

THE GREATNESS OF THE GOSPEL, Pt. 1
ROMANS 1:16-17

I have in my closet some important letters — Raye Jeanne wrote them to me when we were dating and not yet married. Over the 13 months that we dated before marriage I suppose I have 100 or more letters (hard copies — on genuine paper and cards!). They speak of a love that has now flourished for more than 28 years.

You have in your hands an important book that is a compilation of 66 books. Together, they are a letter of love from God to man and the most important tome one will ever read. Individually, they all bear the same message of the same God. All of them individually are profitable for teaching, reproving, correcting, and training in righteousness.

At the same time, some books stand out in particular ways, and as I've noted previously, Romans has been called the greatest letter in the greatest book (the Bible) ever written. Luther said of this book, "This letter is truly the most important piece in the New Testament. It is purest Gospel. It is well worth a Christian's while not only to memorize it word for word but also to occupy himself with it daily, as though it were the daily bread of the soul. It is impossible to read or to meditate on this letter too much or too well." ["Preface to Romans."] And this morning we arrive at the key verses and theme of this great letter, 1:16-17.

One writer has said, "These two verses express the theme of the book of Romans, and they contain the most life-transforming truth God has put into men's hands." [MacArthur, p. 49.] Another has written, "These two verses have an importance all out of proportion to their length. The weighty matter they contain tells us much of what this epistle is about. Barrett can say, 'Most commentators recognize in them the "text" of the epistle; it is not wrong to see in them a summary of Paul's theology as a whole.' [Morris, *Romans*, p. 66.]

We might summarize these two verses this way:

THE GOSPEL IS GOD'S SAVING POWER, REVEALED THROUGH HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS.

These two verses contain four declarations of the greatness of the gospel (the first two are this week).

1. There is No SHAME in the Gospel (v. 16a)

- As Paul comes to the end of his introductory remarks, he summarizes the essence of the gospel and sets a trajectory for everything else he will say in this letter.
 - ✓ In verse 15, Paul says that he is *eager to preach the gospel* to the Romans.
 - ✓ In these two verses he offers four reasons that he is so eager to administer the gospel — why the gospel is so important (notice the three uses of the word *for*, or “because,” and the one quotation from the OT). He is eager to preach the gospel because of what the gospel is and does. These are declarations about the power and greatness of the gospel.
- The first thing that Paul says about the gospel is that he is *not ashamed* of it (v. 16a).
 - ✓ Now it could be that Paul is using a particular figure of speech (litotes) that is purposefully understated. He uses a negative to express something that is actually good. So we say, “Blue Bell ice cream is not too bad,” by which we mean, “Blue Bell ice cream is the best!” Or someone says, “I am not amused,” which really means, “I’m very angry and upset!” So when Paul says, “I am not ashamed,” he really means, “I’m proud of the gospel.” That’s certainly possible, but I don’t think that’s what Paul means.
 - ✓ As one writer says, “there’s no sense in declaring that you’re not ashamed of something unless you’ve been tempted to feel ashamed of it.” And there certainly was reason to feel shame about the gospel.
 - From early in Christ’s ministry people were ashamed of the gospel and wanted to disassociate themselves from it (cf. Jn. 6:65-66). Jesus’ teaching was too radical for them.
 - Even one of Jesus’ choice followers succumbed to the temptation to be ashamed of Christ (Peter, in Jn. 18:25-27).
 - So Jesus warned of the danger of being ashamed of Christ (Mk. 8:38).
 - Yet the temptation to shame persisted — that’s why Paul wrote what he did to Timothy (2 Tim. 1:8-12) and why he warned the Corinthians the way he did in 1 Cor. 1:18-25.
- Why would Peter or Paul or Timothy been tempted to be ashamed of the gospel?
 - ✓ Because the world despised Christ and the gospel and persecuted those who followed Christ.
 - He was imprisoned in Philippi (Phil. 1:16), Jerusalem (Acts 23-28), and Rome (Acts 28:16ff)
 - He was chased out of Thessalonica (Acts 17:10)
 - He was smuggled out of Berea (Acts 17:15)

