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THE GOSPEL: GOD'S POWER FOR SALVATION

Romans 1:16-17

By

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Romans Lesson 5

The Gospel: God's Power for Salvation Romans 1:16-17

James Boice wrote that these verses, Romans 1:16-17, "are the most important in the letter and perhaps in all literature. They are the theme of this epistle and the essence of Christianity" (*Romans* [Baker], 1:103). As you probably know, it was Martin Luther's wrestling with and finally coming to understand verse 17 that transformed his life and led to the Protestant Reformation. So these verses have had an incalculable effect on world history and they will have a profound effect on your life personally if God opens your eyes to the truths in them.

Before we look at these verses in detail, we need to see the flow of Paul's reasoning. He begins verse 16 with the word *for*, which connects it with verse 15. There Paul said, "I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome." Why? "*For* I am not ashamed of the gospel...." Why? "*For* it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." How is this gospel the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes? "*For* in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith." Is this a new idea that Paul thought up? No, he cites Habakkuk 2:4, "as it is written, 'But the righteous man shall live by faith.'"

At the outset, we may wonder why Paul says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel." It is a figure of speech called litotes, where through understatement the affirmative is expressed by the negative of the contrary. For example, if you say, "he's not a bad athlete," you mean, "he's a pretty good athlete." So when Paul says that he is not ashamed of the gospel, he means, "I glory in the gospel. I'm proud of the gospel."

But why does he express it this way? Well, there were many reasons that a first century Roman might feel a bit uncomfortable about this Jewish man coming to a sophisticated city like Rome to preach about a Galilean carpenter-prophet who was executed by the Roman government in the most humiliating manner possible, by being crucified. After all, this was Rome, the capital of the civi-

lized world! Your message had better appeal to the educated or it won't fly here! Your message needs to offer political solutions to the pressing needs of the empire or it will not gain a hearing here! It had better offer some answers to the massive problems of slavery, greed, lust, and violence, or the people in Rome won't listen!

But Paul's main message did not directly address these issues. His main message focused on the main need of every human being, whether the most religious Jew or the most educated, worldly, immoral Greek—the need to be reconciled to the holy God. How can I be right before God? As we've seen, Paul's theme in Romans is God and the good news that comes from God, how sinners can be delivered from His righteous judgment and reconciled to Him. This is called *salvation*. Here Paul tells us...

Because the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, we must believe it and proclaim it boldly.

1. The gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.

To proclaim the gospel boldly or unashamedly, we must believe it. But to believe it, we must understand it. The gospel is all about salvation. So I want to explore five statements about salvation that stem from our text.

A. Salvation is the main need of every person.

This anticipates the point that Paul makes from 1:18 through 3:20, where he shows that all have sinned and thus fall under God's righteous condemnation. Because all have sinned, whether the religious Jew or the worldly Greek, all are alienated from God, who is absolutely righteous. Thus all are under God's wrath, as Paul immediately explains (1:18), "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness."

Salvation refers to being rescued from God's wrath and judgment that we deserve because of our sin. It means being delivered from the penalty of sin, which happens the moment we believe; being delivered from the power of sin, as we grow in godliness; and, being delivered from the very presence of sin when we stand blameless in His presence in glory (Jude 24). John Piper argues that Paul's main focus here is this future aspect of salvation (see his

sermons on this text on desiringgod.org). Salvation also has many positive aspects, such as enjoying a reconciled relationship with God (Rom. 5:10), experiencing His peace (Rom. 5:1), and receiving all of the unfathomable riches of Christ (Eph. 1:3; 3:8).

But if we think that we need to “sell” the gospel by glossing over the negative aspects of salvation and focusing only on the positive side of it, we fall into the sin of being ashamed of the gospel. We do not need God’s salvation and Christ did not need to die on the cross if we’re all basically good people who just need a little encouragement to be right with God. We do not need a crucified Savior if our main need is to polish our self-esteem and learn some helpful hints for happy living.

We need a Savior who was crucified for our sins because we all by nature are ungodly rebels who are under God’s righteous wrath. This is offensive to the natural man, but if we pull our punches on this point, we miss the very heart of the gospel. The gospel is only good news to the person who realizes that he needs to be saved or he will eternally perish.

B. Salvation requires the very power of God.

The gospel does not tell people *about* the power of God. Rather, it *is* “the power of God for salvation.” This means that salvation is not something that sinners can attain by their own efforts or good works. If that were so, Christ did not need to die on the cross. Salvation is not a joint project, where God has done His part and now you must contribute your part. You may be thinking, “But don’t I need to believe?” Yes, as we will see in a moment, salvation is received and sustained by faith alone from start to finish. But saving faith, which includes repentance, is not something that sinners can produce on their own. It is the gift of God, so that we will not boast (Eph. 2:8-9; Phil. 1:29; 1 Cor. 1:30-31; Acts 11:18; 13:48).

