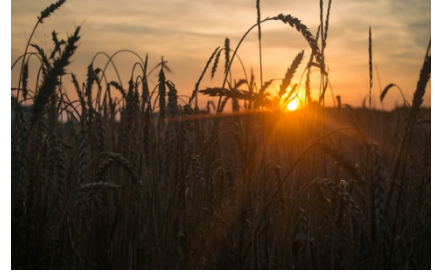


***“PREACH CHRIST:” PAUL’S MISSIONARY MESSAGE
ROMANS 15:17-21***

Some sermon topics invariably provoke listeners to experience a sense of guilt:

- Sermons on prayer lead to thoughts of “I don’t pray enough...”
- Sermons on evangelism lead to thoughts of “I don’t tell enough people about Jesus...”
- Sermons on missions lead to questions like “should I go?...” And throw in a **picture of a sunset** over a field of grain and the question, **“should you go...?”** and the feelings are compounded.



For at least the next three Sundays, we are going to be thinking about missions — but with the goal of stimulating passion and gratitude. It’s helpful to see what God says about missions because the word “missions” is now used in so many different ways — the social gospel is missions, social justice is missions, outreach (mercy ministry) is missions, evangelism is missions, and some churches even talk about their local church as doing “missional ministry.” So what is missions? That’s our topic at the end of Romans 15.

As Paul prepares to go to Spain — and as he prepares to come to Rome and ask for support to help him get to Spain — he affirms his missionary priorities. In verses 22-29 Paul will talk about his vision for missions — what is his goal and strategy for evangelizing the nations? — and in verses 30-33 he will talk about the empowerment for missions. In these verses (vv. 17-21) he reveals his message for missions; Paul affirms that as he goes to the nations as a “missionary,” he has just one message:

THE MESSAGE OF MISSIONS IS THE SINGULAR GOSPEL OF CHRIST.

In these verses, Paul tells us what he will tell others when he goes on missionary ventures. There are many possibilities of what he (or any missionary) might do when he goes to a new country. Paul is only interested in one thing — preaching. And specifically, he is interested in preaching Christ. Why does he want to preach the gospel message of Christ? He provides **six reasons for preaching Christ as the missionary message:**

- 1. Preach Christ Because of What **CHRIST** Has Done through Past Preaching (v. 17)**
- 2. Preach Christ Because We Only Have **CHRIST** (v. 18a)**
- 3. Preach Christ Because of How **CHRIST** Changes (All) People (v. 18b)**
- 4. Preach Christ For the Advance of **CHRIST’S** Church (v. 19)**
- 5. Preach Christ Because Only **CHRIST** is the Foundation of the Church (v. 20)**
- 6. Preach Christ Because Missions Has Always Been Only About **CHRIST** (v. 21)**

1. Preach Christ Because of What **CHRIST** Has Done through Past Preaching (v. 17)

- This section (vv. 17-21) is about preaching Christ, and that starts in this verse — *I have found reason for boasting...* And Paul's object for boasting is *in Christ Jesus* and *things pertaining to God*.
 - ✓ To "have a **boast**" is exactly what it sounds like — it's a source of pride. And in **v. 16**, Paul *has* been "boasting" about his ministry. But here he makes clear that the bragging is not personal.
 - ✓ At the end of the verse he says something similar — *in things pertaining to God*. He is likely looking back at verses 14-16 and remembering what God did in the Romans to prepare them for ministry — *full of goodness, filled with all knowledge*, and *able to admonish*. And God did that in the Gentiles (not just His chosen people).
 - ✓ Now Paul agrees with other biblical writers that most boasting is illegitimate (cf. **3:27**; **4:2**).
 - ✓ But here boasting is appropriate — "I have a [reason for] boasting..." And the reason is Christ and all that Christ has done through the preaching of the gospel message (cf. **5:2**).
 - ✓ Paul is not asserting that he has done anything remarkable; he is looking back at the work of Christ and what Christ has done through the faithful preaching of the Scriptures and the gospel message.
- Now if I am going to boast about something, it means that I am going to talk about it. Repeatedly. Incessantly. Nauseatingly. ("Won't you please stop????") That's Paul and his message: Christ.
 - ✓ But this is not the only verse where he talks about talking about Christ:
 - He is a minister of Christ Jesus (**v. 16**)
 - He won't preach anything except Christ (**v. 18**)
 - He fully preached the gospel of Christ (**v. 19**)
 - He desired to preach the gospel [about Christ] (**v. 20**)
 - He is only following the preaching pattern of Isaiah (**v. 21**)
 - ✓ We have said that this section is about Paul's missionary message — do you see it? It's only preaching Christ — and that singular message transformed the Gentiles.
 - ✓ The message that changed people then, still changes people today:
 - That's what we've heard from both our missionaries in the Middle East in past two months
 - That's what Jack and Susie Weertman have affirmed about the growth of the Cambodian church
 - That's what Keith and I have seen in Russia and the Ukraine and Israel — e.g., one faithful church in Irkutsk that has been the sending church for 40 other churches in Siberia.
 - That's what David Gibson reports about the progress of the gospel in PNG — as Scripture is translated, people believe and lives are changed (we've all seen his tears of gratitude...)
 - We preach Christ because we have seen the power of what Christ can do — here and abroad.

