

“Living with Purpose” // Romans 15:14–33 // *Romans* #30

Isn't that awesome? And we have all those language groups represented here each weekend, and they **all have one thing** in common--they think I talk too fast.

Something in the heart of every follower of Jesus: Rev 7:9. Not an American movement, not English speaking, or Western movement

Romans 15: We are coming to the end of the book of Romans.

As I've pointed out through this series, even the **arrangement of the book of Romans** teaches you a lot about the Christian life.

- The first 11 chapters are all about what God has done in providing us salvation; the last 5 chapters tell you how you should be in response.
- **That's the Christian life--working from acceptance and not toward it.**
- That's different from every other religious message in the world--**every other religion in the world teaches: *If you obey, God will accept you. The gospel is that God has accepted you, therefore obey.***

As we approach the end of the letter, you are going to see how the gospel shapes **Paul's personal goals**.

If the gospel is true, what makes for a worthy life and what makes for a wasted one are different than what the world usually tells us.

One of the **most powerful moments I've ever experienced in a sermon** took place about 20 years ago in a large field on a farm outside Memphis, Tennessee.

Works Consulted:

Romans for You, “Romans 15,” Tim Keller

“Life on Mission (Romans 15:8–33),” Joby Martin

“Great Commission People, Part 1 (Romans 15:14–33),” Tony Merida

“Great Commission People, Part 2 (Romans 15:14–33),” Tony Merida

It was not a **great day for an outdoor sermon**. It was chilly, windy, and rainy. There were **about 40K college students** present that Tuesday afternoon, and they were restless; many were holding their bags above their heads to protect them from the rain.

When the preacher stood up to preach, a gust of wind blew half of his notes out into the crowd. That's like in the list of “top 3 worst things that can happen to a pastor.”

He had to lean down on the lectern, pinning his remaining notes down with his arm.

He said a quick prayer, regained his composure, and then told this story:

“Three weeks ago we got word at our church that Ruby Eliason and Laura Edwards had both been killed in Cameroon,” he began. “Ruby was over eighty. Single all her life, she poured it out for one great thing: to make Jesus Christ known among the unreached, the poor, and the sick. Laura was a widow, a medical doctor, pushing eighty years old, and serving at Ruby's side in Cameroon. The brakes failed, the car went over the cliff, and they were both killed instantly. And I asked my people: Were their lives wasted? Is there story nothing but a sad tragedy of two older ladies who wasted their lives, in the wrong place doing the wrong thing at the wrong time?”

The crowd seemed hesitant--almost a little confused, but a few of the people in the audience yelled back, “No!”

“No,” the preacher echoed. “That is *not* a tragedy. But I'll tell you what is.”

He then **pulled out a page from a travel magazine** and read,

Bob and Penny took early retirement from their jobs in the Northeast five years ago when he was 59 and she was 51. Now they live in Punta Gorda, Florida, where they cruise on their 30-foot trawler, play softball, and collect shells.

He continued:

The American Dream: come to the end of your life—*your one and only life*—and let the last great work before you give an account to your Creator be, ‘I collected shells. Lord, see my shells.’ *That* is a tragedy.

People today are spending billions of dollars to persuade you to embrace that tragic dream. Today I’m here to plead with you: don’t buy it. *Don’t waste your life.*

John Piper was the preacher, and this sermon became known as his “**seashell sermon**.” And my little clip of it can’t do it justice. It later became a book called *Don’t Waste Your Life* that I hope you’ll read.

I read an article that pointed to an unbelievable **number of Christian leaders who point to that message** as a turning point in their lives. David Platt. Matt Carter, who has preached here, Jamie Ivey--popular podcaster.

It was **certainly that for me**. It came at a time where I was thinking about what to do with the rest of my life.

It **sets up the question** Paul answers today: *In light of the gospel, what constitutes a well-lived life? What is the difference between a ‘wasted’ life, and a worthy one?*

I know this is a question a lot of college students are talking about.

- I recently read a survey of twentysomethings who were asked what their top post-college aspirations were.
 - **Their top answer** was “finding meaning in their work.”
 - **“Making lots of money”** made the list, too, but it placed behind “helping others” and “providing aid to those in need.”
- **And that’s great**. We seem to know that **we’re put here on this earth for a purpose**, and that purpose is not just making money.

