

11. The Book of Romans 1:16-17-Part 3

Paul's Epistle to the Romans
A message by Pastor Phil Ballmaier
(3-29-23)

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By way of review—Paul has just finished his opening salutation (verse 1-7); and his personal introduction (verses 8-16a).

The middle of verse 16 through the end of verse 17 form the *theme* and *thesis* of the Book of Romans—which the rest of the epistle in many ways is merely an expansion of.

Romans 1:16–17 (NKJV)

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "*The just shall live by faith.*"

The only way you will not be ashamed of the gospel is if you commit yourself fully and completely to Jesus Christ—no games, no excuses—to quote Nike "*Just Do It!*"

But before you can commit your life to something you first have to *believe* in it—and before you can believe in it—you first need to *understand* it. Understanding the Gospel of Jesus Christ hinges on knowing 4 keywords—all of which comes out of Romans 1:16-17:

1. *Power—verse 16*
2. *Salvation—verse 16*
3. *Believes—verse 16*
4. *Righteousness—verse 17*

Last time we finished looking at the first 3 key words defining the gospel of Christ—which brings us to Paul's statement at the end of verse 16:

Romans 1:16 (NKJV)

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, **for the Jew first and also for the Greek.**

This statement by Paul was not meant to say that Jews were better or more important or even more loved by God than the Gentiles. It simply expresses the chronology of the gospel presentation—it came to the Jewish people first (God's chosen people)—and then from them to the rest of the world (Gentiles):

Genesis 12:1–3 (NKJV)

¹ Now the Lord had said to Abram: “Get out of your country, from your family And from your father’s house, To a land that I will show you. ² I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; And you shall be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Jesus stressed this truth during His earthly ministry—that, because the Jewish people were God’s chosen people—they were to be the first ones to have the gospel preached to them:

Matthew 15:24 (NKJV)

²⁴ But He answered and said, “I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

Matthew 10:5–6 (NKJV)

⁵ These twelve Jesus sent out and commanded them, saying: “Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. ⁶ But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

John 4:22 (NKJV)

²² You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews.

→ Acts 10 talks about the door of the Church being officially opened to the Gentiles.

4. Righteousness—verse 17

Romans 1:16–17 (NKJV)

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the **power** of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. ¹⁷ **For in it the righteousness of God...**

Right here in verse 17 Paul introduces the key statement of this epistle: “**the righteousness of God**”—which, of course, is connected to the “**gospel of Christ**” in verse 16. The ‘**gospel of Christ**’ is the theme of the Book of Romans—whereas Paul’s statement in verse 17 “**the righteousness of God**” explains what the heart of the gospel is all about—making sinners righteous.

The basic idea is not one of ‘*doing right*’ but of being ‘*declared right*’ or ‘*righteous*’.

One commentator writes—

“The ideas of right and wrong among the Jews are forensic ideas, that is, the Jew always thinks of the right and the wrong as if they were to be settled before a judge. Righteousness is to the Jew not so much a moral quality as it is a legal status.” (i.e., a matter of guilt or innocence as determined in a court of law)

The concept of **righteousness** (the Greek is *dikaíosunē*) is so important to the Christian faith that Paul used it in one way or another (*righteous, just, and justified*)—over sixty times in this letter!

Many scholars say that the accurate rendering of verse 17 should be:

Romans 1:17 (NKJV)

¹⁷ **For in it the righteousness from God is revealed...**

In other words, this is a righteousness from God *imputed* to a person who believes in and receives Jesus as Savior—

This is a righteousness that does not come as a result of anything sinners do in the way of good works and religious deeds to *earn* it—

Ephesians 2:8–9 (NKJV)

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, ⁹ not of works, lest anyone should boast.

Wiersbe—

“God’s righteousness is revealed in the Gospel; for in the death of Christ, God revealed His righteousness by punishing sin; and in the resurrection of Christ, He revealed His righteousness by making salvation available to the believing sinner. The problem—“How can a holy God ever forgive sinners and still be holy?” is answered in the Gospel. Through the death and resurrection of Christ, God is seen to be “both just and justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” (Romans 3:26).”

