

## What Makes Gospel Preaching So Powerful?

Romans 1:17

*Studies in Romans #5*

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Martin Luther he had “a burning desire to understand” Paul’s phrase here “the righteousness of God.” He said, “I hated that word,” because it was understood by everyone to mean that justice that God is and by which he punishes sinners. He said, “I did not love, no, rather I hated the just God who punishes sinners...I grumbled vehemently and got angry at God. I said, ‘Isn’t it enough that we miserable sinners, lost for all eternity because of original sin, are oppressed by every kind of calamity through the Ten Commandments? Why does God heap sorrow upon sorrow through the Gospel and through the Gospel threaten us with his justice and his wrath?’” As he meditated on Scripture he understood that this righteousness was not what God was and by which he judged but the righteousness that God gives by grace. Luther said, “All at once I felt that I had been born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates.”<sup>1</sup>

I want to focus our hearts on this phrase today: **For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith”** (v. 17)<sup>2</sup>. By doing so we will see *what makes gospel preaching so powerful?*

1. ***The Logic of the Text***
2. ***The Meaning of Righteousness***
3. ***The Reception of Gospel Righteousness***

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<sup>1</sup> “Preface” to his *Latin Works* (1545).

<sup>2</sup> On this verse and the doctrine of justification by faith apart from works, see John Chrysostom, *Homilies of Romans*, trans. Panayiotis Papageorgiou (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2013), 37–41.

## The Logic of the Text

First, I want you to notice *the logic of the text*. Paul wants to get to Rome so he can “preach the gospel” in Rome (v. 15). Then he says, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel” (v. 16). Why would he be ashamed? Perhaps people were speculating that the reason he hadn’t showed up yet was that he was ashamed of being a simple preacher of the gospel and not a powerful Roman rhetorician. But he wasn’t ashamed?

This is such a relevant text today. As I mentioned last week, we are tempted on every side to give up taking preaching so seriously. We are told again and again that the way to grow a church is not through preaching but through music. Create a stage. Spend on lighting. Pump up your sound system. Get a band. We are told again and again that we need to use “the most powerful medium known to man” and use movie clips. Will you commit right now as a church with me that no matter how much ridicule we receive for preaching, no matter how little our results, we will preach the gospel?

But why should we not be ashamed of gospel preaching? “For [the gospel] is the power of God for salvation” (v. 16). That’s the irony. Multi-media shows looks, sound, and feel so powerful, but the real power is the preaching of the Word. In multi-media churches, man gets the glory; in preaching, God does! Amen? And how is the gospel the power of God? That’s brings us to our text: **For in [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed** (v. 17).

## The Meaning of Righteousness

This leads to a second point: *the meaning of righteousness*. The question is, “How does Paul prove that the gospel is indeed the power of God to salvation?” Children, when I was a kid in school we had to do vocabulary lists. Every week we had to copy words from the chalkboard onto a sheet and then go home, get out a dictionary, and write the definition of each word. There was no dictionary.com! We need to know the vocabulary of the Bible, which is the vocabulary of our faith.

What does the “righteousness of God” mean? John Calvin was correct when he said it was God’s “full and perfect righteousness.” But how so? The grammar of this phrase can mean that this is either *God’s righteousness* or *the righteousness that comes from God*. In other words, **the righteousness of God** is either *what he is* or *what he gives*.

*God’s righteousness* or *the righteousness that he is* can be found all over the Old Testament. Psalm 11:7 says, “For the LORD is righteous; he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face.” His righteousness is defined here as his love of righteous deeds. In other words, God is the standard of perfection. And if you are upright like him, you will behold his face. And because he is righteous, the Scriptures say over and over again that he is the God “who will by no means clear the guilty” (Ex. 34:7). Because God is righteous, he must punish unrighteousness, he must punish sin. Are you upright as he is? Have you loved him with all your, soul, mind, and strength? Have you loved your neighbor as yourself? Here’s what the prophet Nahum says about God’s righteousness:

The LORD is a jealous and avenging God;  
the LORD is avenging and wrathful;  
the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries

and keeps wrath for his enemies.

