

The Power of the Gospel

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 11 February 2018

Preacher: Cory Brock

[0 : 0 0] So we're in our Roman series this semester and this is the third sermon in the series. Romans is an important, a very important letter from the apostle Paul in the first century to the church which is in the city of Rome and many commentators, theologians of the past have said that these two little verses that we just read, they're the thesis statement of the book, of the whole book which is why we're slowing down and focusing on them.

They're the point of the book in short. It's what Paul is trying to say really in the rest of the chapters of this book and this is the text even that God used to spark the Reformation.

This is the text that Martin Luther grappled with so much when he was provoked and renewed to see the gospel afresh in the 16th century.

He writes just a year before he died a little book called Table Talk and in it he writes of his tower experience which was his experience from his earlier life of grappling with these two little verses in Romans and he said that he at first and the first part of his life hated these verses more than anything else in the whole Bible but at some point in his life he had a change and this is what he writes about that change.

He said, when I realized what Paul meant here, here I felt that I was altogether born again and I had entered paradise itself through open gates.

[1 : 3 9] There a totally other face of the entire scripture showed itself to me and I saw a different face than the one I had thought of God himself, the face of grace.

He was born again, he broke through is what he says. He had entered paradise, he had seen a whole new side of scripture that he had never seen before from understanding what Paul meant here in Romans 1, 16 and 17.

He came to feel the power that the text talks about here, the power of the gospel understood. So this, these two verses are a brief summary of the gospel and they're heavy and they're pregnant and there's been entire books written about them, many, many books about these two little verses and Paul as much as been written, as much as been talked about, as important as they've been, the point here is actually really simple and it's actually really very much on the surface of the text and that's that Paul simply saying, I'm not ashamed of the gospel.

I wanna, he said in verse 15, I'm eager to come to Rome and talk to you about the gospel, preach it to you, to Jew and Gentile, to all ethnic groups. I'm not ashamed of it because I think it's powerful. I think it actually has changing power. I think that God works through it to turn people around to help them break through to be born again as he put it in his tower experience.

[3 : 1 1] So we have to ask Paul, why would he need to say here at the beginning of Romans that he's not ashamed of the gospel? Why would he even need to come out and tell the Romans he's not ashamed?

And the reason is because there were people who were ashamed of the gospel and there were people who had even accused Paul of being ashamed of the gospel at times in his ministry. But in order to ask and really answer what it means to be ashamed or unashamed of the gospel, we first have to ask, we have to see what Luther saw. He broke through.

We have to understand the gospel. So first, we have to understand the gospel in order to know what it means to be ashamed or unashamed of the gospel. And so that's the two things we're gonna do this morning, the gospel, its definition, its content, and then what it might mean to be ashamed or unashamed of that gospel.

And so you may be here this morning and you need to actually hear what the gospel is for the first time, perhaps. It's never really been clear to you or you come from another religion or a different background or have never believed before, maybe.

[4 : 24] Or you need to come back and to see the gospel afresh and to feel its renewing power, as Paul talks about, through your very bones, through your very core.

Or maybe for some of us, we need to fight this morning the real temptation of being ashamed of the gospel, which is an actual temptation that Paul had to address in his ministry here.

And so in all these ways, this text is really important. So let's look at the gospel and then let's look at what it means to be unashamed of the gospel. So first, the gospel.

We use the word gospel a lot and all over the place, really, and that's because the Bible uses it a lot. Paul uses it here in Romans more than any other book in the New Testament.

The word gospel is mentioned more in Romans. It's already been mentioned twice before we even get to verse 16 and 17. You'll see it if you look in verse one and verse nine.

[5 : 22] And it's root word and similar words like the word we translate gospel appear 134 times across the New Testament. And so we talk about the gospel here at St. Colombo's a lot because the gospel is really important and all over the place in the Bible.

And the Greek word that stands behind this word gospel is a really common word that most people will have some familiar, familiarity with. It's the word evangelion.

