

**A Proven Path to Fruitfulness—Romans 15:19-21—2/10/2013**

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What do you want to do for the glory of God?

What do you want to accomplish in your life?

For you young people that can seem like a really scary question.

How do you go about pursuing what you want to do?

Where do you start and how do you know you are on the right path?

How do you make solid, biblical choices and how do you know God will agree with what you want to do for Him?

I could offer a lot of specific steps to biblical decision making to try to help you and we could consider many biblical truths to consider.

And we could talk about the different gifts and plans God has for His people and how God gives us freedom as He leads us.

But when I read things and hear questions about such issues, it seems like Christians often make things harder than they should be.

For example, think of all the Bible reading plans or apps or tools available to get Christians into the Bible.

Not that those are wrong because they can be helpful, but just think of how simple addressing the issue of Bible reading should be.

Even if some parts of the Bible can be hard to understand, the only way to learn is to start reading and studying.

The Bible doesn't become easy reading if you never pick it up.

It's simply an act of faith—an expression of what you believe.

If you believe the Bible is where God has spoken to man, then you pick it up in faith, asking Him to reveal Himself to you there.

Just like you go to your favorite website believing it will give you some fun or escape or some juicy nugget or advice or sale or deal or perspective or highlight or whatever.

It's a simple act of faith at the most basic level and we don't need to make it any more mysterious than that for Bible reading or for many other decisions and directions in our lives.

So as I thought about our study today, I was reminded of Paul's earlier words in Romans 15 about the value of reminders.

Reminders bring us back to the basics that guide even big decisions.

And I'm persuaded that a huge part of my role as a pastor-teacher is to remind us how simple things can be.

Yes, I want to address complicated issues and yes, I care about intricate theological positions and want to teach them clearly.

But most of our lives really are pretty basic and that's why you teens and children can learn something from detailed sermons.

It's not that hard to ask what we believe about God and our lives and our roles and relationships and circumstances and arrive at answers.

And those basic answers are usually enough to direct us in most of what we face in life.

So that's my goal today—to make things simple—to examine Paul's proven path to fruitfulness in life and to make it simple to follow.

As we continue listening to Paul's explanation of his boldness in writing the Roman church that he had never visited, we find more of his ministry perspectives that can help us.

It's in those undergirding foundations of Paul's thought in Romans 15:19-21 today that I want us to be reminded of his proven path to fruitfulness that can give us hope and guidance today.

As we walk through the details of what Paul said specifically about his own life and ministry, we'll draw out 2 broad points of application for our lives and ministries today too.

So turn there with me and let's read Romans 15:15-29. [READ]

As we've said before, verse 14 begins the lengthy personal closing remarks from Paul to a church he had not visited.

So this section explains Paul's purposes in writing and gives reasons for his boldness that we're going to need to think about before we see how simple they are to apply to our lives today.

We have to think because this reads like a defense of Paul's apostleship to the Gentiles.

The language is similar to the extended defense of Paul's apostleship in 2nd Corinthians where some were attacking his apostleship.

If there was any question of how he could be so bold, Paul extolled God's grace to make him the Apostle to the Gentiles.

This was not about Paul's own personal authority, but about the special role of Apostle that God had chosen to give him by grace.

Yet as Paul modeled how to boast in a God-exalting way here, I don't want you to miss what else he did.

I don't want you to miss the authoritative card he played here to trump any question of how he could be so bold.

He said this humbly but we should not miss what's implied in Christ's work in the power of signs and wonders in verse 19.

Did you catch those words—what are signs and wonders?

When you see those two words together, “signs and wonders” together in Scripture, you need to pay attention.

Sometimes they appear with this term for power—*dunamis*—in the plural and it's translated ‘miracles and signs and wonders’ or ‘signs and wonders and powers’.

But here the term power is singular and it is repeated in the second phrase of verse 19 more broadly of the Spirit's work.

Signs and wonders were done in the power of the Spirit but the second phrase describes more generally Paul's life and ministry and its fruit.

So we need to understand signs and wonders here as special.

And you know what a sign is—it's just like those posted along roads pointing to something or someone—they do not point to themselves.

Similarly, biblical signs point to someone or something else—they point to a man & his message as coming from God.

