

# Gospel Ambition

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[ 0 : 00 ] Let's pray as we stand. Heavenly Father, now as we open your word, we ask you give us a sense of privilege of what it means to belong to Jesus Christ.

So that as we speak, you would speak through us. And as we work, you would work through us.

And as we live, that you would live through us. To the glory of your name. Amen.

Please sit down. Amen. You'll find it helpful if you take the Bible and open it up to Romans 15, page 949.

You'll notice that on the front of the bulletin, I've done a little sort of diagram of the passage. You might find that helpful, although it's not going to be all that helpful. I did it before I wrote the sermon. And we're not going to stay confined to that passage. Besides, it's always a dangerous thing, isn't it, when the preacher says, close the Bible and look at something else. You've got to keep checking the preacher.

[ 1 : 04 ] So Romans chapter 15, page 949. I want to say as you're turning to it how grateful we are to Bishop Paul Barnett for being with us here for the last three weeks.

Paul, where are you? Come forward. No. It's been that Paul has been with us, giving himself in an expensive way, I think, in a costly way.

Teaching God's word, encouraging us. And I personally am very grateful. Thank you very much. It's great to have you and Anita as part of our family. And we are a bit top heavy today because also with us is Bishop-elect Felix Orgy.

Thank you. Yes, put your hand up, brother. Where are you?

Right at the back, as usual. Felix used to work on staff here and he's been elected as one of the bishops in the new province under the jurisdiction of the House of Bishops in Nigeria.

[ 2 : 12 ] Dan is now an archdeacon. Felix is now a bishop. I just want to know where I went wrong. I'm not upset.

Well, now, let's turn to this passage. As we come to these last paragraphs in the book of Romans, Romans, the obvious question for us is how do we know Romans has worked or not?

You know, we've been in this for nine months. What difference has it made? What difference should it make? And our little passage, 14 to 21, is a very important passage.

I didn't think so when I first read it. But for the first and only time in the letter, the Apostle Paul tells us why he's writing to them.

And if we miss this point, we miss the whole point of the book. Or at least we miss the Apostle Paul's point in writing it. Just let me read 14, 15 to remind you.

[ 3 : 28 ] He says, Paul says to the Romans, I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers and sisters, of course, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another.

On some points, I've written to you very boldly by way of reminder. This is exactly where Paul has been driving since the early sentences, the first verses of the book of Romans.

And here's the point for us. Paul's been writing to a normal, healthy Christian congregation. He's never been there, but he's got lots of friends there.

But these verses mean that the church is not in bad shape at all. The fact that he writes to them by way of reminder says that the gospel's not new. They're filled with all these Christian virtues of knowledge and goodness.

There's no serious doctrinal or moral issue. There's no great deep division that needs to be held, although clearly there are tensions, as the last chapters say. What is new is the Apostle wants to involve the Roman congregation in a new stage of gospel ministry.

[ 4 : 47 ] Paul sees his ministry shifting into a new stage. Those of you who were with us two years ago, three years ago, when we went through the book of Acts, did you not find it striking that the last third of Acts is about Paul's imprisonment, arrest, and trial?

A bit like the Gospels of Jesus. That from Acts 20 onwards, he never plants any fresh congregations. Instead, he journeys to Rome via Jerusalem.

So he writes to the people in Rome, intending to go to Rome. Look down in next week's passage, verse 24. I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain and to be helped on my journey there by you once I've enjoyed your company for a while.

At present, I'm going to Jerusalem. He says, I'm intending to go to Spain and I'm asking you for two things. The first is to be helped on my journey.

It doesn't translate so well in English. It is a technical term for money, for financial support. And verse 30. I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ, by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me, agonise together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf.

[ 6 : 09 ] So here is Paul engaging the congregation in two crucial ministries, two crucial Gospel ministries. The continual giving of money and agonising in prayer together.

And I do not want to steal next week's Sermon Thunder, but it's very important to keep those two together. Never give money without praying. Never pray without giving money. Both. Here is the whole purpose of Romans, though.