2. Preach Christ Because We Only Have CHRIST (v. 18a)

- Paul provides a reason for his “boasting” in v. 18 — *for* (because). And the reason is that while he won’t be *presumptuous* about anything (the word means “bold” or “daring”), he will be bold in speaking about Christ, and especially what Christ has worked in him (through him).
- Now notice that he is not minimizing his ministry; he doesn’t say, “I’ve never done anything...” He says:
 - 1) “I am not the origin of what his accomplished; it happened in my life (or through my life), but I did not design, plan, or purpose these works.”
 - 2) “While I am not sovereign over these events, yet ministry does happen through me...I mean that God is the One who works, but God also uses weak and flawed vessels like me to accomplish his purposes.”
- Another way to say what Paul says is, “I’m happy to talk about Christ! I love to talk about the gospel.”
 - ✓ The message of what Christ does (in Paul and in others) has been emphasized from the first verse: 1:1, 15-16; 3:24; 4:23-25; 5:19; 6:4; 7:4; 8:1, 4; 12:5; 13:14...
 - ✓ All that has been given to Paul and all that Paul has done in ministry is only because of Christ.
 - ✓ One of the tragedies of missions is that many of the worst things in the American “church” have been sent cross-culturally — things like the prosperity gospel and the worst charismatic abuses.
 - ✓ When we (GBC) go, we are committed to gospel-preaching, church-building ministries that exalt Christ and give people the eternal hope of Christ.

3. Preach Christ Because of How CHRIST Changes (All) People (v. 18b)

- What Christ did in Paul was not unique in Paul — it was the same kind of thing that Christ works in all who name His name: that was even the experience of the Gentiles:
 - ✓ Paul preached and the *result* was the *obedience of the Gentiles*. This is always what the gospel does when it is believed. It results in obedience (cf. 6:16; Mt. 28:20; Eph. 2:10). And the Romans themselves were examples of the obedience that comes from the gospel (1:5; 16:19, 26).
 - ✓ Paul also identifies the kind of obedience — they were obedient to Christ in *word and deed* — in what they said and what they did. Their mouth and their actions were changed (revealing also that their hearts were changed, Lk. 6:45). He will say similar things in Col. 3:17 and 2 Thess. 2:17.
 - ✓ This is another way of saying “everything about them has changed — inside and out...”
 - ✓ What is particularly attractive about this phrase is that Christ produces change in the *Gentiles*. While God has a chosen people, He doesn’t “play favorites” (the way we think about it). God also loves “outsiders.” He is gracious to change any and all who believe in Him.
 - ✓ The gospel message is the only message that will change anyone and it is preached and available to everyone. *Anyone* can be changed by the gospel of Christ (e.g., Mt. 11:28).

- If we want to help people (at home or abroad) only Christ will change them.
 - ✓ I remember very few chapel messages from seminary, but a few stand out. In one message, the preacher quoted from R. A. Torrey who said, “Preach any Christ but a crucified Christ and you will not reach men for long.” Torrey (and the chapel preacher) were only following after the ministry of Paul. We have nothing else to tell people except Jesus Christ.
 - ✓ Stories will entertain, but won’t transform anyone. Motivational messages will inspire but won’t deliver anyone from Hell. Water wells will only satisfy physical thirst, not spiritual thirst. Clothes will make them presentable at work but won’t make them presentable at God’s throne of judgment. Jobs will give them something to do today, but won’t prepare them for eternal work.
 - ✓ The only message we have is Jesus Christ — and Him crucified, risen, and coming again.
 - ✓ Paul knew that only one thing can change a man from the inside out, so that what he says and does is pleasing to God — and that’s the message of Jesus Christ. So that’s all Paul preached. Nothing else.
 - ✓ As we think about missions, that’s our priority.