They highlighted that God was doing something new in a given time through a person, usually giving new revelation to add to His Word.

Like in John 2 at the wedding in Cana when Jesus turned water into wine, John 2:11 calls that the beginning of Jesus' signs.

Then in John 2:23 many were superficially believing in Jesus because of the signs so that in John 3:2 Nicodemus came admitting the obvious truth that no one could do Jesus' signs until God was with Him.

So we should think of biblical signs as blinking neon arrows pointing to the person who was doing the signs.

Signs were authenticating proofs of a servant of God.

And often such signs are referenced in Scripture with that other word, ‘wonders’, which is a word for a miracle or something done that grabs attention and should be observed.

But stop and think—why did Paul mention signs and wonders here when he had not mentioned them at all in this long theological treatise of vitally important truths for the Gospel and church ministry?

Why do signs and wonders come up here?

Remember what we said when we made application of verses 15-16—that Paul’s ministry perspectives are what we could learn from.

We did not assume that you or I were the new apostle to the Gentiles who would take on a new priestly office for our times.

The foundation of the church was this cataclysmic coming together of those two estranged, hostile groups, the Jews and the Gentiles.

Before Jesus came, it was not proper OT religion to freely associate with the Gentiles as if God never made a distinction.

So it required a clear sign from God to break down that wall of separation and bring these two hated enemy groups together.

That’s part of what the signs and wonders of the NT era did.

The NT signs and wonders proved that God really was ushering in a new era in His history of redemption.

We studied that era in Romans 9-11 as the time when Gentiles come to God through Christ and most Jews are hardened.

Yet Paul defended God’s faithfulness to His promises to ethnic Israel and affirmed that He would bring a future salvation of Jews nationally.

We don’t have time to go back over Romans 9-11 today.

But those are issues Paul took seriously and addressed at length before chapters 12-15 where the theme has been love for others.

In order to love those who are different, they needed to grasp that the multi-ethnic church was God’s plan for this era.

And God had attested to that through signs and wonders first by Jesus and then by Jesus’ apostles and their associates in the early church.

Those signs and wonders highlighted first that Jesus was the Messiah and Promised King and Son of God.

Then they highlighted Jesus’ apostles as the foundation of the church.

As Ephesians 2:20 says, the church is God’s household, “having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner *stone*.”

And turn to Hebrews 2:3-4 to see how it describes the purpose of signs and wonders in confirming that foundation on God’s Word.

Read Hebrews 2:3-4. [READ]

Those verses say that our salvation—that’s what ‘it’ is—after our salvation was first spoken of through the Lord, meaning Jesus.

So the full revelation of God in the Gospel of Christ came first through the Lord Jesus Himself, right?

Then that saving truth was confirmed by those who heard Jesus and Apostles had to be those who heard from Jesus directly.

And how was that message of salvation confirmed by those who heard and wrote it down to pass it on down to us?

God confirmed it, verse 4 says, by signs and wonders and various miracles (or powers) and by gifts of the Holy Spirit.

So we know that what we have written in the Bible from Jesus and about Jesus and after Jesus is accurate and trustworthy because God testified to His messengers by signs and wonders.

God proved His Word in that time by signs and wonders.

That's what signs and wonders were and what they were for.

If you are wondering where I was going, I needed to explain those terms to help us simplify this verse into something very basic to apply.

But at this point, some of you may be lovingly arguing with me thinking that God can do signs and wonders today too if He wants and it sounds like I'm saying He doesn't.

So let me say that I agree that God can do anything good for His glory at any time if He wants to do so.

But we should only expect Him to do what He SAID He would do and we should understand WHY and WHEN He did signs and wonders and consider whether to expect them today.

Of course, let me clarify that I am not saying here that God does not answer prayer and even miraculously and unexplainably work in our lives with big health issues or even things as minor as parking spots.

Listen—God DOES work in those details of our lives today and God DOES hear our prayers and answer in ways that often confound the explanations of today's supposed experts.

We've seen God answer prayers in recent doctor visits personally and in treatments for kids in this church, for example, haven't we?

And I can't count how many hospital rooms I've visited where it seemed like the end but God turned it all around.

