



The Just Shall Live By Faith

Romans 1:16-17

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Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, and the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative. Romans, chapter 1, beginning at verse 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. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'"

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. O Lord our God, we ask that you would use your Word this morning, use it even in the way you have intended, O Lord, to shape and mold the hearts of your people, to bring the dead to life, to remind us of the glories of our Lord Jesus Christ. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

As I've said, this section of the first chapter of Romans is one of the best known of all of the Bible. It is perhaps so well known because it is inextricably linked with Martin Luther. You may remember that Martin Luther was the one who set off the Reformation in Europe when he nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg. This past October, we celebrated the five hundredth anniversary of that.

Let me remind you that Luther didn't just wake up one morning and say, "You know what? I think I'm going to write some theses and nail them on the wall." No, this was something Luther had come to from his study of the Scripture, from how the Scripture bound his conscience. It bound him to Jesus. Luther was a man of a very scrupulous conscience. He was very aware that God was holy and righteous and good, and he was also very aware at the same time that he, Martin Luther, was not.

So he was of a constant concern that he could not stand before a holy God. He took to confessing his sins over and over and over again, day upon day, multiple times in the day, confessing the most minute of infractions, to the point where his confessor said to him, "Martin, when you have a sin worth confessing, come back to me." Luther was painfully aware of how short he fell before God.

So if anyone could try to earn God's favor, if anyone could try to make his own righteousness, Martin Luther tried. He did all the confessing he could. He tried every attempt at works that he could to earn favor with God. At one point, he was sent on a journey by his fellow monks to Rome, the center of Christendom at this time. Rome was a place where all of the relics were supposedly held...a piece from the true cross, a cloth Jesus was buried in.

There was one relic, a set of stairs, and this set of stairs was supposedly transported from Israel to Rome. It was the actual stairs that led to Pilate's office, supposedly the stairs Jesus himself climbed before his trial before Pilate. It was the habit of pilgrims to go and climb those stairs, but if you're trying to show your worth before God you can't simply bound up the stairs. No, you have to go up on your knees, and each step needs to be filled with time of prayer and confession and Scripture memorization.

Luther was doing this. So much so that it pained him. Then in the middle of his journey up the flight of stairs, it hit him like a thunderbolt...the text he had read, the text he had memorized... "The just shall live by faith." Luther realized he'd had it all wrong all along, that he couldn't get into God's good graces, that he couldn't make himself righteous or holy before a righteous God, but his only hope of salvation lay in trusting the Lord Jesus Christ by faith.

This morning we're going to look at the gospel. I'd like us to see three things about the gospel that are presented in our text. First, *the gospel is the power of God*. It's not the power of man. It's not the power of the church. The gospel is the power of God. Secondly, *the gospel is for everyone*. Finally, *the gospel is a matter of faith*. The gospel is the power of God, it is for everyone, and it is a matter of faith.

The Gospel is the Power of God

Let's begin, then, by looking at the gospel as it is presented here in Romans 16 and 17. We might ask ourselves right at the beginning, "Why is there so much emphasis on the gospel in Paul's letter?" After all, we're still in the first chapter. We've only gone through a paragraph or two, and over and over again Paul is confirming the importance of the gospel.

He said in verse 1 that he was set apart for the gospel, and then in verse 3 he directly related Jesus to the gospel. In verses 5 and 8 he emphasizes the faith of those who believe the gospel. Then in verses 14 and 15 he reminds us the church is obligated to bring the gospel. We might put it this way: Paul sounds a bit like a broken record, over and over again reminding us of the gospel.

Now again he brings it to our attention, but he does it in an interesting way. He says, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation." At first glance, this seems like a very odd turn of phrase for Paul to use. "What do you mean, Paul? You're not ashamed of the gospel? You've been going on and on and on about it already in this letter. It's what marks your life. You glory in the gospel and what it means. What do you mean when you say you're not ashamed of it?"

The first thing we need to remember is the context into which Paul is speaking. The gospel was something, at Paul's day and time, the wise heaped scorn upon. Those who talked about the gospel, taught the gospel, and believed the gospel were looked at as intellectual inferiors. They didn't really understand how the world worked. If they really understood intellectual matters and philosophy, they would not be prattling on about how the death of someone could set them free from sin and unrighteousness.

