

Romans 1, Pt. 2

Last week, I introduced the idea that God manifests his righteousness through both the way of judgment and the way of mercy. As we will see, both mercy and judgment show up immediately in the first chapter of Romans. Notice that v. 17 says that in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith. And then notice again that v. 18 states that the wrath of God is revealed against unrighteousness. Both righteousness through faith and righteousness through wrath are revealed by God. These are the ways of mercy and judgment. Both are part of God's plan to establish righteousness. As we begin our study of Romans, we must understand both.

In v. 16, Paul states that he is not ashamed of the gospel. Why is he not ashamed? To understand this, we need to know something of both **the problem** and **the solution**. Once we understand the problem clearly, we can understand the solution. Gospel means good news, and Paul is not ashamed because he knows how good this news really is. The gospel is good news of God's righteousness revealed in Jesus as the way of mercy and not of judgment.

An illustration will help us understand Paul's work as an unashamed preacher of the gospel. Imagine that you go to the doctor because you have an unusual and rather itchy rash. The doctor glances over your arm and then definitively states the cause of your condition. But then she stops the visit and wishes you a good day. You would likely say, "Hey, what about the treatment?" Why would the doctor who knows the extent of the problem ever refuse to offer the proper course of treatment? Paul knew what was wrong with the world. He knew from the Hebrew Scriptures and the story of his own heart that **the world was lost in unrighteousness**. He knew that the world was rightly facing the judgment of God. Why would he be ashamed of the treatment? The gospel is good news because it reveals God's righteousness through Jesus as the way of mercy. Let us consider now the problem and the solution as Paul understood it.

The problem. Paul puts things rather bluntly in the first chapter of Romans. The world has fallen into unrighteousness and God has wrath against this state of affairs. The problem is identified clearly in v. 18 as “ungodliness and unrighteousness.” It is right to translate the second word as “unrighteousness” instead of something like “wickedness” because the root of the word is the same root as that of the word translated “righteousness.” God will establish righteousness in his world through the way of judgment against human sinfulness. There is a root cause to this unrighteousness. People have “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images” (v. 23). People did not “honor him as God or give thanks to him” though they knew him (v. 21). It is possible that Paul is here **narrating the story of the fall in Genesis 3**. Certainly, Adam is never far from Paul’s mind in Romans, and the connection will become explicit in chapter five.

Paul’s narration in chapter one (and the verb tenses do suggest a narrative) fits the story of Genesis. Adam and Eve knew God. They walked with God in the garden. But they, at a particular moment in history, while claiming to be wise, became fools. They exchanged the glory of God for images of mortal man and other creatures. Think of Genesis 3. The serpent lied to Eve and told her that, if she ate the forbidden fruit, she would gain knowledge of good and evil and become like God. When Eve gave in to the temptation, she responded to both the physical elements of the fruit as well as the possibility that it could grant her knowledge. She ate and gave it to Adam. But the act did not provide knowledge but indeed brought darkness and foolishness. They, in trying to be like God, tried to put themselves in the place of God.

According to Paul, this fall led to an action of God in which he “gave them up” (vv. 24, 26, 28) to their sinful desires. He had told them that death would be the consequence for their disobedience. And the death that Adam and Eve experienced was not an immediate physical death (though physical death would rear its ugly head in the murder of Abel) but spiritual death. Again, following the verb tenses, Paul’s idea here seems to be **a historical fall in which there was a historical “giving up” of humanity by God as an act of judgment against sin**. Human beings fell into sin. Certainly, Genesis as a historical narrative plays out all the sins mentioned in this first chapter. Human history is a narrative of unrighteousness. Notice that Paul ends his list of human sinfulness with **present tense verbs**, shifting away from the

narrative tense. In v. 32, people “do” unrighteous things and “approve” of those who do them. It is as if Paul in tracing his way through history has made it to the present and declared that this terrible state of affairs is still the prevailing course of this world. This idea is confirmed by the first verse of the next chapter: “Therefore you have no excuse, O man...” Paul ends in the present and pins this whole sordid history on his present audience.

It is somewhat curious that Paul, in narrating this history of sin, spends vv. 24-27 talking about the historical onset of sexual sin and, particularly, the sin of homosexual behavior. Apparently, Paul made the judgment that these areas of unrighteousness were of particular importance to his audience, that they who lived in Rome needed to know that certain behaviors were not acceptable to God. Of course, this is also true in our own society. Faithful Christians, not out of prejudice or hatred but out of fidelity to God’s Word, believe that God’s will for our sexuality is celibacy in singleness or faithfulness in a male-female marriage. There are not, for the Christian, other options. I take no delight in saying such things. In fact, if the issue was not forced upon us by the outside culture, most preachers that I personally know would talk about other things. But this is not the case. We are daily pressured on these issues and required, therefore, to put forward the vision of human sexuality the church has believed for 2000 years. It is important to state that the Christian does not practice some kind of joyless moralism. There is ample evidence that healthy marriage and faithful singleness are both sources of joy, blessing, and human flourishing. In saying all this, I digress from the main point. God has revealed his anger against this historically-rooted unrighteousness. The righteous God will establish righteousness in his creation by the way of judgment.

The solution. We have heard the diagnosis. We are all infected with “unrighteousness.” Consequently, we are open to God’s way of judgment. How could Paul be ashamed of the treatment? He had been made a servant of Christ; an apostle set apart for the gospel. He was to preach the story of Jesus, the descendent of David, who was killed at the cross, but who was “declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord” (v. 4). **Paul’s mission was to preach the message so that people of all nations would have the opportunity to respond in faith.** He desired to go to Rome so that he could

preach the message of the way of mercy in Jesus. The word about Jesus is the “power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (v. 16). The letter will show us that this “salvation” has three great aspects. It is forgiveness from our acts of unrighteousness, the means by which God can love the unrighteous and yet not compromise his own righteousness. It is freedom from continued unrighteousness. God’s Spirit works in us to bring about increasing resemblance to Jesus. It is the hope of a glorious future of renewed righteousness in a renewed world. The theological terms for these aspects are justification, sanctification, and glorification. In due course, we will discuss all of these things.

The thing to emphasize the most this morning is that this gospel of God’s righteousness comes through faith for faith. There has been a perfect revelation of the righteousness of God in history among men. That perfect revelation is the sinless life and obedient death of Jesus. Jesus was always faithful to his Father. There was never nor will there ever be a breach in his faithfulness. And because he was faithful, **you and I need not earn our way to God but instead place our faith in his faithfulness.** The greater mystery is that even our meager faith is a participation in his great faith. Jesus was faithful. Jesus was righteous. And he is offered to us in the gospel. We respond with empty hands and open hearts. God’s righteousness is then established by the offer of mercy in Jesus for all who trust him, sparing them from the way of judgment.

How could Paul be ashamed of this message? How could we be ashamed of this message? It is not something to be embarrassed about. It is life, hope, peace, well-being, and eternal possibility. Without the gospel, the story of the world would be a story of unrighteousness from which there is no rescue. Do we believe that the message that we preach is really the “power of God for salvation?” Then let us not be ashamed.