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**Series: Romans: The Just Shall Live by Faith**  
**Message: Jesus Only**

**Transcribed Message**  
**February 25, 2024**  
**Romans 15:17-21**

If you have been at Covenant for very many times, even if it's just the first time this morning, you've already seen what we do not only at the front end but at the back end when we remind ourselves of three things: that we want to be a people who know God, we want to be a people who love others, and we want to be a people who live out the gospel. My hope and the hope of obviously the leadership of our church – the elders, the staff, and pastors – it is not that this is a cliché. This is not just something that we say by way of a slogan at the end of the morning, but it is really the reality and the passion of our heart. To know God is, as Paul said in Philippians, that I might know him and the power of his resurrection. That was the driving passion of Paul's life. to love others is to live out one of the greatest commandments, one of the most often repeated commandments, all through the Scriptures that we love one another. We were reminded by Josh last week to love even our enemies, those that we would not naturally want to love. But there it is. It's a good command on our life.

Then to live out the gospel is nothing other than Romans 1:16 that we're not ashamed of the gospel of Christ. It is Romans 12. We're not being conformed to the world. We're being transformed. All those things are a part of who we want to be as the people of God at Covenant. We want to live out this faith. We want to live out this truth. We want to live out this gospel in a way that is evident and obvious. I think as we come to this section in Romans that it is almost like Paul is giving us that same sense of passion, focusing our attention on Christ, focusing our attention on Jesus, focusing our attention on the gospel, focusing our attention on the cross. That's what we want to see in verses 17 to 21 this morning – the glory of the gospel. When we glory in the gospel, we are glorying in Christ. When we glory in Christ, we're glorying in the cross. Let's do just as we are called upon to do. Let's glory in the gospel and in this gospel of Christ alone.

A quick review of what we looked at a couple weeks ago in verses 14 to 16. Remember that we noted there that God is working in and through all of us. We commented at the time that all of us are called to be in ministry. Yes, Paul was highlighting the call of God on his ministry and what God had commissioned him to do, but I think it went beyond Paul. It's a reminder that we're all in ministry. When he said at the end of that 14<sup>th</sup> verse that here's another "one-another" thing that you're supposed to do. You're supposed to instruct each other. You're supposed to encourage each other. You're supposed to admonish each other. It just reminds us of all these 30 one-another commands in the New Testament. What do all those things call us to? All those things call us to a sense of engagement, to a sense of involvement, reminding us that we're all in the ministry together and that's what we're sharing in.

Then I also want you to notice this matter of the Trinitarian God who is working in and through us. I just look back at those verses 13 to 21 and looking at the section today. There are 12 different times in this small section of verses that Paul talks about the Father, he talks about the Son, and he talks about the Holy Spirit. It just underscores that we're Trinitarian in our theology. God is our Father. Jesus is our Savior. The Holy Spirit of God lives within us. It is very important, very impactful that we understand the significance of that in relation to our salvation. The Father sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. The Father and Son sent the Spirit to indwell us and to live within us and to empower us. It isn't just a matter of salvation. It carries over as well into our sanctification. It's very, very important that we see how Paul highlights that.

This morning let's look at this matter of humility, confidence, and glory to God. We begin in verse 17 by making this necessary distinction. A necessary distinction in verse 17. Look at it again: "In Christ Jesus then I have reason to be proud of my work for God." I don't know about you but when I read that I go back to verse 14. It just stops me for a moment when I read: "In Christ Jesus then I have reason to be proud of my work for God." It took me back to verse 14 because remember back in verse 14 Paul said, "I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you are yourself full of goodness." Remember when we talked about those words that just check you up a little bit. You're full of goodness. We commented that Paul didn't change his theology. He didn't decide that now we're all inherently good. But we have an inherited goodness. I

felt the same way when I read verse 17 and Paul says in Christ Jesus I have reason to be proud of my work for God. I wanted to raise my hand and say, Paul, what about this matter of humility? What does that have to do with verse 17? Is there any impact on verse 17 with regard to this matter of humility? It reminds me of the guy who wrote the book *Humility and How I Attained It* and he had his picture on the front and back cover. You read that and you just think for a moment what does Paul have in mind here?

