

When in Romans Do as the Righteous Do

“Paul’s Roads Lead to Rome”

1:8-17

There are times I almost regret not seeing the Great Wall of China when I was in Beijing. I didn’t see anything of any tourist interest, really, because I was babysitting one of the believers on our Bible-smuggling trip who was having an extremely difficult time with homesickness.

In retrospect I don’t really care because I did get to see something much more precious. I got to meet secretly, clandestinely, with a couple who were involved with the secret underground church. It was better than anything I could have hoped for.

The apostle Paul wanted to go to Rome. It wasn’t the Coliseum that interested him; it was the church. Not a building, but the people - whom he had never even met!

Romans 1:8 First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world.

Before he got too deeply into the *explanation* of the gospel, Paul showed the Roman believers the *effect* of the gospel. The gospel he preached caused him to “thank my God through Jesus Christ” for “all” of them. He had never seen them, he didn’t know them. When he finally arrived in Rome there would be those among them who resented Paul. Nevertheless the gospel had so affected his heart that he could not help but “thank’ God for them.

It is so important to be right about God, to have correct doctrine. It is also important to be affected by it in a way that reveals itself by loving those whom God loves.

Paul was thankful “through Jesus Christ.” He saw these Romans the way Jesus did - “through” the compassion of Jesus. He saw them as works in progress on their way to completion and perfection.

The Roman church of the first century had an incredible reputation. Their “faith” was “spoken of throughout the whole” of the Roman “world.”

Sometimes “world” means the whole world, as in “God so loved the world...” And other times it is being used as we would in everyday language to mean something less than the whole world. Context will determine the meaning.

If I mentioned a particular church, something would come to your mind about them and their gatherings. That is how they are “spoken of” throughout the world of Kings County.

That means **we** have a reputation! How would you describe us? How do others? It is an interesting question. Send me an e-mail, if you’d like, telling me how you describe Calvary Hanford when asked.

Romans 1:9 For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of His Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers,

Paul takes an unusual oath, saying “God is my witness.” I’m not sure why he felt it necessary. But it is interesting as a reminder that God is witness to our spiritual life - the real one no one else sees! That’s not a bad thing.

Paul tells them he constantly prayed for them but he establishes that it was out of joy rather than duty, out of relationship rather than religion. He served God “with [his] spirit,” as a matter of his heart.

Obviously Paul didn’t mean he was 24/7 on his knees. Praying without ceasing is something outside of the physical realm. It is knowing you are in constant communication with God, in an attitude of being in His presence. *It must include actual prayer times!* But it is more than those.

Romans 1:10 making request if, by some means, now at last I may find a way in the will of God to come to you.

Paul was called to preach to the Gentiles and, since Rome was the center of the Gentile world, to Rome he wanted to go. His prayer was passionate but subordinate to “the will of God.”

Paul was a guy whose philosophy was to ‘go’ unless God stopped him. Others are more ‘stay’ unless God prompts them. I don’t see one way of thinking as more spiritual than the other, and either can be unspiritual.

- You **can** force your way into some service, some position, that is really not the will of God. You seem like a ‘go’ type, but the question becomes, “Were you sent, or did you just went?”
- You **can** refuse some service, some position, that is the will of God for you for a variety of reasons.

If you’re *always* breaking down doors, that’s a problem. If you’re *never* going through open doors, that, too, is a problem. Figure it out!

Romans 1:11 For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift, so that you may be established -

Romans 1:12 that is, that I may be encouraged together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me.

What did Paul mean by saying he wanted to “impart some spiritual gift?” In our minds we might gravitate to the thought that, because he was an apostle, he could, by the laying on of his hands, be a channel through which God would impart spiritual gifts to a believer.

While we practice the laying on of hands for various things, including when we ask God to give gifts, it seems from what he says next that Paul meant something less exclusive. He was simply describing what happens, or what can happen, in the meetings of the church.

Paul had a very high regard for the fellowship of God’s people with one another. Not just their friendships and socializing. There’s nothing wrong with that, but here he was talking about meetings of the church. He saw them as times when the “mutual faith” of believers would encourage everyone in attendance as they exercised their various “spiritual gift[s].” He

would “impart,” which means *share*, his gifts, e.g., teaching. In doing so they would be “established,” meaning they would be *strengthened*. The believers would also “impart,” or share, their gifts and the result would be the encouragement and edification of the whole body of Jesus Christ.

Romans 1:13 Now I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that I often planned to come to you (but was hindered until now), that I might have some fruit among you also, just as among the other Gentiles.

If you follow Paul’s missionary journeys you see he was “hindered” in at least four ways:

- The Holy Spirit sometimes hindered him, for example, when Paul wanted to go Asia to preach the gospel but instead he received the Macedonian Call in a vision.
- The devil sometimes hindered Paul. He says so outright in First Thessalonians 1:18.
- Other times the pressing needs of the churches he had founded hindered him from going to Rome.
- Paul warned about false teachers to believers in Galatians 5:7, “You ran well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?”

Some hinderances, then, are for the betterment of your walk. But others are not! Ask yourself, “What, if anything, is hindering me right now in my relationship with Jesus?”

If it is something you can do something about, *do it!* If it isn’t something you can change, don’t get frustrated or lose focus. Ride it out and learn what God is teaching you.

Paul speaks in verse thirteen of “having some fruit among you also, just as among the other Gentiles.” By “fruit” he was anticipating that many more nonbelievers would come to Christ through his teaching the believers and preaching to nonbelievers.

Paul thought that the gospel ought to have an effect. So should we.

Romans 1:14 I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise.

Romans 1:15 So, as much as is in me, I am ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also.