It's not just a brilliant exposition of the Gospel, but the Gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ ought to have this effect on a normal, healthy Christian congregation.

It ought to spontaneously involve us in the mission of God to bring the Gospel to the world. That's what it's here for. There's great debate, as you know, amongst the theologians about what the point of Romans is.

Reformed and Calvinist scholars say the key to Romans is chapters 1 to 4, justification by faith. The pious, pietistic and devotional traditions say the key to Romans is chapter 5 to 8, a life in the Spirit.

[ 7 : 20 ] The new perspective, which is now a little bit old, says chapters 9 to 11 is the key and the boundary lines between Israel and the Gentiles. And in recent years, chapters 12 to the end have been the focus of study as people have tried to figure out what the tensions in the congregation are.

There is truth in all of these, that they all ignore the reason Paul himself gives for writing. And that is that the congregation in Rome will come to the place that they're so gripped by the grace of God in the Gospel that they will naturally become actively involved in God's mission to bring salvation to all the earth.

This is a great frustration to the commentators. It's of great annoyance that Paul doesn't finish at the end of chapter 14. Some commentaries call this Paul's travel plans.

As though, why doesn't Paul get a life and just say, yours sincerely, and sign off? But here's the thing. The test of whether Romans has worked for us is not whether we are theologically correct. It's not our orthodoxy. Nor is it just our personal assurance of salvation. Nor is it that we live in harmony and unity or the quality of our life together.

[ 8 : 41 ] It is this. It's to understand that all those things are part of what God is doing to spread his name in this world today and to take our part in it.

That's why Romans is the longest and deepest exposition of the Gospel we have in the Bible. The life of sacrificial serving, the life of outwardness or blessing others or continual giving, it doesn't arise from rules.

It doesn't arise from us trying hard. It doesn't come from our own energy. It comes from understanding grace, by being gripped by what God's done for us in the person of Jesus Christ. The depth of his love, the breadth of his mercy, the height of his goodness. So you see, this motivation, I can't give it to you.

You can't give it to yourself. It comes from outside ourselves. Actually, it doesn't come from out. It comes from within, from the Holy Spirit inside us. It happens inside out. As we drink in the mercies of God, we then become transformed by the renewing of our minds.

[ 9 : 51 ] And just before we really get into it, this is the opposite of motivation by guilt. Paul does not send them in Rome and give them 55 duties and commands and say, you're bad Christians if you don't get out on the streets of Rome with my tracts and win a certain number of converts each year.

Never works. What he does is he unfolds the glory of Jesus Christ. He opens our hearts to the love of God and to the anguish of God and to the hope and power of the gospel.

That's what Romans is here for. That we'd be so gripped by the gospel of grace that we would see as God himself sees and feel as God himself feels and participate now in what God is doing. And I think that's why he says in 15 that I've written to you very boldly. This is another neutral English translation. The word literally means I've written and confronted you.

and he has, hasn't he? I mean it's been very loving and very gracious but what confronting truths we've heard. No such thing as a good hearted person.

[ 11 : 06 ] Every single one of us would set a police car alight given the right opportunity. We've all sinned. We all lack the glory of God. None of our works will make us good enough to be accepted by God.

Outside of Jesus Christ we stand under God's wrath with a certainty of judgment. They're bold truths but here are even bolder truths. God has sent his son to die for us to take us out of wrath and place us into salvation.

We receive his righteousness as a gift. We're adopted to be his sons and daughters, his children. We're raised to new life with the promise of having new bodies in the new heavens and the new earth and now the Holy Spirit directly from heaven pours God's love into our hearts and we have the certainty of glory and peace and nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

You see, the gospel of God's grace it doesn't just create converts, it creates congregations. it doesn't just convert people at the beginning but it creates communities of grace marked by unity, marked by unselfishness which become mission bases for the glory of Jesus.

Now how does it do that? How does the gospel do this? What's our connection today? And so in this little passage Paul makes two points and he shows us the pattern and the power of how we as a congregation are to live and to be engaged in this mission now.

