

The Cross and Christian Community

The Cross and the Christian's Calling

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THE CROSS AND THE CHRISTIAN'S CALLING **Romans 15-16**

Before you open your Bible, I want to pray for what is about to happen in the next few minutes.

Acts 13 tells us that while the church at Antioch was worshiping and fasting and praying, the Holy Spirit said, "*Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them*" (Acts 13:2). I've often wondered how that happened. Exactly how did the Holy Spirit say this? I don't know the answer to that question, but I do know that as a result of what the Holy Spirit said on that day, a missionary movement was born that led to the spread of the gospel throughout the known world in the first century.

Earlier this month, we set aside a day to fast as a faith family, and we came together that night. One of the things we prayed for specifically was this day. We fasted and we prayed that God might see fit in our worship gatherings today to say by His Spirit, "Set apart these people for the work to which I have called them." We've been praying ever since that day for the same thing: That by His Spirit through His Word in our worship today God might call certain ones of us from Brook Hills, from Birmingham to spread the gospel in places outside of Birmingham.

Just so you know where this is all going, at the end of our time in the Word today, I'm going to invite anyone—any individuals, any couples, any families—in this room who believe the Lord may be setting you apart to move outside of Birmingham for the spread of the gospel to stand where you are, so that we can pray with you about that possibility in your life or your family. I'm not calling people today to move tomorrow to the Middle East. But I am calling people today to say, "The Lord may be leading me to move away from Birmingham for the spread of the gospel, and I want the church to pray for me in that."

I want to pray now in anticipation of that moment to come. As we pray, I want to call every follower of Christ in this room, and particularly every member of this church, in a new and fresh way, right now to put a blank check with your family and your family and your future on the table before the Lord. To say, "Lord, are you setting me apart? Are you setting my family apart for the spread of the gospel outside of Birmingham?" Will you bow your heads with me?

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name in all the earth. Cause your name to be made known as holy in all the earth. Your kingdom come. We want your kingdom to come. Your will be done. Your will be done in our lives, in our families, in this church, and on this earth as it is in heaven. We pray that, in the next few moments, you would speak clearly to us by your Spirit. That you would keep the Adversary from distracting us from hearing your voice, from doubting you when we hear your voice, and from deceiving us into thinking that your voice cannot be trusted. Help us to hear you, and help us to obey you no matter what you say, no matter what that means because we trust you. We worship you. We pray, I pray, O

God, that in the next few moments you would set apart men and women to stand in this room in the same way you set apart Paul and Barnabas to go two thousand years ago. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Now, if you have Bible, and I hope you do, turn with me to Romans 15. I mentioned over the last couple of weeks that we were going to pause on this Sunday in our study of 1 Corinthians, though it's not really a complete pause because Paul actually wrote the text we're looking at when he was in Corinth. Paul was surrounded by the Corinthian church when he wrote the book of Romans, and I know of no better text for a day like this than Romans 15-16.

I want us to read most of it (we're going to start in verse 8). We're not going to walk verse-by-verse through a study of it, but instead, it's going to be the overall foundation that I'm going to stand on in casting vision for who we are as The Church at Brook Hills and calling many of you to leave The Church at Brook Hills for the glory of God among the nations. Let's start in Romans 15:8, where Paul (who also wrote 1 Corinthians) writes:

For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name." And again it is said, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people." And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him." And again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope." May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

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. But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God 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. 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 to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed, 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; 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, but as it is written, "Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand."

This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. 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, 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. At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them.

For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. (Romans 15:8-27)

The Church at Brook Hills...

Standing upon this foundation, here is the picture I want us to see today of who we are, what is common to all of us who are a part of this church, and what God may be calling each of us to do as a part of this church. First, who we are: The Church at Brook Hills. I know this is wordy, but every word here counts, so follow with me. The Church at Brook Hills. We are a family of brothers and sisters radically saved by God's grace, miraculously filled with God's Spirit, and absolutely surrendered to God's purpose: praying, giving and going together—and the key word here is “together;” we're praying, giving and going together—for the spread of God's gospel and the sake of God's glory among all the peoples of the world. Now in that sentence, in that description of who we are, I want to draw attention to two main facets of our community together—who we are and what we're about.

We are God-centered.

One, we are God-centered. My wording is intentional here to emphasize God's grace and God's Spirit and God's purpose and God's gospel and God's glory. Romans 16:27, *"To the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen"* (Romans 16:27). We are a God-centered community.

His grace saves all of us. This is what makes us the church in the first place: The mercy of God. This is why Christ came in the first place. Romans 15:8, *"Christ became a servant to the circumcised..."* A reference to the Jews, *"...to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles..."* i.e., the nations, which includes most of us in this room. Not Jewish people, but Gentiles - Christ came so that we *"might glorify God for his mercy"* (Romans 15:8).

I realize that some people here today are not members of The Church at Brook Hills, and you're thinking, "What have I walked in on? A bunch of crazy people talking about how they're going to move around the world. Why would they do that?" Here's why. Here's what I pray you who are visiting with us today might hear in this place on this day. That you might hear today that God is merciful and that God is gracious. That you and I have sinned against God, you and I have turned away from God to our own way instead of His way for our lives.

