

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, July 23, 2017**

## **A HOLY AMBITION**

### **Romans 15:14-33**

We are approaching the end of our “Journey on the Romans Road,” a journey we began nearly two years ago, in September 2015. We have explored Paul’s “great exposition” in Romans 1-11, the most thorough and systematic explanation of the doctrines of grace anywhere in the Bible, as well as the “great exhortation” in 12:1-14 and 13, in which Paul gives specific guidance on how to conduct ourselves in this world as “living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God” (12:1). Now we come to the conclusion of the letter, in which Paul shares some personal plans in 15:14-33, and then in chapter 16 his greetings to members of the Roman church with whom he is personally acquainted.

Today we read Romans 15:14-33. Let us give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God’s holy Word.

\* \* \* \* \*

We spent the last three Sundays looking at the question of how to deal with what Paul calls “disputable matters” – meaning, issues of Christian faith and conduct that fall into the category of “non-essentials,” about which the Bible does not require uniformity of belief or practice, and in which sincere, Bible-believing Christians who affirm the trustworthiness of the Bible and submit to the Bible’s authority in every area of life may come to different conclusions.

We identified several “disputable matters” in which we have liberty in Christ to disagree with one another, including:

- How to dress when you come to church.
- What kind of music and what musical instruments are appropriate for use in worship.
- What translation(s) of the Bible to use or not to use.
- What role women should or should not play in the life and leadership of the church.
- The expression of “charismatic” gifts of the Holy Spirit, such as speaking in tongues, in the life of the church.
- Politics.
- Things like smoking, dancing, and the use of alcohol by Christians.

For the sake of review, we summarized Paul’s teaching on “disputable matters” in four principles:

1. When liberty and love conflict with each other, love trumps liberty.
2. Relationships are more important than demanding or asserting your rights.

3. We must not allow “disputable matters” to cause division in the body of Christ. Like Maximus and the gladiators in the arena at Rome, we’ve got to “stay together.”
4. We must sustain, enhance, and strengthen a spirit of unity among ourselves, so that with one heart and voice we may glorify God (Romans 15:5-6).

I remind you of them again today not because I think you are slow to learn, but because these things are so essential to the health and vitality of our church and of all churches everywhere.

### **NOT EVERYTHING IS A DISPUTABLE MATTER**

There is one more thing about “disputable matters” that I want to make sure we all understand: Not everything is a “disputable matter.” Not everything in the Christian faith and life is negotiable. Not everything is a matter of individual choice or conviction. I bring this up for two reasons: First, because our culture bombards us with the false idea that *everything* is a matter of personal choice or belief. It is the gospel of our age. But, when measured against the biblical gospel of Jesus Christ, it is simply not true. Not everything is a non-essential. Some things are universally true, whether or not we affirm their truth. Some things are right or wrong, whether or not we acknowledge their rightness or wrongness. The second reason I bring it up is because some professing Christians and even some churches seem to have lost their way with regard to how the rubber of biblical teaching meets the road of life.

Some of you, I’m sure, know that Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message* paraphrase of the Bible (which I quote regularly), as well as a plethora of books on pastoral ministry, a man highly-regarded in evangelical Christian circles, recently told an interviewer with the Religious News Service (RNS) that he didn’t consider homosexuality wrong and, if asked, would officiate a same-sex “marriage.” When I heard about it, my heart sank. I was deeply disappointed to think that another influential Christian leader, one whom I hold in high esteem, would set aside the clear teaching of the Bible and allow himself to be caught up in the tide of our culture.

Fortunately, the next day, Peterson retracted the comments he made in the interview and said: “To clarify, I affirm the biblical view of marriage: one man to one woman. I affirm the biblical view of everything.”

I was somewhat relieved by Peterson’s retraction. But I’m still scratching my head over it. I accept his retraction and recognize that we are all capable of giving wrong answers or misstating what we believe. I don’t want to come down too strongly on Peterson because I have such respect for him and his track record as a writer, pastor, and follower of Christ. Maybe he simply hadn’t thought much about it. But it seems to me that he should have.

In his *Breakpoint Daily Commentary* on July 18, John Stonestreet offered some helpful insight into the Peterson incident and what it reveals more broadly about how evangelical Christians view same-sex “marriage.” First, he says, it reveals “the crisis of authority among evangelicals.” He points out that much of this conversation, as well as others in the evangelical community, is “driven by celebrities instead of doctrine.” That is a problem.

