

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, July 13, 2014**

TRANSFORMING POWER

Romans 1:1-7, 16-17

INTRODUCTION

Paul's Letter to the Romans has been called the first systematic theology of the Christian faith. In the words of John Stott, it is "the fullest, plainest, and grandest statement of the gospel in the New Testament." Stott calls it a "Christian manifesto" – "a manifesto of freedom through Jesus Christ" – and writes that the message of the gospel Paul lays out in Romans is "not that man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains, as [Jean Jacques] Rousseau put it at the beginning of *The Social Contract* (1762). It is rather that human beings are born in sin and slavery, but that Jesus Christ came to set us free. For here" – in the Letter to the Romans – "is unfolded the good news of freedom, freedom from the holy wrath of God upon all ungodliness, freedom from alienation into reconciliation, freedom from the condemnation of God's law, freedom from what [British writer] Malcom Muggeridge used to call 'the dark little dungeon of our own ego,' freedom from the fear of death, freedom one day from the decay of the groaning creation into the glorious liberty of God's children, and meanwhile" – here and now – "freedom from ethnic [racial and cultural] conflict in the family of God, and freedom to give ourselves to the loving service of God and others" (Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 19).

If you have never read Romans, or if you have never taken time not just to read but to study it, to meditate on its message, and to consider how its doctrinal teachings and practical instructions apply to life as we live it, I urge you to do so. I think you will be blessed by it. For 2,000 years now, God has used the message of the gospel in the Letter to the Romans not only to bring sinners to saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, but to transform the lives of untold multitudes through the power of His Spirit. This gospel proclaimed by Paul has life-changing, transforming power.

I invite you to turn with me in your Bible to Romans 1 as we read a portion of Paul's introduction to this letter. Let's give our full and reverent attention now to the reading of God's Word as it is given to us in Romans 1:1-7, 16-17.

THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

Let me tell you a story. It is a true story. This is the condensed version of a much longer story by Eve Fairbanks published recently in the *New Republic*. From 1986 to 1991, during the final years of apartheid in South Africa, Adriaan Vlok was the South African government's Minister of Law and Order. Vlok and his police were responsible for many of the white-minority regime's most repressive and drastic measures, including kidnappings, bombings, and assassinations of anti-apartheid militants. Eventually, though, thank God, the ugly era of apartheid rule came to an end and democracy came to South Africa.

Eight years ago, on August 1, 2006, this notorious former police minister entered the presidential complex in Pretoria and asked to see Frank Chikane, a former anti-apartheid activist now serving as the chief of staff to South Africa's second black president, Thabo Mbeki. Years earlier, during the last, desperate years of apartheid rule, Chikane, a Christian minister, had been the head of an interdenominational Christian group suspected of harboring armed anti-apartheid militants at its headquarters in Johannesburg. In a bizarre assassination plot, Vlok's police broke into Chikane's luggage at the Johannesburg airport, where Chikane had checked it for a flight to Namibia, and laced his underwear with a toxic insecticide in order to poison him to death. Seriously. It sounds funny, but it was no joke. Chikane became so sick he had to be flown to the U. S. for medical treatment. In God's providence, he survived.

Now, years later, Vlok had come to see Chikane in Chikane's government office. Why? To ask forgiveness. Quaking as he faced this man he had tried to have killed, Vlok read something he had written on the front flyleaf of a Bible he carried with him: "I have sinned against the Lord and against you! Will you forgive me?" Then he pulled a bowl and a towel out of his briefcase, slid off the chair onto his knees, bowed his head, and asked if he could wash Chikane's feet.

A startled Chikane asked him: "Why would you want to do that?"

To which Vlok replied: "I must humble myself before you. For what we did, for what we were trying to do."

Seeing Vlok's sincerity, Chikane removed his shoes and socks. Vlok proceeded to wash his feet and then dried them with the towel. And then the two men dissolved into tears.

Shortly after his retirement from the government in 1994, Vlok's wife had taken her own life. To deal with the loss of his wife and his own sense of guilt for atrocities committed by his police, Vlok found comfort in reading the Bible each day, morning and evening. He found himself increasingly convicted, though, by a particular passage from the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5:23-24, where Jesus says: "If you are presenting a gift at the altar, and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, leave your offering there at the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your gift to God."

"I realized," says Vlok, "I had to start making peace with my brother whom I had hurt." It was the necessary consequence of having been forgiven and made right with God.

When he arranged the meeting with Frank Chikane, Vlok had thought he was going there simply to ask for forgiveness. But as he knelt in Chikane's government office, washing the feet of his former enemy, God showed Adriaan Vlok something he had never realized about himself. Until that moment Vlok didn't realize that he possessed a deep-seated sense of racial superiority. Just like most white South Africans. Just like most white Americans for most of our nation's history. It was something that seemed to come naturally to him, without ever thinking about it. But that all changed for Adriaan Vlok. He says: "I saw that I'm *not* better

than they are. I started looking at black people through different eyes, because feet-washing put me in the place of the slave.”

