

Faith in the Gospel

Romans 1:8-17

Martin Luther was one of the most influential figures in church history during the period known as the reformation.

As far as we know, Luther had no interest in becoming a clergyman in his younger years. Throughout his teens and of his early twenties he was following his father's wishes to become a lawyer.

Things changed when he was 22. He was riding back to school after visiting home and he got caught in a thunderstorm.

It was a severe storm and he became very afraid for his life.

When a lighting bolt struck near him he cried out for help.

His father being a miner, he cried out to the patron saint of miner's, St. Anne promising that if his life was spared he would become a monk.

He survived the storm and much to the disappointment of his father he followed through on his promise.

In the storm he realized that if he were to die in that moment he would have to face God's judgment and he was convinced that would go very badly.

He thought becoming a monk would calm those fears.

He pursued his cause with great determination.

He participated constantly in church rituals, prayers, confession, fasting, and self-denial of many kinds and after nearly ten years of effort he felt no better, in fact he probably felt worse about his standing before God.

All of his efforts to be good kept showing him how bad he really was.

Things changed for Luther while he was studying the book of Romans.

In fact, it was the very passage that we are looking at this morning that gave him hope in the face of his hopeless work to make himself right with God.

When he read and thought about Romans 1:17 he came to the conclusion that faith rather than works was the only way a person can be made right with God, escape hell, and have the hope of eternal life.

That was a life changing moment for Luther and really for the world as the LORD used him, as imperfect as he was, to point people to the Scriptures and to faith in the Person and Work of Christ.

[A little more than five hundred years later, the need to properly understand faith in the gospel is every bit as necessary as it was in Luther's time. Thankfully God has preserved His Word for us and so we have the opportunity to see what the LORD says in the Bible about the importance of faith. Turn in your bibles if you would to **Romans 1:8-17**. If you have any kind of concern

for your soul, and all of us should, then you need to give your full attention to what is said to us in these verses. Verse 8 begins with Paul telling the Romans about how he prays for them. His prayers begin with thanksgiving and the reason why he is thankful shows us this important lesson about faith, that...]

Point #1 – The effects of genuine faith are noticeable. (Verse 8)

When people truly acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Saviour it is something that seen in their lives.

Let's listen together at what is said here in verse 8.

We should take the word 'first' here to mean high importance or priority.

Before he gets into all the issues of this letter he wants these believers to know that he is thanking God.

Notice that he refers to the LORD specifically as "my God".

It is one thing to have an idea in our heads that there is a God, it is another thing altogether to know Him personally and be in a relationship with Him.

He is also careful to write that this thanksgiving to God whom he knows personally is coming through Jesus who makes the relationship possible.

He says, he is thanking God, for "all of you".

He is thinking of the church as a whole and the grateful for the work that the LORD has done and is doing among them.

The church in Rome was likely established shortly after Jesus ascended into the heaven and the apostles began preaching and long before Paul became a Christian.

This brief thanksgiving is a reminder that the success of the gospel depends on the mercy and grace of God.

That grace is clearly evident in the church that Paul is writing to here because he says, "[their] faith is proclaimed in all the world."

That is a phrase the probably reflects Paul's personal experience.

He was a guy who got around in the Roman Empire.

Most of your bibles probably have maps of Paul's missionary journeys that show he covered a huge amount of territory and everywhere he went he heard about the faith of these believers.

The only way that is possible is if there is something tangible, something that people can see happening as a result of believing the gospel.

[How many of you have ever heard of the Bay of Fundy? It is between Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. What is it famous for? For the tides, which are the highest on the earth according to New Brunswick tourism and reach up to 52feet. The way the Ocean shapes the landscape is remarkable and that is why it is famous because people can see the effect of the tides in a powerful way and they tell other people about it.]

Genuine faith in Christ is like that.

Yes Christians have problems.

Yes Christians fail at times.

We understand our need of Grace, but we also know that believing in Christ and receiving the grace of God does something to us.

It changes us in noticeable ways.

It humbles us, it creates a desire to know God, to worship Him, there is an uncommon peace that comes with faith, it gives us a unique capacity for forgiveness, gratitude, compassion, and the list goes on.

