

## Gospel Ambition in Word & Deed

### Gospel Culture – Part 17

Romans 15:14-33

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Please turn to Romans 15. Today we'll be looking at the latter half, from verse 14 to the end.

Let me pray for us as we open God's Word together.

Father, thank You for our time of worship and now for this time of listening to Your Word. We want to be people who are rejoicing in songs that speak truth, as we desire to know You and praise You. We also want to be those who intently listen to You as You speak to us through Your Word. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to You. Please use these moments to shape us for Your glory and purpose. In Christ's name. Amen.

This is the end of our series in Romans and Paul is also wrapping up his letter. How many of you were here at the beginning of Romans? I'm sure you were all pretty young back then—it's been a while. Paul is actually saying the same thing now as he was in the first chapter: "I want to come to you. I'm praying for you. I'm eager to see you and impart a blessing to you." Of course, we love Romans for its doctrine and exhortations in the body of the letter, but these parts are also important as they remind us that in fact this is a letter—a situational letter.

You'll notice that Paul mentions past ministry updates and then his present desire, first to go to Jerusalem to carry an offering to the believers there, then to go visit the church in Rome—a place he's never been. After that, Paul plans to go to Spain. This sort of writing could remind us of letters we get from our global partners with updates and prayer requests. But obviously this letter is different, because it's also the living, inspired, true, flawless and priceless Word of God. So let's listen carefully to what Paul writes:

*<sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> In Christ Jesus, then,*

*I have reason to be proud of my work for God.<sup>18</sup> 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,<sup>19</sup> 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;<sup>20</sup> 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,<sup>21</sup> but as it is written,*

*“Those who have never been told of him will see,  
and those who have never heard will understand.”*

*<sup>22</sup> This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. <sup>23</sup> 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,<sup>24</sup> 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. <sup>25</sup> At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. <sup>26</sup> For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. <sup>27</sup> 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. <sup>28</sup> When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you. <sup>29</sup> I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.*

*<sup>30</sup> 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,<sup>31</sup> that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints,<sup>32</sup> so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. <sup>33</sup> May the God of peace be with you all. Amen.*

One phrase might have stood out to you as we read this. In verse 20 Paul says, *“Thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel.”* This is what drives Paul. These aren't wasted words. Paul is driven by what he terms “ambition.” That's a strong desire to achieve something or to fulfill a dream. It's the thing that keeps a person up and moving, and it's also what makes you interesting. For Paul, the gospel was his ambition.

Not that he wasn't naturally an ambitious person. If you recall his life story, he had great zeal before he met Christ, but it was a zeal without knowledge. At that point he was ambitiously against the gospel. The transformation in Paul was amazing, going from being against to being

for the gospel. Maybe you've met someone like Paul, a person who seems to talk about nothing except the gospel. It was front and center for Paul, like caffeine for his soul. It kept him up at night and woke him up in the morning. It was in his bloodstream all day. It was essentially who he was.

This week Alicia met with one of our global partners and her comment when she returned was, "He is really ambitious!" There is always mutual encouragement when we're able to interact with our partners around the world. And there was probably no way the readers of Paul's letter would not become more ambitious themselves, as his enthusiasm was so infectious. We should want our enthusiasm for Christ to be contagious.

Often we are driven more by selfish ambitions, as James 3:13-18 describes it. This is what happens when our goals don't go beyond our interests. Even if our interests are good, it can be a problem. For example, a person might have the ambition to write about the gospel but really just wants the praise it will bring them. Someone could be speaking from this pulpit but in reality just ambitious to gain a reputation. Someone could be winning an argument mainly to prove how clever they are. Just by doing good things does not mean you're ambitious for the gospel.

It really takes a heart change, which is what happened to Paul. In James 3:14, James describes this selfish ambition as something that resides "in the heart." It's as though there's a crevice in your heart that harbors the desire for self-promotion in unspiritual or even demonic ways. Selfish ambition can wreck us and we may not even see it. It could be a craving for money, a love for reputation, a desire for gain or comfort in this world.

Paul however shows us what a redeemed, gospel-informed ambition looks like, one that's grounded in repentance and faith. We're all ambitious—it's a matter of what we're ambitious for. Are we ambitious for the things God is ambitious about? That's the key question. Our biggest takeaway today could be the question of how aligned we are with the heart of God, as modeled here by Paul. Are we ambitious to live under the Lordship of Christ, to love our neighbor, to do everything for the glory of God? Are we so ambitious for these things that it motivates us in every part of our lives, as we see in Paul?

