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*This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while. At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you. I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.*

*I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. May the God of peace be with you all. Amen. Romans 15:14-33*

In the spring of the year 1814 - after a series of defeats on the battlefields of Russia, Germany and France - the French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte abdicated his the throne; and on April 6, 1814 he was exiled to the tiny little island of Elba in the Mediterranean. But, as the new King Louis XVIII began the work re-establishing the borders of France to what they had been back in 1791, Napoleon’s found a way to escape his tiny little island to the mainland of France where 1000 soldiers awaited his return. And as his army began to grow, so did his ambition – so much so that less than a year from the day he was exiled, Napoleon marched his army into Paris without resistance, taking the city and the throne back into his own hands. Yet his success was short lived, for 100 days after he escaped from the island of Elba, Napoleon lost his army and his throne on the battlefield of Waterloo, which is in modern day Belgium.

While history often frames Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo by pointing to the Prussian fighters who reinforced the British army against him, it is also well-known that, while his triumphant return to power in Paris was enthusiastically embraced, that zeal gave way to old frustrations and fears about his ambitions as he arrogantly resumed control of the government. Napoleon’s loss at Waterloo happened mainly because many in his army struggled to follow his egotistical leadership. Ironically, it was Napoleon himself who once said: “Great ambition is the passion of a great character. Those endowed with it may perform very good or very bad acts. All depends on the principles which direct them.” While Napoleon’s *principles* may have been very good in some ways, clearly the *manner* in how he carried them out revealed his ambitions were more about him than they were about France. Napoleon’s ambition stands in stark contrast to the ambition of the apostle Paul who wrote: “*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 15:21-22).

In Romans 12-15 Paul lays out for us how we are to obediently live out the righteousness of God we receive when we truly embrace Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. This is what we have been seeing throughout Romans 12-13: obedience to God, obedience to serving others, obedience to loving others, obedience to loving our enemies, obedience to all those in authority over us, and obedience to the Law of Love for the sake of unity in the church and so that we might be living witnesses of the joy of the gospel of Jesus Christ to those who are lost in the world around us. Remember also Romans 14 revealed to us that God builds His church through the sacrificial decisions of his people, as we love each other as God loves us - revealing that Jesus died on a cross so that people with all kinds of personal preferences, opinions and convictions will unite together under his lordship and reflect the love and grace and glory and joy of Jesus Christ.

This was the joyful burden of the apostle Paul's heart, as God had called him to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with both the Jews and the Gentiles, uniting together two groups of people who were essentially two polar opposites in their view of just about everything that truly mattered - so much so that they were considered to be mortal enemies of one another. And even though Paul was a Jew to the most extreme extent, God sovereignly chose and called Paul to be His instrument of mercy, grace and love in bringing the gospel to the non-Jewish, Gentile world. Paul spoke of this in his letter to the church in Galatia in Galatians 1:13-16: *"For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles."*

Though he lived his life contrary to the statement, Napoleon spoke truth when he declared: "Great ambition is the passion of a great character" because Paul's character was forged in the furnace of God's will for his life for the cause passionately proclaiming the glory of God in Christ for the joy of all people throughout the world. Paul's ambition was to fulfill the mission of the Greatest Commandments to love God with all of our hearts and minds and souls and strength and to love others as God has loved us; by fulfilling the mission of the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that Jesus has commanded us; by fulfilling our Lord's call and command that we be his witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth; as we live in such harmony with one another, each in accord with Christ Jesus, that together we with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:10; Mark 12:30-31; Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 1:8; Romans 15:5-6).

And so as we continue in the application section of Paul's letter to the Romans, the apostle now takes a turn towards the personal side of his life in speaking of the ambition within his heart to fulfill the mission God had called him to. It is in these words we see the heartbeat of a true follower of Jesus Christ who is joyfully and obediently filling his call to live out and share the gospel - which is, in essence, the very same ambition God has called every follower of Jesus Christ to pursue. Our text for today is significantly relevant for all of us who claim Christ. Paul's words are both his personal ambition and his exhortation to the church of Jesus Christ today, as followers of Christ we are to join Paul in his holy ambition and to fulfill the church's mission.

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In these verses Paul explains his reason for writing this to the church in Rome. He begins by giving them his assessment as to how they are fulfilling God's call for their lives. After he had just challenged and chastised them about the disunity in the church in Romans 14 by telling them that when our preferences become precepts we polarize the church, and then in Romans 15:1-13 lovingly admonishing them to love and serve and live in harmony with each other, as brothers and sisters in the family of God ought to do, Paul then tells them *"I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers."* The apostle then gives them three reasons why he is *"satisfied"* with their progress in their call to pursue a collective holy ambition and to fulfill the church's mission.

The first reason Paul told them, that he was *"satisfied"* with their progress was because *"you yourselves are full of goodness."* The apostle is speaking here of their motives, in that they were motivated by a sense of showing goodness towards others rather than showing selfishness towards themselves. That *"goodness"* shown through what they thought, said and did because their hearts were in the right place with God and with each other and with people they came in contact with. The second reason Paul was *"satisfied"* with their progress was because they were *"filled with all knowledge."* This doesn't mean that they knew everything they needed to know, but rather, that they acted humbly and obediently and wisely and purposely in what they did know. You would think Paul need not commend them for that, as that should be a given. But that's not a given as they were most likely just like so many who claim Christ today who seem to just muddle along through life doing the best they can, hoping things will turn out all right in the end. Paul tells us those in the Roman church were beyond that; they passionately lived out their lives for Jesus by obeying, loving and sharing the things that they knew about Jesus. Since they were *"filled with all knowledge"* about God their holy ambition was to live out that *"knowledge."*

The third reason Paul was *"satisfied"* with their progress was because they were *"able to instruct one another."* The apostle is telling them that he is now seeing real spiritual maturity among them. The mark of a mature disciple of Jesus is to ability to help someone else with what you have learned. God's Word speaks of this in Hebrews 5:12-14: *"For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil."* This is a struggle for the church in North America as our rights-oriented, entitlement culture does not point us towards maturity. Sinclair Ferguson once said: "There is a difference between a well-instructed congregation and a well-nourished one. " Brothers and sisters, we don't know as much as we think we know – and that's especially true about ourselves and about our God. That's why we need each other. We were created us for community. It's only when we are united that we able to instruct and learn from each other.

