

Unashamed, on the Streets of Rome

Romans 1:8–17

INTRODUCTION: Last week, we were introduced to who Paul was, what he proclaimed, and to whom he was writing. Now, in verses 8-17, Paul opens his heart. He pulls back the curtain on what drove him. And in many ways, it provides us the secret of a powerful Christian life, namely, a bold confidence in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

CONTEXT: Now, understand, Paul had never been to Rome. He had never seen it. He had never preached in it. And yet, writing from Corinth, he declared to that imperial city his determination to come and proclaim the Gospel there also.

I have found that a person may display great confidence in his faith in a place like this. He may read scripture, recite prayers, boldly and prophetically take a stand for truth... but such boldness doesn't seem to follow him to home, work, the neighborhood - to his personal ROME.

It certainly doesn't accompany him to the breakroom at work. It doesn't walk with her down the corridors of the public school. How do we explain this? Why are we bold here, and not so bold there?

And might it be that the great secret of walking in power is to learn to walk in the same confidence in the gospel there as we do here? I think it might.

You see, as Paul pens his letter to the Saints at Rome, he sits in the city of Corinth. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Paul anticipates the thoughts and questions the church in Rome might have about his reasoning for arriving sooner.

It was unquestionable that the Roman church would exceed all others in influence in the days to come. Yet, Paul had never been there. Perhaps some assumed that Paul was reluctant to bring his Gospel to this city to which all roads led, the very capital of Caesar, the place where those who displeased the status quo were fed to lions, set ablaze in the city streets, and sat before the gladiators.

The great imperial historian **Tacitus** spoke of the religions of Rome. He said his city had become *"an open sewer, where everything sordid and degraded converged from all the quarters of the earth."* And of Christianity in particular, he singled it out as *"an especially detestable superstition."* He wrote, *"Though suppressed for the moment by the execution of its founder, it broke out again, not only in Judea, the origin of this evil, but even in Rome—that receptacle for everything atrocious of which one ought to be ashamed."*

Tacitus denigrates the faith of Christ as something *of which one ought to be ashamed*. Was Paul ashamed? Was he afraid to sound this message in that sophisticated city, on the stage of the seven hills of Rome? **Absolutely not.**

We know this by comparison—by where else Paul was willing to sound the Gospel.

- He spoke it in **Ephesus**, the great financial emporium of the day, the center of banking and commerce.
- He had sounded it without intimidation in **Athens**, the center of the intellect of his day.
- And neither would he be ashamed of the Gospel in **Rome**, the center of political power.

Perhaps, as we look into his words, we, too, can find the boldness to preach the Gospel to this city and never be ashamed.

The letter continues with...

1. THE COMMENDATION (vv. 8–10)

Romans 1:8–10 (ESV)

⁸ First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. ⁹ For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, ¹⁰ asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you.

Before Paul lays out a single doctrine, before he dismantles a single argument, the very first thing he does is give thanks. The first word out of his theological mind is not correction. It is commendation. He says, “First, I thank my God.”

Be sure to remember that the attitude of gratitude dominated Paul's thoughts as a great priority. This letter isn't written by a frustrated man, not by an angry man, not by a disappointed man, but rather by a thankful man.

Notice he says, “I thank my God.” This is personal. Paul does not say “the God” or “a God.” He says “my God.”

And he thanks God “through Jesus Christ.” Even Paul's gratitude is mediated through the gospel. He cannot even say “thank you” to God without going through the cross.

“Because your faith is proclaimed in all the world.”

Paul is thanking God not for their buildings, not for their budget, not for the size of their congregation. He is thanking God for their faith. Their reputation was built on a genuine belief in the risen Christ.

ILLUSTRATION: What is our church known for? If someone in another city heard the name First Baptist Fernandina Beach, what would they say? Would they talk

about the building? The music? The coffee? Or would they say, “Those people radically believe what they preach”?

The next words of those of an oath “For God is my witness.” Paul is invoking the Almighty as a guarantor of his sincerity.

⁹ For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers.

The phrase “without ceasing” does not mean Paul never stopped praying. It means he never stopped returning to prayer for them. They were a permanent fixture of his prayer life. He carried the Roman church in his heart the way a mother carries a child — always there, always a concern, always brought before the Lord.

And his prayer had a specific request: “That somehow by God’s will I may now at last succeed in coming to you.”