And you hear it when we use words like evangelical, which just means gospel-centered, evangelion. And in the middle, the shorter term for it is evangel. And if you listen to the word evangel, gospel, you'll hear even in that word a word like angel, evangel, evangel, angel.

And that's because what's an angel? Well, really, an angel, in its most basic sense, is a messenger, a herald, as the King James might put it.

Someone who comes and runs over the hills with a message, a proclamation from the King to read something that's been happened or stated like a victory in war.

[6 : 33] That's an angel, someone who brings a great message. And so evangel, it means simply good news. And this is, of course, very simple.

And many of us know this, but we need to make it fresh for us. And the simple point is this, the gospel, the evangel that Paul is talking about here, it's not advice, it's news.

The gospel is not good advice, no matter how good it is. It's good news. It's the messenger coming over the hill to say something has happened.

It's not good advice, it's good news. It's hearing the gospel. If you're hearing the Christian gospel, it's not like going to a guru or a yogi or a clinical psychologist and being told how to make your life better.

It's not any of those things. It's not advice at all. It's entirely a message about something that's happened. It's news, it's proclamation, it's heralding something forth.

[7 : 36] And that means that Christianity is utterly unique. Christianity is unlike any other system or religion or philosophy because at its core is not good advice but good news.

And Christians even speak about false gospels sometimes, but even that notion doesn't really work because other religions and other philosophies don't actually put forth false gospels because they're not gospels at all.

Gospel is news. They put forth advice. They tell you to pick yourself up and tie up your shoes and get to work and be a better person and sober up and be kinder and follow these rules and be committed in whatever religion you follow or some type of moral conformity.

But that's not a gospel at all. That's advice. But the gospel is news. It's proclamation of something that's happened. So the gospel, it's not a call to moral conformity although it creates moral change in the person who believes it.

And it's not a call to religious commitment although it causes people who believe it to be committed religiously to their local body.

[8 : 58] It's like picking up the newspaper and reading about what's happened, what's taking place. Now just think about it before we talk about its content.

If the gospel was advice, if the gospel was advice about moral conformity, if it was something like if you want to be loved by God and accepted by God then you have to act like God in every way before you can truly be accepted by God then the same thing that happened to Martin Luther would happen to all of us and that's that we would hate it because we would try and we would try and we would feel like failures.

We would never have any assurance, never any hope that we could be truly accepted and that's exactly what Luther struggled with as he wrestled with these verses. And so the first thing to simply

see is the gospel is the heralding of good news of an event that has taken place.

All right, so now we have to ask of course, what's its content? What is the news? What's the news about? And Paul tells us here, if you look at verse 17, he says, in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed.

So Paul says that the content of this news is that in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed. Now what's the righteousness of God?

[10:25] A very tricky and difficult phrase when you just read through it to grab, what is Paul saying here when he says, in the gospel, in the news that's being proclaimed, the righteousness of God is revealed to you.

And to get at it I think it might be helpful to go back to Luther's story because this is the exact little phrase that he so struggled with before he finally broke through to see what it meant.

And for him, Luther, he had a really sensitive conscience. So he was really aware, probably more than most of us, of all the things he did wrong in his life.

Now, if you're a Christian, whether you're a Christian or not this morning, all of us feel and know times that we do things that aren't right. We feel the times that we stick our feet in our mouths.

We send a text message to the wrong person that was actually gossip about that person. Whatever it might be, even things that we might not actually act out, sometimes for all of us, thoughts slip into our minds, perhaps, about something and we're thinking, how could I even think that, right?

[11:32] Even though you know you'll never act on it and you feel dirty. Every human has these experiences, these guilt experiences. But Luther, he was a monk and a very devout man and he actually lectured regularly on this book, Romans, and he was a good person.

He was one of the best people. He was rigorous and he obeyed all the rules. But he constantly struggled, the fact that he couldn't stop doing things that he felt were wrong, even no matter how much he tried.

And for that reason, this text scared him. That's why he said in the quote, printed the bulletin that he even hated it.

