

“The Nations”

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Series: *Romans*

Bible Text: Romans 15:8-21

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If you have a Bible, you can be making your way to the New Testament Book of Romans. We're in chapter 15, verses 8 through 21. Full disclosure, I might cough my way through this entire sermon, so I'll try to turn the mic off before it strikes, but no promises. We are getting into the last few chapters of this letter to the church in Rome, and it's kind of starting to feel that way. You'll feel it even as we read it this morning. Paul's going to start tying up loose ends. He's going to start talking about his own travel plans, et cetera. But before he does that, he has one sort of final thing to say to this church that's made up of Jewish background Christians and total pagan background Christians in the city of Rome, something near and dear to Paul's heart and near and dear to God's heart as well.

So let's read and remember that this is God's word for God's people.

Romans 15, 8-21

8 For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs,

9 and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name."

10 And again it says, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people."

11 And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him."

12 And again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope."

13 May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

14 I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another.

15 But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God

16 to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

17 In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God.

*18 For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed,
19 by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God—so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ;
20 and 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,
21 but as it is written, “Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.”*

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Would you pray with me?

Help us now, we ask, our Father, would you give us the illumination of the Spirit? Help us understand what we're reading? More than that, Lord, would you press it in? Press it into our hearts. Lord, give us a great vision for the work that you've called us to, the work which you're doing. We ask in Christ's name, amen.

Any 90s kids here who remember the cartoon Pinky and the Brain? Any? One hand. Okay, I see a few. Okay, thank you. Appreciate that. For the rest of you, the premise is it's two lab mice that were genetically altered, and so one of them is super smart and the other is an absolute idiot. And every night, this is one of the taglines, every night Pinky asks the Brain, Brain, what are we going to do tonight? And the Brain always answers the same way. The same thing we do every night, Pinky, try to take over the world. And then they concoct some scheme where they're going to take over the world, world domination that is thwarted by morning. It's very niche, but funny. Every episode, the Brain asks Pinky, are you thinking what I'm thinking? And Pinky always replies with some ridiculous, I think so Brain, but if Jimmy cracks corn and no one cares, why does he keep doing it? It's that kind of show. It's for a certain audience.

But my point in bringing up this apparently not so popular mid-90s cartoon is the catch phrase, what are we doing tonight? The same thing we do every night, try to take over the world. I wonder if you have ever ran across this passage that's in the Book of Habakkuk of all places that says this. *The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as waters cover the sea.* That sure sounds like world domination to me. If you follow after the pattern of the apostles, and most Christian churches would say that yes, we're following in the pattern of the apostles, we have this calling to take good about Jesus to every tongue, tribe, and nation, every little subset of humanity that exists on the face of the world. All who follow are called to, not in a militaristic political sense, take over the world, but to see the knowledge of the glory of God cover the earth as waters cover the sea. It's nothing less than taking over the world. It's our mandate, it's our mission from the Lord, but even more than that, it's the Lord's mission. It's what he's doing.

As we look at this passage, what becomes clear to us is that the gospel of Jesus Christ is for the nations, but first the nations are God's mission, then they're our mission. Let's talk about those two things, that's the outline for us. The nations is God's mission, then our mission, first God's.

The nations is God's mission

We've said that before during this series in Romans that Paul has to address some things that we don't have to address very often, like the strange mixture of first century Jewish background Christians intermingled with this bunch of pagan background Roman new believers. That's his world, it's not really ours, but he talks about these issues of conscience between the two groups, how they need to love one another and welcome one another, and then in verse 8, he reminds them, *Christ became a servant to the circumcised*, that is to Jewish folks. The Jewish Messiah came to serve the Jewish people. We know that. Jesus himself said that he came for the lost sheep of the house of Israel. His ministry, though it included Gentiles at times, was largely to Israelites, and that was without apology.

You may recall one of the most enigmatic stories in the Gospel accounts, which is his interaction with the Syrophenician woman who was a Gentile, and she comes to him and she asks him, would you cast out this demon from my daughter? And Jesus gives this reply that, if we're honest, it offends our modern sensibilities. He said, *let the children be fed first, for it's not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs*. That is not the Jesus that is plastered on our children's information. He's using the language of the day, calling a Gentile a dog, and he affirms his commitment to the children first, by which he means Jewish folks. Jesus is in charge of that scene. He's the Lord. He knows what he's doing, and when she replies with that crazy, every single person in the world would have said, oh, oh, that's how it's going to be, I'm out, that's it. And she says, *yes, Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs*. And he tells her, because of that response, a response of faith and humble faith at that, go home, because the demon left your daughter.