Paul was a “debtor.” We think of that as a very negative term and it can be. His idea of “debt” wasn’t a lack but an overflow. He had been given so much by the Lord he felt he was indebted and had to give back by sharing from the abundance he had been given.

Paul was ready to preach to those who were cultured as well as those who were crude; to those who were intellectuals as well as to those who were ignorant.

The gospel is a universal message. It’s not an eastern message, or a western one. It is not an ancient message or a modern one. It is for everyone, everywhere, throughout all of human history.

The gospel message does not change. How we deliver it must change if we are truly wanting to reach people with it. We should not expect nonbelievers to conform to our presentation, to learn our jargon, in order to hear the message of salvation. Without changing the gospel in any way we must present it in ways that make sense to folks across every demographic.

Paul was “ready to preach the gospel” in Rome as he had elsewhere. John Phillips, in his commentary on the Book of Romans, noted,

When Paul preached the gospel at Jerusalem, the religious center of the world, he was *mobbed*. When he preached it at Athens, the intellectual center of the world, he was *mocked*. When he preached it at Rome, the legislative center of the world, he was *martyred*.

Mostly we will be mocked. It can make us feel ashamed.

Romans 1:16 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.

There were a lot of reasons why you might be ashamed of the gospel in the first century.

- Among Jews you might be ashamed because they considered it a shameful thing for a person to be crucified. Yet you were suggesting that their Messiah was, in fact, crucified.
- Among the Greeks you might be ashamed because they considered the message of the Cross to be an inferior, ignorant position.

We still face those criticisms today. Especially the accusation of ignorance. Christians are thought to have left their brains at the door when they converted to Christ. After all, really smart people have proven that the Bible is full of errors, haven't they? They've shown that God doesn't exist, haven't they? Religion is for wimps who cannot cope, isn't it?

The gospel "is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes..." One author wrote,

The gospel is not advice to people, suggesting that they lift themselves. It is power. It lifts them up. Paul does not say that the gospel brings power, but that it is power, and God's power at that" (Morris).

Rome was reputed to be the center of world power but despite all her power she was powerless to change men's lives. The ancient philosopher Seneca called Rome "a cesspool of iniquity" and the ancient writer Juvenal called it a "filthy sewer into which the dregs of the empire flood."

"Salvation" has the basic meaning of being delivered. The gospel delivers sinners from the penalty, the punishment, and the power of sin.

Notice the emphasis on "believes," *not* on behaving. God does not ask men to behave a certain way in order to be saved, but rather to believe.

Historically this message was preached "for the Jew first and also for the Greek." Jesus told His first followers to wait for the promise of the Holy Spirit and then preach the gospel in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and

then to the uttermost parts of the world. We live in the time when the gospel is going out to the uttermost.

The gospel is given to us in just a few words by Paul in First Corinthians 15:1-4.

1 Corinthians 15:1 Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand,

1 Corinthians 15:2 by which also you are saved...

1 Corinthians 15:3 For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,

1 Corinthians 15:4 and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures,

That's simple enough, but here is the question. Since God is infinitely holy, how can He save sinners and receive them into His presence based solely on what they believe?

It has to do with what is here called "the righteousness of God."

Romans 1:17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "THE JUST SHALL LIVE BY FAITH."

The word "righteousness" is used in one way or the other over sixty times in this book. The word is used in at least three ways:

1. First it is used to describe the attribute of God by which He always does what is right, just, proper and consistent with His nature.
2. Second the righteousness of God refers to the method by which He saves ungodly sinners.
3. Third it refers to the perfect standing which God provides for those who believe on Jesus.

God's righteousness, then, has to do with how He is able to save ungodly sinners and give them a right standing before Him *without* violating His holiness or any other attribute of His nature.

How He does this is “revealed” to be “from faith to faith.” That means the way God saves sinners consistent with His nature is by “faith” from beginning to end. It begins with faith and then it continues by faith. It is a matter of belief not behavior. Works *never* come into the picture.

Another word is introduced: “just.” “Just” is short for “justified,” or for “justification.”

William Barclay explains the meaning of the ancient Greek word *dikaioo*, which means *I justify*, and is the root of *dikaion* (righteousness).

All verbs in Greek which end in oo... always mean to treat, or account or reckon a person **as** something. If God justifies a sinner, it does not mean that he finds reasons to prove that he was right - far from it. It does not even mean, at this point, that he makes the sinner a good man. **It means that God treats the sinner as if he had not been a sinner at all.**

Justification is the act of God by which He declares a believing sinner righteous on the basis of Jesus Christ's finished work on the Cross.

“The just shall live by faith” could be translated, “the justified-by-faith-ones shall live, i.e., have eternal life.” A paraphrase would be, “justification by faith is how God saves sinners and remains holy.”

God saves ungodly sinners and gives them a right standing before Him without violating His nature when they believe what Jesus did for them on the Cross. He justifies them, declaring them righteous.

We'll later on in Romans see Paul utilize a banking metaphor. He'll tell us that when a person believes in Jesus, God puts righteousness in their account in Heaven, He credits them with righteousness, while withdrawing all their sin, debiting their sin.

The Book of Romans will explain that there is no one righteous, nor can you ever become righteous by behaving a certain way. The only way for you to have God's righteousness is for Him to declare you righteous, and

the only way He can do that is for you to believe in Jesus, the God-man, God incarnate.

In verse seventeen Paul quoted from the Old Testament Book of Habakkuk. In Romans he will quote from the Old Testament more than in all of his other writing combined. This is no new message, invented by Jesus or Paul in the first century. It is God's plan of salvation from the beginning.

I'll close with this quote by E. Stanley Jones: "Religions are man's search for God; the gospel is God's search for man. There are many religions, but one gospel."