I mean, **how many celebrities** do you need to follow on Instagram before you learn this?

- **Late last year Katy Perry** said on Instagram: “100 million digital singles and still insecure.”
- **Comedian Jim Carrey** said, “I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it's not the answer.” #BeyondDumbandDumber
- Maybe **Quarterback Tom Brady**, who gives all of us over-40 guys hope, at least, **until last week**, said it best. After winning his 3rd Super Bowl, he was asked on **60 Minutes** “*This whole upward trajectory—what have you learned about yourself?*”

Brady said, “Why do I have three Super Bowl rings, and still think there’s something greater out there for me? Maybe a lot of people out there would say, ‘Hey man, this is what it is.’ I reached my goal, my dream, my life. Me, I think: God, there’s got to be more than this.... What else is there for me?”

The interviewer, Steve Kroft, responded, “And what is that answer?” Brady smiled for a moment, and then his smile faded. “I wish I knew,” he said. “I wish I knew.”¹

In Romans 15, Paul tells you the answer. He pulls **a lot of his themes in Romans together** and shows you how the gospel enables you to live with purpose.

- I think it’s a **great way to start our year**. Recalibrating our lives around eternal purposes.
- **To be clear, Paul’s calling is not the same as yours**, but how he thinks about his will show you how to find yours.

¹ “Transcript: Tom Brady, Part 3,” 60 Minutes.

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/transcript-tom-brady-part-3/>; “Tom Brady on

Winning: There’s Got to Be More Than This,”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-TA4_fVkv3c.

(Romans 15:14–33)

Our friends already read the passage in the video.

One of the things that is **really striking** to me about this passage is the personal terms Paul talks about the ministry with:

- Vs. 15, *Grace given to me by God for ministry*
- Vs. 16, *My offering*
- Vs. 17, *My work for God*
- Vs. 20, *My aim*

Vs. 20 ²⁰ *My aim* (some translations say ‘ambition,’ read that as ‘my personal ambition’) is to preach the gospel where Christ has not been named, so that I will not build on someone else’s foundation, ²¹ but, as it is written, “Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand.” (Isaiah 52:15)

Paul’s personal calling was to preach Christ in places where Christ has not been heard of--which for him, he explains, means Spain, because at that point those were the “ends of the earth” to him. He’ll say that he is “finished” with the work in these regions, not because everyone is a Christian or there is nothing left to be done in the churches there, but because there is a church there and his calling is to get the gospel established in places where Christ’s name is not known.

This assignment to “*preach Christ where he had yet to be named*” was *not the same assignment* given to everyone in the early church.

- **Peter**, after all, was called to stay in Jerusalem. Paul affirms that in Galatians² (2:7).
- **Apollos**, whom Paul talks about in 1 Cor, was a build-on-someone-else’s-foundation kind of guy.³ He stayed behind in places where Paul had planted churches to build them up and strengthen them, and Paul praised him for it.⁴

² Gal 2:7

³ 1 Cor 3:3–11

- **And just think of all the people Paul** is addressing in Romans. Paul does not tell each reader they need to quit their job and start traveling with him.

But **preaching Christ in places where his name was not known was Paul’s personal purpose**. And in vs. 22–Paul explains how his understanding of his purpose functions for him as a decision-making grid that helps him make decisions. **In vs. 22 he says,** ²² *This is why I have been prevented many times from coming to you.* (“I’ve wanted for a long time to come to you, but there was a specific calling by God I had to obey.”)

Paul had the confidence to say “no” to certain good opportunities because he was clear where God had called him.

Wouldn’t this be great? A clear sense of calling that would help you make decisions?

Paul knew how to turn down *good* ideas for his life so that he could focus on the *God* ideas for his life).

Paul’s understanding of his purpose came from 2 things, and this is what we’re going to look at today.

I. Understanding the *purposes* of God in the world

- Notice how Paul grounds his understanding of his calling in God’s purposes on earth.
- In vs. 20, right after he states his purpose, ²⁰ *My aim is to preach the gospel where Christ has not been named...* (he immediately turns to *Scripture*)²¹ but (because), as it is written, “Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand.” (Isaiah 52:15)
- **Personally, I would have expected Paul** to have grounded his explanation of his purpose with his Damascus Road experience.

