

Romans 1:16–17

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Date: 18 January 2026

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[0:00] Bit of an opening. Spielberg's Catch Me If You Can.! Very fun movie. Over 20 years old now, interestingly.! Main character in this movie, Frank Abagnale Jr.

! He's played by Leo DiCaprio. He begins a life of crime and deception, in part, to fix his parents' broken marriage and regain his father's lost honor.

He idolized his father, and his father was on this descent, and his, again, in part, his purpose for his life of crime, stealing money, was to restore his father's honor.

And while giving an acceptance speech, while accepting a prestigious award from his Rotary Club, Frank Abagnale Jr.'s father, Frank Abagnale Sr., tells a story, and the story goes something like this.

He gets up, and he goes, two mice fell into a barrel of cream, and the first one struggled and quickly gave up and drowned. But the second one struggled and swam and struggled and swam and turned that cream into butter and then climbed out.

[1:11] And then he says to this audience of his peers, I am that second mouse. And that, interestingly, that line, that image, follows Frank Jr. all the way through the story.

So, he tries to give his father money after he steals a fortune, and his father, you know, who is now, you know, descending into poverty, he says to his son, which mouse am I?

And then his son kind of transforms back into that lowly 14-year-old boy, and he says, well, you're the second mouse. He goes, what do I need your money for? It's a very interesting story, an interesting analogy, because I think what it does is it highlights something that, in a movie, of course, it's really exaggerated, but it's something that is found in all of us, that we have a hard time accepting help or receiving charity.

It's difficult for us. So, maybe you're not as proud as Frank Sr. from the film, but I would venture a guess that almost everybody here has a difficult, maybe I'll put it this way, would rather give charity than accept it.

Maybe receiving charity would give you a feeling of discomfort. It would maybe even offend you. We can feel that such help or charity is actually an affront to our dignity.

[2:44] And for some here, like I've mentioned, the shame or offense of receiving charity means we will never really accept it. Our text today will touch on this very issue.

Romans chapter 1, verses 16 and 17. And make it clear that such a mindset is actually not just a weird character quirk, but something that will inhibit us from receiving saving faith from God himself.

So as we open Romans chapter 1, verses 16 to 17, we're going to take our time through it. And we're focusing on these two verses because Romans 16 and 17 are really like the thesis statement of the entire book of Romans.

So we're going to take some time and really understand it. But as we open to Romans chapter 1, 16 and 17, we'll look at God's power, we'll look at God's righteousness, and then how to properly respond to both.

And I hope and pray that in doing so, we can better understand our deep need to feel dignified, which I think is a real need that we have, and how the gospel of God helps us in ways that are both uncomfortable but deeply needed.

[3 : 59] So, if you're following along in the scripture journals, page 8, verse 16, point 1, God's power. And I'll read it for us. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is a power of God for salvation to everyone who believes to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

The gospel is God's power to save sinners. It's displayed in Christ for all people to the Jew first and to the Greek. And the Jew first and the Greek, it's a very interesting thing to explore.

We're not going to explore it today. It'll come up throughout our time in Romans. But I'll just have a quick side note that Paul is, he'll constantly refer to the Jews and their priority in proclaiming the gospel primarily for two reasons.

Number one, because this is the combination of the promises made to the Jewish people in the Old Testament, but also because Jesus himself was a Jew. That's all I'm going to say.

If you have any questions, you can talk to me about it afterwards. I don't want to get too sidetracked, but I wanted to bring your attention to that. Again, we'll discuss this in weeks to come. Nevertheless, it is God's power, the gospel is God's power, to save sinners displayed in Christ for all people.

[5 : 17] It says a lot about God, his willingness to exercise his power to save. He did not have to. Instead, God saves out of an act of love.

And we'll see in this next point that it is actually an expression of his very character, of his righteousness. But for us, I think it is, it reveals a great amount about who we are as human beings.

And very specifically, that we are sinful and wicked and corrupt. It tells us that we are not actually inherently good, but there's something, again, again, bent or corrupted about us.

Put it in very stark terms, we are spiritual failures. Why? Because we are unable to use religion or spirituality to achieve our salvation.

It tells us that our wickedness is far worse than we would have ever imagined, for it requires the highest sacrifice to atone for such evil, namely, the Son of God dying on our behalf on the cross.

[6 : 27] And what it truly tells us is that all our pride in being completely put together, ultimately dignified, is nothing more than deluded self-righteousness and self-indulgence.

And it's a heavy thing to say, and I would prefer to sugarcoat it in some ways, but I think the fact that God is going to save speaks, of course, to who God is, but also to the calamity that is the human experience.

And this is where the shame and offense come in because our dignity is offended. The prideful heart responds to the gospel, not with a, yes, I'm a spiritual failure, yes, I need your help.

