

A Task Unfinished

Romans 15:14-24

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC (Missions Weekend) on August 24, 2025

Introduction

- ❖ As many of you are aware, this weekend we've been focusing a spotlight on Global Missions. On Friday and Saturday, we held churchwide activities that were aimed at educating and mobilizing each other to actively participate in what God is doing around the world, to the ends of the earth. And after service this morning, we have a special missions-focused Sunday School class that will be meeting in the chapel.
 - **Let's be grateful to our Global Outreach department and all their hard work in organizing everything.** They do a lot for our church. In addition to putting on conferences like this, the department provides ongoing support and care for our long-term missionaries. They support our various short-term missions trips. They counsel and equip those in our church sensing a call to full-time missions. **Amid all the busyness of our church calendar and our various ministries, the Global Outreach department keeps the flame going for our mission to make God-loving and compassionate disciples of Jesus Christ *among all nations*.**
- ❖ **Any church that takes the Great Commission seriously needs a missions-centered department like that.** Some designated group needs to run point on global missions, or else it'll be neglected in the busy life of a church. But there's also a danger in setting apart one group in the church and labeling them the Global Outreach or Missions department.
 - **Because by calling them a department, you're signaling that they're just one division among many others within the same church.** They handle one important ministry while the other departments handle other important ministries.
- ❖ **It's easy and quite common to look at missionaries or members of a missions department as Christians who have a special interest that you can respect but that you're not really into it yourself.** We treat them like we do our friends who have unique tastes in music. I know some of you are really into K-pop. I keep hearing those same songs from that Demon-hunter movie. While I'm driving in the car with my kids or driving the church van with the staff on our way to staff retreat. I can appreciate it. I can jam to it – to a limit. In the end, it's just not my thing. 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 treated as merely a special interest for some Christians in the church.** Missions should be the heartbeat of a church. A passion shared by all members. Because we're all called to the work of disciple-making on both a local and global scale. We each have a God-assigned role in this global task of reaching the nations for Jesus. We all have a part to play.
 - This morning I want to study what might be considered an obscure passage in Romans. It sounds like Paul just giving some travel updates. **But what we discover in this text is the Apostle Paul's definition of the task of missions.** It's an unfinished task. One that we will eventually be finished by God, according to his own timing. But not without us. Not because he needs us to finish this task. But because he graciously invites us to participate.

- ❖ My hope is that, in studying this passage this morning, some of you here will hear a particular call from God to help finish the task by becoming a Paul-like missionary. **I pray this message might be 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.**
 - For the rest of us, I pray we'll be set ablaze with a passion to give sacrificially, pray devotedly, and advocate persuasively for missions as faithful senders and mobilizers. There are three things to see from our text: (1) the missionary's ambition, (2) the missionary's urgency, and (3) the missionary's strategy to pursue this unfinished task.

