

On Mission With Our Global God

The Task of Missions (Romans 15:14-24)

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on February 1, 2015

Introduction

- ❖ I'm excited to help kick off our church's Missions Month. Since the start of the year, we've been going through our mission statement – to make God-loving and compassionate disciples of Jesus Christ among all nations. And it works out well that we can focus on the “among all nations” part this month. Because we want to connect *missions* with our church's *mission*.
 - Now I know the terms can be confusing. **We talk about our church's *mission* and then we talk about *missions*.** And we're not sure if we're talking about the same thing. Think of it this way. Mission refers to the overall purpose of a church. And that, as we emphasized last week, is to make disciples.
 - And there's an implied sense that we mean starting with those God has directly placed in our lives. Geography is implied. We're starting with those living in Houston or more specifically in southwest-central Houston – in this med-center, university district, southwest inner-loop corner of town.
- ❖ But even though our church's mission always starts locally, it ends globally. Jesus said to make disciples *of all nations* (Mt. 28:19). So this is where missions comes into play. Missions is about taking our implied sense of disciple-making where we live, work, and play and connecting it with the nations, taking it to the ends of the earth.
 - **So while *mission* refers to the overall purpose of a church, *missions* refers to the specific ministries of a church directed at moving our own disciples beyond where we live (where it's comfortable) to go and make disciples in places where there are no disciples or churches equipped to make disciples.**
- ❖ So in our church we have a Missions Department filled with brothers and sisters from all three congregations devoted to this very task. They're the ones who organized Missions Month, who educate us on missions, who handle all the logistics of supporting long-term missionaries and sending short-term teams.
 - Any church that wants to take this seriously needs something like a missions department. **But we must be extremely careful not to give off the impression that missions is just one of many departments in a church.** Missions should be the heartbeat of a church, the passion of all its members.
- ❖ **We often look at missionaries or members of a missions department as these peculiar Christians who have this unique interest or pastime that you can respect but you're not really into it yourself.** At least not as much as they are.
 - We treat them like we do our friends who have really unique tastes in music. Like that friend who's into indie rock or garage punk or K-pop, and you're like, “*That's nice. I'm glad you found something you enjoy, something you're passionate about*”. You might even dabble in it. You have one or two K-pop songs in your playlist. You can appreciate it. But it's not your passion. And that's okay. To each their own, right?

- ❖ When it comes to music, yes. But when it comes to missions, no. **Missions should not be just a side interest for some Christians in the church.** If that's so, we have to do whatever we can to remedy that. That's one reason we're having a Missions Month. We want every believer to know that you're called to the work of disciple-making on a local and global scale. We each have a God-assigned role in this global task of reaching the nations for Jesus.
 - I love how John Piper puts it. **He says there are three kinds of Christians: the goers, the senders, and the disobedient.** So just all members of this church are called to be actively involved in disciple-making, all of us are called to be actively involved in missions. No Christian has an excuse to take a backseat to the Great Commission. We all have a part to play.

- ❖ This morning I want to take you to what might be considered a rather obscure passage in Romans. And here I want to show you how we're defining the task of missions. I want you to see the heart behind missions. And my hope and prayer is that God, by his sovereign will, might use this message from the Word to inspire some of you to be goers, to be missionaries in the likeness of the Apostle Paul.
 - With the number of people in this room, the odds are that at least some of you here are called by God to the mission field, and **I pray this message might be the catalyst, the spark that sets you ablaze with a passion to preach Christ in the hard-to-reach, distant, hostile lands where he is not yet named.** And for the rest of us, I pray that we'll be set ablaze with a passion to give sacrificially, pray devotedly, and advocate persuasively for global missions as faithful senders and supporters.
 - There are three things I want you to see from our text 1) the ambition of a missionary, 2) the urgency of a missionary, and 3) the strategy of a missionary.

