

# Holy Ambition to Preach Where Christ Has Not Been Named

by John Piper

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*A holy ambition is a passion to do something God wants you to do, and it keeps you from doing other things you want to do that are also good, while the immeasurable need is for people to know Jesus and the Gospel.*

**Duration:** 34:10

**Scripture:** Romans 1:18, Romans 15:20

**Topics:** "Missions", "Evangelism"

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## Description

This sermon focuses on three key points: a holy ambition, an immeasurable need, and a global strategy. Paul's holy ambition to preach the Gospel where Christ is not known is highlighted, emphasizing the importance of having a passion to reach the unreached. The immeasurable need for people to hear the Gospel is discussed, stressing that a holy ambition always meets a real need. Additionally, a global strategy for missions is outlined, distinguishing between evangelism and missions, and emphasizing the importance of both local evangelism and reaching unreached people groups.

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## Transcript

I see three things in this text that we should, I think, focus on. All of them have direct implications for your life, and all of them relate directly to God and His purposes for the 21st century. Here they are.

Number one, I see a holy ambition. Number two, I see an immeasurable need. And number three, I see a global strategy.

So that's the outline, and we'll tackle each of those. Number one, a holy ambition. Verse 20, 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.

Paul was controlled by a holy ambition. The reason I say he was controlled by a holy ambition is because in verse 22 he says, This is the reason why I have so long been hindered from coming to you. And then in verse 23 he says, I have longed for many years to come to you.

So now why, if you have a tremendous longing to go somewhere, don't you go? He says, I've been hindered from going. What's the hindrance? My ambition to preach from Jerusalem to Albania until my work is done. And now it's done.

We'll come back to that breathtaking statement that it's done. But I want you to see now the way ambitions work. When you have an ambition, it keeps you from doing things you want to do.

Because you want this ambition 10,000 times more than you want those things. An ambition is a passion, it's a longing, a want to do this. And all the other things that you want to do also, you don't do.

Until you're done. That's the way ambitions work. He's controlled by this ambition.

When his work is done from Jerusalem to Illyricum, which is Albania today, then he's free to do what he wanted to do, mainly go to Spain. And Rome happens to be on the way, and so one of his lifelong longings he can now do also, because it fits the ambition. So he'll stop off there and enjoy some fellowship for a while, he'll mobilize them to support him, and then he'll be on to his ambition in Spain, preaching the Gospel where the name of Christ is not known.

I'm calling it a holy ambition. Why? I'm calling it a holy ambition because it's an ambition to see people who don't know anything about Jesus, hear about Him, believe in Him, become obedient to Him, and be saved by Him from their sins and from the wrath of God. That's a holy ambition.

People who don't know anything about the name of Jesus, I will devote my life to not doing things I want to do, that I might do this. Save sinners who don't know about Jesus. And I'm calling it holy because of what it comes from.

That's what it's aiming to. And where this ambition is growing from, and it's growing from God and His holy Word. But that's a point later on in the message, so you will see it when it comes, how it grows out of His Word.

So my question is, do you have a holy ambition? Not everyone should have Paul's. Clearly, he doesn't expect the church in Rome to go with him to Spain. One plants another waters.

Each has his own gift. Each stands and falls before his own master. This is not a sermon trying to get everybody to be like Paul.

But, I think God would be pleased if all of His children had a holy ambition. I think He would be pleased. If all of His children had a holy ambition.

Little children, heads up. If you can understand me right now, kids, I want you to listen carefully. I know the term holy ambition is a big term.

It's a big word. It's not something you use every day. Here's what it means.

This is for children. It means something you really, really, really want to do, and God wants you to do also. That's a holy ambition.

A holy ambition is something you really, really, really, really want to do and keeps you from doing other things you really want to do that are also good, but you do this and it's something God wants you to do also. It kept Paul from going to Rome when he wanted to go to Rome much. He wanted to preach more from Jerusalem to Illyricum.

Children, do you have a holy ambition? And my answer to that is probably not. Children probably don't yet have one of these. You're only a child.

