

The gospel that works

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[0 : 00] Let's turn to our studies in Paul's epistle to the Romans, chapter 1, and reading again verses 16 and 17. Romans chapter 1 at verse 16, reading from verse 15.

So as much as in me is, I am ready to preach the gospel to you that are at Rome also. But I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

For therein is the righteousness of God revealed, from faith to faith, as it is written, the just shall live by faith. Now the television has brought into our homes scenes of horror, deprivation, degradation, that most of us would not normally have seen in our lifetime.

We can think in the past number of years of seeing some places like Uganda, Cambodia, Ethiopia, and so on. But perhaps some of the most disturbing scenes that we have seen in recent days have been those from Romania.

We have seen these handicapped and retarded children herded together, naked, living almost like animals. And these pictures, when they were first shown, aroused sympathy in the West.

[1 : 38] And people were sent out to try and help. And one expert from this country admitted that he could offer no solution to the problem.

They were given clothes, but the clothes were torn off. And it was said, what further horrors are likely to come to light in that land?

Imagine such a situation or something similar to that. And I go along to that situation, into that situation, and I offer these people, or those who are looking after them, I offer them six bars of soap and six copies of a book, How to Learn the Alphabet.

If I have any sense at all, I will not go near them with such a thing. I ought to be utterly ashamed to go into such a situation with such a small offering.

Something that will go no way to dealing with that awful problem. Once I grasp the awfulness of the situation that they are in, once I grasp the terribleness of it, it's not worth me offering such a thing.

[3 : 01] Imagine again, perhaps, a friend of mine is ill. And the symptoms are described to me. And I think I've got a homeopathic tablet that can help this person.

And I go along to this person, and I begin selling this remedy to them. And this person then gently touches me on the arm, and he says, Oh, I'm suffering some inoperable cancer.

I feel ashamed of myself that I'm trying to help this person with this thing that may help a cold or something like that.

But it's totally inadequate to deal with the situation that that person is in. Well, Paul is writing a letter to the Christians at Rome.

He has never met these Christians, and he has never been to Rome. And he's greeting these saints in Rome, and he tells them that his great desire is to see them and to help them, and that they might be a help to him.

[4 : 09] But also he tells them of his great desire to preach the gospel at Rome, because he feels himself a debtor.

He feels under an obligation. He feels under a constraint that having received this gospel, he must give it to others, to those who are perishing as he was perishing.

And therefore he's under this constraint to bring the gospel to the people at Rome. I am ready, he says, to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also.

Well, why was the apostle ready to preach the gospel to those in Rome? He explains why in verses 16 and 17.

And these verses give us the very theme of this epistle. They are what you might call the thesis of the epistle. They're the text of the sermon that the apostle is preaching.

[5 : 13] This is what Paul is going to develop in this epistle. They have an importance beyond all proportion to their length. They are perhaps maybe you could say the two greatest verses in the whole Bible.

The two verses of greatest importance in the whole Bible. In fact, we could say that they contain the very essence of the gospel.

And to think that these verses, in a sense, were responsible for the Protestant Reformation, we can see how important they are. And Paul is reasoning here.

He's going from one step to another. If you look at the force that occur in these two verses. For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ.

For it is the power of God and the salvation to everyone believeth, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, the just shall live by faith.

[6 : 23] For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven. And it's Paul's method, his logical method of reasoning things out. He's going from one step to another.

And we have three reasons here that we can consider this morning. First of all, we have Paul's reason for being ready to preach the gospel at Rome.

That's the first thing. Paul's reason for his eagerness to preach the gospel at Rome. For he says, I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ.

That's the reason why he's so eager to preach the gospel at Rome. Why are you so ready? For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ.

Now, you might have expected the apostle to say instead of, I am not ashamed. You might have expected him to say, I am proud to preach the gospel of Christ.

[7 : 24] I glory in the gospel of Christ. But he puts it in this negative way. He uses a particular figure of speech, which we need not go into at the present time.

But he uses a negative. Instead of saying he is proud of, he says he is not ashamed of. And that is deliberate. Because, you see, there may have been a tendency among the Christians in Rome to be ashamed of the gospel.

They may have been ashamed of that gospel. Amongst the might and power of Rome, they may have felt reason to be ashamed of the gospel. And, you see, even Timothy, the apostle Paul's lieutenant, who we are speaking about on Wednesday night, he seems to have had problems in this direction.

Because Paul, writing his last letter from Rome in prison to Timothy, says, Be not ashamed of the testimony of the Lord or of me, his prisoner.