It responds, I'm that first, or I'm that second mouse. who are you to tell me what I need, that I am bad, or that I am weak, or that I am a failure, or that my way of salvation is a false way, or that true salvation isn't about my happiness.

Who are you, God, to tell me what I need? And it sounds potentially silly to put it that way, but this is the nature of a deluded mind that is self-righteous and self-indulgent.

[7 : 53] In addition to that, it says that we cannot lean on our own pedigree or achievements to give us preferential treatment for salvation because salvation is for everyone.

So you see, again, going back to Catch Me If You Can, Frank Sr., he is so dignified, what made him so dignified was his admittance to this inner circle of the New Rochelle Rotary Club.

But if the inner circle is open to everyone, it no longer is a special place. Feeling special is always in relation to the status of others, and the Gospel is making it very clear that because it is offered to everyone, everyone is in the same position.

There is no special person. The Gospel then insults our desire to be set apart from the peasants. It tells us that we are a peasant.

And that is precisely what is so, again, offensive about the Gospel because it undermines this delusional self-righteousness and self-importance. It tells us that we are not special at all for we all need saving.

[9 : 02] And yet, and this is the beautiful part, and this is why the Gospel on one hand is such a beautiful picture of God's grace and love, but it seems almost comical because although it says that we are not special at all, on one hand, we are actually so special that God has chosen to save us.

So what does the Gospel do that can both reveal our self-delusion and rescue us from it? And this brings us to our second point, God's righteousness that is revealed. Look with me at verse 17.

For in it, that is the Gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, the righteous shall live by faith. This one verse is both crucial to the rest of the letter and historically very difficult to interpret, but the big questions are what does Paul mean when he speaks about the righteousness of God?

What does he mean when he says from faith to faith that the righteous shall live by faith? It's a really, it's a really good question, it's an important question, and it's a question that we need to answer.

Again, because this is the thesis of the entire book, but also, out of all of Paul's writing, so he has written, in the New Testament, there's a number of books written by Paul. There are letters written to specific churches, but then there's general letters written to the people, but they're called the general epistles.

[10 : 38] In all of Paul's writings outside of Romans, he talks about righteousness something like 69 times. In Romans alone, he speaks of righteousness 77 times, okay?

So it's important for us to get a good handle as best as we can so that we can read Romans with some clarity. So let's walk through this verse, verse 17, and attempt to answer these questions.

So, what is the righteousness of God? And I'll just say, I'm indebted to the late John Stott for providing these three possible options or understandings of what this righteousness could be.

The first, that the righteousness of God describes God's quality and character. It is who he is. God is himself righteous. He hates wickedness.

He hates sin. He hates evil. He hates death. He hates decay. Conversely, he loves what we would call the fruits of the Spirit. Love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness and faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

[11 : 42] He hates evil. He loves good. This is what God is all about. He himself is righteous. And a part of that righteousness is that God judges justly wickedness.

And that justice, that just judgment is an expression of his character. Therefore, at the cross of Christ, God's just judgment and perfect righteousness are supremely revealed.

So, therefore, the righteousness of God, his very character, is fully displayed in his acts of salvation and judgment in the gospel God is committed to his own righteous nature, which is to say that he cannot deny himself.

So, the gospel is God's character on full display and he cannot not be righteous. Option one. Second option is that God's righteousness describes his activity.

So, if the first option is his character, the second option is his activity. It is what he does. God has made promises in the scriptures. He has made covenantal promises throughout history that he keeps beyond all hope.

[12:58] He will keep his promises because he is all-powerful and, therefore, his activity in fulfilling them cannot be undone or thwarted. The Lord acts righteously when he fulfills his promises, overthrowing evil, saving his people.

It's what God does. That is option two. Now, the final and third option describes the status that God confers upon those he saves. If the first is who God is, the second is his activity, the third is what he achieves.

In this final view, God gives us his righteousness. It is a status that is alien to us but is who God is and how does he do it?

By laying on Christ our sin, our brokenness, our wickedness, which deserves his just judgment and instead of rightly punishing us, Jesus takes on our punishment in our place and pays our penalty.

But not just that, okay, because it's great to not be in the red anymore but when you're at zero, I mean, that's, I mean, at least you're not in the red but what we have here is that then he gives us his righteous status so that we are in the black in an infinite type of way.

[14:16] Because of this status given to us as an act of love and grace and received by us through faith and we're going to touch on that faith bit in the third point, we have a certain hope that we can stand before a righteous God not just be unmade and this is from the scriptures that nobody can stand before God and live but that we can in Christ stand before God being in his presence and that we can enjoy his presence and fellowship forever.

The scripture talks about being clothed in the righteousness of Christ or given the status of Christ's righteousness something that we need and strive after but we constantly fail to achieve.