4. Preach Christ For the Advance of **CHRIST’S Church** (v. 19)

- When Paul preached his message was accompanied with *the power of signs and wonders...*
 - ✓ This phrase is a typical NT way to speak about miracles (2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:4).
 - ✓ Before the completion of the Scriptures, miracles authenticated that the message of the apostles was true (the same reason that Christ performed miracles — to affirm His messianic message).
 - ✓ So this phrase helps us understand the significance of these miracles — they were an attestation and confirmation of his apostolic message, and thus unique to the apostles at that time.
 - ✓ We should also notice that what is prominent here is not the signs and wonders, but the main verb that they modify — what *Christ accomplished* (v. 18, through Paul’s preaching). Paul is not drawing attention to the miracles, but to the power of the preached gospel.
 - ✓ Paul is also explicit here that the miracles are also done *in the power of the Spirit*. The miracles are no more from Paul than the message he preached was his, or the ministry he did among the Gentiles was his. It was all by and from the Holy Spirit (which has been a repeated emphasis in chapter 15 — cf. vv. 15, 16, 18).
- What is notable in this verse is not the use of miracles by Paul, but the result of his preaching: *so that...*
 - ✓ When he preached the gospel, the church expanded and grew.
 - ✓ How far did it grow? It grew under Paul’s ministry from *Jerusalem* — to *Illyricum*.
 - ✓ While Paul was not based in **Jerusalem**, we do know he was in Jerusalem (Gal. 1:18; Acts 9:26ff), he interacted with the leaders of the church there (Gal. 2:2), and he was about to return (v. 25); so he apparently is saying that this was the southern-most limits of his ministry.

- ✓ While we don't know exactly when he was in **Illyricum**, it may well have been in Acts 20:1ff.
- ✓ So over the span of approximately **1000 miles**, he says the gospel was **fully preached**. He doesn't mean that there is a church in every location, but that all throughout those regions, gospel-preaching churches were planted as an outgrowth of his ministry.
- ✓ Because of that he now wants to come to **Rome**, strengthen the church there (1:11) and be **sent out** to Spain with the support and encouragement of the Roman church (**15:24**).
- ✓ This is a reminder that missions is about going (being sent) into cross-cultural settings. But when you get in that "foreign" place, the essential missionary tasks are the same as at home — evangelizing, discipling, training, and building the church (v. 16). The place is different, but the ministry goal and work is the same — advance and build the church of Christ.

5. Preach Christ Because Only CHRIST is the Foundation of the Church (v. 20)

- If the church is going to advance, Christ must be preached, because He is the church's *one* foundation.
- Paul was passionate about preaching the gospel: ***thus I aspired to preach...***
 - ✓ The word ***aspire*** is the word "to have ambition" (2 Cor. 5:9). It's an eager desire.
 - ✓ In other things — in the things that the world considers important — Paul exhorts that the believer is to have no ambition (**1 Thess. 4:11**). But when he thinks about the gospel and progress of the church — he is relentlessly passionate to see the gospel preached and church expanded.
 - ✓ Note this also: while Paul wanted to preach, what he really wanted to do was preach where the gospel had never been previously preached (***not where Christ was already named***) — he wanted to go to what we call today, "unreached people groups." He was a start-up engineer. He was in the foundation laying business.
 - Paul did ***not*** want to ***build on another man's foundation***. It's not a sin to build on the work of others (cf. **14:19**; **1 Cor. 3:10**; Eph. 4:12, 16; 1 Thess. 5:11).
 - But Paul's personal ministry was advancing the gospel to new regions. His gifting and calling from God was to establish new churches in new areas — and he was passionate for it.
 - ✓ And the foundation he wanted to lay, of course, was Christ. Christ is always the foundation of every true church (**1 Cor. 3:10-11**; **Eph. 2:20**).
 - While Paul "laid" the foundation, *he* was not the foundation, Christ was. Christ is the Head of the church, the beginning of the church, the Master, the Husband, and the foundation. He is the central part of the church; the church is built on Him and the church is built for Him.
 - It's also significant to note that this apostolic ministry of "laying the foundation" is finished; while new churches in new areas are still being formed, that is different from the apostolic work that Paul and the others did; that work is done (and the need for those gifts is gone).

