

The Power of the Gospel: For the World

Romans 1:16-17

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August 22, 2010

(Yes, It's Missions Sunday: It's Always Mission Sunday!)

Now turn with me if you would to Paul's letter to the Romans and our text is a very familiar one this evening in chapter 1 and verses 16 and 17. This is the penultimate study in a series that we've been engaged in all summer on the "Gospel-Centered Life." They'll be one more next Lord's Day evening and then two weeks from now we'll revert back to the books of Samuel and pick up just where we left off in the second chapter of 2 Samuel and the life of David. That will be in two week's time. But tonight we want to focus our thoughts on this very well-known text. Before I read it let's look to God in prayer.

Father again we come before You asking for a blessing, for an out-pouring of Your Spirit, in acknowledgment that without You we can do nothing. So come, O Lord, and grant us illumination as we read this portion of Scripture. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Hear the words of God:

"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.'"

Amen. May God bless to us that reading of His holy and inerrant Word.

Paul in this letter has just greeted Christians in Rome. He's given thanks to God for them. He has told them of his desire to come and visit them. Incidentally that prayer of the apostle was answered but probably not in the way he thought it would be. He was to visit the church in Rome but as a prisoner in chains. Be careful what you pray for. And now in verses 16 and 17, he having said in verse 14, "I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians," he now goes on to express that this Gospel that he wants to tell them about is a Gospel that is for both Greeks and barbarians.

Now Martin Luther, the German reformer, in 1545 — he was to die in 1546; this is at the end of his life — he is writing a preface to a publication of his Latin works. And as he thinks about this preface he's thinking back over the twenty-five years or so of how God has used him, employed him, in changing the face of Europe with the Gospel.

And as he begins to write this preface, he reminds himself and his readers that it all began in this chapter and with these verses. Because as Martin Luther read these verses — “I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God,” or as Luther would have read it in his Latin Bible, “the justice of God.” And he writes in that preface he came to hate the righteousness of God because the righteousness of God for Martin Luther was something that condemned him. No matter what he did, no matter how hard he tried, no matter what deprivations he went through, no matter what self-denial he engaged in, the righteousness of God always condemned him. And he says, “I began to hate,” those are his words, “I began to hate the righteousness of God until” — until he saw for the first time that the righteousness that God demands is a righteousness He provides in the Gospel. And when he saw that he says, “It was like the opening of the gates of paradise.” It was this text.

Now this text is a summary of the entire epistle to the Romans. You can summarize the entire epistle to the Romans with this text. Cicero, the rhetorician, the man who invented, I suppose, the idea that every speech, every address should have a main point and that you should be able to distill it all into one crisp point, the whole thing. Well you could do that with Romans just using this text, that in the Gospel, “the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith.” That's what Romans is all about.

Now four things I want us to see because he tells us he's not ashamed of the Gospel. He's not ashamed of the Gospel.

I. The Gospel is the saving power of God.

And he's not ashamed of the Gospel first of all because it is the saving power of God. It is the saving power of God. Now, if you did, in Paul's time, word association — you know, you say “black” and you say “white.” But in Paul's time if you said “black” they'd say “white.” If you said “horse” they'd say “chariot.” If you said “power” they'd say “Rome.” Rome was the power. Rome was an awesome power. It had changed the entire face of the world. It had stretched as far as, at least folk who are within the sound of the Gospel, it had stretched as far as they could even imagine. Their roads went everywhere. Their phenomenal ability in construction, their legal system, their armies had tramped across Europe and beyond. And the power was associated with Caesar or Kaiser as he

would have been called. And one of the great tests for Christians in the first and second and right into the third century, the great test for Christians was “Will you say, could you say, ‘Caesar is Lord?’” That’s why Paul writes in his epistles “Jesus is Lord.” That’s the Christian testimony. But there was an enormous cost to saying “Jesus is Lord” because at the same time you were denying that Caesar is lord.

And as he writes to Rome, the center of the Roman Empire where Caesar lived and dwelt, the most fundamental power that exists in the universe if not Caesar, it’s the Gospel. It’s the Gospel. For many of his readers it was counterintuitive. For many of his readers it comes like a shockwave at the beginning of this letter, that the Gospel is the power in the universe. It outstrips every other power - the power of intellect, the power of economics, the power of science, the power of industry, the power of military might. This is a far greater power — the power of the Gospel, the Gospel that can translate an individual from darkness to light, the Gospel that can bring an individual from a road that leads to hell to one that leads to Paradise and to heaven. I’m not ashamed of this Gospel because it’s powerful. It’s the power of God unto salvation. It’s the saving power of God. This isn’t a weak thing. This Gospel is not effeminate. This Gospel is powerful. It’s the most powerful force in the universe.

