

The Righteousness and Power of God

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. A reading from the letter of Paul to the Romans.

I'm under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I'm eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. 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 for faith.

As it is written, the righteous shall live by faith. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Father, your Son said that blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

[1 : 13] And I just pray that you would give us that hunger. You would give us that thirst. Not for a righteousness of our own, but for a better one. A righteousness that comes from you. And would we know the wonderful truth of the gospel that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are satisfied and filled in Christ.

Would we experience that deeply and truly in the preaching of your word today, I pray in the name of Jesus. Amen. Amen. All right. So we're continuing our series in the gospel.

Not the gospel. We're done with the gospel. Sorry. In the epistle of the Romans. All right. This is Apostle Paul's letter to that first century church in Rome. And if you're new here, don't worry.

We've only been two sermons into this series. And today we're arriving at really the thesis of this letter. The thesis of this letter, which you can find in verses 16 and 17.

But we're just going to jump right in, okay? No fun intro today. We're just going to jump right in, starting with verses 14 and 15. And what I want to do is I want to take a second to give us some of the background context for this letter to the Roman church.

[2 : 19] You see, I think a temptation for many of us is to approach the book of Romans like a systematic theology textbook. And the tendency of many interpreters of Romans can be to, like, dehistoricize this letter.

To kind of ignore the specific context Paul is writing to in the first century. And while, yes, Paul is super theological in this letter, I think it's important to humanize this situation, this letter, and not see it as some kind of impersonal theological statement of faith.

We have to listen for not just Paul the theologian, but Paul the pastor. Because, see, what Paul is doing here is not primarily writing up a doctrinal statement, defining, like, what the gospel is with systematic clarity.

But as with all his letters, he is at least equally interested in applying the gospel. So I want to take that lens to the book of Romans as we're going through it. This is Paul applying the good news about Jesus to a particular people in a particular place in this thriving church at the heart of the Roman Empire, at this church that he has not yet visited.

All right, so let's turn now to verse 14. Look what Paul writes. Paul writes, I am under obligation both to the Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish.

[3 : 36] So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. And what we have to understand here is that the concern in this letter is not just the question of, how can I be right with God? But also, how can we be right with one another?

So you see, the gospel, the Christian faith, though it, of course, is about the vertical relationship we have with our Creator, we must never forget that it is also about our horizontal relationship with the rest of creation and with one another.

And it's super important that we always hold both the vertical and the horizontal. Because see, throughout church history, the church has gone wrong when we've emphasized one and neglected the other.

When the church has upheld the vertical dimension of the gospel while neglecting the horizontal dimension of the gospel, we have tended to turn a blind eye toward injustice, toward prejudice, toward bias against our neighbors, and we've easily gotten into the trap of othering different kinds of people that are easy to other.

But when the church has emphasized the horizontal dimension of the gospel and neglected the vertical aspect of the gospel, well, this has resulted in us forgetting the divine and transcendent foundation on which we believe in human equality and the love for our neighbors that we owe, right?

[4 : 49] So again, we have to hold both, and that's what Paul is doing here in verses 14 through 17. He's holding both, the vertical and the horizontal. Now, in verse 14, he's basically saying this. He's saying that the gospel, the good news about Jesus, obligates him to be an equal opportunity preacher, all right?

This gospel is for everyone. That's what he's saying. To barbarians, to the foolish, to the wise, to the Greeks, all right? And this might sound super basic and just super commonsensical to us, right? It sounds pretty standard to our modern Western ears, but the very reason that this sounds so commonsensical to us is actually because of the way that Christianity has shaped modern Western thought.

Really, if you're of the mind that Christianity is about imperialism and uniformity, and it's maybe this, like, white man's religion, I mean, sure, people have done terrible things in the name of Christianity, but historic, orthodox, spirit-led Christianity, according to the Scriptures, is anything but that.

See, the early church is actually the very first institution in history to truly unite a diversity of people, a diversity of cultures, without the use of force, without the use of the sword, or without dangling, you know, self-interest, like dangling money or consumeristic preferences in front of people.

