



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Romans 15:14-21

Romans

"Paul's Priestly Ministry"

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] Our text this morning is Romans 15:14-21.

"And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able also to admonish one another. But I have written very boldly to you on some points so as to remind you again, because of the grace that was given me from God, to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the gospel of God, so that my offering of the Gentiles may become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Therefore in Christ Jesus I have found reason for boasting in the things pertaining to God. For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed, in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit; so that from Jerusalem and around about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ. And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named, so that I would not build on another man's foundation; but as it is written, 'They who had no news of Him shall see, and they who have not heard shall understand.' "

May the Lord bless this reading of His Word. Let's bow in prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank you for this time together, time in which your people, people you have chosen from the foundation of the world, redeemed from the foundation of the world by the Blood of the

Lamb, can come together, open their Bibles and read a text of Scripture and then consider the meaning of it in some depth. Father, as we do that, we pray that you bless us. You have given us the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Trinity who lives within us and guides us and directs us and illumines our minds. We pray that that ministry would go unhindered by us, that we would be yielded to His ministry and greatly affected by it.

We thank you for the gift of your Word and the instruction that it gives. And what we are reminded of this morning, as Paul writes some concluding comments to the church in Rome, reminded that his ministry was a priestly ministry. And our ministry, as well, is that. All of us, every one of us, every believer in Jesus Christ is a priest and has a glorious ministry in one area or another. So we all have a priestly ministry, and I pray, Father, we would be enabled to see and appreciate that this morning and take seriously the opportunities that we have, take seriously the life that we have, which is a priestly life, and live lives of devoted service for you.

We really have very little time to do that. Live is short and it doesn't pause for us. It keeps moving and soon it will be over. Help us to redeem the time, live wisely, live well, live lives of productive service for you. To that end we pray that you bless us in our time of study.

Build us up in the faith so that we could go out from this place, and throughout the week live as Godly servants ministering to those around us in word and deed. But we pray for our physical needs as well, Father, and there are many. I think of the sick: some who are facing surgery, some who are recovering from surgery, some who have unspoken needs. They may be physical, they may be emotional, they may be financial. There are a wide range of possibilities and realities, Father, of those who have needs, and we pray that you'd bless.

You know their conditions better than we do, better than they themselves know it. And you know the good that's going to come from it. We pray that you'd bless with healing. We pray that you'd

give encouragement, pray that you would build up, spiritually and physically, those who are afflicted. And those who aren't, those of us who enjoy good health and seem to possess all of the good things of life, we pray that you'd give us the sense of thankfulness, give us perspective on it.

We realize everything we have is a gift from you. Make us appreciative of that. Bless the families here today. And bless us this evening as we return to this place to worship our Lord and remember His death for us and remember that He's coming again. And may that not be an idle statement, a mere sentiment, Father.

May we truly see the significance of our Lord's first coming and His second coming. He purchased us in His first coming. He's coming again for us, and that will be a glorious day. Help us to remember that and to live in light of it. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.

[Message] As you can see, we are coming to the conclusion of the book of Romans. In fact, we might call chapter 15, verse 14 the beginning of the end. Paul's exposition of Christian doctrine and his exhortation to Christian living are at an end. But Paul's not finished yet. There are personal matters that he needs to communicate to the church, such as his travel plans and his greetings to friends in Rome.

But first, Paul felt a need to reassure the church about his reason for writing this letter. Paul did not found the church in Rome. He had never visited the church. He was concerned that some might have thought him presumptuous for having written a long letter instructing them on the great doctrines of the faith, informing them on how to live and correcting their problems. His worry was that they might misinterpret his motive and think that he wrote this letter because he thought their Christianity was defective or immature.

And so Paul now writes to reassure them that he was not speaking down to them. In fact, he had the highest regard for the church at Rome. He begins in verse 14 by expressing his confidence

in them. He calls them "brethren." It's more than just a common way of address.

In using that expression, he was recognizing, and communicating to them that he recognized that they share equally in fellowship with Christ with him. They're equally brothers and sisters in the Lord. And so he addresses them in that way. And then he gives three reasons for his confidence in them as brethren. They're "full of goodness," he writes, "filled with all knowledge and able also to admonish one another."

