

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Romans – Jesus’ Gospel Sets You Free!

Looking Forward, Pressing On!

(Romans 15:22-33)

Study #27

Introduction: Visionaries - and not so much...

We admire the visionary.

We are grateful for those like Robert Kennedy who famously said, “*There are those who look at things the way they are and ask, ‘Why?’ I dream of things that never were and ask, ‘Why not?’*”

And then, of course, there are those who are what we might call the UN-visionaries.

Here is astronomer Simon Newcomb’s thoughts about the possibility of manned flight: “*The demonstration that no possible combination of known substances, known forms of machinery, and known forms of force can be united in a practical machine by which man shall fly long distances through the air, seems to [me] as complete as it is possible for the demonstration of any physical fact to be.*”

In other words, in 1903, this astronomer said that people will fly when pigs fly, just months before Wilbur and Orville Wright’s plane took flight at Kitty Hawk.

Today it is a “given” that inventions and new technologies are developing at an algorithmic rate.

One hundred and seventy years ago (1844), Henry Ellsworth, the U.S. Commissioner of Patents, wrote what seems patently absurd to us: “*The advancement of the arts from year to years taxes our credulity and [foreshadows] the arrival of that period when further improvement must end.*”

Or these thoughts from U.S. Senator Daniel Webster on the purchase of the California and New Mexico territories in 1848, “*I have never heard of anything...more absurd to all sober judgment than the cry that we are profiting by the acquisition of New Mexico and California. I hold that they are not worth a dollar.*” - this, exactly one year before the start of the 1849 California gold rush.

Vision. Some people got it; some people ain’t got it.

We look up to the visionary, the man with a mental image of where he wants to go and the way to get there; to that woman whose holy discontent with the *status quo* gives her energy to move.

Well, over the months of our studies in the book of Romans, we have seen the Apostle Paul as a master theologian. We’ve seen him as a brilliant thinker and as a wonderful teacher with a shepherd’s heart. Today, we meet Paul, the VISIONARY.

Before we hear him outline his towering vision for the future, though, let’s review a bit of his amazing career as an apostle of Jesus.

A brief survey of the career of the Apostle Paul... (Romans 15:14-21)

When he sat down to write this letter, he was knee deep into his third missionary journey, writing from somewhere in Greece (probably Corinth) to people in the Roman capitol he’d never met. By this time he had already had a very full apostolic career.

He had been tagged by Jesus as the apostle specially commissioned to serve the Gentiles. He had done his best to fulfill that stewardship by going to regions where nobody had ever even heard about Jesus.

On his first missions trip, taken with his good friend, Barnabas (and, for a while, John Mark), He established churches in the Galatian cities of Pisidian Antioch, Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium.

While on those travels he also collected his first scars for Jesus. He was stoned nearly to death in Lystra and was strongly opposed everywhere else.

Between missionary journeys Paul served as a pillar in the church of Antioch. He was also a major voice in the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), a convention of early church leaders that set the ground rules for fellowship between Christian Gentiles and Christian Jews.

On his second missions trip he had a very fruitful ministry in the region of Macedonia, establishing churches in Philippi and in Thessalonica.

He went on to preach the Gospel in Athens (with very little success) and then went on to have a rich ministry in Corinth, planting a somewhat troubled church there. From Corinth he traveled on to Ephesus where he established yet another church.

Along the way on this journey, Paul suffered all sorts of hardships. He endured beatings and imprisonment (Philippi) and a riot (Ephesus).

Paul preached to large and small crowds, debated opponents, and tirelessly taught new converts. He baptized baby Christians and organized new churches. He traveled on land and sea, journeyed alone and with teammates, sometimes received support from faithful Christians and often had to support himself.

Whew!

We review his life to the point at which he wrote Romans and are impressed with its scope. Without question he was busy. But he wasn't just busy. He was effective. God was using him.

Over the twenty years of his ministry to this point, people had come to the Lord. Souls had been saved. Lives were turned around as they learned from Paul what Christ had done for them when He died on the cross.

