

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 11, 2015**

A FAITH-BASED RIGHTEOUSNESS

Romans 1:16-17

Have you ever felt ashamed of something you said or something you did that let someone down, or hurt someone, and damaged your reputation? I sure have. We all have. We all have things in our past, or maybe in our present, that we don't want anyone to know about. There are some things for which it is right to feel ashamed, but you don't have to be held hostage to shame, because God's unfailing love and always sufficient grace cover all our sins and shame and sorrow. All of them.

NOT ASHAMED

Shame is something we all know about. But there are some things about which we should never be ashamed. One of those things is the gospel itself. "I am not ashamed of the gospel," says Paul, "for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes For in (the gospel) a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last" (Romans 1:16-17).

As we pointed out last Sunday, Paul was not embarrassed by the gospel or apologetic for it. He was not timid about sharing it. There was no hesitation or reluctance on his part to declare it openly. Even when it got him into trouble. He was not ashamed of it.

It is true, as Paul knew from his own experience, that the message of the gospel often arouses opposition and even ridicule. Why? Because, as John Stott says, the gospel undermines our self-righteousness and challenges our self-indulgence (Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 60). It exposes the fiction and folly of self-sufficiency. It is offensive, too, because it claims to be objectively true, and its truth-claims violate the prevailing spirit of our age.

John Piper makes the point that there is a difference between being ashamed of the gospel and being shamed or ridiculed on account of the gospel. If we are faithful in proclaiming the message of the gospel, he says, we should not be surprised if we are "shamed" – put down, made fun of, discriminated against, or treated as outcasts – for the gospel (Piper, *The Gospel Is the Power of God unto Salvation*, 21 June 1998, www.desiringgod.org).

Despite all that He went through for us, Jesus was not ashamed of the gospel. Hebrews 12:2 says that "for the joy set before Him," Jesus "endured the cross, despising its shame" For our sakes, yours and mine, Jesus willingly endured the shame and humiliation and unspeakable suffering of the cross, though He had done nothing to deserve it.

The way for us to avoid feelings of shame in a world that finds the message of the gospel offensive is not to go silent. Nor is it to alter the gospel in order to make it more palatable, more in keeping with the spirit of the age. No. As Piper says, the way to avoid feelings of shame when we encounter opposition or ridicule is to remember that the gospel will be

“vindicated in the end. We [must] remind ourselves that the gospel alone brings forgiven sinners to final, everlasting joy. Nothing in the world can do this except the gospel of Jesus Christ. Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam – they do not have a Savior who can solve the problem of separation from a holy God through sin, and offer sinners hope by grace and not works. Only one message can save sinners and bring (us) safely into the presence of God – the gospel of Jesus Christ” (Piper, *ibid.*).

THE POWER TO SAVE

Paul was not ashamed of the gospel, because he knew it to be the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. It is intuitively obvious, isn't it, that power can be intoxicating. It can become an idol. It can and often does corrupt those who possess it.

Rome prided itself on its power. Just like we Americans do. In its day, no one could rival the power of Rome. The Roman army was the greatest military force on earth. The Roman Emperor was undisputedly the most powerful man on earth. Still, as Paul recognized, Rome was powerless when it came to changing people's hearts. Rome was helpless to fix what is broken in the human heart. Only the power of the gospel can do it. Only the power of the gospel can fix what is wrong with you and me. Neither Paul nor any preacher has the power to do it. Nor does any emperor or president or politician or general or military force. Only God has the power to save us from sin and guilt and shame and the condemnation we deserve. Only God can do what is necessary to accomplish the salvation of sinners. The gospel has the power to save because it is the power of God.

The word “salvation” contains the idea of deliverance or rescue from trouble of some kind. From what does God rescue or save us through the power of the gospel?

- ☒ From sin and its power to hold us hostage to our sinful desires.
- ☒ From guilt and shame because of our sins.
- ☒ From being separated from God because of our sins.
- ☒ From the righteous wrath and just condemnation of God.

In his exposition of Romans, Charles Erdman says that the idea of salvation includes “all that a believer receives through faith in Christ, from the moment we are pardoned as penitent sinners until we realize our fullest blessedness in eternal glory” (Erdman, *Exposition of Romans*, 31). Salvation is not limited to what takes place at the moment of our conversion to faith in Christ. It is all that God in Christ has done on our behalf, and all that God continues to do in us and for us until He calls us home to heaven.

