

March 28, 2001

The Just Shall Live by Faith Romans 1:17

The Gospel of God saves us from the wrath of God by the righteousness of God received by faith.

LTS: Gal. 3:7-14

Today we climb the Mt. Everest of Romans. Verses 16-17 of chapter 1 are the twin peaks that tower over the theological landscape of this timeless epistle. Martyn Lloyd-Jones once said “these two verses are the most important in the N.T.” I can’t help but agree.

Together they were responsible for striking the spark that quickly erupted into a spiritual forest fire that thundered across the western world with such power that its effects are still plainly evident 500 years later. Like all major fires, this one had a name. It is universally known as the Protestant Reformation. And at the blazing center of that massive spiritual reformation stood and stands the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel is what Paul is writing to us about in Romans 1:16-17. But before we dive into our study, let’s stand together and read our passage for this morning within its context.

Read Rom. 1:13-17

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. ¹⁴ I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. ¹⁵ So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

May the Lord add his blessing to the reading of his word.

Throughout the centuries leading up to the reformation, the idea of how one could be reconciled to God and attain salvation was a complicated thing. Virtually everyone was taught

that they needed to follow Roman Catholic rituals, attend the mass, confess their sins to the priest, do the prescribed penance, try not to commit mortal sin, give money to the church, obey the law and keep the traditions. Then, when you die, you are summarily cast into purgatory where you will spend an undetermined length of time (hundreds or even thousands of years) for purification. After which one may be permitted to enter heaven.

Now, all of that may sound rather strange to our protestant ears, but even today, millions of people are trapped in this largely man-made religious bondage.

The whole scheme, like that of all religions of the world, is a works-based system of earning one's way to paradise. And it wasn't a new idea. In Paul's day, Judaism had devolved into a similar system of works-based righteousness that promised to lead one to God. In reality, however, it never could because no sinner has ever been reconciled to God on the grounds of good works.

When you read the N.T. you repeatedly hear the apostles (especially Paul) bringing Scriptures to bear against such forms of works-righteousness. But if earning your way to heaven is not acceptable to God, then how can anyone be saved?

That's a great question. And Paul wrote explicitly and repeatedly on the subject. From the Spirit-inspired letters of the Apostle Paul, we learn the only way sinful men and women can receive God's salvation. And today we study it by examining four gospel truths. I want to talk to you today about those four truths. The first one is this...

I. There is, a Righteousness God Requires:

1. Now in our text for this morning we see that Paul is, indeed, writing about salvation. He says (16), "I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for salvation..."

2. Given the repeated biblical teaching that the wages of sin is death, and that all humans are sinners, salvation is the most important need of mankind everywhere! Sinners need to be saved from the just and holy wrath of God.

3. All of this should be especially interesting to all of us at Calvary Bible Church because Paul is actually writing to the church. The epistle to the Romans is not a gospel tract for unbelievers (though it should certainly be used to that end). Rather, it's a letter to believers. It is essentially a letter explaining to the church how God has brought us into his salvation and how that salvation changes us.

4. Notice what Paul says (17) “For in it [i.e. the Gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed.” Now, why do you suppose he didn’t he says “The righteousness of God is revealed? Why did he say “In the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed? I mean, why didn’t he say “in the gospel the love of God is revealed? That wouldn’t be wrong. We could point to any number of passages in the Bible that appeal to God’s love as the basis of salvation.

- (Jn. 3:16) For God so loved the world...
- Eph. 2:4-5; Because of the great love with which he loved us, he made us alive together with Christ.
- 1 Thes. 2:16; or 1 John 4:10

5. But I submit to you that Paul wants to take believers deeper into the gospel so that we will marvel all the more at the glory of His grace. He wants us to drill into the deep inner workings of our salvation. So rather than emphasizing the LOVE of God, he points us to the Righteousness of God in these four gospel truths. Or, we could say that the saving love of God is manifest in these four gospel truths. The first of those truths is that...

There is a righteousness that God requires.

5. When Martin Luther wrestled with these verses, they didn’t strike him as tidings of Good News. Quite the opposite! When he read these words, he became extremely troubled. He knew the repeated O.T. requirement to pursue a life of holiness before God. For example:

- A. When God gave Abraham the sign of circumcision he said, “Walk before me and be blameless” (Gen. 17:1)
- B. God instructed Moses to tell the congregation of the people, “Be holy for I am holy” (Lev. 11:44)
- C. In Deuteronomy God warned the people saying (Deut. 11:26–28) “See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: ²⁷ the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you today, ²⁸ and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn aside from the way that I am commanding you today...”