Those are three characteristics of a mature church. Their goodness is their opposition to evil, and approval of righteousness. But it's also their generosity and their kindness. They were full of goodness. Now earlier you'll remember, in chapter 3 Paul wrote: "There is none who does good. There is not even one."

But here, Paul writes that these Romans were full of goodness. Or as Leon Morris writes: "The Romans were outstandingly good." So how do we account for "There is none who does good," and these people are full of goodness. Well, of course, we account for that by the grace of God. God has saved them; He saved them out of that condition.

He had changed them, and by His grace, through the power of the Holy Spirit, He was working out His life in them. That's what God does. The Christian life is a supernatural life. Justification, sanctification, two of the great themes of this book, are God's work in the believer. We're not justified by our own activity. We're not sanctified by our own work. That is God's work of grace.

And we can see Paul describe the Christian life and the Christian experience in that way in many other places in the New Testament. One that's well known to us is Ephesians 2:8-10, where Paul tells us that we were saved by grace and he calls us God's "workmanship." That's verse 10. We're very familiar with Ephesians 2:8-9, but very often we skip verse 10. And yet verse 10 is filled with the grace of God.

We are God's "workmanship." Whatever you are in Jesus Christ, you are that because of God. He's made you that. We are "His workmanship, and Paul goes on to say, "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them." That's an amazing statement.

God prepared good works beforehand. Before you ever existed, your good works were prepared and He set them out for you. And you are able to walk in them, you are able to do them by the power of the Holy Spirit. He empowers us to do that. He produces the goodness.

In fact, goodness is listed in Galatians 5:22 as a fruit of the Spirit. It's a work of God's grace. He's working out His life in us. And as a church, these Romans were manifesting goodness in their lives. They were living upright moral lives.

They were kind. They were generous to those within their congregation, to those within their community. They were good people. Their Christianity, in other words, was not defective. They were living in a manner that was consistent with the gospel, that was consistent with the truth of Scripture because they were filled with the knowledge of Scripture.

That is the next description that Paul gives. They are "filled with all knowledge." They understood the Christian faith. Paul didn't take them to be an immature group of Christians. The very fact that Paul wrote this letter to them is proof that he knew that they had a great appreciation for the truth, that they had a deep understanding of it.

The book of Romans is not for people who take their faith lightly. The book of Romans is not for people who are unwilling to think deeply about the things of God, because we have in this book profound truth about God and His ways. So the very fact that Paul wrote this letter to them shows that he knew that they were serious about their faith, that they were serious about theology, about the doctrines of the Christian faith, that they were serious and interested

in Christian truth. And that accounts for much that was true about that church. Knowledge is fundamental to the Christian life.

It is basic to being full of goodness. In that little letter that John wrote, the last of his letters, of his epistles, 3 John – in verse 4, the apostle wrote: "I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth." As you know, that word, "walk," is a metaphor for the Christian life. It is a progressive thing, as a walk is. It is as we walk from one place to another, as we have a destination.

The Christian life is like that. We progress in time toward a goal, which is the kingdom to come. But walking in truth is living according to the truth. Now you can't do that if you're not serious about the truth. If you ignore the Word of God, if you ignore the truth of God's Word, you cannot live in a way that the apostle said they'd enjoy.

A right walk, a correct walk, a correct life is in the truth. We cannot live like Christians if we don't think like Christians. Knowledge of God is basic for a Godly life. The Romans had that knowledge and they were able to use it. They understood it; they applied it, because Paul says they were also able "to admonish one another."

Now, that means to correct one another. Notice, Paul does not say that they were a Godly church, they were a congregation of good people because their pastor had a good ministry of correcting them every Sunday morning. In fact, you can read through this book and you won't see Paul talk about their pastor or the pastor. It's just the opposite. This was what one scholar called "a reciprocal brotherly ministry."

This is not one man ministering down to people and admonishing them once a week. This is the church functioning as a body, and functioning as a body that was concerned about its members. They cared about each other. They cared about each other enough to admonish one another. And I say cared about each other enough to do that because that's not an easy thing to do.

For some people who are rather combative by nature, well, they like to admonish people, they like to correct people. But I think most of us probably don't like that task. We don't like confrontations of that kind. But it's necessary. It's necessary to correct error if we care about an individual and want to see that person progress in the faith.

