

“I Am not Ashamed of the Gospel”

Psalm 32:1-2; Romans 1:1-17

By Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • June 27, 2021 (BSCC)

Dear Congregation of Christ: Sometime after Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses on the door of Wittenberg Castle Church, he was reading Romans 1:17. He came across the words “*the righteousness of God.*” He thought then, “I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners. Thus, I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience.” He thought that those words pointed to a righteousness that he had to attain to get to heaven. But no matter how many good works he did as a priest, he knew that they were not enough, that he still was a sinner condemned by God to hell.

But then, he realized that the same verse also said, “*The righteous shall live by faith.*” So, he said, “There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely, by faith... Here, I felt that I was altogether born again and the very gates of paradise opened up before me.” As we begin our study of Paul’s letter to the Romans, we must note that the main theme of his letter is in verse 17, “*The righteous shall live by faith.*” This opened the gates of paradise for Luther.

The Apostle Paul wrote this letter about AD 57, almost 30 years after our Lord Jesus Christ was crucified, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven. At that time, he was preaching in Corinth in Greece during his third and last missionary journey. From Corinth, he was heading back to Jerusalem to deliver the collections that he gathered from mostly Gentile Christian churches in his journey to the mainly Jewish churches in Jerusalem. From there, his goal was to visit Rome and then on to Spain (Rom 15:22-29). Little did he know that his visit to Rome was as a prisoner because he preached the gospel that was offensive to the Jews and foolishness to Gentiles (1 Cor 1:23). But there are some scholars who believe that when Paul was released from prison in Rome, he was able to finally visit Spain and preach the gospel there.

In writing this letter, he was addressing both Jews and Gentiles who were converted to Christ. In Chapters 9-11, he teaches that Jews were chosen by God as his people in the Old Testament, but that God’s purpose from creation was to save people from all the earth. In Chapter 16, he sends greetings to both Jewish and Gentile Christians. Who founded the church in Rome? Most likely, on Pentecost Sunday thirty years before, Jews from Rome who were converted to Christ established house churches after going back to Rome. Therefore, there is no evidence that Peter founded the church there and became the first “bishop” of Rome. In fact, if Peter was the pastor of the church in Rome, then why did Paul not even send him greetings in Chapter 16? He greeted 29 people, but strangely, not Peter, who was supposed to be the bishop there.

In this letter, Paul addresses the tension between Jews and Gentile believers in Rome. There were Jews who still wanted to follow the Old Testament laws and sacrifices which were made obsolete by the death and resurrection of Christ. But in AD 49, Emperor Claudius expelled the

Jews from Rome because of disorder over a man named “Chrestus,” obviously Christ (Acts 18:2). Unbelieving Jews violently opposed Jewish Christians. Since the Jews were banished, Christian churches became more Gentile in membership. But the Jews started returning to Rome after just a few years, resulting in a more even Jew and Gentile church membership. As we have seen in Paul’s other letters, this resulted in more tensions between the two groups of Christians.

What are the main themes of Romans? We see a few, including salvation or justification by faith alone in Christ alone, the church made up of Jews and Gentiles, and the gospel of Christ. This last theme, the gospel of Christ, is our meditation today under three headings: first, **The Gospel is Christ**; second, **the Gospel is Our Motivation**; and third, **The Gospel is Powerful**.

The Gospel is Christ

In a 2009 survey conducted by White Horse Inn during an evangelism and music event, only 35 percent agreed that the gospel is the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. B. B. Warfield, a Presbyterian pastor and theologian, once said, “It is corrupt forms of Christianity itself which menace from time to time the life of Christianity... Because a pure gospel is worth preserving; and is not only worth preserving but is logically... the only saving gospel. [T]he gospel with man-made additions, no less than those who subtract from it God-given elements... [is] a different kind of gospel, which is essentially no gospel at all.”

