

Sam Storms

Enjoying God Ministries

Romans #4

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The Gospel and the Power of God Unleashed!

Romans 1:16-17

I still vividly remember the first time I shared the gospel with another person, face-to-face. I had spoken at a couple of evangelistic rallies and shared my testimony about becoming a Christian. But this was the first time I sat across a table from one person and talked about Jesus.

I was a freshman at the University of Oklahoma. The individual was someone I knew from high school. We were sitting at a restaurant in Norman, and I was terrified. We talked about any number of other subjects, when I finally mustered up the courage to ask him if I could share something about my Christian faith. He said Yes.

Until I heard the simple response, “Yes,” I was literally shaking with fear. All sorts of questions raced through my head: Will he laugh at me? Will he get up and walk out? Will he ask me questions I can’t answer? Will he shout angrily and accuse me of being narrow-minded and bigoted? Will he spread false rumors about me to others we both knew? I was involved with Campus Crusade for Christ at the time, so I pulled out a Four Spiritual Laws booklet and slowly walked him through it. By God’s grace, he responded positively, and he prayed to receive Christ as his Lord and Savior.

I was 18 years old at the time, and I’m embarrassed to say that I was embarrassed to talk about Jesus openly and in public. That is no longer the case, but I suspect that many of you can identify with my initial fears. The bottom line is that in the moment, I was ashamed of the gospel. The Holy Spirit helped me overcome my hesitation, even as the Spirit undoubtedly helped the apostle Paul overcome his. And thus we read in Romans 1:16-17,

“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 to faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith’” (Rom. 1:16-17).

Are You Ashamed of the Gospel?

Shame is a powerful energy in the human soul. Sometimes we experience shame when we boast about something we think we can accomplish only then to fall flat on our face in public. For example, in 1986, in one of the first dunk contests hosted by the NBA during their All-Star weekend, most of those who volunteered for the competition were anywhere from 6'6" to 7' tall. But one participant, a player named Spud Webb, was only 5'6". No one expected much from him, but he proceeded to win the contest by out-dunking his Atlanta Hawks teammate, Dominique Wilkins, who stood 6'8". I suspect that Wilkins may well have been ashamed to have lost to a player more than a foot shorter than he.

Or suppose a 9th grade student makes a presentation in class about the most honorable person he knows, his dad. He brags on him and tells everyone what a great man he is. Later that week charges of embezzlement are brought to bear against this boy's dad, and he is later sent to prison for 5 years. That 9th grader would likely feel a great deal of shame and embarrassment.

Numerous other examples could be cited. You've practiced incessantly for your piano recital, only to freeze up during your performance, forgetting everything you thought you had learned. You hear people laughing in the audience, and you are filled with shame. Or a group of students begins comparing how they fared on the ACT or SAT tests, and you discover that your score is considerably lower than everyone else's.

You could likely avoid feeling ashamed if you had only studied more for the standardized test. You might have avoided shame if your dad had chosen not to steal from his company. And maybe if Dominique Wilkins had paid more attention to the remarkable leaping ability of Spud Webb and devoted himself to more practice time, he might have won the dunk contest and avoided being humiliated by the much shorter Webb.

There are any number of reasons why people today feel *ashamed* of the gospel. They live in constant fear of losing face, fear of losing friends, fear of being labelled a fanatic, fear of taunting and scorn, fear of losing influence. Paul undoubtedly had these same concerns. But he refused to yield to them. How?

Perhaps there was something Paul might have done to avoid being ashamed of the gospel. Perhaps he could have rephrased the nature of the gospel, eliminating any offensive elements in it. Or maybe he would be more selective and discerning when it came to the places and people where he shared the truth about the gospel. Or perhaps he could have worked hard on his public speaking skills or improved his physical appearance. Or maybe he could have used terminology when explaining the gospel that would make him and it more popular and winsome. But no.

You may recall that Jesus himself was confronted with the prospect of shame. We read in Hebrews 12:2 that it was "for the joy set before him" that "he endured the cross, despising the shame," and he "sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." Being nailed naked to a cross in public would almost always induce shame in the victim. But when Jesus felt the pressure to conform and avoid the cross, he said: "Shame. I despise you. I will not let you control my actions or rule in my heart. I will look to the reward that awaits me on the other side to defeat your power. I will meditate on the joy of glorifying my Father and redeeming men and women and spending eternity with them in the new heaven and new earth." Jesus felt the pressure to look good in the presence of his family and his followers, but he refused to let that prospect of shame hinder him from finishing the work that his Father had sent him to accomplish.