[6 : 10] This is the only institution that's ever been able to do that, without dangling a carrot or without using force. And you have to understand, in the ancient world, even equality and the dignity of every human being, that was a radical idea.

That was an incredibly radical idea in the ancient world. In the ancient world, yes, they had all kinds of gospels, all kinds of good news, but no one had good news that was good news for literally everyone, right?

No one had good news that was good news for everyone. In that day, how they understood this word gospel, good news, was usually in the context of these people called heralds, right? They would go from city to city, heralding the good news.

Rome has won. They would say, hear ye, hear ye, let us celebrate, dun-dun-dun-dun, that Rome is victorious, right? Rome is victorious. They would say that in Athens, in Corinth, all over the empire. We have conquered yet another barbarian people, and this is the gospel. We've subjected others to our utopian empire. But don't you see what that is?

[7 : 17] It's good news, yes, for the conqueror, but is it good news for the conquered? No. But what Paul is saying is that he has a better kind of good news. He has an announcement that can be good news for both the sophisticated and wise Greeks and the supposedly foolish barbarians.

The gospel of God, Paul is saying, is good news for truly everyone. The gospel of the Creator is good news for all God's creatures, and this was absolutely radical in the ancient world.

And the reason Paul was writing this to the church in Rome was because of a specific historical context that was going on in this church. You see, the church in Rome was made up mostly of the Jewish people who were there in Rome and also the Greco-Romans, all right?

Two very different cultures. And what you should also know is that not long before Paul wrote this letter, under the reign of Emperor Claudius, for at least five years, the whole Jewish community was expelled from Rome.

They had to leave, all right? They had to leave. And what that meant was that for a significant amount of time, at least for five years, this multi-ethnic church of Jewish people and Greco-Roman people being together in the same church, it had become a monocultural church.

[8 : 30] Just Greco-Romans for at least five years, all right? Now, in the time that Paul is writing to them, this has changed. Claudius has died, and the Jewish community has started to move back home, back into Rome.

You have people like Paul's ministry partners, Priscilla and Aquila, moving back into Rome. But becoming a multicultural church, once again, would not be a super easy thing to navigate, right? You can imagine, right? Like even here at Christ Church, you know, some of us come from the African-American church tradition. I come from the Asian-American church tradition. Others here grew up in more of a predominantly white church tradition.

We all have a sense of nostalgia, right? We all have certain preferences, certain things that we just love, that really formed us, but that maybe we don't practice here at Christ Church.

Musical style, preaching style, what night of the week to have youth group on, right? Or like what our kids address others as in this church, right?

[9 : 30] Very different things. And that's what they were up against in the Church of Rome. Paul is addressing this church in Rome, and he's not just wanting to define the gospel for them so that they can have their theological ducks in a row.

He's wanting to apply the gospel to this church so they can live as the beautiful community, the beautiful community, the radically diverse community that God wants them to be.

And not only does he want the Jewish people and the Greco-Roman people in Rome to get together and get along united in Christ, but we also know in chapter 15 of this letter that he's hoping that this multi-ethnic church will also support him as he goes to even more barbarians west in Spain.

So that's the big historical context behind this letter to the Romans. He's challenging them to believe the whole gospel and the vast implications for how Christians of various cultures ought to relate to people of other cultures, even when to our culture they might seem barbaric and foolish.

And see, Paul's strategy for unity, it's not just saying, hey, you've got to be more progressive.

You've got to be more open-minded. Stop being racist. Be more tolerant. No, his strategy is to point this church to the gospel of God concerning the crucified and risen Christ.

[10 : 49] Like, remember, there's this place in Galatians chapter 2 where Paul tells this story about his interaction with another apostle, Peter. This guy who actually walked with Jesus Peter, Paul says when he met up with Peter, they were there at the very first multi-ethnic church in Antioch.

They're meeting up and he's like, hey, what's up, Peter? Hey, what's up, Paul? But he noticed something different about Peter. Peter initially was cool just hanging with his Gentile friends in the church, eating meals with them.

