

"The world is peppered with people who can coax small seeds of inspiration into richly flowering ideas that put humankind on a better path.

...And then there's that guy in Des Moines."

So begins the news report about a recent police chase in Iowa that took an intriguing turn. Early one morning... a trooper with the Iowa State Patrol had attempted to pull a man over — but he "*stepped on the gas and triggered what turned into a 10-to-15-minute pursuit.*" ... The chase finally ended when the cars got off the freeway... and "*a pit maneuver forced the fleeing car and driver to a stop near a Des Moines elementary school.*"

So what caused the driver to speed away from his traffic stop? ... "The 46-year-old at the helm of this idea told authorities that leading police on a chase was just something on his *Bucket List.*" ... **[P A U S E]** ...

Hopefully not many of us have a dream of being chased by police... but most of us do have dreams and goals and "bucket lists." ... As we think on them... however... we need to see how they align with God's Word and... ultimately... hold them loosely. After all... Proverbs tells us:

Proverbs 16:9 (ESV)

⁹ The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.

It will be helpful to remember this as we study our passage in Romans today... and then discuss our own ambitions.

We are coming to the end of our study of Paul's great letter to the Romans. With Romans 15:14... Paul begins to wrap this up... turning in his final paragraphs to his reasons for writing the letter... suggesting what his future

travel plans might be... and sending greetings to people he knew in Rome. But even though he is ending... he still has quite a bit to say. ... In this passage of Romans... Paul seems to be looking back over the greater part of his lifetime career as a missionary... and giving us an inside look at his spiritual ambitions.

We know from his letters to the Corinthians that his career had been difficult. ... He had experienced hardships... threats... beatings... dangers... and rejections (spelled out for us in 1 Cor. 4... as well as 2 Cor. - chapters 4... 6... and 11.)

But he did not judge what he had done to be a failure. ... On the contrary... in today's passage... he actually boasts about what God had accomplished through him "*in leading the Gentiles to obey God*" (v. 18). ... He uses the words "glory" or "boast" in verse 17 ("I glory in Christ Jesus")... and then the word "ambition" in verse 20 ("It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known").

Certainly... boasting can get us (as Christians) in a lot of trouble... can't it? (We will say more about boasting later.) ...AND ambition can also be problematic for Christians... because we see so many bad examples of ambitious people who claw their way to the top. ... But certainly that isn't the kind of ambition we see in Paul. ... Instead of looking out for himself and working hard for personal advancement... he was ambitious to serve God — and for Paul... that was an ambition to "preach the Good News where the name of Christ has never been heard."

Another reason why ambition can be a difficult topic for Christians... is because an ambition to serve God often draws parents away from the needs of their family. (Ambition to do the Lord's work... has devastated many Christian homes... much to the delight of Satan.) ... [P A U S E] ...

But we will see in today's passage that ambition (in itself) is not improper to have. ... It is having an inflexible ambition... or the wrong ambition... that will be destructive. ... That is why we need to know the difference between a "holy ambition"... and an unholy one. ... Our passage today will offer us some insight.

But first... let me ask: "*Are you ambitious for God?*" ... "*Do you want (more than anything else) to please God and to do His will?*" ... All through today's message... I am going to ask you to pray for "holy ambition."

Romans 15:14-33 is one of the most descriptive passages dealing with ambition in the servants of God. It reveals what it was that made Paul such a great servant of the Lord. ... So here is what a "holy ambition" looks like... as we will see it in our passage for today.

- I. It is adaptable to be either assuring or confrontive (vs 14-15)
- II. It is motivated to share the Gospel with unflustered dignity (v. 16)
- III. It has a zeal for God's glory that diminishes self-pride (v. 17)
- IV. It experiences divine enablement (vs. 18-19)
- V. It is flexible while it attempts big things for God (vs. 20-29)
- VI. It involves strenuous prayer (vs. 30-33)

Let's get started... I. *It is adaptable to be either assuring or confrontive.*

In Romans 15:14... we will see that the apostle Paul was as far as possible from dwelling on the faults of these believers. ... When it was necessary to reprove them... he did it... but he did it with tenderness and tears. ... And when he could commend... he never hesitated to give them credit to the utmost extent to which it could be rendered. (This is what we see him do in verse 14.)

