



Let's continue worship our holy God by turning to the Holy Scriptures. Our text for today is Romans 1:16-23. So far, we have studied Paul's greeting in verses 1-7, and his expressed longing in verses 8-15 to be with his fellow believers in Rome. Now in verses 16-17 Paul transitions into the primary theme of his letter, the righteousness of God revealed through the gospel. We desperately need this gospel, as Paul will show. So let us hear the word of the Lord through Paul as it comes to us in Romans 1:16-23:

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."

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Lord, simply by reading this text, we see the contrast between your righteousness and our wickedness, your wisdom and our foolishness, your goodness and our corruption. Thank you, Father, that we can always count on you to tell us the truth about yourself and about ourselves so that we can be put into a right relationship with you. We pray that your Holy Spirit would open our eyes to see wonderful things from your Word today. We ask this in the precious name of your one and only Son Jesus. Amen.

This past week began with sunshine, followed by two days of rain. Then, thankfully, the sunshine returned. This did not come as a surprise to most of us because we checked the forecast and adjusted our expectations accordingly.

It would be wise for us to do the same as we move into this next section of Romans. It begins with beautiful sunshine. But starting in verse 18, things turn dark and gloomy. A tropical depression sets in and doesn't lift until the end of chapter three. But there's a reason for that, as we will see. I share this "textual forecast" so you can be prepared.

The main point, the transformative truth, of the passage we just read is basically this:

***God's righteousness is revealed as
sinners respond to the gospel in faith.***

Because we're sinners, we need salvation, and that must come from God. We can't save ourselves because we're our worst enemy. Scripture says, "Salvation is from the Lord" (Ps. 3:8; Jonah 2:9). In Romans 1:16-17, Paul explains how *God's righteousness is revealed in the gospel*.

**God's Righteousness Revealed
in the Gospel
(vv. 16-17)**

Paul begins by saying, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel..." The word "for" connects Paul's statement here in verse 16 to his statement in verse 15: "I am eager to preach the gospel..." Paul was "eager to preach the gospel" because he was "*not ashamed of the gospel*." Here in verse 16, Paul uses a literary tool known as litotes – a deliberate understatement in which something positive is expressed by the negative of its contrary.

My wife employed the use of litotes a few days ago without realizing it. When I got home from work and saw her, I complimented her on her appearance. Ruthie responded by saying, "You don't look so bad yourself." That was her way of saying, "You look good." Likewise, when Paul says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel," he's really saying, "I am extremely proud of the gospel." That's why Paul was so "eager" to proclaim it.

Paul then explains *why* he is proud 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" (v. 16). In this single statement Paul lists several reasons why he was not ashamed of the gospel.

1. **the power of the gospel:** Why be ashamed of power? The city of Rome, which Paul hoped to visit after sending this letter, certainly wasn't ashamed of power. As the capital of the world empire, Rome boasted of its military might, its territorial expansion, its economic strength, its magnificent architecture, and its political power. But all this paled in comparison to the gospel, for it is the "power of God" at work. The Greek word for "power" is *dunamis*, from which we get the word "dynamite." Some like to think of the gospel as the "dynamite of God." But it's probably better described as the *dynamism* of God. *Dynamism* is "the quality of being characterized by vigorous activity and progress." Just a couple of decades after Jesus' death and resurrection, Paul testified in his letter to the Colossians,

This same Good News that came to you is going out all over the world. It is bearing fruit everywhere by changing lives, just as it changed your lives from the day you first heard and understood the truth about God's wonderful grace.

- Colossians 1:6 NLT

Whereas the Roman Empire collapsed after a few centuries, the unshakeable kingdom of Christ continues to grow to this day. Jesus said, "I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). That's because the gospel is "the power of God" at work. Why be ashamed of that?

2. **the provision of the gospel:** “it is the power of God *for salvation*.” Scripture clearly states, “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be *saved* through him” (John 3:17). Sin leads to death – eternal ruin and alienation from God. But God sent Jesus into this world to be our heaven-sent substitute. He lived a perfect life on our behalf and took the penalty that we rightly deserved because of our rebellion against God. Three days later after laying down his life, Jesus took it up again, proving that he had conquered sin and death for all would repent of their sin and put their trust completely in him.
3. **the proffer of the gospel:** “it is the power of God for salvation *for everyone who believes*.” To *proffer* is to present something to be received or rejected. That’s what the gospel is – the message from God “concerning his Son” that can either be rejected or received. This message was “to the Jew first.” The people of Israel were the first ones to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. God worked through them to prepare the way for the Messiah. Sadly, most of them rejected Jesus, at which point the gospel went to the Gentiles. But all this was part of God’s plan, and Paul will talk about this in chapters 9-11. But the point here is that the gospel is a universal message that everyone must receive or reject. That’s why John wrote,

The one who believes in the Son has eternal life, but the one who rejects the Son will not see life; instead, the wrath of God remains on him.