That was just the wise or the powerful or the intelligentsia. The bulk of the world just simply ignored the gospel. It never made it to a level of interest for them. Where Paul is right now is at the center of all worldly power, the center of the world that thinks it has no need for the gospel. I want to ask you this. Is this any different from the day you and I live in? Don't the intellectuals today deride Christians as slow or dumb-witted, as those who don't understand science or can't think philosophically?

Every Christian is supposedly someone who was never even able to *get* into college, much less graduate. Sometimes I wonder if as I proclaim I'm a Christian I should have special gloves to help me as my knuckles drag. But most of the world doesn't even get involved in that contest, do they? Because for them, the gospel is something they never pay any attention to.

Think about what the world focuses upon. It doesn't focus upon Jesus, upon the Bible, upon Scripture. It focuses, instead, on who made the gown the woman was wearing at the last awards show, as if somehow that was of critical importance. Or what is the ranking of the player who was drafted by the team, and were they underselected or overselected? And give me 150 reasons why each way. This is what we spend the bulk of our time on in our world.

Paul knows about people. He knows circumstances may change but people do not. The people in our day are the same as the people in Paul's day, and Paul knows *their* need is the same as *our* need. We're going to look into this in detail later, but let me just summarize it for you. People are not righteous. This is what Paul will begin to say in verse 18 and following through to chapter 3. People are not righteous. They are not good.

This should come as no surprise to you and me. If you ever read a newspaper or watch the news on television, this should be fairly obvious to you. The world is filled with lying. The world is filled with theft. The world is filled with murder and abuse. We take it as a granted that people are not righteous. You may recall that once someone asked the late R.C. Sproul how he could prove that people were evil. What was the proof of this? R.C. looked at the gentleman and said, "Do you lock your door?"

That's the truth, isn't it? We don't dare not lock our doors. We don't dare let our children out of our sight, because we don't know the depth of the evil and the wickedness in the world around us. We know we are not righteous, but instead, we see that the wrath of God is revealed against this unrighteousness and wickedness. So when Paul says he is not ashamed of the gospel, he is actually understating his case intentionally.

He is saying his lack of shame is proof of his belief in the Lord Jesus Christ. He's actually, I think, paraphrasing Jesus from Mark 8, where Jesus says, "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 glory." Paul is saying, "I'm not ashamed of the gospel. I'm not ashamed of Jesus. I trust him with my life and my eternity, and I know Jesus will not be ashamed of me, because he has given me his sure word and promise."

Paul sets forth here the solution he wants us to see. We might ask ourselves, "What is the gospel good for?" Paul says it's good for salvation, because the gospel is the power of God for the purpose of salvation. The plain message Paul is giving to us is that God's solution to the problem of sin and wickedness is the gospel. It's not just a hope. It's not just something man dreamed up.

I like to think of this human dream in terms of what I call *Star Trek* theology. You may have heard me talk about this in the past. You know, when you watch *Star Trek* that occurs hundreds of years in the future and they just pronounce things like time changes man. They'll say things like, "Do you remember when we solved all hunger?" or "Do you remember when all illness went away forever?" or "Do you remember when no one ever had a mental disease ever again?" as if somehow just adding hundreds of years changes who people are.

The gospel doesn't have a vague hope that somehow, someday, out there in the future everyone will be nice and good. No, the gospel treats us exactly where we are: in the midst of our sin and our need. That is the solution God has given. The message of the gospel itself is God's power. That is how he saves. It is not a vehicle to something else. The gospel saves.

So what is that message, then, of the gospel? The message of the gospel is that God took the initiative. Remember, this is God's power, Paul says. God takes the initiative by sending his Son, Jesus Christ, to save sinners. He rescues sinners from death and sin and from the path of destruction they are on and puts them on a path of righteousness and life. All of this is God's work. It is *his* power.

I want you to notice in chapter 1 who is the subject of the active verbs. It is God who is acting. *He* is promising. *He* is loving. *He* is calling. Everywhere, we are passive. We are receiving. We are *being* loved. We are *being* called. It is God and his power that initiates the gospel. All of this is God's work. The gospel brings salvation to sinners.

This is why the gospel is good news: it doesn't depend on you and me. Because of that, Paul doesn't need to be ashamed of his own efforts. The gospel cannot be defeated, because it doesn't depend on us. If it depended on us, we know we would fall short, because we don't have the power to accomplish it. We all know we fall short in what we do. We are familiar with this in real life. It's the main difference between real life and movies.

