

Romans: The Revealing of Righteousness (part 2 of 9)

The Righteous Shall Live by Faith

Romans 1:8-17

Mark Vroegop

“First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. 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, asking that somehow by God’s will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine. 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. I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. 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. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”” (Romans 1:8–17, ESV)

The book of Romans has changed the world because its content has the power to change a person’s life. Martin Luther changed the landscape of the religious world, opening the door for the Protestant Reformation, because his life was changed by his study of the book of Romans. And it was Romans 1:17 that became the epicenter.

For years Luther had struggled with his relationship with God. He was a monk, and he had dedicated his life to God’s service and to seeking Him. But the teaching of the church caused Luther to develop a hatred for God. The more he “learned” about God, the worse the situation became. This was due to the fact that the church taught that one must become righteous – as righteous as God – through religious activity. In other words, the church taught that God makes people righteous as they make themselves righteous. Therefore, Luther worked tirelessly to make himself righteous by keeping the Law and serving the church. When he came to the term “righteousness,” whether referring to God or to what he was supposed to be, Luther knew that there was no hope. The result was that Luther hated “righteousness.” Who could blame him?

The righteousness of God in this context creates impossible requirements, continual fear, perpetual failing, and a lack of freedom and joy. Trying to actively achieve God’s righteousness was impossible and debilitating.

But one day in his study in the Tower of the Black Cloister in Wittenberg, everything changed! Luther described the moment like lightning striking his conscience or a thunderbolt in his heart. What happened was that Luther came to understand the meaning of Romans 1:17 when it says “the righteous shall live by faith.” Romans changed his life. Romans 1:17 changed his life. Or better: the truth of Romans 1:17 – the righteous shall live by faith – changed Martin Luther’s life.

Last week we looked at the overarching theme of Romans: **righteousness through the gospel**. And I tried to help you understand some of the background of the book. For those of you who missed last week, I explained that Paul wrote this letter to a series of house-churches who were struggling to get along, who had never met Paul, and who Paul wanted to motivate to reach the people in Spain. And what does he give them? The gospel. This book is the most systematic and in-depth explanation of the righteousness that comes through the gospel.

Today I hope to show you what is in Romans 1:17 and connect it to power and passion. I want to show you the **proposition (the truth) of Romans 1:17 that leads to power and passion**.

The Proposition: The Righteous Live by Faith

The power of Romans is the truth within its sixteen chapters. And that truth is propositional, meaning that there are statements, maxims, principles, concepts, and spiritual ideas which are communicated. You may have heard the statement that “ideas have consequences.” Well, that is true from a spiritual standpoint as well. The gospel has consequences such as forgiveness, reconciliation, joy, worship, gratitude, and witness. And they all center around what we find in Romans 1:17.

I want to examine our text today by looking at the passage backwards – beginning in verse 17 and working our way back to verses 8-15.

Verse 17 shows us that there is a link between faith and righteousness. There are two key parts of this verse. First, we read, “for in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith.” What is the “it” in verse 17? According to verse 16, it is the gospel. But what is “the righteousness of God” referring to? You might initially think that Paul is talking about how God reveals His righteousness, as if the gospel reveals His character. While it is true that the gospel reveals the righteous character of God, I don’t think that is what Paul meant here. Rather, the righteousness of God is in reference to salvation. In other words, Paul is talking about the righteousness of God in human beings. In the gospel we see the way that God’s righteousness comes to sinners. So the statement is not about God’s character but about God’s righteousness that comes to us through the gospel.

How does that righteousness come to us? Answer: from faith for faith. This means that righteousness comes by faith or belief, and that it does not come by works. What’s more, “from faith for faith,” means that faith is the origin of righteousness and the direction in which it leads.¹ In other words, Christianity is entered into by faith, but it also continues by faith. My favorite example of this is Galatians 2:20.

“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20, ESV)

¹ Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995). 73.

Christianity is essentially about faith. All other religions of the world are based upon a system of works. What's more, human beings naturally look to their works as the means of their acceptance. So this is why the gospel is so potentially liberating and unique. The natural inclination of the human heart and the disposition of all other religions is works. But the good news of the gospel is that God's righteousness is given, not earned.

