

THE GOSPEL: THE POWER OF GOD FOR SALVATION

Romans 1:1-17

Key Verse: 1:16

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.”

We have just finished Matthew’s gospel. In fact, every year we study one of the gospel narratives to learn of Jesus’ life and ministry, and especially his death and resurrection. We always feel that Jesus is speaking to us directly and we encounter him very personally in ways that transform our lives. Jesus’ words and deeds give a good foundation for us to live by faith in this fallen world. The New Testament, beyond the gospel narratives, includes apostolic epistles which explain the meaning of the gospel and how to apply it. Together with the gospel narratives, they are the basis of sound doctrine which we hold on to as we live out the gospel. The gospel is so profound that we need the whole Bible to grasp it fully. Among all the books of the Bible, Romans helps us understand the gospel in the most systematic and comprehensive way. The great Bible scholar John Stott has called Romans “...a timeless manifesto...the fullest, plainest and grandest statement of the gospel in the New Testament.”¹ Martin Luther called Romans, “...the chief part of the New Testament, and truly...the purest gospel.”² Our life and ministry should always be based on the pure gospel. This requires us to constantly grow in our understanding and application of the gospel. If our understanding remains shallow, we risk falling into a legalistic mindset or abusing God’s grace as a license to sin. To grow as healthy and fruitful Christians, we need a deep understanding of the gospel. Then we can live gospel-centered lives in a gospel-centered community. This is why we need to study Romans.

Paul begins his letter in a very personal way.³ It is a testimonial epistle based on his experience with the gospel. In this introduction, he uses the word “**gospel**” six times; it is his main subject. He explains what the gospel is, and its relationship to him and to the Romans. Paul shares his missionary vision to preach the gospel to people of the whole world.

First, Paul and the gospel (1-7). Verses 1-7 are greetings. Here, Paul introduced both himself, as a gospel worker, and the gospel. In verse 1, he says, “**Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, and set apart for the gospel of**

¹ Stott, John R. W., *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), p. 19.

² Luther, Martin, *Lectures on Romans*, in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 25 (1515; ET, Concordia, 1972). p. 365.

³ The personal pronouns, “I, my, me,” occur 20 times in verses 1-17.

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God....” “Paul” is from a Roman family name, “Paulus,” which means “small” or “humble.” Paul’s Hebrew name was “Saul,” which means “asked for.” But he always calls himself “Paul” in his letters, perhaps emphasizing that he is the apostle to the Gentiles (Ac 13:9). From a human perspective, Paul could have identified himself with an honorable title such as “Dr. Pharisee.” However, he identified himself as a servant of Christ Jesus. **“Servant”** comes from the Greek word “doulos,” which means slave. According to first century Roman law, masters had absolute ownership and absolute power over their slaves.⁴ Under that law, slaves were mistreated and abused and became very fearful. But when Paul referred to himself as a **“slave of Christ,”** it had no negative connotation. It was because his Master is our Lord Jesus. Jesus is gentle and gracious, and he gave himself up for us as a ransom sacrifice. He bought his people with his precious blood (1Co 6:20). So his people submit to him thankfully, willingly and joyfully. When Paul called himself **“a servant of Christ Jesus,”** it was with a wonderful sense of belonging, confidence and reverence.

Paul also said that he was **“called to be an apostle.”** While the word **“servant”** characterizes Paul’s relationship with Christ, the word **“apostle”** characterizes his mission to the world. The broad meaning of **“apostle”** is “one who is sent as a messenger.” However, in a stricter sense, the word **“apostle”** applies uniquely to the Twelve. To be qualified as an apostle, one had to be with Jesus during his entire earthly ministry and witness his resurrection (Ac 1:21-22). Paul did not meet these qualifications. Rather, he persecuted the church. But he became an apostle only by the grace of God when the Risen Jesus visited him personally on the road to Damascus and called him as the Apostle to the Gentiles (Ac 9:1-16; Gal 1:1; 2:8). Paul received the gospel as a direct revelation from Christ (Gal 1:11-12). On this basis, he had apostolic authority to preach the gospel to all the Gentiles, including the Romans.

Paul also said that he was **“set apart for the gospel of God.”** **“Set apart”** means to be dedicated for a particular task (Ac 13:2). The Risen Jesus set apart Paul for the gospel of God. Why was this necessary? The gospel is that Christ died for our sins on the cross and was raised from the dead on the third day (1Co 15:3-4). This message is the good news that comes from God. But it is not easy for human beings to understand or accept it. Paul said that preaching Christ crucified is a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles (1Co 1:23). When Paul proclaimed the resurrection of the dead in Athens, some of them sneered (Ac 17:32). Governor Festus responded by shouting, **“You are out of your mind,**

⁴ Harris, Murray J., *Slave of Christ* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001), p. 26.

