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”* Hebrews 4:16

## PAUL’S PRIESTLY SERVICE

Get the picture here: Paul is going out in the grace of the Lord proclaiming His gospel and leading people to faith in Christ and Paul is holding them in his hands and bringing them back to the feet of Jesus and kneeling before Him, offering them to Him in priestly service.

John Piper famously said, “Missions exists because worship doesn’t.” Paul gave his life to bringing worshippers to Jesus. What a life! Paul’s body laid down at Jesus’ feet committed to His service being used to go out and bring others back to Him as trophies of grace. “Here’s another one, Lord.”

Incredibly, we also get to be part of this priestly service and present the nations to Jesus as a sacrifice of worship. Peter calls us “a royal priesthood,” saying, *“...that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”* 1 Peter 2:9

You and I get to offer to God not only ourselves as living sacrifices, but the praise and worship of the nations as we pour our lives out for His glory. But here’s a caution: no matter what we do, all glory goes to Jesus.

## LOOK AT WHAT CHRIST HAS DONE

Paul continues in **verses 17-19** saying, **In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God.<sup>18</sup> 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,<sup>19</sup> by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God—**

Once again, I can hear Paul saying, “All I can say is Christ has worked in and through me and the evidence is that Gentiles are obeying God in **word and deed**. Look at Gentiles all over the empire and see that they have responded with sincerity to the gospel of Jesus and Christ is transforming their lives. That is the fruit of my ministry. That is my boast - what Christ has done!”

Where Christ is preached faithfully, people’s lives are being changed by the Spirit. Preachers labor in the preaching of the Word of God. We must work hard at it. If you are sitting there today and you

are thinking to yourself, I want to do that one day. I want to stand up in the pulpit and preach, you must know that this is labor.

Standing before the people of God declaring to them the full council of the Word of God week after week, reminding people what they have known for years and hoping and praying for a breakthrough *this time*, that is labor. If you are unwilling to *labor* in preaching, you need not apply.

But nothing good comes out of our labor unless the Spirit of Christ moves. Nothing good comes out of our study time unless the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of the people.

Preachers can labor for 20 hours crafting a beautiful sermon only for it to fall flat in 45 minutes. It is a reminder that the work I do only has power when the Spirit empowers it. Unless Jesus is accomplishing the work, nothing gets accomplished.

### SPIRIT-EMPOWERED MINISTRY

Praise the Lord, Paul's ministry was spirit-filled, spirit-empowered, and spirit-directed. We know this in part because the Gentiles responded to the gospel in the obedience of faith and in **word and deed**. Their lives reflected their spiritual transformation.

We also know this because of the **power of signs and wonders by the power of the Spirit of God** that accompanied Paul's ministry. The Holy Spirit worked powerfully to affirm the legitimacy of Paul's claims, authenticating Paul's message...**so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ;**

Paul had travelled over 1000 miles from Jerusalem to Illyricum, present day Yugoslavia. What fueled Paul's mission was not signs and wonders, but rather the fulfillment of **the ministry of the gospel of Christ**. Preaching the gospel, not signs and wonders, was what mattered to Paul.

The signs were there to legitimize the gospel, not vice versa. Today the Lord can and arguably does signs and wonders, but the absolute greatest miracle is when a spiritually dead person is brought to spiritual life.

Whether that happens to an 8-year-old in Wildwood Kids ministry or a 75-year-old witch doctor in Haiti, when a person is truly born-again, that is the miracle of all miracles.

There is nothing more difficult than for a dead heart to be made alive in Christ. It is a sure sign of the Spirit's power and work because it's something only He can do!

### PAUL'S GOSPEL AMBITION

Paul wasn't content with what the Lord had already done. He had travelled far and wide and watched the Holy Spirit do marvelous things, but Paul was hungry for more. **Verse 20 and 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...**

There is nothing wrong with building on someone else's foundation. Every pastor of an established church or church planter in a region already reached with the gospel is building on someone else's foundation.

But Paul was not a pastor. He was an apostle sent specifically to places that the gospel had never been preached. Paul was called by God to specifically take the Gospel to unreached peoples. He was a man with **ambition**.

I think it's important for me to say this loudly and boldly and clearly: there is nothing wrong with ambition. The Lord needs men and women who are driven, competent, hard-working, visionary, energetic, and willing to spend their lives for His glory.

