

Romans

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May 22, 2024

Romans 1:16-25



v. 16

- Paul concluded the opening to his letter by stating that he desires to “preach the gospel” (*euangelizo*) to the church in Rome. Here he says that he is *not ashamed* to preach that gospel—not even in Rome.
- Why might he be ashamed to preach the simple message of the gospel to such a sophisticated culture? Rome is the heart of the empire, the seat of political, social, and financial power. Rome is the symbol of strength. Romans valued men of noble character who ruled over their affairs well—be they social, familial, political, or military responsibilities. The gospel, by contrast, values humility, and dependence that invites us to entrust ourselves to God with childlike faith. In 1Corinthians 1:18-29 Paul acknowledges that the gospel is counterintuitive to both Jews and Greeks (see v 14). The message of “Christ crucified” is neither impressive nor wise in the eyes of sophisticated, self-made people. In the capital of the empire where people were expected to declare Caesar as Lord, Paul is not ashamed to say “the crucified Christ has been raised as Lord over all.”
- Note that Paul does not say “I boast” or “I glory” in the gospel, as he might elsewhere. Phrases like those might indicate a personal conviction about the gospel. Here he says that he is “not ashamed” of the gospel. Perhaps there was concern that Paul’s message might not be sophisticated enough. If that were the case, Paul addresses the concern head on. He is not ashamed. He then tells them why.
- ...because it is the power of God, for the purpose of salvation, for everyone who believes—be they Jewish by birth or Greek. There’s a lot to unpack in that statement.
 - “the power of God” reminds us that this is not something of human origin. The message of the gospel, therefore, is not simply rooted in self-improvement or self-actualization. We believe, with Paul, that God desires to do something in and through us that we could not do on our own.
 - Salvation is a robust word in the new testament (*soteria* (n); *sozo* (v)). On occasion the word indicates the total healing of a person. In other places the emphasis is on deliverance and rescue. Both of those concepts come together in this word to reveal that God desires to rescue us from our current state that we might experience the life for which we were created. The message of the gospel that we preach is not simply “fire insurance” from hell. Nor is it simply therapeutic. It’s both! There is a salvation

- from outside opposing forces of evil and healing of mind, soul, and body, which we experience now, in part, in expectation of a future final reality.
- This salvation requires nothing more than to “believe” (*pistueo*) the gospel. The importance of the word *pistis* in the Bible and in the book of Romans, in particular, cannot be overstated. The noun form of the word can be translated “faith,” “belief,” or “trust” and carries with it the idea of loyalty and conviction. The verb form of the word can simply be translated “believe,” but this is so much more than mental ascent or acceptance—we are called to “put our faith in” or to “trust” the good news in such a way that we risk our lives on its truth. In fact, the point of Paul’s apostleship was to bring about the “obedience of faith among all the Gentiles....” Faith not expressed in obedience is incomplete (or “dead” to use James’ terminology). And yet, the only thing required to receive God’s total salvation through Christ is that we “believe” it.
 - This gospel message is not only for one chosen people. It has always been for the “nations” (see Genesis 12:1-3; Psalm 22:27-28; Psalm 67; Isaiah 56:3, 6-7; Revelation 5:9 for some highlights). Paul later explores the special role of Israel in chapters 9-11. But the message of salvation and blessing is not exclusively for them alone. The foot of the cross is level ground for all nationalities, families, education levels and socio-economic statuses.

