

Romans 15:14-33

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[0 : 00] Let's now turn to the passage which we read in Romans chapter 15. Romans chapter 15 and I would like us to look especially at Paul's words in verse 15.

Where towards the end he speaks of the grace God gave him to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles. So we might be nations rather than Gentiles there because that's what the word means. To be a minister to the nations with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God. So that the nations might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

I think most generations find the world difficult to understand. And many people today are finding the world in which we live difficult to make sense of.

On the one hand there are those who like the governments in their political correctness tell us that we live in a secularized society. And that religion really ought not to be taken too seriously.

[1 : 19] Religion is alright if it's privatized, if you exercise it in the home or at weekends. But don't bear take it into the public square. And yet on the other hand religion has become a tremendous force in the world.

We see that in the conflict in the Middle East especially. We see it in the Israeli Hezbollah. A conflict in the Israeli-Palestinian tension.

We see it in Iraq. Religion is in the public square. And for many people to pretend that it's not. It's living out of touch with reality. We live in a world where there are many forms of the secularization theory.

Which tells us that religion is diminishing. The University of Aberdeen is well known as being a center where the theory of secularization is taught.

[2 : 24] Perhaps in a leading way in the English-speaking world today through Professor Steve Bruce. And yet the evidence to sustain the secularization theory is simply not there.

We see a resurgence of religion around the world. Many countries of the world. It may be that in this country the churches are temporarily in decline.

And that is true throughout Europe. That Europe, as some commentators have pointed out, is the exceptional case. And whereas the churches may be declining, we are seeing a revival of interest in paganism and new ageism in our society.

So religion is an issue. Religion is in the public square. And it's tremendously important for us as we look out on the world to be able to make sense of it.

At least to try to begin to make sense of it. Now God has given us his word to help us to make sense of the world.

[3 : 32] It's important for us to recognize that. Calvin used to speak of the scriptures as spectacles which help us to see the world more clearly.

And we need to recognize that the Bible is not simply a devotional book. It's not simply a book through which we nurture our own soul. God has given us the Bible to be a book for living.

A handbook for life. In this book we have our maker's instructions. Which gives us guidance. Not simply for our private devotions.

Not simply for our religious hobbies. But for the whole of life. And we need to recover or recapture the Bible in that sense today.

The Bible is a book for the human race. It's not simply a book for the religious. It's a book for all. It is God's word to all.

[4 : 34] And he's given us his word. And we need to carry the word of God into the public square. And you and I can do that by using the scriptures to help us to interpret what is happening in the world.

Now I don't mean that we turn to some form of dispensational fundamentalism. Which has a bizarre interpretation of prophecy. Although that does seem to influence, sadly, some American foreign policy today.

That is not the tradition, the Christian tradition. That is some relatively new interpretation that has been brought in through John Darby in the 19th century.

The more orthodox understanding of the scriptures sees the scriptures as giving us not detailed, prophetic insights, but general principles which help us to interpret the history of the world and contemporary events.

Now this passage that we have read today in Romans chapter 15 is one of the passages that helps us to see the world in a new light.

[5 : 53] It helps us to make sense of the world. Because Paul shares with us here his vision and his mission. And what was his vision?

His vision was that he was a minister or a servant of the nations. And that service was a priestly service. He was a priest for the nations.

And his task in presenting the gospel to the nations, and that was his calling, was in order that the nations, that he might offer the nations to God. That he might give them to God.

And this is the, if you like, the perspective, the angle that Paul is viewing the nations here.

And I would suggest that Paul has shared this with the Romans, and he shared it with us, in order that we might adapt his perspective.

[6 : 54] And that we might see the nations as the offer to God. That's certainly the vision that we have in the book of Revelation, where the wealth and the glory of the nations is brought into the new Jerusalem.

Nations, of course, in the Bible, are not the nation states of today, which are relatively recent historical development. The nations of the Bible are the ethnic groups, of which there are many more than there are nation states.

Each ethnic linguistic group is, each ethne is a nation, in the biblical sense of the term. And the vision that the book of Revelation presents to us is that every nation, every culture, every ethnic group will bring its glory into the new Jerusalem.

And that, in one sense, is another side of the vision that Paul has here, of presenting all of these nations to God as an offering. And so Paul was concerned that through the presenting the gospel and through witnessing to the nations, he might present them to God.

But, of course, he was also paid for them. Part of the priestly calling was not simply to make an offering. It was also to intercede with God.

[8 : 21] And Paul here is interceding on behalf of the nations. So I think what Paul is suggesting to us here is that when we read the newspaper or when we watch the news on television and we see what's happening in Iraq or in Congo or in Lebanon or in Israel or in Gaza, let us have this vision of bringing these nations to God and praying for them.

And praying that those who are witnessing to them the good news of Jesus Christ might indeed present them as an offering to God. And to see our role as priests, as part of the priesthood of all believers, is to intercede on behalf of the nations and also to witness to the nations in order that they might become an offering to God.

