

Rev. Lex DeLong / General Adult

Romans Road to Recovery / Romans 15:14–21

Notes

Romans 15:14-21

Title: "Pioneering the Gospel of Grace"

Subtitle: Paul's Priestly Ministry and the Strategic Boundaries of Missions

Main Idea: Recognizing Paul's unique dispensational role as the apostle to the Gentiles, the local church today must adopt his relentless ambition—actively mobilizing its people and resources to proclaim the gospel to the unreached as a supreme act of spiritual worship.

Companion Scripture: Isaiah 52:13-15

Romans 15:14-21

Title: "Pioneering the Gospel of Grace"

Companion Scripture: Isaiah 52:13-15

Main Idea: To truly worship God, we must trade polite religion for God-given relentless ambition to reach the unreached with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Introduction

In the spring of 1845, the British Royal Navy launched what was supposed to be the greatest pioneer expedition in history. Sir John Franklin set sail with two ships, the *Erebus* and the *Terror*, to finally conquer the Northwest Passage—a brutal, unmapped labyrinth of ice at the top of the world. It was a rugged, dangerous mission. But when historians look back at the ship's manifest—what the British officers actually packed for this pioneer conquest is downright comical. They were sailing into the most lethal wilderness on earth, but they packed for a polite Victorian tea party. The ships were loaded with a 1,200-volume library, heavy mahogany writing desks, and an organ so they could play hymns. Each officer was issued solid sterling silver cutlery, intricately engraved with their family crests, along with cut-glass wine goblets.

They were so obsessed with maintaining their comfortable, polite society that they completely failed to prepare for the reality of the frontier. When their ships inevitably got trapped in the ice, they were entirely unequipped to survive. They tried to drag mahogany desks and silver teapots across the frozen tundra. They prepared for a cruise, when they were called to a conquest.

The 1845 Franklin expedition ended in total disaster. Both ships (HMS *Erebus* and HMS *Terror*) became trapped in the ice near King William Island in September 1846. The entire crew of 129 men, including Sir John Franklin, perished. Franklin himself died in June 1847. The survivors abandoned the ships in April 1848 and attempted to trek

south across the Canadian mainland but all died from a combination of exposure, starvation, hypothermia, scurvy, and lead poisoning (possibly from their tinned food). The sunken vessels remained lost for over a century and a half. Searchers located the wreck of the *Erebus* in 2014 and the *Terror* in 2016 to confirm the tragic end of the expedition.

As a modern church, we are often spiritually guilty of the exact same absurdity. We have developed what we might call "polite Christianity," that itself can lead to the same type of tragic death as that expedition, but for our local churches. We take a calling that is supposed to be a rugged, glorious, territory-taking pioneer mission to the unreached, and we load it down with the spiritual equivalent of mahogany desks and silver teacups. Polite Christianity is safe. It is predictable. It is perfectly content to come to a comfortable building, join in activities of engaging events, consume a good sermon, and maintain our polite society.

But as we look to our Bibles today in Romans chapter 15, the Apostle Paul is going to challenge us to leave the silver cutlery behind. He is calling us away from polite Christianity and into the wild, reliant airspace of pioneer missions.

Up to this point in his letter to the Romans, Paul has laid out the most magnificent theological framework of grace the world has ever seen.

Now, as he begins to close his letter, he transitions from deep theology to his personal itinerary.

But Paul cannot even talk about his travel plans without turning them into a masterclass on the mission of God.

In verses 14 through 21, he pulls back the curtain on his own heart, revealing how he views his calling and how he draws the strategic boundaries of his ministry.

He is writing to a church he didn't even personally plant, but he writes boldly to shake them out of their polite routine and remind them of the monumental, cosmic rescue operation God is running across the globe and has called them to and how they might and are expected of God to worship.

To truly worship God, we must trade polite religion for God-given relentless ambition to reach the unreached with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Please take note of this...

We are not called to be consumers; we are called to be conquerors.

Today, Paul is going to show us exactly how to pioneer this gospel of grace by laying down

Three essential shifts for a church on mission:

1. First, we must change our identity.
2. Second, we must change our metrics.
3. Third, we must change our strategy.

Let's look at the first shift, beginning in verse 14, as we consider that we might need to...

