

Not Ashamed

Romans 1:16-17

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We live in a world that likes to shame people for all sorts of things. You have probably felt the sting of shame for some of your own preferences and choices. We can feel ashamed of our past mistakes, feeling as though people will never look at us as whole again. We can feel ashamed of the choices of our family members; even though we have not done anything wrong, the judgmental looks of others make us feel ashamed. People may even try to shame you for the music you listen to, the movies you watch, or the books you read. One of our society's favorite tools of getting people to fall in line is to make them feel ashamed.

This is not to say that there aren't things over which we should feel sorrow. The Bible gives us many examples of sinful actions and thoughts that we should be weeding out of our lives, but even then shame is not the intent, repentance and restoration is.

The Apostle Paul, in our text this morning, speaks about something else that many people are ashamed of—the gospel message. He, however, reminds us that he is not ashamed of the gospel, and tells us that we shouldn't be either. In fact, we should have quite the opposite response! But our world today tries very hard to make Christians feel ashamed of their beliefs. It tries to tell us that we are foolish, close-minded, and believers of fairy tales. Paul answer to these charges is to point to the truth of the gospel. As we unpack these short verses in Romans chapter 1 today, I hope you will see that not only should we not be ashamed of the gospel, we should rejoice in it!

The Power of God

We are only going to look at two verses today, but those two verses contain some rich theological truths which are worth slowing down to examine. Here's what Paul says in verse 16,

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes—the Jew first and also the Gentile.
(Romans 1:16, NLT)

If you recall last week, we talked about how Paul desired to go to Rome. He wanted to encourage the Roman Christians, be encouraged by them, and join them in their work to reach people in Rome. This leads to Paul's statement here: "For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ." The fact that this statement begins with the word "for" tells us that it was a response to what he said before. He said that he wanted to see people from all walks of life saved. Why did he want this? Because he was not ashamed of the Good News about Christ. The word that the NLT translates as Good News is more commonly referred to as the gospel (which means good news).

Why did Paul need to state that he wasn't ashamed of the gospel? Shouldn't that be obvious? Paul was an apostle. He traveled far and wide telling people about Jesus and

planting churches. Clearly he was not ashamed of the gospel message, so why mention that fact here?

I believe the reason Paul says this is because he knows one of the biggest hurdles to people ministering to others is that they are ashamed of the gospel message. We may not be ashamed of the message itself, but often we are ashamed of what we imagine people will say to us or what they may think about us. We are afraid of being made to feel bad (or ashamed of our beliefs), so we keep quiet. We ignore many opportunities for ministry because we are afraid of what other people might say or do. Paul did not allow that fear to control him. He was motivated by something greater than fear—the need for people to hear the gospel message!

He said that the reason we shouldn't be ashamed of the gospel is because it is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes. This, too, seems like a somewhat obvious truth, but it is a significant one that we shouldn't simply gloss over. Paul said that the gospel message is literally the power of God at work, and that it saves everyone who believes!

First, let's focus on the part about saving those who believe. Hopefully you know that no matter how good you might think you are, you simply aren't good enough. If that's not clear to you yet, it will become clearer next week! No matter how many good things you do, you cannot erase your past failures, nor atone for your future ones. Each of us falls far short of God's perfect standard. So each of us deserves condemnation, and there's not really anything we can do to change this fact. But, the gospel tells us that Jesus died to pay for our sin so we might be saved from the penalty we deserve. Not only are we forgiven, but we are blessed beyond measure!

This truly is good news, but we must remember something—it is **only good news for those who believe it!** Only those who trust in Jesus to forgive them and follow Him with their lives get to experience the salvation He offers. Everyone else is left to bear the just penalty for their sin for themselves. They will spend an eternity in Hell as a result of their rebellion. The *only* hope for people is to trust in Jesus Christ for forgiveness. *Everything else ultimately leads to Hell.*

When we really grasp this truth, it will cause us to view the world differently. People who choose to reject Jesus are not merely making a different choice than we are, they are sealing their eternal destiny. Many people ignore the Christian faith because they do not understand the stakes at play. They imagine it is just a preference that doesn't really matter. Many simply don't understand the message. How often have you heard someone say they think someone is in heaven because, "They were a good person." Most people just do not understand the problem of sin, nor the solution that is Jesus.

If we embrace the gospel message, we will understand that it is people's only hope. It should give us a sense of urgency and a drive to make sure others know the truth. We cannot make anyone believe, but we have a responsibility to make sure those around

us know not only the reality of sin and condemnation, but also of the forgiveness and new life offered by Jesus. The gospel is something everyone needs!