⁴ Douglas Moo, *Commentary on Romans*

- Isn't that where you'd start? "I was walking to class one day, and **Jesus appeared** to me..."
- (J.D., if you were on a skateboard, that's not God that knocked you off. It would like God to keep you on. That would be a miracle.")
- **But that's not where Paul starts.** And I think it's so he can be an example to us.
- Most of us will not have a **Damascus Road experience**, you see, but all of us have the Scriptures.
- And **that's the place you are supposed to begin** in figuring out God's purpose for you.

So, let me ask: Have you ever asked yourself how well your life goals line up with Scripture?

- When I ask people what they want to do, I hear things like:
 - "I want to be a great doctor, one of the best heart physicians in the world."
 - "I want to teach kids."
 - "I want to maximize my talents and be the best that I can be."
 - "I want to just do what I love so that I never feel like I have to work a day of my life!"
 - "I want to own my own business so I can make my own rules."
 - "I just want to make a good living so I can take care of my family."
- **And there's nothing inherently wrong with those answers. Some of them are really good.** But often when I ask believers what their ambitions have to do with God's agenda, I get blank stares.
- God is doing something on earth he has told us about very clearly in Scripture—and our understanding of our ambition has to begin with his.

We're like narcissists when it comes to the will of God--we're all into Enneagrams, personality profiles, strengths finder. We want to know all about us. But before those things are relevant, we have to figure out what God is doing in the world and conform to that.

OT scholar Christopher J.H. Wright pinpoints the problem: We ask, "Where does God fit into the story of my life?" when the real

question is, "Where does my little life fit into the great story of God's mission?"

I'm a Star Wars fan like many of you, and like many of you, I think they made entirely too many movies. I don't really feel like the last 3 were necessary.

- **The one from this last batch** I really liked, story-wise, was **Rogue One**. And it's a tragedy, because **just about everybody dies** in the end
- (and that's not a spoiler because they tell you that in Episode IV of the original trilogy. You are like, "**Well, I haven't seen the original trilogy.**" Look, it came out 42 years ago, I mean... That's not on me." You're like, "Oh yeah, we were going to go home and watch it this afternoon.")
- Rogue One examines the backstory for one little scene in Star Wars. Basically, all these rebel fighters died so they could **get the plans of the Death Star to the Rebellion** so that Luke use the Force and blow it up.
- **The story of the people in Rogue One ended tragically**, but the big story ended awesome, and that reshapes what you feel at the end of theirs?
- **If Rogue One were the only part** of the story we had, we would have no choice but to conclude that their story was a tragedy. But if we see the bigger picture, we know that even though it's sad, it's part of a story of victory.

That's how Paul saw his life. He was **part of a grand story** that superseded the outcome of his small one.

- **You understand that when** Paul finally did get to Rome (not how you go to Rome), he never left. He was imprisoned and ultimately beheaded there.

And Paul knew that might happen. But he had seconded his story to a grander story that he was **sure would end in victory** and in which no sacrifice was wasted.

- **Where he could look at tragedy and say, 'That's ok?'** It ends in triumph.
- **Where he would look back at any sacrifice and say, "Worth it!"**

Don't you want to live in a way that you can say that?

Have you ever **thought about your life through the lens of eternity** and what God says he is doing in the world?

Earlier in this series I told you about C.T. Studd... the Tom Brady of the 19th century, the cricket GOAT, who felt like his life was mattering little for eternity. So, **at the height of his career**, he resigned his position and went as a missionary to India and Africa and China. Imagine if Kyrie Irving or Drew Brees did this today. Why? His response, “Only one life to live...”

And now, undoubtedly, he looks back on his life and says, “Worth it.” Only when you live for God’s purposes first and foremost can you say that.

You want to know what God’s will is for your life. Have you started by asking what his purposes are on earth?

Many of us have turned the **the will of God into an idol**, wanting to know it more than we do the purposes of God and seeking it more than we do the glory of God.

We talk about finding God’s will—it’s not really lost. 2 Peter 3:9, “The Lord is not willing...”

Don’t think about your life narcissistically. Think about it in light of the purposes of God.