I. Change Our Identity (vv. 14-16)

We change our identity by stepping into the sacred work of sharing grace with a desperate world

When we talk about sharing our faith, what comes to mind? For many of us, it feels like an awkward duty or a sales pitch we have to force onto our neighbors. We have reduced one of the most glorious realities of the Christian life into a rigid, clinical, theological, uncomfortable word: *evangelism*. But as we look at Romans 15, Paul completely redefines this calling for us.

We begin to change our identity when we first...

A. Acknowledge Our Spirit-Given Competence for the Mission (v. 14)

- Before Paul challenged them with their mission, he started by affirming their capability.
- As we see in verse 14, Paul looks at a church he didn't even plant and says here in v. 14, '*And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able also to admonish one another.*'
- The Greek word for 'instruct' here is *nouthetein*—it means to counsel, to warn, and to guide each other, here with the Romans, through the Word of God and that with which, we see in the coming verses, the Holy Spirit has filled them with.
- Paul is validating the competence of the local church. He is telling them and us that ministry is not just for professionals.
- Because we have the Holy Spirit and the Word, we are fully equipped to minister to one another right now.

As we change our identity then, we need to...

B. Combat the Natural Drift of Gospel Amnesia (v. 15a)

- This raises a question in the minds of the believers in Rome that Paul is writing, "If we are so spiritually mature and capable, why is Paul writing so 'boldly' to us?" (v. 15). It is because he knows a fundamental truth about human nature: we suffer from **Gospel Amnesia**.
- He says there at the start of v. 15, *'But I have written very boldly to you on some points so as to remind you again...'*
- Why do mature, knowledgeable Christians need to be reminded of the gospel? Not that we wrestle with the importance of the Gospel, at least for the most part we understand that. But maybe it is **because we forget**.
 - We naturally drift from the grace that we are saved by and the urgency we once felt.
 - We drift from an urgent, outward-facing mission to share our faith with others, back into comfortable, inward-facing holy huddles.
- Here is what is important to remember. We don't just preach the gospel to save the lost; we preach the gospel to the saved so they might remember who they are in Christ alone.

In the process of changing our identity, we also need to...

C. Receive the Call to Reach the Lost as a Gift of Grace (v. 15b)

- Paul says he does this work 'because of the grace that was given me by [or from] God.'
- When Paul says *grace* here, he isn't just talking about his personal forgiveness. He is talking about his divine commission.
- He viewed his assignment to the Gentiles—the hard travel, the rejection, the pioneer church planting, and even the persecution—not as a heavy, crushing burden, but as a profound, undeserved gift.
- God *graced* him with the privilege of being part of God's rescue operation.
- We have received that exact same grace. We were not just saved from the penalty of sin; we were commissioned as emissaries to present that same salvation to others.
- God has graced us with the privilege of carrying His name to a world that desperately needs it.
- Sharing the gospel is not a corporate obligation; it is our divine and privileged entrustment.

To do so means to choose to...

D. Adopt the Posture of a Priest Rather Than the Pitch of a Salesman (v. 16a)

Romans 15:16 "...because of the grace that was given me from God, 16 *to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the gospel of God, so that my offering of the Gentiles may become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.*"

- Look at how this grace changes Paul's vocabulary in verse 16.
 - Because it is a gift, he doesn't use the language of a salesman; he uses the language of a priest.
 - He calls himself a 'minister'—a servant of the temple.
 - Paul is looking at a first-century world that is completely desperate. They had pagan altars, they had the Roman empire, they had philosophy, they had religion—but they did not have grace.
 - Paul steps into that darkness and says:
 - 'The world is now the temple.
 - I am the priest.
 - The gospel is my liturgy.
 - And you—broken, desperate Gentiles—are the sacrifice.'

