

THE GREATNESS OF THE GOSPEL, Pt. 2
ROMANS 1:16-17

A few years ago an investment company produced a commercial advocating using their services to accumulate enough wealth for retirement — the commercial showed a couple sitting on a couch being bounced up and down from behind by their hosts in an attempt to jiggle loose change from their pockets. The idea was that looking for loose change in one's couch is not the best way to fund a retirement account. But maybe after [a report from last May](#) that idea needs re-thinking.

Three roommates in New York State bought a couch from a charity shop for \$20. They took the couch home and while cleaning it found several envelopes stuffed inside it containing \$40,000 in cash. The owner of the couch was in the hospital for surgery when her daughter sold it, unaware of the contents of the old couch. Oops.

One of the purchasers said, “The most money I’d ever found in a couch was like fifty cents. Honestly, I’d be ecstatic to find just \$5 in a couch.” In an act of kindness, the roommates found the name of the woman who originally owned the couch on one of the envelopes and agreed to return it to her. The woman told them it had taken her many years to save the money — each week her husband had given her some money to put away, and this was her life’s savings.

In a \$20 couch (and it looks like a \$20 couch) a \$40,000 treasure. Who would have thought that? You never know where you might find a treasure.



Believers in Christ also have a great treasure. It is the treasure of the gospel. Now some might yawn with boredom over the gospel and minimize its value and importance. Yet for the apostle Paul writing to the Romans, nothing invigorates him like the gospel. He is passionate for and thrilled by the gospel. And in the key verses of the book (1:16-17), Paul explains the importance of the gospel 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; we looked at the first two last week; this week we consider the final two declarations of the gospel's greatness.

This message isn't about something we need to change; it is about how we need to think about our condition without Christ and about our condition with Christ and in the gospel.

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

- It is tempting to be ashamed of the gospel — because of mocking and persecution from the world, there is compelling temptation to be silent about our belief in the gospel (e.g., Jn. 18:25-27).
- But there is nothing shameful about the gospel. We can be bold because the gospel is the only good news (10:15-16) and our foundation and security is in the gospel (16:25).
- The cross and Christ are increasingly marginalized; we are now the enemy. We are “the problem” to the world. This is no time for shame. This is a time for boldness with the gospel. Never has the world’s need in this country been more apparent. We have the 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 makes three statements about the gospel’s power

- The gospel’s saving power 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. And it not only can save *some*, but it saves ***everyone who believes!***
- There is no restriction on who can be saved. All people everywhere (Jews & Gentiles) are condemned by sin and all people everywhere can be freed from that condemnation (Acts 17:30-31).

“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.]

- When one believes, God saves. That’s the power of the gospel.
- The third declaration of the greatness of the gospel is that it reveals the righteousness of God.

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

- How can the righteousness of God be good news? When Paul wrote, *the righteousness of God is revealed* that did not seem to be good news to everyone who read it. That's because "righteousness of God" can be understood in two primary ways:
 - ✓ It could refer to the righteousness that God possesses — it is "of God" in the sense that it belongs to Him and it is what He demands.
 - When the gospel is accurately contemplated it reveals the attribute and character of God's righteousness — it cannot be attained (2:12-15, 23ff), as Jesus Himself taught (Mt. 5:48).
 - This is the ruin of every man (Is. 6:5). If God is infinitely righteous, we are all undone, which is why Luther virtually had a permanent residency card for the confessional booth.
 - Luther grew to hate the phrase because he knew he was not righteous before God and had no hope of ever becoming righteous and so faced eternity in Hell.

"I hated that word 'righteousness of God,' which, according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically of the formal or active justice, as they called it, by which God is righteous and punishes sinners and the unrighteous. Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt I was a sinner before God with a most disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, indeed, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners. Secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant." [Martin Luther]

- ✓ But this clause can also mean something else — *the righteousness of God* can mean "the right standing which God gives and of which God approves."
 - Often in Romans, Paul uses "righteousness" to denote God's gift (e.g., 3:21-22; 5:17; 10:3ff) and in most of those ref's, Paul unites the righteousness of God to faith in Christ.
 - So the righteousness of God is good news because it is the means by which the wrath of God against our sin is absorbed by Christ and His righteousness is imputed to us: **3:22, 24-26**.