God’s Word tells us that to get into heaven a person has to be as righteous as God (John 16:10)—which is impossible by human effort! (Matthew 19:23-26).

God has already said that He will not accept the ‘righteousness’ of man up into heaven—for the so-called righteousness of man is as ‘filthy rags’ in His sight (Isaiah 64:6).

God’s solution to fallen man’s predicament—God *imputes* His righteousness to sinners based on their faith in Jesus.

The concept of God *imputing* His righteousness to us is a bookkeeping or accounting idea based on each person’s leger (the record of all our sins) which God keeps tract of—

Colossians 2:13–14 (NLT)

¹³ You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins. ¹⁴ He canceled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross.

Romans 4:3 (NKJV)

³ For what does the Scripture say? *“Abraham believed God, and it was accounted [imputed, credited, reckoned] to him for righteousness.”*

Romans 4:5 (NKJV)

⁵ But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness.

Philippians 3:9 (NKJV)

⁹ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which *is* from the law, but that which *is* through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith...

You see that’s the difference between law and grace, and between religion and Christianity.

No doubt the biggest lie the devil has ever fed the human race is the lie that you get to heaven by being *good* (moral, religious)—that heaven is a reward for deserving people—that is the lie of religion.

There are really only two ‘*religions*’ in the world—the religion of *human achievement*, and the religion of *divine accomplishment*. Every religion and religious system in the world apart from Christianity falls under the category of *human achievement*—what we do for God to earn His favor (and if they believe in the God of the Bible—to earn heaven).

Only Christianity (which is not a religion but a relationship) falls under the category of *divine accomplishment*—in other words—what God has done for us according to the ‘*gospel of His Son, Jesus Christ.*’

Someone has said, “*Religion is spelled “DO”* (as in ‘do’, ‘do’, ‘do’ and maybe someday you’ll earn heaven)—*but Christianity is spelled “DONE”* (as in “It is finished”—John 19:30).

Religion comes from man and is an expression of his pride (to show he’s good enough to work for and earn a place in heaven)—it is man-centered and works oriented.

Christianity comes from God and is Christ-centered and grace oriented (i.e. salvation isn’t something we earn by works it is free gift we receive by faith—Ephesians 2:8-9).

Trying to *add* any work or works (no matter how religious and well intentioned they might be) to the completed work of Jesus on Calvary’s Cross as a way of earning salvation—is an abomination in the sight of God Who will not share His glory for the work He has done with anyone!

I grew up in the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) where we were taught that religious practices and observances like—going to mass, lighting candles, keeping holy days, praying the rosary, abstaining from food during lent and other acts of ‘piety’ would—earn us ‘installments’ of grace that would accrue and eventually earn the faithful Catholic their salvation.

For centuries the RCC taught (and still teaches) that we must punish ourselves as a way of paying for our sins and lessen our time in purgatory.

And so faithful Catholics in some parts of the world, would (and still do) walk barefoot on roads containing sharp rocks while flagellating themselves with whips until their feet and backs were raw and bloody—as a way of earning God’s favor and meriting heaven (like Roman Catholics living in the Philippines who even conduct mock crucifixions to atone for their sins).

This is an absolute blasphemy against the completed work of Jesus Christ Who said from The Cross—“It is finished!”

Listen to the words of Isaiah on the subject:

Isaiah 53:5-6 (NKJV)

⁵ But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

One pastor said, “*If you add one ounce of works to a billion pounds of grace you negate grace.*”

In other words, you forfeit grace and have divorced yourself from the completed work of Christ for you on Calvary’s Cross. (Galatians 5:2-4) Which means that—what Jesus did in paying for your sins will not help you at all if you try to add to it, in any way, human works as a way of ‘*helping*’ to purchase or earn your salvation.