What then is this pure gospel? When Paul introduces himself to the Roman believers, he calls himself “*a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God*” (1:1). Unlike many “pastors” and “reverends” today, Paul considers himself a humble, lowly servant of Christ. If Paul, considered the be the greatest of the apostles, calls himself as the lowest of the lowest serving Christ, we must call ourselves the same servants whether we serve the church as pastor, elder, deacon, Bible study teacher, Board member, or Sunday school director.

Paul was called by the Lord himself, not by any man or organization, to be “the apostle to the Gentiles” on the road to Damascus. Christ set him apart from other men to preach “the gospel of God” or “the gospel of Christ” (Rom 15:19). Paul used to be a Pharisee, an enemy of Jesus, and the word “Pharisee” also means “set apart.” So, after his conversion, Paul was “set apart” for the gospel as an apostle, after he was “set apart” for the law as a Pharisee.

This gospel was promised in all the Scriptures, in the Old Testament as well as in the New. We find the first declaration of the gospel as early as in the garden of Eden when God condemned Satan the serpent in Genesis 3:15, “*I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.*” God prophesied that because of his deception of Adam and Eve, the Son of the woman will crush his head even if at first, he would seem to have conquered the Son of the woman. When Christ, the Son of the woman, died on the cross and rose from the dead, Satan was crushed. Paul says that Christ was declared to be the Son of God in the power of the Spirit when he rose from the grave and now reigns as the Son of David forever.

In this prologue, Paul declares that Christ is both fully human and fully divine. He was a descendant of King David, therefore, the rightful heir of David's throne. But he was also declared to the whole as the Son of God, a divine title that also refers to the Divine Messiah or the Christ. This does not mean that he became God's Son only when he rose from the dead, because he is the eternal Son of God. He was the Son of God from eternity past to eternity future. He was never not the Son of God. The resurrection was only a witness of his divinity. And, his perfect holiness also evidenced his divine nature, because God is perfectly holy.

Therefore, in 1 Corinthians 15:1, 3-4, Paul directly defines the gospel, *"Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you... For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures."* Remember, the gospel is not God changing me, or making a decision for Jesus, or living for God. The gospel is the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Gospel is Our Motivation

What then must we do after we believe in the gospel of Christ? Paul is our example in verses 8-16. First, he is motivated by the gospel in relation to his brothers and sisters in Christ in Rome.

He commends them for their faithful witness throughout the Roman empire. Since all roads led to Rome, Christians from all over the empire have heard of their faithfulness to Christ. So Paul gives thanksgiving to God for all of them. He prays unceasingly for them, asking God to grant him his desire to visit his Roman brethren. Why does he want to visit them? He wanted to share with them "some spiritual gift to strengthen them." Since Paul has not been to Rome, he was not familiar with the needs of the church there. So he was not very specific, but he was sure that their faith would be strengthened by these spiritual gifts.

Do you remember to pray for our brothers and sisters in the church? So many of us have serious health problems that prayers for all are essential. Not only are we to pray for one another, we must also make known to them that we are praying for them. But most of all, we must pray that each one of us will be strengthened in the faith by God's Word and the Holy Spirit. In this way, God will keep us in the faith.

Paul also desires to visit the Romans so that *"we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith"* (1:12). He says the same thing in 1 Thessalonians 5:11, *"Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing."* Encouraging and building up one another is dear to the heart of Paul. In Romans 14, he rebukes those who judge others based on whether they abstain from certain foods and on honoring or not honoring certain "holy" days. So he reprimands them, *"Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother?"* (14:10) The Christians in Corinth also had the same problems, even worse than the Romans, so Paul wrote to them, *"perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder"* (2 Cor 12:20). We must avoid such things that belittle, put down, and take apart our brothers and sisters in Christ. So pray for one another, encourage one another and build one another up.

