

A Plea for Ambitious Evangelicals

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Union University Chapel

March 8, 2013

Well, good morning to each one of you. If you have a Bible, turn with me to the tail end of the truly magnificent and magisterial letter of Paul's to the Romans, chapter 15. Here, Paul is giving some practical explanations to conclude really what is Paul's systematic theology. After he has explained what is the gospel, in this chapter Paul says how he intends to come to see these believers in Rome, though he does not plan to stay but to press on and go to Spain. Paul is saying, "I have more work to do. I'm ambitious to do more things." So follow with me if you will, Romans 15 starting in verse 17.

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." (Romans 15:17-21 ESV)

On Location in Myanmar

I can still remember it as if it happened this morning. I was standing in the middle of a field in the middle of the country of Myanmar, amid the tallest weeds that you have ever seen, weeds so tall that they came above my head. It was as if I was going through my own Narnian wardrobe—sort of working through the weeds to try to come out on the other side. I remember it like it was yesterday because I can still remember a man's distinct voice pleading with me, and I can still see him as he's crying, tears running down his face and his body shaking because he is asking me and a friend of mine to make a promise to him—a promise I am not so sure that we can keep.

This was a few years ago when I traveled to Myanmar after teaching for a while in the country of Malaysia. I specifically had gone to Myanmar to do some research on a pioneer American missionary, a man named Adoniram Judson, who two-hundred years ago, in 1812, left America for the very first time and became the first pioneering missionary to take the gospel to the Burmese.¹ I was in Myanmar trying to find the location of a place where Judson was imprisoned for almost two years where he suffered horrific pain and endured unbelievable hardship for the sake of the gospel. I was trying to find this location because the Myanmar government wanted nothing to do with Judson and they had sought to eradicate any aspect of his life in the country.

¹ See Jason G. Duesing, ed., *Adoniram Judson: A Bicentennial Appreciation of the Pioneer American Missionary* (B&H Academic, 2012).

So, there I was traveling with my suitcase through long dusty cab rides up to and near the city of Mandalay when we came to the edge of a river. There with a translator and a taxi driver, just as I am wondering how we will find our way across, along comes a long, rickety boat, with a homemade propeller on the end connected to what looked like a lawnmower. In the middle of this ferry, the owners had fashioned crates on which to sit as half of the boat was filled with water. We boarded and made our way across to an island only to find some further intriguing form of transportation. Standing before me was a horse-drawn carriage with a very small traveling compartment. I climbed up with my luggage and we rode along through very bumpy terrain.

Out of the woods alongside us came an older man who looked to be in his seventies. I would later find out he was ninety-two. As I did not speak the language, my translator talked to him and asked whether he knew the location of Adoniram Judson's prison. He said, "I know where that used to be and I can take you there." We traveled further along the bumpy road, and came to a clearing surrounded by a wall of weeds. These plants were so enormous that we could not see through them or beyond them. We literally had to carve our way with me trailing with my suitcase, in classic out-of-place-American fashion, sort of wheeling it through, and finally we arrived at an opening.

I had been researching the life of Judson for some time and thus had an idea of what to look for when searching for the location of the prison. One account said surrounding the prison were three trees near an old palace wall. Sure enough, just as I had read, the old man brought us right to the exact location.

At that moment, I was unbelievably pumped. I cannot describe to you how excited I was. I put all my things down, pulled out my iPhone, and for the next five minutes I thought I was NBC's Brian Williams on location. I walked along making my own video saying, in an official voice, "Today, we are in the place of the imprisonment of Adoniram Judson ..." As I continued, I was lost in the moment, just unbelievably consumed that I found this hidden site of history. That day proved incredibly important for my research and the things I was writing to try to tell Judson's story for a new generation. And, it was the closest thing this seminary history professor will ever get to the National Treasure movies. It was awesome.

Yet, as I was concluding my video recording and other data gathering, my thoughts were interrupted because I heard a growing impassioned conversation between my translator and the old man. They were talking in their native language and they were going back and forth and the old man's voice was escalating and I thought, "What did we do? Did we offend him? What's going on?" The old man was shaking and I heard him saying the same phrase over and over

again pleading with my translator. Pleading and pleading and pleading. I stood there helpless, wondering what in the world was going on.

What Are You All About?

