

Romans: The Good News of God

The Gospel Is for the Whole World

Romans 1:14-15

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The Gospel Is for the Whole World

Scripture

In the opening greeting (1:1-6) of Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul gives us a succinct six-point summary of the gospel. These six points are as follows:

1. The origin of the gospel is God (1:1c),
2. The attestation of the gospel is Scripture (1:2),
3. The substance of the gospel is Jesus Christ (1:3-4),
4. The scope of the gospel is all the nations (1:5b, 6),
5. The immediate purpose of the gospel is the obedience that comes from faith (1:5c), and
6. The ultimate purpose of the gospel is the glory of God (1:5a).

This six-point summary of the gospel is a summary of six major themes that are traced throughout Paul's entire letter to the Romans. Today, I want to examine one of these points, one of these themes, namely that *the scope of the gospel is all the nations*. Paul expresses it this way in our text for today, Romans 1:14-15:

¹⁴ I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. ¹⁵ That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome. (Romans 1:14-15)

Introduction

In today's text Paul is saying that the gospel is for the whole world.

Thom Hopler, in his excellent book on cross-cultural evangelism titled, *A World of Difference: Following Christ beyond Your Cultural Walls*, shows this from the Bible as a whole.

As early as Genesis 3, we see that the gospel is for both male and female, the first announcement of the gospel being made to both Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:15).

In Daniel we find that the gospel is for the dreaded Babylonians as well as for the persecuted Jews.

In the ministry of Jesus the gospel was taught to “publicans and sinners” as well as to those who had the privileges of education and high birth, like Nicodemus.

The gospel was disclosed to the Samaritan woman of John 4.

Later, at the time of the expanding apostolic ministry, God reminded Peter that the gospel was for Roman military officers, like Cornelius, as well as for those who, like the Jews, were ceremonially “clean.” On that occasion Peter made the point by declaring, “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him” (Acts 10:34-35).

Jesus showed the geographic scope of the gospel’s proclamation in the Acts’ version of the Great Commission: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).¹

Lesson

How easily we forget this! Christians forget, or perhaps ignore, that the gospel is for the whole world. Today, I want us to see from our text that the gospel is for the whole world.

I. The Gospel Is for Educated People

First, the gospel is for educated people.

In Romans 1:14 the first persons to whom Paul says he is **obligated** as an ambassador of the gospel are **Greeks**, whom he contrasts with **non-Greeks** or, as some of our more literal translations

¹ Thom Hopler, *A World of Difference: Following Christ beyond Your Cultural Walls* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981). Hopler surveys the biblical material in the middle chapters of this book.

say, “barbarians.”

There is a second contrast in this sentence, **the wise** and **the foolish** (or “unwise”), which indicates how the first category is to be understood.

If Paul had contrasted **Greeks** with Romans—which he could have done, since he was writing to the Romans, we would understand the distinction between **Greeks** and **non-Greeks** in terms of *nationality*.

If he had let the comparison end with **Greeks** and **non-Greeks**, not mentioning **the wise** and **the foolish**, the distinction would have been primarily an *ethnic* one.

However, Paul adds the words **wise** and **foolish**, and by doing this he shows that what he is chiefly thinking about is *education*.

Because of their language, long-established **Greeks** had access to the great historical, epic, dramatic and, above all, philosophical writings of the past. Even the powerful Romans got most of their education through this channel. Apart from the Greek language, others—people of all kinds—could never be considered educated or **wise** by Greek standards.

So, Paul’s first claim is that the gospel God sent him to proclaim is for the educated people of this world. It is for the **wise**, whether they are Greeks or Romans or Americans or the intellectual academicians on university campuses.

The gospel is for you if you are among the educated of our world. You need this ancient Christian gospel. Whatever your educational attainments, however wise you may be, you are still a sinful person who is cut off from the God who made you and to whom you must one day give an account for your life, including your sins. You are mortal. One day you will die. You will enter eternity with or without the Lord Jesus Christ—just as surely as any other person in this world.

I remember when I was being interviewed by the Session of the Oakwood Presbyterian Church to become their pastor. One question was eventually asked, which I had been expecting, given

the fact that Oakwood Presbyterian Church was located in State College, a university town: “What do you think about your ability to minister in a community of highly educated people?” (Ten out of the 20 people in the adult Sunday school class I attended the Sunday I interviewed were either had Ph.D.s or were Ph.D. candidates.)

I recall that my answer was something along these lines: “Gentlemen, the ground at the foot of the cross is level. And every person, whether educated or uneducated, sophisticated or unsophisticated, intellectual or ignorant must come to God through Christ, and through Christ alone. Every person, academician and non-academician alike, must one day stand before God and give an account of his life.”

I say again, the gospel is for you if you are among the educated of our world. Your intellect and education are great gifts. But it is God who has given them to you. And if you do not thank him for these gifts and use them in ways that honor him, you are more deserving of judgment than those who do not have intellectual gifts. You, like everyone else, need a Savior.