And then all of a sudden, there was this Jewish party that came to visit their church and this particular group of Jewish people believed that you have to become culturally Jewish to have a right relationship with God.

And then all of a sudden, Peter stopped eating with his Gentile friends in the church. And so Paul says, and I opposed Peter to his face on this. Now, what did Paul say to Peter, though?

Did he say, yo, Peter, you're not being woke enough? No. He didn't say, you're breaking the no racism rule? No, he didn't say, you're being a Jewish supremacist right now?

[11 : 52] No, he says to Peter, just as he's saying to the church in Rome, you're walking out of accord with the gospel. He says, you need to live in line with the gospel.

Because at the ground, at the foot level of the cross, it's all level. Seated in the high places at the right hand of God, it's all level. The gospel is where we get our notion of human equality and diversity and unity.

And so the application for us is to have such an understanding of the gospel, such an understanding of this amazing thing that Jesus has done to save the world and to make disciples of all the nations that we cannot help but feel the same obligation as the word Paul uses in verse 14.

For every kind of person, every kind of people, that we cannot help but have the same eagerness, it says in verse 15, to announce this good news that is good news for everyone. For those of us who are here today who claim to follow Jesus, who claim to believe the good news of God, this is not a recommendation.

This is an obligation. And if we don't also see this duty as a delight, if we don't also have an eagerness to share this good news, the question for us is, do we even believe it? Do we even believe that this is the gospel, that this is good news, or are we ashamed of the gospel?

[13 : 15] Verse 16, that's why he says in verse 16, for I am not ashamed of the gospel, Paul says. For it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

To this now probably very Greco-Roman-led church in Rome, Paul reminds them that this gospel, this salvation is to everyone. Everyone who believes, everyone who has faith and trust in the promises of God, he's reminding them that because God has opened up access to the Greeks to enter into the covenant family of Abraham, Greco-Romans have every reason to accept their Jewish brothers and sisters back into the church in Rome, and also to support his missionary work to those barbarians over in Spain.

And in fact, to not welcome them, to not pursue the barbarians of Spain, would be to be ashamed of the gospel, to be ashamed of the very power of God for salvation.

Now how so, you may be wondering. We see, if we insist on privileging one culture, one people group over another, what we are basically saying is that the good news of this beautiful humanity that Jesus is bringing into existence, this beautiful unity and equality with others in the eyes of God, we're saying that that is shameful.

Or maybe it'd help if we asked this, like why did Paul put it this way, that I am not ashamed of the gospel? Why did he put it that way? Why didn't he just say, I'm proud of the gospel? Well, I think he said it this way because the gospel really is a scandalous thing.

[14:50] It really is a shameful thing to many of our sensibilities. You know, this reminds me of the parable of the prodigal son that Jesus told, where the younger son basically says to his father, I wish you were dead, just give me your money, dad, give me my inheritance, and he goes and he spends it extravagantly on like worthless things, right?

Only to return home penniless and having squandered all the wealth. And yet, what does his father do? He throws a party for him. He slaughters the prized, fattened calf.

He puts a ring and a robe on his son who had just come out of a pig pen. And the older brother is so ashamed, right? He is so ashamed. He's so scandalized.

He refuses to go and celebrate with his father. He refuses to go and celebrate the return of his brother. He hates his father's prodigal treatment of his prodigal son. The love of the father is too scandalous for him, too foolish, too dishonorable, so, so shameful, right?

And I remember sharing this story with our youth, with our high schoolers in January, and they agreed. They agreed, like maybe you can let him back into your house, but don't throw a party for this guy.

[16:05] Don't give him a ring. Don't give him a robe. Don't broadcast it everywhere. Don't be a fool. What kind of example is that going to set? And how is this younger son ever going to learn a lesson?

And like the older brother, they couldn't help but be incredulous about the father's treatment of the son. And they weren't sure that that was the kind of parent that they wanted to be. And they weren't sure that that's the kind of parent that they wanted to even have.

Or that they could even respect. Because in their eyes, what the younger son had done, disrespecting his father, wishing he were dead, running away, spending it all on worthless things, in their eyes, he didn't deserve this measure of love from the father.

