

The Gospel

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[0 : 0 0] And this is God's word. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith. As it is written, the righteous shall live by faith. Martin Lloyd-Jones, who was the great preacher of London in the 20th century, he preached five or six straight sermons on these two verses in the 1950s, I think it was.

And he said something very big about these two verses. He said, there are no two verses more important in all of Scripture than these. And then he said that these two verses are so important because they are the rock bottom foundation of Protestantism.

Now, it's a new year and in the next couple of weeks we're going to start two new sermon series, Mark and Isaiah. But we have some opportunities for some standalone sermons and it's always tough to pick what you're going to preach on.

Whenever those opportunities come, I like a series. Because I know, I want to be told what I'm going to preach, not have to pick. But why not two of the most important verses in all the Bible if we have an opportunity to pick.

[1 : 3 1] And so here they are, Romans 1, 16 to 17. The reason Lloyd-Jones said that is because, the reason he said that these are the rock bottom foundation of Protestant Christian faith is because Martin Luther, Martin Luther in the 1500s, when the Protestant Reformation began, these were the two verses that he hung his hat on.

Many preachers, when they preach on Romans 1, 16 to 17, bring up Luther because Luther writes about how in 1519 he had what we've come to call the tower experience.

He was in a monastery in Wittenberg, Germany and he had an experience where he came to understand what these two verses mean for the first time. Before that, he said that when he read Romans 1, 16 to 17, that he hated these two verses.

And he said that he hated them because he thought that everything about it, everything about what Paul says here meant bad news, not good news. And so when he was in that tower in 1519 and the Holy Spirit helped him to realize what Paul's saying here, this is what he wrote about it.

He said, I felt that I was altogether born again and that I had entered paradise itself through open gates and a totally other face of the entire scriptures showed itself to me for the first time.

[3 : 0 0] And so Luther says when he realized what Romans 1, 16 to 17 meant, that he felt as if he had just stepped through the gates of paradise. Now, no matter where you are tonight, if you're a 50 year Christian or you're coming tonight still curious about the truths of Christianity and the claims, all of us want to step through the gates of paradise.

And Romans 1, 16 to 17 can do that. It can do that for you. It did it for Luther. He had hated it and then he saw it and he stepped through the gate.

And that's exactly what Paul offers here. That's exactly what God offers here through Paul tonight. And the interesting thing, the striking thing is for Luther, it was all about what Paul means by the phrase, the righteousness of God.

But that's not actually Paul's main point. Paul's main point is really clear. It's the first few words of verse 16. He says, I am not ashamed of the gospel. That's the main point.

And then he says, because of the righteousness of God, because it's the power of salvation. And so we've got to think about two things. We'll take them in reverse order. Paul tells us about the gospel second, but we're going to think about it first.

[4 : 22] What's the gospel? What is the power that Paul's talking about? And then second, ask, how can we be unashamed of the gospel in 2023? Okay, so first, the gospel, two things about the gospel that Paul mentions.

The first is the word itself. We Christians, we use the word gospel all the time. We write it on everything. We talk about it all the time. Romans uses the word gospel more than any other letter in the New Testament.

And this is the third time already when you get to Romans 116 that Paul has used the word gospel. So he mentions it in verse one. He talks about the gospel of God. He mentions it in verse nine.

He talks about the gospel of the Son of God. So this is the third time. And the word gospel gets used 134 times in the New Testament. And it's the Greek word, the evangel.

So when we say evangelism, we mean telling somebody about the gospel. And we call it evangelism because the Greek word for gospel is the evangel or the Evangelion.

[5 : 33] Now, a commentator, many commentators point out just the basic makeup of that word. I've mentioned this before from this pulpit, but evangel is E-V-A-N-G-E-L.

And so the back half of the word, if you take the prefix away, is the word angel. And the reason for that is because an angel, the word angel just means message. An angel is a messenger and an angel is also just a noun that means message.

And the E-V at the front means good. And so the word gospel very literally means a good message or as we often say, good news. Now, that's simple. And for many of you that's old hat, you know that the gospel means good news, the good message.

But it's really important to say that this is the word that the Bible writers chose. This is the word that Jesus chose to use when talking about what he came for.