We've all done it, and what has God done? God has sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to pay the price for our sin and our rebellion. You and I deserve death from God in our sin, and Christ has died in our place. He has died the death we deserve to die, and He has conquered the enemy we cannot conquer—sin and death itself. Jesus has risen from the dead, and God is graciously inviting you today to turn from your sin and to turn from yourself and to trust in His mercy toward you through His Son on a cross.

As other people in this room in a few moments might stand and say, "I believe the Lord may be leading me or my family to spread this good news outside of Birmingham," I invite you to respond today by saying in your heart, "Today, I'm going to receive this good news. Today, I'm going to trust God to save me from my sin and myself by His grace and in His mercy." Let this day be that day for you.

Christian, remember today that when it comes to making decisions about going around the world with our lives, what drives us is not guilt. "We feel guilty because we've heard the gospel and others haven't, so I guess we need to go." No. What drives us is not guilt; what drives us is grace! The greatest news in all the world is that God has sent His Son and that He has saved us from eternal death to eternal life. It just makes sense for us all to put the blank check on the table before this God because the very reason He has left us on this planet is to make this good news known among the peoples of the earth!

We're a people saturated by the grace of God, and as a result, we're a people surrendered to the mission of God. Don't forget. Some of you may think, "I don't know if I can give God a blank check with my life or my family. What if He calls me to Africa? What if He calls us to Central Asia or the Middle East?" This is where I remind you: If you can trust God to save you from your sin, you can trust God to lead you in your life. And not only to lead you, but to satisfy you every step of the way. The grace of God saves us. May the grace of God save us from ourselves even today, and consequently compel us to go wherever He leads and to be with us every step of the way.

The next blank there in your notes: God's Spirit fills all of us. One of the many things I love about Paul's description of his life and ministry in Romans 15 is how all the credit goes to God. Verse 18, *"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, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God"* (Romans 15:18). Everything Paul did as he traveled around the world proclaiming the gospel was a result of the power of the Spirit of God in him. After all, who set Paul apart in the first place? Acts 13, *"The Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Paul and Barnabas, for the work to which I have called them'"* (Acts 13:2).

The Spirit of God called Paul, and then, follow this: The Spirit of God equipped Paul for everything God called him to do. Some of you may already be thinking, "I just don't think I could do this. I don't even like to travel. I've spent my whole life in Birmingham; I don't think I could make it somewhere else. I just don't think I'm cut out to be a missionary somewhere in the world; that's a whole other class of Christian, isn't it? I'm just a plain person. This is not me." If that's what you're thinking - if you're thinking, "I could never do this," I want to say as loudly as I possibly can this morning, "You're right!"

But this is where every Christian in this room has got to answer the question: Are you going to waste your life on that which only you can do in your own power, or are you going to spend your life doing that which you can only do in His power? Are you going to live your entire Christian life in dependence on yourself, always limited by what you think you can handle? Or are you going to live your Christian life in dependence upon His Spirit, never limited by what He might accomplish in and through you?

I remind you, Church at Brook Hills, every single one of you in this room who has trusted in Christ for your salvation has received the Holy Spirit of God, who right now is dwelling in you. For many of you, He is calling you today to do something you could never do on your own, something you could never do in your power. But because of your obedience to Him, one day, you're going to look back and say, "I won't venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me by the power of His Spirit."

I'm calling many of you today to step out and go not because I have confidence in you, but because I have confidence in the Spirit of God in you, the Spirit of God who has filled you, and the Spirit of God who will enable you to do whatever He calls you to do. That's part of

what it means to be God-centered. We're living our lives in ways that can't be explained naturally but can only be explained supernaturally.

God's grace saves all of us, God's Spirit fills all of us, and God's purpose includes all of us. His purpose includes all of us. You say, "What do you mean? What is God's purpose?" Look at Romans 15:8-13 with me, where Paul quotes four times from the Old Testament (back-to-back-to-back-to-back). In these quotations, we see a picture of God's purpose in all of history, specifically the purpose for which Christ came and died on a cross.

Follow this in your notes, and then I want to show it to you in the text. Jesus Christ died. Why? What was the purpose? Jesus Christ died to purchase a people from among all the peoples of the world for the eternal praise of God. Again, every word here is important. Jesus Christ died for this purpose. Why did Jesus die on a cross? Here's why: To purchase a people from among all the peoples of the world for the eternal praise of God.

The wording here is taken almost verbatim from Revelation 5, where angels in heaven sing to Christ, saying, "*Worthy are you...for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation*" (Revelation 5:9). That heavenly vision is exactly what these Old Testament quotations are all about. These quotations take us all the way back in the Old Testament to show us that, when God called the people of Israel, the Jewish people, it was never just about God receiving praise from them. God's purpose from the very beginning was to receive praise from all the peoples of the world.

Look at the progression that unfolds from Romans 15:9-13. Follow this. The first quotation in verse 9 is from Psalm 18:49, and the picture is the Jewish people praising God among (in the middle of) the Gentiles. Romans 15:9, "*Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name*" (Romans 15:9). Then, in the next quotation, the picture is the Jewish people praising God with the Gentiles. Romans 15:10, "*Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people*" (Romans 15:10).