Far greater than those is the miracle of new birth when anyone is saved

When God totally changes our hearts and give us eyes to see His glory and trust Christ, it is always supernatural.

But here's where we need to be clear and precise in what we say if we are going to stay focused on the basics of the Christian life.

The answers to prayer and movements of God that we seek and value and praise God for in our times are not the same biblical category as signs and wonders.

Signs point to God's messenger in new revelation.

That's why if you search for signs and wonders in the Bible, you'll find them most often referenced about God's miracles in Egypt to rescue Israel out of slavery through the Exodus.

Then you'll find reference to them in Jesus' life and among the Apostles and their associates in Acts as the church was founded.

But then the few other times warn about future judgment by signs and wonders and about FALSE signs and wonders in the end times by false teachers like in 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians 2:9.

And if you study God's work in time you see that miracles were rare and that they confirmed His messengers at special times.

That confirmation purpose was true for NT signs showing who true apostles of Christ were as 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 12:12 explains.

Turn to 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 12:12 to see that. [READ]

Again, if you study 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians, you find that Paul was defending himself against self-professed super-apostles who had come there trying to take over the church.

So in a delicate, humble way, he was defending his apostleship.

He knew that all the miraculous things God had done through him were only for God's glory and Christ's Gospel and not at all to puff him up or boost even his own faith.

Jesus rebuked the people of His times for always asking for signs.

So signs were not to happen normally as the way to get people to believe or to grow faith.

Signs happened rarely and that's what made them signs—that's what made them unique and striking and significant.

Think of that word—significant and signify—and that can help you recall what signs were for.

2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 12:12 says that signs and wonders and miracles were the signs of a true apostle—they proved who the true apostles were.

True Apostles were those who saw and heard from Jesus and were proven by signs and wonders as Jesus' messengers and they were largely instrumental in the writing of Scripture.

Even Mark and Luke and other NT writers were informed and overseen by Apostles in their writing of Scripture.

That's what signs and wonders were and that's how they were linked to the Apostles and to the writing of Scripture.

Now turn back to Romans 15:19 and let's see why I've talked for so long before telling you what our 1<sup>st</sup> point of simple application is.

I want you to understand what the words of Paul meant when he wrote them to the people to whom he wrote them.

I want us to interpret this rightly so that we can apply it rightly.

If we assume we should have signs and wonders today without thinking this through, we can create a lot of confusion.

So look again at Romans 15:19. [READ]

To confirm his apostleship to the Gentiles, Paul referred to the power of signs and wonders in his ministry.

And that explained why Paul could write so boldly as an Apostle through whom Christ was giving Scripture.

Do you see the reason Paul mentioned signs and wonders as a defense of his apostleship and his bold writing?

It has to do with his letter being trusted as coming from God in that pivotal transition from a focus on Israel to the new era of the church.

Viewed in that broad, foundational way, Paul's mention of signs and wonders here should point us to the trustworthiness and sufficiency of the Scriptures as God's Word.

It should point us to treasure our Bibles as the proven Word of God and it should delight us that we have the full revelation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ revealed in the NT.

That's the link the end of verse 19 makes when it speaks of Paul fully preaching the Gospel of Christ through his travels.

He had fulfilled the Gospel throughout those regions.

That refers both to his faithfulness in preaching the whole truth & to his faithfulness in reaching the major cities in those areas.

Some of Paul's travels had gone into the province of Illyricum and he had visited Jerusalem as well where the church began.

So the arc of his travels had stretched from Jerusalem up into southeastern Europe where the former Yugoslavia was and where now would be parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina and southern Croatia and northern Albania.

Paul had not preached to every soul in those regions, but he had spread the Gospel in those regions so churches could spread the Gospel there.

And his preaching had also been done in the power of the Spirit so that his own life and the response of others were beyond what he could have created on his own.

The Spirit had empowered Paul to love and persevere when he was persecuted and beaten and chased out of places.

And the Spirit had used his preaching to save people so that lives were transformed and churches were established.

So Paul's proven path of fruitfulness was in the power of the Spirit.

His proven path of fruitfulness centered on and confirmed God's Word and it depended on God's Spirit.