It is an alien status given to us. So, as a recap, okay, this is like heavy, thick theological things we can talk about it after if you need a bit more clarification but as a recap, the righteousness of God that Paul has in mind could describe either his divine character, his divine activity, or his divine achievements.

Okay? So, which is it? I'll make the case today and throughout Romans that the great weight is given to the third option. That God, in his perfect justice and perfect mercy, he atones for our sins and wickedness by laying them onto Christ and giving, and Christ giving us his righteous status.

Okay? Some theologians call it the great exchange. Our sin for his righteousness. 2 Corinthians 5 says it this way, he who had no sin became our sin so that we could be the righteousness of God.

[15:57] This is primarily what the apostle will lay out in this letter. However, okay, however, to ignore God's divine character and activity I think is the key insight to help us understand what the righteousness of God that is being revealed in the gospel is all about.

So I think, and I'm going to put forward to you today, that although the third option has, I would say, the most weight in terms of Paul's letter in Romans, all three aspects of this righteousness, God's character, activity, his achievement, should not be pitted against one another.

They are complementary. I'll put it this way, how could God be faithful to his righteous promises if he was not himself righteous? How could those promises be fulfilled that he has made so that we could enjoy his presence forever if we did not share that righteousness?

There's a lot of interplay happening here, okay? God's activity is an aspect of who he is and what he does in his activity is to give us his righteousness so that we could be redeemed, counted as worthy to be in his presence.

So in a big way, we can't really have one without the other. However, for Paul, he is emphasizing the third option above the other two in his letter.

[17:24] So the predominant view presented in Romans is that the righteousness of God as revealed in the gospel is this incredible achievement of God through Christ. He is taking sinful, spoiled, corrupted humans, he is paying the penalty for their sin, not overlooking their transgressions, not overlooking our transgressions, our sins, but what he is doing is he is paying the penalty through Christ.

No more red ink. And then giving us the very status of being the son so that it's not just we have no liabilities, but that we are himself, we are ourselves, in God's view, as righteous as Christ himself.

And this will lead to our third point, because, because, with any gift, and friends, this is a gift, with any gift, we need to receive it rightly. And this leads to our third point, how we respond.

And that response is by faith. So three times, three times in two verses, the Apostle Paul will speak of belief or faith. He'll say in verse 16, the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.

And then he'll say in verse 17, the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith. The righteous shall live by faith. faith. So, if the gospel is God's power to save, bestowing on us his righteous standing, his righteous status, then the means by which we receive this gift is faith.

[19:00] We are to believe in the gospel. Before we dive into belief, let us again consider not our own ability to believe, but first and foremost, the faithfulness of God, the trustworthiness of God.

So I think before we consider a belief in God, a trust in God, a faith in God, we ought to ask the question, is God trustworthy? Is God worthy of our faith?

Is God faithful to keep his promises? And the answer is yes. He is the one who keeps his promises. And we touched on this in the previous point where we said that God's righteousness is an expression of his very character.

So therefore, when we ask the question, is God faithful? Is God trustworthy? We're really asking the question that has plagued humanity from the very beginning, what we've wrestled with from the very beginning.

It's a very hot-button question. Is God who he says he is? Is he a trustworthy God? And I would just say to you now, okay, you might be feeling like your faith is at maybe a solid eight and a half out of ten, okay?

[20:11] You're feeling great about faith. Maybe you're kind of potentially cratering, right? You might be in a tough season where faith isn't really there. I think it's always an appropriate question to ask the Lord.

Are you worthy of my trust? If you ask in the question with the heart of God, I believe, help my unbelief. There's another way to ask that question that isn't good.

It is the way that the serpent asks the question in the opening chapters of Genesis. Did God really say that? Did he really say you couldn't eat of the apple? Is God really trustworthy? Which isn't so much a question, it's more of a statement.

But I'll say to you, and this is actually, it's just an aside, it's not in my notes, it is an entirely appropriate question to ask God because God is strong enough to weather that kind of question.

So ask that question prayerfully. So is God, is God faithful? Can we really trust that God will keep his promises to restore our dignity, to remake us, and to redeem us?

[21 : 21] And friends, the answer is yes. And it is on this basis that we believe. That is in part what Paul is referring to when he says from faith for faith because what he is saying, and again, this is why this is a very difficult section to interpret, but it would have kind of many facets to it, but this is what Paul is saying in part, that upon the faithfulness of God we base our faith.

From faith for faith. From the faithfulness of God, that is what we, that's what we build our faith upon. But as it is multifaceted, there's more. For it would seem that by saying from faith for faith, Paul is also communicating that the faith we are to have in Christ is to increase in quality and quantity as we continue on in the Christian life.

