

Romans 15:17-22

Embracing Ambition

The Summit Church, Standalone

MPT: The HS gives Paul a holy ambition to accomplish his specific calling for Christ.

MPS: Holy ambition is not self-promotion, but Spirit-fueled resolve to accomplish a specific work for Christ.

UFN: Ambition and calling: "I want to do something that matters, but I don't know if wanting that is godly or selfish."

READ LOCALLY

¹⁷In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God. ¹⁸For 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, ¹⁹by 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; ²⁰and 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, ²¹but as it is written,

"Those who have never been told of him will see,
and those who have never heard will understand."

²²This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you.

ROMANS 15

Welcome back to *CHURCH!*

- Good to see actual human beings again.
- Sorry I'm not sorry that you had to get out of your sweatpants this weekend.
- When I get to heaven, I'll ask God why inclement weather always happened on Saturday...

Romans 15...

- We just finished **2 Corinthians**, where we watched Paul faithfully carry out the ministry God entrusted to him.
- Next week we begin **Nehemiah**—a book about a man who doesn't just feel called, but is driven to rebuild something specific for God.

Starting next weekend we're gonna spend several weeks around this idea of **calling**. But before we talk about where God might send you, I want to talk about what drives you. Because underneath every calling is something deeper: AMBITION.

- For some of you, that word is exciting. For others, it makes you uncomfortable—you assume ambition is for a **certain personality type** or only **certain kinds of Christians**.
- But whether you call it ambition or not, **everyone here is being driven by something**.
- And in Romans 15, Paul shows us not only *where* God has called him, but he also shows us *what drives him*—his **holy ambition**.

INTRODUCTION: My Story

February 2008: Saved. Junior year of college.

March 2009: Marry the girl that led me to Christ.

Fall 2009: Hillsong concert → CALLED to ministry (Liz: "I know.")

Seminary 2011: Moved out here with nothing, knowing nothing nor anyone. Left ATL up 85, eventually hit 40, turned onto 98, and drove that all the way into WF having never been to RDU once. No jobs, only about 8 weeks of cash to live on. Young and ignorant...but we were **zealous and had hearts full of faith and were filled with one ambition: to preach the gospel and reach the world for Christ** →

"That's cute...slow down...you know how this ends for ambitious
pastors...you'll learn...etc."

Then I heard this quote by a Pastor named **James Emery White**: "I'm taken by this, because there is nothing I want more than for my life to matter. I want to be used profoundly by God, to be seized by his great and mighty hand and thrust onto the stage of history in order to do something significant. With as pure of a heart as I can muster, this isn't about fame or prestige. It's about wanting my life to count where it is needed most. There is a great movement of God that has been set loose in this world, and I want to be on the front lines."

- That quote put something to words I'd been feeling but didn't quite know how to say.

I wanna talk to those of you who have been taught that godliness means **wanting less** instead of **aiming higher**...those who have wondered if that **burning drive and desire inside of you** is supposed to be **fueled by faith**, or snuffed out to avoid pride.

Somewhere along the way, Christians got nervous talking about **ambition**. We'll talk about **calling** all day, but ambition feels **dangerous; self-promoting**; like it's impossible to be **ambitious** w/o also being **prideful**.

- And, sure, the bible certainly warns about **selfish ambition**.
- But Scripture doesn't call us to **kill** our ambition, but to **rightly aim** it.

See, the question is not **whether** we will strive toward something; the question is **what** we are striving for and **why**. IOW, we're not at war with ambition; we're at war for ambition—a HOLY AMBITION

- We don't need to **lose** our ambition, but to **redeem** it and aim it at the right target.

- I'm going to walk through the passage you just heard, and then I want to share four ways the gospel shapes ambition.

WALKTHROUGH

¹⁷**In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God.**

"THEN" is a conclusion drawn from the previous verses we didn't read. In those verses Paul discusses **his mission to the Gentiles**. In Acts 9 when God knocked **The Artist Formerly Known as Saul** off his horse, blinded him, and saved him...a few days later he restored his vision and **simultaneously gave Paul a very specific calling to take the gospel to the Gentiles** (which was nuts cuz up to this point Paul was an insanely zealous **Jewish Pharisee**).

- To call a Pharisee to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles would've been unthinkable—to the Pharisees, **Jesus was a fraud** and the **Gentiles were the muggles**.