And these people cared about one another enough to do that, to point Christians in the right direction when they saw that they were going astray. This is a church that was very actively engaged and involved in the lives of the members, with one another. So Paul was fully confident that they would be able to handle the difficulty, the problem that he has just been dealing with, this conflict between the weaker and the stronger members. He knew that the stronger would bear the weaknesses of the weaker brethren.

The church at Rome was an impressive church. Paul thought very highly of it. And it is good to ask how we, as a church, measure up to their standard. I think they do set a standard for us in these three ways: full of goodness, full of knowledge, able to admonish, correct, teach one another. And I think that as we measure ourselves by that, that we as a congregation measure up rather well.

This church, I believe, is a mature church. It is a congregation that wants to know the things of God, the great doctrines of the faith. I think that that is generally the reason why you are here; to hear the teachers in this church preach the Word of God, which we seek to do faithfully every Sunday. You're a people who want to know God, who want to grow in your knowledge and your relationship with Him. You are a people who have manifested a lot of kindness and concern for the body.

I think all of these things are true. I think we measure up well with the church of Rome. Still, we should not presume too much and think that we have arrived. The church in Rome did not think that of itself, and we should not think that of ourselves. Instead, we must ask ourselves if we are continuing to measure up to some of these standards.

Are we filled with goodness? Can we continue to be increasingly filled with goodness? Are we advancing in our knowledge? Do we desire to do that? Do we really want to know more about our Lord, and are we able to apply that knowledge? Are we using it well?

Do we have a vital relationship with our Lord? Because we can have that relationship today and then grow cold in the days to come. That's a danger. So we need to be asking ourselves these questions. And we have a good standard here by which to measure ourselves.

The church that was in Rome gives a good standard for us, and Paul spoke very highly of those Christians. But you might ask the question, if this church was so mature and it understood so much, why then did Paul write such a long letter to it, a letter that Paul admits, in verse 15, he wrote "very boldly on some points"? The reason, he explains, was more to remind them than to instruct them. They knew the fundamentals of the faith. They were well grounded in the truth.

But we are never so spiritually mature that we don't need to be reminded of the great truths of the Christian faith. And so as we go over old truths, we gain deeper insight into them. And no doubt, the Romans learned much from Paul's letter. The knowledge that they had of justification, the knowledge that they had of sanctification increased as they read and contemplated this letter. They advanced in the faith as a result of it.

They were given what may be the most important book in the Bible. Some people believe that it is. And it well may be not only the most important book in the Bible but the most important piece of literature ever written. And so they certainly did learn things that they had not realized before. So they needed this reminder. We all do.

I was reminded of that the other day when I read a review of a new book by William Bennett. It's not on theology. It's on culture and politics, and it's a critique of, among other things, educators in America. And Bennett criticizes universities for not requiring basic

history courses, and he made this statement. "What is not taught will be forgotten, and what is forgotten cannot be defended."

We can apply that to Christian doctrine. If we don't remind ourselves of the truths of the faith, they will become forgotten and they will go undefended. The church, if it is not continually dealing with the Word of God, searching the Scriptures, studying the Bible, going over the old truths and learning more about them, learning to articulate them, understanding them more deeply, the church will grow weak. And the church will become ineffective.

And there are some who have evaluated the evangelical church in the past 10, 15 years, who say, "That's a good description of it." It's shallow and it's ineffective. And that's the danger we face. We must be reminding ourselves of these things. And so giving the Christians in Rome a reminder of the great doctrines of Christianity was a good reason for having written this letter to them, and it was reason enough.

But Paul also had the authority to write this letter "because of the grace" given to him, he says, meaning his apostleship. So it was Paul's right to address them. It was his ministry to remind them of Christian truth, and it was within his authority to do that in the way that he did it. And in the remaining verses of the paragraph, Paul explains the nature of that ministry, the nature of that grace that was given to him, the nature of his apostleship. And he does that by focusing on three features of it.

John Stott, in his commentary on this passage, outlines the passage in those three points in verses 16 and 17. He titles it, "Paul's Ministry as a Priestly Ministry." In verses 18 and 19, it is a powerful ministry. And then in verses 19 through 22, it is a pioneer ministry. First, in verse 16, it's a priestly ministry.

