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Sermon Notes

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## **Paul's Passionate Focus... and Ours**

### **Romans 15:14-22**

#### Introduction:

Story used by the communists during the October Revolution of 1917 that ushered the Communists to power. They were seeking leaders for the future and set men to various tasks. Three men were assigned the task of building a brick wall. The leaders then went to the first and asked, "What are you doing, comrade?" He answered, "I am putting this brick on top of that one." They went to the second, and asked "What are you doing comrade?" He answered, "I am building a brick wall." They went to the third, and asked, "What are you doing comrade?" And he answered, "I am building a new world!" They chose the third man.

#### I. Why Paul Hadn't Visited Rome

##### A. Question of Context

1. Last week: "Competent to counsel"... a whole sermon on the need for Biblical counseling
2. This week: return to sound, exegetical consideration of the text in the flow of Paul's thought
3. Paul is doing three things with Romans 15:14-24
  - a. First, he is explaining why he hadn't visited Rome yet
  - b. Second, he is asking them for help on his way to Spain
  - c. Third, he is preparing them for him only to stay a short time as he passes through

##### B. Paul Deeply Wanted to Visit Rome

1. The Roman Christians should not feel slighted by the fact Paul had never been there before
2. It wasn't as though he didn't want to come

3. It wasn't as though he thought very little of their progress in the gospel or their strategic importance for the Kingdom of God
4. Far from it!! Paul several times affirms his deep desire to fellowship with them

***Romans 1:8-13 First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. <sup>9</sup> God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you <sup>10</sup> in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you. <sup>11</sup> I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong-- <sup>12</sup> that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. <sup>13</sup> I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now)***

***Romans 15:23-24 since I have been longing for many years to see you, <sup>24</sup> I plan to do so when I go to Spain.***

So if Paul deeply wanted to share Christian fellowship with them

And if it would have been a richly blessed time

Then... Why hadn't Paul been there yet?

And why would he only be passing through for a short time en route to Spain?

### C. Why Paul Hadn't Visited Rome Yet

1. Working backwards... verses 20-22 are the key

***Romans 15:20-22 It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation. <sup>21</sup> Rather, as it is written: "Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand." <sup>22</sup> This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you.***

2. Paul's call is to be a frontier, pioneering, church-planting apostle
3. He was called by God to be "Apostle to the Gentiles", with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel to them
4. His understanding of that call was that he was to give priority to the regions in the Gentile world where Christ was not yet known or named
5. AND the Roman church was a MATURE CHURCH... fully capable of carrying on without him

***Romans 15:14 I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another.***

6. ALTHOUGH he had written them boldly by way of reminder

*Vs. 15 But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder*

7. So, here we get a glimpse into the central calling of Paul's apostolic life

8. Here, we get a glimpse into Paul's Passionate Focus

## II. Paul's Passionate Focus

Illus. on focus: Solar Ovens in Afghan Refugee Camps

### A. A World Full of Ambitious People

1. Empire builders: Napoleon

**“Ambition is never content, even on the summit of greatness.”**

Napoleon's ambition was to rule Europe and bring it under his genius, his order, his sense of law and rule and equitable society. He was willing to pay any price in blood to accomplish it, and he left a trail of blood in the snows of Russia as evidence of his ambition

2. Athletes: Ted Williams

Early in his career he announced that his main ambition was to have people say, "There goes Ted Williams, the greatest hitter who ever lived."

3. Businessmen: Bill Gates

Characterized not only by extreme intellect and ingenuity but also by a burning ambition to conquer and control the software industry, Gates has positioned Microsoft in as dominant a position in its industry as the Robber Barons positioned their railroads or oil companies or financial companies in the late nineteenth century

4. Scientists: Frances Crick and James Watson, discoverers of the double-helical structure of the DNA molecule

Time Magazine:

from the beginning, the Watson and Crick story had traces of hubris. As told in Watson's classic memoir, "The Double Helix," it was a tale of boundless ambition, impatience with authority and disdain, if not contempt, for received opinion

Watson and Crick were driven, as are many research scientists seeking prominence in their fields, by burning ambition for personal glory and recognition

5. Ambition drives achievement... for good or evil... in just about every field

a. Ambition overcomes every obstacle

- b. Ambition organizes life and power in a single direction
- c. Ambition drives the person to make vast sacrifices for a single goal
- d. BUT Ambition can also be a slave to self-worship, to pride of the worst kind