And that finally brings us to how we can apply this to our lives today.

So you kids can perk up now if Pastor Mark went into way too much stuff that you didn't understand so far today.

Here's a 1<sup>st</sup> point of application to take from Paul's proven path of fruitfulness revealed in verse 19 in context.

Point #1—be empowered by God's Word and God's Spirit.

After all that explanation, it's that simple and basic.

Point #1—be empowered by God's Word and God's Spirit.

Paul's confirmatory signs and wonders highlighted God's Word and the fruit of his life and ministry highlighted God's Spirit.

So if you want to follow in Paul's proven path of good fruit, seek to live in the power of God's Word by God's Spirit.

Be empowered by God's Word and God's Spirit.

Take encouragement and boldness in knowing that the Bible was proven as God's Word when it was given through signs and wonders and those messengers were trustworthy and true.

Be delighted that you have a copy of the only Book proven through history as accurate and life-changing revelation from our Creator God.

And be strengthened and motivated to know that God promises to give understanding of His Word by His Spirit and to give power to trust and obey His Word by His Spirit.

So we can pray and seek and strive to live out the proven path of blessing revealed in God's Word with the help of God's Spirit.

That's point #1 to try to take the life of the Apostle Paul and make his path simply for us to follow.

#1—be empowered by God's Word & God's Spirit.

Then consider point #2 from verses 20-21.

Point #2—Be encouraged by your opportunities and others' needs.

#2—be encouraged by your opportunities and others' needs.

Read verse 20 to see how we make that application. [READ]

As we've said, this is Paul's burden, Paul's calling in God's plan, Paul's special role and ambition for his life.

The words of this verse do not specify what each and every one of us needs to consider our calling in life.

He was the Apostle to the Gentiles—I am not, for example.

So my life calling for the past 12 years and for many years to come, I think, is to pastor a church that existed before I was born.

And 12 years ago, Roanoke was not and still is not a place where people have no access to hearing about Jesus.

But that does not mean it's wrong for me to come here or stay here as a pastor just because you can find a Bible or a Gospel-preaching church or a true Christian in Roanoke if you look hard enough.

So when we read verse 20, we read about Paul's ambition.

It was a God-centered, Christ-exalting, Spirit-dependent ambition that was not for self-glory or worldly wealth or any other wrong motive.

So it models that it is good to have godly ambitions and Christ-exalting longings for what we want to do with our lives.

Paul's ambition was to spread the Gospel to places where the Gospel had never been heard before, not where Christ was already named in the sense of being named as Lord and Savior.

He wanted to reach places where Christ had never been called upon in saving faith.

And evangelism in each of our circles of influence is always our responsibility too—please understand that.

God put you with the people you know so that YOU would share the Gospel with them.

Loving people by speaking the truth of God's Word and proclaiming the hope of the Gospel is not an option to obey if you are good at it.

You are commanded by Christ, in Matthew 28 for example, to make disciples—to invest in lives around you so that you lead others to Christ and teach them all that He has commanded.

Others may be more gifted and you can lead people to resources and teachers that are more gifted than you may be.

But we exist here in this fallen world to rescue people from the wrath that is coming by leading them to Christ.

Read verse 21 to see what motivated Paul on this. [READ]

This is a quote from Isaiah 52:15 that has future implications, but it also has a principle of reaching the unreached that Paul was applying for the outreach of the church to all nations.

Verses 20-21 are where the phrases “frontier missions” and “reaching the unreached” get a solid basis.

Verse 21 grounds this idea in an OT text of God's purposes for the coming of Christ.

And Paul models frontier missions by his description of not building on another man's foundation.

Frontier missions includes going to places that do not have an established church or a Bible in their own language.

Do you know how many of those places and people groups still exist?

I emailed our missionary Don Eenigenburg to get some up-to-date numbers on this because he oversees the outreach to the least reached by his Christar missions organization.

And here's what he sent from the website [joshuaproject.net](http://joshuaproject.net).

Out of the 16,598 total people groups in the world, there are 7,165 unreached groups, which is 43.2% of people groups.

And of the world population of 6.93 billion, there are 2.87 billion people in those unreached groups, which amounts to 41.5% of the world population.

