

Unashamed - Part 1

Romans 1:16-17

January 29 2017

Introduction:

This might come as a shock to some of you, but when I was in grade school, I was not one of the cool kids. I was for the most part a scrawny and bashful boy. While I did well academically, when it came to sports, the real determiner of where you landed in the school social hierarchy, I was less than stellar. Grade school basketball consisted mostly of me watching from the bench and maybe getting thrown in during the last few minutes of a game we were going to lose anyway. Most boys were bigger, stronger, and far better at any number of sports than I was, which left me on a pretty low rung of the social ladder.

But I wasn't at the bottom. That unfortunate position was solidly occupied by a classmate by the name of Mike. Mike had several things that didn't work in his favor, be it his nerdy glasses, bad teeth, frizzy hair, and a bunch of strange habits that clearly made him the odd bird of my class. So, seizing on the opportunity that afforded me, Mike became an object of my grade school ridicule, teasing, and mean-spirited bullying. It was a classic case of making yourself feel better about your lowly position by belittling someone who was even worse off socially than you were. And so, throughout grade school, Mike became the target of my repeated cruel and mean-spirited attacks.

Fast forward many years later. I had become a Christian and had an opportunity to see Mike again. But this time I approached him not to harass him but to apologize to him. I confessed to him how wrong I was for how I had treated him all those years earlier and asked for his forgiveness, which he graciously granted. Looking back, I was ashamed of what I had done to him. Even to this day when I think back to the Rob Borkowitz I was back in grade school, I'm ashamed to say that was me. There is no fondness for those days of my childhood when I consistently harassed Mike; only regret and shame that I would be so cruel towards someone who did not deserve it.

Shame. I suppose I'm not the only one here who has a story to tell of something they're ashamed of. Maybe it's shame over something you did. Or perhaps it's a shame you felt towards someone else, a parent or a sibling possibly, that made you ashamed to be seen with them in public. Sometimes being ashamed is warranted: certainly, I should have felt ashamed for how I treated Mike in grade school – no doubt about it. But other times we can be ashamed of things we ought not be. Sometimes our shame is misplaced.

The apostle Paul had reason to be ashamed. He had done some horrible things: he had dragged innocent people off to prison and death. But then God saved him and gave him a message to proclaim to the world: Jesus, who was crucified, was the resurrected Lord in whom people needed to trust to be saved. That wasn't the kind of message that was going to land Paul high up on the social ladder. Proclaiming that a crucified man was God was blasphemy to the Jews and utterly ridiculous to the Greeks. It was the kind of message one would more likely want to hide under a rock in shame than to proclaim boldly out in public. But that would have been misplaced shame.

This morning, we're going to examine a very important passage in the book of Romans, a passage many Bible scholars recognize as the main theme of the entire letter. In it, we find Paul boldly proclaiming that he is unashamed of the gospel and why. As a result, we'll be challenged by what Paul has to say, both by his boldness to proclaim it as well as what it is about the gospel that made Paul so unashamed. So to that end, please open your Bibles with me to Romans 1, which can be found on pg. 939 of the pew Bibles if you happen to have left your personal Bible at home this morning.

These are the last two verses of the opening of his letter, before Paul gets into unpacking the message of the gospel throughout chapters 1-8, and they serve as the main theme of the entire book. Follow along as I read v. 16-17 of Romans 1. Paul says there, **"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.'"**

We're going to unpack what Paul says about the gospel in a moment, but before we do so, we need to camp for a bit on this opening clause where Paul says, **"For I am not ashamed of the gospel..."** The preposition **"for"** connects his statement to what came before it. As we saw last week, Paul opened his letter by informing the Romans of his desire to visit them and his hopes of having a harvest among them. So then reading v. 15 & 16 together, he says, **"So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome, for I am not ashamed of the gospel..."**

Being eager and being ashamed are opposites reactions. You aren't eager to do something you're ashamed of. I remember when I was a kid and I got a haircut that was way too short for my liking. I was ashamed of how I looked and so I wasn't eager to go to school the next day. I wanted to sulk at home until my hair grew back. But Paul doesn't have that problem when it comes to the gospel; he's eager to preach it because he's not ashamed of it. Rather, it's his joy and his desire. Paul said in v. 10 that he was ceaselessly praying for God to open a door for him to come to Rome, and in v. 11 that he was longing to see them. Those are the words of a man unashamed. He can't wait to proclaim the gospel to those in Rome.

What is remarkable about this is how easily Paul could have been ashamed. Paul had to put up with Jewish opposition to his preaching, opposition that often resulted in imprisonment or flogging. He was proclaiming a message that was repulsive to the Jews. Considering what Paul faced with his own countrymen, it wouldn't have been surprising if Paul had taken the Jonah route and tried to escape his calling rather than obey it.