Selfish ambition seeks to gain and receive, but a gospel ambition is costly—and that makes us resistant to it. But when we are willing to pay the cost, we become more and more like Christ. This is the benefit of today's passage: to awaken us from our lethargy and ask God to give us the ambition that is properly ours because we belong to Him. In Romans 15:15, Paul says, "*I have written you very boldly by way of reminder...*" Paul considers the longest of his letters to be primarily a "reminder." In other words, he's implying that the people already know the things he wrote about.

Essentially he's saying, "You know the gospel. This isn't new, but I'm connecting it to the story line of the Old Testament and explaining the implications of what it means to follow Christ." Paul is also boldly building up the church in Rome with the gospel. We need to realize the gospel is not just for unbelievers, but for believers as well. When we read about justification, adoption, being filled with the Spirit and how we're raised from death in sin to new life in Christ, there are ramifications for us throughout our lives. We also need to realize that we're united as Jews and Gentiles, as one people in Christ and called to accept one another. We should never stop teaching and reminding each other of what Christ has done for us. Even though we don't exhibit this perfectly, these gospel truths are the things that will strengthen us.

Notice too that Paul is not writing to rebuke the church in Rome. Rather he commends them in verse 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.*" Paul sees in their character that they are full of goodness. He notices that they are true believers, filled with knowledge. And third, he acknowledges their competence, being able to teach each other. But that doesn't mean he holds back his boldness in writing, because he is a true apostle. This applies to us in the sense that we too should step up to the callings God has given each of us.

This passage is somewhat autobiographical, so it doesn't mean that our lives are to be exactly like Paul's life. Parts of it are descriptive rather than prescriptive. His life represents some unique aspects of redemptive history and even the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. At the same time, we can gain things for ourselves by studying the life of Paul and the New Testament church.

I think there are three areas in which we can learn things from his example to us:

- First, we see his ambition for evangelism.
- Second, we see his ambition for ministries of mercy, such as his determination to bring the collection of money to Jerusalem.
- Third, we see his focus on prayerfulness and his requests for prayer.

## **Gospel Ambition for Evangelism – Romans 15:14-21**

One of Paul's governing metaphors for how he describes himself is in Romans 15:16. He speaks of the grace he's been given to preach the gospel and to be "*a minister of Christ in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.*" The Old Testament imagery here is striking: priestly service and acceptable offering. What is Paul talking about?

If you recall, the Levites were called to be a "priesthood" who represented the people to God. They also were to expound the law and intercede for the nations. In that sense, they were

mediators between God and the people. But instead of the people of Israel becoming priests for God to the nations, they actually became like the nations. They did not draw the nations to worship Yahweh, but rather chose to worship other gods themselves. They failed to live out the commission God had given them.

Paul is very aware that the great High Priest, Christ Himself, has accomplished what the Israelites failed to do. Through His atoning sacrifice, His people are now clothed in His own righteousness. Nevertheless, even though we are no longer priests in the Old Testament sense, we have now been commissioned to a kind of priesthood, what Peter refers to as the priesthood of all believers. So our service to the nations is a priestly service. Thus, our ambition in evangelism is directly connected to how much we understand our identity and role as the people of God. Paul wasn't the only one called to a "priestly service."

Look what he says in verse 19: *"From Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ."* The best commentary on this verse is Acts 13 where his missionary journeys are recorded. For roughly a decade, Paul traveled throughout the region, and now, remarkably, he tells the Romans, "I have fulfilled the work of the Lord." How can he say that? I think it's because he understood his unique role, as "the apostle to the Gentiles," in fulfilling the Old Testament redemptive story.

Remember, the gospel began in the region of Jerusalem, and it was from Jerusalem that Christ commissioned His disciples to go out to minister. Once they were filled with His Spirit, they were to be witnesses to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). But who was primarily responsible for the movement of the gospel westward from Jerusalem toward Rome and Illyricum, which is next to Italy? That was Paul's role. He was the person God used to fulfill His commission, along of course with Paul's other gospel partners.

But now Paul is able to write, "After ten years, I have fulfilled my ministry and now I'm ready to go to Spain." During that time, Spain was truly "the ends of the earth." As far as Paul knew, that was where civilization ended. In his unique role, Paul initiated the gospel growth within the Gentile nations, among idol-worshipping people. He mentions specifically that he wasn't building on anyone else's foundation.

