

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 4, 2015**

NOT ASHAMED

Romans 1:7-17

I want to pick up this morning where we left off last Sunday, as we began this “Journey on the Romans Road” together. At the end of last Sunday’s message, we noted four things Paul says about the Christians in Rome to whom his letter is addressed, all of which are true of you and me and every genuine follower of the Lord Jesus Christ everywhere in the world today:

First: They were “called to belong to Jesus Christ” (1:6). *We* are called by God Himself to belong to Jesus. *You* are called by God to belong to Jesus. Not simply to *believe* in Jesus, but to *belong* to Him. To be part of His “forever family.” Not because of anything you have done to deserve such an honor, but because of God’s sovereign choice and initiative. If you belong to Jesus, no one will ever snatch you out of His hand.

Second: They were “loved by God” (1:7a) as His very own children, with a love that will never change. So are we. So are you. Loved by God *personally*. Just as you are. Don’t misunderstand: The fact that God loves you just as you are does not mean He wants you to stay just as you are. In His love He does not leave you just as you are. He wants to change you into the God-glorifying man or woman you were created to be. He wants to transform you from the inside out by the power of the Holy Spirit who is at work in you.

Nor does the fact that God loves you mean that He will not allow you to experience any trials or troubles or hardships or setbacks or suffering or disappointments in life. And if – I mean, *when* – you go through any of these, because you will, if you’re not going through something right now, it does not mean that God does not love you. You are loved by God with an everlasting love. Nothing will ever change this fact.

Right now you or someone you love may be going through a hellish experience, such as the break-up of a marriage. You or someone you love may be teased and taunted by other kids at school. You may be grief-stricken by the loss of a loved one you aren’t sure you can live without. You or someone you love may be dealing with an illness or injury or other medical condition for which there seems to be no earthly answer. God forbid, you or someone you love could be in a Bible study or music rehearsal at church, or in a college classroom, or in a movie theater, when, without warning, someone starts shooting. You or someone you love may be facing a mountain of debt from which you see no way out. You may feel like a failure because of something you have done or something you didn’t do. You may be discriminated against because of your faith in Christ and your unwillingness to approve what God disapproves.

And at some point you may wonder: If God loves me, why am I going through this? *Does God really love me?* The answer is yes. Yes. Always yes. You are loved by God. In the midst of it, in the hardest, most painful moments of life, God is with you. And He loves *you*,

just as He loved the Christians in 1st-century Rome. Because He loves you, God will never let go of you. Never let go of Him.

Third: The believers in Rome were “called to be saints” (1:7a). And so are we. But what does that mean? What does it mean to be “saints”? “Saints”, literally, are “holy ones.” The word is *hagioi*, from *hagios*, the word for “holy” or “set apart.” When Paul uses it as a noun to refer to Christ’s followers, it is always “saints” plural. Never singular. And it does not refer to Christians who have achieved an elevated status in the church by their spiritual devotion or sacrificial service. In Paul’s vocabulary, “saints” simply means “Christians.” All Christian believers are saints, set apart by God, for God, to be God’s holy people and to serve His purposes in the world.

During Pope Francis’ recent visit to the U. S., one of the items on his agenda was to canonize a famous 18th-century priest named Junipero Serra as a saint in the Roman Catholic Church. Serra was instrumental in the establishment of Spanish missions among Native Americans in California. In the Roman Catholic Church, sainthood is way out of the reach of ordinary Christians. It is only for a select few who meet the qualifications.

But not so in the New Testament. Not so for Paul. Sainthood is not an award or title earned or achieved. It is not like making Eagle Scout or being inducted into the Hall of Fame. We are called by God to be saints and set apart by Him. Not on the basis of what we have done, but by virtue of *His* love and grace, demonstrated to us in the gospel of His Son. You and I – all who belong to Jesus Christ and are loved by God – are His saints. His “holy ones.” So, let’s be what we are and live like it. Every day.

Fourth: The Christians in Rome were the recipients of God’s grace and peace (1:7b). As are you. As am I. I have preached a lot about the amazingness of God’s grace over the years, this gift that comes free of charge to people who don’t deserve it and never will. Like me. And you.

By definition, by its very nature, grace is never deserved. If it is earned, it is no longer grace. It is not something we are entitled to. Nobody has a right to grace. *Nobody*.