So, here is Paul declaring: “I refuse to let the words of mockery that come from the cultured Greeks prevent me from proclaiming the gospel. I refuse to let my fellow Jewish brothers and sisters shame me into denying the truth of the gospel. I am **not** ashamed of the gospel!” Why? For one simple reason. I’m not ashamed of the gospel because “it is the power of God unto salvation” (Rom. 1:16; see also 1 Cor. 1:18; 2:4-5; 4:19-20; 1 Thess. 1:5; also 2 Cor. 4:7; 6:7; 12:9; Eph. 3:7).

People today will try to shame you into denying the gospel or keeping silent about it, not because they say you are wrong or that the gospel is misguided. No, they will shame you for thinking that other people are wrong in what they believe. It is not your belief that offends them, but your attitude. The fact that you would insist not simply that your view is true but that all other views are false is what provokes their disdain. You are intolerant and arrogant and mean-spirited for preaching the gospel of Jesus, so they say. And sadly, that has led many Christians to cower in shame and to shut up and refuse to proclaim the gospel.

Here is what kept Paul from being embarrassed by or ashamed of the gospel.

“Jesus said to him, I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

“There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

Paul was not ashamed of the gospel because Jesus himself made it plain that there is no other hope for any human being apart from faith in him and his death and resurrection. Paul despised whatever shame he might otherwise have felt because he knew that “there is salvation in no one else.”

This doesn’t mean that he wasn’t “shamed” for preaching the gospel. He most certainly was. He was vilified and mocked and scorned and made fun of for preaching that salvation and forgiveness of sins could only come through faith in a crucified Messiah. He was shamed and subjected to public humiliation for claiming that Jesus was the Messiah. He was beaten and imprisoned and scourged and finally beheaded because of the gospel he proclaimed. But being “shamed” for preaching the gospel is far and away different from being “ashamed” of the gospel.

To put it as simply and as straightforward as possible, Paul says: “I am not ashamed of the gospel because when it is made known and preached and proclaimed ***the very power of the omnipotent God is released*** and secures for hell-deserving men and women the forgiveness of sins and salvation from judgment.”

In other words, Paul is not ashamed of the gospel because he knows that it can do what nothing else in all the universe can do. It can deliver men and women from condemnation and secure for them forgiveness of their sins and eternal life. No other religion can do this, not Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, or Islam. None of these religions provides a Savior like Jesus who could live a sinless life, die a substitutionary death, and rise again from the dead in order to bring us forgiveness and justification.

As wonderful as good physical health is, that will not guarantee eternal life. As uplifting as multiple caring friendships can be, they cannot save us. As helpful as is the best education that the best universities in the world can provide, it will not avail in the presence of an infinitely holy and righteous God. As

encouraging as are the many scientific and technological advances in our world, they are impotent to overcome our moral failures and idolatry and rebellion against God.

No amount of religious zeal nor worldly fame nor Roman military might nor wealth nor ethnic heritage nor anything else can do what the gospel can do. The power resident in the gospel and the gospel alone can save the lost, give hope to the hopeless, freedom to slaves, guidance to the wandering, purity to the polluted, and purpose to those convinced that life has no value. But there is power in the gospel. ***There is sin-killing, guilt-forgiving, wrath-satisfying, death-defeating power in the truth of who Jesus is and what he came to do.*** And he came to save us! So, let's slow down and make sure we know what Paul means when he speaks of this "***salvation***" that the gospel powerfully secures.

Salvation from What?

Many things could be said, but first and foremost Paul wants us to understand that the gospel has the power to bring believers in Jesus into eternal safety and joy in the presence of a righteous God. But the only way it can do that is to deliver or save us from the condemnation that our sin deserves. ***It is ultimately from God's just and holy wrath that we need to be saved.*** We see this over and over again in the NT.

"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Rom. 1:18).

"But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed" (Rom. 2:5).

"Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life" (Rom. 5:9-10).

Paul is thankful for the Thessalonian believers "who turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come" (1 Thess. 1:9-10).

It isn't from your low self-esteem that you need to be saved, or from the damaging effects of an abusive and dysfunctional family that you need to be saved. It isn't from ignorance or poverty or earthly injustice that you need to be saved. That isn't to say you shouldn't do all within your power with God's help to

overcome these tragic circumstances and experiences. It is simply to say that the worst they can do is make life miserable for you here on earth. But your greatest need is salvation from the misery of eternal damnation and condemnation. And that is what the gospel can do that nothing else can.

People will let you down. Your closest family members will often let you down. Your preferred Presidential candidate and his political party will let you down. But the gospel never will. It will always succeed in bringing you through the worst trials and temptations and persecution into God's glorious presence.

But the salvation that is available only in the gospel of God's Son, Jesus Christ, does not come automatically, unconditionally, or universally to all. It comes to "everyone," yes, but to "everyone who *believes*" (v. 16b). The truth of the gospel must be appropriated by the divinely appointed instrument of faith. Hearing it, applauding it, understanding it, even writing or reading a book about it, will not avail. You must believe it.