Then there was the ridicule Paul had to face from the sophisticated Greeks. The notion that a man crucified as a criminal was in fact God incarnate to whom all needed to bend the knee to as mankind's Lord and Savior was preposterous. Such a message was foolishness to the Gentiles and no doubt many scorned and mocked Paul as he proclaimed his gospel in the public forums and marketplaces across the Empire.

Add that the personal element that Paul needed to eat a huge slice of humble pie. He had zealously tried to stop the advancement of the gospel back when he was Saul the Pharisee. Now he was publicly proclaiming what he once denounced. I don't know if you've ever

changed your mind about something you once harshly denounced, but it can be rather embarrassing to admit just how wrong you once were. Paul could have been ashamed of himself and let that fear of what people thought paralyze him from preaching the gospel.

Yet none of those things happened. Despite the persecution, ridicule, rejection and his own embarrassment of his past opposition, Paul states unequivocally that he was unashamed of the gospel. But that then begs the question... why? What is it about the gospel that Paul could confidently state he was unashamed of it despite all the personal embarrassment and persecution he suffered because of it? What made it worth all the hardship he faced? Why could Paul throw caution out the window and boldly proclaim it before hostile audiences knowing what it would cost him personally?

It's a question we need to answer because if we're going to engage our world with the kind of missionary zeal that Paul had, then we need the kind of confidence in the infinite value of the gospel he had. Our own hypocrisy can cause us to be ashamed of the gospel because we think, who are we to tell others to repent and believe when we've been poor examples ourselves. The fear of ridicule and rejection can make us ashamed of speaking about Christ to our family and friends. The potential of suffering loss and enduring physical suffering can make us hesitant to share the gospel. So then, what Paul says about the gospel is more than just some academic exercise: it's what we need to confidently believe if we're going to overcome our fear and hesitation and be unashamed as well.

The reasons for Paul's unashamed proclamation of the gospel are given in v. 16-17 and I think we can discern at least four reasons why Paul is not ashamed of the gospel, two of which we will cover this morning; the last two we'll get to next week. So, let's begin with the first reason, which is...

Paul is not ashamed of the gospel because...

1. The gospel releases the power of God for salvation

The good news of what God has done for sinners through the death and resurrection of his Son is far, far more than just a good story. Paul says in v. 16, **"I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation..."** The gospel has power. The word translated as "power" is the Greek word *dunamis*, which is where we get the English word for dynamite. Have you ever seen dynamite go off? They use dynamite to blast through solid rock to build roads and train tracks on mountainsides. That's the kind of power the gospel has: it can disintegrate the stoniest of hearts and reduce it to the rubble of repentance. It has the power to utterly transform those who hear it.

The gospel tells us the most powerful, the most life-altering news imaginable. Think for a moment of some of the most powerful stories you've heard. For me, I can remember watching the Pixar movie *Up* and being surprised how I was weeping like a baby within the first ten minutes of the film. Or watching the film *Schindler's List* as Oscar Schindler recounted how many more lives he could have saved if only he had sold more of his possessions. Those were powerful stories. Then there are those real-life news stories that powerfully stick with us: the collapse of the Twin Towers on 9/11 or the horrific

shooting of the children at Sandy Hook Elementary that deprived those families of their precious sons and daughters a few short weeks before Christmas. Those are stories that stick in our memories and move us emotionally.

But the good news of the gospel has a power that is quantitatively different. Paul says the gospel is “**the power of God for salvation.**” Consider first that phrase, “**the power of God.**” Since it is God’s power, it means it cannot be thwarted. God always accomplishes what he intends because there is no power that can resist him. Through the preaching of the gospel, God makes dead men alive. He causes those whom he has chosen to be born again so they would be liberated from their bondage to sin and believe. Consider what Peter says about this in 1 Peter 1:23-25. He says,

“...you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God... and this word is the good news that was preached to you.”

The power of God in the gospel then is more than the power of a good story to move us to tears temporarily. The gospel releases the power of God unto “**salvation.**” There is no other message, news story, movie, or book ever written that has the power to save. And this salvation which the gospel accomplishes is not only what we would consider the initial conversion of sinners. Salvation is often used by Paul to include our ultimate, final salvation. The gospel has the power not only to bring us to faith to begin with but it is also the power of God to preserve us so that we will not fall away but will obtain our final glorification at the resurrection.

That’s why Paul is so eager to preach the gospel to them. In v. 15 Paul says he’s eager to preach the gospel to those in Rome, not because they aren’t Christians but because as Christians they need to be reminded of the gospel and its implications for their lives over and over again. The gospel is the power of God both for initial conversion of the unbeliever as well as the ongoing sanctification of believers.

