

Nothing To Be Ashamed Of

(This message is part of a series on Romans titled "Based on a Promise, Called for a Purpose.")

Romans 1:16-17

16I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. 17For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

We're at the beginning of a journey through parts of Paul's letter to the Christians in 1st-century Rome. As I said last week, there are a few things for us to know as we try to understand this complicated letter.

The Roman church was really a network of homes and converted synagogues where people gathered to worship and learn and serve in Christ's name. Remember that there were more than 50,000 Jews in Rome at that time, and that a significant number of them had converted to Christianity and were worshipping side-by-side with Gentile Christians from Rome and other parts of the Empire.

Paul was the ideal person to write this pastoral letter. Paul had been a devout Jew for most of his life. He was trained as a Pharisee under the most famous Pharisee scholar of them all, a man named Gamaliel, which I said last week was the equivalent of getting an Ivy League PhD in Jewish law. Saul calls himself a 'Hebrew of Hebrews', and even leads some of the early persecution of the Christian church.

But Saul becomes Paul when he meets Jesus on the road to Damascus, and everything changes for him. He takes his academic training, his ability to earn and raise money, and his passionate faith in Jesus Christ—he takes all of those into his new job—his new calling as one of the founders of the Christian church. It's in that new role that Paul writes this crucial letter.

And so what was the point of Paul's letter to the Romans?

Romans was written to convince one group of people that God could be trusted because of his faithfulness to another group of people.

Let me say that another way:

The letter to the Romans was written to convince the Gentile Christians in Rome that God could be trusted because he kept his promises to his Jewish covenant people.

It was also a reminder to the Jewish people that they hadn't left their old faith behind for a new one, but that Christ was the completion of the faith they'd held all along.

Simple, right?

It's not really simple at all, but as we make our way through our text this morning, there are some things to notice about what Paul is teaching here.

First, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is rooted in the promises God made to the Jewish people.

Paul says in our text that the Gospel is "first for the Jew, then for the Gentile," and the text ends with a quote from the prophet Habakkuk: "The righteous will live by faith." Even in this short passage Paul is making the link between the Gospel of Jesus and the history of God's relationship with the Jewish people.

Second, that Gospel, wherever it came from, is available to all people.

The Gospel is God's "salvation for everyone who believes." This is a key part of Paul's ministry, and it also shapes the early history of the church. The Christian faith was born out of Judaism, but it was meant for everyone. Remember the promises we read last week and this morning that God made to Abram—that he would make him into a great nation with more descendants than he could count. All of that was meant for a purpose: "...and all the nations will be blessed through you."

It's the ministry of Jesus that becomes that blessing—it's a blessing that comes through Jesus—through Judaism—and offers God's redemption and reconciliation to the whole world

Finally we experience the full gift of the Gospel by faith alone.

"For in the Gospel a righteousness is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last."

This is a tricky one, because it's in this single sentence that Paul is trying to change the entire world view of his Jewish convert readers. They would have believed from birth that "righteousness"—being reconciled to God, came from following the Law and offering the right sacrifices. Here Paul is saying that the gift of connection to God is just that. It's a gift that comes by faith alone, and not by anything we can do to earn it.

It's this theme that pushed Martin Luther into the movement that became the Reformation. So many things had been added by the church to the list of what people had to do to draw near to God. So many layers of religious stuff had been placed between the individual believer and God. When Luther read Paul's letter to the Romans with fresh eyes, he learned that God had cleared out all of those obstructions—when Luther realized that what God wanted was for people to come to him by faith alone, it changed everything.

In the Jewish tradition tomorrow is Yom Kippur. It's a day of solemn reflection and confession for sins against God and against other people—it's also a day of repentance for both individual and corporate sins. The purpose of the day is to be cleansed—to be released from the guilt and shame that come from those things we do that separate us from God (not God from us, by the way).

The message of Romans, and the point that Paul is trying to communicate to his Gentile readers and Jewish converts at the same time, is that we're not driven or controlled anymore by our guilt and shame. Because God has been faithful to his promises, we can come to him by faith alone.

But that doesn't mean that 'shame' isn't a real part of our lives.

John Bradshaw is a psychologist who specializes in dealing with the impact of shame on individuals and families. He wrote: "To have shame as an identity is to believe that one's being is somehow flawed—that one is defective as a human being. Once shame is transformed into an identity, it becomes toxic and dehumanizing." That's what the Gospel is designed to transform in our lives—that feeling of being not quite fully human because of our sin and shame.

That brings us back to Paul's bold claim: "I am not ashamed of the Gospel." What was he saying?

Paul was making the point that he wasn't ashamed of the gospel, because the point of the Gospel was to take away his shame. But mostly he's saying that as strange as this story sounds, he knew that it was rooted in the history and promises and character of God himself, so there was no need to be embarrassed about it.

Paul said to the Romans: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes."

What does that mean for us? The first two things we've said already:

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is rooted in God's promises and relationship with Israel.

The Gospel is available to all people.

But there's more.

The Gospel is something we grasp through faith, not science, not blind leap, but through our struggle to trust the God who has demonstrated his trustworthiness through the Cross and Resurrection.

As we grasp the Gospel we find that it takes away the shame we carry with us in our lives. That's part of the point. As hard as it might be for us to fully comprehend, the Gospel restores us and remakes us into the people that God made us to be in the first place. Part of that process is helping us to acknowledge our sin and ask for forgiveness. The rest of that process is like a deep cleansing that the

Scriptures tell us will make us 'whiter than snow.'

Mostly this text is a reminder that just as he did with Paul, God invites us to stop being ashamed of the gospel. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is rooted in history and available to everyone. It has the power to build community and spark reconciliation and give hope to every single person on earth.

But mostly we stop being ashamed of the Gospel when we accept the fact that the Gospel isn't ashamed of us.

No matter what we done or said or thought or believed in the past, the gospel—the good news that Jesus Christ has come and lived and served and died and rose again—that Gospel takes us where we are, it cleanses us and restores us, and in the end it makes all things new.

When Yom Kippur was celebrated in the ancient world, it was the only day of the year when the high priest would enter the 'Holy of Holies,' the most important room in the Temple at Jerusalem. The gift of the gospel—the reason we're all here today—is that through Jesus Christ we can approach God wherever we are and whenever we want. The call on us to come in faith, to trust in God's promises, and to share that message with a hungry world.

That desire to share the message of the Gospel is what's behind our closing hymn today. When Charles Wesley would have one of those moments where he realized the depth of God's love for him, he would wish for a thousand voices to offer his love and praises to God.

Let's stand together and ask for the same thing: *"O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing"*