

Romans 1:14-17  
Righteousness From God by Faith

**<sup>14</sup> I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians,<sup>[d]</sup> both to the wise and to the foolish. <sup>15</sup> So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.**

**<sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith,<sup>[e]</sup> as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”**

**Prayer:** *Holy Father, we come to you today grateful for the revelation of your Word. When we were lost and undone and without hope you made the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ known to us. You enabled us to see our sin, and see the Savior as the One who died for our sins and rose from the dead so that we could be justified in your site, so we could receive the very righteousness of Christ into our lives. Grant now the aide of your Holy Spirit that we might understand your Word and behold your great saving work in our lives. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

A Blessed Reformation Sunday to you all. And you are blessed, whether you realize it or not, because as Christians we are all sons and daughters of the Protestant Reformation that began traditionally on Oct. 31, 1517, when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses, 95 items for debate, on the church door at Wittenberg, Germany. This was the spark that lit the fires of the Reformation.

Without the Reformation of the church that mushroomed at that time, we would not be here together as people who place all our religious beliefs and practices under the authority of the Word of God.

Before the Reformation in the early 1500's, the Roman Catholic Church had gradually pushed the Word of God aside and more and more placed itself, its traditions and teachings, above the Word of God.

The Church continued to hold to the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, but it was teaching that salvation was by Christ, but Christ plus other things such as the Mass where Christ was supposedly crucified afresh every time the Mass was performed. It taught that grace and faith were a necessary part of salvation, but it was grace and faith provided to the believer through the ministry of the sacraments in the church. No believer had assurance of their salvation since it could be lost at any time by sin, especially mortal sins. Mortal sins unconfessed to the priests could damn a person to hell.

In the Roman Catholic doctrine salvation was no longer in Christ alone, but Christ plus sacramental works as prescribed by the Church. It was no longer faith alone, but faith plus works. In the Reformation the Protestants once again affirmed the five great “Solas” as we call them – “Solas” meaning “only” or “alone:” the scriptures alone, Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone, and the glory of God alone.

Into this theological departure of the Roman Catholic Church from the supreme authority of the Word of God was found a Roman Catholic monk named Martin Luther. He was a theological professor who had studied thoroughly the Bible and he knew how absolutely righteous God was. And he knew how sinful he was. He understood God's character and God's law and he understood how far short he was constantly falling from the commandments, the will, and the righteousness of God.

He was tormented by his own sins. He did all he could on his part to somehow gain forgiveness. He punished his own body, he confessed his sins continually, but the harder he tried, it seemed the further behind he got. It was a hopeless situation, and he was in despair, in mental and spiritual agony.

He had been teaching the book of Romans and he had studied it intensely, trying to grasp the message of this great theological treatise of the Apostle Paul. And his attention rested on one verse: Romans 1:17, <sup>17</sup> **For in it [that is, in the Gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith,<sup>[e]</sup> as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."**

For a long time Luther understood the verse as saying that the person who is righteous in God's eyes must be righteous in himself, that is, he must be free of sin, fully confessed up of all sin, and continue to maintain himself in a state of avoiding all sin — striving with all his might to be pleasing and acceptable to God in every thought, word, and action. Failure was unacceptable before a righteous God. Absolute sinlessness was required. If a man were to attain salvation, he must walk this narrow road, never veering to the right or left. God was looking and he would know when one slipped up.

This was Luther's understanding until God began to show him that he was misunderstanding this text. The light from God began to break through into his mind and the Holy Spirit began to show him that for a sinner like Luther, for any sinner, the righteousness of God is not earned by the sinner but it is bestowed upon him as a gift from God. It is received not by works but by faith. Not by what the man could do in his own strength, but was based on what Christ did by his death for sinners and his resurrection for their justification.

So, Luther grasped it – he grasped what the Word of God was teaching. It was not Luther's own efforts, his work, his faithfulness. It was Christ's work. Christ had done it all. Luther realized he couldn't earn his salvation. He realized he must take it as a gift from Christ. This is the way Luther described what he experienced on that blessed day when the light of God shone into his mind and heart: "It was as if the gates of paradise were swung open to me, and I was born again."

Luther, the theological professor, had now become a Christian, a born-again Christian. He experienced that spiritual birth, that birth by the Holy Spirit, that is the essential ingredient for bringing a person into the kingdom of God. His meditation on Romans

1:17 brought him into the understanding that righteousness from God was a gift given to believers.