And the reason is because he thought it meant, he thought the righteousness of God meant this, revealed in the Gospel meant this, that when you believe in Jesus, when you have faith, as the text tells us in Christ, and believe in Jesus, that at that time, and for Luther, it was the time you were baptized, your slate, your sins are wiped away, you're forgiven, right?

And that sounds familiar, that sounds true, doesn't it? You're familiar, you're clean. But after that, Luther thought that when you believe, God actually, and the old word is, infuses righteousness into your very bones, into your core.

[12:59] He actually gives you his own righteousness, his own goodness, his own perfections, that it actually becomes literally who you are. So much so that after you believe, after you've been infused with the righteousness of God here, revealed that you're able to be perfect, to live a life without sin, that you can actually walk in true righteousness and actually deserve to be in God's presence.

And that's what he thought it meant. And so, every time he would sin and stumble, even as a monk, even as a teacher of the Romans, he said, how can it really be that God has given me his own righteousness in every way that I'm perfect?

I can't, I don't feel perfect. I mean, I believe in Jesus, but I keep on sinning, and I keep on stumbling, and I keep on falling. And so, when he came to this text, it felt to him like slavery, that if I've really been given the righteousness of God in every way, how is it that I keep acting like this and struggling?

And it's something that every Christian can, even as a Christian and believer, we can all see and admit to, that we still struggle after we believe, right? And that's what Luther was wrestling with. And so, this is what he said.

I did not love, yes, I hated the righteousness of God, who punishes sinners. And secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God.

[14:24] And I said, God, as if it is not enough that miserable sinners eternally lost their original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the Ten Commandments, without having God add pain upon pain by the gospel.

And also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath, you see, he thought the gospel was a threat. Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled consciousness.

But then, he read these verses and lied to the whole book of Romans, and he writes about his breakthrough.

What was it? What does this mean? What is Paul saying here that the gospel reveals to us? What is its content? What is the righteousness of God revealed here? And look, it cannot mean that if you believe in Jesus Christ, you become righteous just like him in every way, all the way through. Because as soon as you sin, that can't be true of you. That can't be true. What's Paul saying here? And it's this. That first, the gospel says this to you.

[15 : 33] God forgives you your sins. But even more. The salvation, it doesn't stop at the forgiveness of sins.

It goes, it's more. It's greater even than just the forgiveness of sins. What he's saying here is that the righteousness of God given to you in the gospel when you believe is that God looks at you and gifts to you, counts you as righteous just like Jesus Christ is righteous even though you aren't and never will be in this life.

It's not that he makes you perfect, that he infuses the righteousness into your very bones. It's that he looks at you and says, despite you, I'm going to count you righteous like my son.

He gifts to us the righteousness of God and counts it to us. Another metaphor for this throughout the whole Bible is that God looks at us despite our filthy garments and clothes us in a robe that is not our own.

This is all over the Old Testament even. Just listen to Isaiah 61. I will rejoice greatly in the Lord for he has clothed me with garments of salvation.

[16 : 52] He has wrapped me in a robe of righteousness. It's the same idea. Why? In Isaiah 64, all of us have become like one who is unclean.

All of our righteous deeds are filthy garments. All of us wither like a leaf in our iniquities like the wind blow us away. What he's saying here is that in the gospel, in the news, the proclamation, by faith that God comes out to you like the father running out to his prodigal son, his prodigal daughter in the distance, and he throws over you a robe, the royal robe of righteousness.

It's not a robe that you ever made, that you wove together. It's not a robe that you could ever produce. It's a gift. It's entirely a gift. He throws upon you who did not deserve it a robe of righteousness and says, you're not clean, but I will count you clean.

That's what Luther saw. That's what he broke through to see. He says he saw the gates of paradise, that he wasn't accepted by God out of his perfections, but because God counted him righteous despite himself.

You see? Now the question is, how can God do it? How can God do it?

[18 : 15] It's not just some costless gift. It's free to you, but it cost God.

