

Romans, Part 4 5-1-22

Gospel Power

Romans 1:15-17 *I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.* ¹⁶*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.* ¹⁷*For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."*

You ought to be ashamed! Ever say that to someone? Ever had someone say that to you? *You should be ashamed of yourself!* Or maybe, *have you no shame?* What is shame? Is it a good thing? Bad thing? Depends on the context. Depends on what you mean by the word too. My online dictionary says it is *the painful feeling arising from the consciousness of something dishonorable, improper, ridiculous, done by oneself or another.* I find that interesting – that some of us feel shame because of things done by another person with whom we share some association. We feel ashamed because of what a parent did, or a child, or maybe a fellow Christian. It might even be something from a century ago. But some of us are susceptible to borrowed shame as it were. Big difference between that and something I clearly did myself. Shame that is associated with personal guilt - we all have felt that, haven't we? Got caught losing our temper, telling a lie, gossiping. When those kinds of things happen, shame is actually a good thing, isn't it? Sociopaths don't feel shame. They get caught in a lie and they just tell another bolder one. A feeling of shame is simply an indicator that you still have an active conscience – but as we mature I think we discover that our shame mechanisms get distorted. Some may be lacking in appropriate shame, but we may also feel shame for things we should not. Certain people in your life may try to use shame in a manipulative way. They call you names – *homophobe, transphobe, bigot, racist.* They put blame on you, toss some shame in your direction and hope you own it and adjust to their expectations of you. Your shame becomes a lever of control for someone else. Parents use it. Kids use it. Siblings use it. Pastors use it. Political leaders use it. Whole societies use it. The sensitive believer sometimes gets confused about when to embrace shame and when to reject it.

Apparently, our friend, the apostle Paul, was aware of the temptation to wrongly, unwisely embrace the shame. He was a man who sold himself out to preach the message of Christ throughout the world. Did anyone try to make Paul feel shame for what he believed and proclaimed? Oh my, yes, they did. They

accused him of disloyalty to his Jewish heritage, of betraying the law of Moses, of being a stupid, gullible fool who believed nonsense. To add injury to insult they threw stones at him from time to time and accused him before the Roman courts. Jewish leaders, Roman leaders, Gentile leaders all took their shots at trying to shut Paul up by inducing shame. So, when Paul says, *I am not ashamed*, there is a context for that. Lots of folks were trying to convince him he should be ashamed.

The opening lines of the epistle to the Romans alert us that the letter will be focused on this thing called *the gospel*. The Greek word is *euangelion*, *evangel*. It is found in chapter one of Romans six times, called the gospel of God of which Paul is not ashamed, but is eager to preach. After some introductory remarks, Paul really begins the body of the letter here in verse 16 with this line about not being ashamed. I can't explain with confidence why he does that, but it has become a favorite verse for many of us because we can relate to the temptation to shrink back, to not claim it or proclaim it. I feel that. Do you? I went to the University of Florida and it was not a Christian school. Even then, the person who stood for Biblical sexual ethics was considered backwards. The claim to have absolute truth that was binding on all men and all cultures was simply scoffed at. Unsophisticated. And if we spoke of a Creator – what?! We may as well be flat-earthers. Disdain is what we tend to get from the power-brokers of our world. And so, because I prefer to be thought well of, because I prefer to be esteemed and accepted and liked, there is a resident voice within me telling me I had better not let my Christian convictions be known.