Romans 15:14

Now... this is not flattery. He told the truth. ... he did not commend them in order to excite pride and vanity... but to encourage... and to prompt to still more active efforts. ... (Church!) Please pray for “holy ambition” and then watch for evidence of God’s grace given to you and flowing out to others from you... as encouragement. ... “Holy ambition” is not in the believer who always censures and condemns... whose ministry is made up of complaints and dirges... who never speaks of Christians ...but in a strain of fault-finding.

With his encouragement... Paul begins in verse 14 with *goodness*... and he says that this is something of which the Roman church was full. ... What a commendation! ... In the Greek... this is a rather rare word that Paul came-up with. It isn’t found anywhere else in all of Paul's writings. ... The word is *agathôsune*. This was practical goodness manifested in helpfulness to others... in bearing the burdens of one another.

Then Paul commends them because they were filled with all knowledge. ... This does not mean “learn-*ed* in an academic sense”... but rather a wise... practical understanding of how to be helpful to others. Believers today – who do not have this type of understanding will see a fellow believer who is

hurting... and glibly say “*If you need anything – let me know...*” (thinking that they are being helpful.) But those who do have the kind of understanding that Paul commends the Roman believers as having... will offer specific ways of helping. (They have a perceptive ... down-to-earth grasp of how to be useful to others.)

Finally... Paul says in praise of the Roman church that the believers in Rome were "*competent to instruct one another.*" The word for “*Instruct*” carries the idea of admonishing another person in order to correct something that may be wrong.

Boy! Paul really found some great qualities to commend these believers in Rome with. His holy ambition was flexible to be gentle as well as harsh (when needed.)

Romans 15:15

(Church!) Please pray for “holy ambition”... and then watch for God to grace you with words of affirmation when they are most needed... and bold confrontive words... when they are most needed.

Holy ambition...

- I. It is adaptable to be either assuring or confrontive.
- II. It is motivated to share the Gospel with unflustered dignity.

Romans 15:16

The word translated "minister" is the same root word from which we derive the word *liturgy*. The word even sounds like it—*lietourgon*. This is most significant... because every other time... Paul used other words to

describe himself. For example... he often used the term *doulos* to indicate he was a servant of Jesus Christ... or else he used *diakonos*... which (also) means "servant" or "minister." ... But (here) he chose *lietourgon* because he saw his missionary work like that of a priest offering sacred worship to God.

Here we are exposed to Paul's remarkable self-conception. Though he is involved in the dusty... mundane business of traveling the ancient world on foot... suffering from exposure... threats... beatings... and rejection... in his heart of hearts... he sees himself in priestly garb in the Temple... lifting up the souls of men and women... which then ascend as a sweet-smelling fragrance to Christ. This is a dazzling picture!

(LISTEN!)... how you and I perceive ourselves... will greatly determine how we will live our lives. ... Imagine what this priestly self-perception did for Paul. His missionary life was to him intensely sacred. The most mundane daily occurrences were "holy." However humiliating his treatment... he saw himself with unflustered dignity... dutifully serving God. All of life was a liturgy.

If only we could see our service as such... our lives would be transformed. A pie baked for a neighbor becomes an offering to God. Efforts to beautify the church are a drink offering. A Kids Church lesson - well taught - is a sweet fragrance to God. ... These are beautiful thoughts! ... Even better - they are true!

(Church!) Please pray for "holy ambition"... and then watch for God to give you opportunities to lovingly (with unflustered dignity) share your faith... along with His motivation for you to do so.

Holy ambition...

- I. *It is adaptable to be either assuring or confrontive.*
- II. *It is motivated to share the Gospel with unflustered dignity.*
- III. *It has a zeal for God's glory that diminishes self-pride.*

Romans 15:17

Paul did not glory in his natural abilities or his accomplishments. We know that he had a powerful intellect. The Book of Romans and his other writings are ample proof of that. And we know that he could speak persuasively. His speeches preserved in Acts give an idea of how tactful... wise... and informed... his speeches were.