And that's what you're supposed to be. Someday you won't be a child anymore. And one of the differences between being a child and growing up is that growing up as a Christian means you get a holy ambition.

That's one of the differences between being a little child and being a mature Christian. Most little girls, heads up little girls, most little girls, if I'm learning anything from Talitha, like to have and play with dolls. Molly, Samantha, Felicity, Addie.

You wonder how I know the names of these dolls? It's because I called my daughter in Barnesville, Georgia this morning and said, remind me of the names of the dolls. I want the girls to recognize the names of the dolls when I mention them. And she rattled them off.

And she said, there are more. Do you want more? I said, that'll do. Most little girls really, really, really want to have a special doll and play with it with friends.

Someday that good thing is going to go away. That good thing is going to go away. The day is going to come when you little girls will grow up and you will put away the happiness of playing with the dolls for a bigger, better joy of caring for real babies in the nursery.

Or some very hungry babies far, far away and you may lead a ministry that will feed them. Or some very lonely babies that have no mommy and daddy. You will lead the ministry that cares for those little babies.

But you won't play with dolls forever. It's a good thing for a 10-year-old Talitha to play with dolls if she begins to dream a dream. Little boys.

Boys, listen for a minute. If you are like I was, what you want is a ball, a truck, and a gun. I've never owned a real gun.

A pellet rifle as far as I've ever gotten. I have no gun now. I did shoot a lot of bad guys with my Matt Dillon pistol and my Lucas McCain handle round rifle.

And I loved playing football in the backyard even after we broke Billy Shaughnessy's neck playing tackle. He turned out okay, that's why I can say it so lightly. So we did play tackle.

It was another stupid flag ball. We were men! Stupid men, but we were little warriors. And I loved digging roads.

Sonny Paul had a bank in his yard and I had a shovel and half a dozen trucks and we dug roads for those trucks and made a town. And I loved to draw my pistol so fast you couldn't see it. It was fun.

It was good. But someday you little boys and big boys will grow up and the difference between a little boy and a grown up boy, a grown up man, a Christian man is that you will get a holy ambition. You will get a holy ambition.

You will put away childish things. And that means that the fun of guns and trucks and balls will get small and the joy of fighting for justice and salvation will get big. Growing up means getting a holy ambition to wield the sword of the Spirit mightily, drive a truckload of love to the needy and kick Satan's rear end in the name of Jesus.

That will start to be vastly more joyful than your little trucks and balls and guns. And the mark of maturity, so here are the implications of this, adults. The mark of moving from a child to an adult is that you get a

holy ambition.

Where does it come from? It comes from verses 20 and 21, tell us. Just go there with me. So you're sitting there now thinking, hmm, I'm not sure anything I have quite fits that category.

So you want one? Listen carefully. Verse 20, 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, many quotes, Isaiah 52, 15, but those who have never been told of Him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.

Now that is amazing and relevant to you. We know that Paul was called by the living Christ on the Damascus Road to do this. I will show you how much you must suffer for me and I will make you an apostle to the Gentiles.

Jesus called Paul, first from his mother's womb, let him go into terrible murderous sin, and then knocked him off his horse on the Damascus Road and made him into a risk-taking apostle to the Gentiles who would carry His name to those who'd never heard. And Paul doesn't say that here. He's giving an explanation of where his ambition comes from and he doesn't even tell us that.

That's strange. Most of us, when we give testimonies, we talk about the amazing things that have happened to us. A guy told me about how he was called and he was driving from Knoxville to Louisville.

He had to pull off the road and he shook for half an hour. That's what he told me. That's great.

Paul doesn't do that here. What does he do in verse 21? He says, here's my ambition as it is written. Those who've never been told of Him will see Him and those who have never heard will understand.

What do you make of that? What do you make of that? Here's what I make of it. When Jesus called Paul on the Damascus Road to take the Gospel to the Gentiles who'd never heard, Paul went to the Old Testament and looked for confirmation and explanation of how this fit in to the big picture of God's purposes in the Old Testament and he found it. And I think, for our sake, he said it this way.