Am I the only one here like that? Paul is about to spend the next seven chapters explaining to us why we have no reason for shame over the gospel and every reason for boasting in the gospel. It is well that we immerse our minds and hearts in what he has to say. And the main point he will make is that this gospel, which many despise, is, in fact the most powerful thing in the universe. It is God's power for eternal salvation. It is what can make a dead man live, what can make a blind woman see, what can turn a lost sinner into a confident saint. Paul says it is the power of God unto salvation. I Corinthians 1:18 *For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.* Foolishness to some – no doubt. It includes this ridiculous claim that Jesus rose from the dead. It suggests that a man dying a criminal's death in Palestine two-thousand years ago is what rescues us here in 2022. These are not things one readily believes. It isn't surprising that most in our world think our message is bizarre. Their view is easy to understand. What is not so

understandable is the view of the gospel you and I share. I mean, we seem like reasonable, intelligent people. We are able to function in the world. Many of us got advanced degrees. How did it come to be that we hold to these fanciful notions contained in the gospel? Because we experienced its power. If you brought into your home someone who had never been around modern appliances – had no acquaintance with electricity – and you told them that if they put their water in a white box on your counter, turned a knob or pushed some buttons and that water would come out hot in a minute or so, that person would likely think you are being ridiculous. You can't heat up water without a fire. And yet, within two minutes they would know differently wouldn't they? They would touch that hot water, experience the power of the microwave and go from doubt to belief. They wouldn't understand the how – they can't explain it – I still don't understand how microwaves work – but, like you, I am a believer because I have seen their work. I have also experienced the power of the gospel and seen what it has done for me and for many, many others – the author of this letter being among them. Paul, remember, was once a huge doubter, hostile as he could be – but his mind was changed. His heart was changed. He was transformed and saved by this gospel. I Peter 1:23 *you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God.* It is the message of the gospel that God uses to give life to what was dead, to reconcile sinners to a holy God, to give hope to the hopeless – confidence even. What else can do what the gospel of Christ does?

So, we see that the gospel has power – but it is a specific kind of power. Power unto salvation or for salvation. What is in view here? Salvation is a flexible term. What kind of salvation is in view? What is it salvation from? What would you say? As a Jesus-believer, I am saved from ____ (*if you have an answer you like raise your hand*). Good stuff. There are lots of great answers to this. Salvation is a flexible term in Scripture. It is more than conversion. It is all that delivers us safely into the Father's arms on the last day. Certain elements of salvation are still in the future for us. But the gospel is always central. It is what keeps us looking to Jesus, staying faithful, still believing to the end. Even now it saves me from discouragement, temptation, apostasy.

One commentator posted a list that I rather liked. It showed salvation's effects viewed as a negative and then as a positive, with the baseline understanding that salvation saves us from sin. On each point here I will read the negative and you join me on the positive – okay? He writes that Jesus rescues men

from sin's guilt to bring men into a state of righteousness. He rescues from sin's pollution to bring us into a state of holiness. He rescues men from slavery to bring us into freedom. He rescues from sin's punishment to bring us into a state of blessedness. Specifically, on this last point, alienation into fellowship, wrath into love, death into life. Is that a message to be ashamed of or to glory in? It is awesome, beautiful and speaks to our deepest needs.

In the context of Paul's thought in Romans one, the answer to what the gospel saves us from is suggested in verse 18. We will dive into that next time, but look briefly for now. *18 For the wrath of God is revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.* When Paul thinks of being saved, it is precisely these things that come to mind – the wrath of God which is due upon sin, here described as ungodliness and unrighteousness. With this language the apostle places us into the courtroom context for judgement and redemption. God is a judge who hates and must punish human rebellion and wickedness. Our most pressing problem can be described many ways, but in one sense, our biggest problem is God. He is holy and we are unholy. He is a just judge and we are cosmic criminals. Human beings have political troubles, relational troubles, psychological troubles, financial troubles, medical troubles, troubles with war, oppression, addiction – all of it, and the gospel will speak to these things, but its core concern is on the central issue – our guilt before a holy God. Romans 5 makes this exceedingly plain. Romans 5:9 *having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him.* A lot of preachers in the church and out have decided to focus on the other problems, but gospel focuses on sin and wrath and the solution which has come in Jesus. So, that will be our focus as we engage the letter to the Romans. Can I hear an *amen* on that?