#### B. Paul's Godly Ambition

***Vs. 20 It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known***

1. Paul identifies here the grand and glorious ambition of his life
2. He was called to be a trail blazer... to go where no man had gone before
3. He was called to survey the terrain, to level the ground, and to lay the foundation of a new work for the glory of Christ in location after location
4. He was called to be a pioneer, to open up new works for others to follow
5. The Greek word for "ambition" is made up of two words: "love" and "honor", specifically, a love for the honor of something

#### C. Paul's Driven Life... Remade on the Road to Damascus

1. Paul had always been an ambitious man, driving himself to excel

***Galatians 1:14 I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.***

2. That overpowering drive was not crushed on the Road to Damascus... it was merely redirected
3. From that time on, Paul knew why the Lord had left him alive, though he richly deserved to die
4. So many of us lack focus in our lives
5. There doesn't seem to be an overriding theme that holds everything together, that helps us decide what to do, where to live, how to spend our money, how to spend our time, what our jobs should be
6. Many go through life like a sailing vessel with no rudder, controlled by a captain who has no compass or sextant or chart, drifting aimlessly as the wind and the waves dictate
7. Paul was NOT like this! He knew exactly why he was alive, what work Christ had left him alive to do

8. For Christ had met him on the road to Damascus and could have killed him right there and then
9. But Christ spared his life and immediately linked the sparing of his earthly life with the mission that would dominate his days until his death

*Acts 9:3-6 As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. <sup>4</sup> He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" <sup>5</sup> "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. <sup>6</sup> "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."*

10. So right from the start, there was a sense that Paul's life was forfeited, except for the mission Christ would give him: **"You will be told what you must do"**
11. Paul clearly states the extent of his passionate focus in his moving farewell address to the Ephesian Elders:

*Acts 20:24 However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me-- the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.*

- a. He counts his life worth nothing to him apart from this one thing
  - b. There is absolute commitment, absolute passion
  - c. He knows the race he's running and he doesn't get sidetracked
  - d. He knows the "task the Lord Jesus had given him"... felt that task had been handed him directly by the Lord
12. He even mentions it: "The task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace

#### D. Paul's Godly Passion Applied

1. Applied to preaching
  - a. In effect, he was too busy doing what he was called to do to come to Rome
  - b. He says what was occupying his time
  - c. He was called to fulfill an ancient prophecy: Isaiah 52:15

*Romans 15:21 Rather, as it is written: "Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand."*

2. This is the introduction to one of the greatest prophetic passages in the Old Testament, Isaiah 53... the glorious Suffering Servant prophecy which speaks so clearly about Christ's death on the cross
3. In Isaiah 52:15, the prophet speaks of the spread of the gospel about Christ among Gentiles and their kings:

***Isaiah 52:13-15 See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. <sup>14</sup> Just as there were many who were appalled at him--his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness-- <sup>15</sup> so will he sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand***

4. Paul took this as his life verse in terms of his calling
5. In fact, he made it intensely personal... ancient prophecies about Christ became the marching orders of his personal life

Speaking to hostile Jews in Pisidian Antioch who were against his gospel message, Paul told them he was now going to turn to the Gentiles:

***Acts 13:47 For this is what the Lord has commanded us: "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth."***

The quote is from Isaiah 49:6, one of the greatest prophecies of Christ's ministry to the Gentiles:

***Isaiah 49:6 he says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."***

In that prophecy, God the Father is speaking to God the Son, saying "It is too small a thing for you only to save Jews...I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth"

Paul took that statement from the Father to the Son as his personal life command:

***Acts 13:47 For this is what the Lord has commanded us: "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth."***

Paul's calling was to take the name of Christ to the ends of the earth, to Gentiles who had never heard of Christ before

He was busy doing precisely that, from Jerusalem all the way round to Illyricum

***Romans 15:22 This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you.***

6. Applied to not coming to Rome

- a. Roman church was already established
  - b. The brothers there were mature, well-led, competent to counsel each other, able to reach the city of Rome for Christ
  - c. Someone else had laid the foundation... Paul was NOT CALLED to build on that man's foundation
7. Applied also to not staying at Rome when he goes to Spain
  8. Paul had an intense passionate focus to his life... it concentrated all his efforts and actions
  9. It even caused him to weed out some good things (like visiting Rome) so he could do the best thing: preaching the gospel to unreached peoples

Do you have a focus like that?

Do you have a compelling reason to live every day?

Do you know what God is calling you to do?

Is your ambition holy and Christ honoring or is it selfish and ego-exalting?