Far too scandalous. Far too shameful. This notion that everyone can be loved and accepted and even celebrated back into the family of God if they just turned to him in faith.

Or to use the language here in verse 16, this notion that everyone can be saved. I mean, it sounds good at first, but when you think about the whole swath of corrupted humanity throughout history, doesn't it make you wonder at least a little bit?

[17:20] Right? This scandalous and shameful truth that all you have to do is have faith and believe and trust in God's promises offered to us in Jesus and you can be saved.

You can have the same status as Mother Teresa or fill-in-the-blank holy person. Like, really? What about Larry Nassar, the convicted child molester who was involved in sports medicine with young gymnasts?

Is the gospel the power of salvation for him too? If he just repents and believes, that's all. Really? He can have a seat next to me at my father's table.

Really? Really? I want to read the words of one of his victims, Rachel Denhollander. She is a Christian who testified against Nassar for his crimes and asked the judge to give him a just sentence, but also who prays for Nassar to know the sweetness of the gospel and the forgiveness of God.

At a hearing, she said to him, in our early hearings, you brought your Bible into the court. She's speaking to Nassar. And you have spoken of praying for forgiveness. So it is on that basis that I

appeal to you.

[18 : 39] The Bible you carry speaks of a final judgment where all of God's wrath in all its eternal terror is poured out on men like you.

Should you ever reach the point of truly facing what you have done, the weight of guilt in the face of the horrific evil you committed will be crushing. And that is what makes the gospel of Christ so sweet.

Because it gives hope and grace where none should be found. And I pray, she says to him, you experience the soul-crushing weight of guilt someday so that it can be followed by true repentance and forgiveness from God.

What other kind of faith can lead people to say things like that? Righteousness and mercy together. And that's the gospel. The gospel is scandalous.

The gospel is shameful. And yet the Apostle Paul, who says elsewhere in the New Testament, you know, as a murderer, a former murderer, the chief of all sinners, Apostle Paul, he is not ashamed of this shameful gospel.

[19 : 51] Precisely because it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes. Paul recognizes that as shameful as it is, the gospel is his only hope.

And it's your only hope, and it's my only hope, the only hope for the world. Salvation from the wrath of God reserved not just for Larry Nassar and his sins of child molestation, but for all of us who've introduced way more pain and way more poison into this world than we even know.

Through our selfishness, through our disregard for God and our neighbors every single day, honestly, the difference between Larry Nassar and us is almost indistinguishable compared to the difference in righteousness between us and our holy God.

And that's why we need the gospel, the power of God, the only kind of power that can save us. And notice how Paul says that the gospel is the power of God, not that it just leads to the power of God or tells us about the power of God, but that this news itself about Jesus and what he's done, it is itself the very power of God.

It doesn't say do more, it says it's done. It's not advice, it's not a command to help us attain to God's power and salvation, nor is it just the means to the power of God unto salvation. It is the power of God unto salvation.

[21 : 21] And how so you may ask, verse 17, for in it, for in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith as it is written, the righteous shall live by faith.

And this right here, this is the key to the whole letter, the whole letter to Rome. Righteousness is by faith, from faith to faith, from first to last, from the beginning to the end.

It's always by faith and by nothing else. What makes the gospel, the power of God unto salvation for all who believe is that it is a revelation of this thing called the righteousness of God that is from faith. Now please bear with me, I need to take a second to explain this. And let me start by making sure we notice how Paul says, for in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed. He doesn't say the love of God is revealed, he doesn't say the mercy of God is revealed, he doesn't say the grace of God is revealed.

He says the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith. What's he saying here? Well, Paul will talk about this more in chapter 3, we're going to look at that in a couple weeks, but absolutely key to understanding the gospel is not merely understanding the love, grace, and mercy of God, but maybe even more importantly, the righteousness of God.

[22 : 37] And let me draw your attention to another passage outside of Romans from Philippians to help us understand what Paul means by talking about this revealed righteousness of God from faith. If you want to open up your Bibles, your pew Bibles, to page 952.