Over the years I have heard people issue this challenge,
“If we were put on trial for being a Christian would there be enough evidence to convict us?”

[There ought to be! Because that is the nature of genuine faith. Paul has never met the majority of the Christians in Rome but he has heard about their faith and is thankful for it because it is evident that the Lord is at work among them. While growing in our faith is absolutely God’s work in our lives, it is important to remember that He uses people and situations to accomplish His work in us. We can see that here as the apostle continues to tell these believers about his prayers for them. What he asks God for here shows us that...]

Point #2 – Faith requires encouragement. (Verses 9-12)

Every Christian regardless of maturity level or knowledge benefits from the influence of other genuine believers.

Listen to what he shares in verse 9 (stop at start of v.10 with ‘prayers’).

Calling God as a witness serves to underline the sincerity of what is being said here because of the seriousness of making that claim.

To say something like this and have it not be true is a great offense against the LORD and can only serve to invite His judgement and wrath.

Paul has seen the glory of the living Christ, he would not say something like this unless it were true.

That is emphasized by what he says about ‘serving God with his spirit in the gospel of His Son.’

The word serve there means service in worship.

This is more than a task for the apostle this is the willful engagement of the fullness of his inner being for the purpose of calling attention to and delighting in the greatness of God.

He is saying this in an extreme way so they will know that this a true devotion to praying for them regularly (probably on a daily basis).

Now look at what he is asking God for in **verse 10-11.**

He is asking the LORD to allow him to travel to Rome.

His reason for wanting to visit this church is to impart a spiritual gift to them so that the church would be strengthened.

Commentator Colin Kruse points out that what he probably means by imparting a gift is that he will exercise the gifts given to him by the Holy Spirit, likely preaching and teaching, for the purpose of helping the church to grow in their faith.

This is a church that has been in the faith longer than Paul has.

Their faith has been so rock solid and observable that people are talking about this church all over the world.

Even so, their faith can be strengthened they can benefit from encouragement.

Paul is also quick to point out that they are not the only ones who would benefit from his visit (**verse 12**).

He fully expects that being with these believers is going to build him up as well.

[I have heard more than one preacher compare the faith of an individual believer to a fire. How many of you have had the chance to sit around a campfire this summer? If you watch a fire for a while you will see that at the bottom there are a bunch of little pieces called coals. That is the hottest part of the fire and the coals glow red and orange. Do you know what will happen if you reach in with a pair of tongs and pull out a single coal? It won't be long before it cools and stops glowing, but if you return the coal to the fire it will once again burn brightly.]

I know lots of people these days are down on being a part of a church.

The church is full of hypocrites some will say.

I can worship at home and get some teaching on the internet or on TV.

I don't see how you can square that kind of thinking with passages like this.

If the apostle Paul thought he needed other believers to encourage him in his faith surely you and I do as well.

[Each one of us should feel a deep need to be encouraging others and we should all recognize our own need to be encouraged in our trusting of Jesus. God's design for the church is that believers need one another. There is a caution that we need to be aware of however. When we build these kinds of relationships of encouragement with one another we can easily make the mistake of turning the church into a bit of a club that we are comfortable with. As Paul continues to express his long standing desire to visit the Romans and encourage them in their faith he shows us that the Christian faith is bigger than particular groups of people. He shows us that...]

Point #3 – The invitation to faith is for all. (Verses 13-15)

It is right and necessary according to Jesus' command for the gospel to be made known throughout the earth to every people group and language.

The apostle, as he so often does, anticipates a question rising in the minds of his readers.

If he has had such a great desire to go to Rome and minister to these believers, why hasn't he done that?

He answers that in **verse 13**.

This gives us a glimpse into Paul's theological view of his day to day life.

He lived with the daily expectation that God is in control of everything that happens in life.

It seems clear that he is meaning that God is the One who is responsible for the preventing of his travel to Rome, because the outcome is going to result in a 'harvest among' those believers and even beyond the church.

He believes he has been delayed by God for the good of the church.

Looking ahead to that opportunity to visit Rome and the anticipated harvest he writes this in **verses 14-15**.

