

Romans
The Good News
Romans 1:1-17
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Ellie is going to read Romans chapter 1 verses 16 & 17 for us this morning.

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.”
Romans 1:16 & 17

Thank you, Ellie. Those verses are not only central to the first chapter of Romans, they’re foundational to Paul’s entire letter to the 1st Century Church at Rome. The word *gospel* which occurs twice in those verses, means *good news*. It occurs 93 times in the New Testament and 6 times in these first 17 verses of Romans. The Greek word translated as *gospel* is *euaggelion*, and from this word we get words like *evangelist* and *evangelical*. The gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ that explains the way of salvation. The Apostle Paul clearly states the essence of this good news in 1 Corinthians chapter 15 verses 3-5 when he wrote,

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. 1 Corinthians 15:3-5

Title Slide

A key component of the gospel, that was especially important to Paul because it tied into his calling from God on the Damascus Road, was that the good news of Jesus was not restricted just to Jews. It was for everyone who believes. As Paul wrote, “*I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.*” As I was prepping for this series, I thought about including the phrase, “*for everyone who believes,*” in the title, but decided to go with the simpler, “Romans.”

It’s fitting that we’re starting this summer-long series on Romans on Pentecost—the birthday of the Church. In Acts chapter 2 we read the account of the Pentecost that occurred 7 weeks after Jesus’ resurrection. Pentecost—with the root *pente* meaning 50—was a prominent Jewish festival celebrated 50 days after Passover. On that Pentecost as thousands of pilgrims

from all over the world had descended on Jerusalem to celebrate, the Holy Spirit, symbolized by tongues of fire, came to rest on people and they were supernaturally empowered to speak in foreign languages, so that people from across the world were able to hear the gospel in their own tongue. The Apostle Peter preached a sermon that day that connected what was happening with prophecies in the Book of Joel and 3,000 people believed and were baptized. The Church was birthed that day and the world has never been the same since. At the conclusion of the sermon today, we'll be receiving Communion to remember Jesus' sacrifice and celebrate our faith in Him and to acknowledge our place in Jesus' Church.

Before we look more closely at Paul's introduction to this letter, I want to share a few insights about Paul's letter to the Romans. Romans has long been viewed as Paul's magnum opus—the letter where the great apostle communicates the doctrinal truths that compose our faith. Romans is long and deep in meaning and in it Paul unpacks theology—the nature of God and our relationship with Him. Romans can be intimidating with its many references to the Jewish faith and its expositions on faith, grace, righteousness, justification and holiness. I've heard of a nationally known preacher who preached through the Book of Romans to his church on Sunday mornings and Sunday nights for 13 years.

You can probably see why some are intimidated by Romans, but Romans is also a letter—written by the Apostle Paul to followers of Jesus living in 1st Century Rome—a city Paul had longed to visit, but had never been able to get to. Our tendency is to view the letters in our New Testament as doctrinal treatises written by theologians, who like a modern day author would invest hundreds of hours writing a book. In his book, Interpreting Biblical Literature, retired Messiah University professor, Michael Cosby, explains the nuances of writing, delivering and having a 1st Century letter read. His explanation helps humanize a process that at times can make letters like Romans seem beyond our reach.

The letter to the Romans was written by the Apostle Paul from Corinth in the late 50s AD. It was written to followers of Jesus in Rome. While we don't have firm numbers it's likely that the number of Jesus' followers in Rome, a city of 1 million people, numbered less than 100 people, probably meeting in several small house churches throughout the city. The map on the screen highlights the extent of the Roman Empire (highlighted in yellow) during the time Paul wrote this letter.

THE ROMAN EMPIRE 1ST - 2ND CENTURY A.D.

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I'd like to read through the first 15 verses of chapter 1, giving some commentary along the way, and then we'll conclude by looking more closely at verses 16 & 17.

Romans 1:1-7

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name's sake. And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people:
Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul's opening to Romans is similar to the way he starts many of his New Testament letters. He makes it clear that he is Jesus' servant and identifies himself as an apostle—the word means *"messenger"* or *"one who is sent out."*

Paul goes on to summarize the gospel as promised by God's prophets in the Old Testament and fulfilled in the life and resurrection of Jesus, the Son of God. He identifies God's Son as "Jesus Christ our Lord." The phrase Jesus Christ our Lord is common to us and doesn't seem very radical, but to 1st Century citizens of the Roman Empire, the designation "Lord" was reserved for one person, and one person alone: The Emperor Caesar. Declaring Jesus or anyone else "Lord" was viewed as subversive and a threat to Caesar's reign. Keep the significance as Jesus as Lord in mind, because we'll return to that when we look at verses 16 & 17.

Another notable feature of these opening verses is the reference to Gentiles—non Jews. It was revolutionary that Jesus' coming as the Messiah wasn't reserved for Jews; it was for everyone. Paul was called by Jesus to be a missionary to the Gentiles and he makes it clear to his readers in Rome that they too were included in that group. The Gospel wasn't reserved for Jesus. It was available to everyone who placed their faith in Jesus.

Now, I'll read verses 8-15 of Romans chapter 1...

Romans 1:8-15

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. God, whom I serve in my spirit in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you.

I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles.

I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome.

Unlike the other New Testament letters he wrote, Paul had never visited Rome. Typically, Paul's New Testament letters were written to churches he had planted and then moved on from to preach and plant additional churches in different locations. Paul had intended to travel to Rome on many occasions, but for various reasons, he had been prevented from doing so. He wanted to encourage and strengthen those who were already believers in their faith, and he wanted to preach to those who didn't yet know Christ, that there would be a harvest of new believers in the Capitol City.