In his letter, Paul's letter to Philippians, to the Philippians church in chapter 3, verse 8, Paul says that he considers everything, all his good works, his whole spiritual, social, and academic resume as lost, as garbage, as trash compared to knowing and gaining Jesus.

That he desires only to be united to Jesus. Then in verse 9, he says, not having a righteousness, what? Of my own that comes from the law, or like from his own record of obedience, but that which is through faith in Christ.

Listen, the righteousness that comes from God. From who? From God. On what basis? On the basis of faith. So when Paul is talking about the power of God or the power of the gospel unto salvation, what that power is is the way that God has revealed how he's going to credit

righteousness to those who don't deserve it.

To his beloved people of faith. Theologians call this the imputation of righteousness or the great exchange. Just as Paul says in 2 Corinthians chapter 5, he says, God made him who knew no sin to be sin on the cross in our place for us so that in him by faith we might become what?

[24 : 12] The righteousness of God. So you see, the power of God unto salvation, the gospel is that the salvation of sinners and the righteousness of God are not at odds, but that they are met and satisfied in the crucified and risen Christ.

Revealing to us a God who is willing to credit to us his own perfect righteousness. The righteousness of his perfectly obedient son at his expense.

Not ours. We'll just unite ourselves to him by faith. And I'm sorry if that got a little heady, if that got a little theological, but this matters. Why? Because we're all seeking some kind of righteousness.

If not before God, before someone else. But we're all seeking some kind of status before God or some kind of highest court of opinion. Some kind of honorable, elevated, exalted status.

A status we can count on and fall back on and brag about and trust that we are fine and secure and lovable and lovely and delightful in the highest court of opinion. But the thing is, if we're honest with ourselves, none of us actually measures up.

[25 : 24] None of us actually arrives at the righteous standard we all try to live by. Or is it just me that's insecure? We're all trying to attain that righteous status by all manner of efforts or by following this or that constructed tradition.

For me, it's be a good Christian, be a good husband, be a good dad, be a good basketball player, right? Be a good preacher. Those are my righteousness. And I fail at all of them except for basketball.

No, I failed that one too. And it's exhausting. It's exhausting. I've fallen way short, right? And the distance between me and my standard only increases every single day.

I'll never be enough no matter how hard I try, at least not for long. And this is a universal human experience. This is why Romans chapter 1 verse 17 changed the world and launched the Protestant Reformation and it did so because this monk in the 16th century named Martin, he felt all these things too.

Like he could never measure up before God. Even as a monk in one of the strictest monastic orders in all of Europe, he devoted his whole life to following God. Even as that kind of a monk, peace and assurance of God's love and forgiveness and pardon would always elude him.

[26 : 43] And he went all in. Like all night prayer vigils, long periods of fasting. He was known to spend six hours at a time in the confessional booth just trying to get everything off of his chest and yet still wondered, have I really confessed every sin?

Have I been righteous enough to escape the judgment of God? Luther wrote, I went to confession frequently and I performed the assigned penances faithfully. Nevertheless, my conscience could never achieve certainty but was always in doubt and said, you have not done this correctly.

You were not contrite enough. You omitted this in your confession. No matter what, Luther did.

Even as he ascended into the ranks of the church, he joined the theology faculty at the University of Wittenberg.

Every standard of righteousness he tried to abide by, he never felt secure before the judge of the universe. There was even this carving out at Wittenberg. It was carving a thing of Jesus and this Jesus, I don't know why, but had some swords coming out of its mouth trying to indicate that Jesus is the judge of the universe.

And Luther said, I couldn't look at that thing. He had to walk by it every single day to daily prayer and every single day he would walk by and cover his eyes because he could not gaze upon the judge of the universe.

[28 : 03] He was never sure if he was enough. He was never sure if he was worthy. Actually, he was quite certain that he wasn't and he was plagued with guilt and fear and dread and shame over that reality.

And this wasn't just Martin's experience. Isn't it yours too? It's mine. Sensing our need to be righteous in the sight of God or even for those of us who aren't sure we even believe in God, we all sense this need to be righteous in the highest of high halls of judgment, right?