Second, it reveals the need for clarity on another oft-repeated point, which is the mistaken idea that there has been “a massive shift among [evangelical] Christians on this issue.” While some high-profile figures have embraced same-sex “marriage,” most evangelical organizations and denominations (including the EPC) have staked out clear biblical positions on sexuality and marriage. The evangelical church as a whole is not caving to gay theology. This is good news.

Third, Stonestreet says, Eugene Peterson’s “original statement appealed not to biblical teaching or theological argument but to *people* and *experiences*.” That is a problem, too. Tim Keller has written that “if you change your mind about homosexuality because you meet a friendly and intelligent gay person, your views were probably not based on a biblical theology of [sexuality or] marriage to begin with.” “Feelings,” notes Stonestreet, “are no substitute for an informed Christian worldview.”

Stonestreet concludes that this is not, as some people suggest, a side issue or something on which Christians can just “agree to disagree.” Or, in the language of Paul, it is not a “disputable matter.” From creation onward, “the Bible consistently and unambiguously teaches one view of human sexuality.” (John Stonestreet, “Breakpoint Daily,” July 18, 2017).

Not everything is a matter of personal belief or conviction or choice. The Bible speaks clearly and with one voice about homosexuality. The Bible speaks clearly and with one voice about marriage being the union of a man and a woman. Holding onto a biblical view of sexuality and marriage may put us at odds with our culture and its gospel of personal fulfillment, but we are not free to set aside the clear teachings of Scripture or to jettison the plan of God for marriage, intimacy, and the family, in order to fit in with the culture.

Not everything is a “disputable matter.” Not everything is non-essential. Not everything is up to the individual to decide. This is one of those things. It is one of the implications of a biblical faith in which, if we are to be found faithful to God, we must remain united in what we believe and how we live.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **PAUL AND HIS PLANS**

Now, to Paul and the plans he shares with the church at Rome. Paul, you may recall, wrote the letter to the Romans from Corinth during his third missionary journey (ca. AD 57). Having completed the missionary work God had given him to do in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. Paul turned his eyes to the west. He had never been to Rome, but Rome was not his ultimate goal. He wanted to visit Rome in order to be refreshed and encouraged by the believers there as he continued westward, hoping to take the message of the gospel to Spain, where the gospel had not yet been proclaimed and Christ was not yet known.

To that end, he planned to visit Rome. From there, he planned to go on to Spain. But first, he wanted to go to Jerusalem with the offering the churches in Macedonia and Achaia had collected for the impoverished believers in Jerusalem. Paul had earlier written to the

Corinthians about this offering in both 1 Corinthians 16 and 2 Corinthians 8-9. This offering would not only provide real, practical relief to the poor in Jerusalem in a time of genuine need. It would also serve as a tangible expression of love from the Gentile Christians in Greece to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. And, Paul hoped, it would help to cement the relationships between Jewish and Gentile believers in the body of Christ.

That, in a nutshell, was Paul's plan. But, as you know if you know the story of Paul's life, it didn't work out quite the way Paul had hoped. He did go to Jerusalem, but shortly after arriving he found himself under arrest. After spending more than two years in prison with no resolution of his case, he appealed to Caesar, which set the wheels in motion, at last, for him to go to Rome. The New Testament attests that Paul did go to Rome, as a prisoner. It is believed that he was released from prison at some point and lived in freedom for some time before being rearrested in a crackdown against Christians by Emperor Nero, starting in AD 64. Whether Paul ever made it to Spain is not certain. We simply don't know for sure.

### **A PLEA FOR PRAYER**

There are two things I want you to notice in what Paul shares with the Romans here. The first is his request for prayer. In verses 30-32, he asks the Romans to join him in prayer – to pray with and for him – for the fulfillment of the plans he has shared with them. He uses an unusual word in verse 30 in asking for their partnership in prayer – the word *synagonizomai* - which means, literally, “to agonize with” him in prayer. It is similar to what he says in Colossians 4:12, where he describes Epaphras as “wrestling in prayer” for the Colossian believers, that they may all “stand firm in all the will of God.” Paul is asking the Romans to go into their prayer rooms to pray on his behalf against those who would seek to thwart his labors for the kingdom of God.