But Paul seems to be in wonder... at how God would take such a proud... stubborn... self-righteous murderer of God's people... (as Paul was) and turn him into such a pioneer missionary for His kingdom!... Paul could never take that glory to himself. He could only glory in Jesus Christ. He gloried in what Christ had done through him.

(LISTEN!) You and I are the most useless servants (even if we have great natural talents) UNTIL we will offer ourselves to God as his slaves.

William Wilberforce was crippled... but he offered himself to God as His servant... and God used him to free the slaves - throughout the British empire. ... D. L. Moody was only an uneducated shoe salesman with extremely poor grammar... But one day Moody heard a preacher say: "*The world has yet to see what God can do through one man who is entirely surrendered to him.*" ... In his heart Moody said, "*By God's grace I will be that man.*" And God made him into a powerful evangelist.

Neither Moody... Wilberforce... you or I can ever take credit for how God will use us. ... But most often we are like the Little Leaguer who put all his sixty pounds into a ferocious swing and barely connected. The ball scraped by the bottom of the bat... jiggled straight back to the pitcher... who groped and fumbled it. There was still plenty of time to nail the batter at first... but the pitcher's throw soared high over the first baseman's head. ... The slugger flew on toward second base. ... Somebody retrieved the ball. ... The next throw sailed wildly into left field. ... The hitter swaggered into third... puffing along with a man-sized grin... then continued on to cross home plate. "*Oh, boy,*" he said, "*that's the first home run I ever hit in my whole life!*"

That is so like us! We step to the plate for Jesus... barely tip the ball... but He arranges for us to get home — and we try to take all the credit!

(Church!) Please pray for “holy ambition”... and then watch for God to give you a zeal for His glory that diminishes a self-pride.

Holy ambition...

- I. *It is adaptable to be either assuring or confrontive.*
- II. *It is motivated to share the Gospel with unflustered dignity.*
- III. *It has a zeal for God's glory that diminishes self-pride.*
- IV. *It experiences divine enablement*

Romans 15:18-19

Signs and wonders were the marks of the apostles and the early preachers of the gospel. (You see)... They did not come with a New Testament in their hands -- it hadn't been written yet. They came with these credentials:

mighty "signs and wonders." ... When the Apostle Paul defended his apostleship to the Corinthian church... he wrote about his visit with them:

2 Corinthians 12:12 (ESV)

¹² *The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works.*

Signs and wonders were meant to authenticate the apostolic office and message... (the message and the messenger)... in the days before there was a New Testament. Today the New Testament serves **that** purpose. It authenticates the message and the messenger. The right use of Scripture is how we know that a person is speaking God's Word.

(Hear me, please)... the miracles that need to be done today are not healing the sick or raising the dead... **but bringing dead souls to life** - to believe on Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior... and then to be changed by Him.

Someone once asked a preacher whether he could turn water into wine as Jesus did. He answered that he could do something better than that. He told about an alcoholic who had neglected his family but who had been brought to Christ by hearing the gospel. The preacher said, "*We didn't turn water into wine, but we turned whisky into milk for his babies.*"

(And hear me on this as well...) I am **not** saying that God never does miracles today. What I **am** saying is that signs and wonders should never be our primary focus. (LISTEN!) 2nd Thessalonians 2:9 says that when the Antichrist comes... he will try to authenticate his message by doing signs and wonders. So we know that signs and wonders can be used by the evil one to mislead.

Something better is needed to authenticate the message and messenger today... and we NOW have it. Scripture! God's Holy Word needs to be a FAR greater emphasis. Seek God's divine enablement as you study it.

(Church!) Please pray for "holy ambition"... and then watch for God to give you His divine enablement as you use His Word... by the power of the Spirit of God... wherever He takes you.

Holy ambition...