Yet Paul's not simply **obedient** to this call, he says **he is PROUD of this work**. Other versions say: *I glory in...I take pride in...I boast in...I am enthusiastic about...I exult in.*

- He's not bragging; but he is definitely boasting.
- But the key to understanding his boasting is that little phrase at the very beginning of v17: **IN CHRIST JESUS**.
- Paul's boastful attitude here isn't about what *he's* done, but **about what God has done through him**.
- This is **joyful boasting**, not **prideful self-promotion**.

We know it's not pride, cuz Paul continues in v18: ¹⁸**For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—**

Paul's like, "If any part of my ministry does not stem from God's work through me, I don't even want to talk about it cuz it ain't worth mentioning."

- If you remember back to **2 Cor 12** which PJD preached a few weeks ago, Paul is **incredibly coy** about his vision "in the third heaven," which is God's throneroom.
 - (Listen, if your boy gets a vision of heaven and pulls up to the throneroom, Y'ALL ARE HEARING ABOUT IT.)
- Paul has a *vision of heaven*, yet he barely wants to talk about it cuz **he wants to keep the attention on Jesus**, not himself.

My 5 y/o son is about to play his second season of "baseball." If you've ever been to a little league baseball game, you know it's not really baseball, it's more like a **live-action social experiment**.

Insanity of a little league inside-the-park home run...

- Barely tips the ball. Rolls like 6 ft.
- No one can throw or catch. Ping ponging around the field.
- Dugout is going crazy. Parents screaming like it's G7 of WS.
- Meanwhile this kid is **sprinting** around the bases like he just broke the HR record. **Slides into home** (for no reason at all)...**peacocks** over to the dugout where everyone is cheering and he's like, "DID YOU SEE ME?! I DID IT! I HIT A HOME RUN!"
 - To be fair, technically he did hit a HR. But it was far less about what he did and more about what everyone else did.

Here's my fear: **So often our testimonies sound less like Paul in Romans 15 and more like a 5 y/o yelling "I DID IT!"**

- **That's how ridiculous we look when we take credit for things God does through us.**
- I mean, even me, I get up here, step up to the plate for Jesus, barely tip the ball during a 40 minute sermon, yet God

arranges everything in order for me to slide into home, and I'm like, "Yup...CRUSHED that one today."

Paul says, "I will not venture to speak of **anything** except what Christ has accomplished through me!" Not cuz he's embarrassed by his work, he just refuses to take credit for GOD'S WORK.

- Never once does Paul say, "Look what I did!" He always said, "**Look at what Christ used me to do!**"
- The only time Paul wants to insert himself in the story is to tell about the parts *God* used him for.

Paul says "*I'm proud of my work because (look at the end of v18) it resulted in the bringing of the Gentiles to obedience. And there's 3 ways Christ accomplished this through me,*" Paul says:

FIRST, **by word and deed,**

Listen, the gospel travels along two rails: **proclamation** (word) and **demonstration** (deed).

- Proclamation is the **WORD**. It's the preaching of the gospel. Proclamation makes the word intelligible.
- However, proclamation must go hand-in-hand with demonstration: demonstration is the **DEED**. It's how your lifestyle **validates the message your mouth is preaching**.
- Proclamation makes the word intelligible, your deeds make the message tangible and believable.
 - **Missionary Theologian Lesslie Newbigin** often said that "**the word without the deed is empty, but the deed without the word is mute.**"
 - This is exactly what James meant when he said **faith w/o works is dead**. We need both.

SECOND way Christ accomplished this through me, Paul says, ¹⁹by the power of signs and wonders,

Signs and wonders are visible manifestations of an invisible reality.

One commentator calls signs and wonders the **finger prints of God**.

- Signs and wonders weren't just for spectacle but were intended to **confirm the truth of the gospel** and **demonstrate God's power over creation, sickness, and evil**.

And THIRD, Christ accomplished this through me: **by the power of the Spirit of God—**

If you've ever wondered how Paul was so successful, this is it: he was **filled with and empowered by** the HS.

- W/o the Spirit, all we have is *activity*, not fruit. You can have the **right words** and the **right deeds**...but w/o the Spirit you're just *busy*.
- This means the Christian life isn't powered by **grit**, but by **dependance**. Cuz if God doesn't move, nothing lasting happens.
- The **work of God** can only be done by the **power of God**, which works through us in the form of the **Spirit of God**.
 - The same Spirit that empowered Paul is the same Spirit that raised Jesus Christ from the dead, and that's the same Spirit that lives and dwells in you and me.

