

For the Love of God

Our Obligation to the Unreached – Part 1

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August 17, 2014



OUR OBLIGATION TO THE UNREACHED – PART 1 **Romans 1-3**

Why are we commissioning the Merediths today? Why are we laying hands on this family and sending them out to New Jersey/New York...to work...and to make disciples...and to plant churches among South Asians in the city where they'll live? And as we do that, why are we all saying, "Who else is the Lord calling to go?" With them? With others?

Why is there an interest meeting tonight regarding a team that will move to Dearborn, Michigan, to work among Muslims there? Why are about 100 members of this church currently in a pipeline of working toward moving somewhere cross-culturally for the spread of the gospel? And not just moving outside of Birmingham...why is there a gathering coming in September sponsored by our Local Missions Team, Church Multiplication Team, and College Ministry Team to consider church planting among different people groups here in Birmingham? Why are we doing all this? And the answer just so happens to be found in our Bible reading this week and next.

So if you have your Bibles, and I hope you do, then open with me to Romans 1. This is almost too good to be true for me...to be in Ruth last week, which is probably my favorite book in the Old Testament, only to be followed by Romans this week and next, which is probably my favorite book in the New Testament. But not just because I love this book, but also for a variety of other reasons. I do not believe it is a coincidence that we would find ourselves in Romans right now in light of what God is doing in our faith family. And somewhat similar to last week, there's not a lot new that I want to put on the table this week. There's not a lot here that, if you've been around Brook Hills, you haven't seen or heard before.

But there is a lot here that we can't forget, and a lot here that informs our understanding of what God is doing right now at Brook Hills. So this week and next, I want us to consider truths in Romans that we've seen before, and trust that the Holy Spirit is reminding us of these truths right now for a reason. And I use that word "reminding" with a bit of hesitation because these truths that we're reading in Romans are indeed reminders. But as our pastors were praying leading up to this sermon, we had this sense as we prayed that God was not just going to remind us of these truths, but that God was going to jolt us with these truths as we read Romans each day, and then this week, and next week as we study it together. We are praying, and I have a sense that God wants to jolt us individually and collectively with His truth, and its application to our lives as well as to this church.

So let's start by remembering why this book was written. Hold your place here in Romans 1, and turn to Romans 15. This is a passage we will likely spend more time in next week, but this is one of those instances where Paul gives an introduction at the beginning of a letter, but then at the end of the letter, he lets us in a little more on what he's trying to accomplish with the letter. So start with me in Romans 15:18,

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."

So Paul says, "I want to see Christ preached where He's not been named..." – in other words, among people who had never even heard of Christ. So then he writes in verse 22...

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.

Now what we just read makes total sense in light of the geography behind this book. Let me remind you of the context in which Paul is penning this letter...1st journey 2nd journey 3rd journey – Corinth, writes Rome, wants take Gospel Spain, you'll notice he doesn't go back to Corinth – why not? MAP: Antioch not the best home base. Missionary support letter. This whole book written to encourage church take gospel to those who had never heard it.

So what we're reading in Romans is not a masterful portrait of the gospel just so that we can know the gospel. Yes, for that reason, of course we want to know the gospel well. But even more, we want to spread the gospel, particularly to people who have never heard it. That's what's driving Paul as he writes the book of Romans. So don't miss this...this is so key! The intended effect of the book of Romans was to cause the church at Rome to do whatever it took to get the gospel to people who have never heard it.

Which is why—now turn back to Romans 1—Paul says what he says in the beginning of the letter. Let's read together now how he opens the letter – look in verse 1...

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus (the word he uses there is a Greek term for slave), called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God (then he begins to explain the gospel), which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about (so this is what we're after) the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,

(So I'm writing to you in Rome) To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in

coming to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish (Did you hear that? Paul says, "I owe the gospel to all peoples...Greeks and barbarians...wise and foolish...I owe them all the gospel." What a statement!). So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

This is Paul saying, "This is the greatest news in all the world! People can be made right with God through faith in Jesus Christ! There's no better news in all the world and everybody has got to hear this!"