The LORD is slow to anger and great in power,  
and the LORD will by no means clear the guilty. (Nah. 1:2-3)

“I hated that word...I did not love, no, rather I hated the just God who punishes sinners...I grumbled vehemently and got angry at God.” Do you understand now why Luther said this? More importantly today, have you come to know what it means that God is righteous? Have you come to know what it means that you are a sinner under his righteous judgment?

But there is another side to this **righteousness of God**. If you’ve ever looked at old precious coins, you know that they have two unique sides. And a lot of times in coin books both sides are put side by side in an image so you can see them both. This way you don’t think, “Those are two interesting coins.” No, it’s the same coin; just two different sides.

In the same way this same God who is righteous also **gives righteousness**. The same Psalms that declare, “The LORD is righteous,” also pray, “In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me” (Ps. 71:2; 31:1). The Psalms declare, “The LORD has made known his salvation; he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations” (Ps. 98:2). That means the Lord’s salvation is his righteousness. So when we speak of the righteousness the Lord has, we’re speaking of his judgment; when we speak of the righteousness the Lord gives, we’re speaking of his salvation. It’s this saving righteousness that is so precious to our souls. It’s like a cool breeze in the hot sun. It’s like ice-cold water to your parched tongue. In the words of John Calvin, “We can obtain salvation from no other

source than the Gospel, since God has nowhere else reveals to us His righteousness, which alone delivers us from death.”

## **The Reception of Gospel Righteousness**

So in unashamed gospel preaching God powerful works to present the righteousness of God that saves to us. But how do we benefit from this spiritual blessing? Notice here *the reception of gospel righteousness*: **For in [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”** How do I receive God’s gift of righteousness? Faith alone in Jesus Christ alone! Paul excludes anything else and everything else when he says **from faith for faith** and then he goes on to cite from the prophet Habakkuk, **as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”** I mentioned last week that while in Costa Rica I had to walk out of church. The preacher preached about faith. He said you just have to have enough faith and you can have whatever you want. My friend, if you are here today and you’re new to Christianity or if you’ve heard people in Pentecostal churches talk about the need of faith, I am saying the complete opposite! Paul is saying the complete opposite! To talk of faith and having enough faith to get what you desire is to make faith something you do. Faith is merely our reception of what Christ has already done!

“But isn’t this talk of faith alone in Jesus Christ alone too blunt in our day and age of pluralism? I mean, shouldn’t I be sensitive to my friends’ feelings?” Yes we should, but not at the price of adulterating the gospel. Unfortunately we live in an age of “seeker

sensitivity” and tolerance. But the gospel is the only way of salvation and hope for eternity. It was for Paul it is for us. The gospel hasn’t changed!

Faith is absolutely necessary for us unrighteous sinners to receive God’s gift of Christ’s righteousness so that we can be accepted into God’s presence and see him face to face. This is what Paul and we call “justification.” It’s an act of God’s free grace unto us as sinners, whereby he pardons all our sins, accepts and accounts us as righteous in his sight; not for anything wrought in us, or done by us, but only for the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God imputed to us, and received by faith alone (WLC, Q&A 70). As Martin Luther said,

God certainly desires to save us not through our own righteousness, but through the righteousness and wisdom of someone else or by means of a righteousness which does not originate on earth, but comes down from heaven. So, then, we must teach a righteousness which in every way comes from without and is entirely foreign to us.

Turn with me to one other passage before we close. Philippians 3. Here Paul contrasts the righteousness that he thought he had by his obedience to the law but the true righteousness he received through faith in Jesus Christ:

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, **not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith**—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Phil. 3:4-11)

A notice the benefit of this faith: “that I may know him.” This is what Luther meant when he said of understanding that it was through faith that God’s righteousness comes to save us: “All at once I felt that I had been born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates.”