

“How to Participate in the Mission”

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Series: *Romans*

Bible Text: Romans 15:22-33

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Thanks, Gary. If you have a Bible, you can be making your way to the New Testament Letter of Romans. We are in chapter 15, verses 22 through 33 today. If you don't have a Bible, you can follow along in the Worship Guide. The text is printed there for you. We're a few weeks out from finishing this series through the letter from Paul to the church in Rome. Hard to believe, but he's now firmly getting into the travel plans, which if you read through all of Paul's letters, he always has some travel instructions at the end. It's really strange. The book of Romans has the highest heights of theology, the deepest depths of unveiling the doctrines of our faith. And so it's strange to see the guy writing it start talking about, hey, make sure you greet so and so. And I'm planning on passing through there on my way to whatever. And there's a place in another letter where he says, make sure you bring me some books and some parchment. It's like, oh, it's a human. It's a guy writing this that has plans and things to do. And yet we know that this is not just a letter written by the great apostle Paul. This is God's word. And that means that even travel plans and itineraries have something to say to God's people. So let's read Romans 15, 22 through 33. And remember that this is God's word for us.

22 This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you.

23 But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you,

24 I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while.

25 At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints.

26 For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem.

27 For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings.

28 When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you.

29 I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.

30 I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf,

*31 that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints,
32 so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company.
33 May the God of peace be with you all. Amen.*

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together.

Our Father, thank you that you are the one that makes sure that we have what we need here in your word. And so it's our prayer now that you would send us the help of God the Spirit, that we might understand what we're reading, that it might press in further into our minds and hearts, that we might be renewed and transformed, and Lord, that we might be caught up in what you're doing in the world around us. Would you do for us more than we can think to ask as we look at your word? We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

There's a strange observation that I get as a pastor, and it has to do with you. So over the years, at some point, most people here were a visitor at CPC, and if you're a visitor, you're de facto on the outside. It's just the nature of being a visitor, right? You're on the outside looking in, wondering, should I come in? Should I be part of this thing? And very often I get questions about the church, and usually from somebody who's new, the question goes something like, so how do you guys do missions, or how do y'all handle nursery, or how do you go about small groups, or what does your church teach about this theology topic, or this theology topic? Sometimes somebody comes here from a different church, and when they talk about the church they were at previously, they accidentally slip into, well, this is how we do it. This is how we did it at my old church, and that makes sense. That's where you were a member. But I get to watch as the process changes, and people go from, how do you guys do this, and what do y'all do, to, oh, this is how we do it. It's that identification. It's being an outsider and coming into the inside, and the you-y'all becomes we-us.

This happens, maybe you've seen this happen at home. You've been working on a project, and if you have little kids around, you're working on a project, your kid comes up to you, and they say, what are you doing? You tell them what you're doing, and then you say, hey, could you hand me that thing over there, and they hand it to you, or come here, I want you to hold this while I do this, or that. And when that kid goes and talks to somebody else about the project, they don't say, yeah, here's this thing my dad was doing. They say, hey, let me tell you what we did. It's like, did you do that? My mom has a phrase for that, which sums up most everything in life. Her phrase was, and it wasn't hers, this is a good Rabun County education for you. You got to know phrases like this. We killed a bear, but Paul shot it. That's what we're talking about.

What is that? When you move from me to we, from I to us, it's identification, it's being on the outside and coming to the inside, it's getting involved. There's a word that we could use to sum that up, and it's the word participation. You're not spectating. You're not on the outside looking in. You're participating. You're in it. It's what we are doing.

As we get into this passage, even the travel plans of Paul, it becomes clear that Jesus calls us to become part of what we are doing. He calls us to action in his mission, and for us that means participation.

The God who made us and redeemed us in Christ intends us to participate in the mission that he has for the globe.

How? We'll see three ways that he calls us to participation from the text. Know the aim, be a partner, pray boldly. Know the aim, be a partner, pray boldly. Let's talk about the aim first.