- I. It is adaptable to be either assuring or confrontive.
- II. It is motivated to share the Gospel with unflustered dignity.
- III. It has a zeal for God's glory that diminishes self-pride.
- IV. It experiences divine enablement
- V. It is flexible while it attempts big things for God

Romans 15:20-29

Paul had an impressive list of missionary accomplishments (sufficient for many lifetimes)... but he had no intention of settling down into a comfortable retirement. ... Paul never rested on his oars... never sat back to rest. Time was too short... the task too great... the laborers too few... the issues too momentous. ... To his underlying viewpoint he added undying vision. He saw a lost world... a world which in his day was focused on Spain and Rome. He wanted to visit Rome... *briefly* on his way to Spain.

Up to this point... he has been too busy reaching the unreached to fit his desired visit to these areas into his plans. ... He has put Rome on his itinerary again and again... only to have it blocked out by more pressing interests. ... For while Paul had ambition... he never became a slave to his plans. He always allowed the Holy Spirit to set them aside for better ones.

One of those “*better plans*” was to take money that the churches in Macedonia had raised to help their poor brothers and sisters in the Lord (back in Jerusalem.) ... It seems that *being Christian* and *being poor* went hand-in-hand for the believers in Jerusalem. ... (And you can understand why.) ... Christianity was not well accepted by the *Jewish authorities*... and when *Jews became Christians* they were often *cut off* from family and friends. The Jerusalem church probably had little means of support... so help from the other churches was needed and greatly appreciated.

As Paul describes the collection for the saints in Jerusalem... he emphasizes that those who gave “*were pleased*” to do so. (“Their decision was their own”). These Gentiles felt that they “*owed* it to the Jews to share with them.” ... The Gentiles had received the gospel (spiritual blessings) originally from Jerusalem (where Christianity began)... so they felt obligated to offer financial help to the needy believers - there.

And **Paul** wanted to bring about ... a closer bond between the mother church at Jerusalem... and the daughter churches in other parts of the empire. Unfortunately (you see) ... there were still Jewish believers in the Jerusalem church... who *opposed* the message of grace to the Gentiles. They wanted Gentiles to (first) become Jews and accept the Jewish Law.

So it was again... that Paul’s plans to visit Rome were blocked by a more necessary plan. Time and again the Holy Spirit postponed Paul’s plan until God’s time was ripe... *and then* He sent Paul there. (And – get this!) When God sent Paul to Rome... it was **not** as a pioneer... but as a prisoner in chains! (We know what happened when he went to Jerusalem to deliver the gift... because the book of Acts tells us.)

Most believers can identify with Paul's blocked plans. Who hasn't made plans (big ones and little ones)... only to find that they are changed or even canceled because of some conflict... or sudden change in circumstances?

Unfortunately... many times we react with grumbling... irritated that our hard work was for nothing. If we take a closer look at the reversals in Paul's plans... we discover that he never begrudged these changes but accepted them as the intervention of the Lord. Can we do the same?

We should understand beyond any shadow of a doubt that God is in charge of all aspects of our lives. God's interruptions are corrections for our lives... nudging us in a different direction than we had originally planned. Instead of responding in frustration... we should accept these "interruptions" as evidence of God's continued care for us.

Holy ambition is flexible as it attempts big things for God.

By the way... did Paul ever make it to Spain...? ... We don't know. But please listen to the words of (author and pastor) Kent Hughes:

I personally think it does not matter, and here is why: First, God knew Spain was in Paul's heart, just as much as it was in David's heart to build the Temple, though that king never saw a stone of it laid. Secondly, the value of a dream is not whether we achieve it or not, but in setting out to achieve it. This has been a great lesson for me personally. God is not so much interested in whether we reach our destination as in how we try to get there. To us arrival is everything, but to God the journey is most important, for it is in the journey that we are perfected, and it is in hardships that he is glorified as we trust him.

(Church!) Please pray for "holy ambition"... then attempt big things for God... and allow God to revise your vision... perfecting you in the process!

Holy ambition...

- I. It is adaptable to be either assuring or confrontive.
- II. It is motivated to share the Gospel with unflustered dignity.
- III. It has a zeal for God's glory that diminishes self-pride.
- IV. It experiences divine enablement
- V. It is flexible while it attempts big things for God ...(and finally)
- VI. It involves strenuous prayer

Romans 15:30-32

What a word picture Paul used here for “strive together” in prayer. It was the word from which we get our words *agony* and *agonize* (*agonizomai*). An *agon* was an athletic contest... and *agonizomai* described the struggle that took place in an athletic contest.