But notice what else Paul says, he says it is the power of God at work. One of the biggest reasons people give for why they keep quiet about their faith is that they feel inadequate to the task. They are afraid someone will ask a question they don't know how to answer, or that they won't be able to respond to the arguments people make against the Christian faith. Don't miss what Paul said—the gospel message is God at work! In other words, God is present with us as we share the message of salvation through Jesus. We don't have to worry about how powerful, smart, or eloquent we are—we need only communicate the gospel message clearly. God will work in and through it.

This reminds us of another important truth, however. **Only the gospel can save people.** We each have causes we like to champion. Maybe it is some moral issue, a political point of view, or some point of doctrine. None of these things are inherently bad. But if we focus on winning people to our particular cause rather than sharing the gospel with them, we are not helping them! You can view the world the exact same way that I do and champion all the same causes I do and have all the same convictions as me, but if you don't know Jesus, it is all for naught. Paul reminds us that the gospel should be our focus. We need to devote more energy to making the gospel known than we do to campaigning for our causes. The gospel alone is what can save people.

There is one other statement in this verse that may cause your ears to perk up. Paul says the gospel is for the Jew first and also the Gentile. What did he mean by this? I think there are two sides to this statement.

First, salvation came to (and through) the Jews first. The Christian faith is the culmination of the Jewish faith. The Jewish people had been promised a Messiah who would save them and bless them. This Messiah would also be the savior of the world. Unfortunately, the vast majority of Jewish people missed the Messiah. They chose to reject Jesus because they did not believe He was the fulfillment of the promise. This salvation that we (Gentiles) enjoy is due to God choosing to work through the Jewish people. So it is right and accurate to say that salvation was for the Jews first, and then for the Gentiles.

Second, the Jews are God's chosen people, not Gentiles. It will be a while before we get to Romans 11, but there Paul seems to say that the story of the Jewish people isn't over yet. The analogy Paul uses there is that Gentiles are like branches that are grafted into the tree that is the Jewish faith. The Jews are His chosen people, but Gentiles are given the privilege of being added. So in that sense, salvation is for the Jews first.

Whatever the case, there is one salvation that is available for all people, and it is available only through Jesus Christ. You can believe in whatever you want, you can follow whoever you want, but there is only one Savior for all the world—Jesus.

Saved By Faith

Paul continues his explanation of the gospel message in verse 17,

This Good News tells us how God makes us right in his sight. This is accomplished from start to finish by faith. As the Scriptures say, “It is through faith that a righteous person has life.” (Romans 1:17, NLT)

This verse, too, is full of rich theological truths. The first one is that God makes us right in his sight. This is a multifaceted statement that we could spend all day digging into, but there are a few things we need to understand about what Paul says.

First, we might ask what does it mean to be made right in God’s sight? Aren’t we all still sinners? How can we be made right? The Greek word used here carries the idea of God declaring us as right or treating us as though we are right in His sight. In other words, we do not become perfect the moment we believe, but we do gain right standing with God at that moment. This concept is called justification. One of the best ways to define justification is that in the eyes of the Lord it is now “just as if I’d never sinned.” In other words, because of Jesus’ sacrifice, God no longer looks at us and sees our failures and sin. Instead, He sees Jesus’ sacrifice on our behalf. Not only that, He sees Jesus’ righteousness instead of our sin.

It is important to note who the active party in this process is. It isn’t us, it is God. God is the One who justifies us, He is the One who forgives us, and He is even the One who draws us into a relationship with Him. It is from Him from the first to the last! When we come to understand this, it is truly astounding.

Paul continues, explaining that our justification and our salvation is accomplished by faith from start to finish. This means that our salvation is not accomplished by anything we have done. Rather, it is accomplished simply by trusting in what Jesus has done on our behalf. We do not deserve the forgiveness we receive; it is received as a gift.

This is one of the central doctrines of the Christian faith. Christianity is unique from every other religion of the world. Every other religion tells people they need to improve their behavior so they can be acceptable to their god(s). These religions are constantly telling people to work harder in the hopes that one day they will merit salvation and blessing. The Christian faith is upside down. It says we cannot be good enough, so we should stop trying to be and instead choose to rest in what Jesus has done, placing our trust in Him alone. We are saved by our trust in Jesus, not our performance.

Now, Christians should see a change in their behavior and thoughts after they have trusted in Christ. This is a natural outcome of submitting our lives to Him. But this is not the cause of our salvation, it is the effect of it. Sadly there are many churches today where people leave each week feeling that they must work harder so that they might be good enough to get to heaven. That isn’t good news—because if we’re honest with ourselves, we know we’ll never be good enough! Fortunately, the gospel says we don’t have to be. Christ has been good enough on our behalf, and we need only to respond in faith to Him.

