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Have I Got Good News for You! Romans 1:8-17

In the opening verses of Romans, Paul introduces himself as an “apostle” of Jesus. That word means someone who has been commissioned as an ambassador to a group of people. Tonight/this morning, we are going to commission Michael Bouterse to his work as an ambassador to a local ministry called “Thrive.” Michael, could you please tell us about this new calling of yours? (Michael comments)

One of our three focuses for *Beyond These Walls* was “releasing leaders;” that we would intentionally raise up, train and release leaders into God’s world. What a wonderful example of that. Let’s pray for Michael.

OK, week two in Romans. As you learned last week, it has a LONG salutation. Why? Because Paul was a stranger to them. This church had already existed for 20 years. So Paul spends 13 verses introducing himself. You can study the rest of the introduction this week but I want to move to the punch line of his salutation...and frankly, of the entire letter. This is Paul’s thesis statement...and these are the verses that transformed Martin Luther’s life and launched the Protestant Reformation. Romans 1: 14-17

I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. 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. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

Let’s do a little crowd-participation. Raise your hand if you ever had a child. A grandchild. If you ever received a financial windfall. If you remember when your sweetheart said, “Yes” to your proposal. If the scary medical tests performed on you came back negative. If the treatments you received were successful.

A new baby...a financial windfall...the love of your life ...the gift of health...what do all these things have in common? They are good news, aren’t they? The sort of good news you can hardly contain; the sort that makes you run right out and tell someone or get on Facebook and blab it to the world. Good news makes life ...good, doesn’t it?

So what? Well, Paul uses another churchy word four times in his salutation. *Gospel*. We call Matthew, Mark, Luke and John “gospels.” But “gospel” is more than a literary genre. What does “gospel” mean literally? Good news! This good news is the centerpiece of Paul’s message. And what IS that good news? Well, he outlined it in his opening introduction.

The gospel is not a “what” ...it’s a WHO! Jesus of Nazareth! The rescuer who was promised by the prophets and revealed to be the Son of God in power .by his resurrection from the dead. THAT’S the gospel! We sometimes thing of “gospel” as a thing...as a theology to be taught or learned. But it is a person. Every time you hear gospel, think “the good news about Jesus!”

Paul makes three strong personal assertions about the Jesus-good news. He says “I am under obligation...I am eager...I am not ashamed.” Let’s look at each of those. In verse 14 Paul says he is “under obligation” to preach the gospel to non-Jews—gentiles as they are called. It is almost impossible for us to understand how revolutionary this was. Jews considered Gentiles inferior. In fact, they called them “dogs” ... and that was at a time when dogs weren’t cute, pampered members of the family with color-coordinated sweater vests. Dogs were despised, vicious, street-roaming scavengers to be kicked to the side. The Jews...God’s chosen people...looked with disgust upon the Gentiles... who were definitely NOT of any interest to God.

Except, as it turns out, they were. Turns out, Gentiles were loved by God, too. In fact, they were from the beginning, a point Paul will make later. But for the person here who has never considered herself worthy of God’s love...never quite fit in the church ...always felt a little bit judged...has Paul got some good news for you! Even YOU can be part of God’s family! (We’ll find out how in a little bit!)

Paul says, “I am under obligation” to share this good news with Gentiles. Literally, the Greek says, “I am a debtor.” There are two ways to be a debtor. ____, let me borrow \$10 from you. I want to go buy one small cup of Starbucks coffee. Now...I owe ____ \$10. That’s one way to be a debtor. But there’s another. I had some work done on our roof. My friend lined up the roofer and I gave HIM \$200 to pass on to the roofer. Suddenly, my friend is a debtor to my roofer...because of what he received from me. That’s what is meant here. Paul had received from God a gift...the gospel of Jesus...to be passed on to the Gentiles. Paul was obliged to shared it. He was a debtor.

Paul also says that he is “eager” to share this good news in verse 15...and, in verse 16, that he is “not ashamed” of the good news. The Jews would have found the gospel of Jesus shameful because he was crucified...which was a curse in Jewish law. The Romans would have found this religion about a carpenter from Nazareth to be pathetic compared to THEIR glorious pantheon of gods whose statues could be found on every street corner. It was embarrassing. But Paul was NOT ashamed.

