

“PAUL’S HOLY AMBITION.”

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church

May 17, 2026, 10:30 AM

Scripture Texts: Romans 15:14-21

Introduction.

We are turning the final corner in our stretch to the end of Paul’s letter to the church in Rome. The end is now in sight. Paul gets more personal here at the end.

Paul is aware he has been pretty bold, pretty hard on the church in Rome, especially confronting their division and strife. He has rebuked the boasting of the Jews and the arrogance of the Gentiles. He shows his pastor’s heart by now offering some encouragement, some positive affirmations.

Some accuse Paul of using flattery here. No, this is Paul being a good pastor showing his warm-hearted affection for the people. He looks for evidence of good in the people and he affirms it.

Paul speaks the truth, but he speaks it in love. Even in speaking so strongly he wants them to know he doesn’t doubt their faith, wisdom, goodness or knowledge of the truth. He doesn’t want them to misinterpret his boldness to suggest he thinks they are weak or foolish.

Paul to the church in Rome, vs. 14.

Romans 15:14 I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another.

He begins with praise for the church. He affirms they are full of goodness in how they treat each other and in their attitude toward outsiders. They are a church shaped by grace.

He affirms they are full of all knowledge. The implication here is not that they know everything, but their knowledge of the truth has given them a hunger to continue to grow and learn.

He affirms they are able to instruct one another. The ESV and NIV weaken this by watering down to the word instruct. The word is much better understood as admonish.

Because of their goodness and wisdom, they are in a position to exhort and encourage each other.

But admonish doesn't sound so nice to us. We like to water down words like this.

But why? This is no different than what we expect a father to do to his son, parents to children, teachers to students, bosses to employees. Why do we chaff at this being done where it matters the most, in the spiritual realm, in the church?

God gives to His church pastors and elders and senior saints with wisdom and grace to be used to help us grow and improve in our Christian walk, in our becoming more like Jesus.

When we join the church one of the vows we take is, "Do you promise to submit to the government of the church and also, if you should become delinquent either in doctrine or in life, to submit to its admonition and discipline?"

We all say yes to that. But what happens if it actually becomes necessary? We become defensive. "It is like who died and left you in charge. Do you think you are better than me?"

When it comes to being admonished, we suddenly revert back to our adolescence. You know, what it is like to admonish a teenager. They don't like it, they resist, they push back, they disagree or become defensive. How do I know this? Because I remember being a teenager once and I raised five sons through the teenage years.

None of us quite grow out of it. None of us likes being admonished or being corrected in some aspect of our life or having our sins confronted.

But how do we think we are to grow, to improve, to become more Christ like? We can no more grow in grace and holiness without admonishment and correction than our children can grow in maturity and wisdom without parents loving correction and discipline? How many times have we read verses in the NT and thought little of them until they suddenly need to be applied to us or to a brother or sister in the Lord?

II Timothy 3:16-17 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

I Thessalonians 5:12-14 We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and *admonish* you, 13 and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. ... *admonish* the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.

I Corinthians 4:14-16 I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. 15 For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. 16 I urge you, then, be imitators of me.

Colossians 1:28 [We proclaim Christ], warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

Colossians 3:16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom.

Galatians 6:1-2 Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. 2 Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Paul is treating them like mature adults in expecting them to be able to be honest and sincere in their dealings with each other and to have enough of a firm grasp of the Gospel to be able to admonish one another.

Paul gives us wisdom to effectively admonish someone. It must be full of goodness, from a place of genuine kindness, love, and pure motives, not from superiority, anger, or judgmentalism.

It must come from a place of knowledge, meaning a solid understanding of truth (wisdom from Scripture) to guide someone else correctly. Without knowledge, advice is just personal opinion.

When goodness and knowledge are combined, it creates the spiritual maturity and courage required to step into someone's life and offer a course correction, truth with love. Gently with a sober awareness of our own sin, of the log in our own eye.

I have had experiences on both sides of *being corrected*, times when I didn't like it, my pride got in the way; and times when I was able to receive it humbly, gratefully, in love.

And I have had experiences on both sides of *giving correction*, when it has been resisted, and when it has been received graciously and gratefully. I am in an ongoing conversation with a brother who welcomes the accountability, sees it as the path toward growing and improving in the Gospel.

No matter how much progress any of us has made in our spiritual journey, all of us have much room for growing and improving. Paul himself said he had not arrived but presses on toward Christ. When you are admonished or corrected receive it in humility, receive it as grace and love. Don't be proud in your sin, receive God's admonishing wherever it comes from, so that together we may make progress toward complete holiness and obedience.

Paul to the Gentiles, vss. 15-21.

15:16 to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

Paul uses language here that sounds strange or unfamiliar to us. The priesthood of a Christian pastor is not to offer sacrifices on behalf of God's people, but to offer up God's people as a sacrifice to God by

bringing them to obedience to the Gospel. Pastors have as their calling offering to God souls admonished to be holy and purified by faith.