So then, maybe a few points of application are in order. First, you need the gospel as a Christian. The gospel isn’t something you hear once, believe, and then move on to bigger and better things. We need it every day. It’s so easy for us to slip back into our old ways of thinking and behaving. We can readily resort back to thinking God loves us because we read our Bible today or didn’t act beastly towards our spouse or because of some other external acts of righteousness. Or when we sin, we can allow the guilt to devastate us and make us fear that God might possibly wash his hands of us and reject us once and for all. Or the trials and struggles we face can tempt us to despair, to imagine that God isn’t with us and that we’ll never get through it.

The gospel has the power to correct those gross misunderstandings and demonic lies. Through the gospel, we’re reminded that God’s love and acceptance has nothing to do with our good deeds. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. The gospel reminds us that we didn’t earn God’s favor to begin with and we can’t keep it by what we do or don’t do. Through the gospel, we’re reminded there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. No sin, no moral failure, no thought, word, or deed

has been left uncovered by the atoning blood of Christ. Through the gospel, we're reminded that God will never leave us or forsake us, that nothing in all creation can separate from the love of Christ. So we need the gospel to live the Christian life. It's what anchors us in the promises of God and can dispel the false beliefs and anxieties that can so easily assail us.

Second point of application: belief in the power of the gospel will inevitably result in the bold proclamation of the gospel. Paul is not ashamed of the gospel because he knows it is the power of God for salvation. Grace Fellowship, do you believe that? Do you truly believe that by proclaiming the gospel to others, God's power is unleashed to bring the spiritually dead to life? I would dare say that our boldness in evangelism is in direct proportion to our belief in the power of the gospel. The less we believe this to be true, the less willing will we be to tell others about it. But the more we recognize the power of God at work in the gospel, the more confident and willing we will be to proclaim it.

The message that Christ suffered, died, and rose again so that whoever believes in him will have eternal life is more powerful than any book, movie, or news story because it alone can bring about the salvation of an individual. God has entrusted you and I with that message so we can partner with him in the miracle of bringing the spiritually dead to life. But its power cannot be unleashed unless it is first proclaimed. As Paul says later in Romans 10,

“How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?”

So for those people in your life who don't know Christ, who are lost in their sins – put those faces in the forefront of your mind for a moment – they can't call on Christ if they don't believe and they won't believe if they've never heard the gospel and you may be the only person in their life right now from whom they have any hope of hearing it, so preach the gospel. Proclaim the good news of God's love for us in Christ. Be boldly unashamed of the gospel because that's the only news you can ever tell them that will save them from their sins. Talking about politics or ethics or sports or hobbies or television shows has no power to bring about life transformation. It will never lead them to eternal life. Only the gospel has that power so proclaim it to them. Talk about it. As much as you're able and they're willing to listen, tell them the good news that God offers them the joy of knowing him and the forgiveness of sins through faith in Christ.

But let's move on now and talk about the recipients of the gospel. Who exactly is this gospel to be proclaimed to. To whom is it for? This then brings us to our second point that Paul is not ashamed of the gospel because...

2. The gospel results in salvation for everyone who believes

The gospel is not for just an elite group of people, such as the wealthy or powerful or famous. Nor is it only for those who already have their moral act together, who are good, wholesome people who never cheat on their taxes or utter a swear word. What

does Paul say in v. 16 about who the gospel is for? Look there again. **“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.”** Let’s unpack that a bit.

First, the gospel is for **“everyone.”** All people. No matter what your age, your race, your gender, your social or economic status, the gospel is the power of God to save. It doesn’t matter who you are or what you’ve done, whether you’ve lived a virtuous life thus far or whether you’ve been a moral failure, the gospel message is for you. It’s for everyone. Remember what the angel said to the shepherds when announcing Jesus’ birth? “Behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” Paul is saying the same thing the angel said: the good news of Christ’s death and resurrection is for each and every person.

So then, let’s try to apply this for a moment. Is the gospel for that co-worker who always swears and treats you poorly at work? Yes, it is. Is the gospel for your lesbian neighbor who recently got married to her partner? Yes, it is. Is the gospel for that relative who votes differently than you and always argues politics with you at every family gathering? Yes, it is. Is the gospel for that friend who lives a good moral life but doesn’t go to church and wants to worship God her own way? Yes, it is. Is the gospel for the man who killed three people while drunk driving, or who molested those young girls, or who was stopped before he could carry out the terrorist attack he had planned, or who cheated elderly women out of their life savings with a Ponzi scheme, or who got caught cheating on his wife, or who committed war crimes against innocent civilians? Is the gospel for those people too? Yes, my friends, it is. The gospel is the power of God for salvation to *everyone* who believes.

