



This past week Lynn and I made arrangements to visit Washington D.C. next month. Believe it or not, neither of us have ever been there. Our kids have been there, most of you have been there, but we've never been there. And so, we've been eager to get there for a long time, and finally an opportunity presented itself. We can't wait to see the White House, the Lincoln Memorial, the Vietnam Memorial. We're counting the days.

In many ways, I think this is how the Apostle Paul felt. Although he was a highly educated and well traveled man, he'd never been to Rome. Rome was a great city, the center of Western Civilization. A first time visitor to Rome would run to see the great Colosseum, the Pantheon, the Roman Forum and all the palaces on Palatine Hill. But Paul wasn't interested in visiting Rome to sightsee. In the opening sentence of this letter to Rome Paul says he's eager to visit Rome not as a tourist but to preach the gospel there. The word he uses tells us he has more than just a passing desire to get to Rome, but a compulsion; he was dying to get there.

Why do you think that was? Pretend for a moment we're children. What's the favorite question children like to ask? Why? Kids love to ask, Why?

I say to my five-year-old granddaughter, "Peyton, let's go to the park."

"Why?"

"Because it's a nice day out."

"Why?"

"Because the sun is shining."

"Why?"

I want to play that game with Paul this morning. "Paul, why are you eager to preach the gospel?" He answers that question in verses 16-17 of chapter one.

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."

Paul is eager to preach the gospel in Rome? Why? Because he's not ashamed of the gospel.

We Should be Eager to Preach the Gospel Because We're Not Ashamed of It

When Paul says he's not ashamed of the gospel a lot of people think that's just another way of him saying he's really excited about the gospel. Like there's no way Paul would even think of being ashamed of the gospel. We think, "Paul was so articulate and bright; such a great communicator; so passionate and full of conviction. How could Paul ever be ashamed?" But I disagree. I think Paul said this because there were times he **was** tempted to feel ashamed. I can think of a few reasons Paul—and you and me as well—might feel ashamed of the gospel.

First of all, when you think about it, who was Paul? Rome was the symbol of imperial pride and power. People spoke of it with awe. Paul might have thought, "Who am I to think I have something to say Rome will listen to? According to tradition, Paul was an ugly little guy with a unibrow, bandy legs, a bald head, a hooked nose, bad eyesight and a poor speaker. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, *"I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words..."* (1 Cor. 3-4). How could a guy like that think an educated Roman would listen to him? Some of us feel the same way. We're ashamed of the gospel not so much because of its content but because of its carrier. Who am I? Why would people listen to me?

But there are other reasons. We might be ashamed of the gospel because it declares God chose to save us through a crucified Savior. Have you ever stopped to think about that? We worship conquerors, not criminals. We worship powerful athletes, brilliant entrepreneurs and talented entertainers. When Paul wrote Romans the cross of Christ was already a laughingstock in the Roman world. Archeologists have found ancient graffiti in Rome—a drawing on a plaster wall near the Circus Maximus depicts a man worshipping the crucified Christ. But guess what: in that image Jesus is portrayed as a donkey on the cross. The message is clear: to worship a crucified king is asinine! Have you ever felt that? I have. I'm out playing golf with a few old friends. One of them asks, "I hear you're a Christian. What's that all about?" And there's that moment when you know you have to say it. "Well, I came to believe Jesus is the Son of God and he died on the cross for my sins and..." Their eyes are drilling holes in your head. The heat rises on your neck. Your face is red as a beet.

Then you have to explain **why** he had to die on the cross. That's another reason we might feel shame. Isn't the message of the gospel insulting in that regard? Aren't we all basically good? We might be a little goofed up but that's because of our dysfunctional families and too much fast food! But the gospel tells me I'm so bad only the death of the sinless Son of God can save me. I get that no one's perfect. Maybe God won't give me an "A" but at least I'll pass. But you're telling me I don't have to do anything, in fact, I **can't** do anything to earn God's favor. God looks at all my good deeds and all my efforts to be a good person and says, "That's not enough. You're not even close. The only way you can gain salvation is by receiving it as a gift." Really? Where's your self-respect?

Then there's this idea that the gospel tells me it's only through Jesus I can possibly be saved. Have you ever tried to explain that to someone today? It's so narrow. It's not PC at all. It's like you're telling me all those Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and all those "spiritual" people out there who grow up and learn their religion and try to be good are going to hell without Jesus? Haven't we moved beyond that kind of narrow and intolerant thinking?

