**THE PRIESTLY DUTY OF PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL OF GOD**

**(Romans 15:14-33)**

***“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.” (16b)***

We are nearing the end of our Romans studies. At this point in his letter, Paul turns to more personal matters, including his plan to visit the church in Rome. But we must not think today’s passage has nothing important to say to us. On the contrary, when Paul opens up about his real-world concerns and goals, we get an authentic look at this extraordinary servant of God. What especially jumps out to me is his acute sense of God’s calling. One’s calling, the single driving force behind one’s life, is very important for every Christian. Do you have God’s calling in your life? Can you define God’s calling for your life in one concise statement? No matter where we are in our Christian walk, it is imperative that we continually revisit our calling so we can reevaluate where we’re headed. Through today’s passage, let’s especially think about our individual calling through Paul’s example and our corporate calling through the example of the Roman church.

Look at verses 14-15a. ***“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…”*** Paul took great pride in the Roman church, whose beautiful faith was an example to the world (Ro 1:8). They were steadily maturing in Christ in the midst of many pressures and temptations. But Paul knew that no Christian can remain spiritually healthy without being constantly reminded of the truths of the gospel. For the gospel, like the ocean, is accessible enough for a small child to wade in, yet profound enough that even the greatest theologian cannot exhaust its depths.

Paul reveals the motivation behind his instruction in verses 15b-16a. ***“…because of the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles.”*** Paul passionately expounded upon the Scriptures because he was convinced that this was God’s calling for his life. So what exactly is “calling”, biblically speaking? A popular definition comes from Os Guinness’ book “The Call”. He writes, “…calling is the truth that God calls us to himself so decisively that everything we are, everything we do, and everything we have is invested with a special devotion, dynamism, and direction lived out as a response to his summons and service.” In other words, the only reason there is a calling is because there is a Caller. First and foremost, God calls all believers to himself, to share a love relationship with him forever. This “primary” calling is the same for all Christians. At the same time, God gives each believer a unique calling, in which *every aspect* of our lives is meant to be lived out according to his purpose. For this, God calls us to specific tasks in a specific place and time. Such unique callings are based on the gifts God has entrusted to us as well as some need that needs to be met in the world. Think about the way in which God called Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Isaiah and Peter. God personally called them to himself to begin a love relationship with him. At the same time, this cannot be separated from the beautiful mission God entrusted to each of them. Meeting God personally turns our lives upside-down and reveals who we really are and what we were made to do.

Paul understood this so well. He was a violent persecutor of the church until the Risen Christ met him in a blinding light on the road to Damascus. Jesus forgave Paul’s sins, initiated a love relationship with him and revealed, almost immediately, that he would be God’s instrument to proclaim his name among the Gentiles. Paul embraced this calling with all his heart. He was so thankful for God’s forgiveness and for discovering the special purpose for which God created him. That’s why he could say, ***“…because of the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles.”*** Paul delighted in opening people’s minds to the depths of the riches of the glory of God. Do you want to know your life’s calling—a unifying, all-encompassing, God-given directive for your life? Do you want to make a difference for God’s kingdom? There’s so much we can learn from Paul. Let’s especially think about four essential aspects of calling.

*First, God’s calling is so glorious.* Let’s read verse 16b all together. ***“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.”*** What does Paul mean when he refers to his ministry as a “priestly duty”? Think back to the priesthood in Old Testament times. Priests were called to serve as mediators between God and his people. Their responsibilities included teaching God’s word, shepherding the lost, offering intercessory prayers for the people and offering animal sacrifices to atone for sins. The high priest had the most important role, atoning for all the people’s sins annually on the cover of the ark of the covenant. The priesthood was indeed a glorious calling. However, it should be noted that God’s calling extended to all the people of Israel. Exodus 19:5-6a read, *“Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”* God was calling all Israel to serve as priests and mediators to the rest of the world.

How then is ***“proclaiming the gospel of God”*** a priestly duty? In the New Testament era, the priesthood finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. As detailed in the Book of Hebrews, Jesus is our perfect High Priest. He gave his own life to atone for all our sins once-and-for-all on the cross. After completing his mission, he sat down at the right hand of the Father in heaven and is now actively interceding for us. As his followers, all Christians are called to the glorious role of serving as “priests” under Jesus. We are still called to serve as mediators between God and his people, but now everything centers around Christ: we are called to teach people the gospel, we are called to shepherd the lost with Jesus’ shepherd heart, we are called to intercede for others to know Christ personally, and we are called to lead people to the cross, where they can meet the Lamb of God who atoned for their sins. As we carry out these duties, we grow in Jesus’ glorious image. That’s why Peter could say to his fellow Christians, *“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” (1 Peter 2:9-10).* All of us, at all times, and in everything we do, are called to this Christ-centered life of purpose.