Let's read these two verses again. Romans 1:16-17: **<sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith,<sup>[e]</sup> as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."**

This is a crucial text for setting the stage of the entire teaching in the book of Romans and it is a crucial passage for understanding the great doctrine that was the cornerstone of the Protestant Reformation. We call it "justification by faith." Man is justified before God not on the basis of human merit or works, but through faith in Christ and his work, his merit, his worthiness.

Let's think about this word "justification." What does it mean? It means to justify someone, that is, to make them right, make them acceptable. It is to deliver them from condemnation or guilt.

It is an especially crucial word when we think about humanity's relationship with God. What kind of person is God? The Bible reveals that God is a righteous God – that is, within his own being, his own character, there is not the taint of evil, but only purity, moral perfection, light, goodness, and fairness. He is infinitely perfect in his righteousness; he can no more lose or compromise his righteousness than water can lose its chemical makeup of H<sub>2</sub>O.

But the great problem is that we humans are not righteous, we are unrighteous. Why are we unrighteous? It's because we have a legal indictment, a legal charge against us in God's heavenly courtroom that says, "Guilty. Guilt transferred when Adam sinned." This is what Romans 5 teaches us. Rom. 5:18 says, "one trespass<sup>[f]</sup> led to condemnation for all men..." and Rom. 5:19 says, "by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners..." Friends, whether we like it or not, whether we completely understand it or not, this is what the Word of God teaches us: that all people ever born are born with the guilt of Adams' sin branded on their consciences.

So we not only come out of the womb with a guilty sentence already place on our heads, but we begin to sin ourselves because we inherit Adam's sinful nature. Ephesians 2:1-2, for example, says "...you were dead in the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup> in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air..."

Why were we dead in sins? That is, dead spiritually? It is because of our indwelling sinful nature. An apple tree can only produce apples; and a sinner can only produce sins.

So here's the problem: God is absolutely and perfectly righteous but we are the opposite; we are guilty of sin, we are immersed in sin, we are prone to every kind of

selfishness, deceit, slander, lying, lust, thievery, self-glorification, lack of love and disobedience to God – you name it. We may look good and respectable to other humans around us but God knows our hearts. Jer. 17:9 says, “*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?*”

Martin Luther knew all these things and he understood his precarious position before God. He knew his only hope was to somehow find acceptance with God, to find justification, righteousness before the Holy God. This eluded him until God showed him the truth embedded in Romans 1:17, “**<sup>17</sup> For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith,<sup>[e]</sup> as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”**

Let’s look at this verse and see if we can get ahold of what it is saying. As always, when we study a verse or passage in the Bible we have to look at the context in which it’s found.

So let’s go back to verse 14 and read Romans 1:14-17:

**<sup>14</sup> I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians,<sup>[d]</sup> both to the wise and to the foolish. <sup>15</sup> So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.**

**<sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith,<sup>[e]</sup> as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”**

Paul is writing to the church at Rome. He had never been there, but he longed to go there and minister to the Christians there and have them minister to him. He says in verse 14 that he is *under obligation to both Greeks and barbarians, both the wise and to the foolish.*”

Why does Paul say he’s “under obligation”? It’s because the risen Christ had appeared before him and commissioned him to take the gospel to all these people groups that lived in the Roman Empire of that day.

So he was under obligation to obey Christ and fulfill the calling and ministry God had given him. Jesus was now his Lord and Savior. Jesus had shed his blood for his salvation. Jesus had placed his Spirit within Paul’s breast. There was no question to Paul, no other option, but to obey Christ, to obey the one who had loved him and given his life for Paul.

Paul, I believe, was also under obligation to other men and women because he shared a common humanity with them and wanted them to be saved from their sins and come to know the fellowship and glory of the Son of God.

And Paul was under obligation to all people, no matter their background or status in life. Whether they were wise or foolish, cultured or uncultured. Paul could minister to kings

or his prison guards; it mattered not, they were all in need of Christ's salvation. Remember he said in another place, "I have become all things **to** all people, that by all means I might save **some**." 1 Cor. 9:22

Paul says in verse 15 that he is eager to preach the gospel to the Christians in Rome. Paul is not a reluctant servant of Christ but serves with devotion and joy. He remembers how lost he was, how he was depending on his own law-keeping, his own human works to justify himself before God – he remembers how fruitless and useless that was, and how God in his sovereign love and grace came to him and delivered him from his legalistic religion and brought him into the freedom of the sons of God. The Lord regenerated his heart and made a new man in Christ.