Twenty years of serving after a mid-life conversion. Two decades of productive ministry and churches planted and letters written and joyous victories all sandwiched between a great deal of persecution and many shattered dreams.

And Paul was nowhere near finished.

He never lost sight of the ground yet to be covered and he never stopped looking at the distant horizon. He was always thinking about the next faith challenge, the next opportunity to grab for God's glory, his next Gospel adventure.

Paul was a man who kept on dreaming, kept on pressing on, always moved forward.

Today, in Romans 15, we find out what was the "next big thing" on his mind.

I don't know if you have ever told someone who just called you, "*Oh, I was just about to call you!*" - when you really weren't? It's been known to happen...

Well, Paul wants his readers to know that even though he had not yet gotten to Rome, he'd been planning to visit them for some time. Really!

Yet for completely understandable reasons, he hadn't been able to make the journey.

Admitting to DREAMS of Future Impact (vv. 23-29)

Longing to be "On Mission" for the Great Commission (vv. 22-24)

First things first (v. 22)

[22] For this reason¹ I have often been prevented from coming to you

He had been *prevented* from coming to Rome because, prior to this season of his life (the writing of the letter), he hadn't ever gotten to a point where he could feel good about making his way west to Rome.

¹ Those opening words, "*for this reason*" refer to the missionary activity he mentions in verse 19. As we learned there, Paul was up to his eyeballs in pioneering Gospel ministry to the various regions of Syria and Asia Minor, Macedonia and Achaia.

Until he had established strategic Gospel beachheads in the territories in which he was laboring, he simply wasn't free to go.

But now, as he writes, everything has changed. He is now, for the first time, able to seriously consider making a trip to Rome.

Ready, set, go! (vv. 23-24)

Paul's missionary work - DONE! (v. 23a)

[23] but now, with no further place for me in these regions...

Now the fact that Paul is able to think about going to Rome doesn't mean that he thought that he had completely evangelized the regions of Achaia and Macedonia.²

But, as far as his ministry in these regions, the pioneering work was done.

There were no major geographic sectors in these regions that had not heard about Jesus. He had planted functioning churches in enough of the major cities for the Gospel movement to spread to outlying areas.

Just think. No other places to be persecuted. No other places to experience rejection. He has exhausted the possibilities for stoning and beatings and imprisonments in Macedonia.

So, what's next?

A little R&R back in Antioch? Hole up for a while back home in Tarsus?

Nope. For Paul, it was time to press on to new opportunities.

² He was a very well-travelled man and was aware that other lands existed besides the immediately surrounding regions of the Roman Empire. He would have known about the recently-occupied-by-Rome island of Britain, the distant kingdom ruled by the Han Dynasty in what we know as China, and of the vast expanse of Kievan Rus (present-day Russia). He was aware of Africa to the south, and the kingdoms of Parthia, Scythia, India - all of which needed to hear the Gospel.

A couple of years ago I attended a VOICE OF THE MARTYRS conference here in town and heard a man named Russell Stendal speak. Russell told of having been severely mistreated by FARC guerillas while serving the Lord in Colombia - on five separate occasions.

In other words, Russell was persecuted - and then he went back. He went back knowing full well what he was going to experience when he went back. He went back because going back was what serving Jesus was, for him, all about.

Paul's got no other places to go in familiar territory, so he sets his sights on places he's never been, knowing full well that these new places will likely bring him the exact same opportunities and opposition he's already met.

Paul's missionary work, continued... (vv. 23b-24)

[23] but now, with no further place for me in these regions, and since I have had for many years a longing to come to you³ [24] whenever I go to Spain⁴ -- for I hope to see you in passing, and to be helped on my way there by you, when I have first enjoyed your company for a while --

So, he definitely wanted to serve the church in Rome! He had said that back in the first chapter of this letter.⁵ But even beyond his interest in going to Rome, he's got his eye on another place: Spain! - and in a minute we'll come back to visit those plans.