He speaks this way. You can't duplicate Damascus. You're not going to have a Damascus experience.

Maybe something amazing, but probably won't be blinding light, blind for three days, knocked off your horse, can hardly think. Annihilation comes. You're probably not going to have that.

But you can read your Bible and God can come down while you read your Bible. And he can take verse and burn it on your heart so hot you know you're called God. You can't get rid of it.

You can't let it go. It holds you. There have been verses like that in my life and there can be verses like that for 13-year-old girls, boys, and 73-year-old men who say, I will not waste the rest.

I think the way an ambition is born is by meditating on the law of the Lord day and night and asking the Lord to give you one. And he comes. As you read the Bible, and some parts of it take on extraordinary power.

And then you would just do like Paul did when somebody says, why are you doing what you're doing? You just quote Scripture. And if they say, well, that Scripture can apply to anybody. You say, I know.

I know. God took me with the Scripture. He just took me.

God met me in the Scripture. This Scripture became the mandate of my life. Holy ambition.

Number two, the immeasurable need. God doesn't lead us into ambitions that are pointless that you will regret at the end of your life. That's not of God.

There's always a need to be met. Not a need in God. He doesn't need you.

You need Him. The world needs you. And it needs God.

A holy ambition will always meet a real need. Do you hear that? A holy ambition will always meet a real need. You won't be wasting your life padding your own den with excesses.

Holy ambitions are not, unlike the world's ambitions, holy ambitions are not self-exalting. They're not self-aggrandizing. They're not self-enriching.

They are always a form of love. They always meet someone's need. Now, what is the immeasurable need to which Paul is devoting his life? Verse 20, Thus I make it my ambition to preach the Gospel not where Christ has already been named.

That means that Paul has set his faith, like Flint, to preach the Gospel to people who've never heard of Christ. They don't even know His name. That's the need.

They don't know His name and they are perishing until they hear His name. Faith comes by hearing. And Paul is the preacher.

Now here's the question. If these people don't even know Jesus' name, then are they responsible to believe in Him for salvation? And if they're not responsible to believe in Him for salvation, wouldn't it be safer for them not to go? Because if you tell them the name, they might not believe and then they perish because they've heard. So wouldn't it be better not to go tell them lest they disbelieve and perish if they're not responsible for believing in One they've never heard of? Paul, why do you suffer so much to put people at such risk? And he has given the answer already.

That's why he doesn't need to give it here. And I invite you to turn with me to it in chapter 1. If you want to read it, just read it. We don't need a lot of comment.

It is crystal clear and does not need exposition this time. Romans 1. And we will read verses 18-23 and the question will be answered. This is Paul's discussion of how we're to think about the Gentiles, the people who have no access to Jesus Christ.

Verse 18. Chapter 1. The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness. All of it.

All of it. Everywhere in the world. And unrighteousness of men who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

For what can be known about God is plain to them wherever they live on planet earth 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. That's the immeasurable need.

Nobody anywhere in the world will have an excuse when they are sentenced to hell. Nobody. For although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Chapter 2, verse 12. Paul says this.

All who have sinned without the law perish without the law. All who have sinned under the law are judged by the law. Everybody will be judged according to what they have access to and everybody perishes without Jesus.

They suppress the truth that they have in unrighteousness. And therefore, Paul knows and suffers because there is only one hope for Spain. And now he gets there.

Or somebody gets there. The need of the nations who do not know the name of Jesus is an immeasurable need. It's an infinite need.

It's the greatest need that can be imagined. I'm amazed at how many evangelicals cluck their tongues at evangelism and exalt social action. As though they're doing the great thing when they feed a mouth.

Believe me, we should feed mouths and weep if they go to hell. Weep if with full bellies blessing our Christianity they go to hell. Just get our heads straight here.

There are needs and there are needs. And the immeasurable need is to have our sins forgiven. Have a righteousness counted as ours which we cannot perform.