v. 17

- The gospel is both the means by which God makes us righteous and the revelation of his own righteousness. In Romans 3:26, Paul declares that Jesus was the “propitiation” or “atonement” for all sins for all time, so that God is both the “just and the justifier.” The word used for “righteousness” and “justice” or “justification” is the same in Greek (*dikaiosyne*). As important as the idea of faith is in the book of Romans, it is quite possibly trumped by the concept of justification. Faith is our response to God’s character (righteousness and justice) in anticipation of his action (to make us just and righteous).
- This righteousness is received IN FAITH and is lived out IN FAITH. There is no graduation from faith and trust in God, for those who believe the gospel. There is only a deeper exploration of the depths of what it means to “live by faith.” It is by faith that we stand in grace (Romans 5:2) and it is by faith that we continue to experience it. Every new height (or depth, as it were) in our experience of the goodness of God, is an invitation to trust him in ways that are more and more counter-intuitive and counter-cultural.
- The doctrine of justification by faith is both the heartbeat of Paul’s letter and the impetus for the Reformation. The clarion declaration that our righteousness is rooted in our simple trust

in what God has done in the person of Christ and not our own worthiness or good action not only changed the shape of religious expression in the Western world, it continues to challenge our pride and sense of what it means to be good, responsible people. And yet, this is precisely the good news that saves and transforms. Grace is scandalous!

- This is not a new message! Habbakuk saw it clearly 600 years prior (Hab 2:4). As Paul will clarify later in chapter 4, Abraham was declared righteous simply because he believed God (i.e. trusted him, put his faith in him) (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3). And as John later says, “this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith” (1 John 5:4). As the NIV states, this righteousness “is by faith from first to last.”
- Verses 16 & 17 are almost a thesis statement for Paul’s letter.

v. 18

- The wrath of God can be an uncomfortable topic. Paul doesn’t shy away from the idea. Neither does he stay here long. This train of thought barrels forward as Paul constructs an argument that begins to resolve toward the end of chapter 5.
- Note that God’s wrath is directed at ungodliness and unrighteousness—not at humanity itself. That’s not to say that humanity doesn’t experience the wrath of God (see Ephesians 5:6; Colossians 3:6). But it is not humanity that God cannot tolerate; it is ungodliness and unrighteousness.
- Paul will move on to discuss the position of “those who have the Law” (Rom 3:19) as being equally deserving of God’s judgement. We are all saved from wrath through Christ (Rom 5:9-10).
- The revelation of God’s righteousness is contrasted by the revelation of his wrath. In fact, it seems that Paul moves from the thesis of justification by faith and then backs up to paint a backdrop against which God places the cross as the means by which he overcomes ungodliness. Thus Paul confidently calls God both the “just” the righteous one who wages war against evil, sin, and death and the “justifier” who offers grace and salvation to those who are humble enough to receive it.
- Evil is the undoing of the created order and God’s good intent for humanity. To suppress the truth of who God is and who he made us to be is to be unrighteous.

vs. 19-22

- God has revealed himself and his character through creation. We ought to be able to see, as we look around us, something of God’s “eternal power and divine nature.” How have you seen this?

- The problem is not that God cannot be known but that humanity has simply chosen not to honor him or give thanks. Humanity is created to derive it's meaning, life, value, wisdom, fruitfulness, etc. in relationship with God. The temptation is to get "wisdom" or "knowing good and evil" on our own terms (i.e. to define good and evil for ourselves). But our design is to find fulfilment in communion with God as we reflect his character to the world around us, we will only ever discover disfunction apart from God. Thus our search for wisdom apart from God becomes futile and dark. "Professing to be wise, they became fools."
 - "If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!" Matthew 6:23
 - *You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.* – St Augustine, *Confessions*

vs. 23-25

- This is the heart of idolatry and the foundation of the 1st & 2nd commandment (or 2nd for the Jewish Rabbis). An Idol is a "good thing that we make a God thing."
- Notice that God's wrath is expressed in "giving them over" to their lust (this phrase will be repeated 2 more times in this section). It is often the case that, if we persist long enough, God allows us to suffer the consequences of our decisions.
- It is against this backdrop that God breaks in, through the person of Jesus Christ, to say that humanity's failure is not the end of the story. His righteousness will overcome our righteousness. We are invited to trust the God who overcomes sin & death!
 - But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, 21 so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 5:20-21)
 - 33 Now the God of peace be with you all. Amen. (Romans 15:33)