- ✓ Because the death of Christ was itself a “shameful” event that was mocked by the world — Paul was scoffed in Athens (Acts 17:32) and Corinth (1 Cor. 1:18ff)
 - In the 2nd Century A.D., Celsus attacked Christianity saying, “Let no cultured person draw near, none wise, none sensible, for all that kind of thing they count evil, but if any man is ignorant, if any man is wanting in sense and culture, if any is a fool, then let him come boldly to the Christian faith.” He called Christians, “the most uneducated and vulgar of persons.” He compared Christians to a swarm of bats, to ants, to frogs holding a symposium in a swamp, to worms cowering in the mud. [Pennington, 10/5/14.]
 - While excavating ancient ruins of Rome, archaeologists discovered a painting of a slave bowing to a cross with a donkey hanging on it. The inscription reads, “Alexamenos worships his god.” This is what they thought of Christ and the cross.
 - The world hates the gospel and Christ because “no other religion is so offensive to the pride of men.” [Haldane, 54.]
- ✓ Because even “the church” sought to cause him embarrassment and distress for his manner of preaching Christ (Phil. 1:15-17; Gal. 1:7).

“The unpopularity of a crucified Christ has prompted many to present a message which is more palatable to the unbeliever, but the removal of the offense of the cross always renders the message ineffective. An inoffensive gospel is also an inoperative gospel. Thus Christianity is wounded most in the house of its friends.” [Geoffrey Wilson, quoted by MacArthur, 51.]

- ✓ It was tempting for Paul to be ashamed of the gospel because of persecution, because of mockery from the world, and because of scoffing from the church. And nothing has changed for the believer since Paul wrote these words. The temptation to be ashamed of Christ and fearful of speaking the truth is ever-present for the church. Christ looks foolish, antiquated, weak, and inadequate.
- ✓ Someone who had been attending GBC for a few weeks one time asked me about church membership and I explained the process, which includes baptism. I received this response:

“Terry, I have never heard such legalistic endeavor. I think you are 2000 years after your time. The word Pharisee seems to fit. Jesus brought good news that ran contrary to your position. Jesus himself would certainly have been under discipline if that was part of the Jewish faith... You bring an incredible message and then make it impossible to enjoy. Loosen up, Terry.”

- ✓ All that because I said church members should have a clear profession of faith in Christ alone and be baptized. But that denotes Christ’s exclusivity, which even “Christians” may not want.

- So Paul said he was not ashamed of the gospel. He felt the temptation to be ashamed and to soften his message; the Romans certainly would have felt that temptation. And you and I feel the same attraction (and that temptation will only grow in coming years). **So should we be ashamed?**
 - ✓ No. There is nothing shameful about the gospel.
 - Like Paul, we have been set apart to gospel ministry (1:1).
 - We can be content because one day God will judge all the thoughts of men (2:16).
 - What is really shameful (and deadly) is the life of sin of the unbeliever (6:21).
 - We can be bold because the gospel is good news (10:16).
 - The world may attempt to upset us, but our foundation and security is in the gospel (16:25).
 - ✓ Paul said he was not ashamed, and his entire ministry demonstrated his lack of shame in Christ.
 - Onesiphorus was not ashamed of Paul's imprisonment (2 Tim. 1:16).
 - Paul was not ashamed to stand alone for the gospel (2 Tim. 4:16) because he entrusted his life to Christ (v. 18).
 - All of Paul's life was a demonstration of his lack of shame of Christ — no matter the cost (2 Cor. 11:23-29). And notice his conclusion (v. 30-31).
 - There is temptation to be ashamed of Christ — to cower in a science class that mocks the creation account, to shrink back at work when someone blasphemes Christ with profanity, to be silent when the bride of Christ (His church) is scorned, to slink away when sin is praised and righteousness is scoffed.
 - We are living in increasingly difficult times — and it may get so bad that as a friend said this week, “we may look back in a few years at these days and say, ‘those were the golden years.’” The cross and Christ are increasingly marginalized; we are now the enemy. We are the problem with the world. This is no time for shame. This is a time for boldness with Christ and the gospel. Never has the world's need in this country been more apparent. And we have a message of life and hope.

And that leads us to Paul's second declaration of the greatness of the gospel...

2. The Gospel is POWERFUL (v. 16b) — Paul will make three statements about the gospel's power

- **The gospel is POWERFUL**

- ✓ Why is Paul not ashamed of the gospel? Because (*for*) *it is* (present tense) the power of God. The gospel is powerful because God, who is the gospel orchestrator, is powerful —

“Scripture certainly testifies to God’s glorious power (Ex. 15:6), His irresistible power (Deut. 32:39), His unsearchable power (Job 5:9), His mighty power (Job 9:4), His great power (Ps. 79:11), His incomparable power (Ps. 89:8), His strong power (Ps. 89:13), His everlasting power (Isa. 26:4), His effectual power (Isa. 43:13), and His sovereign power (Rom. 9:21). Jeremiah declared of God, ‘It is He who made the earth by His power, who established the world by His wisdom’ (Jer. 10:12), and through that prophet the Lord said of Himself, ‘I have made the earth, the men and the beasts which are on the face of the earth by My great power and by My outstretched arm’ (Jer. 27:5). The psalmist admonished, ‘Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him. For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast’” (Ps. 33:8-9). His is the power that can save.”