Second, Paul is motivated by the gospel *“in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles”* (1:13). By “reaping some harvest among you,” he is referring to strengthening the faith of the Christians through the preaching of the gospel. By preaching the gospel, a harvest of souls among the unbelieving Gentiles in Rome, thereby increasing the harvest of the vineyard of Christ. He knew that he is only a servant working in Christ’s harvest field.

Paul also knows his “obligation” or “debt” to Christ who commissioned him to be the apostle to the Gentiles. He must preach the gospel to the Greeks and to “barbarians,” a term for people who were not Greeks or Romans. He also must preach to both “wise” and “foolish,” educated or uneducated. To the Greeks and Romans, the world is divided into two: themselves who are “civilized” and “wise,” and the rest of humanity. In other words, Paul is motivated to preach the gospel to all the nations, including Spain, his goal after visiting Rome.

First, the gospel is Christ himself. Second, the gospel motivates. Last, the gospel is powerful.

The Gospel is Powerful

As I mentioned, verses 16 and 17 are two of the most important verses in Scriptures. Paul declares in verse 16, with boldness and confidence, *“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.”* The original Greek for the word “power” is *dunamis*, from where we get our English word “dynamite.” Dynamite has the power to destroy. In the negative sense, the gospel of Christ has power to destroy sin, Satan and death. In the positive sense, the gospel is the dynamic and active power of God in the life of a believer.

Verse 17 teaches us the main theme of Romans, where Paul quotes Habakkuk 2:4, *“The righteous shall live by faith.”* Here, we see that even in the Old Testament, salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone. Faith is not object-less. The Old Testament faithful looked forward to the Messiah, the Christ. Paul writes in 4:11, *“Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.”* He believed God’s promise that his “Seed” or “Descendant” will be the Messiah. Therefore, Paul says in Galatians 3:29, *“And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.”* You who have faith in Christ are the true Israelites, Abraham’s children. Therefore, he looked forward to the heavenly city that was designed and founded by God (Heb 11:10).

Our *Protestant* Christian religion is the only religion in the world that teaches that no one can be saved by doing good works. Luther found that out when he read verse 17. Our doctrine teaches us that our righteousness is an “alien” righteousness. It is “outside” of us because we can never attain it, for God gives us the perfect righteousness of Christ by faith. Paul teaches this true gospel in his other letters. In 2 Corinthians 5:21, we read, *“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”* Christ became sin for us when he bore all our sins on the cross. And in Philippians 3:9, he exhorts us, *“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.”*

And then, those who believe and trust in him live out their faith in their lives. Good works necessarily follow faith in Christ because the Holy Spirit indwells his being. The believer bears the good fruits of the Spirit in his life, *“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control... [and] have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires”* (Gal 5:22-24).

And how does a person believe in Christ? It is through the preaching of the gospel. In Romans 10, Paul quotes Isaiah 52:7, *“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”* (10:15). The gospel of Christ is the good news of peace, happiness, and salvation. So Paul concludes in 10:17, *“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”* Faith does not come from “entertaining the goats,” nor by singing happy songs, nor by “inspirational” talks, nor by pounding the people with “do’s” and “don’ts.” Rather, faith comes from hearing the gospel of Christ preached.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, Martin Luther, a priest, was saved when he read, *“The righteous shall live by faith.”* His utter despair ended when he found out from Scriptures that his salvation did not depend on how many good works he did, but it was through the perfect work of Christ in his life and death. With this faith and understanding of the gospel, he went on to spark the 16th century Protestant Reformation. He went into self-exile because if he did not, he would have met certain persecution and death.

He lived the rest of his life bearing the good fruits of the Spirit because he was motivated by the gospel of Christ and its power to save. He translated the Bible into the German language. He wrote numerous books that would benefit Reformed believers, including catechisms.

Therefore, do not despair when you sin, like Luther did. The gospel has the power to save from sin. And it also has power to transform lives because the Holy Spirit motivates you to live godly and righteous lives. *“The righteous shall live by faith.”* Amen.