Even Timothy may have been tempted to this shame. And, you see, it's a temptation for us to be ashamed of the gospel.

[8 : 42] The devil is always tempting us to be ashamed of the gospel. And that temptation must have been very strong in the city of Rome.

Because, you see, Rome was the seat of a world empire. Rome was the mistress of the world. It was the very epitome of world power.

Imperial Rome. It had made all its conquest by might. It was a strong city. It was a powerful city. It despised weakness. And to all intents and purposes, this gospel was a gospel of weakness. And Rome was the city of power.

It was the seat of the empire. And also, Rome was influenced by Greek culture. The Greek language and the Greek culture had spread to Rome.

[9 : 45] And Rome was influenced by Greek philosophy. The great Greek philosophers who gloried in their wisdom. Who gloried in their culture.

The Greeks seek wisdom. This was a great thing. They liked philosophy. They liked learning. They liked culture. They sought after wisdom.

These were the things that were so prevalent in Rome. And you see, the world likes philosophy. The world likes to discuss theories.

Remember Paul at Athens. How they wanted to discuss things with him. What is this man to say? Because these philosophers at Athens, all they did was they spent their time in looking at new things and considering new ideas.

And they'll discuss things at length with you. And that's what they wanted to do with Paul. They wanted to discuss things. They wanted to look at what he was saying.

[10:51] They wanted to discuss philosophy. They wanted to discuss philosophy. And you see, that's the same, isn't it, in our universities and colleges and schools. They'll discuss theories.

They'll discuss a philosophy. They're willing to argue with you. But you mention the great historical facts of the Bible. You mention creation.

You mention the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ. You mention the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. And what do they do? They're ridiculed. There's no place for gospel facts.

It's utter folly to them. And you see, that's what many of our students are to face in these days. They have got to face this. That these things are treated with contempt.

Oh, they'll discuss any kind of theory that comes along. Any kind of philosophy. The most way out. But the gospel and the facts of the gospel. No, that's discarded as folly.

[11:55] And you see, that's the trouble with Rome. And it's the trouble with mankind today. Because they will not accept the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And therefore, there's the temptation to feel ashamed. The world pours such ridicule and scorn upon our gospel. They treat it with contempt.

And they dismiss it. And therefore, we are tempted to feel ashamed. The gospel of a crucified carpenter in the streets of Imperial Rome.

It seems so incongruous, doesn't it? The gospel of a crucified carpenter in the streets of Imperial Rome. And the gospel of the first century Palestine.

In the palaces of learning in 20th century Edinburgh. It seems so incongruous. It seems so out of place. But you see, that's what happens.

[13:04] The world rejects. The world ridicules. And the way you know that you've got the true gospel is that it's always offensive to the natural man.

That's the litmus paper test of whether a man is an evangelical or not. Is his gospel offensive to the natural man? I'm not saying, does he cause offense?

We may cause offense by the way we go about things. That's a different matter. But the great test of an evangelical and the great test of the gospel is, does his gospel cause offense to the natural man?

Because if it's a true gospel, it will. It always does. It's a gospel that humbles man. Humbles his power.

Humbles his pride. Humbles his wisdom. And makes him to be what he is. And you see, the natural man does not like that. And therefore, this gospel, if it's truly preached, is offensive to the world.

[14:14] It's offensive to the natural man. But Paul says here, he says, I'm willing to come to Rome. I'm ready to come. And I'm not ashamed of the gospel of Christ.

Not for a moment am I ashamed of this gospel. Some of you in Rome may feel ashamed that you've got such a weak thing to confront the might and wisdom of Rome.

But not me. I'm not ashamed. I have no reason to be ashamed of this gospel. That's the first reason why he comes to Rome and willing to come to Rome.

Because he is not ashamed of the gospel. Then secondly, he gives his reason for not being ashamed of the gospel. Why is Paul not ashamed of the gospel?

He tells us it is the power of God unto salvation. That's why he's not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God unto salvation.

[15:20] And the Greek word is the word from which we get dynamite. Dynamic. These words. It is dynamite. The dynamite of God.

The dynamic of God. That's what the gospel is. It's the dynamic of God not to destruction. But the dynamic of God to salvation.

That's what the gospel is. It's the power of God unto salvation. It's not good advice. And how often we have the gospel today as good advice.

The sermon on the mount. Telling the natural man how to live and so on. And that's a very popular gospel. Because that gospel is not offensive to the natural man.