And by the way, I mean, I'm not trying to contradict what I previously said about having potentially seasons where faith isn't really there. You know, you zoom out, the line is going like this in terms of quantity and quality, but if you zoom in, it might be like this, okay?

But Paul here is saying that faith in Christ ought to, for the Christian, increase in quality and quantity. It's to permeate our lives.

And we can see this if we take a moment to understand this last line, the righteous shall live by faith. So this quotation is from the Old Testament from a minor prophet named Habakkuk.

[22 : 51] He was a prophet during the time that the Israelites were exiled out of the promised land into Babylon, which is modern-day Iraq, more or less. Without getting lost in the details in its original context, and in connection with our text today, it describes how the righteous live by faith and how they can hope to live through faith.

So the emphasis here with this quotation and with our text is not so much about proving one's righteousness by the way they act, as if, I'm righteous, therefore I have faith, but on how sinners become saints by faith and how they continue to grow in their righteousness and trust in the Lord through faith.

So from faith to faith or from faith for faith. If you remember last week, we talked about how the gospel is not simply the way into the Christian religion, but the very thing that continues to animate it.

Therefore, faith must be continually fed and fostered because we are quick to either take pride in our own righteousness again or to be embarrassed or ashamed by the gospel, for we are slow to remember that it is the power of God for salvation and it's offensive to us and our sensibilities.

So therefore, faith and belief require action and commitment. Few ways that that faith can be fed and faith, how it's more of a verb than it is a noun.

[24 : 25] That we participate in the life of God's covenant people, the church. Again, I emphasize it and I might have emphasized it a bit too much because a couple people were saying, well, if you don't go to church, were you saying if you don't go to church you're not a Christian?

I would take a step back from that. But only to say that the life of the Christian is lived out in community, in the church, in the life of the church. It will require us to be disciplined and grow in our discipline in spiritual practices, in prayer and in scripture reading and in saying yes to virtues and no to vices.

And then it also means that we grow in godly wisdom. We need to feed our faith with the gospel, with a reminder that God is at work in our lives in a huge display of power through the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus.

As we believe and grow in our belief, we will see this power at work in our lives transforming us. I mentioned the fruit of the spirit earlier.

That is a way that we will see this transformation take place. Again, saying yes to the things of God a lot more and saying no to the things of the world or our flesh or the devil a lot less or a lot more or we will say yes to it a lot less.

[25 : 45] We will begin to change and be transformed. But friends, this is activated. This power is released as we begin to put our faith and trust in what God has said and in his word.

A great line by a 5th century Syrian bishop named Theodorat. It was quoted in Timothy Keller's commentary on this text. So I'm indebted to the late Timothy Keller but this quote by this 5th century Syrian bishop describes how faith releases this righteous power of salvation by likening the gospel to a pepper.

I think it's brilliant. This is what it says. Quote, A pepper outwardly seems to be cold but the person who crunches it between the teeth experiences the sensation of burning fire.

A pepper and that's end quote. A pepper may or may not be spicy but the power of it is not released until it is consumed. Which is to say that you can talk about the gospel until the cows come home but until you put your faith and trust in what God has done that that power of transformation will not be at work in our lives for the gift will not be received.

When we believe in the gospel and the one true God to save we are saying no to our own vain efforts to achieve our own version of dignity and saying yes to the incredible work of God to dignify us in ways we could never imagine.

[27:19] I'll end with this. the great irony of shirking help to safeguard our dignity is that we become undignified people. We fail to see that the God of all creation who made us in his image does not treat us as garbage when we fall into indignity but rather restores our dignity for Jesus Christ who is the message of the gospel remember we said last week that it's not just good news but it is a good person namely Christ for Christ Jesus who is the message of the gospel who is the power of God for salvation who is the righteousness of God he becomes undignified by leaving the ultimate place of divine dignity that is heaven taking on human flesh dying a very undignified indign way on the cross for our sins sins he didn't commit and wearing wickedness that was alien to him and then giving us a righteousness alien to us we then get to revel in his righteousness as saved sinners as those who are united to Christ that share in his sonship as children of God and this is accepted by faith and tell me what is more dignified than being a son of God okay and I say son because although definitely the imagery in the Bible and the language uses sons and daughters of God but here it is the place of the firstborn son the place of honor in the ancient world there is no higher honor than that and that is what

God in Christ is bestowing on us as a gift what is more dignified than that Christ has made a way for the sinner to become a saint and then we understand that all of life is a gift and we are not too proud to take help and then to give it without any strings attached the sooner we know friends that that we are not that second mouse but that both mice die and drown we would do well to start as a beginning so that we would understand the gospel of Christ in a in a sweet beautiful way and receive it by faith that is the life of dignity that Christ offers as a woman