Since this is the apostle Paul and he's writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we have to make a distinction here. It seems to me that what we have here is first an acknowledgment that there is inappropriate boasting. We would all agree with that. There is inappropriate boasting. We know that pride is normally sinful, and we know that because God tells us that. The Bible tells us that. The Bible often warns us about this matter of sin. In 1 Peter chapter 5 verse 5, you have one of the strongest, clearest statements about that. When Peter says: "Likewise, you who are younger be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves with humility towards one another, for God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God."

The very essence of the gospel is that we don't have anything in our hands when we come to God. There's nothing for us to boast in. there's nothing for us to look at and say we're doing this or offering this to God. Absolutely not. Pride is essentially an acknowledgment that I don't need God. We know that that's certainly not in the heart of Paul in this regard. Hell is going to be filled with people who were people of pride. They didn't need Christ. They think they can get there on their own if they even believe that there was such a place called heaven. We know there's an inappropriate pride because God said so. We know it is inappropriate because Paul says so. Paul says so in Romans. Paul says so in Romans 3:27 – "Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded by the law of faith." In chapter 4 verse 2 he says, "For if Abraham was justified by works he has something to boast about, but not before God." You have this anti-boasting theme and message that runs through not just the book of Romans but runs through all the Bible. So, we would have to conclude this. The gospel certainly eliminates all boasting. All boasting of the wrong kind.

But there must then be an appropriate boasting. There must be appropriate boasting because that's what Paul says in verse 17, that in Christ Jesus then I have reason to be proud of my work for God. What does it look like for there to be appropriate boasting? The right kind. What would that look like? It clearly is right before us here. It is to boast in Christ. It is to boast in the gospel. Listen to what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 10:17, "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord." There is an inappropriate boasting in ourselves, in our accomplishments, but there's an appropriate boasting that is directed to the Lord. We boast in the Lord. Galatians 6:14 – "Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world." There you have this sense of appropriate boasting, don't you? It's very clear that in Paul's statement in verse 17 he is not the primary focus of the conversation. You look again at verse 17 and he starts off "in Christ Jesus." That's where he wants us to focus. He wants us to focus on what Christ has done. Appropriate boasting takes us to the cross, to Christ, to the gospel. That's what Paul is doing here. You can never put your own glory and the glory of God forward at the same time. They're just mutually exclusive. You can't boast in yourself and boast in Christ at the same time. One is going to be greater than the other in your emphasis and your focus. You can't promote your reputation and God's reputation. This is just a check I think certainly to myself as a pastor but to all of us. How easy it is to step across that line into inappropriate boasting, to draw attention to ourselves in an inappropriate way. I think that's the point that we would make here with Paul. Paul is simply saying allow me to boast about Jesus Christ. That's what he wants to do.

He wants to boast about Christ because it's the very goal of his life and ministry. It is the goal of his life and ministry. As you look at that verse "in Christ Jesus then". It is the same idea as the word "therefore". It takes us right back to what he just talked about. In verses 14 through 16 he talked about his ministry and their ministry, but he talked about his ministry and how it was that God enabled and used him to bring to them the gospel. He is looking back at that, and he is saying look at what God has done among you. He is reminding them of the fact that he's looking at what the gospel has accomplished in their life. We should probably do more of that, shouldn't we? We should probably do more of boasting in the right sense in what God has done in each

other's lives and seeing what God is doing in somebody else's life and being glad for that.

The elders are reading a book entitled *You're Not Crazy*. We're all encouraged by that title. We've confirmed that. We're five chapters in but the fourth chapter that we just read this last Tuesday for our time together was entitled "See the Glory". It was a chapter on the gospel of honoring each other. The whole book is about the gospel and its impact in the life of the church. What is the gospel supposed to be doing in the life of the church? Obviously, it's changing people's lives. This chapter just encourages us as a body to be mindful and aware of what God is doing in each other's lives and expressing thanks for that, speaking into that. In that sense, do what Paul does. Boasting in what God is doing in somebody else's life. That is just a measure of encouragement. Everybody responds to that – when they have somebody notice what the gospel is doing in their life, and they see that and comment on that. What a great thing to have a gospel of culture honor, which is what he referred to it as. Here's Paul.