So then, what Paul does, starting in verse 18, is he starts making the case for why they all need to hear it! Why everybody needs to hear this gospel! So ask the question, then, why are we reading Romans right now? What is the intended effect of our reading Romans right this week and next week as a faith family? The intended effect of the book of Romans in our lives is to raise our eyes to people in the world who have never heard the gospel and to cause us (to jolt us!) to do whatever it takes to get the gospel to them.

Not that there's not other purposes and ways God is using, or will use our reading of Romans right now in each of our lives and families, but I believe the primary purpose for why we are reading Romans together – and I just don't believe this is a coincidence! – is to cause us to say, over the next couple of weeks in particular, in a fresh way, "We will do whatever it takes to get the gospel to people who have never heard it in our day"

People say, "Well, this was Paul's day, but are there really that many people in the world today who have never heard the gospel? Are there that many people among whom Christ has not been preached? Men and women who hardly know His name?" And the answer is, "Yes." And this is where I want to paint a portrait of the "unreached" in our day. And again, if you've been around Brook Hills, none of this will be new, but I pray, God, as You remind us of these realities, jolt us with these realities.

Who Are The Unreached?

As we read Romans, let's remember, "Who are the unreached in our day? Who are the people who have never heard? The unreached are people groups among whom there is no indigenous community of believing Christians able to engage the people group with church planting. Now you'll notice in that definition the term "people group." And just to remind you what that means...

When Jesus commanded the church to make disciples of all the nations, the word He used for nations there is "ethnē," from which we get words like "ethnic groups." And this is important because when Jesus was talking about nations there in Matthew 28:19, He wasn't

referring to nations like we think of nations today – 200 or so geopolitical nations in the world that quite frankly didn't exist 2000 years ago when Jesus said this, in the way they do now. No, Jesus is specifically talking about ethnic groups, groups of people that share common cultural, and language characteristics. And among 200 nations today, there are a plethora of people groupings.

And not just among nations, but in cities. We had a group of church members who recently went into our city to make connections with different people groups represented here, and they went to international restaurants and markets, community centers and college campuses, where they met Thai, Filipino, Vietnamese, Punjabi, Gujarati, Colombian, Salvadoran, Palestinian Arab, Jordanian Arab, Northern Yemeni Arab, and Moroccan Arab people, just to name a few! And that's in Birmingham, AL, hardly the most cosmopolitan city in the world.

So think about 200 nations filled with a diverse array of peoples. Most anthropologists and missiological scholars say over 11,000 different people groups. So unreached peoples, then, are people groups who don't have "an indigenous community of believing Christians" – and what that means is that there is not a church made up of men and women from that people that is sufficient to engage that people with the gospel that has enough presence to make the gospel known among that people.

Technically speaking, when we say "unreached," we're saying that the percentage of evangelical Christians in this people group is less than 2%. And why that's important is because what that means is that if there's not a substantial church presence among a people, then not only do over 98% of the people not believe the gospel, but because there's no church around them, and no Christians among them, then most of them have never even met a Christian (i.e., a person who would share the gospel with them). They are "unreached." Most (if not almost all) of the people in that people group have not been reached by a Christian...and Christ has not been named/preached among them.

How Many People Are Unreached?

So how many people are unreached in the world today? And our best estimate is that out of over 11,000 distinct people groups, over 6,500 people groups are unreached. Over 6,500 are classified as unreached according to the definition above. And just to make sure we feel the weight of that number of people groups. Six thousand, five hundred people groups includes at least 2 billion individual people. So we're talking, in a world of 7 billion people, at least 2 billion of them are unreached—2 billion people who've still not been reached with the gospel of Christ.

And just to put one more term on the table—"unengaged." Over 3,000 of these 6,500 people groups are also unengaged, meaning there is currently no evangelical church planting strategy under way to reach that people group. And those people groups include around 200 million individual people. So in many cases (not in all, but many), these are smaller people groups that don't comprise large swaths of people, but they still have distinct ethnicity and many times language. I was spending some time recently with a group of missionaries from the International Mission Board, our primary partner among unreached peoples, and these missionaries were working to reach people groups who still have had no contact whatsoever with the outside world; living in total isolation.

Now what was encouraging was that there were people working to get the gospel to them. What is overwhelming is to think that right now, there's at least 3,000 people groups (many of which are smaller ethnic groups), that have no one specifically trying to reach them with the gospel. There's only one thing worse than being lost. That's being lost and having no one try to find you.