In verse 17 Paul is essentially saying that in the gospel God has revealed how to be made right with God, and it is through faith. God counts people righteous in Christ; He forgives them in Jesus. Being right with God, therefore, is not something that I must work to create. I must believe that God will do it for me through Jesus. The entrance into Christianity and the life of a Christian is continually marked by faith. Why? Because it is how the righteousness of God comes! It is a gift. Now that is the first key element of verse 17: in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith. There is a second element.

Paul cites Habakkuk 2:4, linking this concept of righteousness and faith with the Old Testament. He says: "the righteous shall live by faith." He uses this Old Testament passage as support that his statement about righteousness coming by faith is indeed true. Paul quotes this passage again in Galatians 3:11 where he says, "*Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for 'The righteous shall live by faith.'*" (Galatians 3:11, ESV). So Paul uses Habakkuk 2:4 to make a very important point: salvation (righteousness of God) does not come by works but by faith. And he'll argue that this is the way God has always worked.

This is the central message of the entire New Testament and the essence of what makes the Good News good news. The beautiful message of the gospel is that God grants to sinful human beings a righteousness that they could never earn nor deserve, and God grants it to sinners as a gift which we must receive by faith as we believe His Word. The proposition is simple: the righteous live by faith. But the implications are sweeping and eternal.

Let me take you back to Luther. This concept of righteousness coming by faith was revolutionary for Luther's relationship with God and the trajectory of Christianity. In that tower in Wittenberg, Luther came to understand that true righteousness is not about an active righteousness that God demands through our efforts but a passive righteousness that He gives to us based upon Jesus' work. He understood for the first time that salvation was not something he could earn; it was a gift. The thunderbolt that struck Luther was that we are saved by someone else's righteousness being given to us. Salvation was by grace through faith alone!

And in that moment, everything changed about Luther's view of God, himself, and salvation. Luther hated the word righteousness before, but now he loved it as much as he hated it: "*I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word 'the righteousness of God'. Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise.*"²

Romans 1:17 contains a proposition that changed everything and that has the potential to change everything about your life. That proposition is: the righteous live by faith. Now let's see how that proposition leads to power.

² <http://www.orldutheran.com/html/tower.html>

The Power

So far we have only looked at verse 17, and we are making our way backwards in the text. Verse 16 helps us see the connection between the proposition and power:

"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." (Romans 1:16, ESV)

Paul begins verse 16 by stating that he is "not ashamed of the gospel." This is not a small statement since at the time of Paul's writing, he had been beaten, imprisoned, ridiculed, and threatened. In fact, he is likely on his way to Jerusalem, and many people are concerned about what will happen when he visits the religious center of the Jewish world (see Acts 20-21). There also may have been a certain level of concern about what would happen if Paul came to the capital of the Roman Empire and began sharing the gospel. Yet he is willing to talk about the gospel message openly even if people thought him a fool or if it was somewhat dangerous.

Is this message about shame relevant to us today? I think it is. Believing in the message of the Bible and its claim of absolute truth is increasingly considered foolish or arrogant by our culture. To believe that salvation only comes by faith in Jesus is something that our world views as intolerant. And to suggest that biblical principles related to morality and the family – like marriage only being between a man and a woman – is now portrayed by some as bigotry and hate. Let me just encourage you that this is not a new problem for the church, and we need to have good, compassionate, and biblically sound reasons for believing what we believe. But how do you motivate people to not be ashamed without being angry? Answer: preach the gospel to them and to yourself!

What comes next in verse 16 is really remarkable. Paul says "it is the power of God for salvation." What does that mean? It is identifying that the gospel does something significant – something eternally significant. In verse two Paul had said that Jesus was declared to be the Son of God "in power according to the Spirit of holiness by the resurrection of the dead." So there is a connection between the gospel and the Spirit and resurrection and power. The gospel has the power to create salvation in the hearts of people and to change them immediately.

