

Saturday Pre-Communion

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Preacher: Thomas Davis

[0 : 0 0] Well, as I said, over this weekend, we're going to look together a wee bit at some of the passages, some passages from Paul's letter to the Romans. And tonight we're going to start in chapter one and focusing really on the two verses, which in many ways sum up the whole of what Romans is all about. And that's the last two verses that we read, Romans chapter one, verses 16 and 17. For I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.

For in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written, the righteous will live by faith.

Sometimes you can come to a letter like Romans and think, oh, this seems quite complicated. It's a big letter. And in many ways, it's not the kind of letter that you could just pick up and read through really quickly because it's so full of information. Sometimes it can almost seem overwhelming. And I remember, particularly when I was younger, I used to come to a letter like Romans and everybody would say, Romans is amazing. It's really incredible, all that it teaches. And I would go and read it and I would think, I don't really understand it.

And there's a bit too much information here and I can't seem to take it all in. If you feel like that, don't worry. Sometimes a letter like Romans can seem a wee bit overwhelming because there's so much rich teaching in it. But I do want to say that it's not too complicated for you to understand. In fact, the message of Romans is in many ways really quite straightforward. Because you can sum up what Romans is all about in one word. Romans is all about the gospel. In many ways, the whole letter is just a great explanation about how the good news of Jesus Christ works.

Paul is explaining to us how the gospel message comes together in and through the person of work and work of Jesus Christ. It's the first thing he mentions. In verse one, he says, Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God. And we read a little bit later on in verse 15 of chapter one, that he was eager to come to Rome in order to preach the gospel.

[2 : 4 3] This good news message is at the heart of what Romans is all about. And that's why verses 16 and 17, in many ways, sum up both the whole of Paul's life and the whole of this letter. When we think of Paul, he was a remarkable man in terms of the leadership he showed in the early Christian church. And he could absolutely testify to these words in verses 16 and 17. He was not ashamed to stand up for the gospel.

And he strove to teach people about that great message of salvation, that through faith in Jesus Christ, we can be made right with God. And in many ways, the rest of the letter after this are a great unpacking of what verse 16 and 17 says. So tonight, I want us just to focus a wee bit on what Paul is saying in these two great verses. So what is he saying? Well, the first thing that he says is very obvious.

He says that he is not ashamed of the gospel. Now, that's a brilliant statement because Paul is nailing his colors to the mast. He's openly, publicly associating himself with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And when he says that he's not ashamed, he's making it absolutely clear that he is not embarrassed to be associated with the gospel. He's not in any way trying to conceal his allegiance to Jesus Christ.

He's glad to publicly align himself to the good news of Jesus. He is not ashamed of the gospel. And I hope that every single one of us here, when we read these words of Paul, I hope we say, neither am I. And that's one of the brilliant things about coming together for public worship.

[4 : 36] That's one of the brilliant things about sitting together at the Lord's table. It's a way to publicly, openly say that we are not ashamed of the gospel.

But in saying that, we have to acknowledge that for many of us, probably for all of us, there is huge pressure to be ashamed of this gospel.

We face pressure from the world around us. So many people today will think that believing in God is equivalent to believing in fairy tales. A lot of people think that believing the Bible is ridiculous.

This ancient book written in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of east, by pretty obscure people, it's just kind of old-fashioned and strange. And living a Christian life, living a life shaped by biblical morality, is seen as narrow-minded, backward, or just a bit weird to a lot of people.

And so as far as the world is concerned, we should be embarrassed to associate ourselves with this gospel. We can also face pressure to be ashamed from our community, among our neighbours, or our classmates, or our colleagues, maybe even in your own family.

[6 : 01] There's a pressure to conform to what the world is saying. So you might be studying, you might be at work, you might be at school, and you might be ridiculed because you're not willing to go out and get drunk with everybody else at the weekend.

Or because you believe that it's actually not right to have sex before you get married. Or you might be ridiculed because you'd rather go to church on a Sunday than go to the football, or whatever else people may be doing.

There's the pressure of being spoken about. People might think, oh, he's going to church, or he's reading his Bible, she goes to a prayer meeting, she meets with friends to read through a Christian book together.

That seems so weird. There's a huge amount of pressure in our workplaces, in our community, to conceal our association with the gospel.

I remember one of the biggest regrets of my life was when I was in school, and I was fairly newly converted, and I got one of these wee badges with the fish, the Ichthus symbol, and somebody, a girl in my class said, what does that badge mean?