The Ambition of a Missionary

- ❖ First, let's consider the ambition of a missionary. **Missionaries are ambitious people.** They've got to be dreamers because they're typically walking into situations where there is no ministry taking place, no churches operating, no Christians. You've got to be ambitious.
 - And I think the kind of people who are naturally ambitious, who are entrepreneurial, who like to build things from the ground up, when they get saved, it's not as if their ambition dries up. No, it gets channeled towards God and the things of God. **I think ambitious people – after grace gets a hold of them – can make great missionaries.**

- ❖ Paul, for one, was just that kind of guy. He had ambition and drive. Before Christ, he was a Pharisee of Pharisees. He was moving up the ranks in Jewish leadership. He would not only persecute Christians where he lived. **His ambition drove him from city to city to seek and destroy disciples of Christ.** He was ambitious.
 - And then grace found him and interrupted his life. Suddenly all that ambition was channeled towards a higher end. **From that day forth, it would drive him from city to city to seek and make disciples – preaching Christ where he was not yet named.**

- ❖ At the time of this letter, Paul had never visited Rome. He didn't plant this church. He never pastored there. But he does have a fondness for this church. He does have a sense of responsibility to these believers because they're predominately Gentile Christians. **And Paul has a unique burden and ambition to reach the Gentiles, the nations.**
 - That's how he introduces himself in the beginning of chapter 1. He describes himself as "*a servant of Christ, called to be an apostle . . . to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations*" (Rom. 1:1, 5). He's an apostle for the sake of Christ among *all the nations*. That's Great Commission language.

- ❖ He says something similar in our passage. Look at v16. Paul self-identifies as "*a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles*", which is the same thing as saying *to the nations*. From a Jewish perspective, the nations of the earth are the Gentiles – the non-Jews. **So whether your translation says *nations* or *Gentiles*, it's referring to the same Greek word *ethnos*.**
 - That's where we derive the English word *ethnicity*. So by *ethnos* we're not talking about nation-states, specific countries. **We're talking about ethnic groups, people groups – not defined by land border but by distinct language and culture.** So it's possible (and quite common) to find many distinct *ethnos* within the same country.

- ❖ Now what Paul's implying here is that he's specifically *not* an apostle to the Jews. **Of course it would be very natural, very comfortable for Paul to focus his ministry on fellow Jews.** He had the perfect testimony. He was at the top of his game as an up-and-coming Jewish lawyer. Power and privilege were in his grasps, and yet he gave it all up for Christ.
 - That's like an executive at Facebook, let's say **Mark Zuckerberg** himself, who graces the cover of magazines, who has movies made about him, who's at the pinnacle of his career – imagine if he walks away from it all to become a missionary. Don't you think he'd be a perfect missionary for Silicon Valley? For all those people chasing after the very things he already possessed? He'd have the perfect testimony to tell them how much better Jesus is than being filthy rich at the top of that corporate ladder.
 - But what if instead he moves to the Midwest, to rural America? To preach the gospel to farmers and ranchers who have no idea how to use the Facebook or the Tweeter or even know what those things are.

- ❖ I'm sure Paul heard it all the time. "Why are you wasting your testimony? You should focus your ministry on those who can appreciate your life story." He'd probably say, "No thanks. I've been called to those who know nothing about the Bible, who aren't expecting the Christ, who aren't impressed and could care less about my righteousness according to the Law. They're my passion. They're my mission."
 - Look at how he puts it in v20. "*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's that word *ambition*. **Paul had a driving ambition to preach Christ and make him known among the *ethnos* of the world, specifically among those who have never heard.** Where Christ is not named / honored / worshipped.

- ❖ Now I know Paul didn't say it's his ambition to preach the gospel to **the unreached peoples of the world (UPGs)** – he didn't use that term – but that's what he meant. It wasn't his ambition to head to Jerusalem, the center of Judaism. Not because there wasn't enough gospel work to be done. There were plenty of lost people there. But the people of Jerusalem were a reached people. There was a Jerusalem church. No doubt Paul would've been highly effective there as an evangelist, but that was *not* his calling and so it was *not* his ambition.
 - Paul's ambition was directed towards unreached peoples – those among whom Christ has not been named, those among whom a foundation has not been laid, where a church has not been established.