It tells him he can do something. It tells him what he can do. And what he is like. But you see the gospel is not good advice. And the gospel does not bring power to us to do something.

[16:24] It's not we who do it. The gospel is the power of God. That's the glory of the gospel. The gospel is that in which God works to salvation.

He doesn't work in the law to salvation. He doesn't work in human achievement to salvation. He works in the gospel and in the gospel alone.

That gospel is efficacious to save. God's power as it is operative to salvation. Is operative through the gospel alone.

There's no other way that God's power is operative to salvation. But through the gospel alone. And therefore we're shut up to the gospel. It's the only means through which God's power is operative to salvation.

And what is salvation? Well basically salvation means healing. It means safety. It means soundness. It means that man is in need of that.

[17 : 33] And what salvation basically is. Is deliverance of man from the consequences of the fall and of sin. Deliverance from the consequences of the fall and of sin.

But the moment you think about that. You're up against a great difficulty. Because today men don't believe in the fall. They don't believe in the fall.

You speak to them. And they say that we're rising. We're coming of age. Man is rising as it were from the slime.

He has risen from the slime. He has risen from the slime. And he is coming on and coming on. That's their view. There's no doctrine of the fall at all. And so therefore you've got to convince them, first of all, that man has fallen.

And in those who have perhaps an intellectual belief in the fall. They don't have a real understanding of the terribleness of the situation that they're in.

[18 : 39] They don't have an understanding of the awfulness of the situation. When you think of that situation that I mentioned in Romania.

These young people, these children, out of a relationship with themselves. Out of their mind, many of them imprisoned. Living in squalor without hope in this world.

Well, the situation that we are in spiritually is far worse than that. Because we're out of a relationship with God. We're out of a true relationship with our maker.

We're out of a true relationship with our fellow creature. We're out of a true relationship with ourselves. We're at war with ourselves. We've incurred the wrath of God.

We've got guilt on our consciences. We're imprisoned by our sin. We're impoverished. We're enslaved. And we're on the road to destruction. All these things are true of us.

[19 : 41] That is our condition. And salvation, according to Paul, is a deliverance from all that. It's a deliverance from sin's guilt and power and punishment.

And it's an admission into eternal life and blessedness. It's a removal of all that is harming us. And it's the entry into all that is good for us.

And you see, this is something that no means of man's devising can bring about. No effort of human wisdom or power can deliver us from that condition that we are in.

But you see, the gospel affects it. The gospel brings about. The gospel does it. The gospel of God. What man cannot do for himself, the gospel of God does.

And, says Paul, it affects it for everyone who believes. For everyone who believes. For everyone who has faith.

[20 : 50] And you see, he's bringing in the very key thoughts that are going to come again and again throughout this epistle. It's a question of faith. It's to those who believe.

And what is faith? What is belief? Well, it is merely the instrument through which we receive the benefit of the gospel. It's the openness to receive that gospel.

And that very openness is created in the heart by God himself. The gospel is effective for all who believe.

It is the power of God and the salvation to those who have faith. To those who believe. You see, it's effective through the faith that God gives us.

And it's also universal. Because it's to everyone. It's efficacious to everyone. Jew and Gentile.

[21 : 50] Greek and barbarian. Wise and unwise. Slave and free. There's no limitation. There's no limitation by race.

For the Jew and for the Greek, it's the same gospel. You would think the Jew was in a privileged position. Yes, he was in one sense. But he needs the gospel in the same way as the Gentile.

It came to the Jew first in the priority of God's plan. But it's a gospel that is for the Gentiles as well. The one gospel for both.

It is the power of God and the salvation to everyone that believes. No distinction of race now. No distinction of class.

Everyone who believes benefits from this gospel. It's a gospel that saves all who believe. But then the third reason we have here is Paul's reason for the gospel being so powerful.

[22 : 56] Why is the gospel so powerful? Why has it got this dynamic that it saves, that it brings salvation? Well, the reason he gives is this.

For therein is revealed the righteousness of God. For therein is revealed the righteousness of God. Now, what does the righteousness of God mean here?

When we think of the righteousness of God, we think of the attribute of God. We think of God's justice. We think of that attribute that belongs to the character of God.

Well, if that is all the gospel revealed, then the gospel would be no different from the law. Because the law reveals the righteousness, the justice of God.

And so therefore there would be no good news. Because the gospel is only revealing something that has already been revealed in the law. Now, that's what Luther thought.

[24 : 02] The great Martin Luther at one time, when he was a monk in the Roman church, he thought that this righteousness mentioned here was a description of God's character and being.