[7 : 18] Does that mean you're a Christian? Well, actually, in Lewis, they actually said, does that mean you've got the Kuren? And I kind of said, oh, I don't know, I don't know.

I kind of just played it down like that. And I wish I hadn't. But there's that pressure.

And I'm sure we all know what that's like. There's pressure from the world, pressure from the community, pressure from within our own hearts as well. We're all battling with a sinful itcher.

Paul calls it the flesh in this book and in all of his letters. And that's what leads us to do things that are wrong. And what's interesting is that at the heart of that sinful nature is a desire to hide our sense of shame.

Remember, all the way back to Adam and Eve, when they sinned, one of the first things they tried to do was to make clothes to cover their nakedness, and they hid from God. They wanted to conceal their shame.

[8 : 21] And if we look into our hearts, we find that there's so much that makes us feel ashamed. Things we've said, things we've thought, things we've done. And our instinct is to hide these things.

Our instinct is to give the impression that these things aren't there. That's why you'll find people are very often defensive when they make a mistake, whether that's in work, school, or whatever it may be.

People want to hide a sense of shame when they know they've done something wrong or made a mistake. Now, the gospel is going to expose all of that because it reveals the true nature of our hearts.

That's why Jesus said, I didn't come for people who are well. I came for those who are sick. I didn't come to call the righteous. I came for sinners. But for humanity, it's always very, very hard to admit that we're wrong.

And because of that, there's a pressure to keep the gospel at arm's length in case it exposes us for the mistakes that we've made from this, in case it exposes that sense of shame that we have deep down in us.

[9 : 31] And so the world is placing a huge amount of pressure on us to be ashamed of the gospel.

But you know, the devil always turns the truth on its head because the world is saying to us, you should be embarrassed to believe in God.

You should distance yourself from such a primitive book like the Bible. You should be ashamed of the gospel. But do you know what the real truth is? The real truth is that you only need to pick up a newspaper and look at the headlines.

You only need to look at the BBC News website to see corruption and wickedness and violence and immorality and greed and a host of other things, a host of other pieces of evidence that will show that it's the world, not the gospel, that's the embarrassment.

The world thinks that we should be ashamed of the gospel. The real truth is that we should all be utterly ashamed of the world. And when we see the fact that our media, TV programs, our films are saturated with violence and all other kind of inappropriate things, when we see massive gaps between rich and poor, even here in Scotland, when we see people's lives that are utterly destroyed by addiction and by broken societies, when we see a world of social media that just delights in the mistakes of others, we need to ask ourselves, are we proud to be part of that?

[11 : 28] Or are we deeply ashamed? It's not the gospel that we should be ashamed of. That's why Paul can say, I'm not ashamed of the gospel.

But not only does Paul say that he's not ashamed of the gospel, he also gives us reasons why he's not ashamed. There's a brilliant wee word there in that verse. Always, sometimes when we go to the Bible, we're attracted to the big words, and big words are very cool, but little words are also very cool.

And there's a little word in verse 16 that's very cool. It's the word for. And that's basically telling us that he's going to give us some reasons why he is not ashamed of the gospel.

He's going to give us an explanation. So Paul, in verse 15, has said he wants to preach the gospel in Rome. That's because he's not ashamed of the gospel. Then he tells us the reasons why he is not ashamed.

And he gives us two important statements, and I want us to focus on these in the rest of verse 16 and then into verse 17. These are two things that we need to make sure that we understand, and these are two things that we must never, ever forget.

[12 : 39] So, number one, Paul says that the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.

Now, this is highlighting a truth that we need to write onto our hearts. At the center of the gospel lies the power of God.

As Paul says here, the gospel is a message of salvation. In other words, it's a rescue. And that rescue is necessary because humanity is in desperate danger. That's the situation that sin has left us in.

The Bible teaches us clearly that we are sinners. Our first parents sinned. From them, sin and death spread to all humanity. All have sinned. All fall short of the glory of God.

And from verse 18 onwards, Paul gives us a really clear explanation as to how that's worked from chapter 118 through to the middle of chapter 3. The Bible tells us that we're sinners, and experience proves it.

[13 : 48] Just as we were saying a moment ago, you only have to look at the world to see the overwhelming evidence that sin is a horrible reality in every one of us. I think I've often said this, that of all the doctrines in the Bible, I think the doctrine of sin is probably the easiest one to prove.