So, we are not ashamed of the gospel – that's point one. It is God's power for salvation – that is point two. Point three then will be this – *to everyone who believes*. Ah – notice it does not just say *everyone*, does it? The benefactors of this salvation form a subset of humanity. It is a limited group. Universalism, the teaching that everyone gets saved in the end, is rejected. It is clearly not Scriptural. The gospel opposes it. But also, the gospel opposes any limitation based upon racial or ethnic grouping. The everyone could be understood by some to only include the elect nation of Israel, the Jewish people. Paul wants all to be clear that it is not so limited. The Jews, by and large, heard the gospel first – that was the appointed order, but the gospel is for people of every race and every place. But it is not saving for every human is it? The gospel discriminates. It is the power of God for

salvation only to those who believe in Jesus. To most others it is just foolishness as we have seen. The gospel makes faith then, the greatest dividing line between human beings. It is more important than race or sex, than nationality or age, than political party or economic class. Where do you stand on the Jesus question? Is He Lord or is he not? Do you reject him or do you believe in Him? That is the all-important matter. Verse 17 says it again – faith is that which brings life. Without faith, the gospel is of no value to you. With faith, you get everything,

We skip down at this point to the end of our next verse – 17 *For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”* That last phrase can be taken in a few different ways, but the best way to read it is like this – *the righteous by faith will live*. The prepositional phrase *by faith* modifies *the righteous*, not the verb *live*. So, it means -*those who are righteous by faith will live* – that is, eternal life is bestowed on those who discover the righteousness of God which comes through faith, not baptism, not law-keeping, but faith in the Son of God who died to save us from our sin.

You likely remember the terrible collapse of the beachside condominium in Florida last summer. It was an awful thing, in part because the way it happened likely meant that a number of those who died probably suffered terribly before their demise, with no one able to rescue them. Similar things occurred around the collapse of the twin towers in New York City. On 9-11-2001, Genelle Guzman, a 33-year-old doctor was buried under the rubble that was the World Trade Center. Her legs and other bones were crushed but she was alive, but buried. No one found her all day. She fell asleep at night but around noon the next day she heard voices and cried for help. She managed to find a hole in the rubble large enough to reach through a battered hand. Soon she felt a hand clasp hers and a man said, “This is Paul. I’ve got you and you’re going to be okay.” Imagine that. Now remember that we are buried beneath our sin and can’t save ourselves. We are trapped under the weight of our guilt, but, but, like Genelle, we can reach out a hand of faith & cry out. Reach out a hand of faith and cry out.

What do we mean then by that little word “faith?” Does it mean “pretending?” Does it require some mystical power? Is it an irrational leap into the darkness? Charles Spurgeon put it well. He wrote: *Faith is not a blind thing; for faith begins with knowledge. It is not a speculative thing; for faith believes facts of which it is sure. It is not an unpractical, dreamy thing; for faith trusts and stakes its destiny upon the truth of revelation... faith is the eye which looks...faith is the hand that grasps.* Indeed, we hear the Savior calling and we reach out to him. Faith is saving

because it connects us to the Savior. The pardon is his, the power is his, the righteousness is his, the merit is his. The hymnwriter nails it when he says *No merit of my own, his anger to suppress, my only hope is found in Jesus' righteousness. His grace has planned it all, tis mine but to believe.* Tis mine but to believe, expressed by reaching out that hand to the Lord.

So, now let's talk about Martin Luther. He was living in Germany early 1500s. He was a brilliant, super-dedicated monk who was eaten up with his personal sense of unworthiness. He saw that God was holy and he was not and that gulf haunted him day and night. At the advice of a friend he focused his questioning mind on the study of Scripture. One verse became especially important to him. It was Romans 1:17. Luther hated it. Yes, I said, hated it. Luther wrote: *I had been captivated with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the epistle of Romans. But a single word in chapter one; "In it the righteousness of God is revealed" stood in my way. For I hated that word "righteousness" which I had been taught is the righteousness with which God punishes the sinner.* You get that? Luther thought that Paul was referring to God's own personal righteousness, his justice, out of which he condemns sinners like Martin. That makes sense. It could certainly mean that. But, in this context it does not. Eventually, Luther's study would lead him to that conclusion, but before it did he wrote this: *Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I beat upon Paul, most ardently desiring to know what Paul wanted. At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "in it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'he who through faith is righteous shall live.'" There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is righteousness with which the merciful God justifies us by faith. Here I felt I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.*

