

ROMANS: PART 3

UNLOCKING THE MEANING OF THE GOSPEL

Last week we concluded by focusing on ten marks of true spiritual service.

If you missed the message last week and would like to get caught up on the meanings of these spiritual service attitudes, you can check out our web site at

www.villagechurchofwheaton.org, where you'll find the text for all of our messages,

Now let's continue on with **ROMANS 1:16,17:**

*16 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 (anyone who is not a Jew).¹*

*17 For in it the **RIGHTEOUSNESS of God is revealed from faith to faith**; as it is written, "But **THE RIGHTEOUS person** shall live by **faith**."*

We're told in Romans 1:16 why Paul is not ashamed of the Gospel. It's because the Gospel is powerful, it has the power to change lives. Faith is the starting point of the Gospel and faith is the goal of the Gospel. Paul didn't care if he was popular. He just preached the Gospel because he knew what it could do. There are four words in verses 16 and 17 that are key to understanding the Gospel. If you understand these four words, their meaning and connection, then you'll understand the Gospel. The four words are:

- 1) POWER
- 2) SALVATION
- 3) BELIEF (FAITH)
- 4) RIGHTEOUSNESS

The Good News about Jesus is that the Gospel has **power**. The all powerful God of the universe stands behind the Gospel message in order to help change the person who wants such power. People really do want to change. As a matter of fact, all the advertising that goes on in the world is based on one simple fact, and that is that people want things different than they are. They want to smell better, look better, and feel better. They want to appear rich, famous, and respected. They want to change their lives but they feel helpless to do so on their own. Listen to what Jesus said in Matthew 22:29 (NLT):

29 Jesus replied, "Your problem is that you don't know the Scriptures, and you don't know the power of God."

Jesus is saying that the people don't know what real power is.

The latter part of verse 16 needs a bit of clarification. Paul's first stop was usually the

¹ Parentheses added.

synagogue where he presented the Gospel message to the Jews first. “The synagogue provided a bridgehead for reaching Gentiles. Paul would often be taking the Gospel message into hostile territory and his chances of receiving a fair hearing were always better among the God-fearing Jews, who formed part of his audience in every synagogue.”² “For Christ was a Jew and therefore the descendant of Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, through whom the blessing of God was first secured, and while the blessing was ‘for all the people of the earth’ (Genesis 12:3), the first opportunity to receive it was naturally extended to Abraham’s own family, the Jews.”³ The synagogue provided a natural base of operations for then drawing Gentiles to hear the message.

In verse 16, Paul is also explaining why he’s eager to announce the Gospel, that Jesus is Lord of the world, including Rome. Paul says that the Gospel reveals **God’s own righteousness, His covenant faithfulness**, which operates through the faithfulness of Jesus for the benefit of all those who are faithful. He is telling the world the news that the God of all the world has been true to His Word, and through the cross has dealt decisively with the evil that has invaded the creation, and is now placing in motion the plan that will one day restore justice, peace, and truth for all those who believe.

The heart of the message of Romans is one of love. God’s justice is His love in action, to right the wrongs of His suffering world. God’s love is the driving force of His justice. Paul knows that no matter what happens the future is secure. The Gospel is the announcement of the lordship of Jesus and reveals God’s righteousness, His promise of faithfulness, His dealing with the sin of the world through the fulfillment of His promises in Christ. He has done all this righteously and impartially. He has dealt with sin, and rescued the helpless. He has thereby fulfilled all of His promises.

In Romans 1:17, Paul applies the same principle in the New Testament that applied in the Old Testament, and that principle is:

“The righteous person will live by faith.”

We see this same promise coming from God through the prophet Habakkuk in the Old Testament writing in Habakkuk 2:4, around 600 B.C.:

4 “Look at the proud! They trust in themselves, and their lives are crooked; but the righteous will live by their faith.

