

Main Idea: From Paul's example in Romans 15:17-22, we learn that reaching the unreached involves living for three ambitions.

- I. Reaching the unreached involves prizing the person of Christ (17).
 - A. See Him as worthy.
 - B. See yourself as a servant.
 - II. Reaching the unreached involves promoting the work of Christ (18-19).
 - A. It shows up in your speech (18a).
 1. You won't want to talk about what you have done.
 2. You'll want to talk about what Christ has done through you.
 - B. It shows up in your service (18b-19).
 1. You'll see changed lives.
 2. You'll see the evidence of the Spirit's power.
 - III. Reaching the unreached involves preaching the gospel of Christ (20-22).
 - A. It's more important than personal convenience (20).
 - B. It's more important than personal recognition (21).
 - C. It's more important than personal plans (22).
- Response: In light of what God is doing in the world today...
1. Let's give thanks.
 2. Let's make the most of gospel opportunities.

It's good to be back home after a couple of weeks ministering in the country of Albania. I appreciate your prayers, which God answered in some wonderful ways. One, He kept my migraines to a minimum (none after the first three days in the country). Two, He gave strength for the ministry of the Word. Pastor Tim Pasma and I each had the privilege to speak 24 times in 11 days. We taught three Biblical Counseling training conferences (in the cities of Durres, 115,000; Korce, 52,000; and Vlore, 80,000). We also each preached in two churches in Tirana, the capital city (421,000).

As I've been pondering what I might share with you about this ministry, a text came to mind. Specifically, part of a verse, that I'd like for us to consider this morning. In the latter half of Romans 15:19 Paul said, “So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ.”

That was Paul's testimony. He took the gospel from Jerusalem to Illyricum.

And while I'm certainly no Paul, it's now my testimony. In 1980 I preached my first sermon, and it took place, by God's good providence, under the stars on a kibbutz in Israel. Then last Sunday I preached my most recent sermon, to a local church in Tirana, Albania.

The connection? I didn't see it until I was in Albania. In the Bible Albania is called *Illyricum*. When Paul wrote his epistle to the church at Rome, he said to that point in his life he had preached the gospel from Jerusalem to Illyricum, or Albania. I say *to that point* because Paul would later go further, to Rome in Italy, and eventually to Spain.

He started in Jerusalem, where the good news began when Christ offered Himself as a sacrifice for sinners and rose again. And He says He proceeded all the way to Illyricum (he calls it Dalmatia in 2 Timothy 4:10).

So I want us to explore this text today, for two reasons. One, I want to share with you what God is doing in Illyricum today, with some pictures and stories. And two, I want us

^{**}Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For an earlier development of this text, see the Romans series preached at WBC in 1998.

to see what it took for the gospel to reach Illyricum in the first place, and what it will take today for the gospel to reach the unreached peoples of this community and world.

What does it take to reach the unreached? Three things modeled by Paul in this text, as we'll see momentarily. What was the effect? The gospel reached, of all places, Illyricum.

[Show power point of slides]

Is that significant? Indeed. Illyricum, or Albania, as it's called today, has about 3 million people. It's located just east of Italy, across the Adriatic Sea. *Where pizza meets baklava*, is the slogan that sums up Albania. It's where the east and west come together. Albania isn't western Europe, or eastern Europe. It's right in the middle.

Albania has a long history of oppression and hardship. The Muslim Turks invaded and then occupied the country for 500 years. Today you see mosques all over, and two-thirds of the people identify themselves as Muslim.

[Listen to the call to prayer video]

After a brief window of independence from the Turks, the Communists took over in the 20th century and closed off the people from the outside world, enforcing atheism as the only accepted religion.

I talked with one believer who told me he saw the enforced atheism as a good thing, for it eradicated all religion, Islam and nominal Christianity, and prepared the way for the spread of the liberating gospel of Christ, which is happening today.

According to Operation World, there are only about 15,000 evangelical Christians in the country today. We were privileged to teach believers in four cities. Here are some pictures of the training that took place in Korce.

[Show pics of Biblical Counseling training class in Korce]

Missionaries Blair and Sue Alvidrez organized the training, along with a team of Albanian pastors and other missionaries. About 250 participated in the 3 conferences, around 120 in Korce.

Over and over the people said, "Thank you for coming and teaching us these practical truths from God's Word." They are just like we are. They have problems—family problems, personal problems, church problems—and they were thrilled to see that in the Bible God has given us answers for the problems of life.