- **Here in Romans 15, when Paul quotes from the OT (vv. 10–13),** he does something no one else does in the NT. He quotes passages from all **THREE major parts of the OT** (the Law, the Prophets, and the Wisdom writings--those are the 3 Jewish divisions of our OT). **It’s as if Paul is saying,** “ALL of the Old Testament is organized around this truth—Would will make his name and salvation known among ALL nations.” And **therefore I plan to organize my life** around that purpose.

To our students, I’ll say: One of the great things about your generation is that it is a cause-driven generation.

- **You want to eradicate poverty. Extend** human rights. **End** global warming. Save the planet from plastic straws.

- And many of those causes are good and worthy ones, and I commend you. I hate paper straws. But for most of those causes, we should care about them.
- **But for the Christian who believes the Bible,** one cause trumps them all.
- That **cause is advocated on every page of every genre** of this book. The Lord is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

As **John Piper says,** relieving any type of suffering is a good and worthy goal. But the worst kind of suffering—the kind that deserves our most earnest attention—is eternal suffering. He says:

Suffering in this world is terrible but limited. Suffering in the next world is terrible and eternal. And love sees it that way. Love does not shut its eyes to this world or that world. Love reckons with the reality of suffering here, and the worse reality of suffering there.

- Of all the causes to give yourself to, the **alleviation of eternal suffering** by helping people escape condemnation through faith in Jesus IS the most important.
- If the Bible is true, then a life that is not wasted knows how it is contributing to that end.
- So, **WHATEVER PROSPERITY, RESOURCES, OPPORTUNITY**
- How is your life contributing to that global purpose?

II. Sensing the *gifting* of the Spirit in you

- **After considering the overarching purpose** of God, Paul sought direction from the Spirit of God regarding his specific role in it.
- That’s why he says my purpose. My ministry. My offering to God. My aim.
- And **like I explained at the beginning, Paul was not the same as everyone’s.**
- Paul arrived at his by sensing what the Spirit of God was equipping him to do personally.
- His life was about what Christ had empowered him to do (vs. 19) and what the Spirit of God does through him (vs. 20)
- We often say around TSC, “Not everything that comes from heaven has your name on it. But something does, (YOU HEAR IT

AND YOUR HEART STIRS) and your responsibility is to figure it out and get after it.”

- **A big theme for Paul is learning your spiritual gift**, because your spiritual gift shows you the role that God has given you to play in ministry.
 - Some of you are given the desire and responsibility like Paul, to take Christ to people who have never heard.
 - **We have 260+. In a congregation of 10–11K, there are that many more.** As you watched the video, you thought, “I want to make that happen.”
 - For some, it is to win people to Christ here.
 - Some of you are called to build up the church
 - Some of you are given abilities to serve members, meeting the needs of people inside the church and outside, being the hands and feet of Jesus to the oppressed
 - Some of you have the gift of generosity or encouragement.
 - Some of you have the gift of faith and prayer
 - And for some of you God will give supernatural gifts of insight and warning to give to others
- **As we saw when we studied chapter 12**, having a spiritual gift doesn't release you from other responsibilities--a spiritual gift is just a specialization in an assignment given to all believers.
- But it's a **special way that God wants to use you**, and figuring out what yours is is essential, because apart from that we'll never experience the kind of Spirit power and movement that the early church experienced.

Bible scholars say that the **Book of Acts, which is the story of the works of Paul and the other early Christians, is wrongly named...**

The early church didn't give the book of Acts its name until late in the 3rd century. They called it “the Acts of the Apostles.” But here's why that is wrong. **Acts 1:1**, “All that Jesus began to do and teach.”

- I've lamented to you before that **most Christians don't know what to do** with the Holy Spirit. For most Christians, he is the **forgotten member** of the Trinity. They relate to him like I relate to my **pituitary gland...**

⁵ Not sure who originated this. In the business world, I saw it in Jim Collins' Good to Great. I've seen Tim Keller use it, too.