The second word we mentioned is **salvation**. God makes His power available so that a person might have salvation. **GOD’S POWER IS SEEN IN SALVATION**. Let’s jump over to Ephesians 2:8-10 and see what Paul wrote to the Ephesians:

8 God saved you by his special favor when you believed. And you can’t

² Bruce, F.F., The Book of the Acts (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1988). P. 247

³ Bruce, F.F., The Book of the Acts (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1988). P. 88.

take credit for this; it is a gift from God.

9 Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.

10 For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ

Jesus, so that we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.

The human race is spiritually dead in sin and the salvation act of God makes them alive in order that they might live forever. **They are cleansed of their sin** and made fit for the Kingdom of God.

Salvation means deliverance from the power and effects of sin.

One is cleansed of the effects of sin and washed clean by the blood of Christ. God now sees us as being pure, spotless, and without any trace of sin.

Only the Gospel of Christ has the **power** to do that. There is nothing else that can save you.

Human beings seem to have a love affair going with their vices, which bring them only despair. Salvation has the power to bring them peace and joy. So why do you think so many people think the Gospel sounds so stupid? It's because of the very thing that Jesus came to free us from, sin. Because of sin, Satan has the ability to control all those who are outside of the Kingdom of God. Those who choose not to accept Jesus as their Savior live outside the Kingdom of God in the kingdom of Satan. Those are the only two choices available. If you don't belong to God, you belong to Satan. And it is not beyond his power to make life very comfortable for those who follow his lead. He's very subtle and often allows his followers to believe they are very good people, even though deep in their hearts they know something is missing. Because of sin, Satan can make the message of the Gospel sound foolish to people and steer them in another direction. He can even make the concept of his own existence sound foolish to them which quite frequently results in a person scoffing at the existence of Satan. Listen to what Paul had to say about this is 1 Corinthians 1:18-20, 27-29:

18 I know very well how foolish the message of the cross sounds to those who are on the road to destruction. But we who are being saved recognize this message as the very power of God.

19 As the Scriptures say, "I will destroy human wisdom and discard their most brilliant ideas."

20 So where does this leave the philosophers, the scholars, and the world's brilliant debaters? God has made them all look foolish and has shown their wisdom to be useless nonsense.

27 God deliberately chose those who are powerless to shame those who are powerful.

28 God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important,

29 so that no one can ever boast in the presence of God.

In Acts 2:40 we're told that we're saved from a crooked and perverse generation. Some things don't change much in 2,000 years because that's exactly what people are saved from today as well. If you have an ounce of morality within you, you are no doubt grieved by the state of morality in our world today. If you **don't think** there's a problem with decency and values in our culture today there's an excellent chance you're beginning to feel the hair on the back of your neck beginning to stand straight up. Having spent the greatest part of my life as an atheist I can understand where you're at, but that simply does not change what the Bible has to say about right and wrong. You might also be interested in knowing that a recent Gallup pole indicates that 8 out of 10 Americans think morality is at an all time low.⁴

We're not here to tell you what you should believe. Our purpose here is to give you an honest presentation of what the Bible says and honestly answer any questions you may have based on what the Bible says. The rest is between you and God. Hopefully, you will accept it, but history confirms that many will not. Some of you may accept part of it and reject part of it, and again that's between you and the Holy Spirit of God. No matter what your response, it will not alter our feelings toward you one single bit. We will continue to welcome you here as long as your interested in coming and hearing the Word of God. Village church is a family and we will care for one another, be considerate of one another, not be judgmental of each other's feelings, and in no way hurt one another. Anyone who doesn't want to be part of that should look for another church.

But let there be no doubt where the leadership of this church stands. The Bible is the one and only source of God's Word and anything that is added to it or subtracted from it by humankind cannot be looked upon as the authoritative Word of God. Listen to the Word of God as John transcribes it in Revelation 22:18,19:

*And I solemnly declare to everyone who hears the prophetic words of this book: If anyone **adds anything** to what is written here, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book.*

*19 And if anyone **removes any of the words** of this prophetic book, God will remove that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city that are described in this book.*

There are already an untold number of people throughout history that have suffered the consequences of using God's Word for their own personal benefit. It is spiritual suicide to tamper with the Bible and its meaning, and we as teachers and pastors are most definitely aware of this warning from God. That warning is clearly stated in James 3:1:

*Dear brothers and sisters, not many of you should become teachers in the church, for we who teach will be judged by God **with greater strictness.***

That should send shudders up the backs of most pastors in this country.