- John 3:36

Paul will talk about God’s wrath in the paragraphs that follow. But here he is emphasizing God’s free gift of salvation. It has already been purchased “with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Peter 1:19), but it benefits only those who believe.

If I wrote you a check for \$100 and presented it to you as a gift, you could either receive it or reject it. The funds are there. The check is good. But it does *you* no good unless you cash it. That’s what God wants you to do with the gospel. Take it to the bank. “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31).

There’s a fourth reason why Paul was not ashamed of the gospel, and this concerns . . .

4. **the purpose of the gospel:** “For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’” The “righteousness of God” is a central theme in Romans. The phrase appears nine times in Paul’s letters, eight of which are in Romans (3:5, 21-22, 25-26; 10:3 [2x]). “The righteousness of God” can be understood in three ways, depending on the context:¹
 - a. “God’s righteousness” – an attribute of God. But the “righteousness of God” understood strictly in this sense is not “good news” for sinners, seeing how Paul immediately goes on to say in the very next verse, “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and *unrighteousness of men*.” That’s *bad* news, not good news, for sinners like us, so it would be hard to see how “the righteousness of God” is revealed in the gospel if it refers only to God’s attribute.

¹ The bulleted explanation that follows is a summary of Douglas J. Moo’s comments in *Romans: The NIV Application Commentary*, gen. ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), pp. 51-52.

- b. “Righteousness *from* God” – a status given to people by God. This is how Paul uses the term when sharing his testimony in Philippians 3:9. He says,

“I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the *righteousness from God* based on faith.”

- Philippians 3:9

This righteousness is outside of us. It is alien to us; it is foreign to us. It comes *from* God. Romans 5:17 calls it “the free gift of righteousness.” It is a status given to people by God through faith in Christ. That certainly seems to be the sense in which the term “the righteousness of God” is used here in Romans 1:17.

This ties in to a third sense in which “the righteousness of God” can be understood:

- c. “Righteousness *done by* God” – God’s saving activity.

In the Old Testament, there is often a close connection between God’s righteousness and his saving activity. In some cases, God’s *righteousness* and his *salvation* are nearly synonymous. For instance, the Lord declared through his prophet Isaiah,

I am bringing my *righteousness* near,
it is not far away;
and my *salvation* will not be delayed.

- Isaiah 46:13 NIV

My *righteousness* draws near speedily,
my *salvation* is on the way....

My *salvation* will last forever,
my *righteousness* will never fail.

My *righteousness* will last forever,
my *salvation* through all generations.

- Isaiah 51:5, 6, 8

God’s saving activity is connected to his righteousness, his covenant faithfulness to those God has called to be his people. Remember, that’s how Paul refers to the believers in Rome, as those who are “loved by God and called to be saints” (Rom. 1:7).

The word “righteous” in Hebrew [*šad·dî·q*] means “in the right,” and the word “wicked” [*rə·šā*] means “in the wrong.”² The gospel is the message of God’s saving act by which he brings sinners into a right relationship with himself.

How? By giving them his own righteousness as a gift. This gift is received “by faith.” Paul emphasizes this strongly in Romans 1:17, saying, “For in it [the gospel], the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith.” This an intensified phrase that means “entirely of faith.” That’s why the translators of the New International Version translate verse 17 this way:

² A good example of this appears in Exodus 9:27: “Then Pharaoh sent and called Moses and Aaron and said to them, ‘This time I have sinned; the LORD is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong.’”

For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is *by faith from first to last*, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”

- Romans 1:17 NIV

The last part of that verse could also be translated as “The one who is righteous by faith shall live.” This quote is taken from Habbakuk 2:4. It’s actually just the second half of the verse. In the first half of the verse the Lord describes the king of Babylon, saying, “Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous by faith will live.” Because the heart of the king of Babylon was lifted up with pride, he would die. But those who trusted in the Lord would live. This part of Habakkuk 2:4 is quoted three times in the New Testament: Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38, and here in Romans 1:17. Scripture consistently teaches in both the Old and New Testaments that salvation is from the Lord, and that it is given to those who trust in the Lord rather than themselves.

***God’s righteousness is revealed as
sinners respond to the gospel in faith.***

That’s good news, but only if we see ourselves as sinners in need of God’s salvation. Remember the textual forecast I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon? Well, now we move from sunshine to dark clouds and a thunderstorm. For Paul makes a dramatic shift from the bad news to the good news. From God’s righteousness revealed in the gospel to *God’s wrath revealed in human experience*.