There's one more reason we might be ashamed. I'm not sure if Paul experienced this or not, but sometimes I'm ashamed of the gospel because it lumps me together with some really weird people (not any of you, of course!) But let's be honest, Christians can be really weird. You're out to lunch with a few friends, not all of whom are believers. Someone says her daughter just had a baby and your friend, the Christian one, says, "Praise Jeeesus." Not "Jesus," but "Jeeesus." You want to climb under the table. Let's face it, some Christians are weird!

There's a lot of reasons Paul and many of us might feel ashamed of the gospel. But let's go back to my question: Why?

"Paul, why are you so eager to preach the gospel in Rome?"

"Because I'm not ashamed of the gospel?"

"Why Paul? Why are you not ashamed of the gospel?"

Paul answers that question in the rest of these verses. In essence Paul says, "I'm not ashamed of the gospel because it changes lives, and I believe people desperately need to hear it." We'll never be eager and unashamed to share the gospel unless we believe it changes lives and people desperately need to hear it.

We Shouldn't be Ashamed of the Gospel Because it's the Power of God that Brings Salvation

Look what he says about the life-changing message of the gospel. First, he says the Gospel is the power of God that brings salvation. Paul was writing to the Romans and they appreciated power, just as Americans do. They prided themselves on their power. They had military power to conquer all the nations that stood in their path; they had a tremendous program of transportation; they had some of the greatest law-makers in history; they had the

power to write literature and create art. But they were powerless when it came to changing hearts. They couldn't eliminate slavery; half of the population of the Roman Empire were slaves. Rome was full of violence; the suicide rate was off the charts. They could do nothing about those things. Neither can we. Here we are, one of the most wealthy, educated and privileged nations on earth, and yet violent crime and suicides are epidemic. Paul says that's why he's not ashamed of the gospel—it's the power of God to do what education and technology and really smart people can't do.

Paul says the gospel **is** the power of God; it doesn't have the power of God or bring the power of God, it **is** the power of God. The preaching of the gospel doesn't merely make salvation possible but actually affects salvation to those who believe. A Syrian bishop in the fifth century said the gospel is like a pepper. "A pepper seems to be outwardly cold, but the person who crunches it between the teeth experiences the sensation of burning fire." In the same way, the gospel might appear at first to be a benignly interesting theory or philosophy, but if we take it in personally, we find it's full of power.

Paul says it brings salvation. Salvation from what? Paul will unpack that in the next few chapters of Romans, but for now understand salvation means to be delivered or liberated from something or someone, like the Israelites were delivered from slavery in Egypt. What the gospel brings is salvation from the penalty and the power and eventually the even the presence of sin. This salvation is both a present reality and a future hope. Part of what we'll be saved from is the future wrath of God against sin. In Romans 5:9 Paul says, "*Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!*"

Paul says he's eager to preach the gospel. Why? Because he's not ashamed of the gospel. Why? Because it's the power of God for salvation. One more time: Why? Why is it the power of God for salvation? Paul answers that in the next line. He says, "*for in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed.*" This is another reason not to be ashamed.

We Shouldn't be Ashamed of the Gospel Because in It the Righteousness of God is Revealed

Scholars have debated for centuries over what Paul means by "the righteousness of God" and how it's revealed in the gospel. Everyone agrees righteousness is an attribute of God. His character is righteous and just. Like Abraham asked, "*Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?*" (Gen. 18:10). The answer is, of course! So, whatever God does through the gospel is right and just. But again, how is the righteousness of God revealed in the gospel? It's revealed in the sense that this righteousness isn't just an attribute of God but it's something God gives to us. This is a

righteousness from God. For us to be right with God we must be righteous, but none of us are.

Later in Romans Paul says, *“There is no one who is righteous, not even one”* (Rom. 3:10). That’s a problem. God is holy and just. He can’t just say, “No big deal. Nobody’s perfect.” What kind of judge would say to a guilty criminal standing in a courtroom of justice, “No big deal. Just go home and try to do a little better.” Every one of us stands guilty before God. But through the gospel God found a just way to make us right. The price of justice was pain. Paul says Romans 3, *“God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith... He did this to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus”* (Rom. 3:25-26).

So the righteousness of God revealed in the gospel is God’s righteous way of making sinners right with himself through the death of his Son. It’s his just justification of the unjust. And it takes place apart from any good works on our part. It’s all grace.

It reminds me of a story about a man who died and faced the angel Gabriel at heaven’s gates. The angel said, “Here’s how this works. You need a hundred points to make it into heaven. You tell me all the good things you’ve done, and I’ll give a some points for each of them. The more good there is in the work you cite, the more points you’ll get. When you get to a hundred points, you get in.”