What Does It Mean To Be Unreached?

Practically ...

Now all these numbers of unreached and unengaged can feel distant. That's the way numbers and statistics work. So, practically, what does it mean to be unreached? And I worded this in your notes in such a way that I want you to put yourself in the shoes of one of these two billion people in the world are unreached.

So imagine you, your family, or your kids—so not two billion—but one, or two, or three, or four of you...if you are unreached, practically that means that you do not currently have access to the gospel. In other words, you likely don't even know it exists. Either, like some people I have met in the world, you have never even heard the name of Jesus. "Jesus...who's that?" Or, you've heard of Jesus, but you know as much about Him as you know about Confucius... "I think he taught on personal and governmental philosophy, maybe...and had influence on Eastern thinking..." But that's about all you know.

And you don't know any Christian. You don't know anyone who knows the truth about Christ. You've never met anyone who knows the truth about Christ. You don't have access to the gospel, and this is key. This is why we don't say, "Well, I don't know why we talk about unreached people around the world when there's unreached people who work at my office." Not true. Those people aren't unreached. Why? Because they have access to the gospel. You are their access to the gospel!

If you're unreached, it means you don't have access to Christians, to truth about what Christ has done, and unless something changes, you will likely be born, live, and die without ever hearing the gospel. That's what we're talking about practically—people who, if they die today... So put yourself in their shoes. If you die today, and you are in their shoes, you will die likely never having heard the good news of what God has done in Christ.

Biblically ...

Which leads to the inevitable question: well, what happens when you die, then? Would you go to hell forever if you died and you had never even heard the gospel? And that's where we come, biblically, to what it means to be unreached. And this is a question that Paul is answering in the book of Romans. It's what we're reading everyday right now. Biblically to be unreached means that you have knowledge of God. This is what Paul is saying in Romans 1:18-20,

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

So this is Paul saying, "Everyone, everywhere has knowledge of God. He has made it plain to them. In creation around them, God has shown Himself, his glory, in such a way that in verse 21, right after this it says, "Although knew God." So wherever you are unreached, you have knowledge of God.

Last night during family worship time, we were putting the kids to bed we've been reading a book called *Keeping Holiday*. It is a Pilgrims Progress-type allegory about coming to faith in God. The whole story is about a journey of a boy named Dylan and his cousin, Clare, who are looking for the Founder of a place called Holiday...and the Founder represents God...and last night, in our reading, they were having a conversation with the stars, and this is how it went:

Although the star's voice sounded as though it came from far, far away, it spoke distinctly. "We have one purpose," the star said slowly and with great gravity. "One grand, glorious purpose. And nothing will ever deter us from doing what we were designed to do. We have done it for centuries, for millennia, yet we never finish and we never tire. We have occupied these same places in the sky, night after night, day after day, always doing the same work. We know no change. Yet we never grow weary. We feel only delight in the most solemn, most joyful task we have received." "What is that task?" Dylan asked.

And the star said, "We announce to everyone that the Founder..." The star paused and Dylan's heart beat faster. The star's voice grew even more solemn, and at the same time a tremor of joy ran through it. "We announce that the Founder—is. We announce to every person on earth—for where is the place where stars are never seen?—to them all, we announce that the Founder is and that he is marvelous. He does remarkable things, amazing things. Look at us, the stars, and know that the Founder is altogether wonderful. Nothing, no one, is so excellent as he."

And I read that and thought, "Yes!" That's right! That's Bible. God says, Isaiah 40:26, "*Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these? He who brings out the starry host by number, calling them all by name, by the greatness of his might, and because he is strong in power, not one is missing.*" So if you're unreached, no matter where you are in the world, you have knowledge of God.

But second, you have rejected God. Romans 1:21-25 You have an inherently sinful nature that rebels against the knowledge God. And it looks different in different places. Maybe you're in West Africa, and you practice voodoo in your attempts to appease and direct evil spirits around you. Maybe you're in India, and you offer incense every day to gods you've crafted with your own hands. Maybe you're in Saudi Arabia, and you bow down five times a day to recite wrote prayers to a false god. Maybe you're in the mountains of Nepal, where you worship the Buddha, and you've sent your firstborn son off to the monastery to attain Buddhahood. Or maybe you're in China or North Korea, and you've rejected the idea of God altogether. You hardly even have a concept of God. It looks different for different people, but if you're unreached, you have knowledge of God, and the knowledge God has revealed to you about himself you have rejected. You have turned aside from the one true God.