**God’s wrath revealed in
human experience
(vv. 18-23)**

You may wonder why Paul moves from the good news to the bad news instead of from the bad news to the good news. Studies show that the vast majority of people would rather hear the bad news first, then the good news. The reason is because if they know they’re going to get bad news, they’d rather get it over with, then hear the good news so that things end on a high note. But research shows that giving good news first, then bad news can be *behavior*. For instance, a doctor may say, “Your blood sugar levels are good, but your cholesterol is really high.” You need to lose weight and lay off fatty foods, or you could have a heart attack or stroke.” People don’t like hearing this kind of news but may do something about it.³

This seems to be Paul’s strategy here in Romans 1. He begins with the good news and then shares the bad news because he wants his recipients to do something about it. He wants those who are not yet right with God to see the awful state that they are in and to put their faith in Jesus Christ for salvation. He wants those who have already trusted in Christ to come to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the gospel, and to share Paul’s sense of urgency, obligation and eagerness to proclaim the gospel to others.

Listen carefully as Paul introduces the bad news in verses 18-23:

³ Cathy Newman, “Good News or Bad News: Which Do You Want First?” National Geographic, 18 November 2013. Retrieved on 24 September 2021 from <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/131115-good-news-bad-news-diagnosis-doctors-psychology-science>.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. ²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

The textual landscape grows dark as Paul moves from the sunshine of verses 16-17 to the darkness of verses 18-23. And this is only the beginning. We'll look at this text and the rest of chapter 1 in greater detail next week. But I want to introduce it today so that you can see the contrast between the righteousness of God being revealed in the gospel and the wrath of God being revealed in human experience.

God's wrath is not like ours – a short-fused, fly off the handle, fit of rage kind of wrath. God's wrath stems from his righteousness and refers to his intense hatred of all sin. Paul says, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men." Paul's language clearly depicts God as right and humans as wrong. "Ungodliness" speaks of humanity's lack of reverence for God. "Unrighteousness" refers to how our ungodliness manifests itself in our behavior toward one another. Paul will flesh this out more fully in verses 24-31.

But first Paul points out humanity's flagrant rebellion against their Creator. The evidence of God's "eternal power and divine nature" are all around us in the things he has created. We sang about this at the start of the service after reading about it in Psalm 19. God's eternal power, wisdom, goodness are evident all around us. As the hymnwriter put it, "Lord, how Thy wonders are displayed where'er I turn my eye: if I survey the ground I tread or gaze upon the sky." But human beings suppress this truth by the weight of their wickedness. This is deliberate, willful ignorance on their part. There's no such thing as a real atheist or agnostic – only rebels who refuse to glorify God or give thanks to him as their Creator.

Paul says in verses 22-23 that their refusal to glorify God or give thanks to him resulted in *futile thinking* and *foolish hearts*. "Claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things." In other words, "they so diminished the majesty and glory of God that they gave the title of 'god' to the images of things that were small and tiny."⁴ John Calvin wrote, "The human heart is a perpetual idol factory."

The most popular view of the human heart today is to see it as your most trustworthy guide. "Follow your heart" is the mantra of our day, and it stems from the idea that the human heart is essentially good. But God tells us something quite different. The Bible says,

⁴ Ambrosiaster, "Commentary on Paul's Epistles" (*ACCSR*, 42-43). Cited by Colin G. Kruse, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary, gen. ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), p. 98.

“The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.
Who can understand it?”

- Jeremiah 17:9

Then in the following verse God says,

“I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.”

- Jeremiah 17:10

“Far from being a good place with pure motives that is free to be true to itself, our hearts are deceitful places under the Lord’s scrutiny.”⁵ As we will see in the verses that follow, our hearts lead us ever further into darkness, confusion, and misery. Romans 1:18 does not say that God’s wrath *will* be revealed but that God’s wrath *is* revealed. It’s revealed through human experience – the consequences of our deliberate rebellion against God. It’s been well said that “the history of the world is the judgment of the world.”⁶

Our sin made the gospel necessary; God’s grace made it a reality.

***God’s righteousness is revealed as
sinners respond to the gospel in faith.***

Remember I said that the phrase the “righteousness of God” appears nine times in Paul’s letters, eight of which are in Romans? Well, the one other text where this phrase appears is in 2 Corinthians 5:21, which says,

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

- 2 Corinthians 5:21

That’s why the gospel is *good news*. In his book, *The Cross of Christ*, John Stott wrote,

The essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives that belong to God alone; God accepts penalties that belong to man alone.⁷

When we began introduced our study of Romans, I said the first reason we should study Romans is that it tells us the truth about God and about ourselves. Jesus said, “you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). Those who truly know Jesus and trust in him are delivered from the bondage of sin and walk in the light of God.

⁵ Philip Swann, “The human heart is a perpetual idol factory.” *Evangelical Magazine*, March/April 2021. Retrieved on 24 September 2021 at <https://www.evangelicalmagazine.com/article/the-human-heart-is-a-perpetual-idol-factory/>.

⁶ J. C. F. Schiller, cited by F. F. Bruce, *Romans*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 6, gen. ed. Leon Morris (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), p. 90.

⁷ John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 20th anniversary edition (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), p. 159.