Stott, one of the most respected conservative expositors of the 20th century, validates this priestly role when he wrote:

"Evangelism is a priestly ministry. The sharing of the gospel is a liturgical service. The converts are the sacrifice. And the Holy Spirit is the fire that falls on the altar to consecrate the offering to God." — **Dr. John R.W.**

Stott (*The Message of Romans*)

When you grasp that reality—when you realize that sharing the gospel is a sacred, liturgical service—it completely dismantles the idea that we are just religious salesmen trying to hit a quota.

The New Testament calls the church a "royal priesthood." Too often, we hear the word "royal" and assume it implies a position of passive privilege or elevated status. But...

Biblical priesthood is not a luxury to sit on; it is an assignment to carry out.

It is a profound responsibility, a sacred duty, and our highest joy to fulfill. We are active priests leading a broken world to the altar of grace.

But if we are presenting a sacrifice, it fundamentally matters *who* is on the receiving end.

In the ancient world, pagan priests brought offerings to buy off angry, capricious, and unpredictable deities. They sacrificed to desperately try and change the gods' minds. But our God does not need to be appeased by our evangelism. When we step into this joyful duty, we are not trying to convince God to love the lost; we are participating in a sovereign, purposeful rescue plan that He ordained before time began.

We are to...

E. Present a Living Offering to a Sovereign, Purposeful God (v. 16b)

Look at Romans 15:16 with me **again**, "*16 to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the gospel of God, so that my offering of the Gentiles may become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.*"

- The only living sacrifice - offering to God that He asks of us, is to live and speak among others in a manner that introduces them to and leads them into relationship with God through Jesus Christ.
- We have to pause and realize how shocking this imagery was to everyone reading this letter.
 - **To the Jewish mind**, this was almost offensive. In the Old Testament, an offering had to be spotless, would be put to death, and the altar ceremonially pure. Gentiles were considered fundamentally unclean. The idea of placing a Gentile on God's holy altar would have sounded completely profane.
 - But it was just as radical **to the Roman Gentile mind**. The Roman world viewed religion as a transaction. They slaughtered bulls at pagan altars to buy off *capricious* gods. And by capricious, I mean deities who were utterly unpredictable—emotionally unstable, petty, and prone to changing their minds on a whim. You offered sacrifices just to appease them, hoping they wouldn't strike you with a plague or ruin your crops simply out of a sudden fit of rage or some level of entertainment for themselves.
- Paul subverts all of that.
 - He tells these Romans, 'You don't need to frantically buy off an angry, unpredictable deity.'
 - 'Instead, we are the prized, precious offering to the one true God.'
 - Unlike the whimsical gods of Rome who reacted on sudden impulses, the God of the Bible does not act on a whim.
 - This ingathering of the Gentiles—this inclusion of us into the family of God—is the unfolding of God's eternal decree. It was set in stone before time began.

- As Paul writes in Ephesians 1:4, God chose us in Christ 'before the foundation of the world.' We are not an afterthought.
- When humanity fell in the garden, God didn't panic; in Genesis 3:15, He immediately decreed that a Savior would crush the serpent.
- When God called a man named Abram in Genesis 12, He didn't just promise to bless one nation; He promised that through Abraham, 'all the families of the earth' would be blessed.
- Paul spent the first eight chapters of this very letter to the Romans proving that this was always the plan.
- We are not a reaction to a chaotic universe; we are the culmination of a sovereign, eternal rescue plan.

In that priestly posture, as we offer the sacrifice, the only choice we have is to...

F. Trust the Holy Spirit to Cleanse and Consecrate the Sacrifice (Save Gentiles: v. 16c)

- We must trust the Holy Spirit to cleanse, otherwise how do unclean, broken people become 'acceptable' to a holy God?
 - Paul gives us the answer. Look at the end of verse 16: we are '*sanctified by the Holy Spirit.*'
 - We do not become acceptable by adopting the Jewish law
 - We do not become acceptable by cleaning up our own lives.
 - When a desperate person hears the gospel of grace and believes, the Holy Spirit descends on the altar.
 - The Spirit Himself does the washing, the purifying, and the consecrating.
- This completely destroys polite, consumer Christianity.
- Polite Christianity tells us to just come sit in a pew, consume a sermon, join an activity group, and go home to our private lives.
- But Paul says if we belong to Christ, we have been graced with a holy priesthood.
- Back in Romans 12, Paul pleaded with us to lay our own bodies on the altar as a 'living sacrifice.' Personal surrender is the absolute prerequisite.
- But once we are on that altar, the mission expands. God calls us to look at our neighbors, our coworkers, and this desperate world around us, live and speak among them in a way that points them to the Savior, and recognize that they are

the next offering that has been saved that we can offer to God.

