



Temple Baptist Church
Wilmington, North Carolina
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The Gospel
Romans 1:16-17; 3:21-26

Maybe it's happened to you. You're reading a book or article or listening to a presentation and you come across a word you don't know. You don't have a dictionary with you or a device you can use to access Google, so you try to deduce the meaning of the word based on its context and the way it's being used. Later on, you find out you were only partly right, or maybe totally wrong. Either way, it changed the meaning of what you were reading or listening to.

Or maybe the word looked or sounded familiar, but you just couldn't remember what it meant. You thought it meant one thing, but in reality it meant something very different. Or maybe your understanding was partly right, but it wasn't completely accurate.

The gospel—the good news—of Jesus Christ is one of those phrases we often misunderstand. For those who haven't yet trusted Christ as Lord and Savior, it may all be very new to them. For those who have walked with him awhile, maybe they just don't fully understand.

So what is the gospel all about?

Listen to what Paul said here in the first part of our text, Romans 1:16-17 . . .

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."¹

Paul was writing this letter to the Roman church as something of a self-introduction. He had never visited the church in Rome at this point, even though he had wanted to and had tried to on several occasions. But each time he'd been hindered by circumstances.

He wanted to visit the Roman church for a very specific purpose. He hoped the visit would bring about mutual encouragement, but in particular, he wanted to enlist their support. You see, Paul had his eyes set on Spain (Romans 15:24), to carry the gospel there, to the western edge of the Mediterranean world—the ends of the earth, so to speak!

So to prepare for this intended visit, Paul laid out his understanding of what God has done in Jesus Christ—the gospel, the *good news*.

Paul's thesis

In Romans 1:16-17, he begins with his thesis that he would develop throughout most of the rest of the book, first describing what God has done and its meaning, then showing them what it means to live as a people who have believed this good news and put their faith in God as he has revealed himself in his Son Jesus Christ.

Paul's thesis is very straightforward: he is not ashamed of the gospel, ***because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.***

Paul's choice of words here is interesting. The word that's translated as ***power*** is the Greek word *dúnamis*. It's the word we get our English word *dynamite* from.

I remember the first time I ever saw the effects of dynamite firsthand. Jo Ann and I were traveling with some friends through West Virginia. Construction crews were using dynamite to blow the sides of the mountains off to widen the highways. Since I wasn't driving, I could get a better look. You could see the grooves where they had drilled down into the rock ever-so-many feet and lowered the dynamite into the holes. And you could see the results—huge boulders along the side of the construction area where they had come tumbling down after the blast.

Maybe you remember “The Loaded Goat” episode of *The Andy Griffith Show*. Jimmy the goat had, as Andy so eloquently put it, “Et hisself full of dynamite.” They had to stop blasting on the overpass outside of town to avoid a chain reaction. They spread hay and pillows all over the cell they had confined Jimmy in to cushion him as best they could, hoping to prevent him from going, as Barney put it, “Blewey!” Finally, Andy led Jimmy out of town as Barney played Jimmy's favorite tune on the harmonica.

Dynamite *is* a powerful force that has to be handled very carefully.

But there's another word we get from *dúnamis*. It's the word *dynamo*. Whereas dynamite is something that has incredible power that's exerted in an instant, a dynamo produces power by converting mechanical energy into electrical energy. You might say it has to do with ongoing power.

This power of the gospel really has both of these dimensions to it.

It's explosive like dynamite, and can bring radical change to a person in an instant when the person puts his or her faith in Jesus Christ.

But it's also like a dynamo, continually working in the believer's life so that the righteous live by faith and experience God's transforming and sustaining power as they walk with Christ.

For all who believe

Now Paul says that this gospel is God's power ***that brings salvation to everyone who believes*** or has faith, ***first to the Jew, then to the Gentile***. In chapters 2 and 3 of this letter, he goes to great lengths to show how the Jews who have been God's covenant people are under condemnation because of their sin just as the Gentiles are. *All are in need of this salvation*. God's intention all along was that Abraham and his descendants of the promise would be a light to the nations and that in Abraham, all the families of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:1-3). Jesus was a Jew, and all the first Christians were Jews. Paul's practice when he went into a city was to go and preach and teach in the Jewish synagogue until he was forced out, then he would turn to the Gentiles and proclaim the gospel.