Notice the surrender embedded in that request. “Somehow” — he doesn’t dictate the method. “By God’s will” — he doesn’t dictate the timing. “At last” — he has been waiting. Paul wanted to go to Rome, but he wanted God’s will more than his own plans.

Little did Paul know that God would answer that prayer by sending him to Rome in chains (Acts 28). Sometimes God’s “yes” looks nothing like what we imagined.

Not only the Commendation, but notice secondly...

2. THE CONNECTION (vv. 11–13)

Romans 1:11–13 (ESV)

¹¹ For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—
¹² that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine. ¹³ 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.

Paul was not a lone ranger. He was not content to write letters from a distance and call it ministry. He longed for connection. The Greek word here is *epipothō* — it carries the idea of a deep yearning, an intense desire.

Paul saw the potential for mutual benefit arising from his ministry to the Roman church.

Paul says he wants to “impart some spiritual gift” to them. Paul was not coming empty-handed. He had something to give. Every mature believer has something to give. The question is: are you giving it?

The purpose of this gift was “to strengthen you” — the Greek word *stērizō* means to establish, to make firm, to stabilize. Paul is not talking about starting their faith. He is

talking about solidifying it. The Roman church was already believing. Paul wanted to fortify what God had already begun.

He also wanted to Receive (v. 12)

But then Paul immediately corrects himself — or rather, he clarifies: “That is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine.”

This is remarkable humility from the greatest missionary-theologian in history. Paul does not position himself as the expert descending from on high to fix the ignorant. He says, “I need you too.”

ILLUSTRATION: The Lord Jesus has so designed his church that we are interdependent on one another. You can only go so far without me, and I can only go so far without you. If we are to reach our ultimate potential for Christ, we must reach it together.

“I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented).”

Paul does not tell us who or what prevented him. But the passive voice suggests it was God’s sovereign hand. Sometimes the most spiritual thing you can say about your plans is: “I tried, but God had other ideas.”

We’ve seen the Commendation, the Connection...

3. THE COMPULSION (vv. 14–15)

Romans 1:14–15 (ESV)

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.

The word translated “under obligation” is *opheiletēs* — it means debtor. Paul says, “I am a debtor.” Not “I would like to preach.” Not “I feel called.” He says, “I owe a debt.”

Paul lists two pairs that encompass all of humanity:

- **Greeks and Barbarians** — This is a cultural distinction. The “Greeks” were the educated, the cultured, the philosophical elite. The “barbarians” were everyone else — those the Greeks mocked because their languages sounded like “bar-bar-bar.” Paul owed both.
- **Wise and Foolish** — This is an intellectual distinction. The professor and the high school dropout. The theologian and the man who has never cracked a Bible. Paul owed both.

Put those two pairs together and what do you get? Everyone. Paul saw every human being he met as someone to whom he owed the gospel as a matter of duty.

ILLUSTRATION: Suppose a terrorist attacked our congregation and smuggled anthrax into the vents of our campus, and slowly, every single person in this

building began to choke and die. The elderly are affected most rapidly, then the small children. But for some reason, a Physician in this room happened to possess the antidote to anthrax on her person. First, she takes the antidote herself; it works dramatically and rapidly – don't you think it would be her duty to get that cure to the rest of us?

I think that is what Paul is saying here – I have been entrusted with the antidote to sin and death. I am now compelled to get it to the world.

15. “So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.”

Paul does not drag himself reluctantly to the task. He runs toward it. **Obligation without eagerness produces drudgery. Eagerness without obligation produces flippancy. But when obligation and eagerness meet — you get a man on fire.**

Where does this eagerness come from?

We've seen the Commendation, the Connection, the Compulsion... and finally notice...

4. THE CONFIDENCE (vv. 16–17)

Romans 1:16–17 (ESV)

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.”

Here is the summit. This is the thesis statement of the entire letter to the Romans. Everything that follows — all sixteen chapters — is an unpacking of what Paul says right here. “For I am not ashamed of the gospel.”

When Paul says, “Gospel,” he is referring to a specific set of claims.

1 Corinthians 15:1–5 (ESV)

¹ Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, ² and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you — unless you believed in vain. ³ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

Now that body of TRUTH Paul says, is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes

The Greek word is ***dunamis*** — from which we get dynamite, dynamic, dynamo. Think of it, Dynamite had not been invented in Paul's day. So this is not Paul looking to dynamite to describe Gospel, but rather when Dynamite was invented, they looked to this word Paul associates with Gospel to describe dynamite.