6. Moreover, when Jesus came on the scene he said (Matt 5:20) For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Then in the last verse of that chapter Jesus concludes by declaring, “You must be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect (5:48).

7. But how could mere man achieve such a standard?¹ It seems impossible! Nevertheless, Luther gave it his best effort.

8. He set himself to pursue holiness (i.e. righteousness). Whatever good works a man might do to save himself, these Luther was resolved to perform.²

9. One biographer writes,

He began fasting, sometimes three days on end without a crumb... He laid upon himself vigils and prayers in excess of those stipulated by the rules. He cast off blankets and nearly froze himself to death.

10. Years later he would write,

I was a good monk, and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery, it was I. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other work.³

11. The reason he worked so hard was to compensate for his sins, but he never could believe that the ledger was balanced. He knew it was not. He would spend excessive time in confession attempting to own every sin. And he was frightened when after six hours of confessing he could still go out and think of something else which had eluded his most conscientious scrutiny.”⁴

12. Luther wasn't crazy. He just had an unusually clear understanding both of the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man. All he could conclude was that achieving his own righteousness was futile. And yet, God demanded it just the same.

13. In his N.T. studies Luther fixated on studying Paul's letter to the Romans. He knew that Paul's main theme was the righteousness of God, but he resented that righteousness because no matter what he did he could not attain to it. How can a sinful man be counted righteous in the sight of a holy God? When he read Rom. 1:17 that “the righteousness of God is revealed,” he understood it to mean that “God's holy character was revealed so that people would know the standard they were to live up to attain salvation. And it didn't help that he was reading out in the Latin in which the words, “righteousness of God,” was actually translated “Justice of God.” Luther knew that he was unjust, but how could one be Justified in the eyes of God? Upon what basis could God declare him to be righteous who was not righteous!

¹ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, (Peabody, Mass., Hendrickson Publishing), 25

² *Ibid.*, 26

³ Roland Bainton, 26

⁴ Roland Bainton, 36

14. This drove Luther to despair. At one point his mentor reminded him that God is love and that we should love him. Luther replied, “Love God? Sometimes I hate Him!”⁵ Nevertheless, He said he would beat upon Paul (in Rom. 1) until he had his answer. “What did Paul mean that the Gospel reveals the righteousness of God? And how could that be Good News for sinners like himself?”

15. The fact is, even though Luther was failing to understand Paul’s meaning, he was correct to conclude that...

There is a righteousness God Requires: And the righteousness God requires is infinitely higher than any sinner can attain by his own works. Hence, Paul will say...

- 3:20, “By the works of the law no one will be justified in God’s sight.” Again, in
- Gal. 2:16, “Man is NOT justified by the works of the law.”

16. All of this leaves every man, woman and child in a hopeless state. As the O.T. prophet Jeremiah rhetorically asked in Jer. 13:23, “Can the Ethiopian change the color of his skin Or the leopard his spots? Then you also can do good who are accustomed to doing evil.” There is none righteous, No! Not even one!”

17. You see, as I said a few weeks ago, There is a righteousness we desperately need, don’t have, and cannot earn.

So, the first Gospel truth is that...

There is a righteousness God Requires

The Second Gospel truth Paul would have us learn about our salvation is that...

II. There is a Righteousness God Achieved:

1. Beloved, this is why the Second Person of the Trinity – Jesus Christ – came to earth, lived for 33 years and died on the cross. Jesus was sent by the Father specifically to accomplish this one thing: to reconcile the ungodly to the Thrice Holy God.

2. How did he do it? That’s the question, right? Remember, Paul is teaching Christians like you and me HOW God has brought about our salvation. So, here we learn the amazing Gospel truth that while there is a righteousness God requires, it is also a righteousness HE achieved on our behalf. Luther doesn’t know this yet but it’s about to transform his life and set the world on FIRE!

3. How did Jesus achieve the righteousness that he required? He did it by two means:

⁵ Roland Bainton, 41

- A. First, he lived a perfect life of righteous obedience to God.
- B. Second, he died under the full weight of God's wrath against sinners.