Notice in verses 18 to 21, Paul is going to speak more about why it is that he's boasting in the way that he is. He is going to point us to a significant set of accomplishments in their lives. He's going to show us by way of his ministry three things that caused him to look at these Roman believers and to say I am so glad for what God is doing in your lives. I am boasting in the Lord, in what he is doing in your life. notice with me these three things. The first one in verse 18 is simply to speak about the nature of his ministry. The nature of his ministry. Verse 18: "For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience by word and deed." How does verse 18 begin? It begins with what we've said many times is one of Paul's favorite words, the word "for". It's just Paul saying here's what I'm excited about. Here's the reason for my boasting. It has to do with what Christ has accomplished in your life. Where does it start? It starts with the beauty of the gospel. It starts with the beauty of the gospel.

Paul is an evangelist at heart. There are a lot of things that you can label Paul with. He is a missionary, a pastor, a theologian, and an apologist. But fundamentally I think Paul is an evangelist. He loves to talk about Christ. He loves to talk about the gospel. He says in 1 Corinthians chapter 2 verse 2: "For I decided to know nothing

among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” He certainly didn't mean he didn't talk about anything else. He was with them, instructed them, equipped them, encouraged them in the word. But in comparison he said you know I look at all of that and I see what it is that essentially every one of us fundamentally needs. We need the gospel. He loved to talk about the gospel. He loved to talk about Christ. He loved to talk about the cross. It is in that same chapter 1 Corinthians chapter 1:18 – “The word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing but to us who are saved it is the power of God.” He rejoices in the gospel.

We should rejoice in the gospel. It is what has changed the trajectory of our life. It's literally changed the destiny of our life. If you haven't encountered the gospel of grace yet, that is our prayer as the people of the Covenant that even this morning you would understand what the nature of the gospel is. It is that all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We can't work our way into the pleasure and grace of God. It's simply not possible for us to be perfect. God provided his way through his Son. Jesus came and died on the cross for my sin and yours. All that God asks us to do is to believe to trust in him. That's it. To believe in and trust that what Jesus did is enough. That's what Paul is excited about. That's what energized this man's life. That's what encouraged him to go on to all the things that he discusses as happening in his life.

Now look at the rest of that 18<sup>th</sup> verse. He says, “For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished...” To me, that's the gospel. That is what Christ has done. “...through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience by word and deed.” Now he is talking about this matter of sanctification. He is talking about transformation. He is reminding us that this matter of the gospel and sanctification go hand-in-hand. They are to be sanctified and obedient in word and deed. The goal of evangelism is not an experience. The goal of evangelism isn't getting somebody to make a decision. The goal of evangelism isn't getting somebody to raise their hand or sign a card or even to walk forward. All those things may be useful and helpful but that's not the goal of evangelism. The goal of evangelism, Paul says, is that we would be transformed, that we would be changed. The goal of the gospel is to make disciples. The goal of the gospel is that we would become fully devoted followers of Christ. That is what Paul's goal ultimately is. This transformation is an exciting thing that he's talking about, that

he's sharing in. The joy of ministry in many respects is to be able to see that happen, to look and see what God is doing in your lives and in the lives of people that are part of this church. That's one of the things that as a pastor you get to have a front row seat regarding that and seeing that. You see all the other things that go with that, but there's nothing more exciting than seeing evangelism that leads to discipleship that leads to transformation. That's what God wants to do.

Remember back in chapter 1 verse 5? You remember back in chapter 1 verse 5. Of course you do. It says this: "through whom we have received grace." This is the introductory statement to the gospel of Romans. "Through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations." That's what he laid out in the very first section of the book of Romans and now here you come to verse 19. Look at verse 19: "by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ."

The second thing about his ministry is the power of his ministry. The power of his ministry. What does he say about the power of his ministry? He speaks about the validation of his apostleship. It's the validation of his apostleship. The signs and wonders that Paul did in the power of the Holy Spirit accredited and validated that he was an apostle of Jesus Christ. Remember, he was an apostle that was born out of due time. He wasn't one of the original that was chosen by Christ. He was born out of due time, he says. He was selected, if you will, after the fact. But God validated Paul's ministry by signs and wonders. Listen to what it says about this ministry of signs and wonders in Acts chapter 2 verse 22: "Men of Israel, hear these words. Jesus of Nazareth. a man attested to you by God, with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know." Even those things were validating that Jesus is the Son of God. Just as Isaiah the prophet said when he comes he will open the mouth of those who cannot speak. He will open the eyes of those who cannot see. He will open the ears of those who cannot hear. When Jesus came, he did those things. What was that? It wasn't miracles for the sake of miracles. It was a validation. This is who he claims to be. In Acts chapter 5 verse 12: "Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles and

they were all together in Solomon's portico." Then 14:3 of Acts, "So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands (as apostles)." Then listen to the final thing that Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12:12. This is the verse that speaks of the validation of the signs and wonders. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12:12, "The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with the utmost patience with signs and wonders and mighty works."

