The Gospel and the Righteousness of God

Romans 1:1-17
Key Verse: Romans 1:17
“For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’”

Today, we begin our study of the epistle (a letter) to the Romans. A few people have expressed to me and to others that they were excited, and looking forward to studying Romans, and I can understand why. Romans has a lot of strong, direct and practical statements of truth. Verses like our key verse: “For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last,” or Rom 3:8, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” or Rom 8:37, “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” Verses like these crystallize our faith into something solid, something tangible, something foundational. Our faith is rooted and grounded in the word of God – and the word of God we are reading today is a result of a letter Paul wrote to the church in Rome.

This past summer we studied Galatians, which was another one of Paul’s letters written in 50AD to the churches he founded in Galatia on his first missionary journey. Romans was written to in 57AD from Corinth, as he was wrapping up his third missionary journey. It was a thriving, vibrant church, situated in the capital of the Roman Empire. At the time, Rome was the most important city in the world, leading in law, culture, philosophy and power – but it was also one of the most wicked cities in the world. Drunken feasts and temple prostitutes were part of the worship of Roman gods. Some of the Roman emperors themselves demanded to be worshipped as gods. It was amazing that there was a thriving church in the midst of all this that was faithful to the one true God of Israel.

The church was not founded by Paul or any of the other apostles – perhaps it may have been founded by some of the people that were converted at Pentecost in the beginning of Acts. The introduction by Paul here is one of the longest in his letters to the churches, but since he has not met the church yet, he spends a little more time introducing himself. Look at v.1, “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God.” Paul establishes his credentials, as he usually does in his letters, as an apostle called by Christ Jesus. But this is particularly important here because the church was not founded by any of the apostles – so one of the primary reasons Paul writes this letter is to provide the church with sound apostolic teaching and instruction.

Although we have the Bible today, in Paul’s time the teachings were still being written. The apostles, each chosen by Jesus, were instructed by Jesus himself, so teaching from the 12 apostles, 13 including Paul, were invaluable to the church. Paul may have also been preparing them for his visit there, which is why Romans is primarily a theological and practical letter. While Paul teaches about why Christ died for all humanity, we also find core Christian concepts such as sin and righteousness, faith and works, justification, election, and deals with the problems of

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Jewish and Gentile differences. The main theme in the whole book is verse 17 – can we all read this please: “For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’” The letter to the Galatians also quoted this verse “The righteous will live by faith,” but in that letter Paul was primarily correcting false teachings. The central focus of this letter is teaching about the righteousness of God, the justification of guilty sinners by grace alone through faith alone. Ch. 1-11 present the theology of this teaching and Ch.12-16 present its practical applications.

The first part of v.17 says, “For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed.” What is this gospel? We can catch a glimpse of it from v.1-4, “...set apart for the gospel of God – the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.” Gospel means “good tidings.” I first heard the term “good tidings” in the song, “We Wish You a Merry Christmas,” the lyrics say, “Good tidings to you, to you and your friends, Good tidings for Christmas and a Happy New Year!” What are good tidings? It means good news! The gospel is good news of great joy! And notice that Paul says, “set apart for the gospel of God.” The gospel is not the good news of man, but the good news of God. While good news from men, from people, is always great to hear, how much greater is good news from God! What is man that God is mindful of him, but God, the Creator of the universe has given us good news.

One thing we learn about the good news is that it was promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures. That means Paul is not making this stuff up. It was promised hundreds (even thousands) of years before he was born, and recorded by the prophets of Gods. The Jews had these documents, and they will testify that they are real, written by real inspired people. We can see them in the Old Testament in our Bibles. The prophet Jeremiah writes in Jer 23:5-6, “’The days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch.’” Isaiah 53 speaks of the suffering servant, “pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. (Isa 53:5)”