Prayer is not a useless exercise. We are engaged in a great spiritual struggle against the devil and his schemes... and prayer is the only way we can participate in it. ... Does holy ambition regularly cause you to agonize in prayer...?

(Church!) Please pray for “holy ambition”... then engage in strenuous prayer.

If we were to turn to the book of Acts... we would see that the strenuous prayers that Paul elicited were effective. ... Paul was indeed delivered from the unbelievers in Judea... (though not in the way he would have wanted or expected.) A riot broke out but Paul was rescued by the soldiers. And though he spent the next two years in custody in Caesarea... and at least two years as a prisoner in Rome... he did at last get to Rome where he was able to receive many believers in his jail cell... and write several of the

letters we have in our Bibles today. And Paul was able to share the Gospel with several high government officials along the way.

There is also reason to believe that the Gentile offering that he took to Jerusalem helped heal the breach between the Jewish and Gentile believers. The Jewish leaders thanked Paul for his concern and praised God for his ministry (it says in Acts 21:17-20).

I will close by going back to the example of Dwight L. Moody. Let me tell you how he became an effective evangelist. Moody was a shoe salesman who was also the teacher of a boy's Bible class in Chicago. He was there at the time of the Great Chicago Fire... and after he had done his part in getting together some money to help the poor and buy a building for his own work... he went to England for a rest. He did not intend to preach. He only wanted to hear Charles Spurgeon... George Mueller... and some others. ... But one Sunday he was invited to preach in a Congregational church in north London... and he accepted.

Sunday morning did not go well. Moody said that he had "*no power, no liberty; it seemed like pulling a heavy train up a steep grade.*" It was so bad that he tried to get out of preaching the evening service... for which he had also been invited... but the minister would not let him off.

That evening it was quite different. Moody felt unusual power... and when he got to the end he decided to give an invitation. He asked all who wanted to accept Christ to get to their feet... and about five hundred people did. Moody thought there must be some mistake... perhaps they just didn't understand him. So he asked them to sit down. Then he said, "*After this*

meeting there will be an after-service in the vestry, and I invite all who are serious about receiving Christ to come to that meeting." When the service was over the people began to stream through.

"Who are all these people?" Moody asked the pastor. "Are they yours?" ... "Some of them are." ... "Are they Christians?" "Not as far as I know" ...was the reply.

Moody went into the vestry and repeated the invitation in even stronger terms... and the people all once again expressed their willingness to become Christians. ... Moody still thought there must be some mistake. He said: *"I have to go to Ireland tomorrow, but your pastor will still be here and if you really mean what you have just said, come tomorrow night and meet with him again."*

A few days later... when he was in Ireland... Moody received a telegram from the minister saying, *"There were more people here on Monday night than on Sunday. A revival has broken out in our church, and you must return from Ireland and help me."* Moody did return, and what happened in those days was the basis for the invitations that later took him back to England and then over the whole world as an evangelist.

That alone is a remarkable story... but here is the rest of it. There were two sisters in that north London church... one of whom was a bed-ridden invalid. After the morning service at which Moody had first preached the healthy sister came home and reported that "a Mr. Moody" had been there that morning.

"Mr. Moody of Chicago?" asked the sister. When told that he was the one who had preached... the sick sister said:

"I have read about him in the newspapers and have been praying that he would come to London and that God would send him to our church. If I had known that it was he who would be preaching this morning, I would have eaten no breakfast and have spent the time praying instead. Now leave me alone. Don't let anyone in to see me. I am going to spend the rest of the day and evening fasting and in prayer."

That is what she did... and the revival in north London resulted.

Is prayer effective? ... Indeed it is! ... It is the **only** thing that is effective in this great spiritual struggle for the minds and souls of men and women.

(Church!) Please pray for "holy ambition"... then engage in strenuous prayer.