And he wrote, I saw it and I wished always that God had not made the gospel known, because this fuller revelation of the righteousness of God seemed to make me utterly hopeless and helpless.

In other words, he thought what was written here was the righteous attribute of God. And that the gospel was revealing the righteous attribute of God.

And what did it do? It cast him into despair. It cast him into hopelessness. Because he said,

Because he said, If the gospel is revealing the attribute of God, which the law reveals, then there's no hope for me.

There's a fuller revelation of the righteousness of God in the law. And therefore, I can't live up to that righteousness. And therefore, I'm condemned. And so it led him to despair.

[25 : 14] And he tried to do things more intensely, these things that he was doing already in the Roman church. And you see, if that was what it meant, then it would drive us to despair.

But that's not what it means. The righteousness here is the righteousness through which we become right with God. That's the righteousness that is mentioned here.

The righteousness through which we become right with God. How can a man be just with God? That's the great question.

How can a man have that which is acceptable to God? Unless we have something that enables us to stand before God now, and on a day of judgment, we are lost.

That's the universal problem. Unless we have something that enables us to stand before God now, and on a day of judgment, we are utterly lost.

[26 : 19] How can we stand? Well, if we are going to stand by the law that we keep ourselves, we've got to do so 100%. It's no use doing it 99%.

It must be 100%. And also, we must be delivered from the condemnation of the law. We must be delivered from the law we've already broken, and the punishment of it.

That's the great problem facing us. How can man be just with God? And the answer is, we can't meet the demands. We can't meet what God is demanding of us.

But you see, the good news of the gospel is this, that God provides us with the very righteousness he demands of us. That's the wonderful good news of the gospel today, that God provides us with the very righteousness that he demands of us.

The gospel reveals God's way of solving the problem. That's the wonder of salvation. It reveals God's way of solving the problem.

[27 : 36] And it's not something new. It was revealed in the Old Testament. Abram was justified by faith. Abram had the righteousness of God.

And Abram was right with God. And we read that chapter in Habakkuk, Habakkuk, that speaks to us about the just by faith shall live.

Others will perish, perish eternally. But the righteous one by faith shall live. He shall live in this world and he shall live in the world to come.

That's the glorious good news. And you see, that's what Luther saw. There's such a thing he saw as a justified person.

There's such a thing as a righteous person. And that righteousness he saw is by faith. And it must be the righteousness which God gives to faith.

[28 : 36] And this is what he wrote later on. When I saw the difference, that law is one thing and gospel another, I broke through. You see, he had this great barrier.

And he couldn't get away through it. How could a man be just with God? And he couldn't see it. And then he saw it. And he says, I broke through.

I had formerly hated the expression, the righteousness of God. I now began to regard it as my dearest and most comforting word.

So that this expression of Paul's became to me, in very truth, a gate to paradise. That's what became to him, a gate to paradise.

This phrase, the righteousness of God. You see, he'd been a miserable, wretched, unhappy monk.

[29 : 33] He'd been unhappy. He'd been defeated. He'd been trying to do everything to make himself right with God. And then he saw, in a moment, in a flash, the glorious gospel of God.

And it transformed his whole life. It brought him liberty and life and salvation. And he became the herald of the Protestant Reformation.

And all that we have entered into, all the blessings that we've entered into in the West, in Europe and in this country, have all stemmed from one man coming to a discovery of what the gospel means.

What a precious thing it was. And something that we must hold on to with all our might. That we do not lose the gospel of God.

That we do not lose the gospel of justification by faith. Because, you see, this is where it is. It's in this very verse.

[30 : 36] In these verses, the very essence of the gospel. The very heart of the gospel. The very heart of all that's going to save us for time and for eternity are in these verses.

And Luther saw it. And Luther was delivered by the glorious gospel of the blessed God. And Paul could say, I am not ashamed of this gospel.

And why was he not ashamed? Because it works. That's why we aren't to be ashamed of the gospel. Because it works. That's the glorious thing about it.

It's a complete and perfect remedy for the greatest problem, the greatest disease that afflicts mankind. He says, I'm going to Rome with it.

I'm not worried about the might at Rome. I'm not worried about the wisdom at Rome. All that power, all that might, all that wisdom, is a mere camouflage.

[31 : 38] That's what it is. Because you look under the surface of that might and wisdom and power. And what do you see? You see guilt and uncleanness and filthiness and emptiness and vanity.

All that's an outward show. It's man like the people at the Tower of Babel, trying to reach heaven in their own strength and in their own might.

