THE GOSPEL: THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD

Romans 1:8­–17

Key Verse: 1:17

“For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’”

Have you ever known a self-righteous person? He or she always has to be right, or to know all the right answers. The person rarely admits to be wrong and, though not much is said, can be pretty judgmental. How does a person get like that? For some, it might be a personality disorder. But many people work very hard to get to a place where they’re sure they’re always right. The problem is, the closer we try to get to a self-righteous person, the more difficult things become. When we hear the word “righteous,” this is what we usually think of, and it’s not pretty. So as we read Paul’s words in today’s key verse, they’re not immediately appealing. But Paul says this righteousness of God is “the gospel,” the good news, something about which everybody should really be excited. Excited about righteousness? Really? Paul also seems to be saying that God’s righteousness has something to do with our being or becoming righteous. What does he mean? Why is this the major theme of this letter? And how might it apply to us today? As we meditate on these verses, may God grant us his Spirit, open our hearts and really speak to us.

Verses 1–17 are Paul’s prologue to the letter, divided into two parts. In verses 1–7 he basically introduces himself and addresses and greets them. Now in verses 8–17 he begins with some thanks and a prayer for them, and then gets to the main point of what and why he’s writing. Let’s take a look at his thanks. Read verse 8. Usually when we’re thankful for somebody, it’s because we know something good about them, or because they’ve done something special for us. But in this case, Paul hasn’t even met most of these people. And he says he thanks “my God through Jesus Christ,” which makes it even harder to understand. Basically Paul is saying he has a spiritual reason for his thanksgiving. He says it’s “because your faith is proclaimed in all the world.” “Proclaimed” literally means “being talked about openly or publicly.” As they say in the media world, there’s good press and then there’s bad press, but sometimes even bad press can be good press. Paul is happy that people all over the Roman Empire have heard about these Christians in Rome, and whether they were saying good things or bad things about them, it’s drawing more attention to what this faith is. Why does Paul write this way to them? He’s not flattering them; he’s trying to help them see what a special position they’re in. They’re not living in remote isolation but in a very exposed, visible place—the capital city of an empire. Paul planted two churches in two large cities, Corinth and Ephesus, so he knows firsthand how hard it can be to have a Christian identity and live out one’s faith in a place where people are living quite differently from Christians and have no clue what it’s all about.

Read verses 9,10. Here Paul gets even more intense. First we notice that he says he’s always praying “without ceasing” for them (cf. 1Th5:17). Clearly these people are important to him, but why? It’s incredible. Honestly our prayers can be pretty feeble. We’d do well to pray like this for people we *do* know, but Paul is praying always, without ceasing, for people he *doesn’t* know! And what’s he praying about? He writes, “…asking that somehow by God’s will I may now at last succeed in coming to you.” In verse 13a he adds, “I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented)…” What’s been preventing him? He explains more about it at the end of the letter. He writes that his life’s ambition has been to preach the gospel where people have never heard about Christ. This is how God had led him, and it’s what’s kept him so busy for the past ten years, ministering all over the eastern Roman Empire. Now that these new churches seem able to survive on their own, Paul is ready to move on (15:18–23). In fact, not long before he wrote this letter, at the end of his third missionary journey, after a healthy ministry in Ephesus was firmly established, Paul suddenly said, “I must also see Rome” (Ac19:21b). What was going on? In Ephesus Paul saw firsthand that through daily Bible studies in a public place the word of God could reach vast numbers of people in a much larger area. Through his ministry in Ephesus so many people came out of spiritual darkness and opened their eyes to see the light of Jesus. Through it, God inspired Paul to do more, and Paul was obedient to the heavenly vision (Ac26:18,19). Paul held onto this vision and prayed for it constantly. Sometimes our prayers are monotonous, just responding to problems or needs in our own lives, or maybe in the lives of others. But Paul was praying fervently with a God-given vision for the gospel to reach the most people possible. Wow!