Know the aim

It seems that Paul desired to go and visit these folks in Rome, and he had desired to do that throughout his journeys, but he hasn't had a chance to do that, and the primary reason that he hasn't gone to see them is because of what we learned in verse 20. His mission was to take the gospel to places where it had not been preached yet, to go to places where there was no church, there were no Christians yet, and now in verse 23, he says he no longer has room to work in those regions where he's been.

Don't miss what that means. It means that in all of those regions, the gospel has been preached and churches have been established. He's been incredibly effective by God's grace on this mission, and so now for the first time he plans to come and visit the believers in Rome, but it's not even a trip for itself. Look at verses 22 and 23. He's longed to come to them, but he hopes to see them in passing as he goes to Spain.

It's really interesting that the great apostle Paul did not plan to go and teach and minister and spend any strategic time in the most important city on the face of the globe, and make no mistake, that's what Rome was. It is the most strategic, important city in the world, and he's like, I'll see y'all in passing. I'll, on my way to this other place, I'll come and.. think of what he could have done. He could have gone to Rome. He's seen the gospel take root from Jerusalem all the way up to Albania we saw last week, Illyricum. That's a huge swath of territory. It would have been so easy for him to say, I've done some good work. I've preached the gospel. There are churches around. Now I'm going to go to Rome, and I'm going to raise up new strategic leaders to take the gospel to other places, or I'm going to go establish a seminary so that we can train up some pastors to go and influence these other parts of the world. All of that would have been legitimate. It would have been a great way for him to spend the next phase of his life, but that's not Paul's calling.

So he'll see the folks in Rome on his way to Spain. Spain had been under the Roman Empire for 260 years or so at this point. Spain was not then what you and I think of now. It's not the place where you're going to go and, go to the topless bars and try some suckling pig and all that kind of stuff. It's the outer edges. If you look on a map, Spain is the place where, here's the known world, and then there's this space out here that says there be dragons. That's where Spain is. It's where the dragons are. The only people who landed there were Phoenician sailors from the previous several hundred years who sailed there and happened to set up camp on the shores somehow. It's a pagan, frightening people, the wild, far reaches of the Roman Empire, and yet that's where he wanted to go. He's seen the gospel go from Jerusalem to Albania, but that's not far enough.

You get the sense that at no point does Paul lose the sense of vision that he has. At no point does he weaken on the mission that God's called him to do. Keep going, keep going, further out, further out. That's the drive for him. The gospel must go to the ends of the earth, and for them that would mean Spain. He actually calls them to share in this. Look at verse 24. He wanted the church in Rome to help him on his journey to Spain after a visit. It's not just this is Paul's little thing that he's doing. He wants them to get their eyes on the ends of the earth as well.

My guess is that the people in Rome probably had a similar response that we might have when we hear of somebody going to a far off place for the sake of the gospel. Steve told me a couple of months ago that he was going to go to Bangladesh, and I think my gut level reaction was, why? Why do you want to do that? I had a friend that went to the villages of Niger right out of college, and I remember this visceral feeling of, why would you go and do something like that? That doesn't make any sense to me. You probably have thought that as well. Glad it's them, not me. We all know that that's one of those gut reactions that you have to get over. That's your thought, but then you have to realize that, oh no, no, that's good. That's right. That's what we're supposed to be about.

If what we said last week is true, that what God is doing in the world is gathering the nations to himself and making a people for himself, that's his mission, and he's enlisted us to that mission, we have to at some level have our eyes set on the ends of the earth. That's still the mission for the capital C church. The capital C church worldwide has to have its eyes constantly on the ends of the earth. That's still the mission constantly refocused on the frontier edges of wherever the gospel has not gone yet. We can't lose our aim. If we do, we'll be aimless, and many churches find themselves aimless. The baseline for the church, capital C, is the ends of the earth, the nations.

Do we know where the frontier is for the gospel in our world in these days?

This is what missiologists study. They spend their time and their energy to try to figure out where do we need to go still. The bigger question for you and me is, do you have any vision for that? Is that in your sight? Do you have any desire to see the gospel go to the places where it hasn't reached yet? And is there any sense that we have a role in that?