[ 12 : 46 ] Firstly, the pattern. It's very personal this passage and the Apostle Paul tells us two things about his ministry and the first most obviously is that God has called him to take the gospel to the nations.

God has called this Jewish rabbi the most rabidly anti-Christian hater to take the gospel outside of Israel to the nations.

It's very difficult for us to grasp how radical that is. He was dedicated to destroying the church. He ravaged the church like a wolf. Happy to sign off on the death of Christians until one day on the road to Damascus the risen Jesus Christ knocked him off his horse.

Paul tells us that Jesus said I am sending you to the nations to open their eyes that they may turn from darkness to light from the power of Satan to God they might receive forgiveness of sins and a place amongst those who are sanctified by faith in me.

It's a complete cultural, social, religious upheaval and reversal for Paul. And you can't miss it. If you look at the front of the bulletin I've put in box the references to the nations here.

[ 14 : 08 ] See verse 16 I am a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God so offering up the Gentiles may be acceptable. Verse 18 to bring the Gentiles to obedience and then in verse 21 it's two references to the nations.

Every place Paul went every new town Paul went. First he went into the synagogue to the Jews because the gospel is first to the Jews and then to the Greeks. And before long he would be thrown out usually violently.

And after he was thrown out he would go to those who are not Jewish. And when some turned to Christ and formed a congregation he would then move on to the next town.

He was under obligation to Greeks and barbarians. The second thing he says about his own ministry is that it's in complete continuity with the Old Testament plan of God.

If you're new to Christianity this might be hard to grasp but God's intention when he saved Israel thousands of years ago in the Old Testament was not to just save Abraham and save Israel from Egypt for their own sake but through them to bring salvation to every family on earth.

[ 15 : 31 ] Israel's purpose was to be a light to the Gentiles to be a channel of God's blessing and goodness. And Jesus' coming and the mission of the church is not plan B.

It didn't work with Israel I think I'll try again. It's the fulfilment of the ancient promises of God. That's why I think Paul uses priestly language to describe his ministry.

It's very strange in verse 16. A minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel. That word is literally the liturgical service.

Offering up the Gentiles as a sacrifice to God. In verse 19 halfway through so that from Jerusalem and all the way round to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ.

The apostle planted churches all the way from Jerusalem around the Levant and up to southern Serbia today. He didn't preach to every person or in every city.

[16:37] His strategy was to go to key population centres establish a church or be kicked out and then appoint leaders and move on. And such was his trust in the power of the gospel that he trusted these new churches to reach their area with the gospel.

Now why am I saying this? Why is he saying this? Paul's ministry was completely unique. He was an apostle. And not every one of us gets knocked off our horse on the way to Damascus.

Yes his conversion and his commission were unrepeated. But here's the point. While his ministry was unique the apostle could not do his ministry on his own.

If he could have done it on his own we wouldn't have the letter to Romans. And in this letter what Paul does is he's giving the church a strategy for reaching the world. God gathers his people into local congregations.

And the last three chapters have described what our corporate life together ought to be like holding fast to what is good. Growing in zeal for Jesus. Blessing those who persecute us.

[17:51] Living in harmony and welcoming each other. Here is the thing. It's the very quality of the public life of a congregation that is meant to be a public display of the glory of God.

God. It's the quality of our life together that enables us to act as a base for mission. The gospel does not turn us into really nice people who become experts at unity for the sake of unity.

Our unity is a result of the supernatural gospel. And that same gospel lays the desire on our hearts that God be glorified. It's very important brothers and sisters.

The way in which we participate in the mission of God in the world is not necessarily to become street evangelists nor necessarily to plant churches from Serbia to Jerusalem or to browbeat our neighbours.

It is by actively participating in our local church. It's by actively living out the gospel at home and at work. That is how we participate in the mission of God.

[19:00] Without the local congregation bearing witness to the glory of God the apostle Paul would still be a couple of miles out of Jerusalem. Very important you see.

This is the pattern of the mission of God in the world. It's through local congregations. And secondly where does the power come from to do this? I find this quite stunning.