The title of my message today is “A Plea for Ambitious Evangelicals.” The word ambition in our 21st century, especially American, culture gets thrown around and used in many ways. For those of us who are seeking to follow God and are concerned with godliness and holiness, oftentimes the word ambition gets shuttled aside as a bad thing—a self-seeking thing or a selfish kind of thing. But Paul used the word ambition here in Romans 15 by harnessing it and putting it in its proper context and direction. Just as that old man was pleading with me, today I am here in a sense to plea with you to be ambitious, to be an ambitious evangelical for the right things, for the things Paul is talking about here.

I’m 38 years old. Soon I will turn 40 and I do not know if this is the way it is with you but every time I come up on a new decade I think a lot about what did I do in the last decade and ask, “Have I really done anything?” and “What do I want to do in the next decade?” I went through this when I was in my twenties in college. What do I want my twenties to be known for, or my thirties, or my forties? I’ve been thinking a lot about this and ultimately asking myself the question, “If you had to boil it all down, what is the most important thing to me? What am I all about? What is my driving ambition?”

There are really two ways to figure this out, two tests. Test Number One, I can ask others who know me what they think I am all about. Or I can look inwardly, Test Number Two, and ask myself some questions.

Test Number One goes like this: you ask other people who know you, “If you had to tell someone what is my driving ambition, what would that be?” In my context, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary is a unique place full of diverse people who are corporately passionate about preaching the gospel and taking the gospel to the ends of the earth. We all have this shared DNA, but it is otherwise a very diverse place. For example, our president, Paige Patterson, is a big game hunter. You walk into his office and there are heads of animals all over the walls. One of our vice presidents, Thomas White, who is a black belt in karate, is known for hunting anything that moves at any point in time, no matter the location, sometimes if it is legal or not. Thus, what is talked about a lot on campus is the television show *Duck Dynasty*, and therefore there is very much a *Duck Dynasty* culture at Southwestern.

Well, you do not know me, but needless to say, I do not really fit into that culture. I am not what you would call, by any stretch, Mr. Duck Dynasty. You have a wonderful dean here, Greg Thornbury, who is known for wearing bowties, right? “Solidarity” bow ties that you all are wear in solidarity for the gospel. On my campus, what I am oddly known for is wearing green socks.

My favorite color is green and through gifts and other means it happens I have a whole drawer full of green socks. When you are a professor like me and are in front of people teaching in classrooms or sitting up on stage in chapel, people will happen to see your socks. Because they are green, people ask about them. After a few weeks, it turns into a thing where I am known for wearing green socks. Thus, at Southwestern Seminary if you ask somebody what I am all about, you might hear, “Well he is the professor who wears green socks.” Or what you might hear is “Well he is not Mr. Duck Dynasty, he is actually more Mr. Downton Abbey who wears green socks.” I do not dress like the Duck Dynasty guys. I don’t have a big beard. I wear green socks and British dress shirts.

So, using Test Number One, to determine what is your driving ambition is not always a good test, depending on who you ask. While others may come close at times, they are not really going to get to the core of who you really are. At best, you might get varying degrees of sort of surface answers. But Test Number Two, if you ask yourself the right questions about yourself, you can get to the core of who you are to determine what are your true ambitions.

A few years ago, I heard a sermon by John Piper speaking to college students at one of the Passion conferences. He was walking through this sort of Test Number Two thinking. He said something along the lines of “You give me a college student and by asking them a few questions, we can get to the core of what they are all about.” Ask them,

“What is your major?”

“My major is nursing.”

“Why are you majoring in nursing?”

“I majored in nursing because I wanted to help people.”

“Why do you want to help people?”

“I want to help people because it will make the world a better place.”

“Why do you want to make the world a better place?”

“I want to make the world a better place because it brings me joy, it makes me happy.”

“Why do you want to be happy? Why does it bring you joy?”

“Well, it brings me joy because I know I am doing something that I have been gifted to do.”

“Why do you want to do something you have been gifted to do?”

“I want to do something that I have been gifted to do because I want to be used by God.”

“Why do you want to be used by God?”

“I want to be used by God because I love God, I want to glorify God, and I want to see his name exalted among the earth as the waters cover the sea.”

And John Piper says, “That is it.”