Do not withhold proclaiming the good news of God’s love for us in Christ out of spite or envy or revenge or because you don’t think they deserve it or because you don’t think they would respond to it anyway. You are not the arbitrator of God’s grace. God has not called you to judge who is worthy of hearing the gospel and who is not. Like the parable of the sower, we are to sow the seed of the gospel everywhere to everyone, regardless of the type of soil it might fall in. God has the power to make it take root and grow in the hearts of those who hear, so leave that work to him and do what he has called us to do: to proclaim the gospel to everyone, here in Waterloo among our friends and co-workers and across the globe through missions. There is no one to whom the gospel should not be proclaimed because it is the power of God for salvation to *everyone* who believes.

Which then brings us to this very important word, **“believes.”** While the gospel is the power of God to save everyone, not everyone will be saved. The message of the gospel will save only those who believe it, who respond to it in repentance and faith. Belief is what allows one to receive the benefits from the life-transforming power of God in the gospel. Think of it like electricity in your home. Electricity is available in every outlet in your home, but you have to be plugged into it to gain any benefit. If you don’t plug your television or your computer into the outlet, the electrical power will do you no good. So it is with the power of God in the gospel: it has the power to save everyone but you need to “plug in” to it by faith. Faith is the switch with allows you to access the power of God available to all in the gospel.

We'll be taking a lot more about belief and faith next week, but right now I want to briefly touch on the last phrase in v. 16. Look in your Bibles with me once again. Paul says, **“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.”**

What does Paul mean here by saying the gospel is for everyone, yet adds it is **“to the Jew first and also to the Greek”**? Paul is speaking of the historical reality of how the good news of Christ has come into the world. God's plan of salvation wasn't written in the sky for all to see. It came first to the Jews, starting with Abraham and God's promise to bless the world through his seed. Abraham's descendants then became the nation of Israel, and through them God revealed his Law and delivered them through the Passover lamb and the Exodus. Then when Jesus came, he came first to the Jews. His ministry was nearly always in Jewish territory. His disciples were all Jewish men and the very earliest beginning of the church were composed primarily of Jews. So then, historically speaking, the Jews were the first to hear the gospel, both in its embryotic form through the OT, but also in the life and ministry of Jesus.

But with Jesus' death and resurrection, the Law had been fulfilled. No longer was the focus on God's redemptive plan solely based on the Jews. Having rejected the Messiah, God's people would now include Gentiles as well. So when Paul mentions the **“Greeks”** here, he's referring not just to Greeks but to all Gentiles, to all non-Jewish people. Whereas to be one of God's people previously meant you needed to become a Jew, no longer would that be the case. Now salvation was to be preached apart from a Jewish identity: salvation could come to anyone, Jew or Gentile, who believed. A new chapter in redemptive history had opened up and the Roman believers had been beneficiaries of it.

Conclusion

So then, as we draw this message to a close, you can see why Paul is unashamed of the gospel. The gospel isn't just some nice story with a happy ending that might be mildly entertaining to those who hear it. The gospel carries with it the very power of God to save anyone who believes it, reconciling them to God by satisfying the wrath of God against their sin. There is nothing else in all creation – no book, no movie, no newspaper story – that can bring about the salvation of men. The gospel alone has the power to make an eternal difference in the lives of those who hear and believe it.

So then, what's your excuse? Paul was unashamed of the gospel, regardless of his past, regardless of the suffering he knew he would face as a result of proclaiming it. So what's holding you back? Is the fear of rejection preventing you from proclaiming it? Is it that you might be ridiculed? Are you worried someone is going to label you a hypocrite because of the kind of life you used to lead? My friends, don't let those things hold you back. The gospel is the only means by which the lost will be found and the dead made alive, so don't allow trivial fears to hinder you from telling those who are lost in sin the greatest news they can ever hear! Don't be ashamed of the gospel my friends. God has given to you the most glorious news imaginable to proclaim and through it has allowed you to participate in bringing the spiritually dead to life, so don't hold back! Don't be ashamed. You've been entrusted with the light of the gospel so should you then hide it under a bushel? No! If the

gospel is indeed the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes, then how else can we possibly respond than to gladly and eagerly proclaim it to a lost and dying world who so desperately needs to hear it.

So my friends, be unashamed of the gospel. Proclaim the gospel. Trust in the power of God unleashed in the gospel to bring about the salvation of those you know and love. This is not the time for fear and hesitation: it is the time for boldness and joy: God so loved the world that he sent his only Son to suffer, die, and be raised from the dead so we might have eternal life. Go and proclaim it boldly, unreservedly, and without shame. Let's pray.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Fellowship of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2017.