But you see underneath it all, it's vanity and emptiness and nothing. It's vileness and uncleanness and poverty. The power of the emperor's throne is just like a puff of smoke in comparison with the power of God in the gospel.

Why should we be ashamed of the gospel? No, not for a moment will I be ashamed. That's where the real power is. It's in that tiny church at Rome.

Not on the emperor's throne. The real power is in the church. And you see, that's why we should not be ashamed of the gospel of Christ.

[32 : 50] And today, what is it in our experience? How about this gospel for us? We may not lack liberty.

We may not lack freedom. We may not lack bread. We may not lack the good things of this life, as these people in Romania lack. But you see, we lack something that is far more fundamental than all these.

And that is we lack a right relationship to God. And that's the most serious problem that we can ever have. If we lack a right relationship to God.

If today we have everything in one sense, but on the other hand we have got guilt. There's guilt in our conscience. There's estrangement in our life.

There's condemnation upon us. There's defeat and powerlessness. There's emptiness. There's emptiness. With all our luxury, there's emptiness. There's hopelessness.

[33 : 53] There's despair. And at the end of the road, there's death. What can be worse than that? What can be more terrible than that? That's our situation if we are not right with God today.

That's our predicament. But you see, the good news is this. That although you're encircled by death, as it were, and death is closing in upon you, death as a consequence of sin, although that is closing in upon you, the good news is this.

That the righteous, by faith, shall live. That those who come into a right relationship with God through the gospel, by faith, shall be a living people.

They shall have life, and they shall have it more abundantly. Because this gospel works. Nothing else does. No philosophy works.

Oh, when Greek philosophy flowered, it was great. It was great philosophy. But you see, Greek philosophy didn't save Rome. When sin came in and corruption came in, Rome collapsed.

[35 : 06] And not all the Greek philosophy in the world could save Rome. And not all the Greek philosophy in the world will save one of us. And not all the gospels that we have and hear from day to day, the gospel of good advice, will never save us.

It is absolutely useless. The gospel of Robert Schuller and the Crystal Cathedral and the Hour of Power. That will never save us. Your trouble, he says, is low self-esteem.

Come and love yourself. And now it's even on television in this country. But that will never save us. Because it's got nothing to answer our needs. It's got nothing powerful in it.

But you see, this gospel has power. That's the wonder of it. That's the glory of it. It's got power. It is the power of God and the salvation.

It actually works. And that's why we have no reason to be ashamed of it. And you see, the only way we'll be delivered today is by recognizing the seriousness of our trouble.

[36 : 17] That it goes deep. That it goes beyond the surface. It's not a question of our attendance at church or non-attendance. It's that disease that is within us that is destroying us spiritually and will destroy us to all eternity.

But the good news is this. That there's a gospel that will change us. A gospel that is all-powerful. A gospel that is mighty to save.

The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because it's got something to answer our problem. It's got everything to answer our problem. It is the power of God and to salvation.

Complete salvation. And all you need to do to do today is to receive it. To open your heart to it. To accept it.

To ask Christ to give it to you. And you're in a right relationship. And you're a righteous man. A just man. You're living by faith.

[37 : 21] And you live forever by faith. Because faith gives you life. Oh what a glorious gospel. What a transformation it wrought in Luther. What a transformation it wrought in Europe.

What a transformation it wrought in Britain. When we are worshipping idols and when we are worshipping false gods. And when we are caught up in false teaching.

It transformed the land. And it's what's going to transform the land again. The gospel of justification by faith. I am not ashamed of that gospel today in Edinburgh.

Are you ashamed of it? Will you go out tomorrow into your colleges and universities and be not ashamed of that gospel. Be willing to stand up for it.

Into your schools into your places of work and say this is the only thing that answers man's deepest problem. That goes to the very heart of the sin of our day and generation and brings men and women out of it and saves them and lifts them.

[38 : 28] Oh may we have the strength to witness to that gospel and may it be blessed to us today. Let us pray. Our gracious God and Father in heaven we thank thee for thy salvation.

We thank thee for the greatness of it. We thank thee there is a radical salvation that delivers us from the deacease of sin. that goes as deep as sin has gone.

And we praise thee today for the great remedy of the gospel. And we pray that this gospel will be precious to us. That we may live by it day by day. That we may truly live by faith and know that we are justified and accepted in Christ.

And we may go on to do great things for him. And may there be those today who will be brought under the power of this gospel for the first time. We pray these things in Jesus name and for his sake.

Amen.