³ This verse is a virtual repetition of what Paul has already said at 1:13. In 15:22-33, Paul takes up again the subject with which he was concerned in 1:8-16a, namely, that of his interest in, and his intention to visit, the Christians in Rome.

⁴ Many of the leading lights of the Roman world in Paul's day were Spaniards including Lucian (the poet) Martial (master of the epigram), Quintilian (teacher of oratory), and Seneca (philosopher, prime minister of Nero). Still, historians tell us that some parts of Spain were profoundly uncivilized in the first century A.D. When fleeing from the presence of the Lord, the prophet Jonah headed west to Tarshish, an ancient name for Spain.

⁵ Back in chapter 1 he had written that he wanted to ***[11]...impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established; [12] that is, that I may be encouraged together with you while among you, each of us by the other's faith, both yours and mine...[15] So, for my part, I am eager to preach the Gospel to you also who are in Rome.***

First, though, he rabbit trails a bit to tell us of some interim plans to travel elsewhere before he heads west to Rome and Spain.

Sharing All Good Things (vv. 25-27)

Paul's immediate destination - Jerusalem, to serve. (v. 25)

[25] but now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints.⁶

We understand from elsewhere in the New Testament (and from the verses that follow in this passage) that the “*service*” Paul was going to Jerusalem to conduct was benevolence. He was planning a mission of mercy.

And this won't be the first time he has gone to Jerusalem for exactly this type of mission. We read in Acts 11 of a first trip that saw him bringing a collection of money to help fellow Christians in hard times.

At that time, God gave a revelation to a prophet named Agabus that there was about to be a severe famine that was going to harm those living throughout Judea and especially in Jerusalem.

So, a collection was taken up among the members of the church at Antioch (just as this week, we have been encouraged to give toward the Oklahoma need in light of the tornado that struck Moore, OK). That money was sent to Jerusalem, carried by Barnabas and Paul.

The trip Paul envisions here in Romans 15 is several years after that first trip. Other churches had already contributed to this second relief offering, and Paul mentions them.

Gentiles serve the Jews who served them (vv. 26-27)

[26] For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution⁷ for the poor⁸ among the saints in Jerusalem.⁹

⁶ So, the same apostle Paul who said, “*If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel,*” (1 Tim. 5:8) and “*Whoever does not work, neither let him eat*” (2 Thess. 3:10) also says here, that some Christians will need benevolent help because of circumstances beyond their control. And in those situations Christians who have an abundance are to come to the aid of those who lack.

[27] Yes, they were pleased to do so, and they are indebted to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things.

Hard times in Jerusalem

It has been a puzzle to lots of people that the Christians in Jerusalem were so needy that they required financial subsidy on these two occasions.

But the need for assistance simply highlights the reality that life was tough in those days and it was especially tough for Christ-following Jews in Jerusalem.

On the one hand, there was the famine (Acts 11) which was tough on everybody. But in addition, as the years passed, opposition to Christianity increased in Jerusalem.

Yes, it was the birthplace of Christianity. But it was also the capitol city of the Jews. And with the growing unpopularity of Christianity, it would have been hard for a Jesus-follower to keep a job in Jerusalem.¹⁰

It was this hardship that prompted Paul to arrange for this second collection to be asked from the younger Gentile churches to support the church in Jerusalem that had meant so much to the Jesus movement.

⁷ In fact, by his very word choice here - the Greek word is *κοινωνία* (fellowship) - Paul emphasizes the fellowship aspect of the collection.

⁸ The need to care for those with material need is a consistent theme throughout the New Testament letters - Gal. 2:10; Phil. 4:18; 1 Tim. 5; Titus 3:14;

⁹ This present collection is mentioned in several places in Paul's letters and in the book of Acts (chapter 24). He refers to it especially in the letter to the Corinthians, at 1 Corinthians 16 (vv. 1-4) and in 2 Corinthians (chapters 8-9). Since Paul mentioned this particular offering for the poor in Jerusalem in both letters to the Corinthians, it seems that he must have been orchestrating this effort among the Gentile churches for several years. And, as he writes to the Romans, the offering is apparently now ready to be handed over to the suffering saints in Jerusalem.