So he is merciful to Gentiles, yes. But his first priority is to the people who have all of the Old Testament, Old Covenant promises. Paul himself, at the very beginning of this letter, said the gospel is for the Jew first, then for the Gentile. But the reason for that is that one paves the way for the other, and you can see that in this passage. This is what it means when he says Jesus' ministry to the Jews was to show God's truthfulness, to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs.

Back in the Old Testament, in Genesis, God met a pagan from Ur named Abraham, and he told him, I'm going to make you a great nation. I'm going to bless you. I'm going to make your family great. I'll bless those who bless you. I'll curse those who curse you. I'll give you land, and all the families of the earth will be blessed because of your family. And he repeated all of those promises to Isaac and to Jacob. And when Jesus shows up, descendant of Abraham, Jesus' ministry confirms all of God's promises to the patriarchs, all of them, but in a greater way than even they could imagine.

Think about it this way. Instead of just a little plot of land in the Middle East, Jesus came to make a new heavens and a new earth, all of it renewed. And instead of just one little great nation, it would be a kingdom of priests and a holy people made up of every tongue, tribe, and nation from every pocket of society.

And in him, all the families of the earth, including Gentiles, who would eventually live in a part of the globe that they didn't even know existed, that's us, right, would call on the God of Abraham, and we would make that God our own.

God made these promises to the patriarchs, and he kept them and fulfilled them in the person and work of Jesus. Jesus' ministry confirms his truthfulness to those promises, and Jesus' ministry confirms the truthfulness of promises that were made to the nations as well.

Verse 9, in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.

Mercy to Gentiles was part of the plan all along. That's why he goes on this stringing together Old Testament quotes. Take a look at some of these. He quotes 2 Samuel and Psalm 18, where the great King David in his time tells God that he will praise him, not among the people in Jerusalem, but among the Gentiles, and sing to his name. Verse 12 quotes Isaiah, who spoke of David's great descendant, the one who is the root of Jesse, that's Jesus, who would come and rule the Gentiles, and in him, the Gentiles would hope. Bear in mind, even in the law, in the book of Deuteronomy, that's quoted in verse 10. They're joining in the praise of the Lord in Psalm 117, which is quoted in verse 11.

See Jesus came to show God's truthfulness to the promises made to the patriarchs, and to give both Jew and Gentile a reason to glorify God for his mercy. Why? Well, it's the good news. It's the gospel. It's what Jesus came to be, and to do that. That Jesus came to be finally an Adam who got it right, second Adam, that he came to be a true Israelite that actually obeyed the law perfectly, and that by his life, his death in our place, and his resurrection, vindicating all of his mission, Jew and Gentile can know sin forgiven, righteousness imputed, credited to our account, and a spirit-empowered life of growth, and the promise of all things made new. That good news is for people who had all the framework for it, yes, and for people who have never heard of it, and who live in another part of the world.

We need to know that it's not as though this was plan B, because I think sometimes that's exactly what we think. That God said, look, we're going to try this out with Israel, and we're going to see how it goes. Man, that didn't work. Those people were more rebellious than I ever thought they would be. Let's open it up. Let's see if anybody else wants to be a part of this thing. Let's try a different tactic here. I think that's how our brain works, because that's usually how we operate with things.

From the beginning, the purposes of God were to have the entire globe knowing him, worshiping him, calling on the name of his son, Jesus Christ.

It's always been plan A. It continues to be plan A right now. Before this mission of taking the gospel to the nation ever becomes Paul's, or ever becomes ours, it's first God's, and its success is guaranteed because it's God who's doing it. And moreover, if you are from a Jewish background or a Gentile background, and you see how truthful God is, it should make you live in hope. That's what he says in verse 13. For all who are in Rome, and even now, if you're in Christ, he says, *may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, in believing in Jesus, and may you abound in hope, even.*

Let me ask you to zoom out for just a minute, and go macro, and answer a big question. Here's the big question. What do you think God is up to in the world? What do you think are the purposes and plans of God in the world, even today, even right now? What's he up to? What's he doing? Now, you might be tempted to say, well, far be it for me to ever weigh in on such a question. Or if you're a good Presbyterian, you might know enough catechism to be able to say, to glorify himself, right? And to make sure that he's worshiped? Yes, that is true. God is glorified and worshiped primarily as more and more people know him and bow the knee to him through his son, Jesus.