That's how Paul describes it. He was a minister to the gentiles, "ministering as a priest the gospel of God." Paul was called of God to be the apostle to the gentiles. And the apostles in Jerusalem all recognized that, recognized his authority and recognized the gentile

land as his province, his area of ministry. We read that in Galatians chapter 2.

The Roman church was mainly a gentile church, so it was within the field of his ministry and authority. But here, Paul doesn't call himself an apostle. He calls himself a minister, which is a word that had priestly associations. And that is the idea of it. Just the way he describes his ministry.

His ministry was a priestly ministry. He considered himself to be a priest. And his ministry "an act of worship," in which his offering to God was not bulls and goats but gentiles which had been converted, which were "sanctified by the Holy Spirit." The priesthood of Aaron has been eclipsed by the priesthood of Christ. The temple in Jerusalem, its altar and offerings and services have been abrogated by the finished work of Jesus Christ.

His death on the cross was the final sacrifice for sin. He declared it to be, and His resurrection proved it to be. He is the only great high priest who lives forever to intercede for His people. He has finished the work of sacrifice, but He continues with the work of intercession. He is presently engaged in that in this present time.

He is our great high priest, and we have been given the privilege of serving in His ministry as His priests. Our priestly service is to proclaim the gospel, telling others of the salvation that is in Christ, and by the influence of the Holy Spirit, leading them to the Savior and the salvation that's in Him. So in this priesthood, the offerings of animals are replaced by the offerings of converts, who by the Spirit's power offer themselves up as living sacrifices, "holy and acceptable to God," as Paul put it in Romans 12:1. That is how Paul viewed his ministry. In all of its aspects, he viewed it as a priestly service.

There's great dignity to what he did in all of his facets. You think about Paul's life and ministry. It involved traveling over dusty roads and rough terrain, working hard earning a living with his own hands by day, making tents so that he would not be a burden on the churches. Sometimes there was loneliness, rejection, exposure to the

elements, shipwrecks, beatings, imprisonment. But all of that and what sometimes was mundane, daily kind of work, all of that was part of his priestly ministry. So all of it had great dignity. That's how he viewed his life.

That's how he viewed his work, his service, and that's how we are to view our lives as well. There are no more apostles. Apostles and prophets were 1st century gifts and offices. The foundation of the church, as Paul describes them in Ephesians 2:20. That foundation has been laid. We're not continuing to build the foundation. It's been laid and there are no more apostles and prophets.

But all believers are priests. And so all of our lives, like Paul's life, are lives of priestly service and they're to be lived in that way. We have all been called to that service, so regardless of who you are and what you're doing, if you're a believer in Jesus Christ you're a priest and your life is a priestly service. Whatever you do has that dignity and that importance to it. You have been called to the highest service in the world.

So if you're a Sunday school teacher, that's your priestly service. God has given you that service. Whether you're teaching children or adults, God's given you that service and you are to consider it a great privilege and an important work. If God's called you to work in the nursery – and we need people to work in the nursery – that's a priestly service. That is a high calling and to be considered a service to God and His people.

If you're a parent, it is your area of priestly service to minister within the home. Wherever we are we are priests, and we are to take our lives seriously. So our conduct is to be taken seriously, at home or in business, in public or in private, because what we do is a witness. It may be a bad witness. Hopefully, it's a good witness.

But the reality is it is a witness. And so we're to take it seriously because it is a service to the Lord. Our lives, as a service to the Lord, as a priestly service, our lives are to be consistent with the gospel that we represent and the gospel we proclaim. Now,

proclaiming the gospel is principally what Paul is describing here as his priestly ministry, and that is, principally, what our priestly ministry is. And Paul was very clear about what the gospel is, very clear about the gospel that he preached.

In fact, the book of Romans is about the gospel. He explains it in detail and in depth. And the gospel is all about grace. It is about what Christ has done as our substitute in judgment. Christ has saved us from God's punishment on our sins, and He has saved us from that punishment by taking our place at the cross, by dying as our substitute. That salvation is received as a free gift through faith alone in Christ alone, and it is all the result of God's grace alone.

That's the gospel simply put, and Paul guarded that gospel jealously. The first heresy of the church was a corruption of that simple gospel. It wasn't a denial of the deity of Christ. It wasn't a denial of His humanity. It wasn't a denial of the Trinity. Those heresies came later.