So, you have the Jewish people praising God among the Gentiles, and then the Jewish people praising God with the Gentiles, and then in the next verse, the focus is on the Jewish people calling the Gentiles to praise God. "*Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him*" (Romans 15:11). That's a quote from Psalm 117. Finally, the last quotation is from Isaiah 11:10, and the picture here is Jesus, referred to as the root of Jesse, rising up and receiving praise from among all the nations, Jews and Gentiles alike. Romans 15:12, "*The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles (in him will the nations) hope*" (Romans 15:12).

Don't miss this. The progression is from Jews praising God among the Gentiles, to Jews praising God with the Gentiles, then Jews calling on the Gentiles to praise God, and then all the peoples—Jews and Gentiles alike—praising God through Christ. The picture here is Paul saying, "This has been the purpose of God all along." Everything God has done in the world, all throughout the Old Testament and now into the New Testament - God's purpose has been to form a people from among all peoples for the praise of His name. This is why Jesus came, and this is why Jesus died—to fulfill that purpose. To make that people from among all the peoples of the earth a reality.

So step back and get the picture. What is God doing in the world right now, today? God is doing what He has been doing from the beginning of history, from the dawn of creation. God is doing today what He sent Christ to do 2000 years ago. Today, God is forming a

people from among all the peoples of the earth for the praise of His name. God is not fully praised when only one type of people worship Him, only Jewish people or only Anglo-Americans or only African-Americans or only Latin Americans or only Europeans. No, God is most fully praised when every type of people in the world, people from every part of America and every part of Africa and every part of Asia, people from among all the peoples of the world are joining together in the eternal praise of God. This is the purpose of God. This is the purpose for which Christ died. Christian, this is the purpose for which we live.

Jesus Christ died to purchase a people from among all the peoples of the world for the eternal praise of God, so we as Christians live to reach people from among all the peoples of the world for the eternal praise of God. It only makes sense, right? If this is the purpose of God in this world, and if our lives belong to God in this world, then His purpose is our purpose. And His purpose includes all of us. Not one Christian is sidelined in this purpose.

For far too long in the church today, we have relegated the worldwide purpose of God to a compartmentalized program in the church. "That's for the missions people. That's for the people who care about the glory of God in the world." No, we all care about the glory of God in the world. It's why we have breath. We all want to see all the peoples of the world praising our God in Christ, and not one of us who has been saved by the grace of God and is filled with the Spirit is content to ignore the purpose of God. We're all in this together. It's the very reason we're on the planet. The reason Christ died is the reason Christians live—so that a people from among all the peoples of the world will resound in eternal praise to God.

This is what it means to be God-centered. It means our lives are not our own anymore. We have been saved by God's grace, we have been filled with God's Spirit, and we are now consumed with God's purpose. As members of this church, without exception, we are all praying, giving, and going together wherever, however, whenever God leads for the spread of His gospel and the sake of His glory among all the peoples of the world.

We are peoples-focused.

Which leads to the next component of our community that I want to emphasize. One (and everything springs from this), we are God-centered. Then, in light of God's grace, God's Spirit, and specifically God's purpose in the world, two, we are peoples-focused. This is how the Bible views God's purpose in the world.

I've already quoted from Revelation 5:9. The Bible views the world in terms of tribes and languages and peoples and nations. It's what Jesus said to His disciples right before He left this earth: "Now go and make disciples of all the nations." We've talked before about how "nations" in the Bible is not a reference to geopolitical countries like we think of today. Around 200 nations are recognized in our world today. We know these are not the "nations" Jesus is talking about because, well, the United States of America didn't exist as a nation when Jesus gave that command.

Instead, the word he used there in Matthew 28, that we see in other places in the New Testament, is "*ethne*", from which we get "ethnicity". It's a reference to all kinds of tribes and families and clans and types of people on the earth, what we commonly call "people groups" today. This is where biblical, anthropological, and missiological scholars have looked at the world and identified, as best as they can, groups of people who share common languages and common cultural characteristics. There are far more than 200 such peoples. There are well over 100,000 people groups like this in the world.

It makes sense. You go to India. It's one nation with diverse people groups everywhere. Different languages, cultures, ways of life, clans, tribes, peoples. For that matter, you don't have to go to India to see this. I was preaching up in Chicago recently, and in a few days of riding around in a cab, I met all kinds of different people: Moroccan Arabs, Somalis, Bulgarians, Nigerians. All living in Chicago. When we look at the world biblically, we don't just see geopolitical nations; we see people groups. Just like the Bible sees Amorites and Hittites and Perizzites and Jebusites, we see these peoples alongside the Baloch people of Pakistan and the Hui people of China and the Arab people of Egypt. We see the world this way because Jesus has purposed to save people from among every single one of those tribes and clans and languages and nations, and Jesus has commanded us in the Great Commission to go and make disciples among every single one of those people groups.

We know we have not been commanded simply to make disciples among as many people as possible. This is huge. Jesus has not just given us a general command to make disciples among as many people as possible. Instead, Jesus has given us a specific command. We know we have been commanded specifically to make disciples among all the peoples of the world. Christ has told us as His church to go to all the peoples of the world, to reach all the peoples of the world for the praise of God.