What if God is up to bringing the nations to himself, like he promised? And if that is true, what would that change for you? Could it possibly encourage you that God actually does what he promises? That there is this plan that he is working out? And would it encourage you as you see the wicked prosper?

How do you combat the news? The news is never light. It's always dark. Virtue and good news doesn't sell, so you never see it on your newsfeed or on your TV, ever. Only the bad, only the dark. How do you combat the news? How do you combat the things that play on our fears? It's almost election time and somebody inevitably is going to play on your fears and tell you this is the most important election that's ever happened in the history of the world and they're going to be wrong again, because it's not. Every new technological development, it's not as though people come on and say, well, let's talk in a nuanced and balanced way about this new technology, about how this could be a tool for good in these ways, but oh, we really ought to be careful and regulated on these issues over here. No. This is going to change everything. This is a seismic shift and your jobs are gone and your family is going to, you know, it's always that. Our world has darkness and it sells. But what if there is one thing that we can know that rises above all of that?

The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.

Do you believe that? I think that God keeps his promises. And do you understand who that would include? Do you understand that Iranians will praise him? And North Koreans will worship him. That places in India where Christ has never been named and never been heard of will actually name him and worship him exclusively. Places like Bangladesh where Steve is at this week, which is Muslim control and relatively terrifying, there will be Bangladesh people who bow the knee to Jesus. Japan and its radical anti-religious bent. Everything is all about just self-everything. Japan will have people who know and love and bow the knee to Jesus.

Cities in America that you don't want to go to because they don't feel like a safe place anymore. The places underneath bridges where people don't go. Homeless camps. People from those places. Some of them will be filled with all joy and peace and believing. Do you believe that a little closer to home, people from the hollows of Appalachia, where generations of darkness have been allowed to perpetuate for years. Places where they would rather shoot you as to welcome you onto their property. Places where there's no price too high for their next high. Some of them will glorify God for his mercy in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Lest we exclude them, there will be some nice suburban middle class families who never needed God because everybody is self-sufficient. Some of them will also see that they are not enough and they've never been enough and that Jesus is enough and he's everything. And they'll bow the knee and they'll worship Jesus too.

This is what he's doing in the world. This is what he's doing. Every tongue, tribe and nation. Every people group on the face of the earth. Every group of people that you think, I don't know about these folks. Every group that I think, no, they're beyond hope. No, no, no, no. There will be people who worship Jesus from all of those places. It's what he's doing. It's his mission. And if it's his mission, that changes how we think about it as our mission. But let's talk about that. Second aspect of this.

The nations are our mission.

Paul says in verse 14 that he's satisfied about the condition of the Roman Christians. They're full of goodness and knowledge and they're able to instruct one another. It's an affirmation of their faith and growth. And he's encouraged that where they're at, even though he's had to speak rather boldly to them on some points, he says that in verse 15, you might recall Paul has not actually met them in person. What he knows of them, he knows through other people. What would ever give him the right to write to them boldly and to challenge them and to push on them?

He says it's the grace given to him by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God. This is getting at Paul's mission as one of the capital Apostles of the church that God gave him the grace, the calling to go to the Gentiles with the good news of Christ. This is all mapped out in the book of Acts. If you read through it and he calls his mission service a priestly service, a priest stands between God and the people. And in this case, Paul acts as a priest who brings God's news to these people. And as these people by the regenerating power of the spirit believe, he then turns and offers these people back to God as an offering, he says. So his ministry is priestly in that aspect and it's apostolic. And to use a crass human word, it's just really successful.

Look at his commentary in verse 17, *in Christ Jesus, I have reason to be proud of my work for God*. It's not sinful pride like we might have. He says that his work for God is in Christ Jesus in the next verse. He won't venture to speak beyond what Christ has accomplished through him.