And as a result, Romans is clear, you stand condemned before God. Depressing verses—1:18-2:16 Gentiles; 2:17-3:8 Jews; 3:9-20 all people guilty. Remember when we asked, "What happens to the innocent guy in Africa who dies with out hearing the gospel?" Does he go to heaven? No question! He absolutely does. The problem is that the "innocent" guy

doesn't exist. We bias the question from the start. There are no innocent people in the world waiting to hear the gospel. Instead, guilty people all over the world. That's why they need to hear the Gospel. I fear that we all too often view heaven as unreached people's default eternal state. We think, "God owes heaven to them." Not true. They are guilty and condemned. Why? For rejecting God.

This is a huge fundamental misunderstanding. Many professing Christians come to the conclusion that if certain people don't have the opportunity to hear about Jesus, this excuses them from condemnation, and they go to heaven because, after all, they never had the opportunity to hear about Jesus. But follow this—and I get the emotion behind that; we want there to be a way! But as soon as we say that people who haven't heard about Christ get a pass—if that's true, then the worst thing I could do is go tell them the gospel.

The reality is, if you are unreached, then you stand condemned before God, and just to keep going, You have never heard the good news about how you can be saved by God. Picture Paul in tears...

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

This is the Gospel! Even if you have lived your whole life unreached by the gospel and flew to Birmingham today, and this is your first access to a church, and you have been unreached until this moment... Then good news, you are now in the "Reached" category! You are hearing this good news, that Jesus stood in your place condemned, having lived the life you should have lived and died the death you should have died. But to all those who through no righteous work of their own, put their faith and trust in Christ for their salvation, then they will spend eternity in heaven with God. That's good news. That's gospel!

But in the words of Carl F.H. Henry, "The Gospel is only good news if it gets there on time." Do we realize this? So now it makes sense? So you're in their shoes: you have knowledge of God, you have rejected God, you stand condemned by God, and you've never heard the good news about how you can be saved by God. So now, let's step out of those shoes and just praise God that we're not in those shoes! Aren't you thankful—Yes, you have knowledge of God, and you have rejected God...but...but...but you stand accepted before God! Not just accepted before God, but adopted by God! How is this so? This is so because we've heard the good news about how we can be saved by God! We had access to this news. Somebody told us. Praise God! Somebody told us. We're not in their shoes. We're in these shoes.

Why Must We Go To The Unreached?

And I use the word “must” there in a Romans 1:14 way. Why are we obligated to give our lives, whether we live here or move somewhere else, why are we obligated to give our lives getting the gospel to people who’ve never heard it? This is the intended effect of the book of Romans—to cause our hearts to consider how we can get the gospel to people who’ve never heard it. Why must we do this, church? Why must you do this, Christian? Why must you and I go to the unreached?

Because their knowledge of God is only enough to damn them to hell.

Hear these four reasons in the book of Romans! One, because their knowledge of God is only enough to damn them to hell. There are over 6,000 people groups—2 billion people—for whom hell is the only option based on their knowledge of God. Oh, feel this: there are over 2 billion people in the world at this moment who have enough knowledge of God to show them that He is incomprehensibly glorious, and they are sinfully lost, but that’s all they’ve got!

I just can’t get out of my head, burning bodies in Nepal. We round the corner and come upon this Hindu holy river where these funeral pyres are set out above the river. The custom is to bring a friend or family member within 24 hours of dying to the pyre, lay the body on the pyre, set it on fire, the ashes fall into the river, and they believe this will help them in reincarnation. So I see this, and I am just stopped and stunned in silence at the sight and smell of burning bodies. And as I’m looking at them I realize that what I am seeing is an earthly picture of an eternal reality. Those people who were alive 24 hours before, are burning in hell now. And it hit me that most if not all of those people on the funeral pyres died without ever even hearing the gospel. This cannot be tolerable for us! Their knowledge of God is only enough to damn them to hell.