What is this "**gospel**" that Paul is so eager to preach? If someone were to ask you, "What is the gospel?" – how would you answer? I remember one time we had a man visiting at our house from a Muslim background and there was another man, a minister, also visiting us at that time and the Muslim asked him, "How does a person become a Christian?" and the other man couldn't answer him. We thought that this was rather sad that a Christian man couldn't explain to an inquirer what the gospel is, how a person can become a Christian.

What is this gospel? Paul is eager to preach it, to throw his energy into making it known, so it must be something great. Paul did not waste his energy on matters of no import, of trivial matters, especially when it comes to man's relationship to God.

The word "**gospel**" means **Good News** and it is the good news that God has not forgotten about or rejected the human race because of its sin and rebellion against him. Instead he had mercy and sent his Son from heaven, who took upon himself our human nature as he was born by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary. He lived a perfectly sinless life and revealed his divine nature and power in the healing and deliverance of multitudes from their sicknesses and demonic oppression. He then offered up his body on the cross of Calvary as the substitutionary sacrifice for the sins of his people. God's righteous wrath against their sin was poured out on Jesus so that their sin-debt to God was paid in full. They were granted full pardon in heaven's courtroom and adopted as God's sons and daughters with the gift of eternal life.

This salvation from sin and judgment is the free gift of God's grace and is offered to all who will repent of their sins and believe in Christ as their Savior and Lord. God has done great things to save a people for himself. So we must come to Christ, the only provision for the sin of man and the only way to go to heaven and enjoy the fellowship of God himself.

There is no other message, no other religion in the world that can measure up to the glory and holiness and profundity of the Christian Gospel. Paul knew well its inestimable treasure and he was proud of it, he proclaimed it as the only hope of humanity, and the defended it.

Paul goes on in verse 16 to elaborate on why he is unashamed of the Gospel. He says, **...for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.**

The word “for” here, “*for it is the power of God for salvation*” carries the meaning of “because.” He is unashamed of the Gospel “because it is the power of God for salvation.”

If there’s one thing about God’s salvation it is that it is **powerful**. It is not weak, milk-toast, or ineffective. When the Spirit of God enters a human heart, profound and deep changes and renovations begin to take place. When a man or woman is captivated and indwelt by sin, what can change them? What can change their motivation? What can change their inner meditations?

Drugs and pills can’t do it, psychological counseling may help but sometimes not very much. What can change bad, evil habits? Very few humans have the will power to break out of harmful addictions, but the Holy Spirit taking the Word of God and ministered through the people of God can begin to truly change the thinking and behavior of a human being.

Paul talks about this power in Ephesians 1:19-20: “...the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might <sup>20</sup> that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places...

This power that is at work in the lives of Christian believers is like that great power that raised Christ from the dead. The power of death and hell sought to banish Christ to the grave and death forever, but he rose up and broke the power of the dark, evil forces of the universe that would have extinguished him forever. That same power is at work in believers and will ultimately raise us from the dead also.

Paul says in verse 16 that God’s salvation is for “**everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.**”

I want you to notice here that his power of God for salvation is for everyone **who believes**.

It doesn’t say that this salvation is for anyone who can keep the 10 commandments or anyone who can follow perfectly that inner righteousness and purity that Jesus speaks of in the Sermon on the Mount, it doesn’t say that this salvation is for the person who gives some money for the starving people in Africa or who works in the soup kitchen downtown once a month or who fasts once a week or who goes to church or who does any infinite number of good works but the only requirement is **to believe**.

We read in Acts 16:20 when the jailor in Philippi asked Paul and Silas, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”<sup>31</sup> And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”

So Paul and Silas put no other requirement or stipulation on the Philippian jailor. They didn’t tell him to return the bribes he may have taken to let prisoners have special privileges, or pay back a man from whom he may have stolen a sheep, but only do one thing: believe the Gospel. Believe that Jesus died and rose again for his salvation.

It matters not a whit who a person may be, what their ethnicity or their education or their economic status or their criminal background or their experience with addictions – the way we can summarize the Gospel’s stance toward all these people is that **it is indiscriminate in its availability to all who will come to Christ, confess their sins, and believe in him and his great redemptive work on Calvary’s cross and his resurrection from the dead after three days**

The gospel does not discriminate against people. People do, but God does not. “He is no respecter of persons.” He will not treat a rich and famous person any different from a poor, unknown beggar. He will deal with both even-handedly, calling sin as sin in both their lives, equally damning to both.