Luther's discovery, his rebirth by the gospel, changed Europe in the 16th century, and it has changed my life and, I expect, yours as well. He pounded on our text until he got the gospel, and the world has never been the same. So, let's get clear on this before we wrap up today. The phrase "righteousness of God" – does it mean here the righteousness which adheres to God, or the righteousness which comes from God? Adheres to God and to no one else, or comes from God unto others? The gospel, the good news, is this – it is the latter. There is a righteousness which comes from God to sinners and makes them clean, just, forgiven, when it is received by faith. Those who are righteous by faith have life. This is good news. Righteousness is absolutely required of every single one of us. Without it we face a

terrible judgement and eternal death. That is the simple, sad truth. Sad because we don't have any righteousness. We are morally bankrupt, having violated God's law from birth. Luther recognized this about himself. I hope you have as well.

That realization would lead to utter despair were it not for the gospel which tells us that what we could never have by our own merit, we can have by the provisions of grace. We are able to reach out a hand of faith and possess a perfect righteousness which our Lord offers as his gift.

Paul writes about this same reality in Philippians where in verse 9 the apostle's desire is expressed that he *9 may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith*. Before Paul met Jesus Christ he was pursuing righteousness, or a right standing before God by careful obedience to Judaic law. That is, he was trying to gain his salvation by being good. But when he met Jesus he realized that by the works of the law no man will be justified because God's legal standard is perfection and no man had ever been perfect, except one – Jesus Christ. And the good news of the gospel is that although nothing you can do will earn righteousness, God offers the righteousness of Christ to you, as a gift, a gift which is received by faith. The righteousness God demands from us, he provides for us. Verse 9 speaks of *the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith*. The word of God teaches that when you place your trust in God's son, His, that is Christ's, perfect righteousness is credited to your account. I can tell from your reaction that you don't believe me. Or you don't understand me. This is the most amazing and wonderful truth you will ever hear. Again, for believers in Jesus, when God the judge looks at the record of your life instead of seeing a book full of sin he sees the perfection of His Son and declares you to be righteous. Understand, the term *righteousness* here does not refer to the inward quality of a person, but to one's judicial record in the court of heaven. And not only do Christians have a clean slate in heaven's court, we have been graciously supplied a credit that we can never spend out.

Any of you remember a cartoon entitle *Zits*? It was about a teenage boy named Jeremy and he appears here sitting with his buddy Pierce, who says *I don't think people appreciate me for who I am*. That's a very common feeling. Jeremy responds, *that's too bad. Who are you?* Pierce now speaks for the entire race and says *someone who needs a lot of undeserved appreciation*. That is so good. We are a people who need to be loved but we are unlovely. We need to be righteous

but we are unrighteous. We need to be appreciated and accepted but we are unacceptable. To get what we need we must count on getting something undeserved. And in the church we call that kind of stuff what? GRACE! Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saves what? A wretch. A wretch like me. And He does this by taking all the badness that is mine and gives it to Jesus. Then He takes all the goodness in Jesus and gives it to me. So that I who was dirty am now clean. I who was condemned am now free. I who was poor am now rich. I who was dead am now alive. I who was an outcast am now accepted in the Beloved Christ and made like him, a son or daughter of the King. United with Jesus, you are righteous, for His name is *the Lord our Righteousness*. This means that your standing with God is not about you, it's not about how you behaved today, it's grounded in the merits of Christ and all His worthiness. I am not righteous, so much as I am made righteous. And oh my friend, if you ever grasp that what awesome freedom you will know. You are one with your Lord. And that means everything He gets you get. You are one who needs a lot of undeserved appreciation – especially from God. And in Christ that is exactly what you find. Glorious!