⁴ Montez, Josh, Morals in Poor Standing (Gallup Poll, 6/1/04).

With that having been said let us continue by turning to Romans 1:17:

*This Good News tells us how God makes us right in his sight. This is accomplished from start to finish by **faith**. As the Scriptures say, “It is through **faith** that a righteous person has life.”*

This verse brings us to the third word, or words, to be more exact. The words **BELIEF** and **FAITH** are interchangeable. We’ve seen that the **POWER** of God through His Holy Spirit can produce **SALVATION**. For whom, therefore, is this power and salvation released?

FOR EVERYONE WHO BELIEVES.

Where there is faith, there you will find the power of God. You might ask, “What is faith?”

Faith is believing. Faith is trust.

To one degree or another we all live by faith. Think about the last time you got on an airplane. Did you know the pilot personally? Did you have an opportunity to interview him and review his resume? Did you check to determine if his blood-alcohol level was OK? Probably not. But you had faith that whoever was up there was qualified to fly. What about the last time you flipped on a light switch? Did you doubt for a moment that the lights wouldn’t go on? That was faith. So we live by faith all the time, don’t we? That’s the only way we can survive. It would therefore not be too much of a stretch to suggest that we all have been created in such a way that we understand what it means to live by faith.

Faith in God should not be any harder for us to activate than it is to have faith that the lights will go on, the car will start, or the elevator will go up and down.

Faith in God is nothing more than **BELIEVING** and **TRUSTING**. The **POWER** of God can bring about **SALVATION**, but it will only save those who **BELIEVE**.

Believe what?

Believe in your heart that God became a man in the person of Jesus Christ and came to this earth to free people from their bondage to sin and death. Believe that He was willing to go to the cross and die a tortuous death that few of us could even imagine (those who have seen the movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, have some idea of his actual suffering). Believe that the Holy Spirit resurrected Jesus from the dead and that He showed Himself to many people over the course of forty days and nights, and then ascended into Heaven to be our advocate before the throne of God. If you believe that, God will declare you righteous, and by His declaring you righteous you will be saved and guaranteed eternity in Heaven. Let’s look at Ephesians 2:8,9 again:

8 God saved you by his special favor when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God.

9 Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.

God does not ask us to jump through hoops, He asks us to believe. THE BEHAVIOR COMES AFTER SALVATION. Therefore, it is essential that you understand that salvation does not come from declaring that you are a Christian. Salvation does not come to a person when they are simply baptized, nor does it come because they have accomplished moral reform. Salvation is not granted to someone just because they go to church, or conform to the rules of the church, or because they exercise discipline and self-restraint.

So many people think they are saved for all the wrong reasons. Salvation does not come to a person through the church. It comes to a man, woman, or child when they recognize they do not have the resources to manage their own lives all by themselves, that they are lost and in need of a Savior, and call upon His saving power by saying from the heart, "I believe!"

This takes us to the fourth word, **righteousness**. Now we have to be very deliberate in determining the meaning of the term righteousness in this verse or it can be gravely misinterpreted. There are certain teachers of the Scripture that we have a deep respect for that interpret verse 17 as saying that because humans have no righteousness of their own, faith helps the person to see the righteousness of God and because they now see God's righteousness and believe that God is righteous, God gives them His righteousness so they might be saved. We do not believe that is the Bible's meaning here and we'll tell you why. Paul writes in Romans 4:5:

5 But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.

The definition of "the righteousness of God" is taken from the Hebrew law court. God's righteousness may be defined therefore in the same way that the judge's righteousness in the Hebrew law court was defined. **Righteousness** for the judge means he must try the case according to the law; he must be impartial; he must punish sin, or some might call it wrongdoing or crime, and he must support those who are defenseless. God's righteousness can be defined simply as **God's own faithfulness to His promises**. God is righteous because He is perfect and keeps every one of His promises. That is not the kind of righteousness Romans 1:17 refers to when it speaks of a "righteous person."