In verse 17 we further following Paul’s reasoning. Granted that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has the power to save anyone who comes to him in faith and repentance, what is the basis or reason or ground upon which God can do this? What about people’s sins, the stained records of their lives, the long list of ways they had offended God and stirred up his anger against them, the long list of the innumerable times they had ignored God and refused to honor him as God, of the years of doing their own thing, their own private agenda – as if God never existed. How can the righteous God receive such people into his presence? Can a man who’s been working in the stench and filth of sewer tunnels all day be brought up out of the tunnel and into the spotlessly clean office of the mayor at the end of the day? That would not happen. The worker would be unfit to enter the office of the mayor.

So a man or woman who’s been immersed in sin all their lives cannot be brought into the presence of the holy, righteous God. Something radical would have to happen to enable such a sinner to enter the presence of the holy God.

Verse 17 gives us the answer – the answer of how the righteous God can receive unrighteous sinners into his presence and fellowship. Verse 17 reads: <sup>17</sup> **For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith,<sup>[e]</sup> as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”**

I want us to notice several things about this verse: first of all, we see the phrase **“the righteousness of God.”** This is a key phrase, a key concept, a key reality in the book of Romans. It is, in fact, the theme, the main idea, of the book of Romans. It is used 8

times in the book of Romans. It doesn't always have the same meaning; it depends on the context as to how we should understand it.

Certainly God is righteous. Most of us Christians in America are probably somewhat unbalanced when we describe who God is, what he is like, what is his nature, what are his attributes – those characteristics that describe his intrinsic nature. Most of us, if asked to describe God, would say he is love. Or those acquainted with R.C. Sproul's teaching would say the key thing about God is that he is holy – high and exalted and separate from his creation and creatures.

But the Book of Romans, Paul's great explanation of the Gospel of Christ, focuses in on **God's righteousness**. In the book of Romans, this is the crucial issue: God is righteous and humanity is not and there is a great problem. How do you reconcile the two parties which are nearly the opposite of one another?

Verse 17 the meaning is not giving us a description of an attribute of God. It is true that God is righteous; he is perfectly right and correct and true, but that is not the purpose of this phrase here.

As I understand it, Paul is talking about ***the righteousness that is granted***, that is given, that is provided to wicked sinners so that their guilty slate before the righteous God can be removed and replaced with a righteousness from God that is given as a gift. It is a bestowal of something completely foreign to the nature of man. Luther called it an "alien righteousness."

Listen to what Luther wrote:

R.J. Grunewald (RG)

Re: Rom. 1:16-17:

"The righteousness of God is the cause of salvation. And here again, by the righteousness of God we must not understand the righteousness by which He is righteous in Himself but the righteousness by which we are made righteous by God." p. 18

And Luther quotes from Augustine: This righteousness of God is "...not that righteousness by which God is righteous but that righteousness with which He covers man when He justifies the ungodly." p. 18

Man is guilty inside and out by reason of being condemned by Adam's sin and by his own sin, and as Paul says in Ephesians 2, he is "lost and without hope and without God in the world."

To put it simply, what God does is he takes a guilty sinner, a many-times felon in the court room of God, and pronounces him righteous, considers him righteous, counts him



righteous – not guilty any longer – free of all guilt and condemnation – and instead clothed with the very righteousness of Jesus Christ.

Isa. 61:10 speaks of such righteousness bestowed on sinners:

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has **clothed** me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of **righteousness**, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

Martin Luther experienced this joy when he trusted in Christ's work and not his own works. When he received from God salvation instead of trying to qualify himself for salvation.

You see, this righteousness is "**revealed**" as it says in the middle of v. 17. It is not something that man thought up – it is beyond man's capability to conceive of what God has done to make a way for sinners to be declared and considered righteous before the holy God, but he has done this in human history by sending his Son to be the sacrifice and payment for the sins of God's people.

We read in Col. 2: 26-27 "2<sup>6</sup> the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. 2<sup>7</sup> To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Verse 17 <sup>17</sup> **For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith,<sup>[e]</sup> as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."**

#### **IV. Faith is the means of receiving the righteousness of God.**

This expression "from faith for faith" is a difficult phrase to translate from the Greek and put it into its proper equivalent meaning in English:

NASB and KJV– from faith to faith

NIV – by faith from first to last

I think the NIV translation gives us the overall idea here: righteousness from God to sinners is by faith from first to last.