And the reason that's so important is because in the first century, when Jesus chooses this word, when John the Baptist chooses this word, when Paul chooses this word, this is not a religious word.

[6 : 42] It's not a word that they made up. It's not a word that hadn't existed. In fact, the first instance we have of the use of evangel is about 500 years prior to Jesus' birth.

And this was a word that was being used all over the place actually, all the time. You would have seen it very regularly. And the place that was most common for it to be used was in the Roman Empire.

If Rome went out as they always did and fought a great battle against the barbarian hordes of Gaul or wherever it might be, and they win that battle, they would send a messenger with the angel, the message.

And he would come and stand on the hills outside of Rome and he would wave the flag and it would be the evangel to the city. And everybody in the city of Rome would know the evangel has been proclaimed.

The good news, we've done it again. We are very powerful. We are very good fighters. We keep beating back all the barbarians. That's the evangel. That's how the word was used all the time.

[7 : 46] And that means that Jesus and John the Baptist and Paul and many others co-opped this term. And they take it and they pack it full of new meaning. And the reason that they choose it is because everybody in the Roman Empire knew that the evangel in Greek meant good news.

They knew that it was a word that meant something like a messenger standing on the hill waving a flag saying, we've done it. We've won. And as one preacher famously puts it, he says that that means the gospel is more like opening the newspaper than going to see a counselor.

Everybody knew what it meant and it means good news. In other words, the gospel, it's very simple, but it's very important that the gospel is not advice.

It's not good advice. It's not like going to see a pastor. It's not like coming to see me or Derek or somebody and saying, I need you to help me think through this decision.

And it's not like going to see a counselor and saying, can you work with me through my problems? Those are important things, but that's not what the gospel is. The gospel is the proclamation on the hillside that God has done something.

[9 : 05] It's news. It's not advice. It's more like a messenger or a newspaper rather than somebody telling you a command. And that's the reason that Paul picks this word because the people understood evangel means something has happened.

It's history. It's not advice. Now, the second thing Paul points us to here, not just the word. The word means that there's news. God's done something.

It's the gospel of what God has done, the good news of what God has done. But of course, news has to have content. So news has to have something that it points to.

And so what's the content of that news? And this is where it gets difficult. So we've got to buckle down for just a moment because verse 17.

Verse 17, Paul says, here's the gospel. In the gospel, in it, which is gospel, the righteousness of God has been revealed.

[10 : 05] So you say, Paul, what is the news? What's the good news? In this good news, Paul says, this is what he wants to tell you, the righteousness of God has been revealed. Now, if you say tonight, what does that mean? What does it mean to say in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed?

Then it's good to know that millions, if not hundreds of millions of pages have been written on what that little phrase means.

So many trees have been cut down to try to answer the question, what does Romans 117 mean? It's the biggest question of all the New Testament, probably. What does this little phrase that Paul uses mean?

And it's very famous because in part because in the 1500s when Martin Luther tried to decide or figure out what it means, when he looked at it for most of his life, he came to the conclusion that he hated the gospel because of what he thought it meant.

And this is what he writes. Listen to this. He says, when I read Romans 1, I did not love, yes, I hated God. The righteous God who punishes sinners and secretly, if not blasphemously, I was angry with God.

[11 : 31] I labored as to how to understand Paul's phrase, the righteousness of God revealed in the gospel. I sought anxiously, but the expression was locked away from me.

Now, Paul Luther said that his entire life he wrestled with this person, he hated it because he couldn't understand it. And the reason for that is because he understood well what the word righteousness means.

What does righteousness mean? Righteousness means to be conformed entirely to God's character, to have total conformity in your character, your heart, and in your actions, your life.

To live your life with the same character that God possesses. That's what it means to be righteous. And Luther knew that if a person is to see God and to have salvation and to be near to God, then they would have to have righteousness.

They would have to have a life and a love in their heart that conforms totally to the character of God. And so when he came and he looked at this, he said that he hated it. Now, here's why.

[12 : 43] Because every single one of us, no matter what you believe in today, tonight, many of you are Christians. Perhaps some of you are wrestling with Christianity or you're convinced otherwise.