It is crucial to see that salvation does not depend on a human decision, but on the very power of God. It requires that God impart new life to a dead sinner, something that is impossible for men to bring about. When Jesus cried out, “Lazarus, come forth” (John 11:43), the bystanders may have thought, “Is He crazy? He’s speaking to a dead man who has been in the tomb for four days!” But

the power of God through the word of Jesus imparted life to a dead man. The gospel is like that.

When the rich young ruler walked away from eternal life, Jesus commented to the disciples (Matt. 19:23, 25, 26), "Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." The disciples were "very astonished and said, 'Then who can be saved?'" Jesus replied, "With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." In other words, "Salvation is from the Lord" (Jonah 2:9). It requires the very power of God. The gospel is not helpful advice that a person may decide to try out. It is the very power of God imparting new life and salvation to those who were dead in their sins and under God's just wrath and condemnation. So, as Thomas Schreiner puts it (*Romans* [Baker], p. 60), "The preaching of the Word does not merely make salvation possible but effects salvation in those who are called."

C. Salvation demands that the righteousness of God be upheld and applied to the guilty sinner.

In verse 17, Paul explains why the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes: "For in it the righteousness of God is revealed. . . ." Before we go on, note that the gospel is not the result of the religious genius of Paul or the other apostles. Rather, it is *revealed* to us by God through His Son. In Galatians 1:15, Paul explains his own conversion by saying, "But when God who had set me apart from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me" So the gospel comes to us by revelation from God that centers in His Son.

Also, note (as Bishop Moule points out, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Christian Literature Crusade], p. 32), Paul does not lead off with the love of God in the gospel, but rather with the righteousness of God. Certainly, the gospel displays God's love for sinners (Rom. 5:8). But the love of God is not a stumbling block or foolishness to sinners (1 Cor. 1:23). They rather like the idea! If God is loving, but not so righteous, then it's easy to view Him as our good buddy in the sky. But the righteousness of God presents a problem, because we all know that we have sinned. If God is righteous and we are not, then we need a Savior.

But what does Paul mean when he says that in the gospel, “the righteousness of God is revealed”? There are three main options. First, he may mean that God’s attribute of righteousness, the fact that He always does what is right, is revealed to us in the gospel. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (*Romans: The Gospel of God* [Zondervan], p. 298) strongly rejects this meaning here, because he says that then the gospel would not be good news, but rather terrifying news. But with some fear and trembling, I must disagree slightly with Lloyd-Jones. I agree that this is not Paul’s *primary* meaning here, but if a person has no concept of the absolute righteousness of God, then he does not understand his precarious and frightening position of being under God’s wrath as an unrighteous sinner (Rom. 1:18). So the gospel reveals God’s righteous character, which shows us our desperate need for salvation. It should drive us to the cross.

Second, by “the righteousness of God,” Paul may be referring to God’s saving power in being faithful to His covenant promises. The Old Testament often refers to God’s righteousness as His salvation of His people (Ps. 71:2; 98:2; Isa. 46:13; Schreiner, p. 66, lists many other references).

Third, by “the righteousness of God,” Paul is referring to the righteousness that comes from God, which He gives to those who believe. F. F. Bruce (*Romans* [IVP/Eerdmans], p. 73) argues that in the Old Testament, which forms the main background of Paul’s thought and language, *righteousness* is not so much a moral quality as rather a legal status. He says (p. 74), “God himself is righteous, and those men and women are righteous who are ‘in the right’ in relation to God and his law.” He adds,

When, therefore, the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel, it is revealed in a twofold manner. The gospel tells us first how men and women, sinners as they are, can come to be ‘in the right’ with God and second how God’s personal righteousness is vindicated in the very act of declaring sinful men and women ‘righteous’.

This third meaning is Paul’s primary thought in verse 17. The gospel reveals how sinners may be righteous or justified before God by faith. We know that this is his meaning by comparing the parallels between Romans 1:17 and 3:21-26. There we read,

But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

God's righteousness is revealed in the gospel in that He can grant right standing to sinners because His Son met the righteous requirement of His perfect Law and died to pay the penalty that sinners deserve. Thus sinners are not justified by their own righteousness by keeping the Law (gal. 3:11), but rather by God imputing the righteousness of Christ to them by faith. Paul states this plainly in Philippians 3, where he contrasts his former attempts to be righteous by keeping the Law with his present experience with Christ, where he says (Phil. 3:9), "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." Salvation upholds God's righteousness by applying it to the sinner who believes. That leads to the fourth point about salvation:

D. Salvation is by faith from start to finish.

Paul mentions believing or faith four times in these two verses: "to everyone who believes"; "from faith to faith"; and, "the righteous man shall live by faith." If salvation comes through faith *plus good works* (as the Roman Catholic Church teaches and all of the cults teach), then it is *not* good news, because you could never know whether you have piled up enough good works to qualify. But if God declares guilty sinners to be righteous or justified the instant they believe, *that is good news!*

But, we need to be clear on several things here. First, saving faith in Christ is not a general belief that He is the Savior. The demons believe that, but they are not saved. Rather, saving faith has three elements. First, with the mind we must understand the con-

tent of the gospel: who Jesus is, what His death on the cross means, and that He was raised from the dead. Second, we must have a heart response to the truth of the gospel, where we agree that it is true and our agreement causes our hearts to be sorrowful about our sin, but also to rejoice in the free offer of God's grace. Third, saving faith includes commitment to Christ, where we trust in Him and His death on the cross as our only hope of eternal life and we follow Him as Lord. Saving faith is not a work that we do, but rather simply receiving all that God offers to us in Christ. It is the hand that receives the free gift of God.