The church is a holy priesthood, Peter tells us, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. And there's one of the ways in which we fulfill that priesthood.

This surely is one of the acceptable sacrifices, spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God that we offer the nations to God.

and that when we read the news, when we watch television, or watch the news on television, we ought not simply to be passive, we're invited here to be active and to recognize that God wants to use us in working out his purposes in these parts of the world.

[10 : 04] He's called upon his people to share with him in his rule, in his kingship over the world. And the key way we do that is through prayer and through witnessing to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so he invites us to become fellow workers with him in the outworking of his kingdom. And so his vision surely ought to be our vision where he envisages the nations coming to obey the Lord Jesus Christ.

John Wesley used to say that the world was his parish. Now so often our parish is the world or our world.

And what Paul is challenging us to do here is to stretch our vision, to broaden our horizon, to recognize that the world is indeed our parish. The world is our order, if you like, where we offer the nations to God.

There are still many nations who are unreached by the good news of Jesus Christ. We can see the lack of the values of the gospel every day when we look at the news or read our newspaper.

[11 : 31] And so our aim, our ambition, our vision ought to be, ought it not, to reach out through prayer and through witness and through support of others to the nations in order that these nations might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

But Paul speaks, shares with us here, not only his vision but also his mission. In verse, he says in verse 18, I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the nations to obey God in what I have said and done by the power of signs and miracles through the power of the Spirit.

So from Jerusalem all the way around to Lyricum which is in the Balkans, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of God. It had always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation.

And so his great ambition was to fulfill the mission. And he had a vision and it's important that we all have a vision. But if we have a vision without a mission then it is simply you know, simply talk.

It is simply thin air. But Paul had a mission and Paul fulfilled his mission. And God has given us a mission. If we are the people of God we have a mission. And that mission in a sense is to spread the gospel.

[13 : 13] It's to be witnesses to the Lord Jesus Christ. our task in a sense is to follow in the footsteps of Paul. Whether we are called to be full-time preachers or not.

All of us have a responsibility to be witnesses to be ambassadors for Christ. And so he challenges us here to make this our ambition to reach people who have not yet heard of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

That was Paul's ambition to find someone who had never heard of Christ. Now I can guarantee that there are many people in Aberdeen who really don't have much idea of Jesus Christ.

Now Paul's ambition if he was here would be to find these people. To reach them. To share the good news with them. And to help them to give their lives to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul at this stage was moving or about to move from the eastern part of the empire to the west to move towards Spain. Whether he reached Spain or not we do not know.

[14 : 30] But we know that he did reach Rome and that he was intended to stop there but he may well have been in his appeal to Caesar may have held him there longer.

There are some authorities who believe that Paul did in fact go on to Spain and preach the gospel there. But his task was to finish the task that God had given to him and he believed that in the eastern part of the empire he'd accomplished what God had wanted him to do.

He hadn't reached everyone but he'd reached key strategic centres with the gospel. Now Paul's approach was a strategic approach. It wasn't a kind of blunderbuss approach.

It was a strategic approach. Now I was very impressed recently when I was attending a conference of the Forum of Bible Agencies to listen to people who were working among Muslims and they said we look for a man of God.

I said what do you mean? I said a man who is seeking God. I said we don't go out into the community and reach as many people as possible. We ask God to guide us to someone who is searching.

[15 : 50] A Muslim who is searching. And once we find him he reaches the other people. Now that is a strategic approach if you like. It's not the only one.

There are many approaches but we need to think strategically as we present the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. To reach people who are key influencers and who are open to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

There are people, we thank God, there are people who are searching. We live in an age in which people are exploring spirituality. And perhaps we should be asking God to guide us to such people. And that we might share with them our spirituality which we receive from the Lord Jesus Christ as the way, the truth and the life. So this was the mission that God had given to Paul.

And his mission was that the church should reach out into areas which previously had been untouched. That the church should always be breaking you ground.

[17:01] Now, sadly today, we tend in the churches in Western Europe as a whole, we tend to have a maintenance mentality.

That's not a fortress mentality, but a maintenance mentality. And we think that if we can keep things going, as they were, we're doing well. But that's not the vision that Paul had.

Paul had a vision of reaching people who were unreached, of breaking new ground, and of extending the work of the kingdom of God, not simply maintaining it. Remember what Julius Caesar, his reputator, said when he came to Britain in 55 BC.

He said, looking back, he said, I came, I saw, I conquered. His mission was to extend the borders of the empire.

A century or two later, the emperor of Hadrian, in the, one century later, in the first century AD, had a different view.

[18:10] He built a wall from Solway to the time, to keep people out of the empire. Now, what is our attitude to the church?

Are we seeking to extend the boundaries? boundaries? Do we see the edges of the church as a boundary or as a frontier? That's the question.

