

The Power of the Gospel

Romans 1:16-17; 3:22b-28 (29-31)

^{1:16} For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith."...

^{3:22b} For there is no distinction, ²³ since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴ they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; ²⁶ it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

²⁷ Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸ For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. ²⁹ Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, ³⁰ since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. ³¹ Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

I have been a Bible student for most of my life and have read through the Bible on more than one occasion. I most admit I have been a pastor for over 10 years and have read or quoted from the book of Romans on numerous occasions in sermons and as comforting words as we have celebrated the life of a blessed saint that has gone home to be with the Lord. So, in this time of pandemic and isolation I want us to take an opportunity to seriously look into the Book of Romans. Therefore, for the next several weeks we will examine Paul's letter to the Christians at Roman and eavesdrop to hear what God is saying to us!

Today we will do a survey and overview of the book of 16 chapters. The writer of this letter was the apostle Paul (1:1). The letter contains a number of historical references that agree with known facts of Paul's life. The doctrinal content of the book is typical of Paul, which is evident from a comparison with other letters he wrote.

The book was probably written in the early spring of A.D. 57. Very likely Paul was on his third missionary journey, ready to return to Jerusalem with the offering from the mission churches for poverty-stricken believers in Jerusalem (15:25-27). In 15:26 it is suggested that Paul had already received contributions from the churches of Macedonia and Achaia, so he either was at Corinth or had already been there. The most likely place of writing is either Corinth or Cenchrea (about six miles away) because of references to Phoebe of Cenchrea (see 16:1) and to Gaius, Paul's host (16:23), who was probably a Corinthian (1Co 1:14). Erastus (16:23) may also have been a Corinthian (2Ti 4:20).

The original recipients of the letter were the people of the church at Rome (1:7), who were predominantly Gentile. Jews, however, must have constituted a substantial minority of the congregation (4:1; vs. 9 - 11; 1:13). Perhaps Paul originally sent the entire letter to the Roman church, after which he or someone else used a shorter form (chs. 1 - 14 or 1-15) for more general distribution.

Paul's purposes for writing this letter were varied:

1. He wrote to prepare the way for his coming visit to Rome and his proposed mission to Spain (1:10-15; 15:22-29).
2. He wrote to present the basic system of salvation to a church that had not received the teaching of an apostle before.
3. He sought to explain the relationship between Jew and Gentile in God's overall plan of redemption. The Jewish Christians were being rejected by the larger Gentile group in the church (14:1) because the Jewish believers still felt constrained to observe dietary laws and sacred days (14:2-6).

The book of Romans is the Apostle Paul's masterpiece, Paul's primary theme is the basic gospel, God's plan of salvation and righteousness for all humankind, Jew and Gentile alike (1:16-17). Romans explains God's plan of salvation by grace,

through faith in Jesus Christ. Divinely inspired, Paul passed on truths that are followed by believers to this day.

The Gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (Romans 1:16). Paul starts the letter to the Romans by showing that we all need salvation. Everybody can know there is an almighty God, but people are not honoring Him (Romans 1:19-21)

In a clear and powerful way, Romans reminds us about God's greatness. Nobody can successfully oppose God (8:31); and nothing can prevent the power of God's love on behalf of God's people (8:35-39).

The book of Romans is unique, as most of the New Testament Epistles are letters written to various churches, usually intended to address and correct specific problems. The Book of Romans is an organized summation of the doctrine of salvation, as seen throughout the Bible, and as proclaimed in its fullness in the New Testament.

The apostle Paul begins our verses by staking a claim for the gospel, anxious to share it and proclaim it to others. As he describes it, the gospel is power, the power of God for salvation. Paul is speaking to a people who live in a culture in which military might is seen as a means of power; so he presents here a different kind of power—the power of God that opens the door to salvation (the divine, spiritual power that works to save humanity from the bondage of sin, death, and the evil one personified, Satan).

Paul contrasts the power of God to other kinds of power that gain a foothold in the world—power acquired through possessions and wealth, military might, political position, corporate leadership, and so on. This power is in contrast to the power with which Satan tries to tempt Jesus. In that situation, the devil takes Jesus to a high mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the world, promising to give all to Jesus, if Jesus will just fall down and worship him. Jesus responds, "Away

with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him'" (Matt. 4:10). The apostle Paul contrasts the power of God with all worldly power, no matter how great. Knowing this power for himself, Paul is not ashamed to proclaim its power of salvation.

In our scripture, Paul introduces major themes that he will unpack in much greater detail later in this letter, that is, the "who, what, and how" of this salvation. Salvation is available to *everyone* who has *faith*, and in this salvation the *righteousness of God* is revealed.

Faith holds the key to salvation. It is not the law; it is not the works that people do. It is faith. This Romans passage serves as a great equalizer for those who think that they have greater access to God because of who they are, people who have the law and follow the commandments, or because of the works that they do. In the early verses of chapter 3 Paul argues, however, that there is not one single person who is righteous. All of humanity is accountable to God (3:19), whether under the law or not. While the law prescribes works of righteousness, the law serves to bring forth the knowledge of sin (3:20). With that is the recognition that no one is able perfectly to fulfill the works of the law. Paul makes the point that *all* Jews (those under the law) and Greeks/Gentiles (those not under the law) have sinned, and *all* fall short of the glory of God.

This "glory of God" according to Paul is the likeness of God within each of us—the human's "original estate as created in the likeness of God." If our true character is in the image and likeness of God and we have sinned, then we have fallen short of our true spiritual nature. We have, to date, missed the mark of our true selves, have yet to reach the fullness of who we are created to be and have veered away from our right relationship with our Creator. Sin holds us back from our true spiritual selves and from God. None is righteous, but faith opens the door to our salvation.

The faith of which Paul speaks is faith in God through Jesus Christ. God's work manifested in Jesus is redemptive, bringing back to God those who have veered off from God, who have fallen short. The work of Christ serves as a sacrifice of atonement, removing the deserved punishment due for the sins committed, and resulting in reconciliation with God. We are now justified, that is, brought back into a right relationship with God. Our redemption and justification become effective through our faith in God through Christ who was slain and yet resurrected.

There is another crucial point that Paul wants to make perfectly clear. Everything that God has done for us in Christ is unearned and undeserved. Persons are now justified by God's grace. It is God's free gift to humanity—free for us, costly for God and Christ.

When we think of this in terms of Paul's statement that it was because of God's forbearance (God's willingness to refrain from giving human beings what they deserve as a sinful people) that God passed over sins previously committed, *all* could/should breathe a collective sigh of relief and lift up holy hands in thanksgivings and hallelujahs to the God of our salvation. "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23).

In our scripture it is God who is righteous. It is God who has graciously acted on our behalf through Jesus Christ to give us an opening and access to God's own righteousness. It is God who moves beyond distinctions between Jews and Gentiles, black, brown, yellow or white, poor or rich, educated or uneducated, natural citizen or immigrant, to make plain that God is God of all. Our response is to have faith in God through Jesus Christ. With this, the door to salvation is graciously open. This is the power of the Gospel. **Diane Turner-Sharazz**

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16).