

# Unashamed - Part 2

Romans 1:16-17

February 5, 2017

## Introduction:

This morning we are going to consider what is arguably the most important verse in all of Scripture, at least from a historical perspective. I know many of you might list John 3:16 as the most significant, but as wonderful as it is as a summary of the gospel, it doesn't come anywhere close to the impact of Romans 1:17. One could safely say the very existence of Grace Fellowship Church along with tens of thousands of other Protestant churches are rooted in the impact this one verse had on one man 500 years ago.

That man of course is Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk who lived in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and who sparked the Protestant Reformation through his discovery of the glorious truth revealed in our passage this morning. Let's look at it together by opening your Bibles to Romans 1. While we're going to focus our attention on v. 17, we need to read the whole passage this verse is a part of and so I'll be reading both v. 16 and 17. So please follow along as I read v. 16-17 of Romans 1. Paul writes, **“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.’”**

The key term here is **“the righteousness of God”** which deeply troubled Luther at first. Luther said this about it,

“I had . . . been captivated with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the Epistle to the Romans. But . . . a single word in Chapter 1 [verse 17], ‘In it the righteousness of God is revealed,’ stood in my way. For I hated that word ‘righteousness of God,’ which . . . I had been taught to understand . . . is the righteousness [with which God] punishes the unrighteous sinner.”

Luther had originally believed that God's righteous character demanded that he muster up the proper righteousness himself. So, Luther poured himself into all those things which would earn him righteousness in God's sight: prayers and fasting and penance. It is said that Luther confessed his sins so often and for so long each day the priest who listened to his confession scolded him and told him to go away and not come back until he had some real sins to confess! But as much as Luther tried, he knew it was never enough. He could never obtain by his efforts the righteousness God required and so he began to hate God for judging sinners for failing to obtain a righteousness that was ever out of his reach.

But then as Luther studied v. 17 more closely, he came to realize that **“the righteousness of God”** was actually a gift of God given to sinners by faith, rather than a standard they had to measure up to in order to be saved. Allow me to quote Luther once again,

“Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience... [But] at last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, 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 . . . righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith... Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.”

The rest is, well, quite literally, history. Luther went on to challenge the Pope and the entire system of works-righteousness propagated by the medieval Catholic Church, and was followed by John Calvin and many other Reformers who put the Bible in the language of the common people and proclaimed the good news that salvation was by grace, through faith, alone. We at Grace Fellowship are part of that great Protestant legacy and thus we owe our existence to the truth this passage teaches.

Speaking of this passage, we began our study of this passage last week as we considered why it was the apostle Paul could say so confidently that he was “**not ashamed of the gospel.**” By way of quick review, we learned from v. 16 that the first reason Paul was unashamed of the gospel was because **the gospel releases the power of God for salvation.** The gospel is more than just good news that entertains us or is a story that moves us emotionally. Through the proclamation of the gospel, God’s power is unleashed to bring the spiritually dead to life through the working of the Holy Spirit. Paul could never be ashamed of a message that had the power of God to bring about salvation.

Then second, Paul wasn’t ashamed of the gospel because **the gospel results in salvation for everyone who believes.** This wasn’t a message for just a select few, as if he was only to proclaim it to kings and governors and those who were the creme-de-la-creme of society. It was a message for princes and paupers, for the powerful and for prostitutes, for men and women regardless of who they were or what they had done. Jews and Gentiles were on the same level at the foot of the cross and so Paul was unashamed to preach the gospel to both, even if it meant persecution from one and ridicule from the other.

Today we want to continue with part 2 of the sermon from last week and consider two additional reasons why Paul was not ashamed of the gospel. So then, the third reason Paul was unashamed of the gospel is because...