But what this is showing us is that Paul's mission is a means by which God accomplishes his mission. Now think about that for just a second. That God is actually accomplishing his mission through somebody like Paul, who just goes and preaches the Bible.

That is an incredible privilege that God would do his great work through somebody like me and you.

There's no place for ugly sinful pride in that. His ministry is accomplished ultimately by Christ himself. The means of his ministry, he spells those out to look at verse 19, word and deed, preaching, that's what Paul does everywhere he goes, he opens up the Bible and he preaches it. Deeds of love and service. He also mentions in verse 19 the power of signs and wonders and the power of the Spirit of God. A couple things to say about that. This is one of those places to remember that Paul is a capital A Apostle and we are not. We're not like him. If you read through the book of Acts, everywhere the gospel goes for the first time, usually through the preaching of the apostles, it's the word going forth and the Spirit causes the word to bear fruit and confirms it by these miraculous signs and powers that confirm that the kingdom of God has actually showed up among you.

Think of it this way, everywhere the kingdom of God, the kingdom of new creation comes, all the evidences of old creation have a blow struck against them. This is what happened, the apostles' ministry is derivative of Jesus' ministry. Everywhere Jesus goes, he undoes the work of the fall and you see lame people who are healed and blind people who get sight and deaf ears unstopped because he's saying the kingdom that I'm bringing you is the kingdom of new creation.

This is descriptive, it's not prescriptive, there's not a place in the New Testament where you're told everywhere you go and preach the gospel, there will certainly be absolutely 100% of the time miraculous things that follow. There are miraculous things that God does, that's 100% true, but it's not a normative principle. The signs and wonders he's mentioning here are confirmations that Paul, who called himself one untimely born because he got met by Jesus on the road, that he is actually a capital A full admittance Apostle. His ministry is spirit empowered.

The last thing to say here is it's targeted. You see he went from Jerusalem all the way to Illyricum, if you look up what that is, modern day Albania. Modern day, I saw a little raising the roof there from a few Albanians in the crowd.

Modern day Albania, Macedonia, that whole area, it's mentioned right here in the book of Romans. His specific ministry was to preach the gospel not where Christ had already been named.

One commentator said tongue in cheek that Paul just didn't really like to be around many Christians so he tried to go where they weren't. He was just more at ease with the non-believer. He didn't want to pick up where somebody else had already been at work. He wanted to go to a place where nobody knows about Jesus, nobody has ever heard of him, preach the gospel, see people converted, see God plant a church there, and then he's gone. He's moving on. That was his calling. It's unique to Paul as an apostle. He's a strategic missionary targeting places where others had not gone. Others would do it differently. Timothy was called to stay put, be a pastor. Barnabas's call was different from Paul's. Not everyone should do the frontier mission thing as Paul did, but there was a strategy.

I said it before, I'll say it again. We're not called to be like Paul fully. You're not a capital A Apostle, neither am I. We're not called to do exactly what he did and exactly the same way he did it. If we did, there would be no churches. We all would be frontier missionaries who would go into all the different parts of the earth trying to reach people with the gospel. That might be good for the nations, but nobody's going to be disciplined.

We are called to a lowercase apostolic ministry. We're all sent out, which is what the word apostle means. We're all called to minister to others in word and deed, relying on the power of the spirit. It's true that as a church, we're still called to take the gospel where Christ has not been named and some will be called to do exactly that. Some will be called to support it. Some are called to take the gospel next door into places where Christ has been named, but people have forgotten and they need to go back and teach him.

The Bennetts talked about just that. We didn't plan for the sermon and for their arrival to be on the same day, but sometimes the Lord works things out, but Christ has been named in Scotland a lot and forgotten. The land of John Knox and the Covenanters and the 18th century revivals where they had communion festivals that would go on for days and thousands of people would show up to hear gospel preaching and were converted. Those days are over and the church is hurting and enfeebled now, and so they're called to go and to do the same things that you and I are called to do, word and deed and relying on the power of the spirit. And when we do that, guess what? We should expect God to show up and to do what he is doing to bring the nations to himself. Our confidence has nothing to do with us. It has everything to do with him, and yet he's called us to do just these things. For all of us, you go to your work or your family or your school in the power of the Spirit, telling the truth, and you trust God to make it bear fruit. We're completely dependent on him. We can't get it done on our own, but our goal is the same.