Remove the wrath of God and it all happens through the work of Christ and the Gospel of Christ. It won't happen any other way. We have it.

And they don't. Not every one of you is called to go like Paul to those who've never heard. But, you cannot be a loving person and not want your life to count for this.

I will say that again. You cannot be a loving person and not want your life to count for reaching unreached people. It's pure hypocrisy to say I love human beings and do nothing in your life.

Have no increment of an ambition to see that the Gospel reach people who don't know Him. Finally, we've seen holy ambition. We've seen immeasurable need.

And now we see a most amazing global strategy. Some of you in this room, God is calling vocationally, irretrievably to frontier missions. Here's the strategy that is so amazing.

If you're newer at Bethlehem, listen carefully for these last couple of minutes. Because you need to understand how we think about missions biblically. How we define missions.

Think about it. And it's rooted in this text. Verse 19.

Second half of the verse. From Jerusalem and all the way up... I'm adding this now. Up through Syria, across what's now Turkey, up into Greece, down the eastern coast of Greece, through Athens and Corinth, back up the western coast, up to northern Italy, from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fulfilled the ministry of the Gospel.

I have fulfilled the Gospel. And if that weren't amazing enough, outrageous enough, he underlines it in verse 23. I no longer have any room for work in these regions.

That is absolutely unbelievable that he would say that. What kind of elbow room do you need? There are tens of thousands of un-evangelized people between Jerusalem and Illyricum and they're all going to hell and you say you have no room for work. I mean, does that bother you? We know they're going to hell and need to be evangelized because he writes a letter called 2 Timothy to Timothy, who's the pastor in Ephesus, which is in Turkey, which says, do the work of a what? Evangelist.

Why? He's done. Does that jar you? What does this mean for us? Bethlehem. What does this mean? I'll tell you what it means.

It means there's a difference between missions and evangelism. Paul cannot talk this way and say my work is done and I have no room here. Timothy, get to work.

There's lost people there. How many people in our churches when a kid gets a passion for an unreached people say, do you know there's lost people across the street over there? How many people talk like that? Of course there are. That's every one of your jobs.

We should be saturating this city with the Gospel, opening our mouths with Spirit-filled boldness. That's not the job of a missionary. His job is to leave, learn a language, cross a culture, find where there's a whole people with no evangelizing church at all and they haven't even heard the name perhaps.

That's what we've learned from this text at Bethlehem. Which is why we're a both-end church, not an either-or. We're not going to get in each other's face and those who feel called to cross the street to witness here or care about unwed moms or get into pro-life causes and do evangelism everywhere.

We're not going to say, don't you believe in missions? We're not going to do that. And we're not going to say to the family who says, I can't rest until I'm in Pakistan and the Baluch. You've got nothing.

We're not going to say to them, don't you know there's lost people here and many others? We're not going to do that. We're going to bless them. We're going to bless them.

We're going to hold the ropes across town and hold the ropes over the ocean. That's what I'm learning here. A global strategy is that in a church, and I'm almost done now.

Listen carefully because God, I prayed that He'd work in these services. Every church must be filled with evangelists, bold speakers of the Gospel, and every church must have a group. God decides what texts burn in their hearts.

A group who cannot rest until they go to an unreached people. Are you one of them? I can imagine, and I've prayed now much today, I can imagine that in ten years, someone, maybe ten, will write a letter home who's sitting in this service, that service. Write a letter home from your unreached people and you will say this in the letter.

I am here to speak the Gospel to those who have never heard of Him for as it is written in Romans 15-20, I make it my ambition to preach the Gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation. God burned that word into my heart and turned it into a holy ambition at Bethlehem Baptist Church, August 2006. Let's just be quiet before I close in prayer and we sing about our

ambition while God clarifies.

Very simply, Father, I ask that You would burn Your Word, if not this text, another, into the hearts of many and that some, whether they're among the TBI guys here or the wider group Sunday morning as well as Saturday night, that You would call them into frontier, pioneer, breakthrough a 7,000 year old satanic darkness in the name of the risen Jesus. Amen.

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