Does your passion get applied ruthlessly to rule out lesser things and drive on for the finish line in your personal race?

### III. The Variety of Roles in Completing the Great Commission

#### A. Not Everyone Called to the Same Ambition

1. Paul has already covered the different roles we each play in the Body of Christ

***Romans 12:4-6 Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, <sup>5</sup> so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. <sup>6</sup> We have different gifts, according to the grace given us.***

2. That is still true, despite a clear sense of Paul's drivenness to take the gospel to unreached peoples in the uttermost parts of the earth
3. Not everyone is called to be a frontier, pioneer, trailblazing church-planting apostle to the unreached Gentiles at the ends of the earth

Two word studies prove this: one on the word "foundation" the other on the word "ambition"

#### B. Greek Word "Ambition" Used Three Times in the New Testament

*ESV 2 Corinthians 5:9 So whether we are at home or away, we make it our ambition to please [Christ].*

This is universal for ALL Christians

*Romans 15:20 It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation.*

This is special for trailblazing, frontier missionaries

*1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, <sup>12</sup> so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.*

This is for heads of families who are called on to stay put in one place, work hard, raise your family, and win your neighbors to Christ

One use of the word is for everyone... make it your ambition to PLEASE CHRIST in everything you do

But how that plays out will be different in different lives

One, as a frontier missionary, the other as a godly family staying put in one community

### C. "Foundations" and who builds on them

1. Paul said he didn't want to build on another man's foundation...

a. Why... because it is BAD to do that?

b. No, not at all

c. Rather, it's a sense of calling, what role you are called by Christ to play in the body of Christ

2. In 1 Corinthians, Paul talks about how Apollos and others came after him and continued working on the foundation he had already laid:

*1 Corinthians 3:10-13 By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. <sup>11</sup> For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. <sup>12</sup> If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, <sup>13</sup> his work will be shown for what it is,*

***because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work.***

If it were wrong to build on another man's foundation, why did Paul speak so highly of it

***1 Corinthians 3:5-8 What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe-- as the Lord has assigned to each his task. <sup>6</sup> I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. <sup>7</sup> So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. <sup>8</sup> The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor.***

What is my point?

Each of us MUST have a passion, an ambition for the glory of God like Paul, but not everyone is going to be called to frontier missions like Paul was

D. BUT We Must ALL Help Advance the Great Commission

***Matthew 28:19-20 go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."***

***Luke 19:10 the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."***

BUT Having said that, I want to share a conviction with you

I think we are not being as faithful as we should in the issue of frontier missions... those who have never heard of Christ

In 1906 James Fraser was studying engineering at Imperial College in London. Later he became a legend as "Fraser of Lisuland" because of his frontier evangelism and church planting in the Yunnan Province of China. The turning point of his life was in college when he read a two-penny pamphlet with these two sentences,

***If our Master returned today to find millions of people unevangelized, and looked, as of course He would look, to us for an explanation, I cannot imagine what explanation we should have to give. Of one thing I am certain—that most of the excuses we are accustomed to make with such good conscience now, we shall be wholly ashamed of then.***

He was never able to escape the power of these sentences. And God gave him a holy ambition.

John Piper's thoughts:

A few years ago when I had to preach my first missions sermon at Bethlehem I took the yellow pages of the Minneapolis and St. Paul phone books and counted the number of

churches in the Twin Cities. There are more churches in the Twin Cities than there are North American Protestant missionaries to the 1.9 billion people that make up 10,000 Muslim, Hindu, Chinese, and Buddhist unreached people groups. Let me say that again: there are 1.9 billion people in 10,000 unreached people groups served by about 700 North American Protestant missionaries. But there are more CHURCHES in the Twin Cities than that.

I could only think of one explanation for this state of affairs: disobedience. What would we say to the Master who commanded us 2000 years ago to make disciples of those 10,000 peoples? It was a personal crisis for me like it was for Fraser. And I told my congregation that I would have to resign and engage more directly on the frontiers unless I could be convinced that by my staying on as pastor of Bethlehem more could be done for the cause of frontier missions than if I were to go myself. How else could I stay in a place where there were 800 churches evangelizing just two million people, and these already reached by any mission standard?

John Piper's conviction and question shook me to my bones!!!!