The Lord is doing a great work in Albania, and while it's new to us, it's not new to Him. It actually began 20 centuries ago when He sent His servants, Paul and others, to this region of the world.

I'll share some more pictures this evening, but now it's time to address a question. What does it take, humanly speaking, to reach the unreached? Think of the yet unreached in our community, those who are isolated from the gospel. And think of the unreached around the world.

Brothers and sisters, it's our mission to reach the unreached. That includes the unreached in our community—that's local evangelism. And the unreached around the world—that's worldwide evangelism, or *missions*.

This was Paul's passion, to make Christ known where He was not yet known.

What does it take? From Paul's example in Romans 15:17-22, we learn that reaching the unreached involves living for three ambitions.

I. Reaching the unreached involves prizing the person of Christ (17).

"Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God." If you want to know what made Paul tick, here it is. Paul prized the person of Christ.

In this letter we call "Romans," Paul is sending the church in Rome a logical presentation of the work Jesus accomplished, and why it was needed. We see a gospel explanation in chapters 1-5, gospel implications in chapters 6-11, gospel imperatives in chapters 12-14, and gospel plans in chapters 15-16.

Romans 15:17 is a difficult verse to translate. The KJV renders it, "I have, therefore, that of which I may glory through Jesus Christ in those things which pertain to God." Literally, the verse begins, "I have a boasting in Christ Jesus."

Is it okay for a Christian to boast? Not the way it's usually done. I remember several years ago attending a student orientation for Christian college students. There was a testimony time for the young people to give honor to God by sharing how God had been working in their lives. A freshman by the name of "John" got up, and under the pretense of a testimony talked about himself. "I'm so glad I'm here at this school. I have a great voice and God's going to use my voice to bless you."

No, there's no place for man-centered boasting in God's universe. But there is such a thing as Christ-centered boasting. That's what Paul did.

If anybody did a lot of things for the Lord, it was Paul, right? If anybody had a "Who's Who?" list of Christian accomplishments, it was Paul. But he didn't boast of himself. He prized Christ.

How can we learn to prize Christ? By seeing two things.

A. See Him as worthy.

B. See yourself as a servant. Remember the context of Paul's testimony. He's just finished teaching on the subject of Christian liberties in chapters 14 & 15. The next thing he does in chapter 15 is motivate the Roman church by saying (14), "God has equipped you to do this! You can do it! You are competent to engage in *nouthetic* ministry."

And then in verses 15-16 Paul shares why he's so bold with the Romans Christians. It's because God gave him a grace-gift (15), an assignment (16), "to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles." Paul saw himself as an OT priest whose task it was, not to offer bulls and sheep, but people to God--to preach the gospel so that Gentiles might become acceptable offerings to God.

That's how Paul viewed himself. As a minister, a servant of the only One who is worthy. That's why he announces in verse 17, "Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God."

My friend, you'll never be sorry if you learn to prize the person of Jesus Christ. He is worthy of being prized! He loved us so much that He left the splendor of heaven to enter this sin-infested world to rescue us. He gave His life for us. On the Cross, He became a curse for us. He took our sin, our guilt, our pain. Then He conquered death. Yes, He's worthy to be prized!

Several years ago I participated in a Career Fair for the local 3rd grade. Some 20 different occupations were represented, and each was given a five minute block of time with groups of 3rd grade students. The goal was to expose the young people to a variety of career options. They heard from a fire-fighter and an eye doctor. There was a nurse, a pharmacist, a secretary, a chef, a correctional officer, and more.

What impressed me was that the interest of the students was keen. They got excited thinking about what they could do with their lives.

We want our lives to count. There are few things more tragic than a wasted life. If you want to learn how *not* to waste your life, just look at Paul. Here was a man who at the end of his life could say, "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith (2 Tim. 4:7)." How could he say that? What made the apostle Paul tick? Why gave him such confidence and meaning? The answer is that he lived with *different ambitions* than most.

First and foremost, he prized the person of Christ. That's essential for us, too, if we're going to reach the unreached. Prizing Christ above all.

II. Reaching the unreached involves promoting the work of Christ (18-19).

"I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done--by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit."

When you prize the person of Christ, you will naturally want to promote the work of Christ. And when it's your ambition to promote the work of Christ, it shows up in two areas.