¹⁰ Barclay especially notes that a large part of the economy in Jerusalem was fueled by the Temple and its supply. People who were employed to support the Temple services would have quickly found themselves out of work as soon as they were converted to Christ.

Over the years and especially in more recent months, Paul had been in close touch with the churches in Macedonia and Achaia, and had spoken with them about the need in Jerusalem, and they had responded with significant generosity.¹¹

So, Paul is taking cold, hard coins to Jerusalem on a mission of mercy. He's carrying money given by Gentiles to support Jews, which will be a living and loving testimony to the unity of the Body of Christ.

He's leaving Corinth soon to go to Jerusalem. But then he won't rest. THEN, his plans are to go to Rome. And THEN to Spain!¹²

Planning Fearlessly (vv. 28-29)

*[28] Therefore, when I have finished this, and have put my seal on this fruit of theirs, I will go on by way of you to Spain. [29] I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.*¹³

Paul's known history, from Corinth on (v. 28)

We know that Paul wrote the letter to the Romans from the city of Corinth near the close of his third missionary journey.

And, what was the course of his life following his stay in Corinth?

Well, from the book of Acts we know that when he left Corinth, he retraced steps he had already taken on the way out, passing through Berea, Neapolis, and Troas. Then, at the port city of Miletus he made for the open sea to go to Jerusalem.

Once in Jerusalem, he was mobbed in the Temple by hostile Jews and given protection by (of all people) the Romans, who escorted him north to Caesarea.

He spent two years in Caesarea with Roman soldiers shielding him from those who wanted him dead. And then, because he appealed to Caesar, he was shipped off to Rome, under Roman guard, with a shipwreck and a snake bite thrown in along the way for good measure. (Acts 27)

We read at the end of the book of Acts (chapter 28) that Paul spent two years in his own rented quarters in Rome waiting to present his case to Caesar Nero, and no doubt, to present the Gospel to Caesar as well.

But the Bible doesn't record Paul's trip to Spain. There is a question. Did he go, or did he not go?

Spain or bust! Who knows...?

It is not clear. Certainly, the fact that Paul wanted to go on a trip to evangelize Spain, even after his Roman imprisonment, is hardly surprising.

Spain would have been a tempting site for a missions trip, not because of the scenic beaches, but because of its having never heard the saving message of Jesus.

Spain was near the western edge of the then-known world, and had been only recently placed under Roman rule.¹⁴

Among scholars, there are mixed and varied opinions about whether Paul ever made it as far as Spain. There are two strains of thought and neither is conclusive.¹⁵

¹¹ The motivation of the Gentile churches is rooted in the biblical principle of *reciprocity*. The Gospel first went out from Jerusalem. Had it not been for the Jerusalem Christians taking the good news of Jesus with them, there would have been no Jesus movement in the Roman Empire of the first century. The message of salvation through Christ came first to the Jews (Romans 1:16), and from them the Gospel went out to the Gentiles. The offering that Paul collected was merely a small return which the Gentile churches were invited to make in recognition of their indebtedness to the mother-church of Christendom - and they were happy to do so. See also Galatians. 6:6 for a similar thought.

¹² Here in Romans 15 is the only time in the New Testament we read of Paul's desire to go to Spain.

¹³ The certainty did not lie in his absolute confidence that he would make it to Rome and then to Spain. It lay in his confidence that if he came to Rome it would be with God's blessings.

¹⁴ Paul's draw to Spain might have been even stronger due to the fact that, by the time of the first century, there were probably some Jewish settlements there.

¹⁵ Some branches of church history hold to a long tradition that says Paul was executed at the end of his two years imprisonment in Rome, mentioned in Acts 28. I am not inclined to this view, as it leaves out evidence that Paul wrote his final

The bottom line is that we flat don't know if he ever got to Spain. Nor does that concern us.