So what does the gospel do? What power is there? Let me give you a few verses that capture the significance of what Paul is saying here:

- *"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God." (Romans 5:1–2, ESV)*
- *"We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." (Romans 6:4, ESV)*
- *"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death." (Romans 8:1–2, ESV)*

- *“What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31, ESV)*
- *“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” (Romans 8:37, ESV)*
- *“For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function,” (Romans 12:3–4, ESV)*
- *“Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” (Romans 13:13–14, ESV)*

This is why it is tragic to only see the gospel as something that relates to where you will spend eternity. The gospel certainly relates to that. But the idea that the righteous live by faith has sweeping effects in every arena of life. When a person understands that righteousness is an undeserved gift given by God to people who violated His law, it changes everything. For example:

- God is no longer your judge but your Father
- Sin is no longer seen as freedom to do what I want but the bondage that nearly ruined my life
- Jesus is no longer an historical figure but, He is your personal Savior
- Your identity no longer is based on performance but on faith
- Hope is not based on what happens to you but on who (God) is in control
- Other people are not just a part of your life but are opportunities for self-less love
- Suffering is not pointless or meaningless but divinely designed to make you like Jesus
- Obedience is not what you have to do, but it is what you want to do
- Joy is not merely an emotion, but it is the overflow of inexpressible contentment in the gospel

And I could on and on. In fact it might be a great exercise in your small groups this week to think through how the proposition – the righteous live by faith – has changed the varied aspects of your life. You could think through the practical implications or the contrast between how you thought about life before the gospel and how you think now.

The gospel transforms people from all walks of life! Notice that Paul says “to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” You see what unites the church is so much more than similar backgrounds, ethnicities, and social standing. The church was meant to be comprised of people from all walks of life because that is what the gospel does: it gets inside of you and changes everything.

The gospel makes you see yourself and God and sin and other people and unreached people through a radically different lens. If you are here today and you have never put your faith in Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins, this is what you are missing. My guess is that you know it. There is probably something strangely attractive and frightening about what you are hearing today. It is attractive because you know it would change everything, but it is scary because you know that it

will change everything. I would invite you to consider if it isn't time to turn from your sin and put your faith and trust in Jesus. The proposition that the righteous live by faith in Jesus has the power to change your life!

The Passion

Having looked at verses 16-17, let's now turn our attention to verses 8-15. They are not as critical as verses 16-17, but they are still important. There is a lot here, but I think you could summarize the contents of these verses by looking at them through the lens of motivation, emotion, or passion. In other words, the proposition of the gospel and its requisite power led Paul to have a particular passion. His love for the gospel created a number of things in his life. Let's see what is here:

Gratitude (v 8) – Paul begins the letter by expressing his thankfulness to God and through Jesus Christ for what was happening in Rome. Notice that Paul is not just grateful for them, but he is grateful to God for them. The gospel causes you to see everything through a lens of gratitude to God.

Mission (v 8) – He is grateful because of the spreading reputation of the church in regards to their faith. Other parts of the world are learning about what the gospel is doing in Rome. Paul loved the spread of the Good News. When you love the gospel, you love to hear about it spreading.

This week I read an article about Northview Church where my friend Steve Poe pastors. They gave away \$83,000 in one service in the same way that we did during our Extravagant Grace series, and I was thrilled. Also, I was at an event recently with Aaron Brackett, another friend of mine who pastors Traders Point Christian Church. He told me that their Christmas Offering was almost four times what they had expected. My heart rejoiced. I was thrilled at what God was doing even though it wasn't necessarily in our church. Do you know why? Because the gospel is bigger and more important than any one church! If you love the gospel, you have to love what God is doing beyond just what is happening in your church or your ministry area or your small group or your passion area.

Prayer (vv 9-10) – Paul mentions that he was constantly praying for this church and asking God to allow him to be able to make a visit to Rome. The gospel not only created a love for the people of Rome, but it also created a love to pray for them.

Spiritual Growth (vv 11-12) – He longed to see them in order to impart “some spiritual gift to strengthen you” and to be “mutually encouraged by each other's faith.” Paul had a passion to see the people of Rome grow in their understanding of the gospel, and their growth would be a great encouragement to him as well.

Last week we had almost 4,500 people here on Sunday. It felt like it (plus, I went a little long). But our passion cannot just be for the number of people who are coming to our church. We need to be passionate about helping one another really grow. So if you are new at College Park, I'm so glad you are here. But if your vision is that this church is a place that you can come, hide, listen, and leave, I want you to know something: I'm okay with you doing that for a little while (because you may need that right now), but long-term I want you to be mutually encouraged by one another's faith.

In fact we have just revamped our temporary small groups for new people. We call it the Bridge³, and I'm excited to see what happens through this ministry, but not just because it is a really good program. Rather, I think some great gospel conversations are going to happen in the Bridge with people who are complete strangers but who are all talking about the gospel.