Because it's everywhere. And we are living our lives as those who, yes, we are made in the image of God.

And yes, we have many wonderful gifts and attributes, but at the same time, we are sinners in need of rescuing. C.S. Lewis gave a great description of this.

He said that man is a glorious ruin. And the vital point that we need to recognize in all of that is that we are totally powerless to get ourselves out of that situation.

Absolutely powerless. Our original relationship with God has been broken. He is righteous. He is perfect. We are not. And as a result, we are helpless.

[14 : 58] Ephesians 2 speaks about that very clearly. Remember, you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the Commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

So when it comes to restoring our relationship with God, we don't have the resources. We don't have the ability. We don't have the strength. We are powerless.

But the amazing good news of the gospel is that salvation is accomplished, applied, and available through the power of God.

And that power of God is evident throughout the whole plan of salvation that God has executed. If you look at the stages of redemptive history, now that phrase, redemptive history is just referring to the fact that God has worked out his plan of salvation across the ages of history.

God's worked things out at certain times. There's our list of some key events in redemptive history. In all of these, the Bible makes clear associations with the power of God.

[16 : 15] So at creation, God demonstrated his power. Jeremiah 10, 12, it is he who made the earth by his power. At the Exodus, 2 Kings 17 tells us that God brought you out of the land of Egypt with great power and an outstretched arm.

At the incarnation, the first coming of Jesus, the angel came to Mary and said, the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the child to be born will be called Holy, the Son of God.

At the crucifixion, Hebrews 2 tells us that through his death, Jesus destroyed the one who has the power of death. That is the devil. The power of the cross, which we sang about, destroys the power of Satan.

At the resurrection, we see the power of God. He was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God, 2 Corinthians 13 tells us. And Philippians 3, 10 says that I may know him and the power of his resurrection.

And then, at the second coming, Jesus himself said, they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.

[17 : 29] So you go through all the stages of redemptive history, all the steps that God's worked out across the time that's elapsed from creation through the ages of Scripture right up towards the second coming, at every stage of God outworking his plan of salvation in history.

At every stage, God is demonstrating his power. There's power, power, power, power, power. And the absolutely amazing thing is that God is using that power so that he can save you.

God's power lies behind every stage of God's saving work. Now, there's a really important point that arises here.

We're looking at the stages of redemptive history. What stage are we at? I left a gap for the stage that we are at. The stage that we are at is called the last days.

The first five things on the list there are all in the past. The second coming is in the future. Right now, we are living in the last days, in that period of history between the resurrection and ascension of Jesus and his return at the end of history.

[18 : 54] These are the days in which the gospel is being spread to all nations. And the vital point is that exactly the same principle applies to this stage as it does to all the others.

The spread of the gospel, the expansion of the church is all accomplished by the power of God. The New Testament makes that absolutely clear.

In Acts, Jesus, as he was ascending, said, you will receive power in order to be my witnesses. And then, when Paul describes coming to preach the gospel to the Corinthian church, he says, I was with you in weakness and fear and much trembling.

My speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

The spread of the gospel, the growth of the church, the gathering in of God's people is all accomplished by the unstoppable power of God. that should give you so much encouragement and so much confidence as you seek to bring the gospel to the people of Aberdeen and the communities in which you live.

[20 : 10] Whatever you do as a church, whatever we do across the church, in all our efforts to witness, our mission is empowered by God.

That's why Paul can say, for God, who said, let light shine out of darkness has shone into our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. So can you reach out to Aberdeen?

Can you reach out to your colleagues? Can you make connections with your friends? Can you invite someone to church? Can you help be a step in the process of leading someone to faith in Christ?

Too right you can because you are doing it all in the power of God. The gospel is... I don't know if I can see a plug.

[21 : 24] Can you see a plug anywhere on the wall? If you look around, I'm sure you'll see a plug. A tiny wee, there you go, there's a wee white plug. We've all got plugs in our house. They all look pretty insignificant, don't they?

They're just, it's just a plug. It's quite normal, isn't it? It's not that exciting. But that plug is connected to the fuse box, whatever that is.

That fuse box is collected to the mains electricity supply. That mains electricity supply is connected to the national grid, which means that that wee plug there has got the strength of every power station in Britain behind it.

You try and drain all the electricity out of that plug. No chance. Now you might feel like a pretty ordinary person and a pretty ordinary Christian.