### 3. The gospel reveals the righteousness of God

Paul says at the start of v. 17, “**For in it [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed...**” I would imagine that’s *not* how you would have written that sentence. If you can put out of your mind for a moment what we just read and answer this question for me: “What does the gospel reveal about God?” What would you say? Or better yet, if you were given a fill-in-the-blank quiz at the start of the service this morning, what word would you have written to complete the sentence, “The gospel reveals the \_\_\_\_\_ of God”?

I would take a guess that probably your first inclination would be to say, “The gospel reveals the *love* of God.” Now I wouldn’t dock you any points if you gave that answer because, of course, that’s true. Paul says something to this effect in Romans 5:8, when he says, “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still

sinners, Christ died for us.” The love of God is most certainly revealed in the gospel, and yet Paul doesn’t highlight that aspect of God here.

Perhaps another answer would be grace: the gospel reveals the *grace* of God. Again, this would be an excellent answer that has biblical support. For example, in Acts 20:24 Paul says this, “I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.” No doubt about it: the gospel reveals the grace of God towards sinners, but again, Paul doesn’t choose that term here either.

Instead, Paul says the gospel reveals **“the righteousness of God.”** That’s not what we would normally say the gospel reveals. It’s a surprising choice to us and so we need to unpack it and make sure we don’t misunderstand it like Martin Luther did for so long. One option for the meaning of the phrase **“the righteousness of God”** is to take it as referring to God’s righteous character, such that the gospel reveals the righteousness that belongs to God. In other words, Paul could be saying that the gospel reveals God’s holy, righteous nature.

Luther understood it this way at first and it drove him to hate God. If the gospel does nothing more than reveal to us God’s absolute righteousness, a righteousness that brings about wrath against sinners who rebel against him through their disobedience, then the gospel wouldn’t be good news at all. I remember back when I was a kid and I had committed some egregious act of disobedience. My mom told me, “Your father is coming home from work soon and when he does, you’re gonna get a wuppin!” Was that good news or bad news? The news that my father was going to punish me in his righteous role as my father was not good news!

So then, it would be a strange thing for Paul to say that the good news of the gospel reveals the righteousness of God by which he will punish sinners. There’s nothing good about that! When Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount and unpacked what God’s righteousness requirements really meant when God said, “Do not murder” and “Do not commit adultery,” that revelation of God’s righteousness wasn’t good news to the man who realized that while he had never cheated on their wife, he had looked lustfully at plenty of women. And it wasn’t good news for the woman who thought she was doing well because she had never murdered someone only to find out her gossipy, slanderous words spoken behind people’s back was no different in God’s sight than if she had stabbed them in the back with a butcher’s knife.

Or consider the prophet Isaiah. He received a vision of the throne room of God Almighty, where angels praise God’s righteous nature crying out, “Holy, holy, holy,” and what does Isaiah do in response? He cries out, “Woe is me! I am ruined! For I’m a man of unclean lips.” The revelation of God’s righteousness was not good news to Isaiah. He recognized as Luther did that as a sinful man, he was ruined. There was no hope to stand before the Holy Sovereign Lord and receive anything but the righteous wrath of God. So, while grammatically Paul could be referring to the righteousness which God possesses and by which he will judge sinners, contextually it makes no sense because such a revelation would only be bad news for us, not good.

But there's a different way to understand this term, "**the righteousness of God**," the way Martin Luther came to understand it and the way the apostle Paul meant it. Rather than the righteousness that belongs to God that judges sinners, it is the righteousness of God that's given by God to sinners through faith in his Son. So instead of being God's righteousness which we've violated due to our wicked deeds that brings about our condemnation, it is a righteousness given freely by grace in order to procure our salvation. That kind of righteousness is truly good news of the greatest kind!

Let me illustrate this for a moment. A few months back there was a news story about veterans who had received a notice from the Federal government that certain bonuses they were given for signing up to join the military were not in fact valid and as a result the government demanded these vets pay back the money. Now these weren't trivial amounts: I remember one man on the news saying he owed the government \$50,000. Getting that letter in the mail wasn't good news for those vets. It was revealed to them that they had a huge debt to pay and most of them couldn't afford to pay it. If Uncle Sam sent you a letter this week saying you had to pay them \$50,000 by the end of the month or you would go to jail, would you be able to write out a check and pay it off? I doubt many of us could. So, the righteousness of God in the first sense is like that: it tells us we have a huge debt we need to pay that we can't afford.