In the movies, there's always enough money to pay the bills. The hero always arrives in time. The bomb is always diffused with one or two seconds left on it. It never blows up and he says, "Oops." It never happens, but in real life there are a lot of "Oops." We don't have enough money to pay the mortgage every month. We say things we wish we would have kept inside. We come too late to rescue. There isn't always a cure for our disease. We fall short. If we had to rely upon ourselves, we would be lost.

I had a picture of this this weekend using a lawn edger. You didn't realize that Pastor was going to use a lawn edger to teach you the gospel, but I am. We have a lawn edger we've used to keep our lawn neat and clean so

we don't get any citations from the homeowners' association. It came in the process of time that the edger came to the point where the blade was dull. Now if you know anything about me and my use with machines, you know where this is going.

I had to replace the blade on this edger, so I read the instructions and found out exactly what kind of wrench I needed to get the nut off so I could get this replaced. Long story short, 15 minutes later, every time I turned the wrench the whole blade turned. I couldn't get it off. So I turned and tried to leverage, and I couldn't get it off. I put a screwdriver in to hold it in place, and I couldn't get it off. It kept spinning and spinning and spinning.

My response to my wife was, "Deb, we need to throw this edger in the garbage and get a new one because it can't be fixed. It's beyond my ability. I give up." The good news of the story is it wasn't beyond my *wife's* ability. You may know how to work with machines. Your thing may be computers or it may be math or it may be foreign language, but we all know we fall short, that despite the best efforts we have, despite the help and the instructions that come to us, we can fall short.

Imagine if it wasn't trying to get a new blade on an edger but your eternal destiny. Would you want that hinging upon *your* ability? Paul says, "No. May it never be." Paul says the gospel can't be defeated because its power comes from God, not from me. This is completely contrary to every other system of religion and philosophy in the world.

Hinduism says, "You have to do better, and if you don't do better you'll get reincarnated backward. You think you're a man? You might be a cat. You might be a bug. You might be a piece of grass. I don't know. Depends on how well you do." Islam is all about fulfilling the tasks that are before you. You have to do certain things in a certain way, the right way, or you fail and you will not know peace with God.

Even in Roman Catholicism, it points us to all we have to *do* in order for God to love us, and if we haven't done enough, then it sets up a place it calls *purgatory* where we can get the punishment for not having lived up to God's standard. But Paul preaches a gospel that cannot be defeated. It cannot be defeated because it doesn't depend on our efforts. The gospel is all about what Jesus did, not what we do.

The power of God had Jesus live a perfect life. The power of God made satisfaction for sin upon the cross. The power of God showed that the work of Jesus was finished and that he was victorious through the resurrection. The gospel shows the omnipotence of God. Now when you think of God's omnipotence, his being all-powerful, I'm sure you think of it in terms of creation, how he created the universe and the earth and the sun and the moon.

I'm sure you think of it in terms of his providence, how he governs all creatures and their actions. But have you thought of God's omnipotence in terms of salvation? He is all-powerful. Satan can't defeat it. My sin can't

defeat it. My weakness can't defeat it. All I do is receive what God has done. Nothing more is added. Nothing more is needed. God makes sure it is effective.

The Gospel is For Everyone

The second thing we see is that the *gospel does not discriminate*. The gospel is for everyone. It is universal. Now, it is natural for us to divide and segregate. We like to be around people who are like us. We like to be around people who talk like us, who dress like us, who speak like us. We naturally think we do things better than other people and that is the solution.

Have you ever considered you thinking, "Why do they cook the wrong way? Why don't they know how to cook?" or "Why do they play that wrong, boring sport? Don't they know what they *should* be playing? Why do they dress like that? Don't they know how they're supposed to dress?" In our minds, the way *we* are is the right way. So it shouldn't surprise us that we gravitate to other people who are like us who do things the right way. We don't have to take the time to correct them and teach them the right way to do things.

It would be easy for us to think there is only hope for people who act like us, and this happens when people come up with solutions. Our solutions are "Be more like me. Work hard at it. In order to be right with God, you have to do what *we* say, the standards *we* have given." This is a significant danger for the modern missions movement.