- Because it is the Holy Spirit who makes the offering acceptable, the pressure is off of us to 'clean people up' before we bring them to God.
- We do not have to demand that this desperate world adopts our cultural habits or moral traditionalism before they can be presented to Christ.
- Our priestly duty is simply to faithfully share the grace.
- The Spirit does the cleansing.

Our Priestly Calling: Every time we open our mouths to share grace with a desperate world, we are stepping up to the altar.

We are doing the sacred work of a priest, seeking to present a surrendered, transformed life to a holy God."

No in vv. 17-19 we see that polite Christianity measures the polish of our programs; Paul measures the polish of the internal, undeniable power of the Holy Spirit.

So, we need to refocus — to...

II. Change Our Metrics (vv. 17-19)

Doing so means that we Boast Only in the Power of God, not in our performance or accomplishments.

- If the first step in our mission is recognizing that we are priests offering a desperate world to God, the second step is completely redefining how we measure our success.
- In the modern church, we are obsessed with metrics.
 - Polite Christianity loves to measure human ingenuity—we boast in our attendance, our budgets, the slickness of our programs, and how well we market ourselves.
 - But when we look at verses 17 through 19, Paul completely strips away those human metrics.
 - He shows us that a church on mission can only boast in what God accomplishes through the Holy Spirit.

So first, in order to change our metrics, we...

A. Redirect Our Boasting from Human Effort to Christ's Accomplishment (v. 17)

- Look at verse 17: *'Therefore in Christ Jesus I have found reason for boasting in things pertaining to God.'*
- At first glance, this sounds like Paul is patting himself on the back. But notice the boundary he puts on his pride: it is *'In Christ Jesus.'*
- Paul is saying that there is a legitimate, holy pride we can take in ministry, but it is pride not in ourselves but in Christ Jesus.
- We do not boast in our cleverness, our eloquence, or our strategic planning. We only boast in the fact that the sovereign God of the universe would take broken people like us, place us in Christ, and use us for His glorious purposes.

We...

B. Refuse to Take Credit for What Only God Can Produce (v. 18a)

- Paul establishes a strict, non-negotiable rule for how he talks about his ministry.
- In verse 18, he says, *'For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me.'*
- Think about how radically this challenges our natural pride.
 - Paul refuses to take an ounce of credit.
 - He recognizes that he is simply the instrument; Christ is the active agent.
- This takes an enormous weight off of our shoulders.
- If we believe that we have to save our neighbors, we will try to manipulate them, argue them into the kingdom, or water down the gospel to make it more palatable.
- But when we realize that Christ alone does the saving, we are free to simply be faithful instruments.
- We don't have to manufacture results; we just have to testify to what Christ is doing.

So we...

C. Align Our Words and Deeds to Call the World to True Obedience (v. 18b)

- What exactly is Christ trying to accomplish through us?

Romans 15:18 "18 For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed,"

- Paul tells us in the second half of verse 18: '*...to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed.*'
- The goal of our mission is not just to get people to pray a quick prayer or check a religious box.
- The goal is the *obedience of faith*—people's lives wholly surrendered to the Lordship of Jesus.
- How does Christ bring a desperate world to obedience through us?
 - By our '*word and deed.*'
 - Our lips and our lives must align.
 - If we preach grace but live with bitterness, our deeds sabotage our words.
 - If we do good works but never speak the name of Jesus, our deeds are stripped of their saving power, because "*Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God.*"
- We are called to embody the gospel with our lives and declare the gospel with our mouths.

We are called to...

