

What Then Are We to Say About these Things?

1. The Righteousness of God Romans 1:1-17

Easter 2
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In this year of ‘lasts’ in my ministry with you,
there has also been some ‘firsts.’

To name a few:

- A Lenten sermon series based on the Penitential Psalms
- A café-style worship area for Easter Sunday,
- and a two-part Bible study on Romans along with this five-week series under Paul’s question: “What then are we to say about these things?”

So, you might be wondering,
“Why Romans and why now?”

The honest answer: in my many years as a pastor-scholar, I have avoided a series on Romans because I thought I would come across more as a scholar than as a pastor.

Now I am ready to be a little bit of both.

What better person for a Lutheran pastor like myself to quote from than Martin Luther.

In his *Preface to the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans*, here’s what Luther said:

“Paul’s Letter to the Romans is really the chief part of the New Testament and is truly the purest gospel.

It is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word by word, by heart, but also that all believers should occupy themselves with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul.

We can never read or ponder it too much, for the more we deal with it, the more precious it becomes and the better it tastes.”

As those who have attended the first part
of our Romans Bible study can attest,
Paul's Letter to the Romans is the apostle's
longest letter and it stands first in
the sequence of his letters in the New Testament.

Romans is also most widely consulted by those
who seek Paul's authority on the preaching of
the gospel and the teachings of the early church.

Romans can also be cited for its theological
impact upon the work and reforming activities
of major figures such as Augustine, Luther,
John Calvin, and John Wesley.

What is it about Romans that has proved
so life-changing and history-shaping?

It is because Romans is about the gospel.

Paul is writing to the church in Rome
around AD 57 because he wanted them
first to understand the gospel, and then
to experience the gospel.

He was likely writing to them during his
third missionary journey, quite possibly
from Corinth in Greece.

They were Christians he had never met,
though he hoped to do so in the near future.

They seem to have been a church suffering
from tensions between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

Even though Paul did not have first-hand
knowledge of them, he knew what they most
needed to hear – the gospel.

That's what Luther himself needed.

Martin Luther was a German Augustinian
monk and professor of Bible theology at
Wittenberg University, who had been taught
that God required him to live a righteous
life in order to be saved.

And so, as he admitted to his confessor,
Johan von Staupitz, Luther had grown to
hate God, for first requiring him
what he could not do, and then
for leaving him to fail.

Then Luther read and finally grasped
 the meaning of the last verse in today's text:
 For in it (the gospel) the righteousness
 of God is revealed through faith for faith;
 as it is written. "The one who is righteous
 will live by faith" (v.17).

Listen to Luther's own words as to his great
 spiritual discovery; his *aha* moment that
 set in motion the Protestant Reformation.
 "I labored diligently and anxiously as to
 how to understand Paul's word.....the expression
 'the righteousness of God stood in my way,
 because I took it to mean that righteousness
 whereby God is righteous and deals
 righteously in punishing the unrighteous.
 Although an impeccable monk, I stood
 before God as a sinner....therefore I did
 not love a righteous and angry God,
 but rather hated and murmured against him...."

"Then I grasped that the righteousness of God
 is that righteousness by which through
 grace and sheer mercy God justifies us
 by faith."

"Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and
 to have gone through open doors into paradise...
 I broke through."

"And as I had formerly hated the expression
 'the righteousness of God, I now began
 to regard it as my dearest and most
 comforting word...."

As Luther so powerfully describes, "this gospel
 of God" as Paul states at the outset of his
 greatest letter is a declaration about
 God's righteousness.

It was the message that the perfection and
 holiness of God has been seen and witnessed
 in the life and death of Jesus Christ;
 and this perfection is offered to us,
 as a free gift, through the life and
 death of Jesus Christ.

That is the “Gospel” message of Romans
 In Romans, Paul shows us not only how
 God in the gospel makes sinners righteous,
 but also how this most precious gift of
 God is enjoyed in our lives – how it
 produces changes in our behavior and
 even in our churches.

Reading and reflecting on this letter today,
 we should be prepared to have our hearts
 shaped and our lives changed by God’s
 gift of righteousness, just as so many
 others have been.

Romans will prompt us to ask:
 Have I, like Martin Luther, “broken through”
 into the freedom and release the gospel
 brings me, both in terms of my future
 and in my life right now?

Unsurprisingly, the beginning of the letter to
 the Romans is all about the gospel.

Paul begins by introducing himself.

He is Paul.

And first and foremost he is a ‘servant of Christ Jesus’ (truly)

Servant here means literally slave.

Paul like any other slave has a master;
 he is a person under authority.

Paul also has been “called to be an apostle” – a sent one.

This is not a job Paul applied for;

he was “called” into it – he was transformed
 and commissioned by Christ himself.

Why did the Lord call and set apart Paul
 to be an apostle?

So that he would spread the gospel;
 that is Paul’s one overriding purpose.

This is what Paul will “slave” for all his life.

What is this “gospel” for which Paul is
 willing to slave?

What gospel would make a person like Paul
 happy to lose everything in order to share it?

Consider the original meaning of the word, gospel.
 “Gospel” literally means “good herald.”

In Paul's first century, if the Romans won a
 great battle, heralds would be sent to the
 emperor in Rome to declare victory.
 Put most simply, the gospel is an announcement –
 a declaration.

The gospel is not advice to be followed;
 it is news, good news about what has been done.

The apostle Paul is the herald of the announcement.
 It is a good reminder that the gospel is not Paul's;
 it did not originate from him; rather
 it is "of God."

We, like Paul, are not at liberty to reshape it,
 to make it more appealing to the mores of our day,
 to reshape it to sound more attractive
 and comfortable for our lives.

The gospel's content is God's "Son."

The gospel centers on Jesus.

It is about a person, not a concept;
 it is about him, not us.

We never grasp the gospel until we understand
 that it is not fundamentally a message
 about our lives, dreams, and hopes.

It is a declaration about God's Son.

Paul goes on to profess that he is "not ashamed
 of the gospel" (v. 16), because it "is the power of God."

The message of the gospel is what God has done
 and will do for us.

Paul says the gospel, therefore, is a power.

It is the power of God in verbal form.

It lifts people up; it transforms and changes things.

It is the power of God "unto salvation."

All that is required to know this salvation is belief:
 it is offered to everyone who believes.

Faith is the channel or connection to the power
 of the gospel.

Notice Paul says it is for everyone.

It came to the Jews first, through Jesus the Messiah,
 but it is for the Gentile as well –
 everyone and anyone.

It is for everyone who believes.

That is why we baptize infants like Logan,
 so he will grow up and become a believer.

Here's the thing – the gospel is the righteousness
of God revealed.

Right standing is received from God,
offered to us by the Son.

It is not something that we earn or accomplish
on our own; that's what drove Luther crazy
because he could never achieve the righteousness
he thought he had to achieve for salvation.

Righteousness is a gift like baptism,
it is received by faith alone, by grace alone,
through Christ alone.

Beloved people of God,

Paul himself had a Luther moment when he
read and quoted from the prophet Habakkuk,
who wrote: “The righteous will live by faith.”

The gospel will always cause offense,
because it reveals us as having a need
that we can never meet.

We need to remember that the gospel, like God,
is for us.

The gospel is the power of God, it reveals God's
righteousness, and it is the way
we receive God's righteousness.

When we come to know the gospel, feel its power,
we become eager to know more of the wonder
and power of the gospel for our lives.

When that happens we become eager to
herald it for others.

We can never earn our own righteousness,
but because of Christ, in God's eyes
we are already righteous.

That, my brothers and sisters is the gospel.