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*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

“*In Christ Jesus*” Paul boasts about his ministry “*for God*” - in that doing so he glorifies Jesus rather than himself because it was “*Christ*” who had worked through him in his ministry to the Gentiles. In fact Paul summarized his entire ministry by saying that Jesus is the one who “*accomplished*” Christ’s work through him by “*word*” (Paul’s preaching and teaching) and “*deed*” (Paul’s lifestyle and Paul’s Holy Spirit empowered work). This reflects what Paul meant when he told those in the Roman church that he was “*satisfied*” with their progress because they were “*filled with all knowledge*” (what they knew about Jesus and how they lived out what they knew about Jesus). The “*power of signs and wonders*” the apostle speaks about here refers to the miracles that accompanied his preaching and teaching and sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout his ministry. We learned what the word “*sign*” here meant a couple of years ago when we went through the gospel of John. “*Signs*” are miracles that were done to point people to the power of God, which reveals the gospel through Jesus Christ, which offers mercy, grace and love for those who receive him as their Lord and Savior. The word “*wonders*” describes how amazed people were when they saw signs/miracles - but which did not necessarily mean a change of heart.

Because it was Paul’s holy ambition to fulfill the church’s mission to love God and love one another and love his neighbors - he made disciples of all nations by passionately proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ among the Gentiles from Jerusalem to Illyricum (modern day Albania and what was formerly Yugoslavia). And because it was Paul’s holy ambition and the church’s mission to love God and love one another and love their neighbors - he made disciples of all nations by passionately proclaiming the gospel among the Gentiles from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth in Port Alberni, British Columbia. Paul’s aim was to preach the gospel and plant churches in areas where no churches existed, thus fulfilling the prophecy spoken of in Isaiah 52:15: “*Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.*” While we do have churches in Port Alberni, the overwhelming majority in our community “*have never been told*” of Jesus. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are to be about the business of sharing the “*word*” about Jesus and living out a lifestyle that points people to Jesus.

*This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while. At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you. I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.*

Romans 15:22-29

Because of Paul’s holy ambition to fulfill the mission of the church, he had been prevented from coming to Rome. And even through his work of planting churches in unreached areas in the eastern part of the Roman Empire was not finished, he now felt that his work there was done. So he hoped to take an offering to Jerusalem, make his way to Rome and then go to Spain.

*I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. May the God of peace be with you all. Amen. Romans 15:30-33*

As Paul ends this personal section of his letter to the church in Rome, he has two prayer requests: 1) for protection: *“that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea”* and 2) for acceptance: *“that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints.”* The Bible tells us that unbelieving Jews arrested Paul in Judea before he was able to make his way to Rome; but the Bible also tells us the prayer for protection was answered as the unbelieving Jews were unable to put Paul to death – which allowed Paul to go to Rome, but not in the way he expected. We also believe the second prayer was answered in that Acts 24:17 tells us the offering he brought to Jerusalem was accepted. God answered Paul’s prayer to fulfill his holy ambition to fulfill the church’s mission: *“I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.”*

It is significant that Paul asked for protection from unbelievers, and for acceptance from the saints – because its in these two areas that Satan loves to attack us when we seek embrace the holy ambition to fulfill the mission of the Greatest Commandments to love God with all of our hearts and minds and souls and strength and to love others as God has loved us; by fulfilling the mission of the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations; by fulfilling our Lord’s call and command that we be his witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth; as we live in such harmony with one another, each in accord with Christ Jesus, that together we with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul wrote his letter to the church in Rome to remind them and us that living out and sharing the gospel will be a joyful burden in that we will face opposition from unbelievers and rejection from one another - and so we must pray for protection from without and acceptance from within.

Yet, in the midst of it all the opposition and rejection he faced in life, Paul joyfully declared: *“I make it my ambition to preach the gospel.”* Great ambition is the passion of a great character when our character is forged in the furnace of God’s will for our lives that we would live out and share the good news that God sent his only begotten Son into the world to die for the sins of those who receive him as Lord and Savior - so we might be forgiven, rescued, redeemed and restored back into the relationship with God we were all created for at the beginning of creation. When we do so we will, like Paul, face opposition and rejection. But when such times come we need to be reminded of the things about our faith in Jesus Christ that we need to continually remember. Yes, Jesus was crucified but he also rose from the dead. Yes, we are labor diligently in serving others, but it will for naught if we do so without the blessing and empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Yes, we will face opposition and rejection when we pursue the holy ambition of the church’s mission to love God and love each other and make disciples and be witnesses and glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ with one unified voice together, but God still miraculously answers prayer, and He will do so when God, rather than ourselves, is the goal. Brothers and sisters, this is our call together as God’s people. In the apostle Paul’s words: *“May the God of peace be with us all. Amen? Amen!”*

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Pastor Leland Botzet

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