- ❖ That's one of Paul's favorite metaphors. He likes to compare the planting of a church to the laying of a building's foundation (cf. 1 Cor. 3:9-15). So he's saying his ambition is to bring the gospel to regions and people groups that don't have churches. Where no one's laid a foundation, no one has planted a church. **That's why a people group is typically classified as unreached if they don't have a self-led, self-sufficient church made up of its own members who are capable of evangelizing the rest of the group.**

- ❖ Paul had a driving ambition to go with the gospel to the unreached peoples of the earth. **This one ambition was so strong that it directed all other good ambitions in his life, all his other plans and longings and desires.**
 - This is the reason he gives to the Romans for why it's taken him so long to finally visit. Look at v22, "*This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you.*" So Paul has had long-term plans to visit Rome. Look at the second half of v23, "*since I have longed for many years to come to you*". He longs to visit them.

- ❖ But unlike so many of us who are carried along by every whim, every longing that hits us, **Paul aimed his life at one holy ambition and let that shape and direct his life plans.** *Why has it taken so long for him to visit Rome?* Because Christ is already named there. The city is reached. A foundation was laid. A self-led, self-sufficient church is there that he didn't plant.
 - **So those desires, those plans to visit, were secondary to his primary ambition to preach Christ among the unreached.** And now that he says, according to v23, that his work is done in the region that God has assigned him, Paul is ready to fulfill those travel plans. But really, as he says in v24, he's only passing through Rome to get to Spain, to another unreached region with unreached peoples.

- ❖ **I think some of you are resonating with Paul.** You have this same burden, this tug, this ambition to play a more active, more direct role in bringing the gospel to the regions of the world where Christ is not yet named. You want to go!
 - But perhaps someone discouraged you and said you're wasting your education and career achievements if you go and live among a people group who can't appreciate your personal testimony. Like Paul ministering to Greeks who don't know what a Pharisee is or how amazing it is that one would become a Christian. Or Mark Zuckerberg ministering to farmers who don't understand what he walked away from.

- ❖ I understand what they're saying. So I thank God that he calls others to stay in their professions or in their cultures to powerfully witness in just that way. But you've got a different assignment from God. You're not being less ambitious with your life. Like Paul you're still driven by ambition. It's just channeled differently now. Ask yourself: *Do I share in Paul's singular ambition to preach the gospel where Christ is not named?*

The Urgency of a Missionary

- ❖ If you're still not sure, then let me show you the urgency of a missionary. I want to explain the situation, to help you see how urgent the need is for the entire church – both goers and senders – to be active and intentional in getting the gospel to the unreached.
- ❖ According to the most authoritative source on unreached peoples, the Joshua Project¹, out of the 9,782 distinct people groups in the world **42.1%** are considered unreached (4,073 groups). So with 7.1 billion people in the world, **3 billion people are unreached!**
 - Now the vast majority (almost 95%) of these unreached people groups live in what's known as **the 10/40 window**. This region belongs primarily in the eastern hemisphere located between 10 and 40 degrees north of the equator. It includes Saharan and Northern Africa, the Middle East, India, China, and Southeast Asia. Many of the countries in the 10/40 are closed to missionaries. They don't want you there. They're not inviting you to bring the gospel. Many will kill you if you try.
 - According to the Joshua Project, barely **13%** of missionary work is being done among these groups. And out of every dollar of Christian giving towards foreign missions, only **1%** is dedicated to work among the unreached.
- ❖ And then there those people groups that missiologists are calling the **unengaged-unreached peoples of the earth (UUPGs)**. A UPG might not have a church yet but it could have missionaries present working to plant a church. But a UUPG doesn't even have missionaries. There's no gospel preaching or church planting going on. They're totally unengaged. According to one source, there are currently **459 unengaged-unreached people groups** with populations more than 25,000². That's approximately 74 million people.
 - 74 million lost souls with no access, no opportunity to hear the good news, with no disciples there to make more disciples. And this is what's so sad, so convicting – it's not like these UUPGs are all living deep in some rainforest completely cut off from modern civilization. No, I'm sure if you were to travel to some of these places you don't have to go very far to get yourself a Coca-cola or maybe a Big Mac.
 - That's inexcusable. As David Platt puts it, "*A soft drink company has done a better job getting brown sugar water to the nations than the church of Jesus Christ has done in getting the Gospel to them.*" This is a problem. So many peoples in the world who are not reached, not even engaged with the gospel.