Because the gospel of God is powerful enough to save them for heaven.

If that wasn’t enough, the second reason, is because the gospel of God is powerful enough to save them for heaven. This gospel’s good! It works! I’m reminded of Northern India, right near Nepal, walking through city slums. Everywhere you look in city slums and rural villages – they’ve never heard. Some of them starving to death. As I was walking through the slums, we stopped in the home of an elderly woman. Hindu gods all over this 1-room shack – It’s all she’s ever known. And I said, “I want to tell you about the one true God who loves you and who sent His Son to die so that you might know him” – And in an instant, in a moment, in the power of the gospel, just like that, she left behind generations of Hinduism, and she said, “I want to trust in Christ alone for my salvation.”

There is not a person or people group on this planet that is beyond the power of God to save. We are obligated to go because the gospel of God is powerful enough to save them for heaven. If they hear it, they’ll believe...not all of them, to be sure, but many will. We know...Revelation 5:9-10, there are going to be representatives from every people group around the throne singing his praises for his salvation... How then can we not take the gospel to them when we know many of them will believe?

Because the plan of God warrants the sacrifices of His people.

Which leads to the third reason why we must go to the unreached: Because the plan of God warrants the sacrifices of His people. It just makes sense! It’s why Paul starts this book and says, “I’m a servant, a slave, of Christ Jesus.” And I’m obligated to preach the gospel to all peoples because that’s the plan for how they’re going to hear it! Go over to Romans 10 real quick.

For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?

This is a picture of the plan of God to take the Gospel to all the people groups. Christ – Servants – Preach – Hear – Believe – Call – Saved. Look back ask where can the plan break down? Only one potential place—when servants of Christ fail to spend their lives preaching the gospel to all nations. You say, "Well, couldn't God get them the gospel another way?" Sure, God could write the gospel in the sky with stars, but He's not. Stars aren't going to do this! Dreams/visions aren't going to do this! (If you look at the book of Acts, you will not see one person come to faith in Christ without a human messenger, regardless of dreams that people have in Acts.)

Brothers and sisters, we are plan A, and there is no plan B. We must go to unreached people because this is the plan of God, and it warrants the sacrifices of His people. And sacrifices is the right word. If we have this much access to the gospel in our culture, and there is this much absence of the gospel in other cultures, then surely God is leading many more of us (maybe the majority of us) to lay down our lives here and go to those cultures there. If God calls us to stay here, then surely he is leading us to live simply and give sacrificially so that as many people as possible can go, and this gospel can spread to them. This involves sacrifice among all of us in our lives, and our families, and as a church. The plan of God warrants it. Why? Because of the fourth reason.

Because the Son of God deserves the praises of all peoples.

We are obligated to reach the unreached – (1) because their knowledge of God is only enough to damn them to hell, (2) because the gospel of God is powerful enough to save them for heaven, (3) because the plan of God warrants the sacrifices of His people, and (4) because the Son of God deserves the praises of all peoples.

This is it. This is how the book of Romans begins—we've received grace. Why? Why have we received grace? "To bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations." Christian brother or sister, you have received grace ...we have received grace. Why? Born into reached family/people...why me? I don't know, but I do know this. I have received grace for a goal. I have received mercy for a mission. You have received grace for a goal. You have received mercy for a mission—to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of Christ's name among all the nations. That's the mission; that's the goal. Every nation, people group bowing around the throne of Jesus singing His praises. That's what we live for. That's what we work for. That's what we strive for. That's what we die for. For the day when all the peoples of the earth take their rightful place around the heavenly throne and give our Lord and King the glory He is due.

Don't you long for that day? I was thinking about it as we were also reading 1 Samuel 5 this week, and the Philistines brought the ark of God into their temple, and they set it up next to Dagon, their false god. And the next morning, Dagon was bowing down to the ark of God. So the text says they picked him up and put him back in this place, but the next morning, not only was he bowing down, but his hands were cut off.

I can't wait for the day when all the false gods of the world are exposed in all their emptiness, and every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. I want to see that day. I want to live for that day. God, use my life to hasten the coming of that day. God, use this church to hasten the coming of that day.

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