Which begs the question: How are we doing? And the answer is not encouraging. Out of over 11,000 distinct people groups in the world, over 6,000 of them are still classified as unreached by the gospel. This basically means they are less than 2% evangelical Christian, which means there is hardly any church presence there to sustain the spread of the gospel within that people. Practically, this means that most people - and there are close to 2 billion people in those 6,000 people groups - in these people groups are born, live, and die without ever hearing the gospel. It doesn't just mean they're lost. There are lost people everywhere. Right here in Birmingham, Alabama, there are people without Christ. The difference between here and there, though, is that here there is access to the gospel. But there, among more than 6,000 people groups, there is not even access to the gospel. For a church that has been commanded specifically to make disciples among all the peoples of the world, this is not acceptable for us.

Yet people say, "Well, like you said, there are lost people here in Birmingham, so why would we pack our bags, sell our homes, and move our families to go over there when there's a ton of need here?" That's a great question.

Let me give you an illustration. Follow this with me. Remember a couple of years ago when tornadoes ravaged Birmingham and northern Alabama, and our city and surrounding cities immediately went into rescue mode. I want you to think about that, and I want you to put yourself in that situation. I want you to imagine that the commander overseeing rescue operations in all of northern Alabama put you in charge of the rescue teams. Imagine taking all the teams you have and coming upon the first community that you found, and that community is in dire need. People everywhere, dying, that need to be rescued from the rubble of their homes. There's more work than your teams could handle in that one community.

Imagine also knowing that there are other communities 5, 50, 100, 200 miles away that also need rescue teams, but you're overloaded right where you are. Let me ask the question. In that situation, would you send some of your teams somewhere else? Basically, would you divide your resources? Knowing that if you did, because of travel, those teams would lose time when they could be saving people right here. Knowing that those other communities are going to be hard to get to, and you don't know even know the way to get

to them. What if you even know that in some of these other communities, they're actually resisting help and don't even want you to come?

If you're in that situation, doesn't contemporary wisdom and even compassion simply say, "Let's stay here and help as many people as we can. This is the best use of our resources. It will take far more time, far more resources, and much greater risk to try to get to those other places. Let's stay here where we know we can help." Follow this. The only thing that would cause you to do anything different than that would be if the rescue commander said to you, "I don't want you to just rescue as many people as possible. Instead, I want you to rescue people from every single one of those communities." If the commander said, "I want people rescued from every single community" - if that was the command and it was clear, then you would use the resources at your disposal to make sure that people from every community were rescued.

Church, this is our command, and it is clear. The purpose of God in the world is that people from every single people group be rescued and ransomed by Christ. Therefore, commitment to the Great Commission in our lives and in this church necessarily involves commitment of our lives and our resources to get the gospel to people groups that have still not been reached. Do you see this?

This is not an option for us biblically. God has not just told us to get the gospel to as many people as we can. If that were the case, then we would go, find the most fruitful mission field there is, and stay there the rest of our lives. But God has told us to go to every people group on the planet. Our mission is not just a lot of people; our mission is all peoples.

There are 6,000 people groups who haven't heard, so we prioritize going to unreached peoples. It's not that we don't care about Birmingham. We care deeply about Birmingham and people we live around and work with here that need the gospel. God will leave some of us here in Birmingham, but at the same time, He is calling many of us to go beyond Birmingham, to unreached peoples in North America.

When we're peoples-focused, when we see the world in terms of peoples, we realize that God has brought peoples (unreached peoples) to us in this country. It's estimated that over 360 unreached people groups are living here in the United States. It's Arab peoples (hundreds of thousands of them living in places like Detroit and Dearborn, Michigan). It's South Asian peoples in New York City, Somalis in Minneapolis, Bosnians in St. Louis, Kurdish peoples in Nashville. It's 20,000 Yemeni Arabs in metro New York. It's almost impossible to get into Yemen right now, but you can reach Yemeni Arabs right there in New York.

We are making plans (and you can read about a couple of families along these lines on the front of your Worship Guide) to send people from The Church at Brook Hills to work among different people groups in North America. God may not be calling you overseas, but He may be calling you, setting you apart to go to unreached people groups right here in North America.

Or overseas, beyond North America. Yes, many unreached people groups are here, but not all of them are here. Most of them are there, so we prioritize going to unreached people groups over there. Men and women from this faith family have moved to reach the Arundo and the Hui and the Baloch and Middle Eastern peoples and other people groups to come.

We prioritize going to unreached peoples, and we prioritize going to unreached places. Even among communities of American peoples in North America, you have cities like Provo-Orem,

Utah, that are 0.5% evangelical Christian, virtually unreached. By contrast, Birmingham, Alabama, is 45% evangelical Christian, almost half. We praise God for that, but Church at Brook Hills especially, we realize that we are among one of the most reached peoples and places in the world.

Wouldn't it make sense that God, who desires His glory among all the peoples of the earth, would send an unusual number of us out from here, from this people and this place to reach unreached peoples in unreached places? It's almost like the default among us should probably be to go, and we should only stay if God is making clear that He's telling us to stay. We've not been commanded simply to make disciples among as many people as possible. We've been commanded specifically to make disciples among all the peoples of the world. So we prioritize going to unreached peoples and we prioritize going to unreached places.

We have a team going to Turkey soon, a nation of 70 million people. Do you know how many believers there are in Turkey? Do you know how many evangelical Christians, Bible-believing, Gospel-embracing Christians there are in Turkey? About 3,000. Do we realize what this means? There will be more people that will gather in this room today to worship God than there will be across the entire nation of Turkey with 70 million people. We must prioritize going to unreached peoples and unreached places.

