

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,  
by Pastor David Fischler, on Sunday, October 26, 2014**

## **THE HEART OF REFORMATION**

**Habakkuk 2:1-4;  
Romans 1:16-17**

Today is Reformation Sunday. Four hundred and ninety-seven years ago, Martin Luther nailed to the door of the Wittenberg, Germany parish church a set of statements—95 theses—that he wanted the Church to debate. In them he proclaimed a new—or rather, very old—understanding of the Christian faith, one that had become obscured over the centuries, one that was based on the testimony of Scripture, and one that found its core in what was read earlier as the Epistle lesson from Romans. In this passage, the apostle Paul takes us to the heart of the gospel, to the meaning of Christ’s death and resurrection on our behalf, and to the response of trust in Christ that His work calls forth from us. This morning, Jeremy and Sandy Kerfoot, the parents of J.J., graphically illustrated Paul’s words, as by faith in the Son of God they gave their own son to the Lord for his care and keeping and salvation. Now, as we turn to Romans, I’d like for us to hear what the Spirit has said to them in this sacrament, and what He has to say to each of us as well.

I’d like for us to take on that task by examining the four key words in these two verses: “power,” “salvation,” “righteousness,” and “believe.”

First, Paul says of the gospel that it is “the power of God.” In it, the power of God is shown forth to the world in all its strength. This power is not an abstract quality, but is the energy God uses to bring about what He desires. The Greek word, *dynamis*, is the word from which we get our term “dynamic,” (and, for that matter, dynamite) and refers to a force that’s active and working in the context of a relationship, whether between a person and an object or between two persons. In the gospel, the power of God is being brought to bear to on us, to bring about change in our lives.

It has been said that change is one of the things that defines life, and especially human life. To stay the same is eventually to die, whether you’re talking about an individual, a corporation, a nation, or a church. Change is the essence of what happens to a person when he or she becomes a Christian, and is transformed from a child of darkness to a child of light. Unfortunately for us, there’s a problem with that kind of change. We can’t bring it about on our own. By nature, people are incapable of choosing to transform themselves. This is a crucial way in which the gospel differs from what the world wants us to believe. The world wants us to believe that we can reform anything, including ourselves. All it takes is enough willpower. Any time we decide that we want to be moral, or want to be holy, or want to be Christians, or want to take hold of eternal life, we can do so on our own, at which point, of course, we owe God nothing. That’s the way the world thinks, and wants us to believe life is like. But Paul, in Romans 5, in speaking of Christ dying for us, says that He did so “when we were still powerless,” in other words, when we could do nothing to change ourselves from followers of the prince of this world

to followers of the King of kings. You see, we haven't got the power. It's like we're trying to start a car without gas, or turn on a lamp without plugging it in. Without the power, nothing happens, especially salvation. But with the power of God, all things are possible, even our salvation.

That's the second key word in this passage in Romans 1. The gospel is "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes." Leave aside the word "believes" for the time being; we'll come back to it. The gospel is "the power of God for salvation." There are several ways in which this term is used by Paul in his letters, any one of which may apply here in Romans 1. Primarily, it's meant in a futuristic sense. Salvation is something that we look forward to, it's something that's going to happen when we physically die. At that point, we'll be both saved from something and saved for something. In the fifth chapter of Romans, verse 9, the apostle says that "since we have now been justified by [Christ's] blood, how much more *shall* we be saved from God's wrath through Him!" The wrath of God which is to be poured out upon all who reject Christ is nothing for us to fear, because we can be assured that we will be spared that wrath, and the eternal punishment which it carries with it, because of what Christ did on the cross. That wrath is what we're saved *from*. Then, in Romans 8, verse 18, we get a hint of what we're saved *for* when Paul writes that "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us," when we join in the resurrection of Christ. The future that we have to look forward to, because of our salvation, is an eternity of life basking in the love of God. In that eternity words like fear and sorrow and death will no longer have any meaning for us, because God in Jesus Christ has saved us from them, while words like love and joy and life will mean everything to us, because God in Jesus Christ has saved us for them.

But salvation is not only future, it's also a present reality. In Romans chapter 8, verses 23 and 24, listen to the change in tenses: "we...groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved." He's talking about the future resurrection, but says that we have been saved. If we believe in Jesus Christ, we can rest assured in our salvation, sure that that future which has been promised to God's people is one we'll participate in. But there's more. Not only is our future blessing assured, and not only is that assurance a present blessing, but we can even begin to live that life now, in a manner of speaking. That's because not only has the power of death been broken, but the power of sin has also been broken by the power of God. Recall these challenging words of Paul's from Romans 6, verses six and seven: "We know that our old self was crucified with Him so that the body of sin might be rendered powerless, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been freed from sin." That's to say that sin no longer compels us to march to its tune. The sinful nature with which we were born doesn't call the shots any more. Now, the Spirit of God who dwells within us calls the shots. Oh, sin can still tempt us, and as often as we aren't careful to turn from the temptation—which is often, I'm afraid—we'll still sin. But we no longer sin because we have to as the law of our nature. We can live as the Lord directs us, and do so for His glory. "Those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires," Paul says in Romans 8, and "the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace."

