

The Priestly Duty to Proclaim the Gospel
Romans 15:14-33
Key Verse: 15:16

"...to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles. He gave me the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit."

In today's passage, Paul shares his world mission vision with the Roman believers. He exhorts the Roman church to be a sending base for his journey to Spain. Paul articulated this vision after experiencing God's mighty work in Ephesus. He said, "I must visit Rome also" (Ac 19:21). Rome was a key strategic city for the evangelization of the whole world. However, the church at Rome was relatively small. By and large, Roman Christians were on the margins of society, struggling to survive. In greeting them by name in chapter 16, Paul mentions many women and several Jews. There must have been many slaves as well. There were not many prominent people. The Roman believers did not expect the world to change through them. They just gathered together for fellowship to comfort one another. They struggled with cultural differences. They seemed to be nothing but a small band of fringe people. But from God's point of view, they were very important. Paul shared God's plan for them so that they may have God's vision to be used greatly in his world salvation work. In this passage we can learn Paul's priestly duty to proclaim the gospel, his burning vision for God's mission, and his pioneering spirit. We sometimes feel like the Roman believers, struggling just to survive, especially in this time of economic downturn. Most people's main concern is how to get a good job, how to get out of debt, and how to manage many responsibilities. But God has a great plan for us. We need God's vision in our hearts. Let's accept God's plan and his vision for us today.

I. Paul, a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles (14-19)

In verses 14-15 Paul explained why he wrote his letter. Look at these verses. "I myself am convinced, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with knowledge, and competent to instruct one another. Yet I have written you quite boldly on some points to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me..." In many of his letters, Paul offers practical help to churches he had pioneered, pointing out their problems clearly. But in the case of the Roman church, Paul was convinced that they were doing well. They were full of goodness, filled with knowledge and competent to instruct one another. Goodness and knowledge are virtues that we must add to our faith. 2 Peter 1:5-7 tells us, "...make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love." Roman believers possessed these kinds of virtues. They were not childish people, they were quite mature. In the midst of a corrupted society they lived godly lives and were growing in goodness. They held firmly to the spiritual knowledge of salvation. There were many good Bible teachers among them. They had the attitude of learning from one another. But they needed something. Paul reminded them of the gospel with a full explanation so that they might stand firm in it. Furthermore, he shared with them God's vision so they would be used for God's world mission purpose.

Paul was confident to write this letter because of the grace God gave him. What was this grace? Look at verse 16. "...to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles. He gave me the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit." Paul's priestly duty was to proclaim the gospel of God. We need to think about the meaning of "priestly duty." The "priestly duty" is closely related to God's world salvation plan. This plan began in God's heart even before time began (Jn 1:1; Eph 1:4). It sprang from God's love, a love that determined to save mankind even at the cost of his one and only Son (Jn 3:16). It was manifest with the calling one man Abraham. When God called Abraham, it was not just to bless him personally, but to make him a blessing to the world. God told him, "I will make you into a great nation...and all nations on earth will be blessed through you." In his great plan, God trained Abraham for a long time until he fully trusted in God and his promises and obeyed his command absolutely. Then God established him as an ancestor of faith. Through his offspring, God wanted to bless all nations of the world. Based on this promise, God raised one nation Israel and trained them in Egypt for 400 years through hard labor as slaves. They cried out for help. Then God heard their groaning and remembered his promise and brought them out of Egypt by his mighty power. He led them to Mt.

Sinai. There he revealed his plan. God said in Exodus 19:5-6a: "Now if you obey me fully...you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

God wanted to save all people through one nation Israel. In order to teach the Israelites how to carry out the duty as a kingdom of priests, God chose the tribe of Levi among the twelve tribes of Israel, and set them apart for his service. It was a pattern that would also apply to the nation Israel among the nations of the world. Practically speaking, the priestly duty included teaching the word of God, intercessory prayer, and offering animal sacrifices to atone for their sins. The offering of these sacrifices was done at the temple, in the center of the nation, and it was the main job of the priests. The people could learn how to carry out the priestly duty from the Levites. The nation was to carry out this priestly duty to the Gentiles as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. That was God's plan.