A. It shows up in your speech (18a). You can tell a lot about a person by listening to what they like to talk about. Some people love to talk about (or hear others talk about) themselves. Please don't misunderstand. There's a place for sharing about yourself, especially in the church. We are to bear one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2). We're to love one another (John 13:34), and you can't bear burdens and love people you don't know. I'm not talking about the pseudo-spiritual response, "How am I doing? Oh, I don't talk about myself, only the Lord."

The issue is your ambition. What do you take pride in? What do you boast about? When it's your ambition to promote the work of Christ, it will show up in your speech in two ways.

1. *You won't want to talk about what you have done.* Paul puts it this way in verse 18 (KJV), "For I will not dare to speak of any of those things which Christ hath not wrought by me." Or to paraphrase Paul is saying, "I'm not interested in talking about my personal accomplishments. There's no eternal value in talking about what I've done. What I've done is nothing compared to what Someone else has done."

To put it another way, when it's your ambition to promote the work of Christ...

2. *You'll want to talk about what Christ has done through you.* "I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me."

Friends, those of us who know Christ have so much to talk about with others, don't we? Just think of all He's done for us, and is doing for us, and talk about those things.

When it's your ambition to promote the work of Christ, it will show up in your speech. Secondly...

B. It shows up in your service (18b-19). Paul describes his service beginning in the middle of verse 18. Here's what he says Christ accomplished through him: "in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done."

Stop there and think about this question. How does Christ work? A few years ago the *Chicago Tribune* reported the story of a New Mexico woman who was frying tortillas when she noticed that the skillet burns on one of her tortillas resembled, she said, the face of Jesus.² Excited, she showed the tortilla to her husband and friends, and they agreed it

²As told by J. MacArthur, *The Ultimate Priority*, p. 1.

resembled the face of Jesus. She went to her priest to have her tortilla blessed. She testified that the tortilla had changed her life, and her husband agreed that she had been a more pleasant wife since the tortilla had arrived.

The woman put the tortilla in a glass case in her home, built a special altar to it, and opened her home to visitors. Within a few months more than 8,000 people came to the shrine of the Jesus of the Tortilla.

Is that how the work of Christ is accomplished? Through tortillas? Friends, how did Paul say the work of Christ is advanced? It's through something very objective, the gospel of Christ.

Don't miss the obvious here. Here's how Christ does His work. He works *through people* who proclaim the gospel to *other people*. Notice the phrases in verse 18.

"What Christ has accomplished *through me*," Paul says. Christ could use clouds in the sky if He wanted, but He chooses to work through people. And what part do people like Paul have in the process?

He explains in verse 18, "In leading the Gentiles to obey God *by what I have said and done*." Ministry requires both proclamation and presentation, both lips and life, both hearing the truth and seeing the truth.

What truth? The objective truth of the gospel, the historical account of the Person and Work of Jesus Christ. That's why Paul's ambition was to promote the work of Christ.

Is that your ambition? What will happen if it is? There will be two evidences that will show up in your service.

1. *You'll see changed lives.* For Paul, the changed lives were converted Gentiles all over the Roman Empire.

"But," you say, "I'm no Paul." No, we're not Paul. His spiritual gifts were different (he was an apostle). His sphere of ministry was different. But we have this in common. If we're serious about promoting the work of Christ, we'll see changed lives.

Are there people who are Christians today because God used you to lead them to Christ? Can you think of other people who are more like Christ today because you invested time in them? Do you have people right now whose lives are being changed because Christ is working through you in them? If so, glory in Christ, not yourself. But if you don't see the evidence, take inventory. Check your ambitions. What do you need to change so that Christ's work is clearly your ambition?

Paul mentions a second evidence...

2. *You'll see the evidence of the Spirit's power.* Listen to what Paul says in verses 18-19 again, "I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done--(19) by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit."

What are "signs and miracles"? In the Bible they are supernatural events that messengers of God did to validate the message they spoke. Moses did "signs and wonders" just before the Law was given. Jesus and the apostles did "signs and wonders" before the New Testament was completed.

Everett Harrison explains (156), "A 'sign' is a visible token of an invisible reality that is spiritually significant. The same act may also be a 'wonder,' something that appeals to the senses and is recognized as a phenomenon that needs explanation."

If you scan the book of Acts, you'll see the record of "signs and wonders" in Paul's ministry...