Specifically, he asks them to pray about two matters related to his planned visit to Jerusalem: First, that he would be “delivered from the lions’ den of unbelievers in Judea” (15:31a, *MSG*), that those who want to thwart *him* and his ministry would be thwarted themselves. He knows that opposition and potential trouble await him in Jerusalem. So he asks the Romans to pray for his protection and rescue from those who were out to get him.

In addition, he asks them to pray for the gift he is bringing from the churches in Macedonia and Achaia to be received graciously and gratefully by the church in Jerusalem (15:31b). He is concerned that the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem may be offended in some way by this gift from Gentile Christians. His desire is for a spirit of unity to grow stronger among Jews and non-Jews in the church. He is not sure how the believers in Jerusalem will receive the gift.

In both cases, Paul does not hesitate to ask the believers in Rome to pray for him. Which suggests to me that we should not hesitate to ask one another (or Christians in other places) to pray with and for us as we seek to serve God faithfully in the places and ministries to which the Lord has called us. It does mean, though, that like Paul we need to be intentional about serving God in the course of our everyday lives. We need to be missionally-focused, understanding that our mission field is wherever God has placed us. It is the place where God

wants you to serve Him. It is the place where He wants to use *you*. It is the place where He wants to use *us*.

### **A HOLY AMBITION**

The second thing I want you to see is Paul's ambition as a missionary servant of God. He expresses it this way in verse 20: "It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known." The Lord had given Paul a pioneering spirit, a passion to take the gospel where it had not yet been proclaimed. That is why he had such a powerful desire to go to Spain.

Different people have different ambitions in life. One person's ambition is for power. Another's is fame. Still another's is for wealth. One person pursues pleasure (like Solomon in the Book of Ecclesiastes). Another aspires to be the best of the best in some field of endeavor. Or to set a world record. Some people aspire just to be comfortable.

In the same way that not every matter is a "disputable matter," not every ambition is a noble ambition. Not every ambition is a worthy ambition. Not every ambition is a holy ambition. Not every ambition has the glory of God as its object. In fact, the Bible warns in several places against selfish ambition. In Galatians 5:19-21, for example, Paul includes selfish ambition along with things like sexual immorality, hatred, jealousy, rage, envy, and drunkenness as "acts of the sinful nature" that are contrary to and unworthy of the kingdom of God.

Paul also recognizes that there are even people who preach the gospel for the wrong reason, with wrong motives. They do so, he says, out of envy or rivalry and selfish ambition (Philippians 1:15, 17), not so much to make Christ known as to make a name for themselves.

But in the fellowship of the church there is no place for selfish ambition. There is no place for selfish ambition in the life of a Christian. So Paul pleads with the Philippians to "do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves" (Philippians 2:3). James also warns against the danger of "harbor(ing) bitter envy and selfish ambition" in our hearts, because, he says, it leads to "disorder and every evil practice" (James 3:14- 16).

Let me ask you today: What is your ambition in life? Do you have a holy ambition? Do you, like Paul, have a God-honoring, God-inspired ambition?

The Huffington Post ran a story earlier this year about a man named Steve Feltham who has dedicated his life – are you ready for this? - to the search for the legendary Loch Ness monster. More than 25 years ago, he quit his job, sold his house, and bought a van he could live in, in order to "pursue his passion." He holds the Guinness World Record for the longest continuous search at Loch Ness. Still hasn't found "Nessie," though.

A holy ambition? I think not. Seems more like an absurd ambition. But it is really no more absurd, I suppose, than the ambitions of so many men and women who spend their lives in

pursuit of whatever it is that they think will bring them pleasure or contentment or significance, instead of giving themselves, as Paul did, to the service of God.

Listen: Wherever you are in life, whether you're young, with your whole life before you, or advanced in years, or somewhere in the middle, it is not too late – and it is never too soon – to ask God to give you a holy ambition for the years that lie ahead.

Paul was a man on a mission. His mission was clear. You and I are on a mission, too. God has a purpose for your life, and for our life together as His people, a purpose that calls for a holy ambition.

Os Guinness tells of visiting John Stott just a few weeks before the British pastor, preacher, Bible scholar, author, and global Christian leader died in 2010. After an hour together, Guinness asked Stott how he could pray for him. Lying in bed and barely able to speak, John Stott whispered; “Pray that I will be faithful to Jesus until my last breath.”

Lord, let it be so in us. Let it be your holy ambition and mine to be faithful to Jesus always. Amen.