Why could Paul say he had completed his ministry? Well, not only had he brought the gospel to the Gentiles, but he had also established churches in their nations. These churches would carry on what he started. His role was defined not as doing it all himself, but in providing the means whereby other believers could carry on the ministry. He was a priest who left a priesthood of believers in the cities where he ministered. Not only do we have the same priestly

role that Paul had, but we also have the same power through what Christ accomplished in us. So our strategy for finishing God's mission is the same as his: starting churches.

Because our High Priest has redeemed and cleansed us, we have now been appointed to represent Him to the world. We are set apart for His purposes. What an awesome privilege! Do we really realize who we are? Can we grasp the significance of this role? If you think about your normal activities—you're just a tire salesman or just a pastor or just some employee—you can miss your clear identity as a priest, representing God. The gospel is our means of mediating Him to the people. This is why the "offering of the Gentiles" is pleasing and acceptable to God. It's not because they're pleasing to us, but because the gospel and the Holy Spirit has set them apart.

Remember in the Old Testament, the non-Jews were not part of the covenant. But now, all of Paul's language indicates that Gentiles are very much part of God's purposes and plans. That should fuel, encourage and equip us in our ambition. The key to keeping our gospel ambition focused and active is to realize our identity as being part of the priesthood of believers. This will help form and fuel your realization of why you're here and what your function is.

Don't forget what the priesthood involved. Among other things, priests were required to be holy, give glory to God, explain the law and to represent God to the people. So our calling is very much the same and it should impact every part of our everyday activities. Think about how this might shape your day-to-day identity. You could ask God to help you be more purposeful in thinking about the role He's commissioned you to do in the context of your normal life, how you can be an influence for the gospel and be interceding for the people in your world.

A second observation is that we also have the same power that equipped Paul: Christ in us. Look at Romans 15:17-18. Paul says, "*In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God. For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me.*" So Paul is not bragging about himself; the spotlight is on Christ. Paul is boasting about what Christ has accomplished through him—and that's the same power that indwells us and works through us.

If anyone had reason to boast, it was Paul. Can you imagine being the best in the world at anything? LaBron James comes to mind—sometimes his face just makes you think he thinks he's the best in the world. But can you imagine where there's actually no debate that you are the best in the world? Paul had that going for him. For ten years he had successful church plants. He could have thought, "I am the best pioneer church planter ever." And during his ten years of church planting, he also wrote nine of our New Testament letters. He could say, "Hey, I am the best theologian on the planet right now."

There are ways he could have been drawn by his selfish ambition to do all these things for himself—had not God so gripped his heart and had he not been constantly repenting of sin and submitting to the Lord Jesus Christ. But he said, “*Christ has accomplished through me.*” He gives Christ credit. He doesn’t rely on his flesh, but rather glorying in Christ. This should help us in our evangelism. We don’t need to think that this ambition for evangelism is about us and our words.

You might feel more comfortable being in a team sport or in a work partnership, where you’re working together. That’s how you need to think about your ministry to other people. God has partnered with you and He’s actually the senior Partner—the active worker—during this time. Christ actually is the missionary—not you. He’s the one using you, but it is He Who is accomplishing something. That’s the humbling role we can have—but it also fuels us. Let these thoughts drive out fear and encourage you when you’re feeling overwhelmed, not knowing what to say or how to respond to someone. We can always pray, “Lord, help me. This is Your work. Work in me. Do something profound here, Lord.”

One time my mom was volunteering at a pregnancy center, helping pregnant women find hope and delivering their babies safely. But with one particular woman, my mother was overwhelmed by the comments she was hearing and had no idea how to respond. So all she said was, “Do you know we have clothes for children here?” The lady started bawling. She said, “No. That was exactly one of my biggest worries.” My mother had no idea that this would touch the woman so deeply. So I think we need to just put our lives out there, saying, “God, use me. Work through me. You’re the active Agent and I’m here for you.” Then let us be fearless in that sense, letting God do His work through us.

So our role, like Paul’s, includes our priestly duties—adopting that identity—and also really praying for the power of Christ to work through us.