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Paul! Your great learning is driving you insane” (Ac 26:24). This story tells us that preaching the gospel is a spiritual battle against all arguments and pretensions that set themselves up against the knowledge of God (2Co 10:5). Fighting such a battle cannot be done casually; it requires full devotion. This is why God set Paul apart to preach, defend, confirm and guard the gospel (Gal 1:15-16; Php 1:7; 2Ti 1:14). Paul considered his life worth nothing to him; his only aim was to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus had given him--the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace (Ac 20:24). In verse 1, we have seen how Paul identifies himself as a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God. How do you identify yourself?

After introducing his relationship with the gospel of God, Paul explains the gospel briefly in verses 2-4. **First of all, in verse 2, he tells the origin of the gospel (2).** The words “**gospel of God**” and “**promised beforehand**” tell us that the gospel originated from God. Since Adam’s fall, all people have lived as slaves of sin and Satan, with no power to get out of it. But God, in his great mercy, promised to send a Savior. Through his prophets he foretold who the Savior would be and what he would do. God fulfilled everything completely through Jesus. The gospel is not a man-made story. It was initiated by God and fulfilled by God. How can we believe this? It is written in the Holy Scriptures, which are absolutely trustworthy. **The Scriptures were not written in a day, but over a period of more than one thousand years by many different authors at different times and places, but all inspired by the Holy Spirit with one main point--that the Messiah would come as the Savior of mankind and restore the kingdom of God** (Lk 24:44; Jn 5:39; Heb 1:1-2).

Secondly, Paul tells us the contents of the gospel (3-4). What is the gospel? It is not a new law, a code of morals, a creed to be accepted, a system of religion, or good advice. It is a divine message concerning the Son of God. Verses 3-4 say, “**...regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life⁵ was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.**” Jesus Christ has both a human nature and a divine nature. As to his human nature, he was a descendant of David. This tells us that Jesus was a real man. He is not a myth or fairy tale, but a human being who lived in history. The record of his life and death is an undeniable fact of history. Furthermore, he was born in the line of King

⁵ In verse 3, “earthly life” comes from the Greek word “sarx(σάρξ)” which means “flesh.” So the phrase “as to his earthly life” could better be translated “according to the flesh” (See ESV, NASB, KJV, NKJV, NRSV) or “as to his human nature” (NIV 1984).

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David, which fulfilled God's promise regarding the Savior King (Lk 1:32; Ac 13:22-23). Through the Spirit of holiness Jesus was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead. Jesus is in very nature God (Php 2:6). His resurrection is the proof. Throughout history, only Jesus has defeated the power of death. Jesus alone can give us real victory over sin and death and living hope in the kingdom of God. Paul concluded that Jesus is Christ our Lord. Anyone who confesses that "**Jesus is Lord,**" and believes in their hearts that God raised him from the dead will be saved (Ro 10:9).

In verses 5-7 Paul tells of his relationship to the Romans and greets them. Verse 5 says, "**Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name's sake.**" We tend to separate "grace" and "apostleship" and understand these words individually. However, Paul links them together to emphasize the undeserved privilege of being an apostle. Many Bible scholars agree that these words should be considered jointly as the "grace of apostleship." By using the personal pronoun "we," Paul indicates that the grace of apostleship is given not only to him, but to other apostles as well. This apostleship was given to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith. "**All the Gentiles**" means all unbelievers in the whole world. For all people, the only way of salvation is through faith in Jesus. Faith is not mere intellectual assent. Faith is acceptance of Christ as Lord which results in obedience to him. This obedience is the mark of a genuine Christian. The grace of apostleship was given, not for Paul's own glory, but for Jesus' name's sake. Paul's main point here is that his authority to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles was given by Christ. The Romans were among the Gentiles who were called to belong to Jesus Christ (6), and so are we. Paul's letter is written very directly to us.

After describing the gospel, Paul finally greets his audience in verse 7: "**To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.**" In the past, the Roman believers were alienated from God and under his wrath. But when they believed in Jesus, they became God's precious children whom he loved dearly. God called them to be his holy people who would live for his glory and purpose in a dark world. We, too, who believe in Jesus are loved by God and called to be his holy people. Paul greets us with grace and peace which comes from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Second, Paul's missionary vision for Rome (8-17). As was his custom, Paul began the body of his letter with thanks and prayer for his recipients. He gave thanks for the Romans because their faith was being reported all over the world

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(8). Why was this so significant? At that time, Rome was the center of the world. There was a saying, “all roads lead to Rome.” It was of strategic importance for world evangelization. Missionary vision for Rome was conceived in Paul’s heart while he was in Ephesus, where he experienced the power of God to impact the whole city. He said, **“After I have been there (Jerusalem), I must visit Rome also”** (Ac 19:21). Though Paul had not yet been to Rome, he heard that their faith was being reported all over the world. As he thought about how they kept their faith in the idolatrous atmosphere of Rome, he was very thankful to his God. Paul wanted them to know that he served God wholeheartedly in preaching the gospel, and constantly remembered them in his prayers; God was his witness (9). Paul longed to visit the Romans, and prayed that at last, by God’s will, the way might be opened for him to come to them (10). There was little human connection between Paul and the Roman believers, but through the gospel they could have a real relationship in God.