So what does this mean? Does this mean that we all need to go to unreached peoples? Does this mean that those who don't move to unreached places are being disobedient? Are those who stay less committed Christians than those who go? Is there a first and second-class Christianity here, where missionaries from Brook Hills are the ones who are really committed, and members who stay in Birmingham at Brook Hills are just somewhat committed?

This is where I want to be really careful, and this is why I was particularly drawn to Romans 15 and 16 together. Because in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul makes clear that his ambition, and God's call on his life, was to preach the gospel where it had never been heard, to name Christ's name where it had never been named. Verse 21, *"Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand"* (Romans 15:21).

What Paul says in verse 23 is shocking. He had said in verse 19 that he had fully proclaimed the gospel from Jerusalem to Illyricum, and then he said in verse 23, *"Since I no longer have any room for work in these regions...I [am going] to Spain"* (Romans 15:23-24). Did you hear that? Do you realize what Paul is saying? Paul is looking around him in places like Corinth and Ephesus and Crete, and he's saying, "There's no more work for me to do here; I'm moving on." Now did that mean that everyone in those cities had been saved? Did that even mean that everyone in those cities had heard the gospel? No. What it meant was that the church had been planted in those cities. The gospel had been proclaimed, disciples had been made, the church had been founded, and the work was going on, so Paul says, "I'm moving on."

We know from the rest of the New Testament that there were other people that Paul himself told to stay in these places. Paul told Timothy to stay and pastor the church in Ephesus. He told Titus to stay in Crete. So the picture you have in the New Testament is some Christians staying under the sovereignty of God in certain places that have already been reached with the gospel. After all, there were other leaders at the church at Antioch that the Holy Spirit didn't set apart to go, but to stay there. So some Christians stayed in the church and city where they came to Christ, and then other Christians, like Paul and some of his traveling

companions and others, who are moving to other cities. It's not because Paul is being obedient and everyone else is being disobedient, but because God is calling His people to carry out His mission in different places and among different peoples.

This is where I want to be really, really careful today and across this church not to imply in any way that those who don't move to live among unreached peoples, those who stay seated in a moment while others stand and say, "The Lord may be leading us to move outside of Birmingham" - if you're sitting at that moment, the last thing I want you to think is that a you're second-class Christian in any way. The ultimate issue is not whether you're sitting or standing in that moment; the ultimate issue is whether you're obeying in that moment. For some of you, obedience will mean sitting. For others of you, obedience will mean standing.

What Is Common To All Of Us...

As the entire church...

This is where I want us to realize the difference between what is common to all of us and what is a calling for each of us. First, as the entire church, what is common to all of us is that we are God-centered. We have all been saved by God's grace, we are all filled with God's Spirit, and we are all included in God's purpose. We live to reach people from all the peoples of the world for the eternal praise of God. We know that we have not been commanded simply to make disciples among as many people as possible. We know that we have been commanded specifically to make disciples among all the peoples of the world.

Together, we prioritize unreached peoples, and we prioritize unreached places. That's exactly what the Bible is saying in Romans 15. Then notice this list of names in the church right after Paul finishes Romans 15 in Romans 16. You have a whole list of people - there are 26 of them mentioned here - who have different backgrounds and different gifts and are playing different roles in the mission of the church, doing different things.

You have Phoebe, likely a businesswoman traveling to Rome and delivering this letter to Paul. You have Prisca and Aquila, a couple who had served with Paul in Ephesus and now live in Rome. You have Epaenetus, the first to come to Christ in Asia, and then another couple who were in prison for Christ alongside Paul. You have families and households, slaves and free. You have Rufus and his mom, who was like a mom to Paul.

See the entire church. Men and women—nine women mentioned in this chapter, Mary and Julia and Persis and others—single and married, young and old, rich and poor. All kinds of different people united together on mission in the church. Think about what unites them all, what is common to them all. First and foremost, obviously what unites them all is Christ. Four times these people are described as being "in Christ," five times they're described as being "in the Lord," and twice he calls them "brothers and sisters." The person of Christ unites them, but so also does the mission of Christ.

See what Paul's writing to them, and as you see it, think about this entire church. Men and women, single and married, young and old, rich and poor, what is common to all of us as The Church at Brook Hills? Well, first, Christ. We are together in Christ, in the Lord, as brothers and sisters. But our unity is not just in His person; our unity is in His mission. And what do we all do in this mission?

We pray...

We all pray. Paul appeals to them in Romans 15:30 for the church in Rome to strive together with him in prayers to God on two different levels: For the church and for the lost; for the church and for the lost. He's asking the church in Rome to pray for the church in Jerusalem, that they will receive Paul when he brings this offering that he has collected for them. Paul also asks the church to pray for him, to be delivered from unbelievers (the lost) in Judea, as he goes. There were major threats against Paul's life in Jerusalem, threats that were founded when he was eventually arrested in Jerusalem. He ended up coming to Rome, not quite in the way he intended, but as a prisoner.

The picture here is huge. He's saying, "On this mission, I need your prayers, the church needs your prayers, unbelievers need your prayers. Strive to God on behalf of all these things," Paul tells the Roman church. Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against rulers and powers and authorities in this dark world and spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places, so pray, he says in Ephesians 6, at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and pray that I may proclaim the mystery of the gospel boldly in the face of adversity.