Then third, we need to really grasp Paul’s strategy for his churches. This is so important. Paul’s strategy for evangelizing the world is through churches, communities, people like us. Sometimes it starts with individuals. Preaching isn’t always to crowds. A church might have started with Lydia, a seller of purple cloth or a jailor in Philippi (see Acts 16 regarding both). But Paul doesn’t see individual conversions as the end game—he didn’t just pray with one person, then was out of there. He was thinking, “What about their household? Who are they married to? Do they have kids? I want the gospel to go there as well. And then I’m interested in this whole community, this whole city. How will we gather these people?”

Notice how his whole strategy was to see the gospel shape communities and churches. That’s our thinking too about evangelism. When you’re thinking about sharing your faith, pay

attention to the person's connections. They may be married or have children or have other relationships. How could God use you to reach those people as well? That's God's intention here and that's how we need to think.

Verse 18 gives us the goal of Paul's discipleship: "*to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed.*" His goal was to bring people to maturity in the faith. He wasn't content with them just praying a prayer and then never seeing them again. He couldn't even remember all the people he baptized. His goal wasn't just to baptize a bunch of people and then leave. His goal was their obedience. The first step of obedience is to respond to the Lordship of Christ, but Paul was also committed to the ongoing expressions of obedience that faith creates as a person follows Jesus and aligns their lives under Him. Paul wanted to help people do this.

So part of Paul's ministry was obedience—and that's our ministry in the gospel as well, that we would grow in obedience to God. Part of our obedience to God is explaining Who He is to the world. Remember, that was part of Jesus' Commission. He said, "*Teach them to obey everything I have commanded...*" Paul was carrying that forward. He was a faithful minister of the gospel, disciple-maker and church planter—and that's what we're called to do as well.

But that obedience is slow. It takes time. So Paul would take a trip, then go back to Jerusalem and then take another trip. On his way back, he visited the churches to strengthen them. He wasn't only a church planter, he was also committed to strengthening them. Do you realize that a short time after Paul's first mission, there was a counter-mission—an opposing gospel—that started being preached? It was a Jerusalem-base ministry with Jews who would go to the young churches and tell them that not only should they believe what Paul taught, but they also needed to be circumcised to be saved.

In his concern about this, Paul started writing letters when he couldn't go to the churches. That's why we have Galatians especially, but nine of his letters were written during this season. He wanted to respond to any opposing doctrines that were impacting his church plants. Obedience to the gospel doesn't come without tensions and trials. There has to be an effort made to make sure people understand the truth, repent and turn back to obedience to the gospel. Paul even asked the Galatians, "Who has bewitched you? You've forgotten what I taught."

Our obedience is never perfect, so that's why we need the church, why we need each other and why we need the Bible. Notice what Paul is leaving behind: churches that are reading God's Word, who are praying, who are in fellowship with one another and who are witnessing to non-Christians. If you leave that DNA behind, you can say, "I'm done." The pioneering/church planting role Paul had allowed him to move on, because he knew the healthy churches he was

leaving would multiply. They had become a functional priesthood because of the Holy Spirit Who was in them.

In our partnership with God, He fills us with His Spirit and we're identified as His people—a priesthood of believers. He empowers this work and we're to be committed to the same approach as Paul's—that evangelism isn't just about individuals. We desire households and communities to come to Christ and we do this together as a church family.

As Paul wraps up his ministry update, he gives several allusions to the Old Testament. One quote in particular is interesting, from Isaiah 52:15. It's part of the famous "Servant Song" of Isaiah, where we go to find the Old Testament prophecies of Jesus' life and ministry and death. Paul has a biblical conviction that supports his evangelism—a pressing priority from this verse. Maybe some of us need a verse from God's Word that drives us to ministry. For Paul, it was one section of the Servant Song that was prophetic about how God was going to sprinkle the nations. Paul tells us what was driving him in verse 21: *"Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand."*

This is how Paul saw his identity and purpose. Jesus was the great Servant Who fulfilled the Song in Isaiah and now Paul sees himself in the line of servants who are now completing God's mission and agenda. Think of how healthy it is to align yourself with Jesus Christ and His purposes. That should be normal and what we should constantly be reaching for. "Lord, align my heart and mind with Your will and purposes." But of course, this takes reading the Word so we will know what His will and purposes are.

In summary, let me quote Tim Chester:

Christ loved the church—and so must we. The local church to which we belong is not an institution with which we affiliate, let alone an event we attend or a building we enter. It is God's mission strategy in the world and she must recognize the defining role of mission in her identity to be effective in that role.