So, if God's mission is to see the nations come to himself and he calls us to be on that same mission, how are you involved in it?

Just because we're not capital A apostles doesn't negate the call to participate in the mission. He's going to talk more specifics next week in the passage that's coming. But let's think in terms of life direction. Let's think in terms of the way we structure our future, the way we think about how we want our life to go.

What are your goals? What do you want out of your life? Some of you are students. What do you want out of your life? I suspect student and adult alike, most of us would say something like to make a lot of money and to provide for our family and to have some nice things, maybe send a kid to college, do a little better than my parents. And some of those are, you know, good things to pursue. You should take care of your family.

I'm not sure we often think about whether the general direction of my life aligns with God's purposes on the face of the earth. I don't know that we let that big question come and disrupt us very much. If God is building his church here and across the globe, that's the whole ballgame.

How does your life align with that? Doesn't mean everybody's called to be a missionary, but some of you might be. And even if you're not, you're still called to align your life to that great purpose. How do we need to reconsider our time, our prayers, our relationships, our spending habits? Another way to ask it is,

when you're structuring your week in your life and thinking about what you want your life to look like, does it have more of an inward turn or is there an outward turn as well?

The inward is necessary. We have to think through, how do I take care of me and my family and our people? We got to do that. But is there ever any space for, and how do I stop thinking of that coworker as just someone who annoys me, and I've just got to bear with them until I die or retire, and I start thinking of them as a person created in the image of God who needs to hear good news and God is probably enlisting me to do it? See, that's an outward turn. It's hard to get there. Where do I need to think about the spiritual good of this family member or this neighbor or this friend? It's hard to have an outward face. It's hard to think about other people.

You know what will help you and what presumably would help me, is to consider how once you were the outsider, to remember the fact that there was a time when you were part of the nations. There was a time when you were still in your sin and you didn't know Jesus and God sent someone, parents, family, friends. Maybe you grew up in the church and he used that. Maybe you grew up outside of the church. Maybe you grew up in a really bad church and you got burned.

But at some point, if you're here and you profess faith in Christ, at some point, in some way, God came to you through other people and turned the lights on and made you see and believe and he gave you hope and joy in believing. Remember how you needed him and he came to you. Now who needs you to go to them? That'll help you.

Remember the mercy of God in your own life and that will likely drive you out to go and show mercy to the people around you.

If you're here and you happen to not yet be a Christian, welcome. Glad you're here. We don't assume everybody here is a believer. You may have heard the good news about Jesus. You've heard it multiple times this morning already. You may know that you should believe in him for the forgiveness of sin and to not go to hell when you die and all of the things that you know and have heard. But if you're honest, you just don't want to. You just don't want to for many reasons. This morning, I would urge you to consider that God has met you this morning in grace and you've heard the truth once again and don't resist the hound of heaven who continues to press you and to come after you.

What are we going to do tonight, Brain? Same thing we do every night, Pinky. Try to take over the world. The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea. It's what he's doing. It's what he's going to keep doing until everything is made new. And he enlists you in the mission as well. So consider the hope that you have in the gospel. Consider the joy and peace that you have in believing. Rejoice that God came after you and he got you. Now start to think, and where does he want me to go and to get others? Let's pray and ask him for wisdom and help as we are sent on his mission.

Lord, we need you. We need wisdom. We ask you to convince us of what you're doing in the world. Would you help us to see that you really are drawing people from all pockets of the globe to yourself and that you insist on using us in that? So show us how and show us where and help us to be willing to realign the direction of our lives if need be. I pray that you would call, I pray that you might call some people from this room specifically onto your mission as missionaries. Would you call some as pastors? But would you call many as teachers who try to tell the truth to students and other faculty members? Would you call some to be small business owners who operate fairly and who tell the truth every opportunity they get? Would you call others to go into their vocation and into their family and into their schools or wherever you send us? Would you help us to tell the truth and to look forward to the day when there's no more need to tell a neighbor or a friend to know the Lord because all know him, because we're in a new heavens and a new earth where you've made all things right again. Give us great hope in that day and open our mouths until then. We ask Jesus in your name, amen.

**Portion of scripture read before sermon—Isaiah 11:10-12