At Cyprus (Acts 13): Paul preached the Word of God (7), and then struck with blindness Elymas, a sorcerer who opposed the gospel (8). The result of the preaching and the "sign" was the conversion of the proconsul who heard and saw what happened.

At Iconium (Acts 14): Verse 3 explains what happened, "So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders." You say, "If I could see a miracle, I'd trust Christ." Would you? Notice the crowd's reaction (4), "The people of the city were divided."

At Lystra (Acts 14): Paul spoke (8), then healed a man lame from birth (10). He got quite a response, too. At first the townspeople said, "The gods have come! (11)" Then the fickle mob stoned Paul (19).

And so the pattern is repeated in Acts. The apostles preached the gospel, and the Spirit authenticated the gospel with signs and miracles.

But not always. In fact, as you move through Acts you'll find less and less emphasis on signs and miracles. Paul preached at Thessalonica, no signs mentioned (ch 17). Then he preached at Berea, again no signs mentioned (ch 17). Then at Athens (ch 17) and Corinth (ch 18), but Luke doesn't mention signs and wonders. We do read that "God did extraordinary miracles through Paul" at Ephesus (19:11)--he healed the sick and cast out evil spirits. And that Paul revived a man named Eutychus who fell out of a window (20:10), and later healed Publius' father at Malta (28:8).

Which raises this question. Can God heal and do miracles today? Certainly, a sovereign God can do anything He desires. Does He still? Yes, and no. Does God still do the miraculous? Every time He transforms a sinner into a saint! But does He still authenticate the gospel through "signs and wonders" like He did with Paul.

I don't believe so, for this reason. We are not Paul. The signs and miracles were the marks of an apostle (see Heb. 2:3-4). Why can't we perform these signs today? Because we're not apostles. Today we don't need more apostles. We have the writings of the original apostles available to us (the NT).³

But we do have that which made the signs and miracles possible. What's that? In verse 19, Paul calls it the *power of the Spirit*.

Several years ago Bruce McDonald, chaplain for the NBA 76's, spoke at a Men's Retreat at Scioto Hills and challenged us with this question. "Is there anything happening in your life that you can't explain apart from God?"

Is there? Ask yourself. Can you see areas in your life right now where you can say for sure, "Yes, I know God is working in and through me life, for His glory. I see the evidence of His Spirit's power."?

I see it in so many ways in this church, particularly as I see how some are suffering in ways that bring glory to Jesus.

Paul's statement in verse 19 is remarkable, "So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ." I'm staggered by that. Roughly speaking, Paul had been serving Christ for about 20 years by this time. In that time God used him to take the gospel from Jerusalem to Illyricum (that's over 1,400 miles). He

³Wiersbe (564), "The miracles God gave Paul to do were 'signs' in that they came from God and revealed Him to others. And they were 'wonders' in that they aroused the wonder of the people. But their purpose was always to open the way for the preaching of the Gospel. Miracles were given to authenticate the messenger and the message."

evangelized a couple of dozen cities, and personally established new churches in many of these. He'd witnessed to tens of thousands of people, and led who knows how many hundreds (or thousands) to Christ.

He started where the Lord started the church, in Jerusalem, and he kept preaching Christ all the way to Illyricum (literally, “from Jerusalem and in a circle even to Illyricum.”)⁴ According to the *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, “A logical suggestion is that Paul went into Illyricum from Macedonia while waiting for a response to 2 Corinthians before going on to Corinth (Acts 20:1–3; 2 Cor. 13:1–2, 10). This visit was fresh in his mind since Corinth was the city where he wrote Romans (see the *Introduction to Rom.*).”

The *New Bible Dictionary* says Illyricum was the first Latin-speaking province which Paul visited in the course of his apostolic ministry, and could have prepared him for his projected mission in Latin-speaking Spain (Rom. 15:24, 28).⁵

Here's what *Harper's Bible Dictionary* says about it: “**Illyricum**, land of the Illyrians, a Roman province on the eastern coast of the Adriatic, today's Yugoslavia and Albania. Ancient writers speak of the Illyrians as wild and given to piracy. It took the Romans about two hundred and fifty years to subjugate the area completely and to integrate it fully into the Empire early in the first century a.d. under Tiberius (a.d. 14-37)... There were Christian communities in Illyricum by the second century, and Jerome, translator of the Bible into Latin (the Vulgate), was born there ca. 342.”⁶

Why did Paul go to Illyricum? For the same reason our sister church in Florence, KY, sent Blair, Sue, and Katie there as missionaries, and funded the recent biblical counseling training conferences. Because there are unreached people there who need to know about Christ and His life-changing work and Word.