Indebted, eager, unashamed. John Stott points out that what makes these qualities more noteworthy is...how opposite they are to the way most Christians feel about the gospel. We don’t consider sharing the good news to be an obligation; rather, we feel we are doing God a favor. We are not eager to share the good news; we are reluctant. And in fact, we often ARE ashamed of being Christians, especially in a culture that treats Christian conversation as hate speech.

But as a matter of fact, Paul lived in a culture where sharing the gospel could get him in big trouble. He had already suffered at the hands of first century's Jewish version of "Antifa" who wanted to shut down his speech about Jesus. And Roman emperors certainly didn't tolerate competition. Paul was stoned, beaten, flogged, and imprisoned. And yet...he was STILL eager...STILL unashamed. And in verse 16, he tells us why:

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.

Why is Paul unashamed to share this good news? Because the gospel is the "power of God for salvation..." The Greek word for power is *dunamis*. Guess which English word comes from *dunamis*? Dynamite! Paul says this good news about the long-awaited, resurrected Jesus is like spiritual dynamite. For what? Salvation! For whom? For everyone! For the Jew first, but also for the Gentile. This VERSE was dynamite when Paul wrote it...it blew up two kinds of misconceptions. That the Gentile COULDN'T be saved...but also that the Jews NEEDN'T be saved! The Jews were God's chosen people! They were already in the club! They had the law and the rules and the rituals. They had all the trappings of salvation that made them arrogant and self-confident. As far as the Jews were concerned, they didn't NEED saving.

I think that's our issue, too. One of the reasons we might be indifferent or even embarrassed about sharing the good news is...I think we forget how desperately we needed saving. Or we don't really believe we were ever that bad. We view sin like we do a cold. It's something you can live with. Take a few aspirin. Ride it out. It's irksome but it's not deadly. But as we will see in the next two chapters, Paul views sin as spiritual Ebola ...and EVERYONE is infected. I was shocked to hear this week of a dear pastor friend of mine, 51-years-old, who was just diagnosed with colon cancer. Guess what...he KNOWS he needs saving. He had ten inches of his colon removed. He begins chemo shortly. He knows the diagnosis was serious and he welcomes all the help he can get because he needs saving.

I remember being beside a swimming pool at a hotel in Hawaii years ago when I noticed a little girl not far from the pool's edge with a look of terror in her eyes as she thrashed silently. She couldn't cry out because she had already sucked in water. I jumped in and pulled her out. It wasn't a very big deal on my part. It was shallow and Maria was tiny. But it was a VERY big deal to Maria...because she needed saving ...and she knew it.

Do YOU believe that you needed saving? Do you believe that you were drowning in your sin and that, left to your own devices, were doomed? Paul did! I think we allow indifference or embarrassment to mute our voices in part because we have forgotten...or we never really believed (since we all grade on a curve)...that we needed saving. And we really don't believe that our family member, friend or neighbor needs saving, either. If they were slipping beneath the water of the pool, you wouldn't think twice about jumping in for them. If they needed your blood platelets, you wouldn't think twice about donating them. Well...apart from Jesus, their spiritual condition IS hopeless and they are doomed... yet we think twice and thrice...we dither and dally...we hold back from them the only good news that can save them. I wish this whole church were going to God Space on Wednesday

nights where we are learning how to have these kinds of conversations... because the stakes could not be higher. We need saving!

And here's something remarkable: this dynamite good news...this salvation...is ALL God's doing. In verse 1 Paul called it the "gospel of God." In verse 9 it is "the gospel of his Son." In verse 16 it is the "power of GOD for salvation." In verse 17 it is the "righteousness of God." Paul underscores repeatedly that this gift of salvation is God's doing, God's idea, God's plan since the beginning. It has NOTHING to do with our being good enough, being Jewish enough, being religious enough, being worthy enough (which is why it was such good news to the Gentiles.)