Trust (v 13) – Don't miss the fact that Paul tells the church that he longed to come and see them, but so far he was prevented. Paul was trusting in the sovereign plan of God. You see, when you understand that everything you have comes to you as an undeserved gift from the hands of an eternally good God, you can trust Him when things are difficult or bad or inconvenient or hard. Life is hard. But when you see it through the gospel, you know that hard is not bad.

Message (vv 14-15) – Paul expresses to the church his sense of obligation when it came to the gospel. He saw the world through the lens of the Good News, and the result was a deep desire to see people from all walks of life hear the message that righteousness comes by faith. That is why he says, "Greeks and to barbarians . . . to the wise and to the foolish." Paul opened his mouth and told people the gospel regardless of who they were or where they came from.

Is there a particular category of people with whom it is difficult for you to share the gospel? Maybe it is really smart people or co-workers or family or neighbors or people from a different culture. Could I issue gentle challenge to you? Why not pray that God would so saturate you with the gospel through this series on Romans that you will find a new level of boldness. Why not pray: "God, help me to 'get' the gospel so that I will be more passionate to share the gospel with _____."

A passion for gratitude, mission, prayer, spiritual growth, trust and message all flow from the gospel. When you understand the reality of what Paul means by "the righteous shall live by faith," it gets "in your bones" and becomes an unstoppable force.

Preach the Gospel to Yourself

In verse 15 Paul said that he was eager to preach the gospel to the people in Rome even though they had already heard it and believed it. That means that the message about righteousness coming by faith is something that we need more than once. In fact, I hope you see today that it is something that we need every day.

You have probably heard me talk about "preaching the gospel" to yourself before. I first heard this when reading my pastoral hero, Martin Lloyd Jones. In his book called *Spiritual Depression*, he said that one of our main problems is that we listen to ourselves instead of preaching to ourselves. Jones suggests that we need to grab our thoughts and emotions and make them listen to biblical truth. We need to preach to ourselves. So what does that look like?

³ Learn more about the Bridget at <http://www.yourchurch.com/thebridge>

Let me give you a few suggestions:

First, you must believe and know the gospel. You must know that 1) you are sinner, 2) God is holy, 3) Jesus died for your sins, and 4) by putting your faith in Jesus, you are counted righteous. If this is not what you believe, and if you cannot articulate it, then it has no real power.

Second, spend some time praying about the gospel. Thank God for your redemption. Rehearse the story, in prayer, about the moment where you came to faith in Christ. Name some of the sins from which you were delivered.

Third, write down some key verses about the gospel and consider memorizing a few. The point here is to get the gospel content in your mind and heart. Or maybe you could write out the gospel and read it to yourself. Or you could use the book I mentioned last week, *A Gospel Primer*,⁴ and read it during your time with the Lord.

Fourth (this is where it gets really powerful!), begin to apply the gospel to the various areas of your life. Try to answer questions such as: How does the gospel help me ask for forgiveness or be generous or make me less critical of others? How does the gospel help me to see my desires for sinful things differently? How does the gospel empower me to say “no” to temptation? How does the gospel help me lighten up about my short-comings, personality, and mistakes? How does the gospel empower me to love hard people or do hard things?

That is just a small list of all the ways that the righteousness by faith could change everything. And it was this proposition – that the righteous shall live by faith – that changed everything for Martin Luther. And it could be life-changing for you!

Jerry Bridges in his book, *The Discipline of Grace*, helps us understand what all of this means. I hope something deep within you resonates with what he says:

To preach the gospel to yourself, then, means that you continually face up to your own sinfulness and then flee to Jesus through faith in His shed blood and righteous life. It means that you appropriate, again by faith, the fact that Jesus fully satisfied the law of God, that He is your propitiation, and that God's holy wrath is no longer directed toward you.

It means that you dwell upon the promise that God has removed your transgressions from you as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12), that He has blotted out your transgressions and remembers your sin no more (Isaiah 43:25). But it means you realize that all these wonderful promises of forgiveness are based upon the atoning death of Jesus Christ.⁵

The proposition – that the righteous shall live by faith – changes everything!

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⁴ http://www.amazon.com/Gospel-Primer-Christians-Milton-Vincent-ebook/dp/B00AY73O8E/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1389902089&sr=8-1&keywords=the+gospel+primer

⁵ <http://www.challies.com/reading-classics-together/preach-the-gospel-to-yourself>