

# Sermon: The Revelation of God's Righteousness Where There Is No Church (Rom 15:14-24)<sup>1</sup>

John Piper

**John Piper** has been the senior pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, since 1980. Previously, he taught biblical studies for six years at Bethel College in St. Paul, Minnesota. Dr. Piper is the author of numerous books, including *The Pleasures of God* (Multnomah, 2000), *Let the Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Baker, 2003), and *God is the Gospel* (Crossway, 2005).

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. But I have written very boldly to you on some points so as to remind you again, because of the grace that was given me from God, 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. Therefore in Christ Jesus I have found reason for boasting in things pertaining to God. 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, in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit; so that from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ. And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named, so that I would not build on another man's foundation; but as it is written, "They who had no news of him shall see, and they who have not heard shall understand." For this reason I have often been prevented from coming to you; but now, with no further place for me in these regions, and since I have had for many years a longing to come to you whenever I go to Spain—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 (Rom 15:14-24).<sup>2</sup>

## Five W's for the Missionaries and the "Rope-holders"

Romans 15 is probably the most missions-rich chapter of the New Testament. Dozens of points could be made about the foundation and goal and method of world evangelization. From all of these, I have selected five observations from this text for this morning's message. My aim is to build in our church—especially with all its new people—a common vision of world missions. Why is world missions so crucial in the ministry of this church? What do we mean by it? How do we go about it? What is your place in it? In all this vision building, I pray that God will use this message to awaken in hundreds of you an irresistible desire to take the gospel of Christ to some unreached people group, and in the rest of you awaken an irresistible desire to be utterly committed rope-holders for those who go, as William Carey called Andrew Fuller, who stayed behind when Carey went to India for a lifetime and never came back.

So here are my five observations that build the vision of world missions at Bethlehem. They all have a key word that starts with "W" to help you remember them, as you quiz each other over lunch today.

## *The Word of God Is the Foundation of World Missions*

Consider Rom 15:15: "But I have written very boldly to you on some points so as

to remind you again, because of the grace that was given me from God.” To see the force of this in relation to world missions you need to have the rest of the chapter in view. For example, look at verses 23-24: “But now, with no further place for me in these regions, and since I have had for many years a longing to come to you whenever I go to Spain—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.” Paul had never been to Rome. But he wanted “to be helped on [his] way [to Spain] by [them].” So he writes this letter to them. That is what he is referring to in verse 15: “I have written very boldly to you on some points.” Whatever else the book of Romans is, it is definitely a missionary support letter. It’s the foundation of his mission to Spain.

It’s as if someone wanted Bethlehem’s support in a mission to a people group in India, and we had never met this person face to face. To prepare us for a visit and an interview with the Missions Committee, the missionary writes a letter. That is what we have here in Romans: It is Paul’s gospel; his message; his theology; his doctrine. This is what he writes to them when he wants their help in doing world missions. When he wants their support in taking the gospel of Christ to the totally unreached land of Spain, Paul writes the letter to the Romans. This is the foundation of world missions.

Now that is tremendously important. Think on it for a moment. We have worked our way through four chapters of Romans in the past couple years. What we are seeing is that this book is rich with weighty doctrine. Paul explains and defends his doctrine of justification by faith apart from works in amazing detail and length.

The book is profoundly theological before it gets practical, so that when it does get practical, the result will be profound spiritual counsel not just moralistic advice or psychological tips.

But now ask yourself this: When world missions is treated today, is this the way it is usually done? How many times do missionaries present their case by stating their doctrine of justification by faith? Or any doctrine for that matter? Or any clear, sharp, glorious vision of God?

So here is the first point. Let us be a church that builds our missionary vision on the Word of God. And by that I mean the truths about God and his way of salvation and his way of life revealed in the Bible. I mean doctrine. Not the less central ones but the really crucial, central doctrines of the Bible. When we choose and send missionaries, let us send those who can preach and teach the truth about God with an understanding of central biblical doctrines. Paul built his life and missions on these great truths. So should we. This is why we have established TBI—The Bethlehem Institute for Bible, Theology, and Missions. Bible, theology, and missions—in that order. So the first observation, based on verse 15, is: The Word of God is the foundation of world missions. Paul made doctrine the foundation for his support: We should too.

