

The Gospel of God: Is it Enough?

Romans 1:16-17

In many ways the most compelling question confronting the Churches we are called to serve is the question of where will we stand with the gospel. It's perhaps the greatest dilemma facing the modern church. Will faith in the gospel be the mode by which we conduct our selves, or will we look for another. The cultural winds of the day threaten to blow the church away from her moorings. There is a feeling that all the previous landmarks are in danger of being erased. Young ministers approaching the field of service are confronted with a welter of ministry strategies that often seem to state implicitly that the Holy Spirit's role is secondary to technique.

While strategies and techniques are necessary, one can not help sensing that somehow we are getting farther and farther away from a feeling of dependence upon God for spiritual power. Though many would disagree, even this is often belied by what the church does. Behavioral changes brought about by the use of technology borrowed from the social sciences are beginning to replace the work of the Spirit of God in sanctification. Prayer for God's blessing in the planting of churches often, at best receive equal time with demographic and sociological studies. These factors are largely brought about by the pressure of the tremendous changes taking place in the world around us. To make some use of the these things is not inherently wrong, but to trust in them is terribly wrong. We must use means, but our trust must be in God alone.

Paul, in our text, helps us to remember what a vast power we have been made stewards of. He helps us recall how sufficient our old gospel still is.

The Rome of Paul's day was remarkably like our own times. It was a fast-paced sophisticated culture that boasted of its technology, learning, and power. Much like today, they had little use for a message regarding a Jewish carpenter; and still much less for one who had been crucified as a common criminal. Paul was under no illusion as to what the attitude of the typical Roman citizen was to the gospel of God, he had experienced it for the better part of two decades. The Jews considered him an apostate, a lunatic; and to the Romans he would have been the object of sneering scorn.

No doubt many questions had arisen in the minds of the saints at Rome as to why the Apostle had not come to Rome. Was he afraid that the gospel would fail in Rome? Did he wonder whether the gospel would be adequate for the very citadel of pagan power and heathen might? Perhaps this is why Paul felt the need to give an explanation for his failure to personally appear in Rome. So he writes: ***I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles. I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the***

wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome. Rom 1:13-15

What Paul asserts is that he is far from being afraid or ashamed to come to Rome. In fact he asserts that he is anything but ashamed. His words carry with them the undertones of exultant assurance. This question of shame was no small issue among the believers of the first century. What early Christian could have possibly forgotten the chilling words of the Lord Jesus Christ? **"If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels." Mark 8:38** In fact Paul's last recorded words to Timothy included encouragement against this very thing: **For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.**

So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, 2 Tim 1:7-8 Perhaps just as significant is his own passionate proclamation along the same lines: **And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day. 2 Tim 1:11-12**

At first sight it appears to be a rather weak affirmation of assurance. However, the apostle asserted his confidence in the gospel in many ways. For example in his letter to the Galatians he puts it, **May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. Gal 6:14** For Paul his declaration of pride in the gospel was a way of saying that he had been faithful to the words entrusted to him by his master, the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus' words require us to be no less faithful than Paul. If we are ashamed of His words He will be ashamed of us. We cannot afford this, for we all must appear before the judgment seat of Christ. We all must give an account to God.

Though Rome could boast herself in the fact that she was the chief city of the most powerful empire in the ancient world, Paul could say he was not ashamed. He was not ashamed because his gospel was the *power of God* for salvation to *everyone* who believed. Were Paul with us today he would undoubtedly say that what he had hidden in his heart and what was contained on the parchments he carried was the mightiest force in the world. He saw himself entrusted with the greatest power for the good of men that had ever entered into this world of time.

The question this raises for us today is, whether we view the gospel of God in this way. Is this gospel the power of God to us or has the recent technological advantages that we have enjoyed as a culture in recent years proven it to be less than adequate? Is this gospel ultimately the greatest friend of the human race or does it totter on the crutches of social sciences and thinly

disguised business management techniques? Whatever one thinks of these questions the issue of shame must be addressed in our day. Have we become ashamed? What did Paul see in the gospel that we might have overlooked or simply under appreciated?

If we carefully consider the statement Paul made we will quickly discover at least a few things that will help us answer these questions. The text does at least two things at the same time. (1) It gives us a continuous explanation as to why he isn't ashamed. He says that he is not ashamed because the gospel is God's power for salvation. It is God's power in that it reveals His righteousness. (2) The text also implies a dramatic contrast, between the work of God in the salvation of men and their rebellious efforts to save themselves. It does this in such a way as to hint that to be on one side means you are opposed and exposed to the other. Its heaven's wrath that has gone out against men and heaven must provide the salvation. To refuse to avail oneself of heaven's solution is to by default ,at best, depend on inadequate means. Therefore the ultimate well being of the human race is either in the hands of God or the hands of man.