Paul hits this hard in the book of Galatians—*“If human works, rituals, ceremonies, sacrifices etc. could save us—then Christ died in vain!”* (Galatians 2:21)

As I said a minute ago—verse 17 is the key verse of the book of Romans—so let’s take a closer look at it.

Romans 1:17 (NKJV)

¹⁷ For in it the righteousness from God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “The just shall live by faith.”

We’ve already looked at the meaning of the first part of verse 17—**“For in it the righteousness [that comes] from God—is revealed...”**

The question is: *“How is God’s righteousness revealed?”*—the answer: *It’s revealed in the gospel.*

Romans 1:16–17 (NKJV)

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ...¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “The just shall live by faith.”

William MacDonald—

*“The righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel. **First** the gospel tells us that God’s righteousness demands that sins be punished, and the penalty is eternal death. **But then** we hear that God’s love provided what His righteousness demanded. He sent His Son to die as a Substitute for sinners, paying the penalty in full. **Now** because His righteous claims have been fully satisfied, God can righteously save all those who avail themselves of the work of Christ.”*

The correct interpretation of the middle part of verse 17 has been debated by scholars over the years—**“the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith.”**

➤ *What exactly did Paul mean when he said this?*

The uncertainty comes through as you read other translations—for example:

The **NIV** has it—*“a righteousness that is by faith from first to last [i.e., “from start to finish].”*

The **Amplified Bible** has—*“a righteousness which God ascribes is revealed, both springing from faith and leading to faith [disclosed through the way of faith that arouses to more faith].”*

The **NASB95** has it—*“from (or by) faith to faith.”*

The **NLT** paraphrases it—*“This Good News tells us how God makes us right in his sight. This is accomplished from start to finish by faith.”*

So, it seems there are 2 dominant interpretations of this phrase—

One way of interpreting the phrase “from faith to faith” is as one pastor put it—

“Think of faith as the rungs of a ladder or steps on a staircase—every day we should exercise faith in our daily lives (i.e., “the just shall live by faith”) and as such climb higher and higher in our relationship with Jesus (I’d call it a ‘stairway to heaven’ but that expression has been tainted!).”

And the other interpretation says that:

“The only way a person can be made righteous is by faith—which is passed on to others through the gospel—one person’s faith giving birth to another person’s faith and salvation—therefore God’s righteousness is passed along from faith to faith.”

I think that Paul could be using “**from faith to faith**” the same way he used “**from glory to glory**” in 2 Corinthians 3:18—

2 Corinthians 3:18 (NKJV)

¹⁸ But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.

I’ll let you decide which one is the correct interpretation—although I will share with you one more from J. Vernon McGee:

“From faith to faith” simply means out of faith into faith. God saves you by faith, you live by faith, you die by faith, and you’ll be in heaven by faith. Let me use a homey illustration. Quite a few years ago I was born deep in the heart of Texas. When I was born, my mother said the doctor lifted me up by my heels, gave me a whack, and I let out a cry that could be heard on all four borders of that great state. I was born into a world of atmosphere and that whack started me breathing. From that day to this I have been breathing atmosphere. From air to air, from oxygen to oxygen. Much later, in the state of Oklahoma, I was born again. I was saved by faith, and from that time on it has been by faith—from faith to faith.”

So, these are the 4 key words (*power, salvation, believes, and righteousness*) that form the ‘*skeleton*’ or spiritual ‘*infrastructure*’ of the gospel. In the rest of the epistle, Paul will be adding *muscle* to the bones and *form* to the frame.

In the meantime, we believers need to understand what a powerful, life-transforming truth God has entrusted to us.

**We need never be ashamed of the gospel of Christ—
for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes.**

But those who believe, if they’re going to grow in Christ and help others come to Christ must—*continue* walking in or by faith.