Why were there so many signs and wonders in the 1<sup>st</sup> century? Why were there so many miracles? By the way, the word "miracles" doesn't appear in the New Testament text. There isn't a word for miracles. It's the word most often used as power *dunamis*. But here we have this reoccurring statement of signs and wonders. The question that often gets asked is are we supposed to be experiencing the same things today? are we supposed to be experiencing these kinds of signs and wonders? People who had significant physical issues were miraculously being healed. People who were blind had their eyesight restored. People who could not hear, the apostles would touch them and they would be able to hear. Those who could not speak their tongues were loosed. People were raised from the dead. We wonder why aren't we seeing that today? Or are we supposed to be seeing that today? Should we be looking for that? Do we not want that for ourselves?

When we ask that question, I suppose if we think in terms of the answer to that question on a continuum from one end to the other you can start off by saying there are those who say all of that was for the 1<sup>st</sup> century. All those things about miracles, that's all behind us. That's all passed. Those things don't happen anymore. I suppose you could say to the farthest side are people who simply say that's all behind us. Then of course there's another end of the continuum, isn't there? If you go to the other end of the continuum, there are people who today would say no. There shouldn't be any difference. We should expect those same things to be happening today. If they're not happening, that's on us. God's will is for everybody to be healed. He doesn't want anybody to be sick. If we are not seeing those kinds of signs and wonders today, even people being raised from the dead, then that's on us and we lack faith and there's something that we need to do about that. You have people that take this to the other



end of the continuum. kind of overlooking in my perspective all that Paul said in Romans 8 about being under the groaning weight of sin and what that has done in our world. I think maybe there's another spot. What if we were to land somewhere in the middle of that and say of course as the people of God we call out to a sovereign God. We ask a sovereign God according to his will. When we have someone sick among us and we pray for them and we lay hands upon them and we ask God to strengthen them and to restore their health, that is a good thing. We should do that. Maybe if you look at that continuum, you find yourself somewhere on there. And if you're of the mindset I don't think there's anything like that even happening anymore, maybe you need to be drawn more towards the middle. Maybe if you're on the other side of that, maybe you need to be drawn more towards the middle.

In my understanding, what Paul in the New Testament says these signs and wonders that were happening at the appearance of Christ, it seemed to be especially intense. It was for a specific season in which God was testifying and validating the apostleship of those men who He had called to establish the church and bring this gospel forward. One thing we know for sure. The greatest miracle that God ever does and still does today is the transforming of the heart, to bring somebody out of death into life, to bring somebody out of darkness into light. The greatest miracle that has ever happened and ever will happen has happened hopefully to all of you and as well as to myself. It is the miracle of regeneration. It is the miracle of new birth.

Paul was unique among even the apostles in the way God used him. He was the one he called to the Gentiles. Let's close by looking at the strategy of his ministry. So the nature of his ministry, the power of his ministry, the strategy of his ministry is given to us in verse 20 and 21: "and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel not where Christ has already been named lest I build on someone else's foundation, but as it is written, 'Those who have never been told of him will see and those who have never heard him will understand'." There's a singular focus. There's a singular ambition. Paul says, "and I make it my ambition." It's almost like the word "boasting". We want to pull back from that a little bit but no, we don't need to.

There is an ambition that's bad. There is an ambition that is self-centered and selfish and divisive. But there's a good ambition. This word here is used only three times

in the New Testament. It is the idea to pursue after something. You are passionate about this. You are eager to pursue it. That was Paul. His ambition was to preach the gospel.

Let me ask you this. Where did Paul's ambition to preach the gospel come from? Where did Paul's ambition to preach the gospel come from? If I was answering that question apart from Romans here I would probably say most likely it came from his Damascus Road experience. There he is, a persecutor of the church. He's on the Damascus Road and God interrupts and breaks into his life with this amazing vision and conversation and calls him to himself. The man who the church feared more than anybody and God miraculously saves him. I would think, Paul, I understand why you have such a passion to preach the gospel. If I had a Damascus Road experience, maybe I would have that passion too. Maybe that would be my driving ambition too. That's not what Paul tells us. Paul doesn't say that the driving ambition of his life is to do this because he had an experience unlike what almost anybody else has ever had. I appreciate the Holy Spirit of God telling us what it is. Look at verse 21.