You press hard enough, and ask enough questions and you will get down to the bottom of what are you all about. You can discern your true ambition. What is your true ambition? Why is it you do what you do? Why are you doing what you are doing?

As I am approaching 40, I'm still asking myself all these questions. If you really want to know me and truly get to people at Southwestern who do know me, aside from the Downton Abbey exterior and the green socks and all these other silly things, I hope that at the core you will see that I am doing what I am doing because I am passionate about seeing people going out to the ends of the earth and knocking on the doors of people who have never heard the gospel or the name of Jesus Christ in their entire lives. They don't have access to it, they have never seen a Bible, they have never heard its words, and to them we are taking the gospel for the very first time. Whatever it takes to see that accomplished, at the end of the day, is what I am all about. My dream job in many ways would be in some sort of position where regularly throughout the year I am able to take my family to different parts of the world and simply encourage those folks that God has called to put on the front lines, if not go there myself, to encourage them in the task to say, "What you are doing is of preeminent importance. What you are doing is really what matters in the world. What you are doing glorifies God. What you are doing is expanding the kingdom. What you are doing is bringing the message of the gospel to people who need it more than anything else."

What is at the core of your heart if you peeled away the layers? Ask those who know you the best. If you ask yourself the why question enough times, what is at the core of your heart?

What I want to show you here in this passage, Romans 15:17-21, is the Apostle Paul's ambition and that this is not just reserved for Paul, it is an ambition to be shared by all evangelicals, all Christians, all people who love the name of Christ. Whether you ever leave this country and become a missionary or not, this should be the ambition, this should be the core of who we are. So let's see if Paul's argument is convincing to us.

Paul Has Fulfilled the Ministry of the Gospel Where He Is

In Romans 15: 17-19, we see number one that Paul is simply explaining that he has fulfilled the ministry of the gospel where he is. Look back at verse 17, *in Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God*. This is Paul doing a unique thing, he is boasting. If you know anything about Paul, he has this whole theology about boasting, which is in short, "don't boast.". If you boast anything, you boast in the Lord. Galatians 6:14, *But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world*.

So we are not supposed to boast, but here in Romans 15:17 Paul is boasting: *I have reason to be proud of my work for God*. He explains what he means in verses 18 and 19. He says, *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. These little passing phrases, these descriptors, are showing that Paul’s ministry consisted not only in the proclaiming of the Word, certainly that was the core of what he was doing, but also showing how he lived his life as he proclaimed the Word. He references all the supernatural things that God had done to accompany his work and his ministry and he is saying he has every reason to be proud of this work for God alone has done it.

Paul concludes in verse 19 with an intriguing statement, saying here specifically that the ministry that he has had over the years has been fulfilled. It is complete. It is done. He says, *that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ.* Here Paul is giving us a little geography lesson. He mentions Jerusalem—a city, a town, and a place that hopefully all of us could locate on a map, and then Illyricum—a city, a town, and a place that probably none of us could place on a map. I had to look it up to be able to explain it to you today.

Let me give you some sense of the geographic region he’s talking about that he is saying where the ministry has been fulfilled. If you take the Mediterranean Sea and all the countries that surround it and you overlay it in your mind on the United States of America. And let’s say that the location of the city of Atlanta is where Jerusalem is, well Illyricum would be the equivalent distance, give or take, of Kansas City, Missouri. Paul is saying basically from, if you follow with me here, Atlanta all the way around to Kansas City, and the word there for “all the way around” means in a circle, so he is drawing a circle that includes the two cities. What Paul is essentially saying is that “the furthest east I have ever been is Jerusalem, and the furthest west I have ever been is Illyricum. All the way around in that circle between these two cities, the ministry has been fulfilled.” Paul is saying, “Everywhere I have been up until this point of my life, the ministry has been fulfilled.” He has fully preached the gospel of Christ.

The idea here is not that every person in that region, as big as it is, is now a Christian. We know that is not the case. But he is saying that all the people in this region now have access to the gospel: “I have sown seeds and churches have started and there are preachers there who will continue the work, and are going to continue to work so that everyone in this huge region now has access to the gospel of Christ. The gospel has been preached here, the ministry has been fulfilled, and it’s now self-sustaining.” In our language today we would call this region “reached,” and no longer unreached.