[MacArthur, 53.]

- ✓ The OT repeatedly affirms that the power of God saves His people (Ex. 14:13; 15:2; Ps. 77:14f; Is. 12:2; **52:7, 10**).
- ✓ And the NT clarifies that the power of God to save is particularly in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Do you want to see the power of God? Look at the gospel (1 Thess. 1:5; 2 Tim. 1:8).
- ✓ And God’s power to save is in stark contrast to man’s inability to save (Rom. 5:6; 8:3). There is nothing in this world that can keep a man from death, raise him from the dead, or even more significantly, keep him from sin. Apart from the power of God, all men have died and apart from the power of God, all men sin (3:23). The gospel is the only power that can liberate someone from death and sin.

- **The gospel is powerful to SAVE**

- ✓ The gospel is not just powerful. It has a *particular* power — the power to save men.
- ✓ The gospel is powerful to save us *from* something —
 - The gospel saves us from guilt (Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14)
 - The gospel saves us from pollution of sin (Rom. 6:6, 17; 7:21-25)
 - The gospel saves us from slavery to sin (Rom. 7:24-25; Gal. 5:1)
 - The gospel saves us from the wrath of God (Eph. 2:3), and eternal death (Eph. 2:5), and alienation from God (Eph. 2:12)
- ✓ The gospel is powerful to save us *to* something —
 - The gospel saves us to righteousness (Rom. 3:21-26; 5:1)
 - The gospel saves us to holiness (Rom. 6:1-4; 12:1-2)
 - The gospel saves us to freedom (Gal. 5:1; 2 Cor. 3:17)
 - The gospel saves us to fellowship with God (Eph. 2:13), the love of God (Eph. 2:4; Rom. 5:5), and eternal life (Eph. 2:1, 5; Col. 3:1-4)
- ✓ The gospel is powerful to save us *from* God and *to* God (**Rom. 5:9-10**).

“To be saved...means to be emancipated from the greatest evil, and to be placed in possession of the greatest good.” [Hendriksen, 60.]

“The gospel is not advice to people, suggesting that they lift themselves. It is power. It lifts them up. Paul does not say that gospel brings power but that it is power, and God’s power at that. When the gospel is preached, this is not simply so many words being uttered. The power of God is at work. When the gospel enters anyone’s life, it is as though the very fire of God had come upon him. There is warmth and light in his life.” [Morris, 67.]

- ✓ Paul is obsessed with the gospel. Like a dog on a new chew bone, he won’t let it go; and the reason he won’t let it go is because of its power to address the greatest problem of a man’s life.
- ✓ When I speak to non-church people who come to us for help with benevolence help, I often say, “We will help, but this isn’t your biggest problem, is it?” With a suspicious look, they say, “no...” (wondering, “what does he know about me?”). “What other problem do you have?” They will list a few things and then I will say, “None of those are your biggest problem.” (Arched eyebrows...) “Your biggest problem is that you are a sinner and God will condemn all people who don’t repent to Hell...” And their looks invariably say, “Oh, that...” as if I said their biggest problem was that they needed to eat more nutritiously — “it doesn’t matter.”
- ✓ This *is* the greatest problem of all men (Paul will demonstrate that in 1:18 – 3:31). And the *only* solution is the gospel. And the gospel *is* powerful to save men.
- ✓ And notice one more statement Paul makes about the power of the gospel —

- The gospel is powerful to save **ANYONE**

- ✓ Who can the gospel save? **Everyone who believes...**
- ✓ There is no restriction on who can be saved. All people everywhere are under the condemnation of sin and all people everywhere can be freed from that condemnation (Acts 17:30-31).
- ✓ Paul is emphasizing that anyone can believe and that the power of God in the gospel is applied to all who believe. And to emphasize that, Paul also says, **to the Jew first and also to the Greek.**
 - This doesn’t mean that the first preaching was to the Jews, and then the Gentiles.
 - It means that in the purpose and plan of God, there is a priority with the Jews — they are His chosen people (the only nation of chosen people) and He will fulfill His covenantal plan of salvation in them (chs. 9-11, esp. 11:25-27). Cf. also 2:9-10. No matter how much the Gentiles dominate in the church today (and even in Rome in Paul’s day), there is still a priority with the Jews — they were the first to receive the promise of God and that promise still applies and will be fulfilled.