However, the priests were not perfect, and their sacrifices were not perfect. They only looked forward to the coming of the Messiah. Moreover, the people of Israel failed to obey God's command. But God never failed. God kept his promise to Abraham. God made a new Israel through Jesus Christ. All who have faith in Christ Jesus became spiritual descendants of Abraham. Now Jesus is our High Priest. Jesus is our perfect sacrifice through his death on the cross. Believers can freely come to God through Jesus (Heb 10:19-20). At the same time, we can carry out the priestly duty to proclaim the gospel to unreached people. All believers, regardless of nationality, gender, ethnic group, skin color, educational or financial level, or any other human distinctive, are part of the new Israel and they are a kingdom of priests and holy nation. All believers are part of the royal priesthood with the duty of proclaiming the gospel of God. Of course, we no longer offer animals on the altar. In the New Testament, the priestly duty is to proclaim what God has done for us in Christ. 1 Peter 2:9 says, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." Revelation 1:6 says, "...and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father--to him be the glory and power forever and ever! Amen." When we pray for North America to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, we are not asking for a new Christendom, but for the kingdom of God to expand in our continent. The same is true for all other continents. May the kingdom of God expand in Europe, the CIS, Latin America, the Middle East, Asia, Africa, Oceania. All believers are members of God's holy nation and are all called to be a royal priesthood. God's nation is different than any other nation in the world. God is our King. Christ is our High Priest and our Head. This is the church. There is one holy, universal, apostolic church, and Christ is supreme over all.

This priestly duty was not a human idea, but God's idea. It did not arise out of a human sense of problem, but out of God's sense of problem. God alone knew what mankind really needed. God is holy and people are sinful. God sent Jesus as our Mediator, and appoints those who believe in Jesus to share his priestly duty by proclaiming the gospel. This priestly duty is given by God. It is holy and glorious. Exodus 28 describes the priestly garment which the priests wore. It was made of blue, purple and scarlet yarn. It bore twelve kinds of precious stones which symbolized the twelve tribes of Israel. It was sacred and beautiful. This tells how glorious the priestly duty is. In Romans 10:15, Paul quoted Isaiah, saying, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" Among the body parts, the feet may be the most unattractive. However, when we serve the priestly duty to bring the good news to people, even our feet become beautiful. When people hear the gospel they are saved from eternal condemnation. They are changed from useless people into useful men and women of God. In the past they were burdensome troublemakers. But after accepting the gospel they became a blessing. What good news!

Proclaiming the gospel is not just speaking a message without any responsibility. Paul said in verse 16b, "...so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit." An offering acceptable to God means that the Gentiles become obedient to God through the gospel, accepting Christ as their Lord and Savior. Gentiles were used to living in unbelief, rebellion and disobedience, according to their sinful desires. They had no concept of obedience to God or holiness. It seemed impossible that they could be men and women of obedience, an offering acceptable to God. However, Paul shared the gospel message without compromise. And he helped them not just to enjoy salvation, but to obey God. Then the Holy Spirit worked in their hearts and changed them into men and women who obeyed God. How could Paul do that? It was because he himself was a man of obedience. A man of obedience can give birth to another man of obedience. In verse 18 Paul said, "...by what I have said and done." Paul

not only proclaimed the message, but demonstrated the example of gospel living. Then God supported his message with signs and wonders by the power of the Spirit of God. In this way, Paul fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, which is on the modern day Balkan Peninsula. For this purpose, he made three missionary journeys.

These days many people think that it is not easy to carry out the priestly duty. However, the season of Christ is coming. Due to the economic downturn, people have become spiritually hungry and thirsty. They are ready to hear the good news about Jesus. At the Well Conference, many young people earnestly sought God. They responded to the truth about God and want to do something for the glory of God. The season of Christ is coming. Last week there was a tragic school shooting in Ohio, which claimed the lives of three students. Coach Frank Hall risked his own life to confront the shooter and prevent further loss of life. Afterward, in a press conference he said, "To the families of Danny, Dimitrius and Russell, I want you to know that I was with them. I prayed for them. I wiped their tears. I know that God was with them." The season of Christ is coming, not only to the USA, but to the Middle East, and many other places. People need the good news. When we carry out the priestly duty, God is pleased and confirms our work with the power of the Holy Spirit. So let's carry out this glorious priestly duty.

In verses 17-19, Paul boasts about what Christ has done through his service to God. Paul's boasting was not to bring glory to himself. It was advertising what Christ had done through him in leading the Gentiles to obey God. Most people boast about themselves or their children endlessly. It is hard to listen to this; sometimes it is unbearable. But when people talk about what God has done we are very glad to hear it. We want to hear more. So let's boast about what God has done.

II. Paul's vision to go to Spain (20-33)

In verses 20-22 Paul shared his ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known. It was not selfish ambition; it was sacred ambition. It was not for his own honor, but for God's honor. This ambition did not come from his own idea. It came from God through his word. Verse 21 says, "Rather, as it is written: Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand." Paul was eager to preach the gospel in Rome to those who had never heard. However, he had often been hindered in going to them. But he did not give up. He had a burning desire to preach the gospel to them (Ro 1:13). This is what we should learn from Paul. Paul had God's heart for the lost. God is not willing that any should perish, but wants everyone to come to salvation (1 Ti 2:4; 2 Pe 3:9). There are many unreached people in the world who are calling out for help, like the man in Paul's dream who begged, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (Ac 16:9). Let's pray that we may share God's heart and have a sacred ambition to share the gospel with the lost.