4. In theological circles we sometimes refer to two means of reconciliation as Jesus' active and passive obedience. Let's think about his Active obedience first. When we say that Jesus achieved righteousness through his Active Obedience, we mean that he lived in perfect obedience to the Father from the day of His birth until the moment he died.

5. You may remember at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, he asked John the Baptist to baptize Him. Baptism was a symbol that one was repenting of their sins against God and ready to live a new life. So, you can imagine that John was a little uncomfortable with the arrangement. How could he, a sinner, baptize the Son of God? So, we read in Matt. 3:13 that John resisted the idea when Jesus presented it to him. John said "I need to be baptized by YOU!" But Jesus replies, "Let it be so for now, for thus it is fitting... (listen carefully) to fulfill all righteousness." He was saying, John, I know you are uncomfortable with this but baptize me anyway baptize me because I have come to fulfill all righteousness.

6. Whatever God required of a people, that is what Jesus did. There were no exceptions. In this regard, Jesus accomplished in his years on earth what Adam failed to accomplish. Paul is clear about this. He writes (5:19)

For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

7. Paul is appealing to the concept of Federal Headship; meaning, that as our Federal head Adam was man's legal representative in the eyes of God. When he fell into sin by his disobedience, he did so as our representative. We all became sinners through Adam's sin. But the same is true with Jesus. When Jesus came into the world, he did what Adam failed to do; namely, He fulfilled all righteousness, and he did it as the federal head (or legal representative) of all who would believe.

8. Jesus lived a life of active obedience to the Father. In the gospels He often himself made statements like this:

- A. (John 4:34) "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.
- B. (John 6:38, "For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me."

9. Listen, beloved, from the first day Jesus arrived in this world he was on mission. The Father sent him to bring salvation to sinners and he would do it – in part – through his righteous life. His active obedience.

10. Was our salvation grounded in the love of God? Yes! And that love was manifest in his active obedience on our behalf. A life of perfect righteousness.

11. The second (and better known) means of our salvation is sometimes referred to as Jesus Passive obedience; namely, that He allowed sinful men to crucify him on a Roman cross where he would die the disgraceful death of a common criminal.

12. The problem, however, with the term “Passive Obedience” is that Jesus was never passive about anything! You will remember that he said, (John 10:17–18)

For this reason, the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again.”

13. So, Jesus was actively obeying the Father even in his death on the cross. So, perhaps it would be better to refer to these two means of our salvation as the two-fold obedience of Christ.⁶ First, for his whole life he perfectly kept the law. Then he willingly accepted the punishment sinners deserve for breaking the law. And why did he do that? He did it so there could be what theologians call “Double Imputation.” That is, the righteousness he achieved and the death he died would be Imputed to our Account” in the eyes of God.

14. Listen to how Paul says it in Rom 5:21

“God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

15. In other words, on the cross, God treated Jesus as if he lived your wicked rebellious life, so that he could treat you as if you had lived Jesus’ perfectly righteous life.

16. You see, beloved, God was out to change our position before Him. He was out to change our standing in the eyes of the court of heaven. He was out to replace our status as condemned sinners to the exalted identity as sons and daughters of God in Christ.

17. So can we say that the ground of our salvation is the love of God? Yes. It is a love that was willing to pay the multi-faceted price to become a man, to live a perfectly righteous life, and die a sinner’s death on our behalf. Paul wants us to know these truths about our salvation.

⁶ Gregory Beale, *Obedience of Christ*, Featured Article in Table Talk magazine. April 2019; Last viewed on March 27, 2021. <https://tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2019/04/twofold-obedience-christ/>

18. We have now covered two of the four gospel truths. We have briefly studied the fact that
There is A Righteousness God Requires & There is a Righteousness God Achieved.
Now, Third...

III. There is a Righteousness God Reveals:

1. Look at Rom 1:16 again. Paul declares, “I am not ashamed of the Gospel” (then v. 17) for in it the righteousness of God is revealed...” You see, friends, if the question is “How can a sinner be counted righteous in God’s sight?”, Paul is now telling us that the Gospel Reveals the Answer!

2. For just a moment, turn with me to the third chapter of Romans, and follow along as I pick up our reading at verse 20.