II. The Gospel has universal significance.

The second reason he gives as to why he’s not ashamed of this Gospel — if the first reason is it’s the saving power of God, the second reason is that it comes with universal significance. It is the power of God, he says, “to the Jew first and also to the Greek” or to the barbarian — “to the Jew first.” Now there’s a somewhat academic discussion whether Paul means that first of all the Gospel ought to be taken to the Jews first and still today whether the Gospel should be taken to the Jews first, or whether he’s simply reflecting on the fact that the Gospel came to the Jews first. And Paul’s way from Acts 9 all the way through Acts was, you remember, to go first to where the Jews were, to the synagogue, to where the God-fearers were gathered together. But it becomes clear in the Acts of the Apostles as the Gospel spreads from Jerusalem to Samaria to Judea to the ends of the earth that this Gospel is a Gospel not just for the Jews. It is a Gospel for the Jews, but it’s also a Gospel for the rest of the world, for the ends of the earth. The promise at Pentecost, do you remember that Peter gave at Pentecost — “The promise is to you and to your children and to all who are afar off.” This is a Gospel for everybody. That’s how Paul works it out in Romans. In the next two chapters he’s going to say why the Gospel is needed for the Jews and the Gentiles because the Jew and the Gentile have fallen short of God’s glory. This is a Gospel for everybody. It’s saying there’s only one way of salvation.

You know, if you were to ask me, “What is the issue that’s perhaps the most

important issue today in the Christian church?" One of them would have to be pluralism, the idea that's abroad, and it's everywhere, that some people can be saved by Christianity and some people can be saved by something else. You know, just find your own way. And this Gospel says there's only one way. This Gospel is for everybody. In other words, turn it around. The only way that a Jew or a Gentile can find salvation is through this Gospel, this powerful Gospel. Whether you're young or old, if you're a covenant child you need this Gospel. Only this Gospel is going to save you. The fact that you're a covenant child is not going to save you. It puts you in a special place, it puts you in a place of great privilege, but it doesn't save you. You need this Gospel.

No matter what your ethnicity, no matter what the color of your skin, no matter what your social background, no matter what your education, no matter what economic level you live in, this is a Gospel for the whole world. I'm not ashamed of this Gospel because it comes with universal significance. You know there's the person, and we think, "This person is so hard to reach." You know they may have great intellect and they may speak on a level we can barely understand, and we say to ourselves, "This person is so hard to reach," but I'm telling you, this is the Gospel that will save them, this Gospel.

III. The Gospel reveals the righteousness of God.

And then in the third place, Paul says not only is he not ashamed of this Gospel because it is the power of God unto salvation, not only because this Gospel comes with universal significance, but in the third place, he's not ashamed of this Gospel because it reveals the righteousness of God. It reveals the righteousness of God. Verse 17 — "In it" in the Gospel, this powerful Gospel that's relevant for everybody, in this Gospel "the righteousness of God is revealed." What is the righteousness of God? Well first of all it's a characteristic of God. God is righteous. God is absolutely faithful to His character. He is absolutely faithful to pursuing His honor and His glory. He's righteous. He's righteous in the way He deals with us. He makes covenants and manifests that righteousness which is His in response to whether we are rightly related to Him in covenant. He's righteous.

If we are unrighteous, He reveals Himself as righteous in judgment, in condemnation. That's what Luther saw, that the righteousness of God condemned him. God was righteous but he was unrighteous. But to those who are rightly related to Him in covenant, who have believed on the terms of that covenant which say, "If you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ you will be saved," God is righteous to that. He holds Himself to that. He is faithful to that, that if you believe on Jesus He will love you and bless you and commune with you and make promises to you. He's righteous.