Again, that's the number of those who do not have a Gospel witness among them, where they can't pick up a Bible or decide to go to the church down the street.

Over 40% have no chance of hearing about Jesus!

The need for frontier missions is no smaller now than it was in Paul's time and we still need people like Paul to go to distant lands to spread the Gospel among the unreached.

Some need to go and everyone else needs to pray and give to support spreading the praise of Christ among all peoples.

But we all should be motivated to respond to the need.

Paul knew the need in his time & now you know the need in our time.

And even a little closer to home in your every day life, Paul's example should lead us to ask some questions.

What are you doing with the needs of children you know and elderly you know and lost people you know and ministries you know of?

What you are doing to serve and give and invest your life and livelihood in Gospel ministry here and around the world?

One of the best cures for depression is to get focused on others' needs and the opportunities for love and serving and giving all around us.

That same cure may free you from coveting or overspending or overworking or addictions to entertainment or exercise or other things that may be ok but can be avenues of self-absorption.

And that's where I say point #2 is a simple application of what we learn from Paul in verses 20-21.

#2—be encouraged by your opportunities and others' needs.

If you are wondering what God wants you to do with your life or where you should invest your resources or how to decide such things, don't make it more difficult than it needs to be.

Be encouraged by the opportunities God has placed in your path and the needs He has made you aware of.

Then act on what's in front of you and what you know.

But let your action be anchored in the Scriptures like Paul's was as he noted in verse 21 with an OT promise from Isaiah.

That's how to put your faith into action to flourish in this proven path of spiritual fruitfulness for God's glory and your joy.

It's really not that complicated.

It's simply about what you believe and treasure, what will be the best investment of your time and relationships.

Ask some questions and make some assessments about your life and why God has put you on this planet.

What has He gifted you to do and what opportunities has He given you and what needs has He brought to your attention?

I did not have Paul's desire to do frontier missions, but I did have a strong passion to fix the foundation that was crumbling in the American church, especially in the south.

So when I was looking for a place to pastor, I focused on coming back to the southeast where I had grown up and knew multitudes of people who claimed to know Christ but whose lives denied their claim.

I had seen the danger of easy-believism, which is a water-down corruption of the Gospel that treats faith in Christ like a one-time recited prayer with no life change to follow Christ.



And that's a lie that leads to the people Jesus described in Matthew 7 that He told to depart from Him because they never knew Him.

Correcting that error with a right view of the Gospel—that faith in Christ is a turning from sin to truly trust Him as the Lord that leads me and the Savior that rescues me—is one of the ambitions I had that led me into ministry.

And other ambitions have grown and increased as I've studied Scripture and walked through life.

But the point is that if you are a Christian, God has gifted you to serve Him and He has given you eyes to see needs and He has given you opportunities to serve Him in various ways.

What are you doing with that?

What can you do when over 40% of the world's people groups and population need a biblical Gospel witness among them.

What can you do to the people at your workplace or in other settings to be and give a Gospel witness there?

Kids—as you think about what to do with your life, think about what matters to God and how you can reach God's goals.

Does God want some of you to go to the unreached?

Does God want others of you to be passionate about praying and sacrificially giving to send and support those who do go to the unreached or give their lives for ministry in other ways?

As 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 3 says, some plant, some water, but God causes the growth and He uses all those who invest along the way.

So learn from what Paul said here and find a biblical text to anchor his life purpose and gifts and pray for God to lead you.

Consider those around you and what God has done for you.

Realize that you can have holy ambitions and aspirations like the Apostle Paul did.

Be encouraged, as Paul was, by your opportunities and others' needs.

Don't wish someone else would do something about that need or opportunity you see.

YOU do something.

Make this 2<sup>nd</sup> point a real application in your life and be encouraged by your opportunities & others' needs.

And remember our 1<sup>st</sup> point as your guide and your promise of divine help—point #1—be empowered by God's Word and God's Spirit.

The Christian life really is simple—treasure God's Word, depend on God's Spirit, be faithful where God has you, and respond to needs He shows you.

I pray you are motivated by this consideration of the basics from Paul's words in Romans 15:19-21.

Let's pray for God to help us to respond rightly.