Church at Brook Hills, across this room, what is common to us all? We are striving together in prayer amidst this mission to make the glory of God known in all nations. This is why I've wanted to expose you to resources like *Operation World*, where you can pray throughout the year for the peoples and the nations of the earth. Prayer for global mission is not just for a select few; it's for us all. There needs to be a global component to all of our praying, on a continual basis. I know this for a fact. This is not a matter of calling. Christian, biblically you need to pray for the spread of the gospel to the nations, for the church globally, for the lost around the world. This is non-negotiable for all of us who know Christ and are in Christ.

We give...

We pray, and we give. We all give. We're all compelled and we've all been commanded to give to spread the gospel and serve the poor. Again, both of these things are evident in the church as a whole in Romans 15-16. Paul says at the end of Romans 15 that he's writing this entire letter because he needs help in getting the gospel to Spain where people have never heard it. He says in verse 24, "*I hope...to be helped on my journey there by you*" (Romans 15:24). The language he's using refers to physical help and assistance in the form of people and resources he can take with him to Spain.

I've talked before about how the book of Romans is one big fat missionary support letter that's saying, "Here's the glory of God in the gospel. Now please help me get this gospel to people who've never heard it before." Now notice this. At the same time, as important as it was to get the gospel to Spain where people hadn't heard it, and as much as he wanted the church at Rome to give toward that end, Paul says, "I'm not going to Spain yet because first I need to go to Jerusalem and deliver an offering to the church there." The reason this was so important is because the church in Jerusalem had experienced a famine and was physically struggling, so Paul had rallied churches all across Asia in places like Macedonia and Achaia, even among poorer churches there, and had collected an offering to take to a suffering, impoverished, struggling church in Jerusalem.

Notice that passion for unreached peoples did not negate love for reached peoples in Paul's mind. The church cares about urgent spiritual need and urgent physical need. Yes, what's driving Paul is taking the gospel to the nations, but along the way, he's encountering brothers and sisters in need, and he's leading the church to do something about it.

The same is true for us. We give. We all give. Let's just pause and remember that we have much to give. We live in one of the wealthiest places on planet earth. God has given us so much, and He has not intended for us to spend it all on ourselves. God has blessed us, Psalm 67, for the sake of His name among the nations. He has given us worldly wealth for His worldwide worship.

So we give—generously, sacrificially, and cheerfully—for the spread of the gospel to those who have never heard. We all give. We all look at our budgets and say, "In a world where 6,000 people groups have yet to be reached with the gospel, how can I give more so that those people groups are reached with the gospel?" And, along the way, how can I give to serve the poor, particularly our struggling, in some cases starving, brothers and sisters around the world. This is why we, as a church, give much to missionaries and missions work around the world that is focused on the unreached, yet we also give to communities and churches in India, even in areas that are more reached with the gospel because we have brothers and sisters who are starving there without clean water or food and they're dying of preventable diseases. This is what we do together. We give to spread the gospel and to serve the poor.

We go...

And then, we go. We all go. In this sense, we go right where we live, and we go wherever God leads. Making disciples is not a calling; making disciples is a command. So we all go right where we live, where we work, where we play, right here. Every Sunday, we send out one another, saying, "Go make disciples." This is what we do, and in this sense, going is not just for some of us; going is for all of us. We are all going, we are all involved in making disciples who make disciples who make disciples because we know that commission is not just for special Christians. That commission sums up what it means to be a Christian. I love this picture in Romans 16 of a diverse people who are all involved in working alongside Paul in the church on mission, and that's what we are. We are fellow workers (to use Paul's description in verse 9), going right where we live and all going, every single one of us with a blank check on the table saying we'll go wherever God leads.

What Is A Calling For Each Of Us...

That leads to what is a calling for each of us. This is where I want to make the distinction between what is common to all of us, meaning what is biblically non-negotiable for all of us. We all pray for the church and for the spread of the gospel around the world. A global passion for the praise of God among all peoples must drive every single one of our praying and our giving. We all give. We all give (we all make sacrifices to give) for the spread of the gospel and the service of struggling, suffering, impoverished brothers and sisters around the world. And we all go. This is not a matter of calling for a few of us, but a command to all of us. We all go, every week, right where we live, making disciples, and we all go wherever God leads. But how God leads us to do these things will vary in different ways. Again, this is part of the beauty of Romans 15-16 and really the whole picture we have of the church in the New Testament.

How often we pray and whom we pray for.

Yes, in Christ, we're united in our praying, yet God calls us to carry out such praying in different ways. What is common to all of us: Praying for the church and the lost around the world. What is a calling for each of us: How often we pray and whom we pray for. I'm just going to hit this real quick because this is not the primary purpose of this sermon.

I think about all these people in Romans 16, and certainly the way Paul's appeal for them to pray at the end of Romans 15 would play out differently. I can picture Phoebe praying for Paul as she delivered this letter. I can picture Prisca and Aquila, this couple who had been particularly close to Paul, setting aside much time together before going to sleep at night to pray specifically for him. I can picture Rufus' mom, who had been like a mother to Paul. I know this is conjecture here, but just imagine. Maybe she was a widow. According to 1 Timothy 5, widows are exhorted to pray all the more, for women with husbands attend to their husbands and younger women attend to their children. But older women whose husbands have died and whose children are grown have more time. Paul says in 1 Timothy 5:5, they "*continue in supplications and prayers night and day*" (1 Timothy 5:5).