Look at verse 17 please. In Christ Jesus Paul says I have reason to be proud of my work for God. He's not boasting in self. Actually there's a better translation on the front of the bulletin.

I can't help this. I have reason to boast in Jesus Christ concerning the things of God. He's not boasting in his work. For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me.

Any genuine spiritual effect we may have on others is not due to our giftedness or our holiness or our talent or our creativity.

[20:11] It's due to Christ working through us. Apart from Christ actively working through us we should pack it in.

I mean we're just a museum. We're living in the past. I never get tired of saying this. I can't change your hearts. I can't give you spiritual life or forgiveness.

I can't give you hope. And you can't give it to anyone else and you can't give it to yourself either.

Only the risen Jesus can. And you know the way he does it? He's through the normal healthy local congregation.

Do you remember at the beginning of the book of Acts this is exactly what Luke says Luke finishes the gospel about the incarnation life death and resurrection of Jesus and he begins volume 2 and he says this in the first book I've dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach.

The obvious implication is this is not just the story of the church this is the story of what Jesus continues to do and teach. It's not that the gospels up to the resurrection of the story of Jesus and now it's our story.

[21:21] Two different phases and two different stages in the ministry of Jesus Christ. His first was as a man in weakness here on earth until his resurrection.

The second is as a man of power seated at the right hand of God from heaven. It's hard to believe this stuff. I mean look back to last week's passage. I just want to correct a few things that Bishop

Barnett said.

Just kidding. Look at verses 8 and 9. For I tell you the apostle says, this is chapter 15 verse 8, Christ became a servant to the circumcised, to Jews.

Why? To show God's faithfulness. Why? In order to confirm the promises to the patriarchs. Why? In order that the Gentiles, the nations, might glorify God for his mercy.

Why did Jesus minister just in Israel? It was to fulfill the Old Testament promises. It was to show he was God's Messiah, but that was not the final step of his ministry.

[ 22 : 30 ] The ministry to Israel, Paul says here, was so that God would reach every nation on the planet. Even more amazingly, look at verse 9. Here, this is a quote from the Old Testament, as it is written, therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles and sing of your name.

Who's speaking? It's the Messiah in the Psalm. It's Jesus speaking in the Old Testament, and it literally says, I will confess your name, I will proclaim your name among the Gentiles.

This is Jesus in the Old Testament saying, he is going to preach to all the nations of the earth, can you believe it? And how does he do it? Through us.

And what is his message? Verse 10, again, literally it says, again, he says, rejoice, those Gentiles, with his people. Rejoice is a bit pale.

It's literally, be really, really happy. Be really happy with my people, he says to the nations, because what I've done for my people in saving them, I now hold out to everyone who will come to me.

[ 23 : 44 ] He is inviting all the world to share the salvation he won for his own people. And the last quote in Isaiah, verse 12, the root of Jesse will come, that's the Messiah, even he who arises, that's a resurrection echo, and why does he rise?

To rule the Gentiles, and what does his rule look like? In him will the Gentiles hope. I just find this amazing. Here's the prophet Isaiah, hundreds of years before Christ come, saying that Christ Jesus will rise and rule the Gentiles by giving them hope.

Hope of forgiveness, hope of salvation, hope of glory, hope of being adopted as sons and daughters with Christ for all eternity, hope of salvation on the last day.

You see, the Old Testament is right. The Messiah has to instruct the nations, he has to proclaim God to all the world, otherwise there is no hope.

I don't know if this is the first time this idea has struck you. Do you mind if we just take a little detour? I find it's quite incredible. Let's turn right to the book of Ephesians for a moment, please.

[ 24 : 58 ] If you've got your Bible open, just flick over to Ephesians chapter 4, page 978. This is a wonderful parallel. And it tells me that the translators find this too good to believe.

In Ephesians 4, verse 20, Paul says, that is not the way you learned Christ. Now, verse 21 has two words that aren't there in the Greek.

Assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him as the truth is in Jesus. These are people in Ephesus, they've never seen Jesus, second generation Christians.