New Covenant Bible Church, how are we doing? I think we have some great energy and a great emphasis. I love how Pastor David, our elders, deacons and many of you bring this to us through your stories. But this is a great reminder that together as a church, we never want to become lethargic or inward. We're here uniquely. God has a unique purpose for New Covenant Bible Church to be on mission, to declare His praises to the nations—and that's what He's doing here.

Let's say Paul planted this church. Would he feel good about leaving us? Would he say, "Oh, they're going to get it done. They're awake. They're not just frozen in time." No. But praise God, we all need each other to be praying this way, thinking this way and making this our identity

as God's people. I think this makes sense in light of how God used Paul. This then is the first ambition we can draw from this passage: the ambition for evangelism.

## **Gospel Ambition for Deeds of Mercy – Romans 15:22-25**

Paul's second ambition was to bring the collection of money to Jerusalem. We might wonder why Paul was going to Jerusalem. He's writing Romans from Corinth, where he'd been for about three months. It would have been closer to go directly to Rome than all the way back to Jerusalem—and for that matter, he would have been closer to Spain. So we can see how important this mission to deliver the money was to Paul; so important that he would delay his future desires and instead return to Jerusalem.

Beginning in verse 25, he writes:

*<sup>25</sup> At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints." Then he tells them where it came from. <sup>26</sup> For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. <sup>27</sup> 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.*

Paul doesn't explain why these saints in Jerusalem were needing this financial aid. Acts 11 talks about a famine, so maybe that was the issue. But Paul isn't motivated by the cause of poverty. Notice that he says, "...they owe it to them." This obligation wasn't done out of duty. In fact he says twice that they were pleased to do it. One of the things going on with this collection is that the gospel had so gripped this Gentile region that when they heard about the need in Jerusalem, they gave generously to it.

These were churches that really did not know each other. There wasn't any internet back then. There were no denominations. All the Gentiles knew is that the believers in Jerusalem followed the same Christ they did. So when they heard of the need, they wanted to help alleviate it. But Paul also saw it as a debt. After all, Christ was from Jerusalem. That was the region where His ministry took place. But He never meant for that to be the only place on earth that received the gospel. He meant the gospel to go from there to the ends of the earth. That's why Paul, as the apostle to the Gentiles, brought the gospel to the churches in Asia.

We need to pay attention to what motivates our giving, because we have received so much from Christ that we will want to give back. When you feel generous with the money you have, that's one way to know you've really understood and received the gospel. This was the motivation for these Gentiles. And Paul was so committed to this ministry of giving that he was going to

deliver it personally. It's likely that he also wanted to give testimony to the unity of the church. Even though his mission was pioneering churches, he was concerned that people had the right impression of the church.

Also, the real relationship between Jews and Gentiles was really important to him. So he wanted to personally tell the Jews in Jerusalem, "Guess who this is from? It's from former idol worshippers who are now new creatures in Christ. The New Testament promise is now given to those who used to be cut off from the covenant—the Gentiles. They responded to the gospel and they desire now to help you." Paul himself was also eager to remember the poor, as he said in Galatians 2:10. Social issues such as poverty were important to him. He was willing to make this long trip to ensure that the gift was delivered. Tim Keller says, "This means that helping the poor is not simply an option we can get to if possible. It is an obligation, a debt to be honored that's motivated by grace."

## **Gospel Ministry Empowered by Prayer – Romans 15:30-33**

We've seen in this section Paul's ambition to preach the gospel and his desire to minister to needs reflecting his ambition for mercy. Third, Paul reminds us that gospel ministry is empowered through prayer. In the earlier verses we read today, Paul sounds very apostolic, focusing on fulfilling his mission. But now we've reached a part where he's asking for prayer and in this section he's as normal as anyone else.

It's like he's saying, "Honestly, I don't know if this is going to go well. I could be facing lots of problems." So he writes, "I appeal to you, brothers." He knows God has used him greatly over the last ten years in church planting, but he really doesn't know what he'll be facing next when he gets to Jerusalem. And notice that he frames his appeal using the gospel: *"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."*

Paul has two specific requests in verse 31. First, *"that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea,"* and secondly, *"that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints."* His desired result is found in verse 32: *"So that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company."* He truly longs to visit the believers in Rome.