In 3:9, Paul states very plainly ***that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin***, and he goes on to quote a series of passages from the Old Testament, primarily from the Psalms along with a few from Proverbs and various prophets, that paint a pretty bleak picture of humanity's sinfulness (3:10-18).

Then in 3:21-22, he ties back into 1:17 as he declares that

now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

This is the righteousness of God revealed in the gospel **by faith from first to last**.

Now what does Paul mean when he talks about faith?

Is he talking about believing the facts about Jesus with our minds? Well, that's *part* of it. After all, Jesus said that we are to love God with all our hearts *and* minds. But Paul's talking about more than just mental assent to the facts here. He's talking about *trust*, about believing the facts with our minds in such a way that we place our faith in Jesus, yielding our very selves to him as our Lord, depending on him to do for us what we can't do for ourselves and set us right with God.

How does God do this?

But *how does God do this?*

In the second part of our text for today, Romans 3:21-26, Paul gives us three pictures or images of how God sets us right with himself.

After declaring that ***there is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*** (3:2-23), Paul goes on to say that all who believe

are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith (3:24-25).

So Paul's first picture is *justification*. Since he was writing to the church in Rome, he may have been using a scene from a Roman law court where an offender is declared *not guilty*, based on Jesus Christ's having given himself for us as a perfect sacrifice for our sins. But the Old Testament Scriptures and their images permeated Paul's thought and were never far from his mind, so he was more likely drawing on the Hebrew idea of God's justice setting his people right in faithfulness to his covenant promises, removing their guilt and delivering them from bondage. Again, it's based on God's saving act in Jesus Christ as he frees us from our sin.²

The second picture Paul points us to is *redemption*. It's the picture of a slave being placed on the auction block. One bids one price, then another bids more. Then out of the crowd, a wealthy benefactor bids a price no one else can come close to, and purchases the slave for the express purpose of *setting him or her free*.

The third image is *atonement*. Some translations say "propitiation," some "expiation," and others "sacrifice of atonement." Through his death on the cross Christ has dealt with our sin, taking it away so that we are reconciled to God. In other words, our sins are forgiven through Jesus' sacrificial, faithful death.

We can be set right with God, set free from sin, and forgiven through Christ's blood. That's good news!

So is it any wonder that *Paul declared his absolute confidence in the gospel as God's power for salvation for all who have faith?*

It had, after all, transformed his own life. As a young man, he was an up-and-coming Pharisee, well-trained and zealous to the point of persecuting the church. But the risen Lord Jesus had apprehended him on the road to Damascus as he was going to arrest Christians there. The dynamite of the gospel exploded his own attempts to earn a right relationship with God and transformed him into one who trusted in Jesus and what he has done to save us. The dynamo of the gospel empowered him to walk with Christ and to carry the gospel to the Gentiles.

It did the same for Martin Luther. He decided to become a monk after he survived being

struck by lightning. The harshness of his father and the sternness of his schoolmaster had made him fearful of authority figures, and especially of God. He thought God was wrathful and vengeful rather than loving and gracious. No matter what he did or how hard he tried, he found no sense of forgiveness or of being right with God. He went to Wittenburg to teach theology while studying for his doctorate. While preparing a lecture on Romans, God spoke to him through Romans 1:17—“the righteous will live by faith.” For the first time, he came to understand that being right with God didn’t depend on his own works but on faith in Christ. He was transformed, and went on to become the leading figure of the Reformation.

And the gospel has transformed and empowered countless others as well.

You see, this is the gospel: *Through Jesus Christ’s faithful life, death, and resurrection, God justifies, redeems, and forgives everyone who trusts in him.* By his faithfulness, Jesus Christ has done for us what we could never do for ourselves, so that when we put our trust in him, God sets us right with himself, and sets us free from our sin and guilt, forgiving us and cleansing us!

Have you experienced this in your life? Have you been set right with God through faith in Jesus Christ? If you haven’t, you can trust him right now.

You can never earn or work your way into heaven. But by putting your faith in Jesus, you can share in his faithfulness and experience God’s salvation.

The righteous are *not* righteous by their own works or power. They live by faith, set right with God, forgiven and set free from sin, and serving King Jesus by *his power*.

And friends, that’s *the gospel!*

†MEG

¹ Scripture quotations taken from the The Holy Bible, New International Version® (2011 edition).

² Charles H. Talbert, *Romans in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2002), 37-41.