Is there an overarching strategy to go where Christ has not been named? I mentioned some of those places last week. There are places that you can relatively easily identify in the Middle East, in certain Asian countries, unreached people groups with Muslim background areas, tribal civilizations. There's all of that still out there. Then add in the places where the gospel has already gone. The church has thrived and died, and it's now, as the folks last week, the missionaries that visited us said, that's now also the ends of the earth at some level. The church has to think and strategize about the frontier, and that in some way has to include you and me.

Even closer to home, our little c church needs an aim as well. And this is not something that we talk about all the time, but we do. We do. The elders have instructed our missions team, here's what we want to care about. A thousand things that we can care about in the world. We're going to try to focus our dollars and attention and prayers toward international, theologically reformed like us church planting. We're going to try to support folks that are going to plant churches across the globe. And so we have people come and share about that, and we try to highlight that periodically. And our church in particular desires to plant other churches even here in our own area. That's our aim. We've said of all the things we could be doing, there's a thousand good things, we're going to try to see new churches planted.

Do you have any vision for what the capital C church is supposed to be about in the world? The frontier edges?

Do you find yourself with not just your thinking and, oh, this is what we're doing, I guess, but with your heart aligned? Oh, I want to see new churches planted for the sake of Christ, not only here in Northeast Georgia, but around the world.

Have you considered an aim for your own personal involvement in the mission of God, wherever it is that you work, live, and play? And be specific about it. Is it my aim is to have a meaningful conversation with this coworker before I retire? Or I'm going to pray for this specific family member either until they become a Christian or I die. Paul's entire life was driven by his aim to preach the gospel in the furthest places.

What is it about God's mission that drives your life? Let me ask it another way. If you knew that God would answer your prayer and you could pray one thing that had anything to do with God's mission and you knew he would give it to you, what would you ask him for? Let me take one off the table. I know you want your kids to believe the gospel. I do too. Take that one off the table. We all want our kids to know Jesus. 100% solidarity in the room. Beyond just your immediate family, you pray one prayer and you know God would give it to you. What is it that you would ask him for? What person? What people? What school? What people group?

We have to have an aim or we'll end up wandering. The way to accomplish the aim though requires more than just a vision. There are plenty of people who get a vision for something, but then there's no way to execute it, no way to get there. Let's talk about the second thing that Paul wants to say to them and to us. It's not just know the aim. It's be a partner, and that word specifically. Let's talk about what it means to be a partner.

Be a partner

He brings up money in verse 25, which is just what you wanted to hear about at church today. The way he talks about money isn't the way that we talk about money, which is actually really helpful for us. His present course, yes, he says, I'm going to go see you in Rome on my way to Spain, but before I do any of that, he's taking money to Jerusalem for the relief of poor people in the church at Jerusalem. This money came as a glad offering from churches in the areas of Macedonia and Achaia.

Money's complicated. We know that, but money is necessary in the work of the kingdom. Can't do anything without it. The poor in the church in Jerusalem will not eat unless someone helps them. Times were different. There's no social safety net at all. In fact, not only for Jewish background Christians in the first century, but as is common among the nations, when people believe the gospel, one thing that almost always happens, especially on the frontiers, is the family members of that person will often cut them off and they are dead to them. It happens in Jewish background areas in the first century. It happens in Muslim background areas today. You become a Christian, you are literally dead to us. You will not get one red cent if you need it. So how are they going to eat if they're old and can't work anymore? How are they going to eat if they're orphans or they're infirm or they can't produce for themselves?

One of the things that marked the church out from the very earliest days was the way that they cared for their poor. They took care of them gladly and freely.

The work of sending missionaries to the far reaches of the world happens when churches do what Paul called them to do in verse 24, help him on his journey. That includes a financial component.

So it's helping the poor. It's moving out into the mission.

Paul's never afraid to talk about money. This is the guy who went around saying the Lord loves the cheerful giver and then told them, hey, give cheerfully. He's the one that said don't muzzle the ox while it's threshing the grain. The ox is our pastors. He calls pastors ox's and says make sure that they can eat while they're laboring. He's the one that tells them to give freely to the poor and to fund mission expeditions.