They shall live (not just get saved) by faith—even as Paul said at the end of verse 17, Paul quotes Habakkuk 2:4: **“The just shall live by his faith.”**

Faith isn’t a force (like the Star Wars force) that you aim at God so that He gives you what you want—there is no power inherent in faith—faith only becomes powerful when it is attached to God. (Mark 11:22)

However, that’s what those in the Word of Faith Movement claim—that there is power in faith—as the ‘granddaddy’ of the movement Kenneth Hagin taught in his book *“Have Faith in Your Faith.”*

**Biblical faith is simply trusting in God—
in His character and His promises on a daily basis
(the just shall live by faith).**

For your faith to grow, you must exercise it—in other words you’ve got to trust God in your life—trust in the promises He has given to you in His Word—

Hebrews 11:1 (NIV)

¹ Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

Hebrews 11:6 (NKJV)

⁶ But without faith *it is* impossible to please *Him*, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and *that* He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

Let me close by sharing something important from history on this subject.

In the year 1920 an English preacher by the name of Frank Boreham published a book of sermons based on great Bible texts.

In each case linking his text to the spiritual history of a great Christian man or woman.

He called his book, *“Texts That Made History.”*

- In the book there was David Livingstone’s text (missionary to Africa): Matthew 28:20—*“Surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age.”*
- There was John Wesley’s text: Zechariah 3:2—*“Is not this man a burning brand plucked from the fire?”*

But of all the texts that are associated with the lives of great Christians, none is more closely connected to a person than the text we have looked at tonight at the end of Romans 1:17—*“The just shall live by faith.”*

You see that text became the text that changed Martin Luther’s life—and through him the world!

One Church historian fills in the details of Martin Luther’s testimony—

“As a young man Luther had been studying law at his father’s request—but his heart wasn’t in being an attorney, you see Luther was tormented by the thought that someday he would have to stand before God and give an account of his life. And so, on August 17, 1505, Luther suddenly left the university and entered the monastery of the Catholic Augustinian order at Erfurt—he was 21 years old.

Martin threw himself into the monastic life, he fasted and prayed, he devoted himself to menial tasks—but above all he adhered himself to the sacrament of penance.

He spent hours and hours confessing even the most trivial sins until his superiors got so tired of hearing his confessions, they ordered him not to come to confession anymore until he had committed some sin worth confessing!

Still Luther found no peace for his soul through these pious practices. You see, the monkish wisdom of the day instructed him to satisfy God’s demand for righteousness by doing good works—*“But what works?”* thought Luther. *“What works can come from a heart like mine? How can I stand before the holiness of my Judge with works polluted in their very source?”*

You see, Luther was in agony of soul because as he confessed to a wise superior—*“I do not know what will become of me.”*

But his wise mentor told him to start reading the Bible to learn about the grace of God and the love of his Savior Who died to pay for all his sins. And this is how Martin Luther began to really study the Word of God—and eventually the Book of Romans.

And as he did almost immediately he came to Romans 1:17 where he read the words, *“The just shall live by faith.”* As he meditated on those words, the Lord began to open his understanding—the truth of God began to dawn on the tortured monk. The righteousness we need in order to stand before the holy God is not a righteousness we can attain—in fact it is not human righteousness at all! It’s divine righteousness and it becomes ours as a free gift which God gives to us—our part is merely to receive it by faith and to live by faith in God’s promise.

Guided by this new revelation, Luther began to compare Scripture with Scripture and as he did he found that the passages in the Bible that had once troubled him now brought him comfort.

In 1510, five years after he had become a monk and two years after he had begun to teach the Bible at the new University of Wittenberg, Luther was sent by his order to Rome. On the way he became gravely ill and relapsed into depression and fear over his spiritual state.

Luther had been sent to Rome on church business but approached the ancient imperial city as a pilgrim. When he first caught sight of Rome, he raised his hands in ecstasy exclaiming, *“I greet thee, thou holy Rome, thrice holy from the blood of the martyrs!”*

At this time, the mass (during which the body and blood of Jesus are thought to be offered for sins) was the focus of Luther’s devotion and he said mass often in Rome. Luther performed the ceremony with the solemnity and dignity it seemed to him to require—but not the Roman Catholic priests! They laughed at the simplicity of this rustic German monk and would interrupt and mock him while he was performing the mass because of his seriousness and piety.