- This is our passion in missions as well. We are committed to building Christ’s church in Granbury. And we are committed to building Christ’s church overseas. And that means that when we go and when we send we our first commitment is to get the gospel right and preach Christ.
- In our Missions Policy, we say it this way:

Simply said, the missionary is someone who is sent with the message of Christ and His forgiveness and freedom. Missions is evangelizing the nations. Consider the great commission statements: Matthew’s gospel emphasizes that Jesus’ command was to make disciples and teach the converted to obey Christ; and Luke records that the responsibility is to testify to the work of Christ on the cross to provide forgiveness for those who repent; and at His ascension, Jesus again emphasizes the responsibility to testify to His person and work.

And the primary task of missions is further to take the gospel to the unbelieving nations, as all three Great commissions passages in Matthew, Luke, and Acts affirm. Disciples are to be made of all the nations (Mt. 28:18-20) and repentance and forgiveness is to be proclaimed to all the nations (Lk. 24:46-49), and the testimony [of Christ] is to go to the remotest part of the earth (Acts 1:8).

- We preach Christ in missions because Christ is the only foundation of the church.

6. Preach Christ Because Missions Has Always Been Only About CHRIST (v. 21)

- To affirm his missionary message from Scripture, Paul quotes a passage from Isaiah — not from another apostle (church age), or from Jesus, but from the OT and the prophets.
- The quotation comes from **Isaiah 52:15**, which is the introduction to Is. 53, the suffering Servant.
 - ✓ While the Servant will be exalted and lifted up (52:13), He will also be marred and humbled (a reference to His suffering on the cross and the physical torture he experienced).
 - ✓ Yet the work of the servant will **sprinkle many nations** (v. 15) — and **Kings will shut their mouths** and **they will see**, and **they will understand**. The suffering Servant labors for the chosen people, Israel, but His influence and provision is also for the nations, the Gentiles.
 - ✓ While Israel would reject Christ in His first advent, many Gentiles would be saved through that rejection (Rom. 11:12, 25). Just as the Messiah’s work was for the benefit of the Gentiles, Paul (a Hebrew of Hebrews!) wanted to work for the advance of the gospel among Gentiles.
 - ✓ We might say that Paul has patterned his ministry after the Messiah — and if anyone “preached” the message of Christ, it was the Messiah Himself! Missions is *always* about Christ.
 - ✓ [Aside: we do well to remember that God is a missionary God — Gen. 12:3; Is. 19:19-25; Jer. 1:5; 3:17; Lk. 2:31-32; Rev. 5:9; 7:9-10; 14:1-6; 22:2]

Summary:

- ✓ Missions is sending people into cross-cultural settings.
- ✓ Missions is sending people into cross-cultural settings with the gospel of Christ to build the church of Christ.
- ✓ Missions is our privilege — even as Gentiles!

CONCLUSION: Because of passages like this, we have a particular emphasis in missions: *the goal for missions at GBC is to cultivate a network of missionaries that will expand our global involvement and see people from all the nations trust in Christ, love Christ, and live for Christ's glory.*

When we use the word “missions,” we are thinking of two aspects of the missionary endeavor.

- ✓ First of all, missions is gospel-focused. The primary task of the church is to take the gospel to the unbelieving (Lk. 24:46-49; Acts 1:8). And the missionary's fundamental task is to be a witness/testimony to the truth of Christ and the provision of forgiveness through Him.
- ✓ Secondly, we believe that “going” is inherent in missions (Mt. 28:18-20; Acts 1:8). Missions is not what we do when we stay; missions is what we do when we are sent (by the church).

The word “missions” is often used to make people feel guilty — “I didn't go and I don't give enough.” That's not Paul's intent in this passage.

He wants us to remember the priority of missions and in particular, the message of missions. The gospel that has saved you is enough to save people in the uttermost parts of the earth. It has saved, it continues to save, and it will save. And that is the message we not only have been called to take to the nations, it is the message we are privileged to be part of taking to the nations.

BENEDICTION: Romans 15:13