Theodore Dostoyevsky, a famous, very famous Russian novelist in the 19th century, he was a Christian Dostoyevsky.

In his novels, he often tried to put the case against Christianity stronger than his atheist and Anastasic friends could do it because he wrestled throughout his whole life with faith and the struggle of faith.

Probably his most famous book, The Brothers Karamazov, he has this long chapter in The Brothers Karamazov that really focuses on suffering, the problem of suffering, but even more it focuses on children who suffer and the tragedy of children suffering.

And Yvonne, who is the main character of the book, the middle son, he sees a family lose their baby in another instance of a young infant toddler dying early and he's broken, he's broken by it.

[19 : 37] And Dostoyevsky writes, Yvonne says, I don't want to belong to a universe where children suffer.

And it's important to know that Dostoyevsky himself lost his own son when his son was only three years old. And so he's wrestling with believing in God as a Christian in the reality of sin and misery and tragedy and plight and death.

How can these two things be at the same time? And so the rest of the book, he gives an answer through fiction and his answer comes in two ways and that's through Yvonne's two brothers, one older, one younger.

And at this moment when Yvonne is wrestling with the possibility of faith in the midst of children losing their lives, his younger brother comes to him and hugs him and kisses him on the cheek and says to him, I love you.

And Dostoyevsky's answer, love, on the one hand, how can you believe in God and have faith and walk through this world in the midst of suffering and plight and sin and death?

[20 : 55] And the first answer he gives is love, it's real, it's expressed from brother to brother there, but he gives another answer later in the book through his older brother. And that's that his older brother stands trial for a murder that he didn't commit.

But in the trial, the brother decides to confess that he's guilty. And he does this because he says that if he doesn't confess guilt, then he feels that there will never be justice in the world.

In other words, he says that if an innocent man isn't willing to come and bear the guilt of the guilty, then there will never truly be justice or hope in the world where children lose their lives in infancy. That's what the book's about. And so Dostoyevsky's answer, what is the hope of humanity in the midst of sin and suffering and death and evil and misery and plight?

What we all feel and what we all know, no matter what background you come from, and his answer is twofold, it's the reality of love on the one hand, it's real, it's objective, it comes from somewhere, and the reality of justice on the other put upon the back of an innocent one, bearing the guilt for people who would never come and fess up.

[22 : 20] Otherwise, you see, it's the meeting place of love and justice in one man, an elder brother who would put the guilt, who as an innocent man would put the guilt of the guilty on his own back.

Look, this, this, what is the news of the gospel through which you can have the righteousness of God? This is what the herald comes over the hill to say to you, to proclaim to you from the king that at the cross a true elder brother, much better than Yvon's elder brother, the true elder brother meets, is love incarnate, meeting justice, the wrath of God poured out.

In one place, it's what the gospel is about. Paul's already said it in the beginning of the chapter, it concerns the Son, or as he puts it in 1 Corinthians 1.18, it's the word of the cross.

It's the word of the cross, that's the content of the gospel, the meeting place of ultimate love and ultimate justice in one human being, satisfying the justice of God for sin and God's ultimate expression for love for us at the very same time.

That's the news, that's the gospel, that the man of power himself grants power through his resurrection because he came for you to be the elder brother who says, I'm innocent but call me guilty, you see.

[23 : 54] And what that means is that he got your sin so that you could be clothed in his righteousness. That's what Paul means here in Romans 1.17. He got your sin, he got your death so you could be clothed in his righteousness.

C.S. Lewis calls this the great exchange, him for us, we on him, the great exchange.

Now just to close this point, it's for whoever would believe, that's what he says here.

For Jew and Gentile, no matter what background you come from, no matter what ethnicity, no matter what you've done, no matter what you've done, you can have it.

It's by faith, it's just belief, it's looking at the power of the cross, the man on the cross resurrected and saying, yes, I believe.