Remember the admonition in Romans 12:1-2, present ourselves as a living sacrifice. An offering pleasing and acceptable to God for His glory, a church not conformed to the world but transformed by grace, being a church shaped by grace.

As I pray and intercede for you, I am offering up to God this flock, praying for you to be sanctified by the Holy Spirit. This is the offering I pray God will make us to be like:

Romans 12:9-18 Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. 10 Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. 11 Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. 13 Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. 17 Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. 18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

This is no casual thing that we are a part of here, this is serious work, holy work, life redeeming and life changing work. It is work we all should actively participate in and never resist.

15:17-18 In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God. 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, 19 by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God.

When Paul says he is proud of his work, he means by that, he is proud of God and what God has done through him, and has enabled Paul to do. His reason for being proud is Jesus.

I Corinthians 2:2 For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Galatians 6:14 Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

Paul is not boasting in his own abilities or successes. He is boasting in Jesus, and what Jesus has done through him. Paul's ministry is no different than any of our ministry, it is all of grace, all by the power of the Holy Spirit, as Jesus brings the Gentiles (and us) to obedience.

Sanctification.

Sanctification is a big word we don't use much or talk about much. It sounds like one of those church words that doesn't apply to us in normal life. When I say it means to make holy that just makes it worse, even more lofty and unattainable. Another word for it is obedience. Worse yet. How is this word relevant to us today? Let me put it simply.

Suppose you have been cheating on your tax forms and then you come to believe in Jesus as your Lord and Savior and you stop doing that. That's sanctification.

Suppose you are demeaning and disrespectful to your spouse, sarcastic, bitter, harsh, and then you become convicted by the Word of God and you change your words and attitude. That's sanctification.

Suppose you are living with your girlfriend or looking at porn and then your conscience gets your attention, you are convicted by your sin and you make a commitment to change and you ask God to help you, that's sanctification.

Suppose you have anger or bitterness or resentment or unforgiveness or envy or covetousness toward someone and then you read in Scripture about that being sin and you ask God to set you free, that's sanctification.

Romans 6:17-19 Thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, ... For just as you once presented your members as

slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.

Sanctification happens when the words of Jesus become real and important to you and you begin to obey them. And your obedience begins to become a joy to you.

That's the grace of God by the power of the Holy Spirit, that's sanctification.

When a church begins to love the world less and Jesus more, when a church begins to seek first the kingdom of God and let material things go and see what they have as belonging to God, when they become bolder to share their faith and have more compassion for others and are devoted to sexual purity and committed to praying not just for themselves but others and the world, that's sanctification, that's an offering pleasing and acceptable to God.

This work of sanctification happens by the Holy Spirit in many ways through the purifying fires of trials, afflictions, sufferings, and through the means of grace, the preaching of pastors and the loving admonition of pastors, elders, and fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

Implications and application.

We are supernatural community, a blood bought community, a Gospel affirming community, belonging to Christ, formed by the outworking of the power of the Holy Spirit, creating hearts that hear and believe and submit and follow. We are a supernatural community kept alive by goodness and knowledge and admonition, presented back to God as an offering, as a living sacrifice to His glory.

Preach the Gospel. Share the truth. Be salt and light.

"Paul offers to God a return of the gifts that God himself has given. That is all we can ever do. What can we give to God that we have not first received from his hand?" RCS

Whatever you do, make it your aim to consciously, intentionally, purpose do it as unto the Lord.

We ask, “Where does God fit into the story of my life?” when the real question is, “Where does my little life fit into the great story of God’s mission?” That’s how Paul saw his life. He was part of a grand story that superseded the outcome of his small one.

Are you little, small, insignificant, not amounting to much. If you look to yourself, sure. But never underestimate what God can do in and through one person, surrendered to Him, seeking His will, and available to His purpose. Ask God to use you, offer yourself to God as a living sacrifice and ask Him to direct your steps. Start tomorrow.

Make a meal for someone going through hard times. Offer to drive. Pick up kids.

Hold a child in the nursery. Teach a Sunday School class. Lead a Bible Study.

Facilitate a Life Group. Bring cookies for fellowship time. Pray for a Serve student.

Be a host home for Sunday morning showers and breakfast. Befriend a stranger.

Lighten someone’s load at work. Help someone with homework. These are offerings, these are acts of worship, sacrifices to God.

Can I change our vocabulary? Let’s change the word volunteers. Let’s not see ourselves as volunteers. Rather, let’s be those who love Jesus and His Church, who believe God calls us to serve Him and His church using the gifts has given us to be a blessing to others.

What is our ambition? Is it worldly or Godly? Is it small or is it great? It is an apostle like work when we share the Gospel with someone who has never heard, who has never received the truth. Share the truth about Jesus with family, friends, neighbors, classmates, co-workers.

The Gospel never stands still, it is always moving outward.

Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. Set yourself to doing what you know God has created and called you to do. Make it your ambition to seek and do His will.

Life is a journey to an eternal destiny. Make sure the path you seek and are on is a path that glorifies God. This is our chief end and purpose.

In your words and actions may:

“Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.”