That brings us to the third key word in Romans, chapter 1: “righteousness.” Paul says in verse 17, “For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last.” This is a righteousness that has its origin in God’s very being, is given to us as we receive the gospel, and is then revealed in us for the whole world to see.

To better understand this great gift that we’ve been given, and its implications for life, we need to know the meaning of the word. The biblical idea of righteousness is not one of doing trivial good deeds, nor does it mean that we just avoid doing evil. The person who takes in stray cats or doesn’t kick dogs isn’t righteous. Neither is the political activist or humanitarian who oozes compassion for the downtrodden. Those may be fine things to do or be, but they don’t constitute righteousness. Instead, biblical righteousness is based on the character of God, who is faithful to those with whom He has covenanted, and who is wholly just in all His dealings with everything He has created. There is nothing false, nothing evil, nothing deceptive, nothing self-seeking in God. Writing in Psalm 25, David put it this way: “Good and upright is the Lord; therefore He instructs sinners in His ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them His way. All the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful.” That’s the righteousness of God. It’s based in what is right, which He unfailingly does, and in loving relationships, which He has with all His people.

That righteousness, however, is not native to us. As sinful human beings, we are often called “unrighteous” in Scripture. Paul, in fact, in his proclamation of the universal need of humanity for the salvation of God, says in Romans 3, verses 10 through 12, that “there is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God...there is no one who does good, not even one.” That doesn’t mean that none of us ever do something that’s good, or that the world might think praiseworthy. Rather, it means that each of us comes into the world self-centered, we all deceive ourselves about the nature of life and our place in it, we all “look out for number one” above all. Because of that, we come into life alienated from God and from one another. Ever wonder why it is that husbands and wives can’t seem to get along? Because neither is righteous. Ever wonder why teen-agers rebel against their parents? Because they aren’t righteous. Why terrorists lop off heads? Because they aren’t righteous. Now please understand me. Like any Christian, my righteousness is only partial, and it isn’t even mine, but God’s. I’m not pointing any fingers and saying, “It’s too bad these people can’t be righteous like me.” No, I’m saying that they aren’t righteous like God. If they were, all of the conflicts to which I’ve alluded would disappear, and that in fact is what we’re promised will happen in the Kingdom of God, when, as the prophet Isaiah puts it, “they will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.” That such righteousness is available from God through Jesus Christ is at the heart of our gospel message, a message we are called to bring to everyone we know.

To step out that way, to allow oneself to be a conduit for God's righteousness in the face of a world that scorns it, can only be described as the act of a believer. That's the last word I'd like for us to look at this morning: “believe.” Paul says that the gospel is the “power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.” Not for everyone, mind you.

In our time one of the notions most destructive of the mission of the Church in proclaiming the gospel is the one that says that salvation belongs to all people, regardless of whether they believe in Christ or not. The Gospel of John, chapter 3, verse 18—the one most folks never get to, so taken are they by the beauty of verse 16—says that “whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.” The salvation that comes through the gospel is grasped by us by believing in Christ, and only then. And what does it mean to “believe in Christ”? I’ll tell you what it doesn’t mean. It doesn’t mean knowing intellectually that a certain thing is true, at least not entirely. The apostle James, you’ll remember, said that the demons believe there’s one God, “and shudder.” I believe that fundamentalist mullahs run Iran, and it gives me the willies every time I think about it. Instead, when Paul talks about believing, he means to trust in Christ, to rely on Him, to put one’s whole life in His hands confident that, as Romans 8:28 says, “in all things God works for the good of those who love Him.” Believing in Christ means to stop working and working and working to make God love us, recognizing that no amount of good deeds done by us can ever force God to love us, and instead to accept the love that He offers freely, as a gift. It means giving up our control, giving up our independence, giving up our self-sufficiency, and turning every aspect of our lives over to the Lord. Now, that’s not easy. We all have things we’d like to retain control over. We’d like to say, “Lord, you take it all—but don’t expect me to give up my credit cards.” Or, “Lord, I give you my life—but don’t expect me to start loving my obnoxious cousin Elmer.” Or, “Lord, rule over my heart—but don’t expect me to start treating homosexuals with respect.” Or, “Lord, be the Lord of my life—but keep your paws off my husband, I like him just the way he is.” I don’t know how many of you would really say that—I know my wife wouldn’t!—but we all have something that we’d rather keep to ourselves than trust Him with it. But that kind of total abandonment of everything we have and are to Him and His will for us—that’s what it means to believe in Christ.

Life—that’s what it means. Our whole life, without exception. At which point we’re back, not just to Romans 1, but all the way back to Habakkuk the prophet, who hundreds of years before the coming of Christ wrote that “The righteous will live by faith.” Let me repeat that, because if there’s nothing else you take away from this service, take away this: “The righteous will live by faith.” The gospel, the good news to us today, is that salvation has come to us—to J.J. Kerfoot, to his parents, and to all who give themselves into the hands of the Lord—and it means that we have been given an invitation to live the most marvelous adventure any creature can ever live, the adventure of faith in Jesus Christ. To God’s people has been given the righteousness, His righteousness, and the faith, the trust in Him, that are needed to transform our every relationship, our every decision, our every moment, and to make them monuments of praise and thanksgiving to Him. Whether that faith and that righteousness are yours today, or you would like them to be, join me now, as we pray.