Paul wasn't the only one who went. In 2 Timothy 4:10 Paul wrote this from prison, “Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia.” Dalmatia is another name for Illyricum.⁷ So after finishing his work on Crete, Titus went to Dalmatia. In fact, tradition says that Titus became a martyr for Christ in the first city in which we ministered, today called Durres. I saw the remains of a huge amphitheater there, with rooms that once housed lions that mauled our forefathers.

Friends, can you imagine what a church would be like today if it was full of people like Paul and Titus whose ambition it was to prize the person of Christ and promote the work of Christ no matter what the cost? That church would face a lot of opposition, yes. And that church would see the joy-producing fruit of unreached peoples becoming followers of Christ.

One more. What's it take to reach the unreached? One, prizing the person of Christ. Two, promoting the work of Christ. And three...

⁴ Bible Knowledge Commentary

⁵ Atkinson, B. F. C. (1996). Illyricum. In D. R. W. Wood, I. H. Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer & D. J. Wiseman (Eds.), *New Bible dictionary* (D. R. W. Wood, I. H. Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer & D. J. Wiseman, Ed.) (3rd ed.) (498). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

⁶ Achtemeier, P. J., Harper & Row, & Society of Biblical Literature. (1985). *Harper's Bible dictionary* (1st ed.) (418). San Francisco: Harper & Row.

⁷ According to the New Bible Dictionary

III. Reaching the unreached involves preaching the gospel of Christ (20-22).

"It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known." What was Paul's ambition? To preach the gospel. You don't need a pulpit to preach the gospel. To preach means "to announce glad tidings."

How can you tell if preaching the gospel is your ambition? It's not complicated. You'll be telling others about Christ. Not because you have to, but because you want to. And for that to happen, we need to overcome three competitors, as Paul did, as exemplified in his testimony in verses 20-22.

A. It's more important than personal convenience (20). "It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation." It was Paul's ambition to be a pioneer, to boldly go where no man had gone before with the gospel.

That's not to say it's wrong to minister in places that already have the gospel. There's a need for church-growing as well as church-planting. And don't misread this and think Paul was a loner in ministry. The opposite was true. He was a team-player (he mentions some 50 of his associates in his letters).

What's clear is this. Making Christ known was a higher priority to Paul than personal convenience. Is that true for us? Are we willing to serve Christ if it's *hard*? Paul was willing to go to unreached, at times hostile areas with the gospel. Are we? What about that neighbor across the street who needs Christ?

B. It's more important than personal recognition (21). "Rather, as it is written: 'Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand.'" Paul quotes here from Isaiah 52:15, which is a prophecy of the suffering Servant, a prediction of the humiliation, then exaltation of the Messiah.

If we're living for personal recognition, then making Christ known won't be a top priority to us. It's been said, "God can accomplish great things through people if they don't care who gets the credit." Remember, our Savior set aside His own interests for us.

Verse 21 reminds us there is inherent power in the gospel. It *will* reach people. God has people who *will see* and *will understand*. So we can go in confidence!

C. It's more important than personal plans (22). "This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you." We can't do everything in life. Even a life of ministry involves choices. Paul says he wanted to come visit his Christian friends in Rome, but he couldn't. A more pressing matter tugged at him--completing his missionary task in the eastern Mediterranean area. So the trip to Rome would have to wait.

Does the gospel take precedence over our personal plans? When was the last time you said *no* to something in order to make Christ known to the unreached?

The issue is ambition. What's it take to reach lost people? By Paul's example, three things. Reaching the unreached involves prizing the person of Christ, promoting the work of Christ, and preaching the gospel of Christ.

Response: In light of what God is doing in the world today...

1. *Let's give thanks.* First, thank Him that you know Him. And if you don't know Him, thank Him for His mercy He's given you another day to come to know Him. Today is the day of salvation. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

Dear church, the Lord doesn't need us, but He has privileged us to be partners with Him in reaching the lost. Let's thank Him for that great honor today. And...

2. *Let's make the most of gospel opportunities.*