Paul continues, *God's done all this through me so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum* (uh-leer-uh-kum) **I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ**;

- This region from Jerusalem to Illyricum was approximately the distance from RDU to Denver—contained ~37 major cities with a population of over 500k ppl. Yet, at most, there were **barely**

a dozen churches there with only about **500 believers**...yet Paul says he's **fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ**.

- *How could he say that?* 500 out of 500k between RDU and Denver is not great gospel advance.
- *So how could he say he's fulfilled his ministry in Rome?*

He could say that cuz he knew his calling; look at v20: ²⁰and 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**,

Paul's calling was to take the gospel to places it had never been.

- 500 believers in Rome now? Time to move on.
- Paul had his aim—his *ambition*—set on Spain, where Christ hasn't been named yet.

And, see, just like with Paul, God has something very specific in his Kingdom for you.

- Like I said, over the next several weeks we're gonna ask you to consider that question: *What does God have specifically for you?*
- But before we ask what God might call us to do, we first need to ask how the gospel reshapes what drives us in the first place.

I wanna show you four ways the gospel reshapes our ambition

How the Gospel Reshapes Ambition¹

1. Holy ambition frees me from the need to prove myself

¹ Shoutout to David Prince and his article [Ambition and Competition: Good or Bad for Christians?](#) which helped guide my outline.

This is Paul's entire foundation for being ambitious and proud of his work. Notice how v17 begins: **¹⁷In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God.**

- Paul's pride came from his **IDENTITY**, not from his **ACTIVITY**.
- From **whose he was**, not from **what he's done**.

I told y'all recently about how ridiculous we love to make our **resumes** sound: you **high schoolers** who are washing dishes somewhere, just put that on your resume. Don't put "underwater ceramics technician." Just say "**dish washer**."

A **resume** is something you're constantly updating, right? New accomplishments, jobs, wins, awards, reasons you matter.

- If at any point you stop updating it, you'd look less significant.

A **name badge**, on the other hand, is different. A name badge doesn't list what you've done, **it just tells you who you are**.

- Most of us treat ambition like **resume**—we're always adding, achieving, proving, hoping it's finally enough.
- But, see, the gospel gives us a **name badge**. It doesn't say, "*Here's my list of achievements; look what I've done!*" It simply says: **CURTIS ANDRUSKO, IN CHRIST JESUS**.

See, when **IDENTITY** comes first, ambition doesn't disappear, it gets freed...cuz you're no longer working **for** approval (**resume**); you're working **from** approval (**name badge**).

- For the Christian, ambition doesn't have to mean *less* activity...it just means our **IDENTITY** is the foundation *for* our **ACTIVITY**.

Most of us don't reject that truth, we just reverse it w/o even realizing it. And what happens when we get that backwards is our ambition begins to flow from **activity** instead of **identity**. And when our ambition functions like a **resume** instead of a name **badge**, a few things begin to happen in your life:

- You'll become **dependent on praise** and **defense without it**.
- You'll struggle to **celebrate others w/o comparison**.
 - You become a **terrible co-worker** cuz you see everyone as competition instead of allies.
- You'll start **justifying compromise** in the name of "results."
- You'll end up **confusing busyness with faithfulness**.
- And no matter how much you achieve, you'll never truly feel settled.

Some of you wear ambition as a badge of honor...but you're not ambitious because you love God, **you're ambitious because you're afraid of being insignificant**.

- That's not ambition; that's slavery! → The gospel heals that.

When your identity is secure in Christ, you're no longer striving *for* self-worth, but striving *from* the worth given to you in Christ.

2. Holy ambition changes what winning looks like

Paul says in v18, **¹⁸For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me.**

- Paul's not being falsely modest here...he's making a deliberate choice about what counts as winning.
- If winning were about **platform, popularity, and personal achievement**, this would be the moment for Paul to list his resume.

- But he understood that winning is not about *what I've accomplished*.
- For the believer, winning is about *what Christ accomplishes through me because of obedient faith*.

I often get asked how you can pray for me; here it is: **FSU Football Fan**
 → Horrible year; state of being. Haven't won an away game in two years. Went 2-6 in a fairly underwhelming conference.

- YET: led the ACC in **Total Offense**—sixth in the nation actually. Averaged 475 ypg.
- But imagine me, a FSU fan, **trying to convince you we were a good team** this year because we had more yards, even though the other team had more points.
- Imagine FSU fans celebrating like we're winning, even though we're obviously losing...all because we're focused on the wrong scoreboard.