There is nothing wrong with ambition. Selfish ambition, yes. But godly, gospel ambition is not selfish ambition! When a person has godly ambition and his or her drive is rooted and founded in the glory of God and making Christ known far and wide, that is a beautiful thing!

What does godly, gospel ambition look like? It is bold, but it is marked by humility. It submits to God's Word and spiritual authority. It accepts risk, but is not reckless. It seeks Christ's glory, not our own. It is eager to move, but is constrained by the Holy Spirit. It is empowered by the Holy Spirit and full of His fruit, or it is not gospel ambition.

Every missionary that sells all they have and goes to a people that has never been reached, if they are sincere and earnest, is full of gospel ambition. He or she echoes the sentiment of 13<sup>th</sup> century missionary Raymond Lull, who went to the Muslims and was their first martyr. He said, *"I have one passion – it is he, it is he."*

Jim Elliot is famous for saying, *"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."*

Listen to John Piper in a message to a group of young adults in 2003...

"If you fall in love with the holiness of God trembling, it's a dangerous place to be. Your attitude towards the nations, the unreached peoples of the world, will undergo a profound change. 'I saw the Lord high and lifted up seated upon a throne and his train filled the temple and above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two they covered their faces with two they covered their feet and with two they flew. And one cried to the other holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.'... Then the next missionary phrase, 'The whole earth is full of his glory.' You see the connection between the intrinsic 'holy, holy, holy' and then the public fullness of glory...you will lay down your lives unlike radical Islam that take lives to spread their religion, you will not kill to spread Christianity, you will die to spread Christianity."

## WHO WILL GO?

Have you fallen in love with the glory of God like this? Do you burn in your heart to take the gospel where no one has ever taken the gospel so that the whole earth will be filled His glory?

We need 50 in the next 22 years. We mean this. This is not just a slogan on our wall. We believe in Paul's gospel ambition. We believe this is still what gospel ambition looks like.

We believe God is still raising up men and women whose burning desire is to spend their life doing exactly this. Why not you?

"I have a job." Can you do that job in another country where the gospel has not been preached. Or quit your job and let others joyfully support your family on the mission field.

"I have a wife and kids." Take them with you.

"I am retired." You are now most available and have no need for financial support...you're making my case for me.

"I do not know a foreign language." We will teach you.

"I don't know how to preach and teach the gospel." Yes, you do. And if you really don't, well teach that, too.

"I'm scared." Good. You're thinking soberly about this. The Lord will be with you to the ends of the age.

"I do not feel God's call to go." That is true for most of us. Perhaps you are not called to go. You may help those who are by your prayer, and you may support them with your giving.

Who will embrace Paul's gospel ambition that **"Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand."**?

## WHAT DOES GOSPEL AMBITION LOOK LIKE PRACTICALLY?

1. Go to the nations – quit your job, sell your house, move your family, commit to four years of education and adaptation and cultural immersion and take the gospel to a people group that has never heard it.
2. Make disciples here – We must equip those we send. It begins in our homes with family worship. When the glory of Christ consumes us, it will transform how we think and how we speak with our kids.
3. Live missionally here -
  - a. Work to the glory of God – Whatever you do, do all for the glory of God; and when you get praised and promoted and rewarded, you make sure Christ gets that glory. You bring Jesus into your workplace or school so that when people see your character, they see Christ's. Jesus said they will see your good works and glorify God for it.
  - b. Turn your spiritual radar on – Wherever you are, that's your mission-field. There are unbelievers everywhere you go. In 2019 George Barna issued a report stating the Quad Cities is one of the least reached communities in our nation, number 15. If you cannot go to the nations around the world, you can lift up your eyes to the harvest across the street. Or as my wife has said, "across the table." Live intentionally with the people around you.
  - c. Give generously to the cause of Christ – Primarily by your faithful giving to this body and secondarily through your individual support of missionaries. Paul told the Corinthians that God gives to us so that we will be able to be generous with others.

Perhaps there can be no greater motivator for gospel ambition than the Lord's Supper. It is an ever-present reminder of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Jesus died for us that we might live for Him. Whether it be at home or abroad, let's embrace Paul's gospel ambition and make Christ's name known among all the nations!

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