“Okay,” the man said, “I was married to the same woman for 50 years and never cheated on her, even in my heart.”

Gabriel replied, “That’s wonderful. That’s worth three points.”

“Three points?” the guy said. “Well, I attended church all my life and supported its ministry with my money and service.”

“Terrific!” said Gabriel, “that’s certainly worth a point.”

“One point?” the guy was starting to panic.

“Well, how about this: I opened a shelter for the homeless in my city, and fed needy people by the hundreds during holidays.”

“Fantastic, that’s good for two more points,” said the angel.

“Two points!” he cried in desperation. “At this rate the only way I’ll get to heaven is by the grace of God.”

“Come on in,” said Gabriel.

That’s the righteousness of God revealed in the gospel. You can’t earn it. It’s all grace. But who is it for? Who gets to benefit from this? Is it for everyone or just a few? If this is just some kind of exclusive club for the privileged few I might have reason to be ashamed. On the other hand, if there was no response required on my part, that would be a problem too.

We Shouldn’t be Ashamed Because It’s Both Boundless and Boundaried

But we needn’t worry about that because Paul says the gospel is both boundless and boundaried. It’s boundless. Paul uses the word “everyone.” That’s what Paul is getting at when he says, “first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.” Yes, the Jews have a priority over the gentiles as God’s chosen people. They were the guardians of the Old Testament scripture. The Messiah himself, Jesus Christ, came first as a Jew to the Jews. That’s why Jesus said, *“salvation is from the Jews”* (John 4:22). So when Paul came into a city to preach the gospel he’d go first to the Jewish synagogue and preach there. But he didn’t stop there. This gospel is also for the gentiles. The fact that Jews have priority doesn’t mean the gentiles are excluded. God’s purpose was always to bless the whole world through the Jews. This good news is for all of us regardless of our ethnicity.

This church is living proof of that. One thing I love about this church is our diversity. We’re a reflection of the wonderful impact of the gospel on every race and nation. Let’s test this out. If you’re an East Indian believer (African American, Middle Eastern Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, Pacific Island, Caucasian) stand up... I tell you what, I’m not ashamed of that!

But here’s the deal. The gospel is boundless but it’s also boundaried. Paul says this gospel is the power of God, not just to everyone but “to everyone who believes.” He supports that by quoting a verse from the book of Habakkuk, *“The righteous will live by faith.”* Faith is more than just mental assent; but also includes an active trust, putting your weight on a promise. Faith isn’t just something we start the Christian life with and then graduate to good works. Paul says it’s *“by faith from first to last.”* You start with faith and you end with faith. Some of you aren’t Christians yet. You go to church. You say your prayers. You may even call yourself a Christian. But you haven’t put your trust in Jesus. You’re still trying to earn his favor. Some of you are Christians. You started with faith but you’re trying to build on that faith with something else, like your own good works. God doesn’t move us **beyond** faith; he moves us more deeply **into** it, because all the power we need to change and grow comes **through** faith in the gospel. Faith doesn’t just ignite the Christian life; it’s the fuel that keeps us going every day.

It’s like you buy your son what you think is the perfect gift. He tears open the gift, but ends up playing with the box. It drives you crazy so you try to find the perfect gifts. You shop and finally find the gift and you’re so excited the moment he unwraps it. He rips it open, sees the toy and he actually begins to play with it. You’re so excited. Finally, victory! You go into the kitchen to get something to drink, you’re there a few minutes, and then you come and what’s he doing? He’s sitting in the box and ignoring the gift! You can’t believe it.

You and I have been given the most awesome gift ever given. It's priceless. It's the gift every human being needs. In all your work, effort and achievement you couldn't ever have earned it. It's the gift of gifts; the gospel of Jesus Christ, but I'm deeply persuaded in the face of this gift, there are many Christians who are content to just play with the box.

I'm convinced when we understand the life-changing nature of the gospel, when we open the box and actually make that gift our own and use it every day, we can't possibly be ashamed of it. This year, as one church on three campuses, we'll continue

to study the book of Romans and remember this rally cry—Not Ashamed! Our goal isn't just to play with the box but to actually put this gift to use in our own lives and then to share it with others. I want to encourage you to memorize these two verses. Ask God to give you a deeper understanding of the gospel so you won't be ashamed of it. And then look for opportunities to share this message.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2015 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA
Catalog No. 1418-3