Another aspect of the gospel was that it regarded God’s Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David. This shows that Christ was a real person, flesh and blood that walked on this earth. The church at Rome, which consisted of converted Jews and Gentiles, and even us today, honor King David as a man after God’s own heart. He lived and reigned over Israel around 1000 BC, Jerusalem is known as the City of David, and we have the Psalms which he wrote. Jesus Christ was a direct descendant of David, and walked among men just as surely as we all sit here today. Not only was he a man, but he was declared to be the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead. This was the supreme and conclusive evidence that Jesus Christ, whom the apostles met personally and who Paul met after He was raised, was the Son of God who came into the world. If some of the people who started the church at Rome were those converted at Pentecost, then some of them may even be the same people who shouted, “Crucify Him, Crucify Him!” It was just a little less than 30 years since Jesus ascended to heaven when this letter

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was written.

We were all born as sinners and unbelievers. We reject the truth and knowledge of God from the very core of our hearts. When I tried to look up “King David” on the internet, more than half the search results on the front page claimed that King David was a myth. If you talk about God who created the earth in six literal days 6 to 10 thousand years ago, many would say you are an old-fashioned narrow minded bigot. If you talk about resurrection from the dead, others would say you’re crazy. We were born in a world that does not believe in God, and we were born with sinful hearts that refuse to believe in Him. How can we ever know or see God? Let us remember – it is not the gospel of man, but the gospel of God. We cannot give ourselves any good news in relation to knowing God, because our hearts are dark and sinful. But God has given us the good news, promised in his Holy Scriptures. Verses 1-4 tell us that Christ came down as a man, promised in the Scriptures, and that he rose from the dead. 1 Cor 15:3-4 helps us fill in some missing details, “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” That is the gospel, God came to shine the light into our dark hearts to turn them away from sin and toward his goodness and mercy by dying for our sins. It is through Jesus Christ our Lord that we can now know God and come to him. Can we know God in any other way? It would be impossible, because the only man who is God is our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now let’s look into how the gospel works itself out in our lives. We see that in v.5-15, but first look at v.5-7, “Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name’s sake. And you are also among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.” Through Jesus Christ, we received grace. We deny God, we reject God, but it is truly his grace that he would call us. We also receive apostleship. Apostleship is similar to a mission. An apostle is a delegate, a messenger, one who is sent forth with orders. Apostleship is to be like a messenger, an ambassador of God. There is some dignity in being a foreign delegate or an ambassador to another country. I was impressed when I heard there are few people in our ministry that were Korean delegates to South America and Africa. These people are chosen representatives of Korea, their actions should reflect Korea honorably, but it is a privilege to be chosen.

Likewise, through the gospel we are chosen to call people to the obedience that comes from faith. We are representatives of the kingdom of God, tasked to preach the gospel and call people to repent from their unbelief, to put their faith in God and obey the author of their lives. As Christians, we bear the name of God, so we do not do things for our own benefit, but we do things for the glory and honor of God. For His name’s sake, not our own. We bear the name of God, because through the gospel, we have been called to belong to Jesus Christ. We also obey because we belong to him. But how sweet it is to belong to Christ! Look at v.7, “To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people.” How can we ever be loved by God? How can we ever belong to Christ? With man, this is impossible, but the good news is that God has made this possible through

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Jesus Christ. Through Christ we are loved by God, and called to be his holy people – set apart, just like Paul was, from the corruption of the world for the gospel of God.

The gospel also works itself out through thankfulness to God. Look at v.8, “First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world.” When was the last time we thanked God for each other? But isn’t this also the gift and grace of God – brothers and sisters in Christ who would not normally be brothers and sisters otherwise. We thank God for one another, and for every newcomer that walks through our doors. We also thank God for those we do not know personally, but whom we pray for, and we thank God because he heard our prayer, and we delight in his work.