What impresses us is the passion of the man. What strikes us is his heart to push the boundaries and to be eager to go where no man has ever gone *with the Gospel* (☺). We are inspired by Paul's vision to serve Jesus.

For Jesus' sake, he wanted to do something. He wanted to go to Rome. He wanted to go to Spain. And he expressed that desire out loud.

Of course Paul fully recognized the sovereignty of God in the matter of his going to Rome and on to Spain, or not.

But he also recognized that he, Paul, himself, had the freedom in Jesus to dream about a God-honoring path and then to pursue that path for all he was worth!

What do you want to do for Jesus?

So, the question that now comes to mind is this: What do YOU want to do for Jesus?

On April 7th, we watched as about seventeen of our friends responded to a challenge to volunteer for an initiative we are calling "Launch."

They came up to the front, probably expecting to hear me or one of the Elders give them an assignment.

Instead, what they heard was, *"Take the next three months to do what you want to do for God outside the walls of this church. Oh, and take this \$100 bill to help 'seed' your vision."*

We are about halfway through those three months now and I can tell you that the Lord has given some GREAT creativity to these LAUNCH-ers.

letter (2 Timothy) from a very different and much darker prison than is described in Acts 28, from which he wrote Philippians and other letters. Others cite 1 Clement, an early Christian piece of literature that suggests that he did, in fact, get to Spain.

Some are still thinking and praying. Some are still in the planning stages. Some have already begun serving - and you'll hear some of the LAUNCH testimonies on the morning of July 7th.

They are wrestling with what they want to do for Jesus and are pursuing it. They remind me of Caleb, from the Old Testament.

At the point where we come into Caleb's story he's well past eighty years of age. But he's still got vision. He's still got fire in his belly.

Caleb asked General Joshua (the only other survivor besides himself of the forty years long wilderness wandering) for the honor of taking some of the more dangerous Hill Country terrain in Israel for an inheritance, claiming that ***[Joshua 14:11] "I am still as strong today as I was in the day Moses sent me (i.e. - to spy out the land); as my strength was then, so my strength is now [12] Now then, give me this hill country about which the LORD spoke on that day, for you heard on that day that Anakim were there, with great fortified cities; perhaps the LORD will be with me, and I will drive them out as the LORD has spoken."***

Wow! Not bad vision for an 85 year old!

So what do you want to do for Jesus?

Is it to responsibly provide for your family's needs?
 Is it to control a thus far uncontrolled temper?
 Is it to share the love of Jesus with your co-worker?
 Is it to help those who are in poverty in Jesus' Name?
 Is it to serve cross-culturally?
 Is it to impact the NEXT generation for Christ?

Pursue THAT!

Do that thing that says you are "on mission" for the Great Commission. Prove that we can be the church where you are free to do what you want to do for God.

Dream, envision, picture what God might want you to do - and then, fueled by your trust in Him - GO FOR IT.

But know that you won't make it without help. You'll need others. And you'll especially need others to pray for you.

Paul knew that if he was going to have success in his efforts to serve Jesus, he desperately needed the prayers of God's people.

PRAYER PARTNERSHIPS Needed for Future Impact (vv. 30-33)

The Need for "Prayer Support" (v. 30)

*[30] Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me*¹⁶

I love it when I am told that someone is praying for me. So do you.

I am encouraged when a friend grabs me in the hall here at church or calls me during the week to let me know that they have been praying for me, especially if they happen to know that I am going through a stressful or a challenging time.

But listen again. It would be tough to come up with a more desperate way to frame a request for prayer.¹⁷

Paul isn't just interested in people mentioning his name at the end of an interminable listing of other names. He wants them to be "*striving together with him*" (literally "*wrestling*") in their prayers.

I don't know what comes to your mind when you think wrestling.

You may think of Jacob's wrestling match with God (Genesis 32) or the WWE (or the sad news that wrestling - wrestling!?! - may be dropped from the Olympics in 2020).