If you live in fear that there is something in you or about you that disqualifies you from receiving this salvation, you are wrong. It is there for "everyone," but only if you "believe"! You may have come from the wealthiest or the most wicked of families, with the highest or the least amount of education. You may think you are of the wrong ethnicity or that salvation comes only to men and not to women, or only to women and not to men. But Paul speaks a beautiful and hope-filled word to us when he says that this salvation is for "everyone who believes."

Thus, the only thing that ultimately and finally excludes you from inheriting this salvation is *unbelief*. If you persist in your rejection of Jesus, if you refuse to put your trust solely and wholly in him and what he has done for sinners, you will not be saved.

Jewish Priority?

But if that is true, why does Paul then say that this gospel of salvation is "to the Jew first and also to the Gentiles" (v. 16c)? Why does the Jewish person have priority, and what sort of priority does he have in mind? There are several possible answers.

(1) He may be referring to his missionary policy of taking the gospel initially to the synagogues as a starting point for reaching an entire community (cf. Acts 13:46).

(2) He also may be alluding to the historical priority of God's revelation to and covenant with Israel. It was through God's sovereign choice of Abraham and his descendants that the Gentile world would ultimately be blessed. He will later remind Gentile believers that it is into the olive tree of Israel that they have been grafted through faith (Romans 11).

(3) There is a Jewish priority over Gentiles insofar as the former were "entrusted with the oracles of God" (3:1-2; 9:4). In other words, it was to the Jewish people alone that God gave his inspired revelation in the Law of Moses and the rest of the OT Scriptures.

(4) The Jews have a priority over the Gentiles insofar as the Messiah, Jesus, came first as a Jew to the Jews (9:5; Matt. 10:5-6). In Matthew 15:24 Jesus said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

(5) Paul may also have in mind Jesus' statement to the Samaritan woman: "salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22). That is to say, all salvation is salvation through God's covenant with Abraham. Salvation comes to us Gentiles from the root of God's covenant with the Jews.

But we should also note the ways in which there is *no* Jewish priority.

(1) They do not have priority in righteousness. As Paul will say, “there is no distinction; for *all* have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (3:22-23). All are equally guilty before God and all who trust in Christ are equally saved and justified and accepted.

(2) Neither do they have any priority in *how* they are saved. Jewish people are saved in precisely the same way Gentile people are saved: through faith in Jesus (see Rom. 3:29-30; 10:12-13).

(3) Neither do they have priority when it comes to participation in the blessings of God’s covenant. See Gal. 3:16,29; Eph. 2:12-13,19; 3:4-6; 1 Peter 2:9-10. Gentiles now share equally with Jewish believers in all the covenant blessings and promises.

What is the Righteousness of God and How does it Save us?

The gospel saves because the righteousness of God is revealed in it. What is it that puts us in a position where we are condemned? It is our lack of a righteousness that pleases God and satisfies his standard of holiness. Not only do we lack righteousness, we are entirely *unrighteous*. What we stand in need of is the very righteousness of God, and that is what God provides for us in the gospel when we believe in Jesus.

So let’s pause and make sure we see the structure of Paul’s argument. There are three subordinate clauses that support and/or illuminate the one preceding it. Observe: (1) Paul is eager to preach in Rome (v. 15) *because he is not ashamed of the gospel* (v. 16a). (2) Paul is not ashamed of the gospel (v. 16a) *because it is in the gospel that one finds God’s power for salvation* (v. 16b). (3) The gospel has power for salvation (v. 16b) *because it manifests the righteousness of God* (v. 17).

What does Paul mean by *the righteousness of God*? We will look at the three options.

(1) Paul may be referring to an *attribute of God*, thus the righteousness that characterizes God. This *righteousness* may be either a) God’s *justice* (cf. Rom. 3:5,25-26), according to which he always does what is right, or b) God’s *faithfulness*, according to which he fulfills his covenant promises to his people.

(2) Others believe Paul is referring to a *status or position* that God bestows on those who believe. It is therefore a righteousness that *comes from* God. **Martin Luther** gave eloquent expression to this view in the 16th century. Late in life he recalled how he had been taught that *the righteousness of God* was an impersonal attribute of God in accordance with which he punishes those who fail to meet his eternal standards. Luther was baffled how anyone, much less the apostle Paul, could call this “good news”. Luther declared,

“I hated that word ‘righteousness of God,’ which . . . I had been taught to understand . . . is the righteousness [with which God] punishes the unrighteous sinner.”