Through Paul’s example in v.9-10, we can also learn to pray continually for one another. He says, “God, whom I serve in my spirit in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times.” First, we can see how we should serve God and his gospel. Paul says, “in my spirit.” That’s with his whole heart. Sometimes we can serve the gospel without our hearts, our lips and our hands may be working, but our hearts are far from our work. Not Paul, he served in his spirit – with his heart, his soul, his spirit he served in preaching the gospel of his Son. And God is his witness how constantly he prays for the church in Rome. Are there a few people in here you pray for every day? There are a few people in here we pray for every day, and more that we try to remember in our prayers. Spurgeon wrote, “I remember a minister, who is now with the Lord, who was thanked by his people for his wonderful sermons; but he said to them, ‘You never thanked me for my prayers, yet they were the best part of my service for you.’ When men of God are mighty in prayer, we owe much to them.”

The work of the gospel changes also changes our hearts to say, “by God’s will.” Even if it is our will, we always leave room for God’s will. In verse 10 Paul says, “I pray that now at last by God’s will the way may be opened for me to come to you.” He planned many times to visit Rome, but each time he had been prevented from doing so (13). Although it was his will to go, he always obeyed God’s will over his own. What was the result? If he did go to Rome when he wanted to ... maybe we couldn’t have this wonderful letter he wrote. God prevented him from going to Rome several times, so maybe he decided finally, to write this letter when God finally opened the way, and we have Romans! In Acts 16, Paul and his companions were preaching in Galatia, which is central Turkey, and wanted to go to Asia (the Roman province), which is Western (modern-day) Turkey. The Holy Spirit prevented them from going there, so they were trying to enter Bythinia, which is Northern (modern-day) Turkey, but the Spirit of Jesus kept them from going there. That night Paul had a dream of a man in Macedonia begging for help, and concluded that God called them to preach the gospel farther west, out to Greece. By obeying God’s will, Paul established churches in Philippi, Thessolonica and Berea.

In verses 11-15 Paul states his reasons for visiting Rome. Look at v.11-12, “I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong – that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith.” Sure, Paul heard of their amazing faithfulness in a

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wicked and immoral culture – but he did not want to go see them out of curiosity or simply to meet them. He wanted to go to them so that he could impart to them some spiritual gift. What is that spiritual gift? In v.12 we see that he wanted to encourage their faith, so we can get some hint in 2 Thes 2:15-17, “So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teaching we passed on to you, whether by mouth or by letter. May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.”

The spiritual gift is the preaching and teaching of the gospel – to make known to them more fully the blessings of the gospel. They would see through Paul not a demonstration of his own power, but a demonstration of the power of the gospel. He says in v.13, “in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among other Gentiles.” This harvest is a harvest of souls – the conversion of sinners into children of God by bringing them to a knowledge of Christ. This ties back to v.5, where through Christ we receive grace and apostleship to call people to the faith, for his name’s sake. The more people we win to Christ, the more God is glorified. For every person that is harvested for Christ’s sake, that number will be added to the multitude who will sing praises to God on the day he comes again. And we don’t always have to be in the pulpit to preach the gospel, but we meet students on campus, visit homes or meet people on the streets, and even there we can preach the gospel.

Notice also in v.12, “that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith.” Paul was not just going there to encourage them, but he would also be encouraged by their faith. Paul planned on stopping by in Rome on his way to Spain (Rom 15:28). He wanted to reach the ends of the earth, and Spain would be near the Western edge of the Roman Empire. As he would encourage those in Rome, they would also encourage him by their faith – they would be able to pray for him, and maybe even send him an offering to take with to Spain. Nonetheless, they would be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith. Heb 10:24 says, “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another – all the more as you see the Day approaching.” A great preacher (Spurgeon again) said, “Christians grow rich by exchange of spiritual gifts, but I’m afraid some have become very poor because they do not engage in spiritual trading with one another...Oh for more Christian communion! – when we blend our mutual faith we are comforted together, each believer grows stronger as they cheer each other on in the Lord!”