I'm not saying that people who are busy in the church don't need to make time to pray. Not at all. After all, we're all busy, right? We all make time to pray, but what that time looks like and how that time is focused is going to vary for us. I have a specific list of things and people I pray for each day of every week, and your list won't look exactly like my list. What will be the same, though, I hope, is that we're praying together for church and the lost around the world.

How much we give and whom we give to.

Similarly, what is common to all of us: We give to spread the gospel and to serve the poor. What is a calling for each of us is: How much we give and whom we give to. Certainly in the Gospels we see even Jesus telling a rich man to sell all he has, and then right after that, commending Zacchaeus for giving half of his possessions away. Then in Acts, we see different people selling property or giving different gifts at different times. We even see some people using larger homes to host house churches.

What our giving looks like will vary, how much we give and who we give to. Obviously there's a priority on giving to the local church that we're going to talk about in a couple of weeks in 1 Corinthians 16, but even as the local church, we make decisions together on what we're going to give to. Many of you, beyond your giving to Brook Hills, give to spread the gospel and to serve the poor in other ways, as well. The goal in all of this is for us to give exactly what God is leading us to give.

Where we go, how long we stay, what financial support we have, and what kind of work we do.

So we're all praying, but God will call us to pray in different ways. And we're all giving, and God will call us to give in different ways. Finally, we're all going, but God is calling us to go in different ways. Here are four categories that I would encourage you to think about when it comes to distinctions in God's call for us to go. So what is common to all of us is that we go and make disciples where we live and wherever God leads. What is a calling for each of us is where we go, how long we stay, what financial support we have, and what kind of work we do.

So think about these four categories. First, where we go. Even just locally, right here in Birmingham, God has led certain ones of us to do ministry right here inside our community, and God has led others of us to reach outside our community. I think about brothers and sisters who might be using foster care or Sav-a-Life to make disciples right here in suburban Birmingham, and others who are making disciples through Divine Faith Baptist Church or Brother Bryan or Olivia House or a host of other ministry avenues in downtown Birmingham. I think of some people who have gone out from among us to church plants in East Lake or Southside for the spread of the gospel beyond this community, people who still live in Birmingham, but the Lord has led even from this church at this location. The reality

is, if we are really going to be about making disciples and multiplying churches, the Lord will lead more and more of us outside this community for the spread of His gospel.

On another level, the Lord may lead us to go among our culture or across other cultures. Again, God is doing this among us as many of you are involved in outreach to international populations here in Birmingham, whether Asian or Hispanic or any number of other cross-cultural ministry opportunities. In the same way, the Lord will lead many of us to make disciples on this continent and beyond this continent. Some will go out from Birmingham, led by His Spirit, to unreached peoples and unreached places in North America. Others will go out into unreached peoples and unreached peoples beyond North America. The point is that we go and make disciples is common to all of us; where we go and make disciples is a calling for each of us.

And so is how long we stay. We encourage and exhort one another all the time to consider short-term (1-2 weeks) missions, spending a week or so going outside of Birmingham for the spread of the gospel and the sake of God's glory. We encourage everyone who lives here in Birmingham to consider giving 2% of your time (about a week of your life in a year) taking the gospel outside of Birmingham in a way that will transform the other 98% of your time that you live inside of Birmingham. We have a whole new list of short-term trips coming out in a couple of weeks, in addition to customized trips that you and your small group can actually create alongside our global team.

We also send out brothers and sisters from us mid-term (2 months to 2 years) to serve between 2 months and 2 years in different places and among different peoples for the spread of the gospel. We encourage everyone who can, who has the kind of flexibility in their schedule to do this, to consider this. Whether you're a student - we encourage every college student to spend at least a summer or semester somewhere like this, even if the Lord doesn't lead you long-term to live among unreached peoples. This will radically transform your perspective on the mission of God among the peoples of the world from wherever you live. Likewise, teachers and other vocations that have longer times like this built in, or flexibility to work on the road, or semi-retired and retired brothers and sisters. We encourage anyone who can to go mid-term.

Then others that the Lord leads to go long-term (more than 2 years) to basically make a somewhat permanent (if not altogether permanent) move to live and work among unreached peoples and places. God is calling some to go short-term, others to go mid-term, and others to go long-term. How long we stay wherever we go is a matter of calling.

Then, what financial support we have. Part of the benefit of God's material blessing upon us in this part of the world is that we are able to send brothers and sisters, and to use Paul's language, to help them on their journey financially. There are some missionaries today who go to unreached peoples and places and are fully supported by other Christians in the church. But the reality is that if we really want to reach over 6,000 unreached people groups in the world, it's likely not going to happen through men and women who are fully supported financially among those people groups.

This is where we must intentionally explore ways the Lord might be sending self-supported brothers and sisters to unreached peoples and unreached places. You may remember we talked about this a few weeks ago when talking about the gospel and our work, that the three great church planting centers of the ancient world (Antioch, Alexandria, and Rome) were all founded not by apostles but by workers who were using their vocations as platforms for making disciples in pioneer areas.