Verses 11-13 tell us why Paul wanted to visit Rome. Was it to see the tourist sites? No. He wanted to impart to them a spiritual gift to make them strong (11). The word “impart” means “share.” The spiritual gift was most likely Paul’s deep insight into and understanding of the gospel. Though their faith was genuine and widely reported, it seems that they were struggling hard just to survive. Paul wanted their faith to grow until it was strong enough to evangelize Rome. Paul had a deep respect for them, expecting that he would be just as encouraged by their faith as they were by his (12). Christian fellowship is reciprocal and a mutual blessing to all. At the same time, Paul wanted to have a harvest among them (13). He wanted to reach out through them with the gospel to save numerous dying souls. He wanted them to become his gospel partners to evangelize Rome.

In those days, everyone hoped to visit Rome at least once in their lifetime. Paul did too, but his motive was different than others, as he explains in verses 14-15: **“I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome.”** **“Obligation”** means “debt.” “Greeks” refer to those who spoke Greek and adapted to Greek culture. “Non-Greeks” meant barbarians. “Wise” refers to the educated, and “foolish” to the illiterate. Broadly speaking, Paul meant he was a debtor to all Gentiles. Many people feel that the world owes them something, and they try hard to get something from the world. But Paul felt that he was a debtor to the Gentile world. Usually a debtor feels a great sense of burden until he pays back what he owes. To be indebted to one or two persons is a great burden. How much more to be indebted to the whole Gentile world. Where did this sense of debt come from? It came from the grace of Christ. Paul was a great debtor to Christ. He was

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once a blasphemer, a persecutor and a violent man. But God had mercy on him and the grace of our Lord Jesus was poured out on him abundantly. He said, **“Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst”** (1Ti 1:13-15). In his grace, the Risen Jesus had entrusted the gospel to Paul to preach to the Gentiles (1Th 2:4; Titus 1:3).

We, too, should have a sense of obligation to God. We were like the man in Jesus’ parable who owed his master 10,000 talents--a debt that was so huge it was impossible to pay back. Because of sin, we deserved judgment and everlasting punishment. We were so burdened every day because of this debt of sin. But God, out of his great mercy, cancelled all our debts through our Lord Jesus. He enables us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness, before him all our days (Lk 1:74-75). Moreover, he gave us the great commission to **“make disciples of all nations”** (Mt 28:19). Based on Jesus’ grace and commission we should have a sense of obligation. But it is not like credit card debt. Such debts make us feel pressured, anxious and burdened and we repay reluctantly. However, our sense of obligation to Jesus is totally different. It comes from remembering what God has done for us and leads us to share the grace of Jesus with others willingly and joyfully. This enables us to grow, bear fruit, and be a blessing to others.

Paul gives another reason he was eager to preach the gospel in Rome. Let’s read verse 16: **“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.”** Paul’s statement here begins in a negative form, rather than a positive one. Why? It was because he knew that people are tempted to be ashamed of the gospel in a sinful and adulterous generation (Mk 8:38). Shame comes if we have a lack of confidence in the gospel. Shame comes when we are more influenced by the world’s values than kingdom values. Paul was not ashamed of the gospel. Why? Because Paul knew the power of the gospel. The gospel is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes. Rome conquered the world with military power. However, she could not conquer the power of sin and death; rather, she was destroyed by them. No philosophy, ideology or religion, no economy, no military can defeat the power of sin and death. Only the gospel can do that. The gospel is not just words or theory; it is power. It is power to make a proud person humble. It is power to make a bitter and sorrowful person thankful and joyful. It is power to make a fearful and doubtful person confident and courageous. It is power to make a hateful and mean person loving and kind. It is power to make a stingy and greedy person generous and sacrificial. In short, it is the power of God to transform anyone who believes into a new creation. The

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gospel has changed so many people, including each of us. The gospel is not outdated. It is still the power of God that changes people. This happens to everyone who believes.

Paul tells why the gospel is the power of God in verse 17: **“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.’”** Here **“the righteousness of God”** is a right relationship with God. We cannot earn this righteousness with our own works. We can have this righteousness only by faith in Jesus. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, **“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”** This righteousness is imputed to us the moment we believe. To believe is not just a one-time transaction to obtain salvation. It is a way of life through which we maintain our relationship with God. We need to live by faith day by day from the beginning to the end. This is consistent with the teaching of the Old Testament, which Paul supports by quoting Habakkuk 2:4: **“The righteous will live by faith.”** In the rest of his letter, Paul will explain how the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel. Let’s pray that we may not be ashamed of the gospel, but rather have confidence in the gospel. Let’s experience the power of the gospel in our practical lives.