Q. Why was shame not necessary?

I. The Gospel works when men fail.

The revelation of God's righteousness is set over against the revelation of His wrath. The gospel is the revelation of His righteousness that can only be accessed by faith and all else lies exposed to His wrath, and is categorized as unrighteousness and wickedness. In the mind of Paul there was absolutely no reason to be intimidated by Rome. He was certain that he knew what the problem was there and equally certain he possessed the only key.

A. *Paul was not ashamed because he knew what Rome was like.* Rome had had time to prove herself. Rome was, no doubt, the apple of the eye of every philosopher, statesman, and cultured despiser of religion in the world of Paul's day. Men of great learning, men who supposedly had been gifted with superior insight and abilities, had graced her streets. Her political system was, in the estimation of most, the best in the world. None could rival the military might she contained.

The question that needs to be considered isn't often asked. Had her technology, learning, and power been able to produce any real righteousness? We need only read the rest of the chapter to find the answer. Had it produced anything to quench the emptiness of the souls of its people? We need only to consider the vast number of religions they partook of, and the types of gods they devoted themselves to. They even worshipped the Caesars, many of whom were immoral monsters, child molesters, and homosexuals. One historian

remarked that Rome was a city without a soul. She had plenty of gods without godliness. She had plenty of orphans without orphanages. She was a lustful, devouring beast, made more bestial by her intelligence and splendor.

Is the modern world any different in this respect? Is it not true that in spite of all our learning, inventions, wealth, that man lives longer but grows worse. Why is it that in spite of the multiplication of our educational facilities and laws, the nations stands so impotent in the face of rising crime and immorality? As a culture we, like the Rome of Paul's day have been *weighed in the balance and found wanting*. Paul knew that they were in over their heads and that their strength was insufficient. They were absolutely enslaved, trapped and dominated by sin. What was even worse was that because of it they were under the wrath of God. There was just no possible human solution.

B. *Paul was not ashamed of the gospel because it had changed him.*

How could he ever forget what had happened to him? One fateful day Paul left Jerusalem for Damascus intent upon persecuting the followers of "the Way." The description Luke gives us is positively grim. He was breathing out threatenings and slaughter. His thoughts and imaginations were evil continually. His set resolve was to spare none, but to exterminate the movement. Suddenly he was struck blind by a dazzling light. To his utter amazement it was Jesus confronting him. He never got over it. All his training, all his learning, he had great respect from his peers, but he was wrong. Previously he had concluded that it was all a lie, all blasphemy, he was orthodox and righteous. He discovered that he was the blasphemer, he, not they was ignorant of the things of God. He had zeal without knowledge. He had experienced the power of the risen Lord and now he could say, 'I am not ashamed.' Why? Because it was God's power and he knew it first hand.

C. *He knew that it had changed others.*

Why was there even a Church in Rome to begin with? Many speculate as to who might have evangelized those Christians Paul found himself writing to. Perhaps no one will ever know for sure. One thing is certain, in spite of the Bible's silence on this question, there was a Church in Rome because the gospel had come in power and in much assurance. To Paul this meant that God had already revealed Himself savingly there. If the scholars are right in tracing the church at Rome's inception back to Pentecost, then let us remember that there was also three thousand saved that day. The Holy Spirit fell like a mighty rushing wind. This was with divine power, and they were never the same. Paul didn't feel shame was the appropriate response for something so great.

Q. *Why need we not be ashamed?*

II. *It's Still God's Power.*

Everywhere we look today we find those who proceed on the presupposition that the present times are unique. There is certainly a sense

where things are different; never have we known such an explosion of knowledge, never has there been such speed of travel and communication. We have known unprecedented technological and scientific advances in the last generation. Yet, there is a sense in which man hasn't changed at all. In fact there is a sense in which man cannot change. The picture the Bible gives us of life outside of proper relationship with God doesn't change. Man is still a child of wrath. Man is still a slave of sin. Man is still helpless, blind, damned, and doomed apart from the grace of God. It isn't in him to recognize his true need anymore today than it was two thousand years ago.

The problem of man is much deeper than anything that can be solved by politics, psychology, or sociology. He suffers from pollution of the nature and paralysis of the will. He needs a sufficient power from outside himself to save him.