Just a normal person in a normal house in a normal job. You have the power of God behind you as you seek to serve Him and as you seek to witness for Him.

[22 : 43] We must never, ever forget that the gospel is entirely accomplishing its purposes through the power of God.

It is the power of God for salvation. Then Paul tells us who the gospel is for. He tells us it's for everyone who believes.

It's the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. That phrase is brilliant because it captures a vital balance that lies at the heart of the gospel. At one level the gospel is for absolutely everyone.

The word everyone is so precious and so wonderful. It's a free universal open offer of salvation. God's desire is that no one should perish. Every single person is called to salvation in Jesus Christ and yet at the same time there's a particular response required.

You must believe. It's not just the power of God for salvation for everyone but it's for everyone who believes.

[23 : 51] And so although the gospel is offered universally it's not received universally because some people refuse to believe and you and I have to make sure that we're not among them.

That salvation has come to the Jews first and that's what redemptive history tells us. God's worked his purpose out through Abraham and his descendants. They were called initially to be his people but from the very beginning that choice of Abraham and his descendants was for a purpose.

The great goal was that through Abraham and his people all the nations of the world would be blessed. So that phrase Jews first then the Greeks it's not a divisive statement it's not putting one above the other.

It's the very opposite. It's showing us that in Jesus Christ God is establishing a united people for himself that stretches across all the nations of the world.

And I want you to make sure that you recognize what's been said here. It's saying to us that the power of God for salvation is available to everyone who believes.

[25 : 06] Now I don't know, I know there's very few people here that I know and so I don't know your situations but if anybody's here who's not a Christian or who's thinking about things or not sure, you need to make sure that you lay hold of the truth that's been said before you here because what Paul is saying in this verse is stripping away any notion that you can't be a Christian.

I don't know if you feel like that, I think that a lot of people have felt like that. They've thought, well I would like to be a Christian but I can't. I want you to see that that's completely untrue because it's not about you, it's about the power of God.

He is powerful enough to save you. When you say I can't, you're actually saying God can't and that's not true. He can.

And if you look at that word everyone, that's exactly what it says. You are included in that. The only question you need to ask is do you believe?

Paul is not ashamed of the gospel because it's the power of God for everyone, for salvation to everyone who believes. But then he tells us something else and we'll just look at this together briefly.

[26 : 43] He says that in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith as it is written, the righteous shall live by faith.

Here Paul is introducing a word that in many ways is going to be a key word in the next seven chapters of Romans. That's the word righteousness. In the gospel the righteousness of God is being revealed.

Now the first question we need to ask is what does righteousness mean? Well basically the word righteousness is referring to God's standards. It's the moral standard that shapes everything that he says and does.

So you want to think of it as like a bar, a standard that is set and that standard is set at the absolute highest level.

God is utterly righteous. His standards are perfect and he never ever compromises from these standards and thank God that he doesn't.

[27 : 52] Now when we think of that we mustn't think that God's righteousness is some kind of brutal strictness. Rather God's righteousness is speaking of a pillar of purity and truth and fairness and justice and wisdom and goodness.

In other words, God's righteousness simply means that it is utterly impossible for God to be bad. God is righteous.

His standards are at the very highest and he'll never ever let us down in maintaining that. And in the gospel we're being told that that righteousness is being revealed.

Now Paul will reveal more about this in later chapters but there's two key points I want to notice just now. First, that in the gospel God is showing us his righteousness.

So across the ages of redemptive history, that great plan of salvation and especially in the personal work of Jesus we are seeing what God is like.

[29 : 04] We're seeing his perfect righteous ways. He's revealing the fact that he's a God who is against all that is wrong and sinful. He's revealing the fact that he's a God who is true, who keeps his promises.

He's revealing the fact that he's a God who is compassionate and merciful. His righteousness is being revealed. We can see it in the gospel message. That righteousness is a defining feature of the Christian message.

But the amazing thing about the gospel is that not only does God show us his righteousness, he also shares his righteousness with us.

And as you go on to the later chapters, you'll see that God's righteousness is given to us as a gift. our unrighteousness is placed on Christ.

His righteousness is placed on us. And a glorious exchange takes place. And the whole of the gospel hinges on the fact that through Jesus, we are righteousness-ified.