And so here he says it was pleasing to those churches to give to the relief of the poor. He also says in verse 27, it was right for them to do this.

And he makes this argument that Gentiles share in the spiritual blessings of Jewish background Christians. The gospel came from them. We stand on their shoulders. We are wild olives grafted into their plant. They support us. We don't support them. So he says if you have shared in the spiritual blessings of being joined into the people of God, then it's a minimum for you to take care of them in material blessings. He lays that argument out for them and essentially says it's a gift and a joy to give. And it is an obligation to give. We're required to take care of the people of God around us.

What's interesting, though, is the word he uses in verse 26 for contribution, because it's not the word that we mean for contribution. We think of that only in terms of cold, hard cash, distant abstract money. And in the original language, it is the word that's primary meaning, has nothing to do with finances. It's the word fellowship. You may have heard *koinonia*.

What he's calling them to is fellowship, and real fellowship in the New Testament church. Always, of course it has financial connotations. How could it not? We're giving ourselves to each other. And if we're giving ourselves to each other, we're giving all of ourselves to each other for our mutual upbuilding and good. Paul isn't interested in money as a cold abstract thing. He wants them to give because they're in fellowship with the saints in Jerusalem, because it's partnership. It's relationship. It's not just an EFT to a mission's cause. That's a good thing. It is a giving of their very selves and their help and their love and their prayers. And yeah, of course, money too.

This is the call for us today. We all know that we're supposed to give money. Yes, it's true, right? You hear that all the time. There's ample opportunity. We're a church that expects church members to tithe. That's one of the membership vows, that you support the church in its worship and work to the best of your ability. That's what we mean. Sometimes you do more. Sometimes you do less. You know that every time you give money here, 10% of the budget goes toward world missions. And then there's plenty of over and above opportunities to give money as well. And I commend all of that, right? Yeah, of course we're supposed to do it. And if that's a basic step that you've never taken, then I specifically challenge you today to consider Christ the Lord over your money as well.

I would commend us as a church, I know less about the money than anybody else here probably, but I commend you for the way that you have given historically. We could stand up here for a while and talk about the things that God has enabled us to do in church planting, in international church planning, in world missions, and in reaching our own little area here in northeast Georgia. Because you, by God's grace, have faithfully given over the years. That is God's grace. And it's because you're not just giving as a cold abstract investment. You've chosen to give your very selves. Amen. And thank you.

Remember that we are not financial benefactors. It's always relational. When we give, we give to people with whom we are united in Christ and with whom we are called to partner to bring the good news to the nations. What I want you to understand is that their work is our work. Their work is your work. Giving is enabling us to have a share and an avenue into the work itself.

Do you consider yourself to be a partner in the mission of God in the world?

Do you think of yourself that way? With your vocation and your family background and whatever. You heard the classic illustration last week from the Bennett's who were quoting the 19th century missionary William Carey that, you know, the person who goes down into the well can only do it if people hold the rope for him. That's a great analogy, great illustration. But it's actually even more than that. It's not just a task. It's a church. It's a partnership.

Let me ask us a diagnostic question. If you were in a moment of brutal honesty, would you say that you really think that the work of missions and ministry is really just something that the professionals do? Is that really your perspective? If it is, I want to challenge that and push back against it.

Do you understand that this is what you're doing as well? Do you see that you're a critical part of the work, not just your money, but your very self, that your presence in the membership of the church, your using of your gifts here, your relationships with others, your prayers? Yes, your money. Yeah, all of that.

God's mission does not just belong to professional missionaries or pastors. It belongs to the fellowship, the partnership of the saints in the church. Don't just be a giver. God calls us to be a partner.

As a partner, there's a lot of good things that you and I can do. And giving is one of those, no doubt. But he actually calls us to the pinnacle of partnership. This is the last point. It's to pray boldly, which is a great thing.