In far too many instances and places, we take Jesus to other countries and say to people from Egypt or from the Sub-Sahara or from Korea or Japan or China, "First, you need to be more like an American. Let me teach you what it's like to be an American. Let me put a Coke in your hand. Let me put a burger in your hand, and then you can really understand what Jesus is saying."

We don't understand the ridiculousness of this, but it's because we are designing a solution of our own accord. I'm sure people in Brazil think everyone should be Brazilians. I'm sure people in China think everyone should be Chinese. It's, of course, the best way to do things. The people from the Caribbean say, "You should all be like us." The truth is that the gospel, because it is God's work, is for everyone.

We don't need to be like anyone. Paul says this in two ways. "Look," he says. "The gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes." Notice there is no qualifier at all. That means the gospel is for *you*. If you believe, the power of salvation is yours. Not after you do certain things, not if you're a certain kind of person. The power of God is yours if you believe.

Paul puts it another way as he expands on the "everyone." He says, "To the Jew first and also to the Greek." I don't want you to think that somehow Paul is saying Jews are better than Greeks. No, Paul is not describing a primacy of peoples but rather the outgrowth of the gospel. This makes sense, because God committed his covenant to Abraham, and then God revealed his law through Israel, that the whole world might know his

law. Then he promised a descendant of David would have an everlasting kingdom, and then Jesus came as a Jew.

So the gospel comes first to the Jews, but it does not end there, because God promised Abraham he would be a blessing to *all* the nations. The Scripture tells us the gospel goes throughout all the world, to the Gentiles, to the islands. If we think about it, salvation of just the Jews is far too small for the work of Jesus. Jesus is the Savior of the whole world. That's what Paul is getting at here. When he says, "To the Greek," he's using that as a stand-in for all of the other nations.

You can be thankful for that, because if Paul had said, "To the Jew first and then to the Greek and the Roman and the Spaniard and the German and the Mexican and the Chinese and the African and the Korean," and so on, it would be an awfully long letter and we would perhaps find it a bit tedious. Paul subsumes all of the world in these two categories: to the Jew and the Greek. The Bible is very clear about this, because God is not a respecter of persons.

Think about how ridiculous it is to assume that some people are not worthy of the gospel. What you are saying is that God made a mistake in his creation. God is the Creator of all races, of all tribes, of all tongues, of all hair colors, of all skin colors, of all heights, of all weights. God is not a respecter of persons. There is no limitation to whom the gospel can reach.

That's what Jesus told us in John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Peter reminds us of it in his sermon in Acts 2. "And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." Not just the rich, not just the poor, not just the wise, not just the foolish, not just the strong, not just the weak, not just men, not just women...*all*.

This, beloved, leaves you without excuse this morning. Will you come to Jesus? You can't say, "Well, I'm not smart enough to understand the gospel. It's not for me." No, the gospel is for you. You can't say, "I'm not welcome with Jesus." Yes, you are. The gospel is for everyone. The gospel comes to each and every person, and when we say that, that includes *you*.

Now it is not just the *call* of the gospel that is universal; it is also the very *nature* of the gospel that is universal. The gospel, because of this, does not depend on you. You don't need to have a certain ability or a record. As a matter of fact, the gospel assumes you are unable and incompetent. The problem with man is that he is unrighteous before a holy God. So, to many of us, the obvious solution seems to be to get ourselves some righteousness.

After that, I can show myself as righteous before God and he'll *have* to love me and he'll *have* to accept me. That's what we're tempted to do. Sometimes in whole. Sometimes we think we can't even approach God

unless we have a perfect record. Sometimes in part. Sometimes we believe we have to trust Jesus and believe on Jesus to *get* saved, but in order to *stay* saved we have to earn our own righteousness before God. Otherwise, Jesus will kick us to the curb; he won't love us anymore.

The gospel throws all of this out. It shows us it is not the righteousness of man that matters; it is the righteousness of God that matters. That's why Paul says in verse 17, "For in [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith." It is in the gospel that God's righteousness is revealed to us. Now what does that mean? It means, first, that we can *see* the righteousness of God, that God is the author of righteousness and it is revealed in the person and work of Jesus.