[30 : 18] Or as we tend to say, we're justified. all of that's made possible by the power of God in the work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

He's the one with all the power. He's the one who does all the work. All we have to do is trust in him. And that's why it says, the righteous shall live by faith.

So in a world that's been ruined by sin, instead of abandoning us as we deserve, God says, I will show you my righteousness. I will show you what a perfect moral standard really is.

But not only does God reveal his righteousness to us, he actually bestows it upon us as a gift. In other words, not only can we see God's righteousness, we can actually become righteous ourselves.

And from first to last, we depend entirely on Jesus. That's why it says it's from faith to faith, or as the NIV very, very helpfully translates it, it's by faith from first to last.

[31 : 32] At every point, we are utterly dependent on Jesus. We never, ever, ever, graduate from trusting him and relying on him completely.

completely. And all of that's just scratching the surface, and there's so much more that can be said and can be discovered in the rest of Romans.

But I just want to close by noticing a couple of really important points. One is, Paul is saying to us that he's not ashamed of the gospel, even though, like us, he faces pressure not to be ashamed of the gospel.

But let me ask you the question, what events in your life are you most ashamed of? What are the things that you think, oh, I just wish I had not done that?

And then ask yourself the question, were these actions acts of righteousness righteousness or acts of unrighteousness? In other words, were they sins?

[32 : 42] And the answer, of course, is that all the things that we are most ashamed of in life are ultimately a result of our sin.

And that's showing us that it is unrighteousness that's going to bring shame and sorrow and regret into our lives. So, in other words, if you want to be ashamed, then go and follow the world.

There's so many things that we can do. We can go and we can go out and gossip and exploit people. We can indulge in all sorts of things. We can take everything that the world is throwing at us, but in the end, all it will leave us with is a sense of utter shame.

Unrighteousness brings shame. It brings hurt and it brings sorrow. And this is where I think the gospel is so incredibly relevant to the present day because it's really interesting.

When you look at the world, you'll see that all the time the world abuses power and indulges in unrighteousness.

[33 : 53] We see that all the time. We see people in the world, they abuse power that they have and they indulge in unrighteousness. And yet, at the same time, people crave righteousness and they loathe the abuse of power.

It's quite ironic and bizarre when you look at how the world functions. A great example of this is the film industry. So, you can see that the whole film industry over the past, I don't know, 20, 30 years, has made a fortune out of all sorts of acts of unrighteousness.

It glamorizes sex, it is full of horrifically violent content, full of things that we would always think would be awful in real life, but in a film they seem fine.

So, the films are full of these things, people go and watch them, and in all of that we feed the power of the film industry. So, people in that industry become incredibly powerful, they become incredibly wealthy, and they can exercise enormous influence.

And then we see that that power gets abused, and people with that power use it to exploit people in real life. And when we see that happening, we are horrified, and everybody craves righteousness, and cries out, that's wrong.

[35 : 29] It's wrong to abuse your power. It's wrong to exploit people in that way. That's why we see that the world is so broken. So, we indulge in unrighteousness, it gives people power.

They take that power, and they engage in unrighteousness, and we think that that's wrong, and yet at the same time we carry on indulging them. And so, it goes on, and on, and on, round, and round, in these crazy circles.

People indulge in power, and give people unrighteousness, and yet at the same time, we think that's wrong, yet we're feeding it. The world goes round in these circles, it's all bonkers.

In the gospel, we see a God who is gloriously different. We see the God of limitless power, but instead of abusing that power, he uses it to save and restore helpless sinners.

And in the gospel, we have the God of perfect righteousness, who even though he has all the power in the world, he will never, ever be bad.

[36 : 37] And one day, he will restore creation into a new heaven and a new earth where righteousness dwells. That's ultimately what the gospel is all about.

no wonder Paul says, I'm not ashamed of that. Let's pray. Dear God, our Father, we thank you that you are different.

Different to all the brokenness that we see in the world around us. We see a world where power is abused and where unrighteousness is enjoyed.

We thank you so much, Lord, that you are different, that you have all that power and yet you use it for the salvation of people who don't deserve it. And we thank you, oh God, that you are righteous and that you never, ever, ever fail to maintain that standard of righteousness.

And how we need your power and your righteousness in our lives. And we thank you that through the gospel of Jesus Christ, that's exactly what we can have.

[37 : 57] Please forgive us for the times when we've been ashamed. We want to renew our commitment to you. And like Paul, we gladly say that we're not ashamed of the gospel.

Amen.