But no matter where you are in life tonight, there's one thing that all of us share, and that's that we all feel the weight of guilt in our lives sometimes. Every single one of us, we don't have to be taught to experience shame because of something that we've done.

We all know that we've got thoughts and actions in our past that we're embarrassed by. And when those things happen and when those things are happening, the weight of guilt bubbles up deep down in the belly.

And then it starts to pour forth in a life of being ashamed of what you thought or did or said or the way you put your foot in your mouth or sent the wrong text message to the wrong person or whatever it might be.

All of us feel it. It doesn't matter what you believe in. If you're human, you know the weight of guilt. Now, you might not have a worldview that can explain why you feel guilty, but all of us feel it.

[13 : 52] And Luther felt it. And he knew that if he was going to see God that he could not have guilt, he had to be righteous. He had to conform totally to the character of God. And so here's what he thought Romans 117 meant, that in the gospel, when Jesus Christ came into the world, the righteousness of God was unveiled to the world.

Meaning, if you want to know what it takes to conform to the character of God, read the gospels. In other words, look at the life of Jesus. You want to know what it truly means to be perfect?

Read about Jesus and he'll show you. And when you look at Jesus' life and then you think about your life, Luther realized, my shame gets all the worse.

My guilt gets all the worse. He read Matthew 5 and 6. And when Jesus says in Matthew 5, the point of the Sermon on the Mount is that you've got to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Luther says, that's the gospel. The good news is that Jesus came into the world to say to me, you've got to be perfect as God is perfect if you want to be righteous and see God. And so he said, if that's the news that Jesus has come into the world to show me by example what it means to be righteous, I hate it.

[15 : 09] It's not good news, it's bad news. He felt crushed by it because he had given up his whole life to God. He had become a monk and lived in a monastery and said he would never have a relationship and all sorts of things.

And he had studied the Bible more than anybody and he had prayed like nobody's business and he said, I cannot stop sinning. And so he felt crushed by the gospel.

He thought that the gospel meant when Jesus came, the great example has come. This is what it looks like to truly be righteous. And he knew that when he looked at it, he wasn't it at all.

Now look, on that day in 1519, the tower experience, the penny dropped. And he realized that Paul meant something different.

And he said that when he woke up, when the Holy Spirit woke him up, it was like walking through the gates of paradise. What did Paul mean?

[16:10] Here's what Paul meant, very brief. Here's a way to think about it. Translate it just slightly differently. In the gospel, the righteousness provided by God has been revealed in faith.

You see, he realized all of a sudden from reading the rest of Romans that Romans 1.17, the great thesis statement of Paul, does not mean that the good news is that Jesus has come into the world to simply show you what it means to be righteous by an example.

Instead, it means that Jesus Christ has come into the world to give you the righteousness that you could never have on your own. In the gospel, the righteousness of God was provided to you by God.

The good news is that righteousness, the exact thing you need to stand in the presence of God, true justice, no shame, no guilt to be without error from top to bottom.

It's been given in the gospel of God. And that's the very reason that the gospel is good news and not bad news, like Luther had thought.

[17:26] Now, the reason we know that, I just want to read one verse and we'll move on, is because you got to read the rest of Romans. That was the mistake Luther was making. And then when you read Romans 3.21 and 22, it says it exactly.

In Romans 3.21, it says, the righteousness of God has been revealed apart from the law. And instead, how verse 22, the righteousness of God has been revealed through having faith in Jesus Christ.

In other words, the true gift has come not by obeying, but by a gift, by simply believing. And so the good news, the evangel for 2023, as it was for the first century, is that the righteousness you need to see the living God has come in Jesus Christ as a gift to you.

That's the thesis statement of the book of Romans. It's the thesis of Paul's entire ministry. It's the gift that God has given out. All right.

The conceptual world of Paul is not always easy to grasp. And the phrase, the righteousness of God has been revealed is not always the easiest thing to hang your heart on.

[18:42] It's the intellectual side of it. Let me give you the metaphorical side, the image. Because the Bible not only tells it to you in word, but it gives you these images to think about.