Just as a side point, unless you think I am going to end this by saying that everyone needs to be a missionary, I am not because even in this statement Paul is saying that there are people that have to stay in these reached regions and build up these churches and train up other people to go out. There has to be people who will stay. Paul says, “I planted the seed, other people are going to

come water and see it grow.” Paul is just saying that this region is now reached. He is moving on from there to places that are unreached. So we see in verses 17-19 that Paul has fulfilled the ministry where he is.

Paul Desires to Preach Not Where Christ Is Already Named

In Romans 15:20 we see Paul’s desire is not to continue to preach where Christ is already named. He says, *and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named.* Paul is speaking with unbelievable clarity. The gospel has been fulfilled and preached where he is, and he has a desire not to stay there anymore. He says, “I don’t want to stay where Christ has already been named, *lest I build on someone else’s foundation.*” In this verse, we come to our key word for the entire message. We see Paul’s ambition to preach not where Christ has already been named. The word conveys the idea of “making it his aim” and shows exactly where Paul is focused. It is what I was talking about earlier when I asked if you peel away all the layers, what are you really about? Paul is saying, “My ambition here is not only to preach the gospel but also to do it where Christ has not been named. That is my core ambition.”

Paul is saying, I am here to preach *the gospel.*” We shouldn’t just glance over that phrase “the gospel.” It is a phrase that we use and have heard and have read, but do not mistake the relevance of what is happening here by him mentioning it in the Bible itself. Paul the Apostle, writing to the Romans, is saying, “My task is to preach the gospel. That is what I am all about. I am preaching the gospel.” Is the gospel that Paul is preaching the same gospel we preach and share?

If you just take Paul’s letters alone and examine him explaining what is the gospel, Paul believes that in all of humanity, every single person, falls into two simple categories: those people who are lost and those people who are saved. Apart from the gospel, no one has hope and they are without God (Eph 2:12). Paul spells this out very clearly and he says that the only way you can move from being a lost person to a saved person is not through righteousness of your own, for he says in Romans 3:10-11, there is no one who is righteous. But, while we all were unrighteous in our sin, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8) in order to give us his alien righteousness. To move from being in a position of being judged by God for your sins to a position of being absolved by God because your sins are forgiven through Christ comes only when you have Christ’s righteousness (Phil 3:9). Martin Luther, the great reformer, once said Christ’s righteousness “serves us like an umbrella against the heat of God’s wrath.” Like an umbrella to which you cling and that covers you to reflect and protect you from the wrath of God, the imputed righteousness of Christ comes as a free gift, even though we all have sinned (Rom 6:23). In Romans 10, Paul says that if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. You will no longer be lost. You will be found.

But, Paul says that the proclamation of this gospel is the only way people can be saved. So for the billions of people on earth who have not heard the gospel, they are still lost unless they hear the gospel, repent of their sins and receive Christ's righteousness. So if we have two kinds of people in the world, lost and saved, and the only way to go from being lost to being saved is to hear the message of Jesus and believe in it, and have Christ's righteousness, the natural question comes up, "How are all of these people going to hear about this great message?" Well, Paul explains in Romans 10:14-17 that the people of the world will not hear unless someone goes and tells them.

Paul's Ambition Is to Preach to Those Who Have Never Heard

Paul's ambition to preach the gospel was wrapped up first in his understanding of what is the gospel. He then understood that it required him to press on to go to those who have never heard and then on from there to others who have never heard. Look finally at Romans 15:21. Paul's ambition is defined further as, through a quotation of Isaiah 52, he says, *Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.* He's reaching back in the Old Testament to the wonderful chapters in Isaiah 52 and 53, where Isaiah is foretelling of the suffering servant, the Messiah who will come. Paul is acknowledging, but his use of this verse under the divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that with the coming of Jesus Christ, the day foretold in Isaiah has come. Paul explains that these people need to hear of this Messiah, that they have never heard but they are going to hear about this Messiah. He lifts up Isaiah 52:15 and puts it into place in his context and it drives him to take the gospel to those who have never heard. This is Paul's ambition.

So what does this mean today for you and me? Let me you a couple of questions:

Has or is the gospel been preached where you live?

Do people regularly have access to the gospel if they want it where you live?

Is that a place where Christ is regularly named?

Do people have easy access to the gospel?

Are there still people in the world then, who have never heard the gospel, never heard the name of Jesus?