He says, literally, assuming that you've heard, him. Not about him. That word is not there in the Greek. How did they hear Jesus speak?

As they heard the gospel preach, as they came and joined the church. I think this is just incredible. And although this was the apostle Paul's privilege in a special way, it is ours today.

[ 26 : 03 ] it's the only way we can make sense of Romans 16. Let's go back to Romans for a moment. I promise not to steal every good point from the next two sermons down there.

Look at how the apostle Paul, let's just fly over this, how the apostle Paul, in the last chapter, commends the Christians in Rome. Look at verse 3.

Phoebe, verse 1, sorry, verse 2, she has been a patron of many as well as myself. Here's a wealthy woman who has been a patron.

She has paid for much of Paul's ministry and for many others as well. Look down, oh, what's more, verse 3, greet Prisca and Aquila, they are fellow workers in Christ Jesus.

verse 5, they have a church meeting in their house. That's what Paul values, they have a church meeting in their house. Look at verse 6, sorry, verse 7, sorry, verse 6, Mary, who has worked hard for you, worked hard, and Dronicus and Junior, my kinsmen and fellow prisoners, they were in Christ before me.

[ 27 : 27 ] Urbanus, verse 9, is a very urbane fellow, a fellow worker in Christ. Verse 12, the twins, Tryphena and Tryphosa, they are workers in the Lord.

More wonderfully, look at verse 13, greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, also his mum, who's been a mother to me as well. Do you find that striking?

There are no Billy Grahams or superstar Christians here in the congregation of Rome. It's a normal, healthy Christian congregation. And the apostolic mission that God has given to Paul is now the ongoing mission of the church because Christ continues to work through us.

And all the good things of chapters 12 and following our unity and our harmony and our loveliness are not beautiful in themselves. They are part of Christ reaching the nations. They're not two separate things.

When we welcome each other, when we forgive one another, when we bless those around us, when we admonish each other, when we glorify God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ with one voice.

[ 28 : 38 ] Not every Christian is a church planter or an evangelist or a preacher. The way in which we support the plan of God and gospel work is by playing our part in the local congregation, by praying, by giving financially, by patience, by love, by blessing.

You see the point of the book of Romans? Participating in the life of the local congregation is gospel work. You don't have to wait until you're good enough to do this.

You don't have to wait until you're a polished Christian. The whole point of the gospel of grace is we don't have to make ourselves worthy and holy enough before Christ makes us part of his plan and work.

God uses fallible, imperfect people to achieve his perfect will. He covers our faults and our deficiencies and he moves the gospel forward primarily through normal, healthy Christian congregations.

It's great, isn't it? And there are lots of implications and we could spend a lot of time looking at the implications. I've just thought of two which I would like for us to reflect on for a moment.

[ 29 : 48 ] The first is this. It is the strength of our privilege. The strength of our privilege.

I mean by ourselves we're nothing. But with the spirit of Christ we have this amazing privilege of Christ himself working through us.

Of God revealing his presence and his power through us. How does God express his anguish for the lost today? How does he fulfill his Old Testament promises?

How does he share his grace and his love today? It's through the local church. And humanly speaking there is no more important thing in the world for the fulfillment of God's mission than the local church.

church. But it doesn't look like it does it? I was thinking yesterday the first church I ever preached in met in a tin shed. Corrugated iron shed.

[ 30 : 48 ] They met in the afternoon after lunch which was unhelpful. The Sunday I preached there it was 107 degrees outside. I don't know what it was inside.

15 people came and it was just awful. And when the service when I finished preaching there was one person in the building awake. It was me.

Even though I didn't want to be. And you know that old joke if you find the perfect church don't join it because you'll wreck it. Every church disappoints those who belong.

Every church has awful things. I mean we're all I know this may come as a shock but every single church has people who are sinful in it.

You know and so they look disappointing the music's too fast or it's too slow or the preacher's too long or he's too short or the others don't understand me and they're not the sort of people I'd like anyway and at one level it just looks very plain and ordinary doesn't it?