The word that is translated as obligation here is a word that was often used in the financial sense of owing a debt, if you have a KJV you will see the word 'debtor' instead of obligation.

In the ancient world an unpaid debt was a really big deal. There were no bankruptcy options.

If you defaulted on a loan you could end up in prison, or you and likely members of your immediate family would be sold into slavery.

That is a bleak picture but I don't think Paul is trying to say that his obligation is a terrible burden to him that he is unhappy about.

I agree with John Murray who believes Paul uses this language to convey the irrevocable nature of his calling to preach the gospel.

He says this obligation is to both Greeks and barbarians.

Those categories divide people based on language.

Most of the Mediterranean world at that time spoke Greek but people in what we know as modern day Europe spoke other languages.

The word barbarian most literally means a non-Greek speaking person.

That means he was including both known people groups and unknown people groups.

Additionally, he mentions the wise and the foolish.

Just like the previous categories every human being could be lumped into one of those columns.

Whatever side of the equation a person fits on Paul sees himself as obligated to them regardless of where they come from.

The only way to understand that is to see that the gospel message is to be extended to everyone.

[Do we see it that way? Of course not all of us are going to be missionaries, but some of us ought to be, and all of us should do what we can to support people sharing the gospel with people of different cultures and languages. People have come to Canada from all over the world, do we see the gospel being for them? I understand we may not be able to learn other languages, but we can at the very least pray for people who look and sound different from us? We can pray that classmates, co-workers, and neighbors would have the opportunity to hear about Who Jesus is and what he has done for them? I marvel at the apostle here. He is in the later years of his life, his body has been through the ringer, he no doubt had aches and pains, and yet he still felt the obligation to preach the gospel to anybody and everybody. He tells us why in verses 16-17 where we are shown that...]

Point #4 – Only faith in the gospel can save. (Verses 16-17)

Now human effort or strength can deal with our problem of falling short of God's standard. Our only hope is God doing what only God can do.

Why does he feel this obligation? Why is he eager to preach in Rome?

He tells us in **verse 16**.

It is interesting he chooses to say, "I am not ashamed of" rather than "I rejoice in" or "I am amazed by" the gospel.

Some scholars think his choice of words reflect the many experiences he had of people trying to make him ashamed of the gospel.

This is his way of saying no matter what people might say about me or do to me I will not shrink back from this amazing message.

Why? Because 'it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.'

That phrase right there draws a sharp contrast between biblical Christianity and every other religion in the world.

False religion tells people what they need to do in order to placate some false god or arrive in some kind of paradise.

The Bible tells us about what God has done for us in order to save us.

And whom does God act for? It says here, everyone who believes.

The Jew first and also the Greek.

That statement reflects both God's covenant faithfulness to Abraham and His grace being extended to every tribe, tongue, and nation on earth.

In verse 17 he explains why the gospel is the power of God for salvation.

This phrase 'the righteousness of God' is extremely important to understanding the need of faith rather than works for salvation.

F.F. Bruce points out that to be 'righteous' means to have right standing with God.

What does that require?

The Bible tells us that God is perfect, that His laws are perfect, and that they must always be obeyed.

To have right standing with God means we need to be absolutely perfect.

This is why trying to earn a right standing with God is impossible, because no one is perfect.

This is what troubled Martin Luther so deeply for more than a decade.

The harder he tried the more he realized that he was farther away from being right with God than he originally thought and trying harder only made his desperate situation all the more clear.

It cannot be by human effort, it must be by the power of God and there is only one way to gain access to the power of God in Christ and that is to trust, it is to believe, it is to have faith that Jesus died to pay my debt and He lives to give me life.

That is why "The righteous shall live by faith."

It is only by believing and trusting the gospel that a person can have right standing with God.

That clicked for Martin Luther and it changed his life as it does for all who believe.

Those who believe it belong to God and to one another and God designed it that way so that we would grow in our faith by encouraging one another.

Whoever you are and wherever you come from this invitation to believe is for you. Believe it and you will be saved because when you believe, when you have faith in the gospel you are receiving the power of God for salvation.