

“WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?”

I. Introduction

- A. As you may know, the basic meaning of the word “gospel” is ‘good news.’
1. In the ancient world, this word was sometimes used to describe a message of military victory delivered to a city by someone sent from the battlefield.
 2. This is the background of Isaiah’s use of the term when he says, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’” (Isa. 52:7)
 3. Early on in church history, the term “gospel” came to be used to refer to a particular genre of literature: the Gospel according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.
 4. In the New Testament, “gospel” is sometimes used to describe Christ’s accomplishment of redemption in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, which is how Paul used the term in the opening verses of this chapter.
 5. Other times, the word is used refer to the Holy Spirit’s application of Christ’s redemptive work to the lives of believers, which is how Paul is using “gospel” in the verses we have just read.
- B. These two verses have played an extremely important role in church history.
1. They were the verses through which Martin Luther’s eyes were opened to a true understanding of the way of salvation.
 2. You could say that it was through these verses that God gave birth to the Protestant Reformation.

3. These verses also play an important role in this letter.
4. They mark the transition from Paul's opening greetings to the main body of the letter, and they do so by stating the letter's overall theme.
5. As we study these verses this morning, I want us to see how they teach us three things about the gospel of Jesus Christ.
6. They show us that the gospel is the power of God for salvation, that the gospel is the revelation of the righteousness of God, and that the gospel is about a righteousness that is received by faith alone.

II. The Power of God for Salvation

- A. The first thing that we see in our text is that Paul asserts that he is not ashamed of the gospel.
 1. The fact that he had not yet come to Rome was not because he was too embarrassed to proclaim the gospel in such a highly sophisticated city.
 2. Paul is not ashamed of the gospel.
 3. On the contrary, he boasts in the gospel.
 4. The reason why Christians are tempted to be ashamed of the gospel is because it is weak and foolish in the eyes of the world.
 5. This temptation can lead us to hide or downplay our Christian identity.
 6. It can cause us to alter the gospel message in order to make it more palatable to the people of our culture.
 7. We need to resist these temptations.

8. Like Paul, we need to be prepared to bear the reproach of the cross of Christ.
- B. The reason why Paul is not ashamed of the gospel is because it is the power of God for salvation.
1. In Paul's day, when people thought of power they thought of Rome.
 2. When people in our day think of power, one of the primary things they think of is technology.
 3. Think of the way technology is described in commercials.
 4. Think of the role that it plays in our society.
 5. Technology is changing our world every bit as much as Rome changed the ancient world.
 6. Nevertheless, the gospel is more powerful than Rome and far more powerful than all of our technologies.
 7. The gospel can do something that nothing else in the world can do.
 8. The gospel can save sinful human beings from the just judgment of holy God.
 9. The gospel can bring people into an estate of eternal blessedness in communion with God.
 10. No human power can accomplish this feat.
 11. Only the power of God will avail.
 12. Only the gospel has power to save.
- C. Notice that Paul does not say the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who is baptized, or to everyone who goes to church, or to everyone who obeys God's commandments, or to everyone who tries to

be nice, or to everyone who feels good about themselves.

1. He says the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.
 2. We have to believe the gospel message in order to be saved.
 3. Faith is the instrument by which we receive this salvation.
 4. We will explore this point further in a few moments.
- D. Paul also says the salvation that the gospel announces is offered to all sorts and all classes of people.
1. It is for Jews and Greeks and barbarians.
 2. It is for the learned and the unlearned, the cultured and the uncultured.
 3. You don't have to be a certain type of person in order to be eligible for what is promised in the gospel.
 4. The only reason why Paul specifies that this salvation is for "the Jew first" is because the Jews were the first group of people to receive this salvation in the historical unfolding of God's plan of redemption.

III. The Revelation of the Righteousness of God

- A. We turn now to consider the second thing that these verses tell us about the gospel: it is the revelation of the righteousness of God.
1. Paul tells us that in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed.
 2. Before we look at the phrase "the righteousness of God", I want us to think for a moment about the word "revealed."

3. This is the Greek verb *apocalypso*, which is the source of our English word 'apocalypse.'
 4. The book of Revelation gets its name from the same word group.
 5. By using this word, Paul is telling us that the gospel is the unveiling of God's redemptive plan.
 6. While this plan was promised all throughout the Old Testament, it was only made fully manifest after the coming of Christ and the completion of his work.
 7. God makes his plan of salvation manifest to us in the gospel as it is set forth in the pages of Scripture.
 8. People who profess to be Christians sometimes lose interest in the Christ revealed in Scripture.
 9. They prefer to focus instead on the "Christ" who lives in their heart.
 10. The problem is that when people do that, they lose contact with the real Christ.
 11. In the words of J. Gresham Machen, such people "substitute the imaginings of their own hearts for what God has revealed; they substitute mysticism for Christianity as the religion of their souls." [*What Is Faith?*, 158]
 12. Mysticism cannot save.
 13. Only the gospel, the gospel that God has revealed, is his power for salvation.
- B. This brings us to a consideration of the all-important phrase "the righteousness of God."
1. What does Paul mean by this phrase?