The gospel is power. It is the power of the Almighty God who spoke the universe into existence.

When the gospel is preached, it does not simply inform — it transforms.

- It changed **Saul** the persecutor into Paul the apostle.
- It changed **Augustine** the hedonist into Augustine the theologian.
- It changed **John Newton** the slave trader into the man who wrote “Amazing Grace.”

The gospel doesn’t just tell you what to do. It gives you the power to do it.

“For salvation.”

Many things are powerful but destructive. A nuclear warhead is powerful. A hurricane is powerful. But the gospel is the power of God for salvation — for rescue, for deliverance, for redemption. It saves from the penalty of sin, from the power of sin, and one day, from the very presence of sin.

The word “salvation” in Greek is *sōtērian*. It means deliverance, preservation, wholeness. This is comprehensive rescue. It is not merely fire insurance for hell. It is the restoration of everything sin destroyed — your relationship with God, your purpose, your peace, your future, your marriage, your relationship with your kids, your career track — the Gospel has the power to change everything.

To everyone who believes

Later Paul will write in Romans 10:17 (ESV)

¹⁷ So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

As the Gospel is proclaimed, faith arises in the hearts of some.

- **The Jew first** — because God’s covenant promises came through Israel. The gospel is the fulfillment of everything the Old Testament pointed to.
- **And also the Greek** — because the gospel bursts the boundaries of ethnicity. No one is disqualified by their background, their nationality, or their past.

17. “For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith.” This is the verse that changed the world.

ILLUSTRATION: When Martin Luther, a trained lawyer, was preparing his lectures on Romans in 1515, he came to this verse and it haunted him. He had always understood “the righteousness of God” as the standard by which God condemns sinners. And it terrified him.

But then Luther read Augustine's commentary. And he saw it. The "righteousness of God" here is not the righteousness by which God judges us. It is the righteousness God gives us. It is an alien righteousness — a righteousness that is not our own. It is the righteousness of Jesus Christ, credited to our account by faith.

Luther later wrote: "When I understood this, I felt that I had been born again and had entered paradise through wide-open gates." The doors of paradise swung open — not because Luther tried harder, but because he finally saw that God had done for him what he could never do for himself.

That is what Paul means: this body of truth is the Power of God – blind eyes are opened, deaf ears are opened, and a stone-cold heart is awakened.

And Paul anchors it all in the Old Testament: "As it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith'" — a quotation from Habakkuk 2:4. This was not Paul's invention. This was God's plan from the beginning.

Colossians 2:6–7 (ESV)

⁶ Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, ⁷ rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

But God's power, more often than not, is very quiet. And we must not be deceived into thinking quiet power is not final power.

CONCLUSION/INVITATION:

Jesus said, "For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels" **(Mark 8:38)**.

Many years ago I read about a Pastor Daniel Kirby - Daniel Kirby was a minister back in the horse and buggy days. He took what he had, a horse, a pen, he preached, he wrote books... but sometimes he wondered if it was doing any good.

Then one night he had a dream. In this dream he stood before the Judgment Bar of God. He said that as God's presence was revealed he fell down into a fetal position, gripped with fear. His arms wrapped around his knees.

Suddenly he heard a loud voice from the throne cry out - WHO ARE YOU AND WHY ARE YOU HERE? But Kirby said he could hardly breath much less speak... then he heard the voice again - - WHO ARE YOU AND WHY ARE YOU HERE? Again, terrified he could not answer... a third time more fiercely the voice asked - WHO ARE YOU AND WHY ARE YOU HERE? And again he was helpless to respond.

About that time he felt two hands reach under his arms and lock at his sternum. He noticed that the hands were nail scarred. It was Christ. Jesus lifted him up and hung there limp and helpless... Jesus looked boldly into the face of the Father and said,

“This is my servant Daniel Kirby - he confessed me before me, now I confess him before you.

LISTEN, I have learned that one of the reasons we are bold here, and not there, is that we are believing a different Gospel there than we are here. Here we are constantly reminded that the power of God comes through faith in the person and work of Christ, but there, in YOUR ROME - power comes through - popularity, prominence, prosperity, accomplishments... But if you are going to walk in God's power in a world that desperately needs you to do so, you are going to have to walk through the streets of your ROME believing the Gospel as you hear on Sunday morning.

“If the gospel is powerful enough to save you, it's powerful enough to send you.”