And that leads to the last phrase in this verse. The NLT says that “it is through faith that a righteous person has life.” I find other translations to be a bit clearer; they say, “the righteous will live by faith.” What Paul was saying was not that if we can muster up enough faith and live in accordance with that faith, then we will be righteous. Rather, we are made righteous by trusting in Jesus. That happens first. Then, after trusting in Jesus, we live by faith.

This was the phrase that forever changed the course of Martin Luther’s life. Luther had spent his life studying the scriptures diligently. He had devoted himself to living a life pleasing to God but found that he kept falling short. The story is told that when he was a monk he used to spend hours confessing his sins. Eventually the monks tasked with listening to his confessions told him to stop and come back when he had some sin that was actually worth confessing!

Luther, however, understood that he could not be good enough to merit the Lord’s favor. He understood the depths of his own sin too well. He knew that he could not be righteous based on his performance. But then he began to grasp what Paul was teaching in these verses. God does not expect us to be good enough to merit His favor. He knows that we will never be righteous in our own strength or devices. That’s why He intervenes and does what we cannot. He simply asks us to believe.

Luther realized that much of what he had been doing was motivated by fear or superstition, not by faith. He was doing all these things in the hopes that one day they might result in his salvation. He came to understand that God doesn’t ask us to live in fear, but in faith. If we live by faith, then we live our lives knowing that what Jesus said and did is true, and we live according to His guidance rather than the world’s or our own misguided notions of right and wrong. We follow Him out of joy, love, and trust, not fear.

We will all still fail at this. The temptation would be to conclude that if we fail, then we are not living by faith, and therefore we are not righteous before God. But that gets the order wrong! Remember, we are declared righteous, and then we live by faith. It is accomplished by faith from beginning to end! God is the One who does the work. We simply must trust Him to do it.

Conclusion

In these two verses, Paul makes some profound and sweeping statements about the nature of the gospel. He will go into much greater depth on each of these subjects as he develops the themes of the rest of the letter. These verses are merely a teaser of what is to come. Yet even now we should be amazed at God’s grace in extending forgiveness to sinners. This message, if we understand and embrace it, truly is good news! And if we understand it, it will also inform the way we live. So let’s draw some concluding principles from these verses.

First, God deserves all the credit for our salvation. Paul is quite clear in these verses about who the active party is in our salvation—it is God! Our Sunday School

class knows the answer to the question, “What do we bring to the table in our salvation?” The answer is sin! Nothing else. God works in us and draws us to Himself. We are saved by faith alone, and that is because of God’s grace alone. This should give us great hope and comfort, knowing that when we fail, we have not fallen from grace. Our salvation isn’t dependent upon our performance, but Christ’s! Understanding this also means that we have no reason to think more highly of ourselves or to look down on those who are not yet believers. We are not better, just redeemed.

Second, we should have patience and understanding with those who aren’t saved. We sometimes get frustrated by non-Christians who are living in ways contrary to the scriptures. Violating God’s laws is sin, regardless of whether you know them or not, or whether you think such actions are sinful or not. But we must remember the order that things happen in the lives of believers. They are made righteous through faith, *and then* their lives begin to reflect that faith. Rather than becoming frustrated by unsaved people acting like unsaved people, we should point them to Jesus. Similarly, rather than trying to get unsaved people to act like Christians, we need to bring them to Jesus. He is who they need. Changing behavior without faith amounts to nothing.

Third, we should see an urgency in the gospel message. I believe one reason we make so many excuses for not talking to others about matters of faith is that we don’t really believe or understand what is at stake. The only hope for every person on the planet is to place their faith in Jesus. They can do nothing to save themselves, and putting their faith or allegiance in anyone or anything else will not save them. It doesn’t matter if they are nice and kind, or even moral. They can change the world for the better, but if they don’t have faith in Christ, they stand condemned in their sin. If we really believe this, then we should be driven to share the message of the gospel with those who don’t yet embrace it. That will supersede our fears of rejection, of ignorance, or anything else and drive us to action.

Finally, we should remember that God is still active. Remember that Paul said the gospel message is God’s power active in our world. We often feel overmatched by the task of telling others about Christ. I think that is because we feel we must do so in our own strength, knowledge, and power. Remember, the gospel message is powerful on its own, because God is working through it! You are not responsible for getting people to change their ways or getting them to believe—you are only responsible for sharing the gospel with them. We are to share the message; God will do the rest.

Paul understood these truths fully. As such, they not only informed his ministry, but transformed the way he lived. Our goal is that we should understand the gospel this fully. If we do, we will see how wonderful it is, we will embrace it and rejoice in it, we will find the peace our world longs for, and we will long to share it with others.

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