2. Is he referring to the divine attribute of righteousness?
 3. Is he saying that the gospel reveals God's righteous character?
 4. If this is Paul's meaning, then the gospel is no different than the law.
 5. God's righteous character is not good news when it comes to the salvation of sinners.
 6. On the contrary, it is bad news.
 7. While the gospel is certainly not in conflict with God's righteous character, it has to be more than a revelation of that character in order to be considered good news.
- C. We need to be counted righteous in order to be in fellowship with God.
1. Without righteousness, we all stand condemned by God's perfect standard of righteousness.
 2. None of us possess righteousness in ourselves.
 3. But the gospel is the revelation of a righteousness that comes to us from outside of us, a righteousness from God.
 4. This is what Paul is saying in these verses.
 5. In this passage, "the righteousness of God" is a matter of our judicial standing before God, a standing that is made possible through God's activity in Jesus Christ.
 6. It is God's provision of a way for us to have a righteous status with God.
 7. This is confirmed by the way Paul uses the same phrase in Romans 10, where he says this about his fellow Jews who reject the gospel: "being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's

righteousness." (Rom. 10:3)

8. We find the same idea expressed in Philippians 3, where Paul says that he counts all his accomplishments as rubbish "in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith" (Phil. 3:8-9).
9. Martin Luther explains the meaning of the term 'righteousness' in these passages by saying "This righteousness... is not that according to which God Himself is righteous as God, but that by which we are justified by Him through faith in the Gospel. It is called the righteousness of God in contradistinction to man's righteousness which comes from works."
10. And Charles Hodge adds, "the righteousness for which we are justified is neither anything done by us or wrought in us, but something done for us and imputed (credited) to us."
11. This is why Paul calls the gospel God's power for salvation, not our power for salvation.

IV. A Righteousness Received by Faith Alone

- A. This brings us to the third thing that these verses tell us about the gospel: it is about a righteousness that is received by faith alone.
 1. We saw this back in verse 16, where Paul said that the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to everyone who has faith.
 2. What is saving faith?
 3. It is important for us to be clear about this, because people do not always mean the same thing when they talk about faith.

4. Some think of faith as a matter of having an optimistic attitude about life.
 5. Others think of it as a matter of believing in the existence of a God who wants them to be happy.
 6. Others think of faith as a matter of believing in themselves or in the inherent goodness of mankind.
 7. None of these conceptions of faith are what Paul means when he speaks of faith.
- B. Over the past few decades, a number of biblical scholars have argued that most of the occurrences of “faith” in Paul’s letters should be translated as ‘faithfulness.’
1. If this is correct, the last sentence in our text should be translated as, “The righteous shall live by faithfulness.”
 2. This would radically alter the meaning of this verse.
 3. It would mean that God accepts us and grants us eternal life on the basis of our faithfulness, on the basis of our works.
 4. But this would be in conflict with Paul’s insistence throughout his letters that justification is not by works of the law but by faith alone.
 5. This is what Paul means in our text by the phrase “from faith for faith”.
 6. The righteousness of God is by faith from start to finish.
 7. It is something that is credited to us as a free gift, not something that depends on our faithfulness.
- C. Christian theologians often specify that there are three essential components to saving faith: knowledge, assent, and trust.

1. Faith involves knowledge.
 2. We have to know what the gospel says.
 3. Faith also involves assent or agreement.
 4. We have to agree with what the gospel says.
 5. We have to accept it as true.
 6. But it is not enough to know the gospel and to believe that it is true.
 7. There is one more part of saving faith.
 8. You also have to forsake all self-confidence and put all your trust in Jesus alone for your salvation.
 9. You have to believe that he loved you and gave himself for you.
- D. The last sentence in our text is a quotation from the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk.
1. Paul cites this verse as scriptural confirmation of the fact that faith is the instrument by which God's saving power is received.
 2. He is showing that in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, justification is by faith alone.
 3. In the book of Habakkuk, this verse sets a contrast between the one who trusts in himself and the one who trusts in God.
 4. God was telling his prophet that, unlike the proud Babylonians, the souls of the righteous are not puffed up.
 5. The righteous acknowledge their poverty of spirit and trust in the Lord for a righteousness that is external to themselves.

- E. The sentence "The righteous shall live by faith" helps us to distinguish the gospel from the law.
1. The law says, 'Do this, and you shall live.'
 2. But the gospel says, 'Because Christ has already done all, all who believe in him shall live.'
 3. This is the principle that governs the entire Christian life.
 4. It is not that we get started in the Christian life by faith and then move on to works.
 5. While we are called to do good works, we must never think that by doing them we earn our standing with God.
 6. We do good works to show our gratitude to God for giving us such a great salvation.
 7. We do good works because God created us in Christ Jesus to do them.
 8. But we always need to fight the temptation to look to our sanctification as the basis of God's acceptance of us.
 9. If we do that, we will either deceive ourselves into thinking that we are pretty good or we will despair that we will never be good enough.
 10. To live by faith is to trust that God counts you as righteous not because of what he is doing in you but because of what Jesus has already done for you.

V. Conclusion

- A. Here is the glorious message of this great text: If you trust in Christ, then God's verdict of "righteous" has already been pronounced over you.

- B. Even though you fail to live up to God's righteous standard each and every day, that verdict still stands.
- C. Each and every day, you cling to that great truth.
- D. As the authors of a book on the theology of Martin Luther put it, "faith believes God's gracious judgment despite all empirical evidence to the contrary. In other words, we cling to the promise regardless of how many times instant replays of our weaknesses and failures pass before our eyes." [Kolb and Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology*, 50-51]
- E. The gospel provides us with the righteousness that we lack.
- F. This is what Paul means by "the righteousness of God" in this text.
- G. And this is what makes the gospel both good news and the power of God for salvation.