Adriaan Vlok, you see, had experienced the power of the gospel, which is the power of God for the salvation of *everyone* who believes. It is for *everyone* who responds to the message of the gospel with faith in the saving, forgiving, freeing, transforming work of Jesus Christ for us. It is for *everyone*: Jews and non-Jews, blacks, whites, Europeans, Africans, Asians, Aussies, Arabs, Persians, North Americans, South Americans, Central Americans, and every other kind of sinner on the face of the earth.

A STORY TO TELL

Adriaan Vlok has experienced not only the saving power of the gospel but also its transforming power. That is, the power of God through the gospel to transform lives and relationships. Adriaan Vlok may be a dramatic example of this, but he is by no means the only example. I could tell you lots and lots of stories. And, whether you know it or not, some of you have stories to tell as well. Each of you, I trust, has a personal story of God’s saving power – the power of the gospel – in your life. Many of you, I think, have stories you can tell not only of God’s saving grace but also of His transforming power, the transforming power of the gospel, in your life. Because, by God’s grace, you are not the same person you were before you came to know the Lord Jesus Christ. You are not the same person you were before you believed and embraced the gospel message. You are a new creation in Christ, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:17. You are not the same person you were before God allowed you to go through some storm, some crisis or hardship or disappointment. You are not the same person you were before you experienced God’s presence and grace in some particular way in some particular circumstance. By telling others, perhaps in a private one-to-one conversation, or in a small group setting, or even on a Sunday morning in Worship, you can let God use you to encourage and build up other believers, or even to awaken saving faith in someone’s life. Look for opportunities to share with others what God has done and what He is doing in your life. Let me know, or Debbie Smith, if the Lord nudges you to share with our church family how you have experienced the transforming power of the gospel in your life.

All of you, I hope, have experienced the power of the gospel to save you from your sins, to forgive *all* your sins, to make you right with God, to give you peace with God. If you have not experienced the saving power of the gospel, I invite you, I urge you to do so today. How? By repenting of your sins. By acknowledging your need of a Savior. By receiving, through faith in Jesus Christ, the gift of salvation and new life in Christ that comes free of charge to people who don’t deserve it and never will.

You *have experienced* or *are experiencing* or *can experience* the transforming power of the gospel in your life. Jesus is in the business of saving sinners. That is one of the essential, unchanging truths of the gospel. The word “gospel,” by the way, is *euangelion* in Greek, which is where we get the words “evangel” and “evangelism.” The word “gospel” simply means “good news.” That Jesus is in the business of saving sinners is undeniably good news. That Jesus has the power to save sinners is unquestionably good news. That Jesus has the power not only to save but to transform the lives of those who trust in Him, to change us from

what we were before His saving grace took effect in our lives and to make us into the men and women He has created us to be through the power of His Spirit at work in us is astonishingly good news. It is grace on top of grace.

This gospel, this good news, as we have already said, is for *everyone* who believes. Listen again to John Stott: “Saving faith, which is the necessary response to the gospel, is the great leveler. For everyone who is saved is saved in exactly the same way, by faith. That goes for Jews and Gentiles equally” (Stott, *Romans*, 60-61). It goes for Frank Chikane and Adriaan Vlok equally. It goes for Pope Francis and Queen Elizabeth equally. Though only one will win the World Cup today, it goes for Argentina’s Lionel Messi and Germany’s Thomas Mueller equally. There is only one way to be saved, only one way to experience the gift of salvation, and that is to receive it by faith in Jesus Christ, who offered up His life as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

NOT ASHAMED

In verse 16 Paul passionately proclaims his allegiance to the gospel: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for [I know] it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). Have you ever felt ashamed of the gospel? Ever felt embarrassed by it? The Scottish preacher James Stewart once observed that “there is no sense in declaring that you’re not ashamed of something unless you have been tempted to feel ashamed of it” (Quoted by Stott, *Romans*, 60). Paul, we may conclude, had faced this temptation. In Paul’s day, as in our own, some people completely dismiss the message of the gospel. They make fun of it. They make fun of people like us who believe it. To some, as Paul writes to the Corinthians, it is foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:18, 23). To others it is a stumbling block (1:23). Some find it offensive. Others find it irrelevant. When the message of the gospel is ridiculed by others, especially when it is ridiculed by prominent cultural influencers such as entertainers and politicians, or when professing Christians defame the message of the gospel by their stupidity or selfishness, we may feel a sense of embarrassment or shame.

Paul urges us not to go there. God urges us not to go there. Why? Because the gospel really *is* the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. It really is the power of God to save sinners and to transform lives, to heal the wounds and divisions of racial hatred and oppression, to put the broken back together, to heal the brokenhearted, to turn prostitutes and tax collectors and self-righteous Pharisees into disciples for life. This transforming power is real. And God is still doing it today.

Pray that this transforming power will be at work in us. Pray that it will be at work and evident in our church. Pray that it will amaze and encourage us to give all praise and glory to God. Pray that God will unleash the power of the gospel to change lives all around us. Starting, if it please God, right here today and this week at Vacation Bible School.

Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name. Amen.