Second, we need to understand what Paul means by the phrase, "from faith to faith." Commentators offer many different views, but I think Paul is emphasizing the centrality of faith in receiving the benefits of the gospel (Schreiner, p. 72). The NIV translates, "by faith from first to last." We receive the gospel by faith and we go on living by faith.

This is supported by the fact that "believes" (1:16) is a present participle, bringing out the fact that saving faith is not a single event, but rather an ongoing, lifelong process. We are justified the instant we believe, but as we go on believing the gospel, God keeps revealing to us the fact that we have right standing before Him on the basis of Christ's substitutionary death on the cross. Faith applies the imputed righteousness of Christ to us so that we increasingly rejoice in Christ alone as our only hope of eternal life. We never come to a place where we can trust in our good works as sufficient for or even contributing in any way to our salvation.

Third, we need to understand how Paul uses Habakkuk 2:4, "But the righteous man shall live by faith." He uses it partly to show that his gospel is not a new idea that he thought up. The Old Testament prophet Habakkuk confirms the truth that righteousness can only be attained on the basis of faith.

Scholars debate whether the quote should be translated, "the righteous man shall live by faith," or, "the one who is righteous by faith shall live." The first view would emphasize that those who are righteous are characterized by a life of faith, whereas the second view would say that those who by faith are righteous shall live, which means, be saved. While there are impressive scholars on both sides, I think that in light of the context, Paul is using the

quote to say, "The one who is righteous (justified) by faith will live, that is, be saved" (see Bruce, p. 76; Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans/Apollos], pp. 71-72; Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], pp. 76-79).

E. Salvation is individual and personal, not corporate and national.

Paul says that the gospel "is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." He could have said, "for the Jews [plural] first and also to the Greeks [plural]," but he put it in the singular. Salvation is an individual and personal matter. Being a member of the Jewish race will not get you saved, even though the Jews were God's chosen people. Being an American or a member of a Christian family will not get you saved. You must personally believe in Christ.

By "the Jew first," Paul means that the gospel came first in history to the Jews. God chose Abraham and his descendants through Isaac and Jacob as the race to which He revealed His salvation. It was through the Jews that the Savior came. Thus, as Jesus said, "Salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22).

But here Paul's emphasis is on the universal offer of the gospel. It is for *everyone* who will believe. It is for the religious Jew who will believe and it is for the pagan Greek who will believe. None need be excluded. The good news is for you, whatever your background! Are you a self-righteous, religious, moral person? You must not trust in any of these things, but as a sinner receive the righteousness of Christ by faith. Are you an atheist or an immoral person or a greedy, cheating businessman? You must turn from these sins and cry out to God to be merciful to you, the sinner, and you will go home justified today (Luke 18:9-14). The gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.

2. Because the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, we must believe it.

I ask, "Have you believed the gospel?" Have you abandoned all of your self-righteousness and all of your good works as the basis for your standing before God and instead trusted only in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ? Do you believe this good news when you fail and Satan accuses you? On the basis of your

right standing before God, do you daily battle against sin, so that your attitudes and behavior are progressively righteous? Is God's power to save you from the power of sin evident in your relationships in the home?

3. Because the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, we must proclaim it boldly.

I could develop an entire message on this point, but I'm out of time. But I ask, "Are you ashamed of the gospel?" Do you dodge warning people about the wrath of God, because that isn't a popular idea? Do you avoid telling them about the shed blood of Christ as the only remedy for sin, because it sounds kind of primitive? Do you put a positive spin on the gospel, so that it sounds like a positive plan for how to have a happy life here and now? If so, you're being ashamed of the gospel.

Conclusion

The gospel is the good news that God has revealed to us how we can be rescued from the wrath to come (1 Thess. 1:5-10). It is the very power of God to save everyone who believes, because in it God reveals how His perfect righteousness will be put to the account of the guilty sinner who trusts in Christ. I pray that we will understand the gospel, believe it personally, preach it to ourselves every day, and proclaim it unashamedly to this lost world.

Application Questions

1. What are some reasons that you have been ashamed of the gospel in the past? How can you prepare yourself so that it won't happen in the future?
2. Why is it important to understand that salvation is not just a human decision, but requires the very power of God in imparting new life? What errors occur when we forget this?
3. Why is it important to insist that justification means that God *declares* the sinner righteous, not that He *makes* them righteous? What implications follow from each view?
4. What is the difference between genuine saving faith and superficial, false faith (believing "in vain," 1 Cor. 15:2)?

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