In other words, Luther at first believed the righteousness of God was his enemy, threatening him with eternal condemnation. But he soon discovered that the righteousness that God demands from us, God gives to us. Then came his life-changing, church-changing, world-changing discovery:

“At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words [in Romans 1:17], namely ‘In it the righteousness of God is revealed,’ as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’ There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely the passive righteousness with which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’ Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise through open gates.”

In other words, Luther came to the conclusion that the righteousness of God that is revealed in the gospel is a *gift of God given to sinners through faith*. This righteousness is purely *forensic* or *legal*. It is a matter of our judicial standing before God, not our internal or moral transformation. Thus, Luther’s view is that Paul refers here to the righteous status that comes from God in the gospel through faith.

(3) Finally, some argue that the phrase refers to *an activity of God*. The righteousness of God is God’s *action* of intervening on behalf of his people to save and deliver them. This idea has strong support from the OT (see Mic. 7:9; Isa. 46:13; 50:5-8).

Perhaps all three ideas are involved. God is just and right when he takes saving action to provide a righteous standing for us in his presence. Think about it in terms of a court of law. God is the righteous judge who not only pronounces us forgiven but also declares that his own righteousness is now credited to our account when we believe the gospel.

So, the answer to the question, “How does the gospel save believers? How is the gospel God’s power for salvation?” is given in verse 17. Some greatly misunderstand this statement, thinking that the antecedent of “it” is God’s love. It is God’s love that saves us, they say. But that is not what Paul says. The antecedent of “it” is the righteousness of God.

That isn’t to say that God’s love isn’t involved in our salvation. Of course it is. Romans 5:8 says that “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” But that is not what v. 17 is saying. God’s love does not save us by sweeping out of the way his righteousness or his wrath. God’s love saves us by sending God’s Son, Jesus Christ, to endure and exhaust that wrath in our place.

The reason we need saving in the first place is because we not only lack any sort of righteousness that might be pleasing to God; we are actually unrighteous, and thus deserving of his judgment and wrath. And the gospel saves us by providing for us a righteousness that we otherwise could never achieve.

“*Whatever God Requires, God Provides*”

The one thing that you and I absolutely must have but could never create or produce or supply is precisely what God in his grace gives us! Righteousness! This is how the gospel saves us from the wrath of God. ***In the gospel God provides in and through his Son, Jesus Christ, the very righteousness that his righteousness demands.*** Our only hope is that the righteous God would intervene in the person of Jesus and give to us the righteousness that is required to live in his presence as forgiven sinners.

Can you see this? I'm repeating myself because your eternal destiny is at stake. God is infinitely holy and just and thus demands complete and perfect righteousness from us. But we don't have it. We can't produce it. The result is that we stand condemned, alienated from God and destined for eternal death. But the good news of the gospel is that through Jesus Christ God gives to us the righteousness that he demands from us.

From Faith to Faith

What is the meaning of *from faith to faith*? There is an almost endless list of suggestions, the most plausible being that this is simply Paul's way of emphasizing that faith and nothing but faith, from beginning to end, can put us in right relationship with God.

Tom Schreiner conveniently summarizes the many options: "Most interpretations include the idea of a progression from one kind of faith to another: from the faith of the OT to the faith of the NT; from the faith of the law to the faith of the gospel; from the faith of the preachers to the faith of the hearers; from the faith of the present to the faith of the future; from the faith of words we hear now to the faith that we will possess what the words promise; from the faithfulness of God to the faith of human beings; from the faithfulness of Christ to the faith of human beings; from smaller to greater faith; from faith as the ground to faith as the goal" (71-72), etc. ad infinitum.

I think Paul is saying that when we respond in faith to the offer of righteousness in the gospel, it leads to even more faith in the future. It isn't only that initial act of faith that saves, but the ongoing presence of faith in our hearts all the way up to the end.

Habakkuk Agrees!

As a way of confirming his declaration that righteousness is made ours by faith alone, Paul cites the famous text of Habakkuk 2:4 "which concerns God preserving the righteous in the time of impending judgment" (Keener, 30). He finds in this text the principle that God preserves and protects from his wrath the people who trust in him wholly.

Conclusion

The gospel of God which concerns his Son Jesus Christ is not just an idea or a philosophy or a world view or a theoretical abstraction. ***It is power!*** It is the supernatural energy and activity of God himself in making provision of a substitute, Jesus, to endure the judgment you deserve so that you will never have to face it yourself. It is the supernatural energy and activity of an all-powerful God who supplies you with the righteousness you need to stand forgiven and accepted in his presence. And it is ours by faith! Not by works. Not by extravagant giving. Not by the breaking of bad habits. Not by any effort of our own but altogether by trusting in the effort he has made in and through Jesus Christ. Praise God for the triumphant grace of his gospel!