So the issue is, are we in a right relationship with Him? That's the issue. And the

answer is, by nature we are not. By nature we are in Adam. By nature we are sinners. That's what Paul is going to take the next two and a half chapters to expound, that there is none righteous. There is none righteous. He's not talking about people who are locked up in prison. He's not talking about murders and rapists. He's talking about everybody. He's talking about you and me. "There is none righteous, no not one, for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." So how can we be made right with God then? And the answer is in the Gospel. God is wholly righteous and He provides that righteousness which we need and He provides it through faith in Jesus Christ because as he explains elsewhere, He made Him the righteous one. "He made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be reckoned the righteousness of God in Him." He made Him to be sin in order that we might be reckoned righteous.

That's the Gospel.

That's the good news. That though we are all sinners, though we are all unrighteous, though, as he goes on to say in verse 18, "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all unrighteousness," in Christ, hiding in Christ, sheltering in Christ, looking to Jesus, His impeccable righteousness is credited to our account and our unrighteousness is credited to His account. He, He experiences the wrath of God that we might be forgiven. That's the Gospel. That's the beauty, that's the simplicity of the Gospel. It's not by our works; it's by Jesus' works. It's by the perfect obedience of Jesus. Throughout the whole course of His life and in His giving of Himself upon the cross as our sin-bearer and substitute, yes, God is righteous. Yes, we are unrighteous. Yes, He condemns us righteously, but in the Gospel, in the Gospel there is good news. God in His grace has solved the final problem.

How? How does that righteous which is Jesus' righteousness, which is God's righteousness, becomes my righteousness?

Well look at the text. "In it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith." It begins by faith; it continues by faith. "As it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'" It's faith. What is faith? Forsaking all, I take Him. F-A-I-T-H. Forsaking all, I take Him. What a Gospel for you tonight, whoever you are, whatever your background, whatever you've done, however great your sins may be. For you, there's a Gospel for you, there's good news for you, that Jesus has died, that Jesus has paid the penalty, that Jesus has borne our sin and He has risen from the dead and He's sitting gloriously and triumphantly at the right hand of God. And all you need to do it believe. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. That's the Gospel.

I'm not ashamed of this Gospel. I'm not ashamed of it because it's the power of God unto salvation and I'm not ashamed of it because it's applicable to everybody. I'm not ashamed because in it, the righteousness of God is revealed. The way of salvation is revealed — how that righteousness becomes my

righteousness. And fourthly, he's not ashamed of this Gospel because, as he says right at the end, it's confirmed by the Scriptures. "As it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'" Habakkuk 2:4 — he's quoting that from the Bible of Paul's time, the Old Testament. Isn't that great? Where does he find the Gospel message? He finds it in Habakkuk. He finds it in the Old Testament. This is not a Gospel only for New Testament believers. This is a Gospel for Old Testament as well as New Testament believers. There's only one way of salvation and it's by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone.

That's what folk say on a Tuesday evening when they gather together with the world. The nations of the world gather together here at First Pres. on a Tuesday evening. And many of you are involved in that and that's the good news. That's the Gospel. And you're not ashamed to say to whoever they may be, "This Gospel is for you. No matter who you are, no matter where you've come from, no matter what you've done, this Gospel is for you. This is the way of salvation. There's power in this Gospel. It's God's power. It's a power that transforms."

Where would you be tonight if this Gospel hadn't come and impacted your hearts and your life? Where would you be tonight? As you think back over the last decade or twenty or thirty or forty or fifty years, where would all those years have been wasted if the Gospel hadn't come and changed you, the power of God hadn't come and changed you? And it can do that tonight. It can do that this coming Tuesday.

Brister Ware gave me a photograph. I will leave it down here somewhere at the end. You know, Brister and Marian go on these expeditions on trains almost every year. This one is a photograph of a grave. It's very, very moving. He knew I'd like it. It's a man or maybe a woman by the name of Clones in Ireland. Died on April 15, 1912 — yes, in the Titanic. Age 28. Do you know what's written at the bottom of this tombstone? The Gospel — "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling." There it is on the tombstone of someone who died in the Titanic in 1912. It's exactly the same message tonight and equally as powerful. Let's pray.

Father we thank You for a sweet and powerful Gospel that Jesus died in our room and stead and bore our sins in His own body upon the tree. We come again tonight and lay hold on Jesus and call Him "mine." Grant Your blessing. Rescue the perishing. For those perhaps tonight who are here who are still outside of Christ, bring them by Your Spirit to an end of themselves and that they might lay hold on Jesus saying, "Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling," for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please stand. Receive the Lord's benediction. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

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