[24 : 53] That's why he puts it in 17, it's from faith to faith or for faith. It's just an old way of saying it's faith all the way down, it's faith all the way through from faith to faith, it's all faith, that's how you get it.

And so look, you can never say or if you ask someone, are you a Christian, the answer can never be, I'm trying to be.

You can never try to be a Christian, that's not possible. That would mean Christianity is about good advice, not good news. But being a Christian, being a Christian is having the righteousness of God gifted to you because of the work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

And so Paul puts it in Romans 5 that if you were a Christian, you stand in the grace and the righteousness of God. In other words, he's saying it's a status, it's not an achievement.

You can never try to be a Christian, you just are one. You just are one if you believe. It's a status, never an achievement because it's news, not advice, not moral conformity.

[25 : 59] And that makes it unlike anything else in all the world. The good news, truly, the only truly good news. All right, so let's just briefly point to say, why does Paul say here that he's not ashamed of the gospel?

Why does he feel the need to say I'm not ashamed? And in other places in the New Testament, Paul says things like, I glory in the gospel. So Paul's the last person on earth that we would think

probably was ashamed of the gospel.

But he feels the need to say it. And I think there are, let me just give two reasons maybe, why. And the first one, they're both clues that we get from other places in the New Testament where he uses the same word, being ashamed.

And the first one is in 2 Timothy 8, 8 to 12, and he's talking to Timothy, who's a pastor, and he says, Timothy, don't be ashamed by the testimony of the gospel.

So same idea. And then he goes on and he says, because I suffer in chains, but I am not ashamed. And so Paul's saying there that he's in prison and suffering, and his life is kind of worse than it was before he ever believed in the gospel in many ways.

[27 : 22] And he's saying, but don't be ashamed of that. Now I heard Jordan Peterson say this week, if you're familiar with Jordan Peterson, the kind of up and coming famous clinical psychologist, had a really famous interview on Channel 4 a few weeks ago, all over YouTube.

You'll see him at some point if you watch the news. But I was listening to one of his lectures this week, and he said that something that people discovered a few centuries into Christianity after Christ was that Christianity didn't actually answer the problem of suffering.

So he said it took a few hundred years before people realized that you can become a Christian and believe, but you still suffer. Well, Peterson presented it as if it was new information, I suppose.

But of course, the Bible teaches us that all over the place, the life of Job, he believed he was blameless, but yet he suffered not because of his sin, the witness of the martyrs in the first and second and third centuries.

It came well before Peterson chronicles it. But he was doing that to critique Christianity and to say that it doesn't actually deal with our biggest problem in life, and that's that we feel pain and we struggle and we suffer.

[28 : 36] Look Paul is saying to Timothy here, do not be ashamed if your life gets harder because you believe the gospel, because for some people that was a struggle in the first century, and it always has been and always will be.

And Paul is saying, look, I'm in prison, and you can read the list in the book of Acts where Paul talks about all the things that happened to him because he believed the gospel, all the struggles. And he's saying, don't be ashamed because you should expect this.

You should know that this was what our Lord talked about, what Jesus Christ talked about that believing the gospel in a world of sin and brokenness and misery is often going to lead to more suffering sometimes.

And so we don't want to offer the gospel this morning if you're new without knowing the truth about what Jesus says. And that's that it's radical, it changes your life, and Jesus in the gospel even calls you to lose sometimes.

So at least being unashamed means this, that being unashamed of the gospel is being with you, willing to let the gospel, your faith in the gospel, your belief cost you something.

[29 : 51] You might lose in life, Paul is saying here, but you can because he first lost everything for you. He lost his father, he lost his home in the heavenly place, he lost the glory of sitting on the throne for us, and he says, imitate me after you have faith, wash people's feet, go low.

It might cost you something, and that's what it means to be unashamed, is knowing that, coming to grips with that, knowing that there's a hope beyond the horizon of our temporal lives, of perfection, of a life without tears, but for now it might cost, it will cost.