The righteousness referred to in verse 17 is a condition in which God declares us not guilty of sin.

Because of our faith (and belief or trust mean the same thing as faith) **in what Jesus did**, we are declared innocent of sin in the sight of God.

Because we have been joined to His Son through our belief, we are cleansed and God no longer sees sin in us.

All that He sees in us is the perfection of Jesus.

We hope we might summarize all we've discussed here in the form of a chart that hopefully will help you solidify these things in your mind:

GOD goes to earth in the form of the man, **JESUS** → to present the **GOSPEL** message to **ALL PEOPLE**.

When they read or hear the **GOSPEL**, the **HOLY SPIRIT** helps them to understand it.

If they believe, God declares them to be **RIGHTEOUS**,

which means they have been **JOINED** to Christ
and are capable of becoming like Him,
which means they are fit for the **KINGDOM OF GOD**.

Because they're **JOINED** to Christ, God does not see their sin.

They then have **PEACE** here and **HEAVEN** for eternity.

Salvation is a **gift** from God and can only come from Him. The gift is guaranteed to all those who believe the message delivered by His Son, Jesus. In this way God sees the believer as having kept the entire Law in Christ. Because Christ kept the law perfectly and because we have attached our lives to His, God sees us as, and declares us to be, law keepers (righteous), perfectly holy. I don't want to get too theological here but this is the essence of the Gospel message that is found in the four words we highlighted and which leads us to this conclusion. If anyone has any questions regarding this process, please discuss them with us.

Now we'll move to the last part of this chapter, Romans 1:18-32, which discusses the **consequences of not believing** in the Gospel message of Christ. Romans 1:18:

But God shows his anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who push the truth away from themselves.

Surprised? There can be no question that God makes a very clear statement regarding His

feelings toward those who reject the truth of His message through His Son, Jesus. This verse stands in total contrast to the message delivered by most churches today. They prefer to talk about God's love. They prefer to talk about happiness, abundant living, forgiveness, joy, and peace. They offer people all of these things, things which God does provide in varying proportions to those who believe His message presented through the Bible, but they avoid mentioning the aspect of God's character that is released against those who reject that message.

It's interesting, don't you think, for Paul to introduce this aspect of God's character very early in his message to the Romans. We believe he does so in order that people might better understand God's love, grace, salvation, and forgiveness. Besides, unless you realize you're in grave danger, there really isn't any reason to recognize the need for a Savior, is there? If anyone is interested we could provide you a complete list of Bible verses describing the nature of God's wrath, but at this point we'll suggest you might read John 3:36; Colossians 3:5,6; and Ephesians 5:6, for further confirmation.

In the previous verses we saw that salvation can only come to a person through a declaration from God based on their faith. Romans 1:18 then correctly states that **without that declaration** of salvation from God all people are considered unrighteous. They are therefore under God's wrath and unless they somehow get out from under, they are not going to receive the gift of salvation. This will result in a final judgment, which in effect they have chosen for themselves because of their stubbornness and pride. And yes that judgment will be an eternity separated from God in the place the Bible refers to as Hell. Paul expresses this very well in Ephesians 2:1-3:

1 Once you were dead, doomed forever because of your many sins.

2 You used to live just like the rest of the world, full of sin, obeying Satan, the mighty prince of the power of the air. He is the spirit at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God.

3 All of us used to live that way, following the passions and desires of our evil nature. We were born with an evil nature, and we were under God's anger just like everyone else.

But remember that God's anger is not like our anger. The anger of God is always perfect anger, it is a righteous anger, a proper expression of His pure holiness. Our anger is often based on a bad temper, selfishness, pride, and a number of other negative attributes. God's wrath stems from a perfection that cannot tolerate anything that isn't pure. God's wrath is directed at those to whom he has given life and who in turn deny Him as their Father. His wrath is a result of perfect judgment.