D. Strip Away Dependence on Human Ingenuity and Rely Exclusively on the Spirit (v. 19a)

Romans 15:19 "*19 in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit...*"

- How did these words and deeds actually bring the Roman world to its knees?
 - It wasn't by human persuasion.
 - Paul says it was '*by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God.*'
- This is where we must let the text confront our modern sensibilities.
 - We live in an era of church growth strategies where we often rely more on Wi-Fi, A/V, lighting, and coffee than we do on the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit.

A.W. Tozer said,

"If the Holy Spirit was withdrawn from the church today, 95 percent of what we do would go on and no one would know the difference. If the Holy Spirit had been withdrawn from the New Testament church, 95 percent of what they did would stop, and everybody

would know the difference." — A.W. Tozer

- Paul didn't rely on focus groups or cultural relevance to crack the darkness of the Roman Empire; he relied on the raw, undeniable power of God.
- If we are going to see dead hearts awakened here in our town, we have to strip away our reliance on human ingenuity and plead with God for the power of His Spirit to move among us.

Then we will be able to...

E. Embrace an Expansive, Unstoppable Vision for the Gospel (v. 19b)

- Because Paul relied entirely on Christ's power rather than his own, his vision was breathtaking.
 - He concludes verse 19 by saying, *'...so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ.'*
- If you map that out, Jerusalem to Illyricum is a massive geographical arc stretching roughly 1,400 miles from the Middle East, up through modern-day Turkey and Greece, all the way to the borders of Italy.
- Paul isn't taking a casual road trip; he is engaged in a spiritual conquest.
- He isn't content with staying in a comfortable holy huddle.
- The power of God drives him outward and pushing forward.
- We must allow the power of God to drive us outward rather than just resting inward.
 - When Jesus said in Matthew 16:18, *'I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it,'* He was giving us an offense mandate. Gates are defensive structures.

Hell is on the defense against the advancing gospel of grace.

- Earlier in this very letter, in Romans 8:37, Paul declared that in all these things we are *'more than conquerors through him who loved us.'*

An Offensive Mandate: Conquerors do not retreat into fortresses; they take territory.

- We cannot settle for merely maintaining the status quo or swapping sheep with other churches in our area.
 - The gospel demands territory.
- We are called to look beyond our four walls, beyond our comfort zones, and

embrace an unstoppable vision to see Christ known where He is currently ignored."

If we truly believe we have this unstoppable, Spirit-driven power, we have to ask where we are aiming it. It is incredibly easy for a church to become like a downtown transit loop, much like riding the Philly Phlash. It is a great ride, but it is entirely designed to keep you circulating through established, familiar stops. Paul is telling us we have to get off the comfortable transit loop of local transfer growth. We cannot just shuffle believers from one familiar stop to another. We have to push into uncharted territory.

We cannot embrace the expansive, conquering vision of verse 19 without adopting the specific, strategic ambition of verses 20 and 21.

Notice how Paul encourages the Roman believers and us to...

III. Change Our Strategy (vv. 20-21)

He encourages us to Adopt a Relentless, Strategic Ambition

- It is one thing to say we want to reach the world; it is another to actually aim our lives and our church's resources at the darkest places.
- Polite Christianity is content with theoretical missions. But Paul shows us that a true grasp of God's grace always produces a relentless, calculated strategy to reach the unreached.

We do this when we...

A. Cultivate a Holy, Driving Ambition for the Unreached (v. 20a)

- In verse 20, Paul says, *'and thus I aspired [make it my ambition] to preach the gospel...'*
- The Greek word for ambition here is *philotimoumenon*.
 - It literally means to esteem something as a high honor, to be driven by a relentless, consuming passion.
- Polite Christianity is often driven by comfort, safety, and maintaining the status quo. But Paul was driven by a holy ambition.
- If we are going to be a church on mission, we must ask ourselves: What is our ambition?
- Are we simply ambitious for a comfortable life, a respectable reputation, and a well-attended Sunday service? Or are we driven by a holy, burning ambition to see the gospel of grace preached to those who are starving for it?

With that ambition, we...