### ***World Missions Is God’s Work***

What I mean by this is not that he does it instead of us, but he does it through us. But he really does it. Missions is really supernatural work. It is really God’s doing, God’s work in and through us.

I see this in four phrases in verses 15-19. First, notice the word “grace” in verse 15, “But I have written very boldly to you on some points so as to remind you again,

because of the grace that was given me from God, to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles" (i.e., "nations," see verse 11). God called Paul and equipped Paul and sent Paul by grace. So Paul's being a missionary is a work of God.

Second, as Paul does his missionary work of gathering the nations for God and preparing to present them like a priest to God (as verse 16 says), who is it that really fits them for God? Verse 16b: "ministering as a priest the gospel of God, so that my offering of the Gentiles may become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit." The Holy Spirit is the one who makes the Gentiles a morally acceptable offering to God—makes them holy. Paul, the missionary, does not do that. God, the Spirit, does.

Third, in verse 18 Paul says, "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." How do the nations come to forsake idols and sin, and become obedient to God? Answer: Jesus Christ does it through the missionary. Not without the missionary, but through the missionary. It is Christ who does the decisive work of conversion and transformation, not the missionary. The missionary's job is to be faithful and true to the Word of God and to lay his life down to show Christ to the nations. But Christ himself is the one who does the decisive work.

Fourth, in verse 19, Paul goes on to say that his ministry proceeded "in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit." So here again it is not Paul, but the Spirit that exerts the decisive power in the work of missions.

So my second observation is that missions is not mainly a human enterprise but a divine one. It is God's work based

on God's Word. We speak and we do. But in and through us God speaks and God does, or all is in vain. We rely on him. Our job is to obey and be faithful and trust him. Just as Paul wrote in 1 Cor 3:6-7, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth" (see also 1 Cor 15:10; Col 1:29).

### ***The Aim of World Missions Is the Worship of God***

The reason the universe exists is that creatures might have the joy of worshipping God. Therefore, missions exists where worship doesn't. Missionaries are seeking to awaken worship for the true and living God through his Son Jesus Christ. Where in the text do I see this?

Consider how Paul describes his missionary service in verse 16. He says it is like a priest preparing an offering for God. Grace "was given me from God, 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." So the aim of missions is to be like priests of God who prepare an offering acceptable to God among the peoples of the world. What does that mean? How are the Gentiles an offering to God?

Romans 12:1 explains, "Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship." The Gentiles are an acceptable offering to God when their lives are an act of worship to God.

But we don't have to leave this chapter to see that. Back up with me to verse 9. Here Paul says that the aim of Christ's coming into the world (as the model for-

eign missionary) was “for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy.” That is the aim of missions—that the nations would glorify God for his mercy. That is worship—showing God to be glorious in his mercy, by trusting in it and cherishing it above all things. Then Paul supports this claim with a string of Old Testament quotations in verses 9b-11, “As it is written, ‘Therefore I will give praise to You among the Gentiles, and I will sing to Your name.’ Again he says, ‘Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.’ And again, ‘Praise the Lord all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise Him.’”

So you can see how Paul thought about his mission. It was a fulfillment of Old Testament expectations that the Gentiles—the nations—would praise the Lord by rejoicing in him above all other joys. That is the goal of missions: The worship of God—or as we like to say, “The supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples.”

### ***The Way to Do World Missions Is to Go to Unreached Peoples***

One of the children asked me last year, “Is “peoples” a word?” There it is in our mission statement: “for the joy of all peoples.” Yes, it is a word. Look at verse 11 again: “And again, ‘Praise the Lord all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise Him.’” The Maninka are a people. The Kazaks are a people. The Uzbeks are a people. The Somali are a people. The Fula and Wolof and Hausa and Kabyle and Farsi and Tajik and Turk are peoples. There are thousands of peoples in the world with significant distinctions in culture and language that have to be crossed if they are to be reached with the gospel.