Paul was obligated to both Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish – basically he was obligated to all people. That is why he was so eager to preach the gospel to those who are in Rome. This obligation came out of a thankfulness for the gospel and a faith in God who loved him. When we grant someone a favor, they are often obliged out of thankfulness to return the favor. Last week I stayed in the office until 8pm, helping to fix an error that was caused on the network side. The network administrator I was working with felt thankful, and offered to send me a bottle. It was a nice gesture, but I politely declined. God has granted us something much more incomparable, and priceless – he has granted us salvation for our souls. We are obligated to God, because we are

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thankful for the riches of his grace and mercy. We are also faithful to God, because sometimes preaching the good news will cause us suffering or persecution, and we are tempted to be ashamed, but we have faith that God's thoughts are higher than ours, so we delight in suffering, if it is suffering justly under God's will...also because we know on that day, we will receive a greater reward for our suffering. One of my favorite verses in Romans is 13:8, "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law."

We talked about the gospel. We talked about the working out of the gospel in our lives. Now, let's look at the power behind the gospel. Paul has now finished his introduction, and moving into the main point of the whole letter. Usually, the main point is found near the end or the conclusion – but the main point of this letter is found here in the first chapter in v.16 and 17, especially v.17. Can we please read v.16, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the

Gentile." The gospel is a stumbling block. For those who do not believe, they think it is foolishness. God? Sin? Jesus? Resurrection? They think it's all a joke or fairytale. But for those who do believe, it's salvation: it's the power and wisdom of God (See 1 Cor 1:23). It's not man's wisdom, but God's wisdom. It's not man's gospel, but God's gospel. The salvation we receive is accomplished fully by God – he alone is mighty to save, and he alone is strong to deliver. Salvation is complete deliverance from sin and death. Through the gospel, we are saved from sin, we are saved from death, and this means that our souls are granted eternal life. This is the good news, and this is the gospel.

Again, what is the power behind the gospel? Can we all please read v.17, "For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'" The power is the righteousness of God that is revealed. In the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed. This is not speaking in terms of God's attributes or character. God is righteous, that is true. But this verse is speaking about the righteousness of God given to men in order to justify (to make right) their sins. Something is wrong with you, something is wrong with me, something is wrong with the human race – and that is sin. Unbelief in God is sin. Pride is sin. Selfishness is sin. The list goes on. And we cannot wash it off, we cannot get rid of it. But God, who is full of compassion, full of grace, full of mercy calls out to you: "'Come now, let us settle the matter,' says the Lord, 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.' (Isa 1:18)"

This is the good news – that God has come into the world to save you from your sins. In the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed. The righteousness of God is Jesus Christ and him crucified. Jesus lived a righteous, perfect and obedient life – a life completely without sin. And he exchanged his life for yours when he gave it up on the cross. When you have the life of Christ in you, that perfect obedience is credited to your account. Jesus Christ made the sufficient sacrifice by dying on the cross for your sins. And he defeated the power of death; he lifted that cloak of death that

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covered the entire world, in great power by his resurrection from the dead. Therefore, if the life of Christ is in you, you are treated as one who is innocent before God. You are safe from the condemnation of your sins. You are pardoned, and forgiven, and treated as if your offence did not occur. God has provided the offering for your sin, he has provided deliverance from death, and he has sent His Holy Spirit into your heart to join you with Him in holy communion, and keep you safe until the day He comes again to take you into His glory.

This righteousness is by faith from first to last. It begins with faith – faith in Jesus Christ after hearing the gospel. It ends with faith – faith in God to deliver. It grows with faith. We mutually encourage one another in faith. God's discipline leads us to repentance, and grows our faith. It began with the faith of Abel, of Enoch, of Elijah, of Abraham, of Jacob, of David, of Peter, of Paul, and is passed on to us by faith. It is faith in God from beginning to end – from His creation of the world, to our fall into sin, to our redemption by the cross of Christ, to our resurrection with Him into glory. It is faith even in the midst of suffering, persecution and trials. It is faith that God lives in us, our bodies are his temple, and we dare not sin against him. It is faith that His word is true. Therefore, the righteous will live by faith – and this can be understood in two ways. The righteous will live by faith in obedience to God and the word of God, and finally, the righteous will live forever because of their faith in Jesus Christ.

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