- Yet that priority does not remove hope for the **Greek** (Gentile); they too are saved by the power of God (10:11-12; Gal. 3:28-29; Eph. 2:11-13).
- ✓ Two applications:
 - God is faithful to keep His promises. As Paul will delineate in chs. 9–11, the promise of God made to Abraham has not been set aside; He will yet fulfill that covenant and that the gospel went first to the Jew is a reminder of the Jewish priority in God’s plan.
 - The priority of the Jew was not because of the greatness of the Jew. Moses reminds the chosen people that they have been selected by God not because of their strength, power, or position (Dt. 7:7-8), but because they were in fact not strong. The Jews were prioritized because they were weak and needy; and this then is a reminder that all who are weak and needy and come to Christ will find provision for their needs — Jew or Gentile.
 - The gospel is not only great in its power, it is also greatly gracious in its extent. No one deserves salvation; God is gracious to save *any* and He saves *many*.
- ✓ Note also, however, that Paul does not say that the gospel saves *everyone*. Not all will be saved (though the gospel is powerful enough to save all men). There is a “condition” to salvation. The one who is saved must **believe**. We will speak more about faith next time (faith and belief are the noun and verb of the same root word), but notice a couple of truths about belief:
 - Paul does not state the object of our belief in this verse (believe in *what?*); but he has already stated that it is belief in Christ and His work of dying for men’s sin on the cross (vv. 4-5, 8, 9). To believe is to believe that I am a sinner deserving of Hell and that I have no ability to save myself but I believe that Jesus alone could and did satisfy God’s wrath against sin and that by trusting that Christ died for me, God removes the penalty of sin from me and frees me from the power of sin.
 - To believe is ongoing — the verb is a present tense, which means, “keeps on believing...” In other words, belief is not something, “I *did*,” but something “I *do*.” Just as there would be questions and a halted service if a groom answers the pastor’s question about promising to love and cherish his wife, “I *did*,” so belief in Christ is a present, continual activity.

“Salvation is not merely professing to be a Christian, nor is it baptism, moral reform, going to church, receiving sacraments, or living a life of self-discipline and sacrifice. Salvation is believing in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Salvation comes through giving up on one’s own goodness, works, knowledge, and wisdom and trusting in the finished, perfect work of Christ.” [MacArthur, 55.]

- And when one believes, God saves. That’s the power of the gospel.

3. The Gospel Reveals the RIGHTEOUSNESS of God (v. 17a)

4. The Gospel is Realized through FAITH

CONCLUSION: I don't know about you, but looking at the top news headlines is getting very hard and discouraging.

- ✓ Homosexual marriage and the degradation of the family unit and the threats of various other kinds of degrading relationships being sanctioned and celebrated (e.g., polygamy and worse).
- ✓ Planned Parenthood and abortion — just reading the summaries of what PP has said has made me nauseated. This is an ongoing abomination.
- ✓ The lack of civility and honor in political discussion.
- ✓

Secular culture has never been biblical or godly. Read history and you will find that apart from periods of the Israelite nation, no country has ever exalted God; the world is blinded by the ruler of the world (2 Cor. 4:1-7) and gives regular evidence of that blindness. For a brief period of time (a few hundred years) our nation has at least not been overtly opposed to Christ. That has changed. And it is tragically sickening.

And it is also a massive opportunity. I remember when a friend of mine was significantly worried about Y2K (remember that?!). He predicted that the massive upheaval would result in some forms of anarchy and persecution for believers. And I told him then that persecution might be the best thing for our country, for it would finally reveal who is with Christ and who is against Him. Well that didn't happen with Y2K, but it is fast approaching now. And that means that we have great gospel opportunities. The bad news of the culture is setting the table for the proclamation of the good news of Christ.

And the good news of Christ is that there is nothing shameful in the gospel and the gospel is powerful to save and transform anyone who believes in Christ. And that is the hope for us individually, and that is the hope for everyone in the world.

The problems in our world are significant. But never forget that the gospel is great. The gospel is greater and more powerful than every other power on earth. The gospel is great — because our God and Savior, Jesus Christ, is greatest.

BENEDICTION: Romans 16:25-27