Now this fourth point is that the way

to do world missions is not to settle down with the peoples that already have churches (even if they are across the ocean), but to keep going to the unreached peoples until all the peoples are reached and have their own Christ-worshipping churches.

Paul makes this point in a stunning way in verses 19-23. He says that he has fulfilled the gospel from Jerusalem to Illyricum (from Israel up through Asia Minor and Greece to northern Italy) and has no more room for work in this region. Look at verse 19b: “So that from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ. And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named, so that I would not build on another man’s foundation. . . . But now, with no further place for me in these regions. . . .” He is now heading for Spain.

Notice three things in these verses: (1) Paul says he has fully preached (literally “fulfilled”) the gospel from Jerusalem to Illyricum; (2) he aims not to build on anyone else’s work, but to be a pioneer and go where Christ is not named; (3) therefore he has no room here. How could he say the gospel is fulfilled in a region where there are tens of thousands of unconverted people? Answer: The task of frontier missions was done, not the task of evangelism. What this all means for us is that there must always be missionaries like Paul if we are going to finish the Great Commission, which is not just to reach more and more people, but more and more peoples—people groups—until they all have churches and can evangelize their own people. We call this frontier missions. This must always be a high priority for our missions vision at Bethlehem. Other kinds of missionary work are good, but

this kind is utterly essential, because the cause of world evangelization will not be completed without it.

Reaching unreached *peoples*, not just unreached *people*, is the key to finishing the Great Commission. What a difference an “s” can make!

### ***God Calls Some to Be Wardens of the Mission, Who Watch Over It from Home***

“Wardens” is my “W” word for “senders.” Consider verse 24. Paul says he aims to go to Spain, which is wholly unreached as far as we know, “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.”

This is important because of what he does not say and what he does say. He does not say: “Everyone in Rome who is obedient to the Great Commission will go with me to Spain, or will go to some other unreached place or people group.” What he does say is: “My hope is that you will refresh me and then help me in my mission to Spain.” In other words, he calls the church in Rome to be senders, wardens of the mission. He wants them to be partners in his mission, supporters.

So we like to say that you have three possibilities in world missions. You can be a goer, a sender, or disobedient. The Bible does not assume that everyone goes. But it does assume that the ones who do not go care about goers and support goers and pray for goers and hold the rope of the goers. Paul was linked with many churches and they sent support to him over and over again. So it should be with Bethlehem and all our missionaries.

### **Summary**

In sum,

(1) The Word of God is the foundation of world missions. We want to send missionaries who can explain to people who God is and how he works and what the path to heaven looks like.

(2) World missions is God’s work. We teach and preach and love, but God gives repentance and sanctification.

(3) The aim of world missions is the worship of God. “Praise the Lord all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him” (Rom 15:11).

(4) The way to do world missions is to go to unreached peoples. Evangelism among a reached people is not frontier missions. Taking the gospel to peoples where the name of Christ is not named is frontier missions.

(5) God calls some to be wardens of the mission, who watch over it from home. You can be a goer, a sender, or disobedient.

What is your aspiration? God wants you to have one—a holy ambition, a passion for the meaning of your life. He wants to ignite it in you through his Word. That is what we see in verses 20-21. Paul had a holy ambition: “I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named, so that I would not build on another man’s foundation.” What sustained this sense of calling and ambition? The Word of God. In the next verse (21) Paul quotes Isaiah 52:15, “As it is written, ‘They who had no news of Him shall see, and they who have not heard shall understand.’”

This is how it will be with many of you. You have heard the Word of God this morning and it has wakened or confirmed a longing from God. Fan it. Read *The Church is Bigger Than You Think* by Patrick Johnstone. Pray earnestly for God’s confirmation and help. Get connected with Bethlehem’s nurture program or

some support group that will stoke your mission embers. Go where you can go. Trust his promises.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>This sermon was originally preached on November 7, 1999, at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Reprinted with permission.

<sup>2</sup>Scripture quotations come from the New American Standard Bible (NASB).