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#### IV. Three Options for Frontier Missions

##### A. What Are Frontier Missions Today?

1. Those who have never heard the name of Christ
2. Still thousands of unreached people groups, of recognizable cultures and languages and peoples who have no viable witness of the gospel
3. Places where the Apostle Paul could work as a pioneer and not build on another man's foundation
4. Joshua Project ([www.joshuaproject.net](http://www.joshuaproject.net)) exists to bring definition to the frontiers of the gospel
5. They are presently listing 6,622 unreached or least reached peoples on earth
6. Many of them are in the 10-40 window, that part of Africa and Asia lying between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 40<sup>th</sup> parallels of latitude

##### B. Why Are Frontier Missions So Vital?

1. Christ said he wouldn't return until all of them have been reached with the gospel

***Matthew 24:14 And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.***

2. John prophesied that elect people from each of these peoples have been bought by Christ's blood and that they would be around the throne on the final day

***Revelation 5:9 And they sang a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.***

***Revelation 7:9-10 After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. <sup>10</sup> And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."***

#### C. Three Options for Involvement in Frontier Missions

1. Go
2. Send
3. Disobey

#### D. My Conviction

1. Way too many American Christians are in the "disobey" category
2. Even if we are not called to "Go", are we really "Sending" like we should?
3. Holding the Ropes for William Carey

William Carey did not know where to turn for sympathy in his desire to reach the untaught world. His first efforts to arouse the Christian people about him met with no response. But in May, 1792, he preached a sermon to an association of Baptist ministers, the sermon which proved to be the bugle call of modern missions. In it he spoke the sentence quoted among Christians everywhere as the watchword of progress: "Attempt great things for God; expect great things from God." The immediate result of this sermon was the organization of the "Baptist Society for Propagating the Gospel Among the Heathen." This society held its first meeting in the back parlor of a private house in Kettering — so few in number were those who were interested in carrying out the commission of our Lord.

About a year later Carey went to India as a missionary. Before he left, he said to the little society which he had helped to organize "I will go down into the dark mine of heathenism, but you must hold the ropes."

How well are we "holding the ropes" for our brothers and sisters that have descended into the dark mine of unreached people groups?

How often do we pray for them?

How much do we sacrifice for them?

How much money do we raise for them?

How often do we contact them by phone, e-mail, regular mail to encourage them?

How often do we get on planes and go to encourage them?

Do we know their names?

Do we care about their struggles?

Have we entrusted their support to the IMB and neglected our own duty?

Did we lay the rope on the ground and walk away or entrust it to hired hands... or are we still holding the rope?

4. And, are all of us going that are called?

- a. I wonder if some of us here today are called to go to an unreached people group?
- b. I wonder if FBC is called to ADOPT a people group, learn about it, pray for it constantly, develop a strategy toward it, and carry out that strategy until a church has been planted in that area?
- c. In 1995, Bethlehem Baptist Church set a goal to send out 2000 missionaries by the year 2000; at the time they made the pledge they had sent out 467... perhaps God is calling us to challenge ourselves in a similar way
- d. We are near Southeastern Seminary as well as Duke and UNC... it could very well be that some godly young people will be touched by this church and challenged to give their lives for unreached people groups... ARE YOU ONE OF THEM????
- e. Perhaps even a retired couple or someone in the height of their career could be used of God to reduce by one the number of unreached people groups
- f. John Piper's haunting question... "Why are there more churches in the Twin Cities than missionaries reaching the unreached people groups?"
- g. If Paul didn't visit the church at Rome because they were "full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to counsel one another," why would he spend even a minute in the entire American church scene?

h. Why do so many of our resources get lavished on ourselves?

## V. Application: What's Your Passionate Focus?

What are you doing with your life?

Do you know?

Are you just putting this brick on top of that one? Taking your kids to piano lessons, or soccer games... going to a 9-5 job because your family needs money to survive? Cooking a meal because you're hungry? Preparing a Sunday School lesson because you told the Nominating Committee you would be a Sunday School teacher and you don't want to go back on your word?

NEXT LEVEL: Or, are you "Building a brick wall"... trying to develop a counseling ministry at FBC? Or having daily devotions with your family because you want them to grow up right? Or playing in the orchestra because God gave you a gift of music and you want to use it for His glory?

NEXT LEVEL: Or, are you building a whole new world by helping advance the gospel of Jesus Christ to the uttermost parts of the earth?

- A. Do You Have a Single Passionate Focus to your Life? Or are you rudderless, drifting from experience to experience
- B. Does this passionate focus concentrate your efforts in one direction for the glory of God?
- C. Which of the three options will you take for frontier missions... Go, Send, or Disobey?
- D. COME TO CHRIST!!