And probably the most consistent image for this same message from Genesis to Revelation is through the metaphor of clothing. It happens in the Old Testament and the New Testament a number of times.

And in the book of Isaiah, especially, it pops up. Isaiah 64. Isaiah 64 says, all of our righteous deeds, all of our attempts at being just people, are like filthy garments before the Lord.

So the metaphor, the Bible says, is imagine that when you stand before the Lord and you put on clothing woven out of all of your attempts at good works and being just, it would appear before God as nothing but filth.

There's so much bad mixed into it. But then Isaiah 61 says, but God has clothed me with garments of salvation. He's wrapped me with a new robe, a robe of righteousness.

[19:51] And so the Old Testament idea that Paul is talking about here is that every attempt at being righteous is nothing but filth for us. But yet God has come and said, but I'll just give you a different outfit.

And he's hung over your head a robe of righteousness. It's entirely a gift. Here's the New Testament image of what Paul is saying. It's when the prodigal son and the prodigal daughter come home from the horizon after living a life far away from the Lord, far away from the Father.

And the Father runs out to them on the horizon and he throws over his son and throws over his daughter his best robe.

And he slides on their finger the signet ring and he gives them his own sandals to wear and he ushers them back home. That's what Paul means. That everything you need to stand, to stand at the party of the fattened calf, to be in the presence of the living God, to be in the place that you are made to be is because God the Father has run out to the horizon of existence.

And he's thrown over you in Jesus Christ a robe that you did not make, a ring that you did not forge and sandals that are not yours. The gift of righteousness, the gift of exactly what you need in Jesus Christ and through Jesus Christ.

[21 : 18] Now, let me close this long point and we'll finish by just saying this. This is not a costless gift. It is free.

The gift of righteousness is free to us, but it was not free to God. And maybe one more image to drive this home. When you read through the Gospels, if you read through the Gospels, one of the things you can do to try to read the Gospels in power is to ask yourself why you read, where am I in this story?

How does Matthew, Mark, Luke, John want me to see myself in each of the stories and each of the characters? If there is one place, I think, that we can go to to find ourselves in the Gospels, it's at the very end.

At the very end, Jesus was about to die. And he had been arrested and beaten. And he was brought out by the Roman governor, as it was the tradition on the Passover, where the governor would take two criminals and he would place them before the people, the Jews, and he would give them the power to vote, the power to cry out to release one of the prisoners.

And on that day, you remember probably that the governor brought out Jesus Christ and he brought out Barabbas. And Barabbas was a hardened, murderous criminal, and Jesus Christ was the one who had solved the public health crisis.

[22 : 53] You know, Jesus had been going around to all these towns and getting rid of all the diseases, you know, that COVID couldn't survive in the place that Jesus was around. Everywhere he went, there was no more sickness and people weren't hungry.

And even if you don't know who he is or who he was, you saw his life and you knew that this man is putting away disease. He's feeding people that are starving to death.

And the crowd cries out and says, we want this one to die, Jesus Christ, and we want Barabbas to be set free. Now look, that means the day that Jesus Christ went to the cross for you.

The guilty man went free precisely because the innocent man was condemned. And when you read the Gospels, if you were to find yourself in one place, it's in the crowd, but even more, it's Barabbas.

I'm Barabbas, you're Barabbas. All of us stood, you see, the guilty go free because the innocent one was condemned. And that means that the righteousness of God is a gift to us, it's free to us, but it was not free to God.

[24 : 12] And C.S. Lewis calls this the Great Exchange, him for us and we for him. But Lewis got that from Martin Luther. Luther was the first one to use that phrase. He called it the Glorious Exchange.

And tonight in 2023, you cannot become righteous before God of your own accord, but you can respond.

And you can respond tonight in faith. And Paul says at the end here that it's from faith to faith, which means it's faith from top to bottom. This year is the year of faith.

At the beginning of this year, Christian or a curious skeptic, it's an invitation to commit yourself to the life of faith because in faith, in Jesus Christ, the righteousness of God is gifted to you.

Now, if that's you tonight, let me close with this, secondly and briefly. If you believe this message tonight and Christ has clothed you in a new garment, the righteousness of God, the main point is to actually hear that Paul says, I am not ashamed of that gospel.