[ 31 : 55 ] Well so did the Apostle Paul. He didn't look like he was preaching as an emissary of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He preached a message that was strangely and incredibly unpopular.

He was ridiculed and mocked. Tradition has it he was not attractive. He was hounded from place to base place beaten. He was abandoned by his friends. He was a very model of a failure.

But it was through this man that God gathered his people in congregations from Jerusalem to Serbia. The fact that Christ continues to work today is incredibly hopeful for us.

I mean if you're new with us and you're not yet a Christian I invite you join our community and watch. we will most certainly let you down. We are all weak and we are all sinful.

But if we are genuine and if we're doing what the Bible says we should be doing you will see Jesus working in our work and you will hear him speaking through our speech.

[ 33 : 02 ] It's amazing really. The effect of our serving Jesus Christ goes way beyond ourselves. I mean when we pray and the offertory is one of the most miraculous moments in the service when we give money our blessing moves beyond ourselves out of our control into Christ's control.

What encouragement it was today to see the two mission teams of primarily young people Malawi and India. Here's the thing they can't do it on their own. They can't do it if we don't support them in prayer with money.

What a privilege it is to have the risen Christ the Lord of glory work through us as we take part in the local congregation. That's the strength of our privilege. That's one thing to reflect on.

The second and final thing is the weakness of our plans. You know if you stand back from these chapters a little bit we've got to say God's plans don't always coincide exactly with ours.

Paul was a church planter with a strategy and here we see he plans to go to Spain via a visit to Jerusalem. Things don't quite work out as he planned.

[ 34 : 16 ] He's imprisoned in Jerusalem. He appeals to Caesar which means he travels yes he does get to Rome but it's as a prisoner. The ship that he has transported him across the sea was caught in a terrible gale.

For two weeks in this gale they barely survived eating nothing and then the ship ran aground and broke up in the storm and Paul and 275 others had to swim to shore and it is most likely when he got to Rome after trial he was executed.

And the point is our plans are weak and we need to hold them with an open hand. But God's plans are indestructible, unassailable and always come to pass.

We plan, we pray, we work, we support, we give ourselves a living sacrifice. We seek to glorify God with one voice but sometimes we end up in a shipwreck.

on the way to a Roman prison. And does that prevent God's plan from going forward? The answer of course is no. All the suffering and all the prisons and all the setbacks in the world do not frustrate God's plans.

[ 35 : 32 ] In fact they promote them. Remember Jesus. I mean his enemies really thought they'd got him when they nailed him to the cross. But that most wicked, biggest setback humanly speaking was the perfect fulfilment of God's eternal will.

and opened the door of heaven for us. So here's a pertinent question for us. Does losing our property hinder God's purposes in some way?

Did it take God by surprise? Does it mean that God will no longer be able to work through us? Does it mean we should stop trying to glorify God with one voice?

God's purpose? I think this is how we know whether the book of Romans has worked or not. That under any circumstances we commit ourselves to loving one another, to working and serving and pleasing others and welcoming them as best we can.

We keep giving and we keep praying and we see if we can pass on God's blessing to others. It's true we're moving to a new stage in our life together. Brothers and sisters, don't focus on having your own needs met.

[ 36 : 45 ] Don't focus on comfort. This is a time for us to focus on how God could be glorified, how he could spread his name through us more widely. And I think if we follow God's lead on this, we will give up small spiritual ambitions, make it our aim to spread the name of Jesus Christ and his blessing beyond yourself, beyond your family, beyond your neighbourhood.

Try to have God sized ambitions. With this proviso, that it's very good to have spiritual ambitions and plans as the Apostle Paul did. But at the heart of those plans is the person of Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, alive and active, and his are the plans that will out.

God has given us every blessing in our union with Jesus Christ. And as we try and give those blessings away to others, Jesus Christ promises to work through us now.

If we hold the blessings of God to ourselves, they turn to dust and ashes in our hands. But when we seek to give them away, what happens is Christ takes them and grows them and then gives them back to us in good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, they put back into our laps.

So let's kneel and pray, shall we? What? There's aOS- I WASSAI like I used to pour Interest an price