Now, let me conclude by giving you just two brief facts and two quick illustrations. Fact number one: statistics from the U.S. Center for World Mission explain that of the 7 billion people in the world, 4 billion live in regions that are reached or have access to the gospel. Among those 4 billion, 90% of all evangelical missionaries are working. The reverse is true then that among the remaining nearly 3 billion people that are unreached and have no access to the gospel, only 10% of missionaries are working.²

² Justin Taylor, "Praying for the Unreached Peoples of the World," March 15, 2010, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2010/03/15/praying-for-the-unreached-peoples-of-the-world/>

Fact number two: a ministry called Open Doors USA comes out every January with list of the top 50 most persecuted countries. The top 5 for 2013 are North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia.³ All of those are places where persecution of Christians is the greatest, where the majority of people are unreached, and where there are the fewest evangelical missionaries working. That is an easy-to-see mismatch, but there is a logical solution.

Illustration number one: William Carey, the pioneer Baptist missionary, father of the modern missions movement, when writing his treatise to encourage people to go overseas said, “Should not believers have at least much concern for the souls of their fellow sinners as the traders have for profits arising from a few otter skins?” He was talking about the fur industry and how people were going all around the world for to acquire fur, but Christians struggled to get people to go all around the world to share the gospel.

What does this mean for our context? An early chairman of Coca-Cola set out as his goal to see a bottle of Coke within “an arm’s reach of desire” of every person on the globe. That was their mandate. And today they’ve basically achieved that.⁴ The people group to which Carey was beginning to work in the early 19th century, the Bengali people today still are the most unreached people group in the world numbering some 240 million. And, just this last year, in 2012, Coca-Cola invested \$50 million to open its first plant in Bangladesh among those same people.⁵ So Coca-Cola, as great as a company as that is, is willing to invest resources to send employees and their families, educate them, and to put them in hard and difficult places, all for what? To give more people in the world a carbonated, brown, sugary drink. Yet, we evangelicals are often wrestling with whether it is worth it to encourage people to leave families and comforts to learn another language, to go among other peoples to do what? To give them the only thing that will save them for all eternal life.

A Plea for Ambitious Evangelicals

What is your ambition? If you peel away the layers, at its core, what do you find there? Did you know that most missionaries do not grow up wanting to be a missionary? Did you know that the greatest supporters of missions who still reside in reached areas did not grow up wanting to be the greatest supporters of missionaries? Most people who have a heart to see God’s name taken to the ends of the earth, come to that conclusion by voluntary choice usually sometime in college or perhaps in seminary. That is when they decide “This is what I am going to be all about. No matter what I do, whether I am a doctor or a nurse, or an agricultural worker or a banker, or whatever else. At the core, if you peel it all back what you are going to find for me is a pooling

³ <http://www.worldwatchlist.us/>

⁴ Jason G. Duesing, “Throwing Our Hats Over the Wall,” June 13, 2012, <http://www.theologicalmatters.com/index.php/2012/06/13/throwing-our-hats-over-the-wall/>

⁵ “Coca-Cola to Invest \$50 Million in Bangladesh,” January 2, 2012, <http://www.defence.pk/forums/bangladesh-defence/150814-coca-cola-invest-50million-bangladesh.html>

of resources no matter what, through prayer, or sending, or going myself, to see that this task is accomplished, to see that the gospel is taken to people at the ends of the earth.”

I am here to plead with you today. It is a plea to be an ambitious evangelical. Remember the old man in Myanmar I mentioned at the beginning who was pleading with me? Do you know what he was saying? At one time, at the lost prison location, there used to be a huge stone monument honoring Adoniram Judson. The government, in an effort to eradicate all knowledge of Judson’s legacy, had the monument buried. So on that day, the old man was pleading with my friend and me. He said, “If the political situation in his country ever changes, promise me, promise me, promise me that you all will come back and dig up this monument so that a new generation of people in Myanmar can learn about Judson.” He pled with us simply to promise to come back to tell his people about a missionary, about a man. As I thought about this, as great as his desire is, that testimony of Judson alone really does very little. What he does not need is a new generation of Myanmar people learning about Judson. What he needs is new generation of ambitious Judson’s to come and tell these people about Jesus.

What is your ambition? I plead with you today as much as that man was pleading me that you become an ambitious evangelical to see the gospel taken to the ends of the earth.

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