It has everything to do with God keeping the promise he made back in the Old Testament, a promise to bless the whole world through his chosen people. Salvation is ALL God's work. This is the dynamite discovery that set Martin Luther free! That helped him realize he did not-- could not-- earn his salvation by being a great monk. Only one thing was required of him. Only one thing is required of anyone. What is that? Faith. "...it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes....the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith...the righteous shall live by faith." It is important that we understand THIS word, too. Because it is easy to turn even believing into one more spiritual effort. If we just had a little more faith; if we just tried harder to believe.

Let me show you a helpful image of faith. (*Pull out a present.*) If I offer this gift to Sally... what does faith look like? Taking it! Receiving it! Saying thank you for it! Opening it up and enjoying whatever is inside. This is the clearest image I can share to explain what Paul means by faith. God saves...God does all the heavy lifting....then he offers to everyone this incredible gift of salvation through his Son...and the one thing he asks of us ...is that we receive the gift. That we have faith in his gift. That we believe.

But a member of my LifeGroup objected: "Do we have NO responsibility for the way we live? No responsibility to live a different sort of life when we follow Jesus?" Great question! And by the way, Paul will deal with it later! But let me try to answer it this way. I have an earthly father who loves me. I have always known that. I have never felt I had to do a thing to earn his love. But BECAUSE dad loves me, I want to please him. I want to make him proud. I am 60 years old and yet...it still matters to me when dad says, "That was a great sermon, son (or) you've done a great job raising your kids (or) you and Cyndi have a great marriage." It STILL makes my heart swell when I please my dad; when he is proud of me. I don't do these things to earn his love. But because I HAVE his love, I want to please him.

That's the balancing act. In verse 5, Paul spoke of the "obedience of faith;" an interesting confluence of two words. But that's what happens when we truly believe. When we receive by faith this incredible, dynamite gift of salvation, we become more obedient. Because we want to please our heavenly Dad.

Let me look at one more thing. Paul writes that the dynamite good news reveals God's righteousness. Another churchy word. There are many layers to this word and we will explore it in the months to come. But at its core the word "righteousness" means a God who keeps his covenant promises. Millennia earlier, God made promises to Abraham and

his family. Centuries later, prophets promised that God would send a Messiah born into that family...to save the world. And now, Paul declares, God has kept his promises. He made a covenant...and now, he has kept that covenant. He has done what we could not do. He has called us back into an intimate relationship with himself...like the one in the Garden of Eden before Adam and Eve threw everything away.

Last Friday was our Rachel's 25th birthday. How can it be? Years ago, Rachel slept in a crib room right off our bedroom. One early morning, we heard her stirring. Cyndi got her, brought her back to bed and put her between us. I was on my side, facing away, staying quiet in hope that Rachel would go back to sleep. For a while it was still. But soon, in the darkness, a little hand began to grope its way over to me. First to my shoulder. Then it found my face and began tracing my features. Finally, little fingers stopped at my left eye... and then pressed. Not hard. Just enough to say, "Open up, I know you're in there." So I gave up, flipped over, opened my eyes...and discovered Rachel's face right there! Her nose was literally touching mine. She was looking right in my eyes and smiling like the sun! It was a precious sight! My little girl with her wild hair, backlit by the window, straining to get a face to face look at her daddy.

When Paul speaks of righteousness, he is talking about a face-to-face relationship with God. A relationship unspoiled by sin or guilt; where we do not have to drop our gaze out of embarrassment because of our failings. And here is that glorious punch line again. This righteousness is a gift from God. We tend to think of "righteousness" as something we do. We act "right." We do what is "right." We walk the "right" path. That makes us righteous.

But what we discover in Romans is that righteousness is something God gives us. Because of his great love for us, he seeks us and, even though we are stained by sin...even though our relationship with him is strained or broken...he restores it. HE makes us clean. He gives to us...the theological word is "imputes"...the righteousness of his own Son. Even if we have our backs turned to God and our eyes closed, trying to ignore or avoid him, he gently reaches out to us in the darkness of our sin, feels for us, lifts our face and touches our eyes. And when we finally open them, we discover his smiling face right there. A restored relationship. A face-to-face relationship with God. If THAT isn't good news...I don't know what it is.