But imagine a different scenario. Let's say you get a letter this week from the IRS that said due to a change in tax laws, they're giving back money that you paid over the past few years and within 7 to 10 business days they Federal government was going to send you a check for \$50,000. Would that be good news? You bet it would! That's what the righteousness of God that Paul is writing about is like: God is unexpectedly giving you a gift of his righteousness. You owe God righteousness but God in an act of grace gives to you what you owe him.

Paul is going to expand on this in more detail later in Romans, but let me explain for a moment how this works. God is indeed righteous. He's perfectly holy, without sin. He expects that we as his creatures obey him, all the time in every way. When God says in his Word to "Be holy as I am holy," he's demanding perfect obedience from us. But we haven't given God his due. We've sinned in thought, word, and deed. So, that indeed is bad news: we owe God a righteous life and have failed to deliver. And since God is righteousness, he must punish sin, meaning we all must face the punishment of death and hell for our sins.

But God did something so wonderful to solve our dilemma for us. He sent his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to deal with our unrighteousness. First, Christ died in our place, so that God's righteous wrath against our sin might be satisfied. Second, Christ lived the perfect, sinless life we should have lived. So then, Christ's righteousness is counted to us as our righteousness when we trust in Christ. That's the good news of the gospel: "**the righteousness of God**" is given to us through faith in Christ. We don't have to earn it: it is given to us as a gift. You and I can have the righteousness God demands of us not by our own efforts but as a gift, a righteousness belonging to Christ but credited to us through faith.

So Paul is unashamed of the gospel because in it, God's righteousness is revealed, a righteousness not to condemn but rather Christ's righteousness that is given to sinners by grace. But there is one more thing we need to say about why Paul is so eager and bold to proclaim the gospel and that brings us to our fourth and final point. Paul was unashamed of the gospel because...

#### 4. The gospel is received by faith

If the gospel is indeed the power of God to save everyone, be it Jew or Gentile, and God accomplishes this salvation by revealing his righteousness through the perfect sacrifice on Christ on the cross, then the last question one must ask is, "How can I obtain the benefits of Christ's righteousness revealed in the gospel so that I can be saved?" The answer, as Paul makes abundantly clear at the end of v. 17, is that it is received by faith. Look again at your Bibles with me as I read v. 17. **"For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'"**

This is astonishing news! God's righteousness is available to all who simply believe. There's no hoops to jump through. No long lists of requirements you need to meet first. No getting you act together to prove you are worthy of receiving this gift. Just believe. Have faith. Trust in God's promise given to you in the gospel that whoever would believe in Jesus would be forgiven and declared righteous in God's sight.

Let me go back to my illustration about receiving a check from the government. If the Feds were to send you a check for \$50,000, that check would be a promissory note. By itself that check is nothing more than a piece of paper. You can't take the check over to Rydell Chevrolet and exchange it for a new 2017 Chevy Camaro. Before it can do you any good, you need have faith that the government really is going to do what they said. In faith, you need to take that check to the bank and cash it, because without faith, that check is worthless.

Now imagine if someone were to receive that check for \$50,000 and didn't have any faith. What would happen? He might set it aside as just another piece of junk mail. He'd look at it, scoff at the ridiculous notion of the government giving him free money and toss it in the garbage. That guy would get nothing. The only way such a check is of any benefit to him is if he has faith to act upon it by cashing it.