We come to him by means of faith and we continue the Christian life by faith. That is, we trust Christ, we believe in him, not only for our salvation, but for our growth in the Christian life and our ultimate glorification. And every challenge and problem we meet along the way we look to Christ and cast our care on him and ask and trust him to intervene and help us.

When we need fuel for our car we put gasoline in it and it runs quite well. We don't change what we put in the gas tank. We don't put in Coca-Cola or orange juice or syrup or even water – none of these substances will work. Only gasoline. So it is with the

Christian life, we begin in faith, we continue in faith, and we come into the home stretch in faith.

So this Righteousness of God is received by faith initially and continually.

The necessity of having faith as the fuel that drives the life of the believer was not unknown in the Old Testament

Habakkuk 2:4 reads, “Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith.”<sup>[a]</sup>

So, those whom God counts as righteous before him, those who are acceptable to him, who are received by him, are those who have faith, they believe the Gospel. They believe that God sent his Son to this world, that he took upon himself our full human nature, but without sin, and died on the cross to suffer the punishment for sin that his people deserve. He stood up and blocked the wrath of God directed toward his people, Jesus jumped in from of them as a person would jump in front of a speeding car, knocking a pedestrian out of the way and taking the hit by the car instead. The pedestrian goes free but the intervener is killed. So Christ was killed in our place so we could go free as forgiven, justified people, cleansed people, declared as righteous before God, not because of our own righteousness but because of Christ’s perfect righteousness bestowed upon us not by our good works or human merit but solely on the basis of the sovereign graciousness of God

This is what Martin Luther began to understand – the Christian life is a life of faith. We begin and continue as people of faith.

It is our faith in Christ and his finished work that brings us justification before God; our faith in Christ results in God counting us righteous, as clothing us with Christ’s righteousness. We don’t work for our salvation; Christ worked for us, he suffered for us, he triumphed over death and sin and hell for us.

Let me summarize what we have studied today:

**I. Paul is unashamed of the gospel; he is proud of it.** We too should be unashamed and proud of it. The gospel is not something from another era that is out of date in our modern culture. It is up to date and just as relevant and vital to humanity’s situation as it ever was. It remains humanity’s only hope of finding reconciliation with the holy, righteous God. We cannot make ourselves righteous and holy; we must receive from God this righteousness, Christ’s own righteousness, as a gift, as a sovereign bestowal of love and mercy.

**II. The Gospel has power to save all who believe.**

So God’s power is more than adequate to save us from our sins, to grant us the righteousness of Christ. Look to Christ and see his power work within you to conform you to his image and make you more and more a vessel for his honor and glory in the earth.

His power can break the bondages of sin that would still harass us.

The gospel is for all who will repent of their sins and trust in Christ. Let's make it available known to the people whom God brings us in contact with. It is good news, news to be shared with others.

### **III. The Gospel reveals the righteousness of God.**

**It is a provided righteousness, not an earned righteousness.**

1. Salvation by is not attained by human works.
2. It is an alien righteousness.
3. It is an act of God's sovereign grace.
4. It is a declaration of justification, a release from condemnation, guilt.
5. It is legal, it is actual, it is permanent.
6. Cannot be lost by sin  
Charles Spurgeon once quipped, "Noah fell down many times in the ark, but he never once fell out of the ark."

### **IV. Faith is the means of receiving the righteousness of God.**

The Righteousness of God is received by faith initially and continually. We live lives of faith in the living Christ. As Paul said,

*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. Gal. 2:20*

**Memorable Phrase: The righteousness of God is given to sinful people by means of their faith in Jesus Christ. So what do we do? We** believe in Jesus Christ our Lord. We receive the righteousness of God by faith in Christ. We rest in him and proceed on our Christian life in the journey of faith in the Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us. All glory to Jesus Christ now and forever for the great salvation he has won for us.

#### **Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, to you be the glory for what you have done for your people. You bore our wretched sins on the cross, you endured the wrath of the heavenly Father that we deserved, you endured it in our place. You suffered for us then you rose from the tomb on the third day. You appeared to your disciples for 40 days, then you ascended back to heaven. And there you are at the Father's right hand as our great High Priest, continually interceding for us.

Great is the work you have done so that you bestow freely on us your own righteousness, righteousness we could never attain in our own efforts.

You are the Savior, you are the Lord, you are the holy One, the worthy One, to you be the glory now and forever. Amen.