"I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith....Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of all Scripture showed itself to me. And whereas before 'the righteousness of God' had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gateway to heaven." [Martin Luther]

- For the righteousness of God to be good news, we must understand what the righteousness is...

- What is the righteousness of God?

- ✓ This is the great doctrine that we call “justification” — men are declared just in God’s Law court not because God overlooks righteousness, but because He applies Christ’s righteousness to them.
- ✓ God is just, and at the same time, He is the justifier of those who believe (3:26).
- ✓ Justification is God’s act of imputing obedience to us without our personal obedience; He imputes Christ’s obedience to us and our disobedience to Christ. This is the gospel (2 Cor. 5:21).
- ✓ We might say it this way — the gospel reveals the justification of God — the way that men are declared to have a right standing before God.

“The righteousness of God, therefore, which the gospel reveals, and by which we are constituted righteous, is the perfect righteousness of Christ which completely meets and answers all the demands of that law to which all men are subject and which all have broken.” [Charles Hodge]

“...[the cross] displays the justice of God and the mercy of God. It is by virtue of the atonement that God can maintain His justice and yet demonstrate His mercy by providing satisfaction for those debtors who can’t pay their debts, those enemies who can’t find reconciliation to overcome their estrangement, and those criminals who can’t pay for their crimes.” [Sproul, The Truth of the Cross, 47-8.]

- ✓ So God’s righteousness is the way He satisfies His wrath against sin (v. 18) by judging Christ for our sins and imputing Christ’s righteousness to us so we are in right relationship with Him.
- ✓ But I want to also ask another question in connection with this — why? **Why does God save sinners?** If we deserve wrath, why not just judge and condemn us? That’s what we would do.
 - A number of years ago, the *Denver Post* (10/7/91, p. 8B) told the story of a woman who visited New York City and was accosted by a mugger. He grabbed her gold necklace and pushed her to the ground and in her attempt to steady herself she inadvertently pulled off the gold chain he was wearing. He ran off, unaware of what happened. But the next day when she went to the jeweler she discovered that she won the exchange of necklaces because the one she lost was costume jewelry and the one she received was 18K gold! We cheer at a story like that — “That’s right! That’s justice.” But if it’s justice we want, we get Hell. So why does God save us?
 - God saves us to reveal His glory. Cf. also Dan. 9:9-14; Dt. 4:37; Ps. 31:3; Is. 43:7.

- *1 Sam. 12:22 “For the LORD will not abandon His people on account of His great name, because the LORD has been pleased to make you a people for Himself.*
- *Psa. 79:9 Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of Your name; And deliver us and forgive our sins for Your name’s sake.*

- *Is. 48:9-11 “For the sake of My name I delay My wrath, And for My praise I restrain it for you, In order not to cut you off. Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction. “For My own sake, for My own sake, I will act; For how can My name be profaned? And My glory I will not give to another.”*
- *Deut. 7:7-8 “The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the LORD loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the LORD brought you out by a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.*

➤ When God righteously saves sinners, He is glorified (His nature is revealed). And so we ask,

• How does the gospel **reveal** the righteousness of God?