This is the reason of Paul's ambition: "but as it is written..." Where is that written? Your Bible probably tells you. It is back in Isaiah. Isaiah chapter 52 and in verse 12 "Those who have never been told of him will see and those who have never heard him will understand." it's almost as if Paul has this vision on the road to Damascus and then he goes and he searches the Scriptures to see what is it that God is doing in my life. what is it that God is calling me to? It is confirmed even in the Old Testament. God is going to raise up. Isaiah 52 is right before Isaiah 53. Isaiah 53 is the suffering servant, the suffering Savior. Here's a passion, the ambition, the demand on Paul. It is the word of God that speaks into his life. just as it is for us. It is the word of God that compels us, that calls us. It's the word of God that commissions us to take this same glorious gospel.

Then just notice this overwhelming need. Not where Christ has already been named. Paul went to the unreached parts, the hardest part of the earth. Look at the map. Point number one. He's writing from Corinth. He's writing the book of Romans most likely from Corinth. He's in Corinth. He's writing to the believers in Rome. That is point 2. He's talking about Jerusalem. That's the little circle 3. He is going to take, as we'll see Lord willing next week, an offering back to Jerusalem. He's talking about the

fact that he's gone to the farthest parts. Illyricum. He has gone there. That is what was at one time Yugoslavia. It is Bosnia Serbia. We don't know how Paul got there. We don't know what exactly he intends to say, but that's where he's talking about. That's the extent of the gospel. He hopes to go to Spain, as we'll see in future verses. That's what Paul did. Paul was unique as I said. He was a frontier missionary. He was a pioneer missionary. He went where nobody else had gone with the gospel.

Then lastly, you notice this is just a wisdom issue. He says in verse 20, "and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel not where Christ has already been named lest I build on somebody else's foundation." Now understand, that's not a command of Scripture. That's just a wisdom issue. Almost all of us build on somebody else's foundation and thankfully we've had many faithful people go before us. We come along and build on their foundation. It's not wrong to build on somebody else's foundation. It was just Paul's *modus operandi* to go where other people hadn't gone. That was God's call on his life. He was an apostle. He had the gifts and calling of an apostle. Ephesians 4 reminds us that he was one with the other apostles who laid the foundation. You only lay a foundation one time. Everybody else builds on the foundation that's been laid. We're all ministers of the gospel. We're all to focus on the glory of the gospel.

What do we take away? I ask myself this like I ask you. What do you want your life to count for? What do you want to boast in? What is the legacy and impact of your life going to be? There are all kinds of ways to answer that question, especially if you're younger with your whole life ahead of you. You have all these opportunities to think about, but what is it that you want your life to count for? What do you want to boast in? What is the legacy and impact of your life?

About 25 years ago, John Piper stood before thousands of college students on a rainy day and gave a sermon that's been known for decades now. This is what he said: "Three weeks ago we got word in our church that Ruby Ellison and Laura Edwards had both been killed in Cameroon." He began, "Ruby was 80 years old, single all of her life. she poured it out for one great thing – to make Jesus Christ known among the unreached, the poor, and the sick. Laura was a widow, a medical doctor pushing 80 years old, and serving at Ruby's side in Cameroon. The brakes on their car failed. They went over a cliff. They were both killed instantly. And I asked my people: were their lives

wasted? Is their story nothing but a sad tragedy? People in the crowd called out and said no, no, it wasn't a tragedy." He then pulled out a page from a travel magazine and read: "Bob and Penny took early retirement from their jobs in the Northeast five years ago when he was 59 and she was 51. Now they live in Punta Gorda, Florida where they cruise on their 30-foot trawler, play softball, and collect shells." He continued, "The American dream. Come to the end of your life. Your one and only life and let the last great work before you give an account to your Creator be I collected shells. See my shells. That is a tragedy. People today are spending billions of dollars to persuade you to embrace that tragic dream. Today I'm here to plead with you: don't buy it. Don't waste your life."

Let's pray. Father, thank you for the calling of God in our lives. Thank you for this glorious gospel. Thank you that you have entrusted it to us. Father, stir my heart and the heart of these people with a passion for this gospel, a passion for the glory of the cross, a passion to make this known. We pray in Jesus's name, amen.