The first heresy, which took place in the churches of Galatia, was not a denial. It was an addition, and it was a very subtle heresy in that way because it was an addition of works to faith, an addition of human merit to God's grace. And that is a corruption of the truth. Paul calls that, in Galatians 1, "a different gospel," which is no gospel at all. It happened very early on in the history of the church. And we see a parallel of that, an illustration of that in the Old Testament, very early on in Israel's history in the priestly service that was offered to the nation.

Not long after they had been given instruction on priestly service and how it was to be carried out, Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, were serving as priests. And they burned incense, which they were to do. But they kindled the incense with fire that was taken, not from the altar as they were instructed to do but from another place. What they are described as doing was "offering strange fire before the Lord." And as a result of doing that, of offering strange fire, they were put to death in judgment.

Well, a false gospel is that. It is strange fire. And God purges it and purges those who preach it. That's Galatians chapter 1. Let them be anathema, Paul says. "Let them be accursed."

Paul preached and he guarded a pure gospel. When he came to Corinth, he said that he "determined to know nothing among" them "except Jesus Christ and Him crucified." That's the gospel. Christ crucified as the substitute for sinners. He did it all.

He finished the work of salvation. We simply receive it by faith. And proclaiming that is our priestly ministry. Paul devoted his life to doing that, and he had much to show for it. Through his ministry many gentiles had become offerings to God.

He says in verse 17 that he could boast about that. But it is a boast that he would make in Christ, meaning all that he had done, he had done in the strength that God gave to him. He had accomplished much. But he should not boast about it as though it was his doing. It was not. He had done it all because Christ had done it in him.

Well, he states that very clearly in verses 18 and 19, where he describes his priestly ministry as the Lord's doing and as powerful. In fact, in verse 19, he repeats that word, "power," twice. But first he states the goal of his ministry in verse 18, which was the "obedience of the Gentiles," and the means by which that goal was accomplished, which was by his "word and deed," meaning the activities that Paul himself engaged in. Now, the goal of gentile obedience was stated back in chapter 1 in verse 5, where Paul spoke of the purpose of his apostleship as being "to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles." Now, here he doesn't say "obedience of faith," simply the "obedience of the Gentiles."

But the meaning is the same. Obedience here is obedience of faith, which tells us about the response of faith that we make to the gospel. It is a response of obedience. It's a response to God's call, His call to sinners to come out of darkness; His call to sinners to turn from sin and turn to Christ, to come to Christ, to believe in Him as the only Savior.

It's not an option. It is a command, and the elect respond to it. They obey. "My sheep hear My voice," Jesus said, "and they follow Me." That's the obedience of faith, and it is an obedience that continues, a faith that continues always throughout a believer's life because saving faith is a faith that obeys.

Paul had witnessed that response by gentiles throughout Asia and Europe, as he went from city to city preaching the gospel. He says in verse 19, he went "from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum." Illyricum is modern-day Albania and parts of what used to be known as Yugoslavia, now Serbia and Bosnia. This was the area of Paul's ministry, and it was a great ministry. He did a great work, a work that required great effort, as he traveled through Asia and Europe over difficult terrain and hard roads and faced people who had not heard the gospel before.

And so it took great skill in preaching and teaching, great discipline and sacrifice on Paul's part to accomplish this goal of gentile obedience. Paul worked hard at it. He is, I think it's safe to say, the greatest missionary in the history of the church. No man had a greater boast in all of history than the apostle Paul, with the exception, of course, of our Lord. No king or conqueror or politician has ever accomplished what he did.

The great walls of Babylon are dust, the forum in Rome is a ruin, but Paul's work continues today. His mission affected the course of western history and the saving of souls, as many gentiles to whom he preached were brought to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. But Paul can take no credit for that. His boast, he says, is in the Lord. As he says in verse 18, he would speak of nothing, "except what Christ has accomplished through" him.

Notice, Paul does not say what he has accomplished through Christ but what Christ has accomplished through him. It is Christ's action not Paul's that's significant. And Christ did it, Paul writes, by his "word and deed," by Paul's word and deed. So it was Christ's work, which He accomplished through the things that Paul said and

the things that Paul did. And that union, that union between word and action is necessary.