¹ see online: http://joshuaproject.net/global_statistics

² see online: <http://www.finishingthetask.com>

- ❖ This is inexcusable. We need to go. We need to send. **Because though these people have never heard about Jesus, they'll still have to give an account before Jesus one day.** And they'll stand condemned for their unrighteousness, for suppressing the truth they know about God, which has been made plain to them in creation. And for that they'll face God's wrath.
 - This is exactly what Paul was warning in the beginning of this letter in chapter 1. Speaking of Gentiles, those without the Mosaic Law, those without knowledge or expectation of the Christ, he says, *"¹⁸For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse."*
 - They don't have an excuse. Not knowing about Jesus; never having heard about Jesus; never being explained the gospel – is no excuse when you're standing before God giving an account of your sin and suppression of truth.

- ❖ Those who die unreached or unengaged will be condemned to an eternity of hell to bear the wrath of God. Not because they didn't believe in Jesus. **Obviously they're *not* judged for *not* believing in a Jesus they've never heard or known. But they *are* judged for *not* believing in what can be known about God** – what God has shown them, his eternal power and divine nature, which is clearly perceivable in the things that have been made.
 - And think about what that means for those of us who *are* reached, who *have* heard the gospel, who know about Jesus – yet if you still refuse to trust him, then you're heaping greater judgment upon yourself.
 - But here's the good news that Jesus offers: He is more than willing to take your place. To be your mediator, to stand before God on your behalf. To let his life be counted as the life you're accountable to live, and to let his death be counted as the death your judgment calls for. He offers this to you. You have to believe on him and trust in him. I pray that you do.

The Strategy of a Missionary

- ❖ So in Paul's theology he understands that there are unreached and unengaged peoples on the earth who aren't worshipping the one true God and Jesus Christ whom he sent (Jn. 17:3), and he's convinced that these peoples are without excuse and equally condemned under the Law.
 - ***So what's his strategy to address this great problem?*** What's his plan? This is where we realize that missionaries – the kind like Paul – are cut from a different rug. They have a unique mindset, a different way of looking at the same problem.
 - I think most of us would go to an unreached people, enter a city, preach the gospel, and if we see receptivity, if we see conversions, if we see a burgeoning church, even if there is hardship and persecution, we'll plant roots, settle down, and put all our blood, sweat, and tears into cultivating that church and building it up for the glory of God.

- ❖ That's honestly what I'd do. Knowing the way I'm wired, if I were presented with a healthy church, with a fruitful ministry of making and maturing disciples among an unreached people, I'd want to keep preaching and keep discipling until every man, woman, and child in that village or town was a worshipper of our Lord Jesus.
 - That's what I would do. And that's probably why I'm a pastor and not a missionary like Paul. Because that's exactly what Paul would *not* do. **He would not settle down in one church among an unreached group and enjoy years of fruitful, effective ministry.**