The Missionary's Ambition

- ❖ First, let's consider the missionary's ambition. **Missionaries are ambitious people.** They've got to be dreamers because they're typically walking into situations where there is no active 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. It just 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 was that kind of guy. He had ambition and drive. Before Christ, he was an ambitious Pharisee among Pharisees. He was moving up the ranks in Jewish leadership. He not only persecuted Christians where he lived. **His ambition drove him from city to city to seek more disciples to persecute.** He was ambitious. But then grace found him and changed him. Suddenly all that ambition was channeled towards a higher end. **His new ambition drove him from city to city to seek and make disciples of Christ.**
- ❖ 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 had a unique burden and ambition to reach the Gentiles, the nations, with the gospel.**
 - 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, about specific countries. **We're talking about ethnic groups or people groups – not defined by national borders but by distinct language and culture.** It's common to find many distinct *ethnoi* 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, vey 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 grasp, and yet he gave it all up for Christ. And honestly, from a human perspective, it makes very little sense.
- ❖ Just think of a contemporary at the height of his or her career. Think of **Lin-Manuel Miranda**, the creator of the hit musical *Hamilton* and *In the Heights*. He's at the pinnacle of his career. He's one of the most talented and renowned cultural creatives in the entertainment industry. **Imagine if he was a Christian and walked away from the entertainment world to become a missionary among some remote tribal group in South America.**
 - **I wouldn't be surprised if many, from a human perspective, would criticize that move and consider it a huge waste of creative, artistic talent.** They'd probably tell him to stay in the industry because Broadway and Hollywood need Jesus as much as an unreached people group in the rainforests of Brazil. He'd be a perfect missionary to his own peers who are chasing after the commercial success and accolades that he already possesses. He'd would have the perfect testimony to tell his peers how Jesus is so much better and more satisfying than all the Tonys and Grammys and Academy Awards. Those tribesmen can't appreciate that. That can't even comprehend that.
- ❖ I'm sure Paul heard those same criticisms. "Why are you wasting your testimony? Focus your ministry on your peers. On those who can appreciate your life story." But to that, I'm sure Paul would say, "I get what you're saying, but I have a calling. To go to those who know nothing about Scripture; who never heard of Christ, who could care less about my impressive righteousness according to the Law. The Gentiles are 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; not worshipped.
- ❖ Paul didn't use the term **unreached people groups (UPGs)**, but that's what he had in mind. It wasn't his ambition to minister in Jerusalem – in the political, cultural, and religious center of Judaism. Not because there wasn't enough gospel work to be done in the capital. There were plenty of lost people there. But the people of Jerusalem were a reached people. There was a Jerusalem church. Now I have no doubt that Paul would've been a highly effective evangelist in Jerusalem. Leading scores of his Jewish kinsmen to Christ. **But that wasn't his calling and so it wasn't his ambition.**
 - Paul's ambition was directed towards unreached peoples – those among whom Christ had not been named. Those among whom a gospel foundation had not been laid. Where a church had 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 (1 Cor 3:9-15). His ambition is to bring the gospel to regions and people groups that don't have churches. Where no one has laid a foundation – no one has planted a church. **That's why a people group would be classified as *unreached* – if they don't have a self-led, self-sufficient church made up of its own people who are capable of evangelizing the rest of the group.**
- ❖ Paul had a driving ambition to bring the gospel to the unreached peoples of the earth. **This one ambition was so strong that it shaped and directed all other good ambitions in his life, all his other longings and desires.** It's the reason he gives to the Romans for why it's taken him so long to visit. Look at v22, *"This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you."* So Paul 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 us, who are carried along by 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 already there.
 - **So that longing – that plan to visit – took a backseat 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 in the end, as he says in v24, he's only passing through Rome in order to get to Spain – to access 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 who can't appreciate your testimony or understand what you're giving up.** 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 Lin-Manuel Miranda ministering to tribesmen who have never heard of *Hamilton* and have no comprehension of what he walked away from.
- ❖ Look, I understand the criticism. And I get where it's coming from. From a legitimate concern for the lost in our culture, in our spheres of influence. And so I thank God that he calls others to stay in their professions and in their cultures to powerfully witness to the life-transforming power of the gospel.
 - But for those of you who are resonating with what Paul is saying in this passage – you've got a different assignment from God. A different calling. **And what I want you to hear is that you're not being less ambitious with your life if you heed that call.** Like Paul, you're still being driven by ambition. It's just being channeled differently now. You're still driven – but driven like a missionary.

The Missionary's Urgency

- ❖ So ask yourself this diagnostic question: **Do you share in Paul's singular ambition to preach the gospel where Christ is not yet named?** If you're still not sure – if you're not sure if you share that ambition – then perhaps it'll help you discern if we talked about the missionary's urgency. I want to help you see just how urgent the need is for the whole church to be active in getting the gospel to the unreached.
- ❖ According to one of the most authoritative source on unreached peoples, the Joshua Project¹, out of the 17,517 distinct people groups in the world **42%** are considered unreached (7,357 groups). So with 8.17 billion people in the world, **3.56 billion people are unreached!**
 - Now the vast majority (96%) 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° latitude, 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 window are closed to missionaries. They don't want you there. They're not inviting you to bring the gospel. Many will try to stop you if you try.
 - According to Joshua Project, less than **10%** of missionary work is being done among these groups. And out of every dollar given towards global missions, less than two pennies is dedicated to work among unreached people groups.
- ❖ 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 there 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 unengaged. According to Joshua Project, there are currently **1600 unengaged-unreached people groups in the world**. In size, that's approximately 110 million people.
 - 110 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 convicting – you see, it's not like these UUPGs are all living deep in the jungle somewhere, completely cut off from modern civilization.** I'm sure if you were to travel to some of these places you don't have to go very far to purchase a Coca-cola or Big Mac.
 - That's inexcusable. As David Platt put 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.
- ❖ 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.