And that brings us to verse 16 of Romans chapter 1—the first verse Ellie read that are central to this chapter and to the entire letter.

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. Romans 1:16

Paul boldly declares that he is unashamed about preaching the gospel of Jesus, because it provides salvation for everyone who believes—Jews and Gentiles. He goes on to note that the gospel reveals the righteousness God makes available to all who place their faith in Him, because those who are righteous will live by faith.

The words, *“I am not ashamed of the gospel,”* would have been fitting words to place on Paul’s tombstone, because they characterized his life and ministry after Jesus miraculously appeared to him on the Damascus Road. His preaching of the good news of Jesus led Paul to be beaten with rods, whipped, stoned and left for dead, in danger of being crushed by an angry mob, ship wrecked, imprisoned, and much, much more. Paul spoke fearlessly before common people and rulers, before the poor and the wealthy, and before Jews and followers of cults. He was truly unashamed of preaching the gospel.

And why we might wonder was Paul so passionate about preaching the gospel? Paul grew up with the name Saul—the name of Israel’s first king. His father was a Pharisee and young Saul was being groomed to not only follow in his father’s footsteps, but to be a star among the Pharisees. Saul was a zealous defender of the Jewish faith. When Jews began converting to become followers of Jesus, Saul was one of their main persecutors. He gave approval to the stoning of Stephen—the 1st Christian martyr, and he even traveled to other cities with authorization from the religious authorities to imprison, beat and even kill Jews who were now professing faith in Christ. It was on a journey to Damascus in Syria where Saul intended to arrest Jews who were followers of Jesus that Jesus appeared to Saul in a blinding light and informed him that while he thought he was doing good, he was actually opposing God. Jesus went on the reveal to Saul that he was being commissioned to preach the gospel to the Gentiles—the very people he had hated and distanced himself from. Saul had been an avid persecutor of Jesus’ followers, but after meeting Jesus personally, Paul became an equally ardent preacher of the gospel. Paul goes in verse 17 to write,

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.”* Romans 1:17

Here we have another clue as to why Paul was so passionate about the gospel. As a Pharisee he had been steeped in following the Jewish Law, believing that by flawlessly keeping the Law he could obtain righteousness in God's sight. Like all legalists, however, Paul came to understand that his striving and working to gain God's favor didn't work. When he encountered Jesus Paul came to understand that it was only by faith in God and God's grace He extends to us that any of us can be righteous before God. As a man who experienced the freedom that comes only by God's grace, Paul was committed to communicating the message of God's grace to everyone he encountered.

Gospel, grace, faith and righteousness. Each of these words appear multiple times in the first 17 verses of Romans chapter 1, and these words recur throughout Paul's letter. They lie at the core of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

I began the sermon today by claiming that Paul's purpose in writing Romans wasn't to write a theological treatise or a systematic theology; it was to help new believers living in the capitol city of the Roman empire understand what they believed and what it looked like for them to live out their faith as followers of Jesus. So, what implications does the first part of Paul's letter to the Romans have for us today? To answer that question I want to stay focused on verses 16 & 17. Since we've read these verses multiple times in the New International Version, I'd like us to look at how the VOICE translation interprets these words, starting with verse 16: For I am not *the least bit* embarrassed about the gospel. *I won't shy away from it*, because it is God's power to save every person who believes: first the Jew, and then the non-Jew. Romans 1:16 VOICE

Increasingly, we live in a culture where Jesus, the gospel, the Bible and Christians aren't respected, and at times are even ridiculed. It's true that we've brought some of this on ourselves, because we haven't always done well at living out Jesus' life as it's demonstrated in the Bible, but it's the exclusivity of Jesus as God's only Son and the description of Jesus as the way, the truth and the life, that causes many to discount Christianity. In a culture that's skeptical or even hostile toward Christianity and Jesus, how do we communicate the good news of the gospel? We don't have to be ashamed or embarrassed as we explain Jesus in the context of what He has done for us and how He is transforming our lives. I won't say there aren't exceptions, but generally, what people who don't know Jesus are looking for isn't doctrine or theological truths. They're looking for life transformation and that's something any of us who follow Jesus can speak to. Now let's look again at verse 17 in the VOICE. This verse expands

expands the good news beyond the saving power it has in our lives to the impact of the gospel on our culture and on everyone.

You see, in the good news, God's restorative justice is revealed. *And as we will see*, it begins with and ends in faith. As the Scripture declares, "By faith the just will obtain life." VOICE

I love the phrase "God's restorative justice." When God shows up He restores justice—justice for everyone. God's justice as revealed perfectly in Jesus begins and ends with the faith we place in Him, not on our good works. It's by placing our faith in Jesus and receiving his grace that we receive life and that the life of Jesus is available to everyone.

As I was studying verses 16 & 17 of Romans 1 this week I couldn't help but think of our McBIC's mission statement: *Experiencing Jesus and Sharing His Love*. It's only as you and I experience Jesus that we're positioned to share his love with others. Again, at times people are led to place their faith in Jesus by facts they learn or doctrine or theology they grasp, but most times, what people find winsome and compelling are stories of how people have experienced Jesus' transformation in their lives. Romans 1:17 also dovetails with McBIC's vision: *We are disciples who bring restoration and wholeness to Mechanicsburg and to the world*. In sharing the gospel we communicate unashamedly what Jesus has done in our lives and we communicate how as we place our faith in Him, his restorative justice is revealed in our world.

My hope is that as we continue our journey through Romans this summer that you and I will be better equipped to experience Jesus' love more deeply and to more effectively share his love with others.