B. Direct Our Resources Toward True Spiritual Darkness (v. 20b)

- Notice the strict strategic boundary Paul places on his ambition in the second part v. 20.
 - He says he wants to preach, *'not where Christ was already named, so that I would not build on another man's foundation.'*
- Paul isn't against established churches—he is writing to one! But his specific calling is to pioneer missions to and for new churches.
- There is a profound challenge for the modern church here.
 - Today, we are often guilty of celebrating 'transfer growth.'
 - We build bigger buildings or slicker programs to attract Christians from the church down the street, and we call it success.
 - But Paul wasn't interested in shuffling sheep between different folds.
 - He wanted to go where the name of Jesus had never been spoken.
- As a local church, we must ensure that our resources, our sending capacity, and our prayers are actively penetrating true spiritual darkness, not just circulating in already-reached areas.

So we...

C. Anchor Our Strategy in God's Prophetic Promise (v. 21a)

- Why was Paul so strictly committed to this pioneer strategy?
- Did he read a first-century church-planting manual?
- No, he anchors his entire strategy in the Word of God.
 - In verse 21, he says as he quotes Isaiah 52:15,

Romans 15:21 *"21 but as it is written, "They who had no news of Him shall see, And they who have not heard shall understand.""*
- This is a profound prophecy about the Suffering Servant—about Jesus Christ—sprinkling the nations.
- Paul links his geographical church-planting strategy directly to the ancient, redemptive work of the Messiah.

We do not invent our mission; we inherit it.

- **Our strategy must never be based on what is culturally trendy or pragmatically easy; it must be anchored in the unbreakable promises of God.**
- We go to the unreached because God decreed centuries ago that the nations would be claimed by the Servant, Jesus Christ.

We can then...

D. Trust the Promise That the Blind Will See and Understand (v. 21b)

- Look again at v. 21 at the specific promise Paul quotes from Isaiah to close out this thought: *'Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.'*
 - This is the ultimate hope for our mission.
 - When we look at a desperate world, or an unreached people group, or even a hardened neighbor across the street, it is easy to feel defeated.
 - It feels like they will never understand.
 - But God's decree promises otherwise.
 - When the gospel of grace is proclaimed to those sitting in absolute darkness, the Word of God promises that:
 - They *will* see.
 - They *will* understand.
 - Not because of our eloquence, but because

It is the Holy Spirit opens blind eyes.

- We can step into our priestly calling, boasting only in the power of God, and pioneer the gospel of grace with absolute confidence—knowing that:

Our Confidence: The God who ordained the mission guarantees the results.

Conclusion:

As we look back at the tragedy of the Franklin expedition, the greatest heartbreak isn't just that they failed to find the Northwest Passage. The heartbreak is that they died dragging mahogany desks and silver teapots across the frozen tundra. They were so committed to their polite society that they completely missed the reality of the frontier.

The world around us is desperate and trapped in spiritual darkness. We have been commissioned by the sovereign God of the universe to a rugged, glorious, territory-

taking pioneer mission. We cannot afford to drag the heavy, comfortable furniture of polite Christianity into the field.

If we are going to reach the world around us, we have to leave the silver cutlery behind.

- We must change our identity, stepping up to the altar not as religious consumers, but as holy priests offering a desperate world to God.
- We must change our metrics, stripping away our reliance on human ingenuity to boast only in the unstoppable power of the Holy Spirit.
- And we must change our strategy, refusing to settle for comfortable transfer growth so we can cultivate a relentless, targeted ambition for the unreached.

This is what is at stake today.

To truly worship God, we must trade polite religion for God-given relentless ambition to reach the unreached with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

So, what does this mean for us tomorrow morning?

Where is God calling you to step out of the comfortable cruise and into the conquest?

- Maybe it means radically shifting how you view your neighborhood or your workplace—seeing it no longer as an everyday routine, but as your priestly mission.
- Maybe it means redirecting your family's focus to aggressively focus on or support pioneer missions in places where Christ has never been named.
- Or maybe God is calling some of you to actually pack up your lives and take the gospel to the unreached yourselves.

The eternal decree of God guarantees that the blind will see and the unreached will understand.

The power is God's.

The mission is His plan for you.

Let's lay our polite religion on the altar this morning, ask the Holy Spirit to consecrate the offering, and step into the pioneer mission of grace.