- ❖ That's not Paul. That's not his missionary strategy. Listen to some of the staggering claims he makes. Listen to v19b, "*from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyicum* [modern-day Albania] *I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ.*" He's describing a coastal region stretching all the way from southern Palestine to northern Italy. That is a huge stretch of land with thousands of cities, towns, and villages.
 - We know from Acts that Paul is successful in planting churches in key cities in those lands over the course of three journeys. Thousands must have been saved. But there are ten of thousands in that region that are still lost and in need of the gospel. **So how can he claim to have "*fulfilled the ministry of the gospel*" in those lands?**
 - And if you look in v23 he doubles down on this claim. He's coming to visit Rome now, "*since I no longer have any room for work in these regions.*"

- ❖ Paul, are you kidding? You don't have anymore room for work here? There are hundreds and thousands of lost people all around! Yes, the churches you've planted are growing, but they're not *that* big. They're not *that* stable.
 - The **evangelists** among us are thinking, "There are still plenty of souls to be won." The **pastors** like me are thinking, "There are still plenty of disciples to be made and leaders to be trained." They're still a lot of work to do.
 - But **Paul the missionary** looks, sees self-led, self-sufficient churches that are in position to self-propagate and spread the gospel near and wide, and he says, "Looks like my work is down here. On to Spain."

- ❖ **Paul is not a local church evangelist. He's a missionary – a pioneer missionary, a frontier missionary, a missionary to the unreached, unengaged peoples of the earth.** His calling and driving ambition is to take the gospel to where there are no churches, no Christians, no other missionaries.
 - I need to be very clear and careful here. In no way am I trying to imply that missionary work of this nature is more important or more valued in God's eyes than the work of continuing to evangelize a reached people group (like missionary work in Mexico or Taiwan) or the work of evangelizing our neighbors and colleagues here.
 - **I don't expect most of you to become missionaries like Paul.** I don't presume most of you share his ambition to actually go to the unreached peoples of the earth. And I don't want you to feel guilty for not having that ambition.

- ❖ But as I said before, I think there are some of you here that do. **You do have that ambition. Perhaps it's only in seed form.** Perhaps you've been trying to suppress it or ignore it. But you know it's there – building up within you is a compelling desire and ambition to preach the gospel where Christ is not yet named.
 - **You mustn't ignore the call.** Barely 13% of all missionaries in the field today are serving the unreached and far less are among the unengaged. I'm not surprised. It's because those people groups are in the hardest-to-reach places in the world. And they're the kind that welcomes Christian missionaries with the sword and the spear. But this is why you must not ignore the call of God on your life.

- ❖ I know you have longings. You have ambitions. You long to be married. You have career ambitions. You long for that accolade or position. You have relational ambitions. You long to raise your kids around family. Or you long to see your grandkids grow up.
 - Paul had longings and ambitions. He made that clear. But he also made it clear that he submits it all under that singular, driving ambition of his to preach Christ where he is not named. Brother/sister for the sake of the unreached you must do the same.

- ❖ And for the rest of us, who don't share the same ambition to go to the unreached but do share a similar burden for the unreached, **we mustn't ignore our calling to send and support.** Only 1% of our giving to missions is going towards work among the unreached.
 - Each of us needs to sit down with our Bible and our budget, and honestly ask God to show us what changes need to be made, what can we cut back on, what can we sacrifice and do without – that we might have more to give directly to the work of reaching the unreached and engaging the unengaged for the sake of Christ.

- ❖ **And lastly we all need to pray.** We need to pray more for the unreached and unengaged in the world. To pray for the Lord of the harvest to send out more laborers into his harvest (cf. Lk. 10:2). Let me leave you with two resources to inform your prayers for the unreached and two opportunities to pray with the church. First, I want each of you to go home and log into JoshuaProject.net, and there you'll have a wealth of information at your fingertips about unreached peoples. Then download the JP Unreached app on your smartphone, and there you'll receive prayer points for a new UPG on a daily basis. Next I want you to join us this Wednesday for our monthly church-wide prayer meeting, and on February 21st, Saturday evening, the BASIC fellowship will be hosting a concert of prayer for Missions Month that's open to all. Let me pray for us all.