And that's what I think he means here about being unashamed. And then secondly and lastly, the last reason I think is this, he listed in 1 Corinthians 18 through 25 all sorts of people that weren't believers in Christ, that were also ashamed of the gospel, or who said, it's foolishness, it's silly, I'm embarrassed by it, I don't want to hear it, or it made them angry, they were offended by it.

He says the word of the cross is foolishness. And that was particularly to the kind of the academics of the day, to the wise, to the intelligentsia of the day.

Why? Because it was too simple. They wanted a philosophy, a nuanced, intricate philosophy that gives people power, and the gospel doesn't do that.

[31 : 22] Actually, why is it so offensive? Why do people feel embarrassed by it, or so upset with it? So antagonistic against it, and Paul tells us right here, because it is power, it is the power of God and to salvation, it's not neutral, it never goes forth without power.

It has that power to change the whole world, to turn over the Mediterranean Sea as it did in just 100 years. It's powerful, it's the power of salvation, and it doesn't say that it empowers us primarily, or that it is a source of some type of political or physical power.

No, it, the gospel, is the power of salvation, it's in it, which means when you come up to grips with it and see it, you have to wrestle with the fact that it's calling you to deny your power, to be humble, to throw yourself before it, to lose, to bow the knee, and the philosophers don't want that, and the wise and the Greeks, they don't want that, and so many don't want it.

You'll hear people even today, just like then, say, you worship a savior that came in humility and weakness and died at the hands of his own creatures, you say, that gospel, that news is too weak for me, or you'll hear, you're telling me that no matter what I've done, all I have to do is say yes to this man, this Jesus, and I can be forgiven, that's too easy.

It's too weak, or in the progressive moderns often, in big cities, like Edinburgh, but like London and New York perhaps, or like the Greeks, it's too simplistic, it's not nuanced enough, it's not enough philosophy and enough religion and enough commitment to religious practices, it's just too easy, it's too simplistic, it's too weak, it's too all of these things.

[33 : 16] And so everybody throughout all of human history has been embarrassed and ashamed and had versions and been offended by the gospel because it's exclusive, it's exclusive, it's Jesus Christ saying I'm the only way, I claim to be the only hope of the nations, you will not have salvation except through me, and the power is that the Holy Spirit comes to all of us who are naturally offended by the gospel and changes us, helps us to break through, like it happened to Luther to see, to know, to have faith, to be changed, to feel the power of its surge right through our very being.

I'll just close with this, in Mark 8 and Luke chapter 9, Jesus says something very grave and he gives a warning and he says, whoever is ashamed of me and my words, I will be ashamed of them before my Father, whoa, in other words, whoever publicly says no to me before other people, I will say no to them before my Heavenly Father.

Now he gives that as a warning, but at the same time, read on Peter, Peter was his friend, his companion, a man of his own heart, they loved each other dearly, and Peter had seen the miracles, Peter had seen bodies raised from the dead in the presence of Jesus, Peter had seen blind men get their sight, Peter had seen deaf people get their hearing back in the presence of Jesus, and when the man of power went to the cross for Peter, Peter said three times publicly, I am ashamed of him, I am ashamed of him, I am ashamed of him.

After Jesus had said, if you say you are ashamed of me before others, I will say no to you before my Father, but the power of the cross, just a few days later, Jesus sits down with Peter at the beach and says, Peter, take this bread, drink this wine, eat this fish, you said ashamed, ashamed, ashamed, and now I say to you, do you love me, love me, love me?

If you will confess and repent, if you will say, I love you, I love you, I love you, then your thrice pronouncement of shame and embarrassment before me, it will be wiped away, it will be wiped away.

[36 : 28] He is so compassionate, even to the unrighteous. Let's pray. Father, we give thanks to you for the gospel, we want to know the power of God unto salvation, so we ask Lord for some maybe today for the first time that you would give them faith for some, that you would renew them, that they would have their hearts broken maybe once more, that for some that we would be strengthened to be courageous and unashamed of the gospel, so we ask for these things, in Jesus' name, amen.