[25 : 31] We know Paul was not ashamed. Paul over and over again said, I glory in the gospel. I'm not ashamed. I glory in it. He said, and Paul was beaten for it and he was crushed for it and ultimately murdered for it.

We know Paul is not ashamed of the gospel, but the reason that he said this is because struggling with being ashamed of the gospel is a real thing. And he even said to Timothy in the second letter that he wrote to Timothy, don't be ashamed of the testimony of the Lord of the gospel.

And so it's probably the case that Timothy was struggling with being ashamed of the gospel in his own ministry. Now, Lloyd Jones, when he's preaching on this, he, this is how he puts it.

He says that Paul is calling all of us tonight to ask the question, am I ashamed of the gospel? And this is what Lloyd Jones says, if you have never known the temptation of being ashamed of the gospel, it's probably not due to the fact that you're an exceptionally good Christian, but that your understanding of the Christian gospel has never been very clear.

Oh boy. Lloyd Jones says, if you say tonight, I've never struggled with the temptation to be ashamed of the gospel. It's probably not because you're an exceptionally great Christian, but because your understanding of the gospel may not be clear.

[27 : 02] And this is what he means by it. What he means by it is that when you understand this gospel, that the righteousness of God has been revealed in Jesus Christ as a gift, and all that it says and all that it means, you know that the gospel is naturally offensive.

That the gospel message is explicitly offensive precisely because it's inclusive and exclusive and explicit. And one preacher puts it like this. He says, think about the offense of the gospel in the first century and today simultaneously.

And here this is how you could think about it. Paul puts it like this. He says, think about the first century, 1 Corinthians 1. The gospel to Judaism in the first century is a stumbling block, Paul says it. Why?

Because the Jewish expectation of a Messiah was that the Messiah would come in utter power and that he would march straight to Caesar's Roman, that he would take over the empire. And when the gospel is preached, the Messiah is a poor carpenter's son who came from Nazareth, which was kind of a dump in the first century. And he was crucified and murdered as a common criminal.

And you see, in the mind of Judaism, the gospel is too weak. It's not nearly powerful enough to be the Messianic hope that was promised. Or if you think about the Greeks, Paul says, well, to the Jews, it's stumbling block.

[28 : 33] To the Greeks, what did he say? He said, it's foolishness. And the Greeks of the first century are just like modern progressive secularists today. They say, well, look, we know too much. We've got philosophy. We've got science. We've got the empirical method.

We've got way too much data to keep believing in this. We know too much. The Greeks were saying the same thing in the first century, that the gospel is foolishness. It's foolishness. Then it was foolishness in the first century. So many it's foolishness.

Today, I heard Joe Rogan recently say, when are people going to stop talking about Jesus? That was the, because he said, we've studied too much. Science has taken us too far. And so for Judaism, the gospel is too weak for the Greeks. And for modern secularists, the gospel is too simple.

It's not sophisticated and intellectual enough. There's not enough research behind it. But what about the world religions from the first century till now? The world religions say, they look at Christianity and they say, look, if you're telling me that all you've got to do is believe that this man died and rose again for you. And that's it. You're in.

Your God has looked on you with favor. And the world religions say, that can't be enough. What about morality? What about conformity? What about discipline? What about right and ritual? And so the world religions say, it's too easy. Judaism says it's too weak.

[30 : 04] Modern progressivists like the Greeks say, it's too simple. We know too much. It's not sophisticated enough. The world religions look at the gospel and they say, it's way too easy. People's morals will get way too lax if it's that easy to get in.

Imagine the Romans, what did they say? Well, they said the same thing that Nietzsche said in the last century, the greatest atheist mind of the modern era. Nietzsche, like the Romans said, look, if God really was to come down and save the world, he wouldn't look like this. He would look a lot more like Hercules.

He would have big muscles and he'd be powerful and strong. He wouldn't be like this. And so the gospel, they said, is much too fragile. It produces weak people, Nietzsche said. And you imagine Paul walking into the great city of Rome, which is actually the point of Romans.