Beyond just getting to Rome, in verses 11–13 Paul reveals more about what he’s praying will happen there. First, in verse 11 he prays to “impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you…” There have been many ideas about what this means. We know that it’s actually the Holy Spirit who gives people spiritual gifts (1Co12:1–11). So Paul must mean something different than that. He does say this spiritual gift would “strengthen” them. Maybe he means helping them have a stronger grasp of the gospel, which he hopes they’d gain by reading this letter. Even more, he’s hoping they can catch the vision to reach more people through their being in this prime location in Rome. There are many things that can strengthen us, but being inspired by a vision from God can make us indomitable.

In verse 12 Paul quickly edits himself and says he’s hoping the spiritual encouragement can be mutual. As he writes later, he was “satisfied” about these people, that they were “full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another” (15:14). He believes that when he finally gets to Rome, he himself will be spiritually “refreshed” by these precious people of God (15:32). Though he wants to strengthen them, Paul genuinely respects them; he doesn’t inwardly think he’s better than them; he’s not condescending. This kind of respect, on the basis of faith, is how we all can build a Christian fellowship that truly is “mutually encouraging.”

Finally, in verse 13b Paul explains what he’s really praying for about his visit to Rome: “…in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the other Gentiles.” God had prepared Paul all his life to be an apostle to the Gentiles (11:13; 15:16). Though he was a Jew, he grew up in Tarsus, a city on the southern coast of Turkey that today has three million people. In the time of Paul the Bible describes it as “no obscure city” (Ac21:39). Tarsus was an intellectual center with a famous academy for children, which is where Paul likely had been educated. Paul’s familiarity with both Gentile culture, language and thinking and with the Bible and the gospel message made him a prime candidate to be God’s “chosen instrument” for the Gentiles and their kings (Ac9:15). Paul experienced that despite all his weaknesses, God had actually used him to lead so many Gentiles in so many places to Jesus. It gave him a conviction that God wanted to use him for a spiritual harvest in Rome also. Through his own, in-person life example the believers in Rome could learn how to share the gospel of Jesus.

Read verse 14. Here Paul is sharing something very personal, his inmost motivation, probably because he wants them these people to make it their very own. He says he’s “under obligation.” In Greek he literally says, “I’m a debtor.” Who’s he indebted to? He says, “…both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish.” How weird! How could he be indebted to all those people? What’s he saying? First of all, Paul is trying to explain that there’s no one he’s writing off, no one whom he thinks is “untouchable” or “unreachable.” He doesn’t follow his own preferences or comforts—he’s ready to minister to anyone, whether they’re highly educated or really uncivilized. He says he’s indebted to them all, but really, he’s indebted to God. What does he mean? Paul knew that the gospel of Jesus is like a very special mystery that so few people know, but should. God had revealed this wonderful mystery of the gospel to Paul, not so that he could just enjoy it for himself or feel superior to others, but so that he would be a good and faithful steward, passing it on to all the people for whom God intended it (cf. 1Co4: 1,2). He writes elsewhere that “necessity is laid upon me,” meaning it was God’s solemn task for him; he wouldn’t try to spare his own life as too valuable or precious to invest in sharing the gospel of God’s grace (1Co9:16; Ac20:24). Paul knew that even though he was the foremost of sinners, God showed him mercy to make him an example of the perfect patience of Jesus Christ, to help all kinds of sinners find the same hope in Jesus (1Ti1:15,16). So he is “under obligation.”

Read verse 15. Here he adds that he’s “eager” to preach the gospel in Rome. Why? Because he knows there are so many kinds of sinners there in that huge, multi-cultural city. Even though there’s a community of Christian house churches, there’s still so many Greeks and barbarians, wise and foolish people just waiting in Rome to have someone explain the good news of Jesus to them. Paul wasn’t burdened by the task; he was eager. What a big heart he had!

Read verse 16. Paul wasn’t intimidated by the power, glory and wealth of Rome—he knew all the people there were the same as everybody else, suffering in the same way and in desperate need. Our Lord Jesus once warned that living in an “adulterous and sinful generation,” which Rome certainly was, it would be easy to be ashamed of him and his words. Why? Because he would suffer many things and die on a cross, and he calls all his followers to live the opposite of how the world lives, to deny themselves and take up their own crosses, and even to lose their own lives for him and for the gospel (Mk8:34–38). To people living for the moment, living for pleasure, this kind of lifestyle seems so strange (1Pe4:1–4).