In verses 23-29 Paul shares his plan. Paul was writing from Corinth on his way to Jerusalem to deliver an offering from the Gentile churches. There was great meaning in this. The Jerusalem Christians, who were suffering from poverty, would feel the love of Gentile brothers and sisters through the generous offering. In making this offering, the Gentile believers respected the Jews, whom God had used as the root of gospel work. The Gentiles could show gratitude and humility. In this way they could overcome their cultural barriers and conflicts with the love of Christ and be one. Then they could glorify God. After completing this historical task, Paul wanted to go to Rome. After visiting the Romans he wanted to go to Spain. He wanted the Roman church to become the sending church for his missionary journey to Spain.

In verse 23 Paul said, "...there is no more place for me to work in these regions." It seems that he completed his mission. Thus far, he had really worked hard, risking his life many times. He proclaimed the gospel from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum. He raised many leaders who were working hard in the cities throughout the Roman Empire. His fruit was remarkable. Now, it was time to retire and enjoy the fruits of his labors. He could find a nice house on the Mediterranean Sea and spend his mornings writing his memoirs, watching the harbor activity. He could have lived as a Christian celebrity, touring around the churches and giving special lectures. But he did not retire. He

was not complacent. He was eager to visit Rome and share spiritual blessings with them. But that was not the end. He planned to go to Spain, which they thought to be the ends of the earth. In fact, according to Mother Barry, who once visited there, there is a large rock with the words inscribed, "The ends of the earth." He wanted to obey Jesus' world mission command to be his witness to the ends of the earth (Ac 1:8). He wanted the Roman church to assist him on his journey as a missionary-sending church. Here we learn Paul's pioneering spirit. When we think about Paul, we never picture him as a doddering old man who should go to a nursing home. Instead, we remember him as a dynamic and passionate man with pioneering spirit. Pioneering spirit always refreshes and renews us like flowing water. But if we lose pioneering spirit we become complacent, useless and corrupt, like stagnant water filled with bacteria. There is no joy of life, but rather complaining, sorrow and regret. However, when we are full of pioneering spirit we experience joy and life-giving spirit.

At the age of 70, Dr. Joseph and Esther Chung left their established ministry and medical career in the United States and went to Uganda as "silver missionaries." Before leaving, Dr. Chung shared his testimony, confessing petty desires to enjoy retirement by playing with grandchildren without any responsibility, and by taking advantage of senior discounts in restaurants. But he decided to live as a man of pioneering spirit to the end. He experienced many inconveniences in Uganda, such as the constant failures of the electrical system. But through this he learned how to wait for the second coming of Christ--he may come any moment. Moreover, after he went to Uganda, the number of one-to-one Bible studies increased 300%. Pioneering spirit enables us to overcome our weaknesses and hardships and to live victoriously. Pioneering spirit empowers us to do anything. So when God created mankind, he gave us the mission to fill the earth and subdue it. When we have a pioneering spirit we can live meaningful and fruitful lives. This principle applies not only to individuals, but also to communities and nations. Let's pray that we may have a pioneering spirit individually, as a community, and as a nation.

Finally, Paul urges Roman believers, by the Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit to join him in his struggle by praying to God for him (30). His first prayer topic was that he may be kept safe from those who refused to believe in Judea. When Paul defended his Gentile sheep with the gospel, denying that circumcision was necessary for salvation, many among the circumcision group were offended. They began to hate Paul and wanted to discredit him, thinking he was destroying their tradition, and was a traitor to his own people. In fact, when Paul went to Jerusalem, forty people took an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed him. Paul asked the Romans to pray for him to be saved from such people in order to carry out his mission. Paul's second prayer topic was that the contribution he took to the believers in Jerusalem would be favorably received by them. He wanted them to overcome their Judaism and embrace the Gentiles as God's children, respecting them and receiving help from them. Paul's third prayer topic was that after delivering the offering, he may go to the Romans with joy and in their company be refreshed. Paul considered the Roman believers as his prayer partners and urged them to pray. Then he finished his letter with a prayer of blessing: "The God of peace be with you all. Amen."

In this passage we have learned that we believers have a glorious priestly duty to proclaim the gospel of God to those who have not heard. We do not deserve this great blessing. As 1 Peter 2:10 says, "Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." In his great mercy, God called us out of darkness into his wonderful light. At the same time, he gave us apostleship to be ministers of Christ Jesus. Now we are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession. We should not just enjoy God's blessing, but share his blessing of salvation with others. Our Lord Jesus saved us so that he might use us to carry out his priestly duty to proclaim the gospel, and help people to obey God, so that they may grow as God's children. This is the most glorious mission. Let's carry out this priestly duty with God's vision and a pioneering spirit.