- ✓ Paul says that the gospel **reveals** the righteousness of God. The word **reveal** means to uncover, and it is used in Scripture to denote the unfolding of God’s salvation plan over the course of human history so that as time passes, there is increased understanding of God’s work.
- ✓ In what way does the gospel reveal God’s righteousness?
 - In the OT, there was a clear understanding of the standard of God and God’s judgment of those who do not meet His standard (all men).
 - In the gospel we see that the righteousness of God demands His judgment of sin. If God’s wrath were not necessary, God would never have poured it out against His Son. Because wrath and judgment *are* necessary components of God’s righteousness, God judged Christ.
 - In the gospel, we see that the righteousness of God also includes the grace of God through the provision of Christ and His work. It was not necessary for God to provide Christ, but He did — and Christ was provided for *undeserving* men!
- ✓ When Luther thought about justification, he initially thought only of God’s absolute rightness (which He is), but that implies that He is righteous without being gracious or kind. God is not a compilation of various attributes — He *is* those attributes, and they work in harmony with one another. So to say that God is righteous is also to say that while He is a fully just and right judge, He is also a judge of grace who makes a way for sinners to be reconciled to Him.
- ✓ So, when we look at the cross and when we hear the gospel, we have been given an increased revelation of what God’s righteousness is — it is necessarily both wrathful and gracious.

- The gospel reveals the power of God for those who believe, and it also reveals the righteousness of God — but that righteousness is only for particular people —

4. The Gospel is Realized through FAITH

- The means by which we receive God's righteousness is faith. That was made clear in v. 16 (*everyone who believes*) and is reaffirmed twice in v. 17.
- Faith is the means by which men are saved. We see this in the phrase *from faith to faith*, which is easy to translate but very difficult to understand.
 - ✓ Some say it indicates a progression of faith (from OT to NT faith, Law to gospel).
 - ✓ Others suggest it means "from the inception of faith to the completion of faith," or, faith, from beginning to end.
 - ✓ Probably it is just Paul's way of intensifying his emphasis on faith — it's faith and only faith. It's faith *alone*. The only thing that will save a man is the effective work of God's grace through faith. Only faith. No works of any kind in any way (3:28 was translated by Luther as "faith alone"). We only receive salvation by faith.
 - ✓ But we must also address the question of what faith is —
 - There are three primary components to faith —
 - ... Knowledge — a certain set of facts about Christ and ourselves. We have to *know* something to be saved (our sin and sin nature, Christ's deity, His perfection/fulfillment of the Law, His substitutionary death, His resurrection, His lordship).
 - ... Assent — an emotional response to the facts about Christ; we believe the facts are true and that we need those truths.
 - ... Trust — the volitional response to Christ, a "heart of faith" and abandonment to Christ. This is also a trust that persists (which is why John usually uses the present tense to refer to belief in his gospel).
 - We want to be careful when talking about faith not to say that faith saves us (Eph. 2:8-9). We are saved *through* faith. Faith is the means or vehicle that brings salvation. But in itself, faith does not save us. God saves us.
 - ... Faith is not a work of merit — it is a response of dependence to what has already been done for us. Faith says, "I can't...but I believe you can."
 - ... It is not abundance of faith that saves us or wavering faith that prevents salvation: "The weakness of your faith will not destroy you. A trembling hand may receive a gracious gift." [Spurgeon]
 - ... It is not the amount of our faith that matters, but the person in whom we are trusting. Salvation is not in a plan, but in a person, as B. B. Warfield wrote:

“It is not faith that saves, but faith in Christ. It is not, strictly speaking, even faith in Christ that saves, but Christ that saves through faith. The saving power resides exclusively not in the act of faith, but in the object of faith. We could not more radically misconceive of Biblical representation of faith than by transferring to faith even the smallest fraction of that saving energy which is attributed in the Scriptures solely to Christ Himself.”