Paul writes Romans and says, I'm writing this letter because I want to come visit you and I want you to know that. Imagine him getting there and walking into Romans, the eternal city, the city of pomp and grandeur, and walking into the great halls of philosophy and saying, believe on the poor carpenter's boy from Nazareth who died as a common criminal, but he didn't stay dead.

And they would have laughed at him and they did laugh at him and they murdered him eventually for it. And the reason Paul says, don't be ashamed of the gospel is because when you understand the gospel, you realize that it's easy to be ashamed of the gospel.

[31 : 31] Because the world and all of its flavors and concepts stands against the gospel. And so Paul comes and says, don't be ashamed of the gospel and the gospel would flip the Roman Empire on its head within 200 years.

Now look, truly the close. If you go out into the world today in a great city, a world city like Edinburgh, and you say to people, Jesus Christ, Christianity is the inspiration for my life.

You know, I want to be a better person because of Jesus. I look at what Jesus did and I'm inspired. I want to change. I want to be disciplined because of Jesus.

Jesus is the wholesome religious element that I need to fill out and round out my existence. Nobody is going to be offended by the gospel.

But if you go out into the world and put Christ at the center of your life and say, Jesus Christ is a historical fact who rose from the grave in the middle of history, who claims holistic kingship on the entirety of who I am, who claims holistic kingship on every human life, who demands my time, my talent, and my treasure precisely because of who he is, then the world will always stand against that message.

[32 : 59] And so there will always be the temptation to be ashamed of the gospel. Now let me just ask this question. I'm asking this question tonight. Am I ashamed of the gospel?

Here's one way to know a diagnostic of how this looks like in my personal life and your personal life. Do my colleagues, friends, neighbors of one year, five year, 10 year, 15 year, 20 year know that Christ is the center of my life?

Do the people that you're around most often in your life that don't believe for the last year, five years, 10 years, 20 years, 15 years, whatever it may be, did they know, will they say of you to another person, Christianity is at the center of that person's life?

He's a little weird for it. He's a little too religious. Will they say that? And it's one way to measure and to ask, am I tempted to be ashamed of the gospel?

Why should we be unashamed? We'll give the last word to Lloyd-Jones. Lloyd-Jones, when he's preaching on this, says, here's the reason to not be ashamed of the gospel.

[34 : 14] Here's the reason, here's why you shouldn't say you're unashamed of the gospel. We can never say it like this.

You know, I'm unashamed of the gospel. I have full confidence in the gospel because I've been a believer for 20 years, for five years, for a year, whatever it may be.

And it's always made me feel happy. And, you know, that Jesus brought something to my life I hadn't had before. That when I looked at Jesus, I felt better.

I slept. I started sleeping better. My habits got better. My emotional life changed. All of that can be true.

And the gospel does do that. But that can never be the main reason to chase after and make the gospel the center of your life. Not at all. And you know why?

[35 : 12] Because every single religion, every single philosophy, and every single self-help productivity book, people say the exact same thing. You know, people say all the time, I joined the gym and found this exercise class, and I'm sleeping better.

I feel better. My emotional life has changed. This is my community. These are my people. I can't stop going six a.m. every week. It's been the best thing that's ever happened to me. If you say that that's the reason that Jesus is the centerpiece of your life, then you've not missed the center.

And here it is. This is what Lloyd-Jones says. He says the only reason, the primary reason, the reason that you've got to choose to say, I'm not ashamed of the gospel is not because of the way it's made you feel or how it's made you feel.

Or how it's helped you to sleep better. But only because you looked at it and said, this is true. That's the question.

Did this man die and rise from the dead three days later in the middle of history? If he did, if he did, you have to put your entire life completely around him.

[36 : 25] And if he didn't, then Paul says, leave it. It's futile. It's not feelings, but truth that matters in being unashamed of the gospel.

Jesus Christ did rise from the dead in the middle of history. That's the truth. And so tonight you can believe, you can be righteous before God, and we can step into the new year unashamed.

So let's pray and ask God that he would do that for us. Lord, we give thanks for the righteousness of God revealed in the gospel and we know it to be power.

That's the reason it's so good. It's because it truly works because it is real power. And so we ask tonight, Lord, that you would help us to be unashamed. And we pray that in Jesus' name.

Amen.