But it's just about impossible to think about wrestling and not think of an intense struggle, an exhausting battle.¹⁸

Paul as asking his friends to pray for him, not half-heartedly or casually, but with a sense of urgency.

It is going to cost us something to be effective in our intercession for one another. It will cost us energy to wrestle in prayer. But that's the kind of prayer partnership to which we are invited as we lift each other up in what we want to do for God.

And what will fill our prayers when we wrestle in prayer for each other? We listen as Paul concludes by outlining three specific "prayer requests" he wants the Romans to pray for him.

The Form That POWERFUL Prayer Support Takes (vv. 31-33)

Deliverance (v. 31a)

[31a] that I may be rescued from those who are disobedient in Judea

First, he asks for prayers for deliverance. Paul knew full well that he was the object of fierce hostility from those who opposed the Christian message.

He may have been in great danger as he wrote. We know that he was in great danger just a few months later when he found himself mobbed in the Temple in Jerusalem.

Yet, when Paul decided to go to Jerusalem, he knew exactly what he was doing. He knew full well that what lay in front of him was persecution, and possibly imprisonment and death.

The height of courage is to know that something perilous awaits us and yet still go on.

¹⁶ It is worth noting how regularly Paul solicited the prayers of believers for his special needs and circumstances. 2 Cor. 1:11; Phil. 1:19; Col. 4:3; 1 Thess. 5:25; 2 Thess. 3:1)

¹⁷ It says something about Paul's understanding of the maturity of the Roman church that he would so greatly desire their prayers for him.

¹⁸ I wrestled on our college wrestling team. I never ceased to be amazed at how much energy is required for three 3-minute rounds of wrestling.

If you are going to be fully engaged in Great Commission service for Jesus, you will be opposed. Opposition may come in all shapes and sizes, physical and spiritual, emotional and mental. But you will be opposed. It will be difficult.

And if you are going to overcome you need prayer partners asking for your deliverance, for your victory, for your protection.

Second, Paul requested prayers for the accomplishment of his own visionary dreams for serving the Lord.

Effective service

[31b]...that my SERVICE FOR JERUSALEM MAY PROVE ACCEPTABLE to the saints; [32] so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God and find refreshing rest in your company.

As I read this, God had given no guarantee to Paul that he would land safely in Jerusalem (in fact, he had been told the opposite - Acts 21:11), or that his plans to go to Rome and Spain would all work out well.

So, he invited the Roman Christians to join him in prayer for the fulfillment of his wildest and fondest dreams.

If you have a hope to serve others in Jesus' Name, the support of others coming alongside of you in prayer for the effectiveness of your service is crucial.

And, finally, Paul also knew his need for excellent relationships with fellow Christians.

Good relationships

[31b]...that my service for Jerusalem may prove ACCEPTABLE TO THE SAINTS;¹⁹ [32] so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God and FIND REFRESHING REST IN YOUR COMPANY.

He was concerned that his ministry be acceptable to the people to whom he was ministering. He was concerned that things not get weird between himself and the Jerusalem saints when he brought the money from the Gentiles.

Isn't it likely that if the hater of our souls really wanted to do damage to the work of Jesus he would sabotage our working relationships and compromise our ability to get along with each other?

Absolutely!

Look for people who will pray that your family relationships in the church will be God-honoring, tension- and baggage-free, loving, and supportive.

Conclusion:

So, these are the requests that headed Paul's list. And we'll assume that the Romans prayed for this way for Paul as soon as they got this letter.

Jesus wants you and me to catch a glimpse of the exciting, new, creative, and innovative things that God is willing to do through us as we depend on Him and on the prayers of our friends.

Today, God says "*Dream.*" "*Envision*" "*Pray.*"

Dare to make bold plans for the future. Trust God as you boldly seek to carry out those bold plans that will result in your own growth as a Christian, and in ministry to others.

Friends, it's time to pray for each other as we seek to do what we want to do for God.

[33] Now the God of peace be with you all. AMEN

¹⁹ See Acts 21:17-20 for the answer to this prayer.