John tells us that love is "in deed and truth." It's in truth and it's in what we say. But what we say and what we believe must manifest itself in what we do. It's not enough to know good theology. It's essential, but it's not the end.

Our knowledge must be reflected in our deeds. That knowledge must be transformed into action. It was in Paul. He was a man of deep thought and great action, who understood the grace of God which was reflected in his speech and in deeds and the way that he treated other people. And Paul accomplished much, and he accomplished much because Christ was working through him.

In Paris, not far from Notre Dame's Cathedral, there is a small gothic church called Sainte-Chapelle. It's surrounded by stained glass windows. On a sunny day it is spectacular, as the light shines through the red and the blue and the gold colors. There's nothing in gothic architecture quite like it. But take away the light and the beauty is gone. There's nothing to be seen. The glory is in the light.

And it's the same with Paul. He had many gifts, glorious gifts. He was an apostle, he was a prophet, he was a teacher, he was an evangelist, he was a man of intellectual genius and energy and action. But apart from Christ, all of that would have been like stained glass in the dark. It was the Lord who gifted and animated and energized the apostle and gave him success.

As the Lord himself said, "Apart from Me you can do nothing." And Paul is saying that. That's the point that he's making. Paul did not accomplish much through Christ. Christ accomplished everything through Paul.

And He did it in two ways. He did it in Paul's words and Paul's works. "Those were the two weapons in Paul's arsenal," someone has said. And they must be weapons that are in our arsenal as well, as we seek to minister as priests of the Lord. But those two weapons of Paul, particularly his works, were manifested in Paul's life and

ministry in a unique way, as he explains in verse 19, "In the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit."

Paul's deeds were supernatural works. They were miracles. They're called signs because they point beyond themselves to the truth about God and the gospel. And they're called wonders because of what they produced in those who witnessed them. They produced a sense of awe; they produced wonder, as they saw the miracles occur.

Now, this is a rare expression in Paul's writings. He uses it only one other place of his ministry. And that's in 2 Corinthians 12:12, where he states that signs and wonders are "the signs of a true apostle." So they were connected with apostleship. Miracles authenticated the apostolic ministry and message.

As Paul went to places that had never heard this message and he preached it, it was authenticated by the things that he did, the miracles he performed. Now that ministry, as I said, is finished because the foundation of the church, that of the apostles and prophets has been laid. The New Testament is now our authority. It's sufficient in itself. We don't need miracles to verify this message.

And that doesn't mean that God can't do miracles today. God does what He wills to do. And we pray that He would produce healing, or we pray that He would change circumstances. But we pray that He do so according to His will. But we live in a different situation from the apostolic age.

This is a different time in which we live. There are no more apostles today giving fresh revelation. People are not being healed by an apostle's shadow falling on them. For all of the talk about contemporary signs and wonders and modern-day miracles, the phenomena of the 1st century are not occurring to day. Now, that doesn't mean aren't happening.

Miracles are occurring and they are just as great. I would say they are even greater today than they were in the 1st century. They are occurring through the preaching of the gospel and the teaching of God's Word. Barnhouse tells the story of a Christian who was asked if

he could turn water into wine. And I'm sure the question was put in a kind of mocking way, to ridicule this man's faith.

And he answered he could do a miracle more wonderful than that. He told of an alcoholic who kept his family in poverty and misery until he was led to Christ, so that through the power of the gospel the man said, "We turned whiskey into milk for his babies." Every conversion of a sinner into a saint is a miracle. That is power far greater than raising the dead.

Lazarus was raised from the dead, Tabitha was raised from the dead, Eutychus was raised from the dead only to die again. But those who are converted to Christ are raised from spiritual death to spiritual life, which is life everlasting. And even though they die, they live and they will be raised from the dead in the resurrection to come. And the life that they live now, it's a life that they live in Christ. If you're a believer in Jesus Christ, you are alive in Him, and that means you have new life, a life that's completely different from that old life because that old man has been crucified. He's dead.

You're a new creature in Christ with the life of Christ within you. Liars are turned into people of truth, the immoral are changed into people of purity, the lazy are made industrious. Cold, dead, hard hearts are made alive and warm and loving toward those around them. That's the work of the gospel, the work of the Holy Spirit through the gospel. That's how the Spirit works to change lives.