- ✓ Faith is the means by which we are saved, and it has always been that way...
- Faith has *always* been the means of salvation — and the quotation of Hab. 2:4 affirms this —
 - ✓ This is the first of more than 60 quotations from the OT in Romans (this verse is also quoted in Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38). How was Paul using this verse?
 - In 1:1-4, Habakkuk is complaining about the ungodliness and wickedness of Israel.
 - In 1:5-11, God says, “I know, I will send the Chaldeans to judge Israel” (vv. 6ff).
 - Habakkuk responds, “The Chaldeans? How can you maintain your righteousness and use the Chaldeans to punish the Israelites since they are worse than Israel?” (vv. 13, 16-17).
 - God responds by saying, “I am just and I will also judge the Chaldeans (2:2-20).
 - The verse Paul quotes is 2:4 — the beginning of God’s final response to Habakkuk:
 - ... The proud one (the Chaldeans, 1:10; 2:5) does not have a **right** (righteous) **heart**. In other words, God will judge the Chaldeans for their lack of righteousness (2:12-14ff).
 - ... 2:20 answers Habakkuk clearly — the Lord is holy and the nations (plural, so both Jew and Gentile) must be silent before Him (they have no cause for complaint).
 - ... So 2:4a means that those who live by pride in themselves will be judged and die because of their lack of righteousness. The one who is proud does not live by faith and does not have a right soul; he is empty inwardly and empty towards God.
 - ... In contrast to the Chaldeans who were judged by God, God then says in 2:4b, **but the righteous will live by his faith**. This is what Paul quotes in Rom. 1:17.
 - ... The message to Habakkuk is that God will not judge everyone; some will escape His judgment and live. And those who are alive are alive because of their faith in God.
 - ... This is the same kind of faith that Abraham evidenced — Gen. 15:6. Abraham and Habakkuk didn’t know about Christ, but they believed that God would fulfill His promises to them and they trusted in Him for their salvation and justification.

“We have thus set before us two ways, the way of life and the way of death....The proud, puffed up, dishonest, drunken, dissatisfied Chaldean will have death; the just, godly, righteous Israelite will have life through faith in the living God. God could not make the responsibilities and issues more clear than He has. And they hold good for all time.” [Charles Feinberg, The Minor Prophets, 213.]

- ✓ Faith says, “I depend only on God’s grace to save me. Faith is no work. It is a recognition that I *cannot* work and that I must rely on Him alone.” And that was true for Habakkuk and the Israelites in 605 B.C. and of Abraham and of Paul and of us. Faith is the opposite of pride; either I believe in myself to save me or I trust God to save me through Christ.
- ✓ Salvation is and always has been by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

“The one doctrine that I have supremely at heart is that of faith in Christ, from whom, through whom, and unto whom all my theological thinking flows back and forth day and night.” [Luther]

- The Reformers called this *Sola Fide* — we are saved by grace alone through faith alone. No merit.
- Can I point out one more item from Habakkuk?
 - ✓ The first two lines of 2:4 are something of a summary of all of history against God — those who reject God are proud in themselves and the way of the proud is death. That was true for the Chaldeans (Babylonians) and it is true of our world as well.
 - ✓ And the last line of 2:4 is the solution to living in such a world. The way to respond to tragedy and trial and trouble is faith in Christ. He not only *will* win; He already *has* won. The objections of Satan are the final, failing protests of a defeated foe; but he’s defeated.
 - ✓ The only appropriate response is to believe the gospel — to be a follower of Jesus Christ, believing in Him to liberate you from the penalty and power of sin. If you are not a follower of Christ, will you begin believing in and following Him today? Would you confess your sin and ask Him to free you from that sin? And through (by means of) your faith in Him, God will save you by applying the blood and righteousness of Christ to your life.
- We receive the gospel *through faith*. This is the last of the four great declarations about the gospel. Salvation is not given because we earn it or deserve it, but because God is gracious to give it when we believe in Christ. This is the only way to live, Paul says.

CONCLUSION: What do you treasure?

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| ✓ \$40,000 in a couch? | ✓ Healthy children? |
| ✓ Your diamond engagement ring? | ✓ Ease and lack of problems? |
| ✓ A reliable car or paid for home? | ✓ |

I submit to you that you and I have no greater treasure than the gospel — the power of God to save everyone who believes and the revelation of God’s righteousness.

BENEDICTION: Romans 1:16-17