Jesus is righteous in and of himself. He is, after all, God, but he is also righteous in all that he does. Jesus lived perfectly a life without sin. Jesus kept every aspect of the law, even those aspects he would not need to do as God himself. Have you ever wondered why Jesus, God incarnate, obeyed his parents? I know, kids, sometimes you think Mom and Dad don't know what they're doing and you don't need to listen to them because they don't know what they're doing. Jesus is perfect and has perfect knowledge of everything, and he still obeyed his parents.

Do you remember when John the Baptist came and Jesus said, "Baptize me"? We wonder, "Why does Jesus need to be baptized?" John the Baptist wondered why Jesus needed to be baptized. Jesus said, "Permit it to be so for the sake of righteousness." That's what Jesus meant. Jesus followed all of the law. He acted in every way righteous and perfect so that his righteousness would be seen. God offers this righteousness to us without cost for no work at all. It is *his* righteousness, not our own.

Secondly, it is revealed in action. It is not just *what* saves us (God's righteousness) but it actually is what has the saving effect *upon* us. God's righteousness is not something we simply observe from a distance. No, that righteousness makes us right with God. It delivers us from the guilt of sin. God's righteousness frees us to love God and love others, to fulfill the great commandment.

It delivers us from the power of sin. That righteousness, by the power of the Holy Spirit, makes us who we were meant to be, delivering us from the pollution of sin. The gospel tells us to stop pretending. Stop pretending you can do it. Stop pretending it doesn't matter. It tells us we must be righteous before God, and it tells us God has provided that righteousness for us.

The Gospel is a Matter of Faith

Finally, we see that *the gospel is a matter of faith*. The gospel must, first and foremost, be received by faith. The power of God is not unconditional and universal. We have to be very careful about this. There is absolutely nothing we can do so we might be saved and that God would love us. The gospel is not restricted to a group of people. We saw this when Paul talked about "everybody" and "to the Jew and to the Greek." But that doesn't mean the gospel accomplishes salvation apart from faith.

The gospel is the power of salvation to everyone who believes. That means apart from faith, apart from believing what God says, we do not possess the gospel. This just makes sense. Remember what faith is. Faith is believing what God has said is true. Faith is affirming that that truth applies to me, and faith is trusting the Lord based on that truth. It is receiving what the Lord has given. It is the empty hand.

Faith is the channel God uses to bring us the gospel. It's not a work. It's not an act. In essence, faith says, "I can't. God must." Lest we get too proud of ourselves, the Bible reminds us that even our faith is a gift of God. In Ephesians 2:8 Paul writes, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God." We must exercise this faith. We must trust the Lord Jesus Christ and who he is and what he has done.

Charles Spurgeon put it well. He says, "Faith is not a blind thing; for faith begins with knowledge. It is not a speculative thing; for faith believes facts of which it is sure. It is not an unpractical, dreamy thing; for faith trusts and stakes its destiny upon the truth of revelation." Faith is the eye which looks. It is the hand which grasps. It is the mouth which feeds upon Christ. The gospel is a matter of faith.

Finally, we see that the gospel confirms for us that faith is the way we are to live. The gospel is not only *begun* by faith; it is *lived* by faith. To do this, Paul takes us all the way back to the Old Testament. At the end of verse 17 he writes, "The righteous shall live by faith." Perhaps your translation is, "The just shall live by faith."

Paul is saying the only way to live in light of the gospel is by faith, because after all, apart from the Lord and his righteousness, we have no hope at all. On our own, we are lost, we are falling, but God stepped in and saved us by his own power. How, then, could we go back to our own ways? How could we, having begun by faith, Paul tells the Galatians, try to continue in our own strength?

This is the great temptation we have today. We are glad to be saved from death and hell, but there's still a part of us that wants to strike out on our own. We're not interested in God affecting how we live. We think we can handle it. What Paul says here is that if you truly believe in Jesus you are all in. There are no halfway measures. If you trust him to save you, you must trust him to be your Lord.

Now, there is no need for this to scare us. Think about what Jesus has done. Think about how Jesus has snatched you from the pit of hell and from your own sin and made you righteous and given you life. How could we not trust him with the life we live? In conclusion, the gospel is God's power, not our own. Because of that, it is for everyone, and the righteousness of Christ is offered to everyone who believes.

Will you believe on Jesus now? Will you receive what the Lord has provided? Will you live your life by faith, trusting Jesus not just for the beginning of your life but for everything? *That* is the gospel. I am not ashamed of it. I pray that you are not either. I pray that you trust Jesus.