But Paul was unashamed. Why? Read verse 16 again. Paul has already mentioned “the gospel” three times, in verses 1, 9 and 15. Here he mentions it again. He has said it’s “the gospel of God,” and, “the gospel of his Son.” Since the gospel is from God and is all about Jesus, those are already two very good reasons not to be ashamed of it. But here Paul adds that it is “the power of God.” What does he mean? In verse 4 Paul writes, “…and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.” The gospel’s power source seems to be in the resurrection of Jesus. This power isn’t for its own sake or only for Jesus’ vindication. Paul writes elsewhere, “…and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places…” (Eph1:19,20). The resurrection power of Jesus is for us. How so? Paul says later in Romans that our sin makes us “weak” (5:6). He explains further what this means when he writes how he himself has the desire to do what is right but has no ability to carry it out (7:18). Paul says that this condition really makes him a “wretched man” (7:24). Actually for all of us, our sins make us God’s enemies (5:10). But the gospel of Jesus is God’s power to save us. It’s not only his resurrection power, but also the power of the blood of Jesus shed on the cross for our sin (3:25a; 5:9). As Paul has been saying, this gospel is available for “everyone”—Greeks and barbarians, wise and foolish—and can work for everyone, whether it’s the most educated and successful person or the most wounded and damaged person. But it works, Paul adds here in verse 16, only for those who believe. When we believe the good news that Jesus shed his blood for *my* sin and was raised to life to save *me*, we can walk in newness of life (6:4). How? God gives us a very practical power that transforms our lives. When we believe the gospel, God gives us the Holy Spirit who gives us both new life and new power to live up to God’s righteous requirements (8:4,11). Even the weakest of people can really experience the power of God in the gospel. It’s amazing!

Paul goes on to explain further how this works. Read verse 17. This is the main theme of Romans. Paul is going to explain all about it. Here we would just like to touch briefly on a few things. First is “the righteousness of God.” In one sense this refers to God’s righteous character, his love of justice and truth (3:5,25,26). In another sense, it tells us of something God does for us. In many places in Romans Paul uses the words “justify,” “justified” or “justification” (2:13; 3:4,20,24,28,30; 4:2,25; 5:1,9,15,18; 8:30; 10:10). In Greek it’s actually the exact same root as the word “righteous.” Paul is saying that through the gospel God gives us his righteousness as a gift (3:24, 4:4; 5:15–17; 6:23). It’s like we were convicted of a crime, with no way to appeal, no parole even, and God just declares us “not guilty” and expunges our criminal record completely. Ultimately Paul explains in Romans that the righteousness of God is revealed in what he did for us on the cross. By sending his Son Jesus to the cross, God found the way to forgive all the terrible sins of people throughout the world, and at the same time, remain righteous and just himself. The shed blood of Jesus turns away God’s wrath from us, and we can become his precious sons and daughters.

Paul says in verse 17 that this righteousness of God is “revealed from faith for faith.” It means we can understand it only through the eyes of faith. We can receive it only by faith. This righteousness of God is ours, always and forever, only by faith. We don’t just pray the sinner’s prayer, then go on our merry way to live our own lives in the world, believing that when we die we’ll get into heaven. No, we keep on living out our faith in Jesus, each and every day. We learn in Romans what this actually means. But suffice it to say here, “from faith for faith” means that our faith in Jesus keeps growing. We grow more and more convinced of the truth of the gospel of God, more and more confident of it, we base our lives and stake our lives on it. Paul ends by quoting Habakkuk 2:4: “The righteous shall live by faith.” He’s going to explain in Romans that this faith basically keeps us from becoming either too legalistic or too permissive. It also gives us a much bigger picture of God’s hope for us, and of the community he calls us to. But essentially, living by faith means trusting in Jesus personally, letting him live within me to change me, and trusting that he loves me and gave his life for me (Gal2:20).

Let’s read verse 17 once more. May God bless us through this study of Romans to newly experience the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus. May he inspire us to really live by faith more and more in this new year.