I think a lot of Christians never find the **peace or joy** that Jesus promises cuz they're “winning” on a scoreboard that's different from the one Jesus uses.

- Jesus' scoreboard is found in **Matt 23:11**, *The greatest among you shall be your servant.*
- For Jesus, winning is no longer measured by how many people serve us, but by how many we serve.
- When ambition is reduced to my **comfort**, my **wealth**, my **preferences**, my ‘**peace**’, my **success**—if your ambition is all about YOU and your little kingdom—you will be **perpetually dissatisfied** because you're over there “winning” at things God never promised to bless. You're keeping score in a worldly game that won't actually matter in light of eternity.

If Jesus really does get to define greatness and winning, then some of the most ambitious people in the church are actually the ones the world will never notice.

- I'm talking about the **SAHM's and caretakers** who spend their days showing up again and again with no platform and no recognition.
- I'm talking to those of you who **wake up early every day, spend time with Jesus, go to work 8-5** in order to provide for yourself or your family or your aging parents, and you come home exhausted...but steady.
- I'm talking about **John Bartuska** who, for decades, has consistently spent his PTO to go on multiple mission trips each year...who just retired this week, and is spending his first **SIX WEEKS OF RETIREMENT** on the mission field.
 - John and Anne aren't retiring to FL to sip fruity drinks, smoke cubans, play golf, and collect sea shells.
 - He knows the mission never steps, so neither should we!
- The **volunteers** who show up here every single weekend to park cars, hold doors, seat people, point cameras, and serve behind the scenes so others can encounter Jesus.
 - **If that's you, you're winning on the scoreboard that counts.**
 - **That's not SMALL ambition; that's HOLY AMBITION.**
 - **You might not look or feel impressive to the world, but you look faithful to heaven.**
 - **Heaven is full of celebration for obedience no one on earth will ever notice.**

Winning isn't **ability** and **number of followers**; it's **availability, dependence** and **service**.

3. Holy ambition looks to join what God is already doing

These last two points I want to make incredibly practical. I don't want you to leave here thinking, *"Okay...ambition...great. But how do I GET it? What if I don't wake up with some burning desire deep in my soul? I'm just trying to get my kids to school w/o starting WW3 each day."*

I want you to know that holy ambition is not something you **invent in your heart**, it's something you **align your heart with**. Holy ambition simply joins in where God is already at work in the world...and we figure that out as we open the Scriptures.

Notice what Paul says in vv20-1: ²⁰**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,** ²¹**but as it is written,** (then he quotes Isaiah 52:15): **"Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand."**

Paul doesn't say, *"I have this ambition because of a powerful experience on the Damascus Road...so get ready, YOUR huge mystical experience with Jesus is coming and then he'll make clear your call!"*

- Paul didn't ask, *"Hm. What excites me? What is gonna fill me up the most? What's my spiritual love language?"*

Instead he asked, *"What does Scripture say God is doing in the world, and how do I give my life to that?"*²

- For Paul, *"those who have never been told and those who have never heard"* meant **GO PREACH TO THE GENTILES.**
- **Listen: if you want to align your ambitions with God's, begin by looking at his Word.**

Again, what that means practically is that you don't have to wonder where to aim your ambition, cuz God has already told us:

- **Missions:** Matt 28:19-20 (Great Commission). **"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..."**
 - STT
 - ICP Catalyst: hearing from missionaries and praying for the nations
- **Church Planting:** Matt 16:18, **"I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."**
 - CLT, ATL, Chicago, Orlando, Manhattan, Cincy, Denver
- **Pregnancy Support Centers:** Prov 24:11, **"Rescue those who are being taken away to death..."**
 - Stop by Next Steps at your campus for local partners
- **College Students:** Acts 1:8, **"You will be my witnesses Jerusalem, Judea, and ends of the earth."**
 - SC United: March 4 at BCC
- **PRAYER:** 2 Chronicles 7:14, **"if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land."**
 - Daily Revival. Boiler Room.

Ambition clarified by the Bible simplifies your life—you simply join what God is already doing in the world.

Which leads us to our last point.