The Apostle Paul was perhaps the most highly educated person of his day. By the time he was twenty-one years old, he had the equivalent of two Ph.D. degrees! He was taught the wisdom of the Greeks as well as the religious traditions of the Jews. But Paul learned that the gospel of the crucified Son of God alone was true wisdom. To people in the Greek city of Corinth he wrote (in 1 Corinthians 1:20-25):

Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolish-

ness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

First, the gospel is for educated people.

II. The Gospel Is for Ordinary People

Second, the gospel is for ordinary people.

The **Greeks** called all people who were **non-Greeks** "barbarians." This is the next category of people to whom Paul says he is **obligated** to preach the gospel.

"Barbarian" did not have quite the negative overtones to the Greeks as it has for us. The word actually had to do with speech patterns, for when the **Greeks** heard **non-Greeks** or "foreigners" speak, what they heard sounded like babbling, or stammering: *bar, bar, bar*. So "barbarians" were people who did not speak Greek.

But although the word did not have quite the negative overtones as it has for us, it nevertheless did have some negative overtones. Greek was the language of the educated. Since the histories, epics, and plays were in Greek, to be a **non-Greek** was to be cut off from this cultural storehouse.

Perhaps you are a person who feels yourself similarly disadvantaged. You may feel cut off because of a lack of educational opportunities. So many people have been to college. You have not. You have not read the books they have read and talk about. You are not at ease with the buzz words of the intellectual establishment. You do not speak as educated people do.

You may feel cut off because of your low income, which shows in the clothes you wear, the neighborhood you live in, the car you drive, or in many other distinctions.

Or you may feel cut off because of your upbringing. Others seem to have grown up in warm and secure families. But childhood was a very difficult experience for you. Instead of security, acceptance and affirmation, you experienced insecurity, rejection, and criticism.

For these and many other reasons, you may feel left out. So you look at what the world calls “Christian people” and say, “Those are not *my* people. I don’t belong in their company. Christianity is *their* religion. It is not mine.”

Christians too often forget that Jesus Christ did not go first to the wise, wealthy, or influential citizens of his day, but to the ordinary people, whoever and wherever they were. And the important people did not like him for it! They sneeringly called him a friend of drunkards and sinners. Nevertheless, that is where he went. His friends were carpenters, fishermen, tax collectors, and others who worked hard for a living.

After Jesus’ death and resurrection, when the gospel began to spread beyond the geographical borders of Israel, it was among the working people—often among slaves—that it advanced most readily.

In Paul’s day there were not many who had the advantages of what we would call a university education, but Paul wrote (in 1 Corinthians 1:26-29, 31) to say that God had chosen them to expose the foolishness of merely human wisdom:

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. . . . Therefore, as it is written: “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.”

First, the gospel is for educated people. Second, the gospel is for ordinary people.

III. The Gospel Is for Religious People

Third, the gospel is for religious people.

In our text, Romans 1:14-15, Paul limits his “categories” of

those who need the gospel to **Greeks** and **non-Greeks, the wise** and **the foolish**. I don't know why he stopped at that point. But it is significant that in the very next verse Paul adds another important category, when he distinguishes between the Jew and the Gentile (1:16).

Isn't it surprising that Paul feels a need to mention Jews specifically? The gospel is about a Jew, Jesus of Nazareth. It was taught, at least in the early days, exclusively from the Jewish Scriptures. The Old Testament is a Jewish book. The apostles and the early preachers of the gospel were all Jews. Why, then, should Jews specifically be mentioned?

The answer is that Jews as a whole, even more than Gentiles, resisted the gospel. Why? Because it did not fit their strong religious traditions.

It is true that the gospel had been promised to Jews in the very Scriptures they defended. But they had imposed their own expectations on those Scriptures and handled them so as to build their own feelings of self-righteousness rather than as a way to recognize sin and their need for the Savior whom God had promised to send. As a result, when God sent Jesus they resented his "independent" spirit and fought him when his moral perfection exposed their own deep sin.

It is the same today, in the sense that the gospel of salvation by Jesus Christ is resisted most by those who are "religious." Of all persons, religious people often have the least sense of personal need. Above all others, they especially think themselves to have achieved God's standards and deserve commendation by him. They resist being taught that they, too, are sinners, that they, too, need a Savior, and that they, too, must come to God through simple faith—just as others. Yet they desperately need Jesus.

Are you one of those people? Do you feel secure in your religion—apart from Jesus?

If so, you need to learn that no religion, even Christianity, can save you. Only God can save you. He has made provision for that through the work of Jesus Christ, his own Son, who died for

sinner. That is the gospel. That is what you need. It is needed by everybody.

First, the gospel is for educated people. Second, the gospel is for ordinary people. Third, the gospel is for religious people.