Luther was invited to meetings of distinguished church leaders. There the priests often ridiculed and mocked Catholic rites and ceremonies. Laughing and with apparent pride, they told how when they were standing at the altar repeating the words that were to transform the bread and wine into the body and blood of the Lord—they said in Latin, *“Bread you are and bread you will remain; wine you are and wine you will remain.”*

Martin Luther couldn’t believe his ears! Later he wrote, *“No one can imagine what sins and infamous actions are committed in Rome; they must be seen and heard to be believed. Thus, they are in the habit of saying, ‘If there is a hell, Rome is built over it—it is an abyss whence issues every kind of sin.’”* He concluded, *“The nearer we approach Rome, the greater number of bad Christians we meet with.”*

But while he was in Rome there occurred the famous incident told many years later by Luther’s son, Dr. Paul Luther. In the church of St. John Lateran in Rome, there is a set of medieval stone stairs said to have originally been the stairs leading up to Pilate’s house in Jerusalem—once walked on by the Lord Himself. For this reason, they were called the Scala Sancta (“holy stairs”).

It was the custom of pious pilgrims, like Luther, to ascend these stairs on their knees, praying as they went. At certain intervals there were red stairs covered with glass said to have been caused by the bleeding wounds of Christ. The worshipper would bend over and kiss these steps, praying a long time before ascending painfully to the next one. The remission of years of punishment in purgatory was promised to all who would perform this pious act of devotion.

Luther began as the other had before him—but, as he ascended the staircase, the words of our text, *“The just shall live by faith”* began to echo in his mind. Over and over again, growing louder with each repetition—*“The just shall live by faith”, “The just shall live by faith”, “The just shall live by faith!”*

But Luther was not living by faith—he was living by fear. The old superstitious doctrines of the church and the newly discovered biblical truth he had learned in his studies wrestled with each other in his mind. *“By fear”* said Luther—*“By faith!”* said Paul the Apostle.

“By fear” said the scholars and priests of medieval Catholicism—*“By faith!”* said the Scriptures.

“By fear” said the other pilgrims who agonized on the staircase beside him—*“By faith!”* said God!

At last, the chains that bound him were broken and he arose in freedom from the steps which he had been dragging himself up, amazed and ashamed at his superstition and ignorance.

Now he realized that God had saved him by the righteousness of Christ, received by faith. He was to exercise that faith, receive that righteousness and live by trusting God—something he had not been doing.

Slowly, he turned on Pilate’s staircase and returned to the bottom. He went back to Wittenberg, and in time, he took *“The just shall live by faith”* as the foundation of all his doctrine.

This was the real beginning of the Reformation—for God first had to bring about a reformation in the heart of His servant Martin, before He could use him to bring reformation to Christendom—which officially began on October 31, 1517 when Luther nailed his *“Ninety-five Theses (reforms)”* on the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg and the Protestant Reformation was born.”

One final quote by a historian on this—

“This powerful text had a mysterious influence on the life of Luther. It was a creative sentence both for the reformer and for the Reformation. It was in these words that God said, ‘Let there be light’ and there was light! When Luther rose from his knees on Pilate’s Staircase, in agitation and amazement at those words which Paul had addressed fifteen centuries before to the inhabitants of the same metropolis—TRUTH, till then a melancholy captive, fettered in the Church—rose also to fall no more!”

So, Romans 1:17 tells us that the righteousness of God has been revealed—the next verse, verse 18 tells us that the wrath of God has also been revealed.

With this statement, we will begin the first major section of Paul’s letter to the Romans.

If you would like to know more about what it means to be a Jesus-follower—please reach out to us. It would be our greatest privilege to lead you into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

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