With this in mind, Paul saw Gentiles converts as the most precious offering he could give to God. So he devoted his life to proclaiming the gospel until they could be born again and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Only then could they be an offering “acceptable” to God. Paul gave up so much and suffered so many hardships to serve in this way. But he knew that his heavenly reward was incomparably greater than whatever it cost him in this life. If we want our lives to matter, if we want to receive God’s reward, we must understand the eternal glory of our priestly calling. The truth is that we cannot take anything with us when we die other that our relationship with God and other believers. There is no calling more noble or more important than carrying out the priestly duty of our Lord Jesus Christ.

*Second, God’s calling is God’s power working through us.* Now look at verses 17-18. ***“Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done…”*** Here the word “glory” means to “joyfully boast”. Despite Paul’s vast ministry efforts, he refused to take any credit for himself. Rather, he joyfully boasted that it was all what *Christ* had accomplished through him. Paul never forgot how Jesus turned his life around 180 degrees from doing everything in his power to destroy the Church to being its greatest champion. This prevented Paul from getting a big head. While this may not seem all that significant at first, it is vital when it comes to one’s calling. Because God’s calling is so glorious and utilizes our greatest gifts, there is a real danger of becoming conceited and twisting God’s calling to satisfy our own evil desires. Dorothy Sayers, a famous Christian writer, once shared, “The devilish strategy of Pride is that it attacks us, not in our weakest points, but in our strongest. It is preeminently the sin of the noble mind.”

But when we live out our calling knowing it is all by God’s grace, by his divine power working through us, everything is different. Paul continues in verse 19a, ***“…by the power of signs and wonders, through the power of the Spirit of God.”*** As Paul proclaimed the gospel among unknowing Gentiles, God validated his message with miraculous signs and wonders. As detailed in the Book of Acts, Paul healed the lame, raised the dead, escaped from prison through an earthquake, survived a shipwreck and experienced God’s help in countless other ways. Such evidences of God’s grace and power as we live out our calling allow us to meet God on the deepest of levels. Although I’ve never performed any miracles like Paul, I can certainly testify that God has done things for me that I know were impossible on my own. Like when God gave me freedom from my lust problem and led me to break off an ungodly relationship within the same day. Or when God recently answered my prayers for Brendan to return to Bible study, something I never imagined would happen. Even as I struggled to prepare this message, God continuously gave me divine strength and wisdom to write every time I submitted to him in prayer. Our calling is not about us. It’s about meeting God, walking with God and doing what pleases God. We are instruments in his hands. So we can fully trust in him and depend on him to manifest his power and wisdom. It’s all by his grace. Let’s remember that the God of the universe is with us at all times and pursue the most exciting life of serving his will.

*Third, God’s calling is so urgent.* Look at verses 19b-21. ***“So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ. It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation. Rather, as it is written: ‘Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand.’”*** Paul’s first three missionary journeys brought the gospel to every corner of the eastern Mediterranean. It’s obvious that his zeal for mission stemmed from his extreme sense of urgency. Paul clearly understood the gospel as man’s most urgent need. He wouldn’t allow for his own inaction to account for someone else’s eternal destruction. Like an ambulance driver bringing dying patients to the hospital, Paul did whatever he could to bring perishing souls to Christ before it was too late. His compassion is a reflection of our Lord’s broken heart for the lost. During his earthly ministry, Jesus wept over the spiritually dying crowds, who were *“harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd”*. He told his disciples, *“The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Mt 9:37-38).* A need so great and so urgent demands the very best we have to offer.

Paul’s sense of urgency filled him with what we call a “pioneering spirit”. He was most troubled at the thought of distant strangers who had zero chance of hearing the gospel apart from his help. So he made it his godly ambition to bring the gospel where Christ was not known, planting new churches in Gentile territory. This work of “laying a foundation” requires immense courage, perseverance, and long-term vision. Yet Paul was convinced that God had specifically gifted him and called him for this task. Successfully carrying out God’s unique plan for his life was so fulfilling. He says in 1 Corinthians 3:10a, *“By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it.”* Once Paul laid a foundation, he knew that God would continue the work through precious co-workers.