IV. The Gospel Is for All People

And finally, the gospel is for all people.

At the close of his statement of obligation to the Greeks and non-Greeks, the wise and the foolish, Paul explains his views by declaring in verse 15: **“That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome.”**

When he mentions **“you who are at Rome”** Paul is not adding a new category, for the Romans fit within the earlier Greek or non-Greek, wise or foolish categories. The church **at Rome** included every conceivable type of man or woman and was therefore itself all-embracing. So when Paul says that the gospel is for those **at Rome “also,”** he is actually saying, “The gospel is for you, whoever you may be and wherever you may be.”

You may be a hardened sinner. You have no concern for the things of God today. But one day you will stand before that God and you will have to give an account of your life. You need Jesus Christ to save you from your sin and hell.

In 1951 comedian Red Skelton and a party of friends flew to Europe, where Skelton was to appear at the London Palladium. As they were flying over the Swiss Alps, three of the airplane’s engines failed. The situation looked very grave and the passengers began to pray. Skelton went into one of his best comic routines to distract them from the emergency as the plane lost height, coming closer and closer to the ominous-looking mountains. At the last moment the pilot spied a large field among the slopes and made a perfect landing. Skelton broke the relieved silence by saying, “Now, ladies and gentlemen, you may return to the evil habits you gave up 20 minutes ago.”

Skelton’s joking advice underscored the truth that whatever

religious “commitments” those terrified passengers may have made were strictly temporary. The minute they stepped safely out of that aircraft, all deals with God were canceled.

But, you cannot cancel the Day of Judgment that awaits every unrepentant and hardened sinner. You need Christ—today.

You may be a child with your whole life stretching before you. You have great plans, and you may have very little place for God in those plans. If so, I tell you that the gospel is for you and that you need it, just as others do.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher of the 19th century in London, once said in a talk to children, “You may be young; but you are old enough to sin, and you are old enough to die.” As long as that is true, you need a Savior.

You may be an older person, perhaps quite advanced in years. You are thinking that life is almost over for you and that decisions of this kind are for young people. You may be thinking that it is too late to make changes. But you also need the gospel of Jesus Christ. Soon you will stand before God, your Maker, and you will have to give an account for your many long years of sinning. You have heard the gospel. Will you have to tell God that you rejected it, that you spurned the offer of grace through his crucified Son, the Lord Jesus Christ? It is not too late. Today can be the day of salvation for you. If you turn to him now, you will find that the last years of your life will be the most important and precious of all. Why? Because you are rightly related to your Creator!

I remember years ago in South Africa a dear old man in my home church in Cape Town. Uncle Des, for that is what we all affectionately called him, had come to know Christ as Savior long after he had retired. I think Uncle Des was almost 80 years-old when he became a child of God. He was so thankful for his salvation, and the remaining years of his life were spent in joyful service to Christ. He never tired of telling people that they were never too old to believe the gospel.

Perhaps you are from a non-Western, non-English-speaking country. You may think that the gospel is uniquely American, that

it is not for you, not for one from your country and your background. I tell you that the gospel is for you. It is the gospel of the only true God and the only true Savior. It is a gospel that has already permeated the entire world. It has now come to you. It is time for you to turn from your god or gods, who cannot save you from eternal destruction, and it is time for you to trust alone in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Most of you here today are American, and you think that you are already a Christian—just because you have been born in a so-called “Christian country.” May I tell you, in love, that being an American will not save you? Having a Christian tradition or even Christian parents will not save you. Belonging to a gospel-preaching church will not save you. You need the gospel of Jesus Christ. You need to turn from your sin and believe in Jesus Christ alone as your Savior.

Conclusion

The gospel is for those in Tampa. It is for those in Toledo. It is for those in Cape Town, Calcutta, Cancun or Cardiff. The gospel is for educated people. It is for ordinary people. It is for religious people. And it is for all people. Wherever you are and whoever you are, the gospel is for you.

If you are not a Christian today, you need to hear this and come to the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior.

And if you are a Christian, you need to make this great good news known to other people, just as the Apostle Paul did. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

Our Father in heaven, thank you for the good news of the gospel. Thank you that the gospel is for all people.

Your Word teaches us that the gospel is for those in Cape Town, Calcutta, Cancun or Cardiff. The gospel is for educated people. It is for ordinary people. It is for religious people. It is for all people.

Father, no person can produce the new birth in another person. Only the Holy Spirit can do that. All I can do is present the truth of the Word of God and ask you to apply it effectually to your elect. And so, would you be pleased to do so today.

Grant the gift of faith and repentance to every unregenerate person in this sanctuary today. Enable those persons to trust in Jesus Christ alone for the gift of eternal life.

And help those of us who are already Christians to share this good news with the non-Christians whom you bring into our lives.

And all of this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.