We talked about how these 6,000 people groups are very difficult to reach, and you don't go into an unreached place like Saudi Arabia on a Christian missionary visa. Missionaries whose financial support is solely dependent on Christians can't get into Saudi Arabia, but do you know who can? Christian businessmen and Christian businesswomen. Do you realize there are about six million Americans living abroad right now, and estimates are that over one million of those are evangelical Christians, followers of Jesus? Do we realize what a missions force this can be in the world?

This is why, even when we talk about missions, the last thing I want you to think is, "Okay, I need to leave my work, my job, my skills, my education behind." No, it's, "Is there a way that my work, my job, my skills, my education could be used to make the gospel known among one of the neediest places in the entire world?" And for us altogether to begin to think like that.

How can your job, how can your work, how can your skills...college students, what degree can you get that will open doors for you around the world? For us all to begin to train our children to think this way, to work hard in school, why? So they can get a good job and make good money and coast out a comfortable life in a Christian setting? Or so that they can be ready to go to people and peoples around the world with their skills and their training and their degrees and make the gospel known among people who've never, ever heard it before? If we really want to reach all peoples in the world with the gospel, it's going to happen on the wings of workers, men and women with jobs, who don't automatically assume that they should teach or program computers or manage or do accounting or do sales or practice medicine in Birmingham or even in America, but workers who default to the fact that if there are people groups in North America and around the world that have never even heard the gospel, then maybe God has given us a job and skills that can be used to reach them. God has designed the globalization of today's marketplaces for the spread of His gospel through the sending of His people as workers around the world for the glory of His name. We must explore ways God is leading more and more of us as self-supported missionaries in different vocations, moving to cities in North America and countries beyond North America to work for the spread of the gospel.

I don't want to leave it at just those two categories because there's a picture even biblically of partially supported brothers and sisters, of whom one was Paul. Paul worked as a tentmaker. At the same time, Paul received support from churches like the one at Rome. There's a place for a both/and here. I would simply emphasize that if and when there are opportunities for people to get jobs among unreached peoples in and beyond North America, we should pursue those possibilities, and in the process, save funds for those people the Lord leads into places where it may be particularly hard to get a job.

Regardless, what financial support we have will vary according to what the Lord calls us to do, and finally, what kind of work we do will vary, mainly according to what kind of setting we're working in. Among the reached, the primary work we're going to focus on is strengthening the church to make disciples. Simply put, where the church exists, we want to work alongside the church. This is undoubtedly the picture we see in the New Testament.

But then, where the church is not, among the unreached, we're planting the church by making disciples. We're going out, much like Paul and Barnabas did, and our goal is to make disciples among particular people groups, and once disciples have been made, to lead them to form a church with leaders and begin spreading the gospel. This is what we're working for among the Arundo and the Hui and the Baloch and Middle Eastern peoples. This is what the two families you see mentioned on the worship guide today are going to do among

South Asian peoples in New York, and this is what we want to send brothers and sisters from this faith family out to do across North America and around the world.

Some self-supported, others partially supported, and some fully supported, going mid-term and long-term, making disciples and multiplying the church among the least reached peoples of the world.

The Question Every One of Us Is Considering Today...

That then brings us to the question every one of us is considering today. What I want to do is I want to give you this question, and then I want to invite you to just sit still for a minute, not to start packing up your stuff, ready to move on to the next part of our gathering. This is the moment that we have been building to. I want to invite every single member of this church, men and women, single and married, young and old, rich and poor, to consider this question, to contemplate this question I want to challenge you, right where you are sitting, to consider: By God's grace, through God's Spirit, and for God's purpose, might the Lord be leading me (or my family) to leave Birmingham for at least two months of my life (or our lives) to spread His gospel for the sake of His glory among unreached peoples in the world?

Now the key word there is "might." This is not me asking you to make a vow, a commitment to move overseas. The reality is that decision is not yours to make alone. In Acts 13, this was a decision that was made in the context of the church, with the church praying alongside Saul and Barnabas. That's why I want to ask you to stand in a minute to say, in a sense, to brothers and sisters in this faith family, "Will you pray with me in this?"

Some of you are married, and you're sensing the Lord may be leading you in this way, but you don't know what your husband's thinking or you don't know what your wife's thinking. This is obviously something you're going to pray about together. What I want to invite you to do is, even if just one of you is thinking this, I want to invite you to stand. Husband/wife, even if you're not thinking this right now, I want to invite you to stand with your spouse, and in that way it will be a picture of you saying, "At least one of us is sensing this in our hearts, so we need people to pray for us." Likewise, if you have kids that would be affected by this, I invite them to stand with you, as well.

The whole goal is to take a first step today, even just in prayer. Then the other thing I'm going to ask you to do is to take the back of your Worship Guide tear-off, and write "unreached" on it. That won't mean we're calling you now to book your tickets overseas, but we'll be contacting you to let you know ways you can move forward in exploring this, even talking about this from here.

Again, by God's grace, through God's Spirit, and for God's purpose, might the Lord be leading me (or my family) to leave Birmingham for at least two months of my life (or our lives) to spread His gospel for the sake of His glory among unreached peoples in the world? If answer to that question is yes, I want to invite you to stand.

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