You might be wondering what God's wrath looks like. Well, God revealed His wrath for the first time in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve disobeyed His command. Immediately God passed upon them the sentence of death; the earth was cursed as well, and Adam and Eve were thrown out of paradise. This should have been the lesson that taught the world that God will not tolerate sin. God's wrath was also revealed in the flood when God drowned the whole world except for eight faithful followers (Noah, his wife,

his three sons, and their wives). Then there was the drowning of Pharaoh's army as they chased the Israelites through the parted waters of the Red Sea. God's wrath was again revealed when Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by fire from Heaven because of rampant homosexuality. These are just a few examples of how God's wrath has been manifested. There are many more, but I think you get some idea how God expresses His feeling about persistent sin in the lives of individuals or nations. As a matter of fact the wrath of God is constantly revealed in our world today.

How is it that some evil people seem to prosper? Why doesn't God punish them for the way they live? Their time is coming. God's bowl of wrath is continually filling in the lives of such people. God may even be giving them some additional time to repent and come to Him. But if they refuse that merciful patience, the day will come when they will pay for how they've lived and pay dearly. It is a foolish person who says, "There is no God." Why would one say that? Because they know that if God does exist they're in big trouble. The other side of that is that many people invent the kind of god they know will tolerate their life style. What a shock awaits them when they die. Remember, however, there is Good News. Christ has taken the full fury of God's wrath for everyone who will accept His gracious substitution.

Let's now continue in Romans 1 with the passage from Romans 1:19-23, and we'll include verse 18 for transition and clarity:

18 But God shows his anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who push the truth away from themselves.

19 FOR THE TRUTH ABOUT GOD IS KNOWN TO THEM INSTINCTIVELY. GOD HAS PUT THIS KNOWLEDGE IN THEIR HEARTS.

*20 From the time the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky and all that God made. **They can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature.** So they have no excuse whatsoever for not knowing God.*

21 Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn't worship him as God or even give him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. The result was that their minds became dark and confused.

22 Claiming to be wise, they became utter fools instead.

23 And instead of worshiping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshiped idols made to look like mere people, or birds and animals and snakes.

As we look at these verses, you should begin to understand why God's wrath is justified. In verses 19 and 20 we see that God has made His existence known to people through His created world and universe. God would never send anyone to Hell that didn't have an opportunity to know Him. This is the answer to those who refuse to believe because they think God isn't being fair to those people who have never seen a Bible. Remember what we just read in verse 19? "**FOR THE TRUTH ABOUT GOD IS KNOWN TO THEM INSTINCTIVELY. GOD HAS PUT THIS KNOWLEDGE IN THEIR HEARTS.**" And verse 20 told us that through God's creation, people can see the power and presence of God. You see God

is a God of justice and He is the perfect judge. The evidence of God's presence is all around us in nature. Look at the variety of flowers, each unique in design. Look at the variety of birds, each unique in their design. Look at the marvel of the universe and its perfection of design and function. Look at the human body and the complexity of design and function, and the remarkable fact that two human bodies have the ability to produce another complex human body, identical in all the basic necessities and yet unique in many ways. Verse 19 also tells us that what is knowable about God is revealed to each person in their heart.

This is simply saying that when a person looks at nature they perceive in their hearts that it is the result of God's creation.

Everyone in the world, therefore, has the opportunity to know God, including those pygmies in Africa that people keep referring to. If you're one of those who doubt God for this reason, I would suggest that you worry more about yourself than those who have never seen a Bible, because you're hearing the message right now, and if you reject it for any reason, your fate will be sealed. God will be perfectly just to those who have never had an opportunity to see or hear the Gospel. Psalm 19:1 says it all:

The heavens tell of the glory of God. The skies display his marvelous craftsmanship.

When someone tells me that creation just happened, that simply makes no sense. It's like taking your computer apart piece by piece, putting it in a box, shaking it, and expecting the computer to go back together again in perfect working order. Such a statement is absolutely ridiculous. Design speaks of a designer.