Paul saw the edges of the church undoubtedly as a frontier, not as a boundary, beyond which we dare not go. He saw it as a frontier which could be pushed forward in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and see the kingship of God recognized and acknowledged in new areas.

And so Paul, I think, is challenging us to have this concept of the church, as a church which is reaching out, in which all of us are active as ambassadors for Christ.

One of the key features of areas of the world where churches are growing today is that these churches are able to mobilize their members as witnesses to the Lord Jesus Christ.

[19:24] I fear that sometimes in this country with our strong tradition of preaching, we tend to say the minister will do it all. But when Paul said it is by the folly of preaching that people are saved, he was not talking about the technique of preaching, he was talking about what was preached.

He was talking about the message of the gospel, the message that was preached. And in the act of the apostles we discovered that not only apostles preached, but the people also preached the good news as they were scattered during the persecution.

And we need to recapture that vision, whereas the minister is not the only preacher, but he is the facilitator of the whole congregation, a whole congregation of preachers and of witnesses to the Lord Jesus Christ.

to God's to be able to hear the God's of God's will be able, by the grace of God, to turn things around here in the Western world.

We need to recapture this biblical vision which the churches in Africa, the churches in Latin America, the churches in China are practicing today and God is honouring them because of their practice of it.

[20:41] And so the challenge here is to take up the baton that Paul is passing to us, and have this vision and fulfil this mission that he has passed on to us.

But finally, Paul, as it records here, I think of what we might call Paul's petition. Paul recognised that he was but an instrument. Paul recognised that strategy, methodology, even preaching, in and of itself, would not bring about the kingdom of God.

He recognised that this was the power of the Spirit of God. It is by the power of the Spirit that he led the nations to obey God.

He says that very clearly. And he recognised that God's Spirit cannot be manipulated. God's Spirit cannot be commanded by us.

God graciously, freely, lovingly, and sovereignly grants us his Spirit. And therefore, he invites us to pray that he will give us his Spirit.

[21:53] And so, prayer becomes a vital part of the task that Paul is outlining here as the task of the church. He says in verse 30, shall we take henge we inscription, ■m in her prayer, into the ■■■ of the grace.

thing the Romans to do is not to give up because it's hard. Not to give up because it's challenging. Not to give up because it's costly. But to join with him in his struggle, praying to God.

He recognized that it is only as he goes out in the full measure of the blessing of Christ that he will be affected. And that is true of us, as it was of him. It is only as we have the blessing of God that we can be affected.

When I witness to someone who does not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, unless the Spirit of God moves through me and in that person, I could be speaking to someone who's dead in the cemetery. People are dead in the trespasses of their sins. They need to be awakened. And it is the Spirit of God who does that. But the Spirit of God uses people.

[23 : 22] He uses witnesses. He uses preachers. He uses the servants of God. And the Spirit of God is today looking for people that he can use.

People who are willing to struggle in prayer. People who are willing to be bold and faithful in witness. He's looking for co-workers today.

And so Paul looks forward to the future. He looks forward to his visit to Rome. He anticipates having a fruitful ministry there.

Paul does not simply look back to what he did in Macedonia, in the file, though he refers to that in this chapter. He looks forward to a new ministry in the future.

And he is looking forward with expectation, believing that the God who is called in is a God who will own the gospel and who will turn the world upside down.

[24 : 25] It's important for us to recognize and to remember that God is a God who can surprise us. And we need to expect to be surprised by God.

So often we are afflicted today by the science of futurology which looks to the current of the past and projects them into the future. And that's the idea of the future.

We expect things to continue much as they were. But that's not the vision that Paul had. Paul had a vision of God intervening. Of God surprising him.

And of God in a special way coming to his people. And that's what we know from the history of revival in our own country and in many churches around the world. God can intervene in a supernatural way.

God can surprise us. Part of our problem is that we don't expect him to. That we don't hunger for that surprise. We don't long for that revival.

[25 : 28] We don't long for that great manifestation of the holiness and the power the saving power of God. And we need to ask God to give us this vision that Paul had to struggle in prayer and to recognize that he has called us to be co-workers with him.

And so Paul urges us. He urges the Romans to join with him. And there's a sense in which his model is that we join with one another.

And that we recognize that the church is a body. Not simply a series of individuals. But he's called us to work, to join together in the task of the gospel.

to work together as a team, as members of a body. And the church of God in the New Testament is a church which has a body ministry. Which everyone has a ministry to fulfill.

A gift to be used in the service of God by the Holy Spirit. And surely that ought to be the model, the concept of the church that we have today as we look forward.

[26 : 44] And as we work together expecting God in his mercy and in his grace to intervene in the way we don't deserve. In order that he might help his kingdom to come.

In order that he might bring the gospel into many lives, into many homes and into many communities. In order that he might be glorified in our generation.

In order that the nations in our generation might become an offering acceptable to God.