Peter called the gospel "the imperishable seed." It is what the Holy Spirit uses to produce new birth. So as we tell others about Christ, the Spirit regenerates the lost, those who are hearing the message so that they understand what's being said and believe it. That is miraculous. And all of this is or should be very encouraging.

Our priestly service is really the sovereign work of God. It is done in the power of the Spirit as Christ works through us. And I say that should be encouraging because the work that's been given to us is a huge work. "Go into the world and make disciples." Who has the ability to do that?

If it's left to my skill and my effort and my drive, my ability to convince, there'll be no success at all. But it's not left to me. I'm to obey, I'm to be disciplined, I'm to work diligently – we all are – but the work is Christ that He does through us. And He does it well. He makes feeble human words effective. He illuminates darkened minds, gives understanding.

John Stott calls every conversion "a power encounter in which the Spirit, through the gospel, rescues and regenerates sinners." And we can add to that, he sanctifies them and he will glorify them. Well, that's Paul's ministry. It was a supernatural ministry, and ours is as well. In verses 20 and 21, Paul describes his priestly service as a pioneering ministry.

He went where others had not gone. And he did that by design, as he explains in verses 20 and 21. "And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named, so that I would not build on another man's foundation." Paul's strategy was to go to major cities, evangelize the people, plant churches there, and then leave those in the church to do the work of spreading the gospel to the outlying areas. But his guiding ambition, his guiding principle in doing that was to go where the gospel had not been preached before.

That was Paul's calling as the apostle to the gentiles. It's not the calling of every minister. For some – for most probably – a calling is to build on another man's work. Paul describes that difference in 1 Corinthians 3:6, where he compares his ministry to that of Apollos in Corinth. He said, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth."

And then in verse 10, he compares himself to "a wise master builder" who "laid a foundation, and another is building on it." So Paul laid foundations. Others built upon the foundations that he laid, as he went from city to city, from Jerusalem to Illyricum. And then, hopefully, he would go on to Spain, he said. Now, that didn't mean that Paul never ministered to churches that he didn't plant. He did.

His letter is proof of that. He didn't establish the church in Rome, but he was eager to come there and to minister. But as a rule, he went into areas where others had not been. He preached the gospel to those who had never heard it. And he had a Scripture that supported his desire to do that. It was Isaiah 52:15, which he quotes in verse 21. "They who had no news of Him shall see, and they who have not heard shall understand."

That refers to the Servant of the Lord, the Messiah and His mission. That verse in Isaiah begins, "He will sprinkle many nations," meaning He will purify them by means of a sacrifice. And they will recognize Him. The gentiles will recognize Him as their ruler. "Kings will shut their mouths on account of Him," Isaiah said.

They will see Christ. They will understand what they had not understood before because they had not been told before. They had not been given the Word before that they will come to know. And Paul identified Christ as the Servant who would save the gentiles, and he saw his ministry as a participation in that prophecy, as he told the unevangelized about the Savior. That's a great ministry, a priestly ministry.

And we have an opportunity to participate in it by telling others about Jesus Christ. I doubt that there's anyone in the auditorium this morning who has not heard of Jesus Christ and His salvation. But there may be some here who have heard but not understood and not believed. The news is simple. We are all sinners.

We are fallen. We're guilty of breaking God's law. And the penalty of that broken law, the penalty of sin is eternal death. But God's Servant, His Son, has come and died in our place. He took the punishment we deserve when He was slain at Calvary so that all who believe in Him will be saved and not perish.

That's the news; that's the good news. So believe. If you've not trusted in Him, look to Jesus Christ, believe in Him as your Savior. Trust in Him and you will be saved. May God help you to do that. Let's pray.

[Prayer] We thank you, Father, for this time we've had to study. And we thank you for this text and the reminder that it gives us of our ministry. It's different from the ministry that Paul had, in that he was an apostle. We are not that. And he had a unique calling, but ours is similar in that we are priests and we have a priestly ministry.

And that priestly ministry is, fundamentally, to preach the gospel and to represent it, not only in our words but in our deeds. Help us to do that, Father, to be faithful to our calling, to be diligent in it. Make us useful to that end this week we pray. And we pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.