Pray boldly

If you don't have a lot of money to give, or if you have a lot of money to give, what he's saying is great, give. The most important thing that you do is verse 30, *that by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the spirit, love from the spirit in that sense, strive together with me.*

That's a great phrase. Strive together with me. Stand side by side and fight with me. That's what he's calling. It's a very action-based word. Stand beside me and let's get into the fight together, which is an amazing statement. Paul could be facing whatever he's facing in another place miles away. And believers in Rome, of all places, are right there with him as they fight the fight before God's throne in prayer.

This is so anti-American. Everything within us wants to say, no, no, no, no, no, no, what can I do? What can I do to help with the cause of world missions? What can I give? How can I go? And God says, well, the first thing you're going to have to understand is that **five minutes on your knees, praying boldly, striving side by side with someone is more effective than five million that you can give.** In God's economy, that's how it works.

What are they to pray for? Verse 31, *that Paul will be delivered from unbelievers in Judea.* Jews in Jerusalem that did not know and love Jesus hated Paul, hated him because he was a sellout in their mind. He had given himself over to this Jesus. He's a blasphemer, an agitator, and a problem, just like Jesus was in their mind. And if they can get their hands on him, they will kill him. So he asked the Romans to pray that he might be delivered from unbelieving Jews when he goes to deliver this money. He also asked them to pray *that his service for Jerusalem might be acceptable to the saints*, which is to say pray that they would receive the money that I bring them. That's weird to us. Do they hate money? Right? Do they not like, you know, eating and having taken care of?

Think of it this way. This is money from a Gentile church going to a Jewish church. And throughout this letter, we've seen the tensions that exist between Jewish background and Gentile Christians. And Paul knows that if they will accept the gift, they're acknowledging that there are Gentile Christians and that we actually are part of the same family. So if they accept the money, they're accepting you. Pray that they would accept the money because their eyes have seen that even Gentiles have been brought into the kingdom of God.

Lastly, he asked them to pray that this would happen *so that by God's will, he can come to them in joy and be refreshed.* What he's doing is he's submitting his plans and saying pray that it may prove that it was God's will for me to actually come and to see you and be refreshed.

We know how all of these prayers were answered. Sometimes one part of the Bible can be illuminated by another part of the Bible. And if you were to read Acts 21, you would see exactly how these prayers are answered. Paul goes to Jerusalem to make his contribution, and the unbelieving Jews seized him to murder him. And he would have been killed had not the Roman authorities grabbed him and spared his life. So his life was spared, but probably not the way he asked for it. He became a prisoner of Rome. The saints in Jerusalem did receive the gift. In Acts 21, you see them greet Paul. They hear him tell about all that God had done among the Gentiles, and they rejoiced and gave thanks to God. And they even helped him devise a plan for how he might get through the city unscathed.

We also know how Paul answered the prayers about it being God's will that he may come to Rome with joy and be refreshed in their company. Paul would go to Rome, but it wouldn't be with joy. It would be in chains. And he would be refreshed by their company, but only as they came and visited him while he was under house arrest, potentially awaiting his execution after he had appealed to the emperor to spare his life. Paul didn't know how things would go. He asked them to pray.

You get the sense here that he's trusting in the providence of God, and he's able to say in verse 33, *May the God of peace be with you all. Amen.* Pray for me. I don't know how it's going to go. There is a God of peace who will be with you and with me. Pray, trust, rest. How can he do that? How can he ask them to pray, knowing full well that he might go to Jerusalem and get killed? And how can he talk about the God of peace when he has every reason to be stirred up and anxious about what potentially awaits him?

This is one of those places where it's only the gospel that helps us make sense out of what we're seeing in the life of Paul. We're called to trust the Lord, to rest in his providence. We're called to be bold and attempt great things and put ourselves in harm's way sometimes for his sake. How are we supposed to do that?