And yet we also sense how far short we all fall of that standard. Do you feel that today? Like you can't wipe out the stains of your past, the stains of your present, that resentment and that malice

that you feel towards those people at work, those people in your family, the greed and the selfishness and the covetousness that no one else knows about but that is surely there in your heart and that controls your life way more than you'd like.

That that porn or substance habit that you can't put behind you for more than a week at a time falling again and again to this or that sinful habit or maybe you've been able to kick these habits for years, maybe for decades but your past still haunts you and your record of unrighteousness just seems so insurmountable that you feel nothing but shame and guilt in the presence of God.

Well, if that's you, God has a word for you today, a gospel, good news for your weary soul just as he did for Luther 500 years ago and it's this thesis statement right here in Romans 1, verse 17, this passage that changed Martin Luther's life and altered the course of world history as we know it that he would not live by his own righteousness but by someone else's righteousness, righteousness, that the righteous will live not by their own efforts, not by their own striving or their own merits but as it says in verse 17, quoting the Hebrew prophet Habakkuk, the righteous shall live by faith.

[30 : 12] This is the scandal. This is the shameful of the gospel of God that no matter what you've done, that no matter who you are, we can be righteous in the eyes of the holy God of the universe and we can live eternally in his presence just by faith, just by faith.

And you see, this is what the whole letter of Romans is about, all right? This is the gospel, the good news of God about how one can be seen as righteous in the eyes of God, the eyes that matter the most, how one can be vindicated in his presence or to use a theological word that we want everyone here to know, how one can be justified before God, justified by faith and seen by God just as the prodigal father saw his beloved son, right?

Clothed in his robe, just as the prodigal son was seen by his father wearing that robe, so does God see us clothed in the righteousness of Christ and that is what justification by faith is about.

And what God is calling us to today is to have this kind of faith, to believe what he says about us, just to believe what he says about us, to believe what he believes about those who trust in him, that we really are the righteousness of God in Christ.

And I know that that can be hard to believe with all the voices all around us telling us who we are and how much we suck, and maybe those voices are inside your own head, coming from your own heart, but God has a better word for us, not a word of shame, but a word of honor, and not because of our merits, but because of Christ.

[31 : 56] So will we listen to his voice? Will we celebrate his love for us? And for the countless others around us who once felt unlovable and forever stuck in unrighteousness and shame, can we celebrate that God has a word for them too?

I want to close by reading this extended quote from a biblical counselor, a really good friend of mine, her name is Esther, about listening to the justifying voice of God and paying attention to his verdict over us.

She writes this, with shame, we tend to hear only one voice, the self-condemning, self-hating voice, all day, every day, not good enough, ugly, outcast, dirty, unworthy, disposable, failure.

If the voice of shame is a soloist in our hearts, we must work hard to listen to the voice of truth, God's voice. We may not completely eradicate the voice of shame in this lifetime, but even if the voice of shame continues to clamor at the highest volume and the voice of God sings only one faint, barely perceptible note, the solo has officially become a duet when belief has begun to break into unbelief.

And over time, one note of God's voice in your heart becomes two notes. Then 50, you can hear hints of a beautiful melody now, even if still frequently interrupted by the voice of shame.

[33 : 24] And rest assured, there will be a day when this clashing duet will end. The duet will become a solo again. But this time, you will stand face to face with your God, and he will be the soloist of your heart and your soul.

No more shame. No more self-condemnation. Only favor, acceptance, honor, and love forevermore. The righteousness of God declared from his lips over us.

The righteous will live by faith. Will you pray with me? Father, we are hungry, so hungry for righteousness, so thirsty for righteousness.

And you know that. And we thank you that you call us blessed. Would we look nowhere else but to Christ, our Savior, and to his righteousness, the righteousness of God that comes through faith in Christ.

And would we wear his righteousness by faith with incredible humility because it is not ours, but also with incredible boldness because it is ours forevermore by your promise, by the word you've spoken over us.

[35 : 02] Make us that kind of people, so satisfied in the righteousness of Christ, and transform us with that truth. I pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Amen.