We must ask ourselves: Do we share God’s sense of urgency? Do we see the world’s desperate need for Christ and take responsibility to do something about it? Our priorities in life are the exact expression of how we feel towards the gospel. Many Christians fail to act because they are unsure of what they’ve been called to do; or they think, “I’m nothing like Apostle Paul; I haven’t been given gifts like he had.” But all that matters is that we have a pioneering spirit! Perhaps we aren’t ready to plant new churches at this stage in our lives, but we shouldn’t act like this could never be our calling, as if it were up to us. Moreover, just as Paul depended on many precious co-workers to build on the foundation he laid, there is so much work to be done in established church communities. For you, a pioneering spirit might mean passionately serving God’s calling in some new way. Maybe you’d like to reach out to a new classmate or co-worker who doesn’t yet know the Lord. Maybe you are serving a student and are praying that God may help them take the next step in their commitment to Jesus. Maybe you are excited to reach out to new students on campus or implement new outreach strategies. Whatever it is, we should do it with all our hearts, challenging ourselves to go deeper in God’s calling for us personally. The fall semester at the U of M is fast approaching. The spiritual need seems endless, but so too are the possibilities for which God can use us. Do you want to find lasting fulfillment in God’s work in this season of your life? Then let’s meet the world’s urgent need with a pioneering spirit!

*Fourth, God’s calling is carried out in world mission churches.* The rest of today’s passage, verses 23-33, is full of practical matters. Though simple, Paul’s words actually teach us a lot about our corporate calling within the church. Did you know that the Greek word for church, “ecclesia”, means “called-out ones”? Churches are the primary setting for individual Christians to live out their callings. Through Paul’s vision for the Roman believers, we can find a few principles that apply well to our own situation.

Look at verses 23-24. ***“But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to visit you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to see you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while.”*** Though Paul was so eager to share a spiritual harvest among the Romans (Ro 1:13), he was already looking ahead with a pioneering spirit. He couldn’t help but see Rome as a key stepping stone to bring the gospel to Spain. In obedience to Jesus’ command, his heart burned to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth (Ac 1:8). In mentioning these things, Paul was instilling in the Romans the desire to be intentional and strategic regarding world mission. He wanted them to catch his vision to dream big and make an impact for the kingdom of God in their region.

Our UBF ministry has a rich history of world mission vision. Whenever and wherever believers have caught this fire in their hearts, missionaries were sent out to every corner of the earth. This is something we must not lose. Today’s America, like Rome, is very influential on a global scale. Campuses in particular are filled with the best and brightest, those who will run the world of tomorrow. This makes a church like ours a prime candidate to be a world mission HQ, sending out shepherds and missionaries to serve at home and abroad. Like Paul, we should be deliberate in our efforts, strategically focusing our time and energy in teaching the Bible and raising disciples. I especially pray that many new young people may catch this spirit, and that the rest of us may renew our passion once more.

World mission churches must have a heart for their fellow brothers and sisters as well. In verses 25-27, Paul mentions the generous contribution other Gentile churches made for the persecuted believers in Jerusalem. This was an unprecedented act of solidarity on behalf of the Gentile believers towards Jewish believers. Paul seems to be challenging the Romans to share in such selfless love and to promote further unity in the Church. Another important way to love our fellow churches is through prayer support. In verses 30-31, Paul humbly asks the Romans to join him in his daily struggle by praying for his specific prayer topics. We should never be afraid of asking our fellow churches for prayer support, nor should we be stingy in providing it to those who ask.

In UBF, I think we take for granted the amazing spiritual co-workers we have *all over* the world. We are so different and so spread out, yet we are one family in Christ and in our common calling for campus mission. I believe we can all exhibit a greater awareness and a greater concern for one another through our support, our material gifts and our prayers. Every week we have many wonderful prayer topics that are brought to our attention. We must not downplay Jesus’ will for us to love and support one another as one body. We should also pray for and encourage our spiritual co-workers from other campus ministries, praying for God’s will to be carried out through them.

Today’s passage was full of inspiring examples through Paul and the Roman church. Has this helped you rethink the place of God’s calling in your life? God has called each and every one of us to a unique priestly duty that only we can fulfill. How can we possibly turn down a calling so glorious, so gracious and so urgent? We have much to look forward to, both as individuals and as a church, especially as the fall semester approaches. Let’s carry out our priestly duty with love, faith and a pioneering spirit!