A. In what way is the gospel this power?

Isn't it fascinating that Paul states that the gospel *is* the power of God for salvation? He could have simply said that it was a message about salvation, but he didn't. He said *it is* the power of God *for* salvation. The gospel isn't just another message awash in the sea of other human slogans and meta-narratives. It is the means by which God saves sinners. It is God's way of bringing men out from under His wrath as it is revealed in verse 18. It's God's salvation breaking in, in the person of His Son and delivering from sin and death unto righteousness and life. It is God ushering the eternal order of things in into the midst of a age of darkness. It reveals the kingdom of light's ultimate invasion of the kingdom of darkness. It is what God promised from of Old. ***He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm worked salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him. He put on righteousness as his breastplate, and the helmet of salvation on his head; he put on the garments of vengeance and wrapped himself in zeal as in a cloak. Isa 59:16-17*** The gospel is the power of God because it reveals a person who Himself is God. It is, ***“the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.” Rom 1:2-4*** And we need not be ashamed because of the reason He entrusted this great gospel to us. ***We received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith. Rom 1:5*** This is His great purpose and its being carried on through this gospel that He has entrusted to us and nothing on earth can stop it. It can't be stopped by hell much less by men. It really doesn't matter what the world at large thinks about it.

B. The gospel reveals the righteousness of God.

Consider (1) what the message actually is and (2) what actually takes place when a person is born again.

1. People don't think much of God's offended majesty and the honor of His government these days. It's often amazing what pitiful thoughts people (often even Christians) have of God in this regard. They think nothing of charging God with running the universe in a way they would never even tolerate mere mortals to do. What would you say if you visited a courtroom in Chicago during a murder trial expecting the judge to judge justly and he didn't. What if the defendant was found guilty of the heinous murder of a child. What if it was certain he had brutally murdered the child and in the presence of the parents, who were unable to even rise for the reading of the sentence so great was their grief, the defendant said he was sorry and the judge let him go free? What if he even shed plenty of tears and cried out loudly? How great would your sense of outrage be? Yet isn't this the very thing many charge the God of the universe with? Men imagine that because God is love He can simply pardon sin on a whim. That He can be a God of justice and yet, look the other way at sin.

The glorious thing about the salvation that is revealed in the gospel is that it is a salvation that is righteous. It points to the cross, where sin is dealt with in a manner that upholds the righteousness of God. In fact, because it is God's own action it can be said that it reveals the ultimate righteous action of God. This is what he means when he says,

This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished-- he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. Rom 3:22-26

2. It is a much greater display of God's power than when one is born the first time. It's being raised out of a pit of corruption into the heavens itself. Everywhere in the New Testament sin is set forth as a force, a powerful principle of evil that works in men. The power of God as revealed in the gospel is set over against all this and reverses this.

- **Sin separates men from God but the gospel overcomes it.**

Those same people who were under His wrath and say, ***Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Rom 5:1-2***

- **Sin separates man from man, but the gospel overcomes it.**

Those who were hostile and alienated from one another are able to say, ***so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. Rom 12:5***

- **Sin separates men from themselves but the gospel overcomes it.**

Those who were formerly servants of sin in body and mind hear, ***now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. Rom 6:22***

III. This is a gospel that can only be received by faith.

Do you notice the primacy of faith throughout the entire early portion of this chapter? In verse 5 the gospel is given us to bring about the obedience of *faith* among all the Gentiles for His names sake. In verse 8 Paul gives thanks to God that those at Rome's *faith* was being proclaimed throughout the world. In verse 12 he says that one reason he desires to come to them was that they might be encouraged by each others *faith*. Faith is given as (1) mode of union with the salvation as it is revealed in the gospel and (2) the mode of life in the context of the salvation as it is revealed in the gospel.

A. It's from faith to faith. This is a difficult expression, which is possibly explained in 3: 19-22. It means a righteousness that is available from God by simple trust and revealed to those who will believe. Faith is the proper means because its wrought by God Himself, what can a mere man add to it? One must say with Toplady, "Nothing in my hands I bring..."

B. It's the way the righteous will live. Paul gives a quotation from the book of Habakkuk that appears two other times in the New Testament. In all four instances the emphasis is on the need to believe in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. It is a call to resolutely cast oneself on the promise of God.

Karl Barth, though we wouldn't agree with him on many things, we would agree with him when he said:

The believer is the man who puts his trust in God, in God Himself, and God alone; that is to say, the man who, perceiving the faithfulness of God in the very fact that He has set us within the realm of that which contradicts the course of this world, meets the faithfulness of God with a corresponding fidelity, and with God says 'Nevertheless' and 'In spite of this'. The believer discovers in the gospel the power of God unto salvation, the rays which mark the coming of eternal blessedness, and the courage to stand and watch.

The idea is that this gospel requires one to abandon oneself to it in spite of what others may think or say. It also requires those that it has been entrusted to to exude and exemplify the same faith in the teeth of opposition. Rome, Ephesus, Thessalonica, New York, Miami, Chicago, Georgia; its still the power of God for salvation to every one who believes. The deeper our insight into this glorious gospel the more confidently we will own it and preach it. The deeper our insight in to this glorious gospel the greater our serenity in the face of the ebb and flow of history. A more intimate acquaintance with these truths will allow us to give ourselves more fully and freely to it; to tell others of it; to trust in it come what may. Though the whole world shakes in convulsions we have an unshakable hope in **the power of God.**