One way to understand the meaning of grace is through the acronym G-R-A-C-E, which stands for “God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense.” It is God’s free gift to us before we do anything good, as John Piper says, and His enabling of us to do anything good.

We have received the gift of salvation at the expense of Jesus, who suffered and died for us. We have received forgiveness of all our sins at His expense. At His expense, through His death on the cross for us, we have been reconciled to God. At His expense, in and through Him, we now have peace with God (Romans 5:1), which is a gift of His grace. It is all by His amazing grace. And, as Tim Keller says, “The more you see your own flaws and sins, the more precious, electrifying, and amazing God’s grace (will appear) to you.” Truly.

This grace and peace are yours “from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:7). This is saving grace that produces peace in our souls, yes. Praise God, yes! But it is grace

and peace for daily life in this world, too: Sufficient grace, sustaining grace for all the ordinary and extraordinary difficulties or challenges you may face. And peace, even a peace that surpasses and defies all human understanding (Philippians 4:7), when life is hard. These gifts are meant for you. They are yours in and through Jesus Christ our Lord. And God the Father delights to give them to you. So, receive them with a glad and grateful heart. And let them flow out of you into life.

After this greeting and introduction that concludes in verse 7, Paul proceeds to explain his reason for writing to the Romans. In verse 8 he gives thanks for the Christians in Rome, even though he has never been to Rome and has never met most of the Christians there. Why? Because people everywhere were talking about the believers in Rome and their faith in Christ. The news of their faith and commitment to the Lord Jesus was the topic of conversation, it seems, wherever Paul went.

Wouldn't it be great if the same were true today – in a positive way – of Christians in Washington, D. C.? Of the church in America? Or northern Virginia?

Paul goes on in verses 9-13 to tell the Romans of his prayers for them and his long-held desire to visit them. Though he had planned on several previous occasions to go to Rome, something had always come up and prevented him from doing so (cf. 1:13, *MSG*). Now, after going to Jerusalem to deliver the special offering from the churches of Achaia and Macedonia, he hoped at last to visit the believers in Rome. He hoped his visit would be mutually beneficial. Not only did he desire to be a blessing and to impart a blessing to strengthen the church in Rome, he also hoped to receive a blessing from them through the gift of their fellowship and encouragement (1:11-12). He desired, too, to preach the gospel there, because the preaching of the gospel, as F. F. Bruce put it, was in his blood, and he could not *not* do it (Bruce, *Romans*, 71).

Why was Paul so intent on preaching the gospel in Rome? He gives the answer in verses 14 and 15. He says he is “obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish” – in other words, to everybody everywhere to preach the gospel wherever and to whomever he can. The whole world, especially the world of the Gentiles, is his parish. The Greek word translated “obligated” is *opheiletēs*, which can also be translated “debtor.” It is the same word Jesus uses in the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:12, where He instructs His disciples to ask God to “forgive us our debts as we forgive our *debtors*.” Jesus uses the word again in the parable of the unforgiving debtor in Matthew 18:24 (see 18:21-35).

Paul understands himself to be a debtor. Not in the sense of owing money, but in the sense of having been entrusted with a commission to preach the gospel and having a sacred duty to carry it out. Out of obedience to Christ, Paul is “obligated” to preach the gospel to anyone who will listen, anytime and anywhere. This is not, for Paul, a duty he wishes he did not have. It is not a burden he wishes were removed from his shoulders. No. It is the heartbeat, the passion of his life. It is what he was made for.

As is true for each of us. Paul knew himself to be a debtor to God and His grace, which is a debt none of us can ever pay. He also understood that he was a debtor to people everywhere,

because the Lord had given him a message to share, the one message that people everywhere need to hear and believe.

That same message has been entrusted to us. To the church. To you and me and all who profess to be followers of Jesus today.

In verses 16 and 17, Paul lays out the thesis, the theme of his letter. Listen to it again: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes, first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness of God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written (in Habakkuk 2:4): “The righteous will live by faith.””

Not ashamed of the gospel. Not apologetic for it or timid about sharing it. Because Paul knew what the gospel could do. He knew what it had done in his life. I know what it has done in my life and in the lives of many of you. We will look more closely at verses 16 and 17 next Sunday.

For today, I close with this: As people who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, as people unconditionally and immeasurably loved by God and called to be His saints, as recipients of the richness of God’s grace and peace, may we, like Paul, be not ashamed of the gospel and its wonder-working power.

Lord, let it be so. Amen.