Romans 1:21 clearly tells us that people have rejected the clear evidence of God's existence. When people find God in creation, they reject Him, and turn away from Him. If you think about it, human beings are the only thing God created that refuse to do what God designed them to do. The heavens, trees, and tides all function according to God's design. So do the animals. It's only humankind that insists on doing their own thing and who refuse to recognize God.

In verse 22 we find that having had their hearts and minds darkened they became fools. Darkness means they were filled with meaningless thoughts and empty words, intellectual ignorance, and an absence of righteousness. They went from having truth and wisdom to emptiness, they forfeited understanding and virtue. All that comes from the vain thoughts of human beings is a legacy of darkness, both intellectual and moral. Paul makes this even more clear when he writes in Colossians 2:8:

8 Don't let anyone lead you astray with empty philosophy and high-sounding nonsense that come from human thinking and from the evil powers of this world, and not from Christ.

Don't let anyone distract you with human wisdom, theories about truth that come out of a darkened heart. The same applies to people who think they use common sense to find the right solution. This is simply the same thing because it is not part of God's truth and wisdom. What comes out of the human mind apart from God embodies the fundamental principles of the world, which has come to mean in this day and age: "*Forget morality, just make money and satisfy your pleasures.*" So a rejection of God's revelation of His existence leaves human beings with a legacy of sin. **They are left with empty, meaningless, human philosophy.** Their darkened hearts are filled with deceit, yet they announce to others that they are wise. That is called rationalization and denial and both represent a loss of touch with reality, as we saw earlier in 1 Corinthians 1:18-20:

In this sorry state that humankind has allowed itself to slide, they decided they would become religious, and they began to make gods out of statues of people and animals. They worshipped the sun, moon, and stars. Some people look at religion as the highest attainment of human good when actually it is the pit, the lowest achievement of human wisdom. After people reject the real God, they have an empty feeling in their heart and they think they can fill it by creating a god of their own. So they make one up. It is almost as foolish as a husband and wife abandoning their daughter and then going out and buying a ventriloquist dummy to replace the daughter and proceeding through life introducing the dummy as their daughter. People like that are candidates for mental institutions, but our society elevates them as "great thinkers and scholars."

You might find it interesting that a tooth is revered by 400 million Buddhists as the most sacred object on earth. They claim the tooth was rescued from the funeral pyre of Buddha in 453 B.C. They've set the tooth in a golden lotus blossom in a temple they call the Temple of the Tooth. They've surrounded it with rubies and flowers. People come from many countries to worship it, bringing gifts of gold, silver, and jewels. This is just one of a multitude of gods Buddhists worship.

Some so-called Christian churches offer the very same kind of idol worship. The Roman Catholic Church claims to have several locks of hair of the virgin Mary in churches at Naples and Rome. It is also said that Mary's wedding ring is in a cathedral in Peru. The holy basin used at the last supper is supposedly kept at a cathedral in Genoa. Legs, fingers, and arms of John the Baptist are supposedly available for viewing as well. This is not what God had in mind when He created the world and the people who inhabit the world. Does God have a right to be angry about sin? You bet He does. But again we have to remember God's anger is not like human anger. His anger is righteous anger and He deals with His anger in a perfectly just manner. God's wrath is no less a divine perfection than His love or His holiness. It's as much an element of His perfection as anything else. It is divine perfection. Way back in the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah made a statement that would endure for all time, Isaiah 44:9-11:

*9 How foolish are those who manufacture idols to be their gods. These highly valued objects are really **worthless**. They themselves are witnesses that this is so, for their idols neither see nor know. No wonder those who*

worship them are put to shame.

*10 Who but a fool would make his own god—**an idol that cannot help him/her one bit!***

11 All who worship idols will stand before the Lord in shame, along with all these craftsmen—mere humans—who claim they can make a god. Together they will stand in terror and shame.

Romans 1:23 says that people exchanged the glory and power of the true God for images of stone, wood, and metal. Today we exchange the glory and power of the true God for money, power, good looks, sexual satisfaction, and a thousand other forms of personal pleasure.

Next time we'll tap into the meaning of the statement, "*God will render to every man and woman according to their deeds.*"