Romans 3:20–23

For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. ²¹ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

3. What is Paul teaching us about our salvation? He is telling us that the righteousness that we desperately need for salvation comes to sinners like you and me by faith rather than by law-keeping or being doers of good works. In fact, Paul says that “In the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – “from faith to faith.” In other words, salvation is by faith from beginning to end; from first to last. This righteousness comes to us – if it comes at all – exclusively by faith.

4. Now, a Jewish person may say, “Now wait a minute! What kind of novel theology is this? To which Paul would reply, there is nothing new here. In fact, the doctrine of justification by faith alone is grounded in the O.T. Notice (Rom. 1:17) how Paul says, “Just as it is written...”. And a good Bible Student should ask, “Where was it written?” Well, the first reference is found all the way back in the book of Genesis. We read...

5. Gen. 15:6 “And he (Abraham) believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.”
Context: This was written after the narrative of God telling Abraham (who was in his 90’s and had no children) that the Lord was going to give him a son whose offspring would as many as the stars in the sky! Humanly speaking, this is impossible. But with God, all things are possible. And though it seemed absurd, Abraham believed God. He accepted God’s promise as true and trustworthy. He didn’t hang his hope and future on his own understanding. He believed God, and God counted that faith as righteousness.

6. Back in Rom. 1:17 again, Paul refers to this as “The righteousness of God.” In linguistic terms (I am told) this is a genitive of source. In other words, God is the source of this righteousness. Every sinner needs it, and the only place to get it is from God.

7. As Martin Luther continued to “beat on Paul in the early chapters of Romans, he discovered all of this afresh. For centuries it had been buried under an avalanche of religious ritualism and works-righteousness. But then, all of us a sudden, the Gospel came to light once again!

8. When Paul’s explanation of the gospel became clear to him, Luther wrote, “Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. Here a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me.”⁷ He saw Christ everywhere! He saw gospel everywhere! He was forever changed, and the sparks of the Reformation began to roar into a history-altering Fire!

8. And that brings us to the final gospel truth: namely: that...

IV. There is a righteousness God bestows.

1. The only place a sinner can find the righteousness he needs is in the heart of God. Only he can bestow it. And the Good News – the message of the gospel – is that that God is willing to give it. He gives it freely and lavishly by grace to those who believe.

2. We see this again in the book of Habakkuk. Paul says, “As it is written, the righteous shall live by faith.” This is another quotation from the O.T. And it is a wonderful statement because it connects our salvation with sanctification.

3. You will remember in Habakkuk that the Lord has just revealed that he was going to send the Chaldeans to Judge Israel for his unfaithfulness to Yahweh, their covenant-keeping God. But the prophet knew that there was a remnant in Israel who didn’t turn away. These were the Lord’s righteous ones who not only received righteousness by faith but who lived by faith. In other words, their lives were marked NOT merely by a profession of faith, but by what we might call Faithful Faith. Or we might simply refer to it as abiding.

4. Just as we receive salvation by the empty hand of faith, so we walk in the Spirit hour after hour, day after day by faith.

5. Is all of this good news? Martin Luther thought so. He wrote,

“Evangel” is a Greek word meaning glad tidings, good news, welcome information, or shout, or something that makes us sing, talk or rejoice. When David defeated the giant Goliath there was a great shout, and an

⁷ Adapted from John Piper, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy*, Wheaton Ill., Crossway Books, 2000,) 91

encouraging message was passed around among the Jews to say that their terrible enemy had been killed, and that they were free to enjoy Liberty and peace; thereupon, they sang and danced, and made merry. Similarly, God 's "evangel," The New Testament, is a good piece of news, a war cry. It was echoed throughout the world by the apostles. They proclaimed the true David, who had done combat with, and gained the victory over, sin, death, and the devil. In so doing he had taken those who were chained by sin, threatened by death, and overpowered by the devil; though they had merited no rewards he redeemed them, justified them, gave them life and Salvation, and so brought them peace, and lead them back to God.⁸

6. And now, my dear friend, the Lord Jesus himself has this very day swung the gates of salvation open wide for you to enter in? Will you receive this grace by the empty hand of faith? I pray you will, even before you leave this place today.

⁸ (Martin Luther, *The New Encyclopedia of Christian Quotations* , (Grand Rapids, MI.Baker Books, 2000, p. 437)