These are big plans so he's asking for prayer. History records that God didn't answer these prayers. It didn't go well with the Judean unbelievers. They accused him and eventually imprisoned him. We're not even sure how the Christian saints received the gift, although we assume it was received with gratitude. But notice in verse 32 Paul acknowledges that he wants

whatever happens to be in God's will. His prayer was subordinate to God's will. What a reminder for us.

Here Paul is an apostle who's just had a great decade of ministry and who is now really eager to go to Spain. Why wouldn't God fulfill that desire, especially since Paul is so convinced that was what he should do next? To be sure, Paul did make it to Rome, but not in the manner he had anticipated. He went there in chains. Then he was under house arrest for five years. It was there that Paul wrote books like Philippians, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. But it's clear that the future was different from what he had prayed for and anticipated.

Isn't that comforting to us in our world, when our plans and prayers don't work out the way we hope? But Paul is reminding us to pray and he's asking the people in Rome to pray for him.

Right now Andrew Brunson, an American pastor in Turkey, has been falsely accused of spying on the president of Turkey and is now in prison. That wasn't his plan either. But his mother and others are calling for prayer. They held an all-night vigil during his trial. We should be praying for Andrew Brunson. Here's something he wrote soon after he was arrested: "Let it be clear I'm in prison, not for anything I've done wrong, but because of who I am—a Christian pastor. I desperately miss my wife and children, yet I believe this to be true: it is an honor to suffer for Jesus Christ, as many have before me." We must continue to strive in prayer. We don't always know God's will, but it will be His good and perfect and pleasing will.

When we read Philippians which Paul wrote from prison—after things didn't go the way he planned—he told them the gospel was being spread. He was excited that his presence there was fruitful. In fact, he told them the whole praetorian guard was hearing about Christ. God just had a different mission field in mind for him—not the one he had planned. I mean, what do you do with a guy like that? If God doesn't answer a certain prayer, he's still fine. He's still going to trust that God has a better plan. That's Paul's ambition. He's a fully gospel-minded, pioneer church planter, pastor and missionary. We should learn from his example.

That's very much a biblical attitude that should also be reflected in our lives. We need to consider our church's ambition for evangelism, our desire to show God's mercy by meeting needs in our community and our identity as a praying church, even praying for those whom we've never met. Paul had never met the people in Rome, yet he was asking them to pray for him.

Here are a few characteristics of a church that is aligned with Paul's ambition:

- They understand and know the centrality of the gospel for all of life. There's something deeply wonderful about how Paul communicates this.
- They are dependent on the Spirit of God and the Word of God. They are a church that hungers to obey God's Word and work in the power of the Spirit.

- They have embraced their calling as servants and priests in the world before God.
- They have acknowledged that the church is God's instrument to bring Christ into an irreligious world. You see, rather than backing away from the world, God's strategy for His church is to go into the world to preach the gospel.
- They are to be active in training and equipping the saints for the work of the ministry.
- They are to practice faith in smaller communities, so that we might reflect God in our neighborhoods.

Tying these thoughts to our church in particular, next Sunday we will start our corporate prayer meeting on Sunday mornings at 8:00 a.m. This will replace our Wednesday evening prayer meetings. This prayer time will be led by former pastor John Sale and several of us will be meeting with him for about 45 minutes. We are also going to do some training this summer in evangelism—that scary task of sharing your faith. We want to help and equip one another to communicate the gospel in a clear way.

Let me close in prayer.

Father in heaven, thank You for Your goodness, mercy, love and compassion toward us. Thank You for the work You're doing in us. We're part of those whom You've called out of darkness into the Kingdom of Your Son. We're part of those whom You've now commissioned to go back into the darkness and tell others about You. I pray that we will be that kind of community—eager and loving to those around us. May we do this in Your power, for Your glory, as priests and servants—all to Your praise. Lord, make us sensitive to the needs around us. We know this gospel ministry is both word and deed, and I pray our hearts would be drawn to that.

Finally, we want to strive in prayer. We do pray for Pastor Andrew Brunson in Turkey, that You would be merciful and rescue him. I'm sure it's extremely hard. He's lost lots of weight and is extremely sick. I pray for mercy on him—and he's just one of many.

There is so much suffering and so many trials that Your people are going through in the world. Help us walk in their shoes and feel the weight of that so we might strive together in prayer for them and for the lost. Make us a praying church.

We ask this because of Christ. We want to be motivated by Him. We thank You, in Christ's name. Amen.

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## New Covenant Bible Church

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*All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.*

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