⁶ Rick Warren, *Purpose Driven Life*

- But the early church depended on his guidance. He shows up 59 times in the book of Acts, in 36 he is speaking.
- Don't always tell us how (frustrating). How? **Acts 13:2: All think the same thought at once?** Text message? Bubbles with thumbs up over some people? Doesn't tell us. That's intentional.
- But **while there is ambiguity** over how he speaks; there is none about whether he speaks.
- And to **know our specific calling, we depend on him to show us**.
 - **I actually wrote a book on this: Jesus, Continued...** to attempt to answer the question of how you can identify his voice in your life. (BTW, for anything we sell here, none of the money goes to me, it all goes back into the church).
 - **Won't go into all that today**, but one of the main things the Holy Spirit does is identify your particular gift in the mission.
- I've given you some tools to help you learn. Here's one we looked at a few weeks ago in our study of Romans 12:
 - **VENN DIAGRAM: Ability, affinity, affirmation⁵**
 - **SHAPE: Spiritual gifts; heart, ability, personality, experiences⁶**
 - Later this year: **Neh 2:12**
 - Again, this is **not the place where I can go in deep** on that... **but one thing is for sure: You'll never know your specific role** in the mission until you understand the unique ways God has shaped you and the distinctive gifts he has given you for the mission.

The thing to remember is that whatever gift you have, you are supposed to interpret it in light of the bigger picture of **God's purposes stated** in his word—to get the gospel to the ends of the earth!

Don't be narcissistic...

I did an illustration here a couple of years ago, but most people on staff couldn't remember it so I figured you wouldn't either. Volunteers? Fire truck.⁷

⁷ (Get 5 people on stage and have them act out 5 different roles on the firetruck). (1) Engineer (drives the truck); (2) Company Officer (commands everyone on the truck; also in charge of busting down doors if

- Have any of you ever been, or are you now, a professional firefighter?
- “What’s your primary job, again?”
- **The church has one mission, stated in God’s word**, that Paul quotes in vs. 21: That “those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.”

We all have a role in that. Some of us are called to go out to the front lines. We need more. Some of us reach people here. Some of us help build up the church and send.

But everything is aimed at fulfilling **vs. 21--that those who have not heard will hear.**

John Piper says when it comes to the Great Commission, there are only 3 options: Go, Send, or Disobey.

- Some of us are called to go; others are called to send, and those who send have to be every bit as committed as those who go.⁸

Notice in vv. 25–27 Paul takes up an offering. We give here to take the gospel. When you give here that’s what you are giving to, and 17.3% of every dollar we get here goes to taking the gospel outside the church. **Are you as sacrificial as our missionaries are? FIRST**

And in **v. 30** he urges them to pray: Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, through our Lord Jesus Christ and through the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in fervent prayers to God on my behalf. (he’s inviting them to share in his struggles through prayer)

Here’s what I have for you: This book. **PRAYER GUIDES:** We’re going to end with a prayer time. This is how we call all share in the mission of what God is doing. Make it a part of your QT and your small group.

needed); (3) Nozzleman (handles and aims the hose itself); (4) Backup firefighter (Assists the nozzleman by keeping the hose untangled...which is apparently quite tough).

(5) Tillerman (Steers the back end of a fire truck)

~~When it comes to the GC, we only have 3 options: Go, Send, or Disobey. And those of us who send have to be every bit as committed as those who go: **CLARA**~~

(MUSIC: CONCLUSION)

Before we spend time praying, let me give you a few other handles:

1. **Ask the question. What has God called me to?** It’s never too late to ask and receive an assignment. Paul was 60 when he said this. Not: “There’s nothing more for me to do, let’s move to FL and pick up shells!” He probably had to learn Latin.⁹
2. **Practice the spiritual gifts you have.** If you’re not sure what your full purpose is, just get engaged doing what you know.
 - Limiting himself to places where people had never heard about Jesus had **not always been Paul’s exclusive focus.** At the beginning of his ministry, he spent a lot of time in Jewish synagogues, teaching church leaders, and etc. But by this point in his life he had **narrowed his life down to a specific ministry focus** (it was like a funnel that started broad)
 - **As he walked forward in obedience**, God clarified his purpose.
 - **So don’t panic** if you’re 20 years old and can’t figure it all out. Just take the first step of obedience and the more you walk, the more your calling will come into focus. God steers moving ships.
3. **Heed the ministry dreams God has put in your heart**
 - They are there for a reason!
 - **Even if they are never fulfilled**, God has a purpose in you pursuing them.
 - Point of fact: Paul never got to Spain to preach Christ there where he had never been named, as he tells his desire is in

⁸ If preaching this on the road, could cut this next part and insert CLARA’S STORY, and then go to conclusion.