Think about Jesus in the garden. Jesus in the garden as he strove in prayer to the point of a holy anxiety of sweating drops of blood, asking for another way than the cross and yet saying, not my will but yours be done, submissiveness to God's will. Then he goes to the cross trusting that God will have to raise him from the dead. That was his mission. That's the purpose for which he came. At the cross, Jesus did not experience the God of peace being with you all. Amen. At the cross, Jesus experienced the God of wrath and justice poured out on himself for you all. Amen. It was very different. Not because he had done anything to deserve it and because of what he did in that moment. That is the only way that you and I can know the God who made us as a God of peace and not a God of intense justice.

Paul could go even if it meant his death because he was at peace with God in his union with Jesus. So you know the worst thing they could do to him? Kill him. That's it. The worst thing they could do to him was kill him. This is what the peace of the gospel does to us. You have now the ability to walk boldly into the unknown for his sake and know that the worst anybody can ever do to you is to kill you and then you go to be with him. But you know what's off the table for those who are in Christ? Hell. It's off the table. God's justice is off the table now. Jesus has taken it. Wrath is satisfied. Death has lost its sting and been declawed because the Lord Jesus was raised from the dead and promises to raise us too. And now as we give and partner in ministry and pray and even go into hard places, we do that under the reign of the God of peace who promises us even if you die yet you will live. Paul knew suffering was possible and he didn't want it and he asked them to pray against it. But the gospel gave him freedom to endure it and to know God's peace in the midst of it because with Jesus' suffering doesn't win finally.

What could ever make a fearful person like me fearless? What could ever make you with your specific brand of fears fearless? What could ever cause a person to willfully enter into the teeth of suffering for Jesus sake with boldness and calm? What could ever cause a person to think about the worst barbarians and the most frightening godless sorts of people, the most frightening place in the world, whatever that is in your mind, what could ever cause a person like you to say to God here I am send me? What would ever allow proud people to accept funds from their once enemies and not just begin to call them friends but brother and sister? Only the work of God and the good news of his son Jesus by his life death and resurrection. Bringing peace by his blood to Jew and Gentile giving us life and love from the spirit.

If you're here and you're not yet a Christian welcome, we're glad that you're here. There's only one way for you to become a fearless person and it's not by mastering the latest techniques that are out there whatever form and fashion they take. There's only one way for you to actually love another person at cost to yourself otherwise you won't do it. There's only one way for you to know the God who made you as a God of peace and not a God of justice, and it's by faith in Jesus Christ, son of God and savior of sinners. If you're wrestling with that we'd love to talk to you about it.

If you believe, you are invited to strive together with brothers and sisters in prayer from the ends of the earth to the hottest crucible. God calls you to pray because that's what he actually uses. Partner in the mission by committing to pray boldly.

This is what we are doing. By God's grace empowered by his spirit rooted in the good news, you and I are called to participation. Not to just stand and watch and applaud, that's good, but to be in it and to know that this is what we are about. To know the aim of the mission is nothing less than the ends of the earth and everything else in between, and to reorient your life according to those great aims, whatever that needs to look like for you. To be a partner not just of money, not less than money, but to be a partner. To give your very self and to understand that yes there are some who are sent out but all of us are called to be partners in this mission and to spend time regularly getting in the foxhole beside brothers and sisters who are in hotter, more difficult places, than you and me, and to strive side by side and to pray that God would actually cause the knowledge of the glory of God to cover the face of the earth as the waters cover the sea.

Christ calls us to action in his mission. Brothers and sisters let's find a way to be very glad and very active participants in it. Would you pray with me?

Lord Jesus, we do ask that you would help us to understand ourselves as sent. We are not capital A apostles like Paul but we are sent in lower case apostolic ministry. You call us oh Lord to know about the ends of the earth and to have them in our vision. You call us to be partners with those who are sent, to know that this is the work that we're doing, and you call us oh Lord to pray with boldness, with fearlessness. Help us. It's so easy to forget about the kingdom of God and to focus on our small kingdoms that we're trying to build ourselves. Even now as we come to the table would you reorient us to what you're doing in the world and make it father not just what you are doing but help us to come inside and to participate and to realize this is what we are doing. Jesus, we pray in your name. Amen.

**Portion of scripture read before sermon—Isaiah 66:18-23