² Paul's ambition was anchored in the eternal WoG: We know from Acts 9, 22, and 26 that Paul was called by the risen Christ on the Damascus Road. Jesus gave Paul his mission in Acts 26:17-18. BUT that's not what he points to in regards to his holy ambition—Rom 15:21 he *doesn't* say "I have this ambition cuz Jesus called me on the Damascus Road." He says, "I have this ambition cuz Isaiah 52:15..."

4. Holy ambition helps me say no without guilt

One of the most freeing and practical things holy ambition does is this: **helps you say no without guilt.**

In Romans 15, Paul is writing to the Church at Rome. Look at how he ends this section: ²²**This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you.** Paul wanted to get to Rome, but he kept getting diverted. “The reason” was that he kept finding out about places where Christ had not been named, so he’d go to those places instead of heading to Rome.

- IOW, Paul had to say NO to Rome in order to say YES to his assignment.
- See, Paul knew what he was called to do...and just as importantly, he also knew what he was NOT called to do.
- He wasn’t **distracted**; he was **focused**. And focus requires limits.

IDK whether it’s age, kids, the Spirit—probably some combination of all three—but the older I get the **more I realize my limitations**. I just only have so much of myself I can give. (And I struggle with that, because I’m a **people pleaser** and I don’t like **disappointing people**.)

- A couple years ago I was listening to a podcast with a famous pastor who was retiring: **What would you tell your younger self?** → **There will always be someone who is disappointed with you.** There’s always someone disappointed with GOD...so why do you think you could do better?

What holy ambition does is it allows you to be okay with **disappointing people today** so you know you **won’t disobey God tomorrow**.

- I just want to tell you this: When you live out your calling, there will be people who are disappointed with you.
 - You won’t give them enough **time**.
 - You won’t meet their **expectations**.
 - You won’t say ‘yes’ to things they think are more than reasonable.

There will always be someone disappointed with you, **sometimes even when you’re being faithful**. Because faithfulness in one place always limits availability in another.

- Paul knew how to **turn down good ideas** so that he could **focus on the God-ideas** for his life
- What we’ll start seeing next week is how Nehemiah didn’t rebuild every wall, only the one God assigned him.

For me, in this season of young kids, God has called me to be present with my wife and to invest deeply in my kids. That means some “good” things get a NO from me right now → Hobbies. Extra opportunities. Trips. Even some relationships. Not cuz they’re wrong or bad, but cuz they’re not my assignment right now. And that disappoints some folks.

- **Parents of young kids:** your calling right now may be faithfulness and investment at home. Saying no to more activity or the extra hours of travel sports or the job promotion isn’t selfish or unwise, it’s obedience to your season.
- **Singles / YA:** your calling right now may be **formation** more than **acceleration**. Saying no to rushing into the next relationship, next job, or next city so you can build deep roots in community, holiness, and skill. That’s not wasting time...that’s building a foundation.

- **Empty nesters:** your calling might be shifting from building your own platform to **investing** in others. Saying no to comfortably sailing off into the sunset and instead mentoring younger leaders, opening your home, and leveraging your **wisdom, time, and resources** for Kingdom multiplication.
- **Students:** your calling right now is to be a **good and godly** student, and to be a light at your school. That's it. Saying no to getting ahead of yourself isn't lack of ambition, it's trusting that God has you exactly where he wants you and he wants to see if you'll be faithful in this season before he reveals the next.

Saying no in obedience is not **failure**, it's **focus**.

CONCLUSION (VAMP)

Here's what all this means: You are not accountable for the whole mission of God...but you are accountable to the assignment God has given you.

- That's how Jesus lived → in John 17, he told the Father, "**I have finished the work you gave me to do.**"

Yet, if we're being honest, when you look at his life—at least by the world's standards—it doesn't look very impressive:

- He didn't write a **best seller**.
- He didn't start an **official organization**.
- He didn't travel to **global cities**.
- From a worldly standpoint, it feels like he could've done a lot more with his **power** and **influence** and **wisdom**.
 - **But he did exactly what the Father gave him to do, and that was enough.**

The gospel is not at war *with* ambition; it's at war *for* it.

- It's at war for an ambition that's **freed from proving itself...**
- an ambition that **measures winning the way Jesus does...**
- an ambition that **joins what God is already doing...**
- and an ambition **that knows when to say no without guilt.**

PRAY

May we never boast in anything except the cross of Jesus Christ. There is nothing we want more than for our lives to matter. There is a great movement of God you've set loose in this world, and I want the people of TSC to be on the front lines.

Fill us. Guide us. Use us. Light a fire of holy ambition inside of us.