⁹ Tom Schreiner

vs. 24. But God used this desire to prompt him to write this letter to the Romans to prepare them for his visit there en route to Spain. He wasn't attending to write the gospel standard for the rest of history, but to prepare the church in Rome for his visit.

- So he may have never gotten to Spain, but he gave us this... This book has not only taught millions of people the gospel, it has inspired countless others to go not only to Spain to the farthest reaches of the world.
- So even **if you don't fulfill that dream God put in your heart**, be assured that God will use it to accomplish his purposes.

4. **Go on mission trips:** It's a way of seeing what God is doing.
STUDENTS: **CITY PROJECT**

5. Also, especially for STUDENTS: **Consider Go2.** Go 2 (go2movement.net). We often say: *Whatever you're good at, do it well to the glory of God, and somewhere strategic for the mission of God.* Also, **RETIREEES**

6. **LASTLY: If you're called to stay, take that assignment seriously.** When it comes to GC, there are only 3 categories: Go, Send, or Disobey. And here's the thing--those who send have to be every bit as committed as those who go. In giving and supporting.

And, like I said, one of the ways we can do that is through PRAYER

CAMPUS PASTORS COME UP TO LEAD PRAYER TIME

Clara

Clara was a young woman who moved to a remote part of Central Asia to work alongside one of our mission teams there. For five years she served the poorest of the poor there. She was a light for the gospel in a very dark place.

Late one night in January of 2008, Clara was kidnapped by Muslim extremists. They perceived her presence there as a threat. She brought education to women, whom they believed should not learn skills outside the home. And, she was a Christian.

Clara had left a very comfortable life in the American Southeast to live in a place where dust storms were a daily occurrence; where windows require blast film because of the constant risk of bomb explosions; a place where sometimes there is no electricity to run even a fan in the midst of 100-degree heat; a place where she had only sporadic internet access to get news from home; and a place where an armed Islamic group that is hostile to the gospel operates with impunity. Clara did all of this because she understood that Christ had come to earth to face even greater dangers for her. She did it joyfully.

Our team leader negotiated with the hostage-takers for six months. They kept moving her from location to location. United States Special Forces tried several rescue attempts, and twice they got very close. On one occasion, she was rushed into a neighboring house just before the troops arrived. On another, she was hidden in the floorboards of a house that the troops were searching. I can only imagine the frustration Clara must have felt to hear her rescuers just a few feet away, unable to get their attention.

When news of her kidnapping was heard in the streets, women from the southern stronghold of these Islamic extremists were outraged.

Something unheard of happened: 300 women marched to the governor's mansion to demand that he do something to free her. These women had benefited from Clara's projects. They didn't fully understand the gospel yet, but they had seen Christ in Clara.

I wish I could say there was a happy ending to this story, but we don't ultimately know what happened to Clara. She kept being moved from village to village, handed off from one group of rogue Islamists to another. The last we heard she had been taken by a nomadic group of arms smugglers across a Central Asian desert.

And then the trail went cold. We don't know for sure if she was killed. The kidnapers said they were going to kill her because he was a Christian, and at this point we have to conclude they carried through with their threat. Still, we have no proof and no body.

I asked our team leader, who led in the negotiations, if Clara was an extraordinary hero of faith. He said to me,

Well, in a sense, now we see that she was. But when I think about her, I remember a regular girl from the American South, a smiling friend, a person who struggled like the rest of us when it was hot; a girl who loved to go on vacation; a regular American girl who decided to step out in faith and obey a calling from Jesus to go to a place that she wasn't sure she could handle.

I saw God's grace and strength enable Clara to set up an amazing project here in Central Asia. It's a grace that got the attention of the community, and I am sure that that same grace and strength were with her when she was taken by the Muslim extremists.

He then paused, thought for a moment, and said:

Faith is demonstrated in times of adversity, but its reality is manifested long before that. Sometimes faith is quiet, working humbly in love, but that is the same faith that makes a regular girl like Clara stand up to one of history's most vicious regimes and say, 'No. Christ is better. You can take my life, but you can't take him. His mission will outlive all of us.