¹ see online: <https://www.joshuaproject.net>

- ❖ This is what Paul warned in the beginning of Romans in chapter 1. Speaking of Gentiles, those without the Law, without the 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; having never heard about Jesus; never being told the gospel – apparently those are not excuses when 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 God’s wrath. Not because they didn’t believe in Jesus. **They’re not going to be judged for not believing in a Jesus they’ve never heard of. But, according to Romans 1, they are going to be judged for not believing in what can be known about God.** His eternal power and divine nature, which is clearly perceivable in the things that have been made.
 - And think about what the 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 you’re judgment calls for. He offers this to you. You have to believe on him and trust in him. I pray that you do.

The Missionary’s Strategy

- ❖ 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 cloth. They have a unique mindset, a different way of looking at the same problem.
 - I think most of us would travel 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’s hardship and persecution – we’ll probably 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.
- ❖ I know that’s what I would do. Knowing the way I’m wired, if I were presented with a healthy church that has a fruitful ministry of making and maturing disciples among an unreached people, then I would want to keep preaching and discipling until every man, woman, and child in that village or town was a worshipper of Jesus.

- ❖ That's what I would do. And that's 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 ambition or strategy.** Listen to some of the staggering claims he makes. Listen to v19b, "*from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum* [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 were probably tens of thousands in that region still lost and in need of the gospel. **So how could 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 me? You don't have anymore room for work there? There are hundreds of thousands of lost people all around you! I'm sure 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." And **pastors** like me are thinking, "There are still plenty of disciples to be made and sheep to be pastored." There's still a lot of work to do.
 - But **Paul the missionary** looks and 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 done here. On to Spain."
- ❖ **Paul is *not* a local church evangelist. He's a missionary. He's 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.
- ❖ Now I need to be clear and careful. I am not suggesting 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 the missionary work our teams did in Mexico or Taiwan this summer) or the work of evangelizing our neighbors in Houston.
 - **I don't expect most of you to become missionaries like Paul.** I don't presume most of you share his ambition to 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.

- ❖ I know you have longings. You have academic and career ambitions. You want to get into that school. To succeed in that field or industry. You're pursuing that position, that accolade. Or you have relational ambitions. You long to be married. You desire to raise your own kids around your family. Or you long to be present 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.** For the sake of the unreached, will you do the same?

- ❖ **And for the rest of us, who may not share Paul's ambition to be the one who goes to the unreached but who do share a similar burden for the unreached, recognize that you have a calling too.** You have a significant role to play in completing this unfinished task.
 - Remember, less than 2% of giving to global missions is going towards work among the unreached. **Each of us needs to sit down with our Bible and our budget, and 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 to the work of reaching the unreached and engaging the unengaged for the sake of Christ?
 - And when our supported missionaries are back in Houston on furlough – and we have quite a few in town now and more in the upcoming months – **how can we best welcome them and support them?** So that they're well rested and well funded to be redeployed again.

- ❖ **And lastly, all of us can 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 the harvest field (Lk 10:2). Let me leave you with a practical resource to help inform those prayers. Some time later today, I encourage you to visit JoshuaProject.net, and there you'll find a wealth of information at your fingertips about unreached peoples. Then, download their *Unreached of the Day* app on your smartphone, and every day you'll receive prayer points for a different UPG around the world.
 - And let me invite you to join with others to pray for such matters before English Service every Sunday in that side room starting at 8:30am. And attend our next All Church Prayer Service with our other congregations. They take place every second Sunday of the month at 5:00pm in the chapel. Let me pray for us now.