That's how the gospel works, but instead of a check for \$50,000 it's worth more than all the money in the world because it's a promise of eternal life. God promises to pay the entirety of the debt of your sin and furthermore give you his Son's perfect righteousness as your own. All you need to do is believe. Believe in God's promise that his Word is true. Faith is how you cash the heavenly check of the gospel: it means you turn from sin and trust no longer in your own works but instead look to God alone as your hope. It means you trust that when the final chapter of your life arrives and you lay your head down to rest in death, you believe God will keep his word and raise you from death to eternal life.

And let me add that such a faith is not a one-time thing; my analogy with the check breaks down at this point because to cash a check takes only a moment whereas faith in the gospel results in a lifetime of trusting in God's promise. That's why Paul quotes Habakkuk 2:4 at the end of v. 17 saying, "**The righteous shall live by faith.**" The gospel is not something you merely trust in once and then forget about. God calls us to a life of faith in the gospel, as we begin to daily grow in our trust and obedience to God.

But when we do that, something equally amazing happens: by the power of God, we begin to become what God has declared us to be. We become righteous not merely by decree but in practice. The righteousness of God given to us in Christ begins to work in us so that we ourselves begin to be practically righteous because we start to live by faith in God's promises and not by our own wisdom or works.

Perhaps another illustration can help us here. Are any of you familiar with a fellow by the name of O. J. Simpson? White Bronco, big police chase, accused of murdering his wife, Nicole Brown... was kind of a big deal in the 1990s for those of you old enough to remember it. As you might recall, O.J. Simpson was put on trial and, after all was said and done, he was found not guilty of murdering his wife. Now let's assume for the sake of argument that he was indeed guilty of the crime. (Yes, I know, an easy assumption to make!) When Judge Ito declared O. J. "not guilty," the judge was doing what God does to guilty sinners through the gospel: he declares us "not guilty" in terms of our position in the eyes of the law. Just as O. J. Simpson was freed from facing the punishment of jail though he was in reality guilty so also, we're free of the punishment of hell, even though we were truly guilty of sin.

But here's the difference: Judge Ito's verdict had no power to change O. J. Simpson's heart. Though he was declared to be "not guilty" his murderous heart hadn't changed. The wickedness within him remained. But when God through the gospel declares us "not guilty," God also changes us through the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit so we begin to become righteous in our actions. We are declared righteous because of Christ's righteousness but over time, as we live by faith, we begin to produce the fruit of righteousness. This is what Paul talked about in Eph. 2:10, after explaining how we were saved by grace through faith, he said this about the practical righteousness that results, "*For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*" The gospel then both makes us righteous positionally as well as practically as we live it out in faith.

## **Conclusion**

No wonder then that Paul was not ashamed of the gospel! Considering all we've learned over the past two weeks from these two verses, how could Paul do anything other than boldly and unreservedly proclaim to the world the good news of the gospel of Christ his Lord. Through the gospel, the power of God is unleashed to bring about salvation to everyone, no matter who they are. In it, God's righteousness is revealed, not as a threat to sinners but as a gift, earned not by our efforts but by the perfect work of Christ who lived the life we should have lived and died the death we should have died. And this is available to everyone who believes, who simply stop their striving and in faith trust in God's promises that in Christ, there is no condemnation but rather eternal life.

So once again as we close, we must turn the mirror upon ourselves and ask, "What about me?" Have I been ashamed of the gospel? Have I been hesitant to proclaim the glorious good news of salvation offered to all through faith in Christ? My hope is that over the past two weeks Paul's reasoning for why he's unashamed of the gospel might enliven your heart and rekindle the flames with a blazing passion for proclaiming the gospel to those whom God has placed in your life that have yet to hear it. Those who are ashamed of the gospel hide it and keep it to themselves; but those who recognize it as the most glorious news that could ever be uttered, who believe that through it God's power to save is given to all who have faith to believe, to those people they cannot be silent. Such wonderful news must be proclaimed!

May you and I not be of those who are afraid or ashamed, but with full confidence in the power and promise of God in the gospel, let's boldly tell others this good news of salvation to be found in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Let's pray.

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