The gospel is the power of God for your salvation and mine. Only the power of God could bring it about. And He has.

FOR EVERYONE WHO BELIEVES

Next, we must ask: For whom is this salvation meant? Who is it for?

The answer? It is for “everyone who believes,” both Jew and non-Jew (Gentile) alike. In other words, it is for *everyone*, irrespective of one’s age, sex, race, language, national origin, social status, political affiliation, tax bracket, education, religious background, or ancestry. None of these things matters when it comes to the gospel’s promise of salvation. What matters is believing the gospel. The promise of salvation is for everyone who *believes*. Which is to say, salvation is received by faith.

The gospel, says Paul, is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. Everyone who believes what? Everyone who believes the gospel itself. It is for everyone who believes the gospel message of God’s provision of salvation in Jesus Christ, the Son of God who took on our flesh and blood, lived a sinless life, and willingly died a horrible death for us – in our place – on a Roman cross, as the perfect, once-for-all, atoning sacrifice for our sins. He was, in the words of John the Baptist, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

No matter who you are or who your ancestors were, there is only one way to be saved – by believing the gospel message and placing your trust in Jesus Christ to forgive your sins, to make you right with God, and to give you the gift of eternal life with Him. There is not one way to be saved for Jews and another way for non-Jews. There is not one way for Presbyterians and another way for Baptists or Anglicans or Methodists or Catholics. Everyone who is saved is saved in the same way.

This, of course, does not mean that we all come to saving faith in Christ in the same way. We don’t all experience God’s saving grace in the same way. Paul had a very dramatic conversion experience on the road to Damascus. Luke describes it in Acts 9, and Paul recounts that experience in personal testimonies in Acts 22 and 26. Not everyone has a “Damascus road”-type conversion experience. Sometimes, as in Paul’s case, it is a “dramatic and clearly identifiable experience But it can also be a long and extended process, sometimes with no clear beginning and no clear end” (John M. Mulder, *Finding God*, xviii). In Paul’s case, there was a radical difference between his life *before* and *after* meeting Jesus on the Damascus road.

God draws us to Himself, to saving faith in Christ, in different ways. Paul was committed to the ministry of proclaiming the gospel because he knew the difference it had made in his life. My story of coming to faith in Christ is different than Paul’s. Your testimony may be like Paul’s. Or it may be much different. No matter. The gospel is still the power of God for the salvation of everyone who truly believes it.

Christianity Today magazine features a testimony of God’s saving grace in someone’s life in every issue. Some of them are dramatic, with titles like “My Train Wreck Conversion,” “God’s Hot Pursuit of an Armed Bank Robber,” “Pro Football Was My God,” “Unplanned Pregnancy, Unplanned Grace,” and “Humbled Hustler.” But not all. In fact, there is one titled “My Boring Christian Testimony,” written by a woman blessed with godly parents and a nurturing church environment, who says: “I cannot point to a specific day of spiritual awakening. I can point only to my Lord, who says, ‘All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away’ (John 6:37). My Jesus, I come.

Every day, in need of grace. And I find myself not cast out” (Megan Hill, *Christianity Today*, December 2014).

This, too, is the power of God for salvation. Is your salvation story, your testimony of God’s grace in your life, dramatic? Then give thanks and praise to God, and tell your story whenever you can. Do you think your testimony is boring and uninteresting? No story of God’s saving work in the life of a helpless sinner is dull or boring. Every salvation story is the testimony of a miracle. Even if it doesn’t look miraculous on the outside. And it doesn’t end with our coming to faith in Christ. God’s hand of grace is upon us at every moment, in the little things as well as the big.

It is a tremendous encouragement to your brothers and sisters in Christ when you share with one another how God is at work in your life. Because it is, we want to re-establish the regular practice of giving testimonies in Worship. If you feel the nudge of the Holy Spirit to give a public testimony, would you let me or Debbie Smith know? Debbie is the chairman of the Worship Committee of the Session.

A FAITH-BASED RIGHTEOUSNESS

Before I close, there is one more thing to see. Paul is not ashamed of the gospel, as we have seen in verse 16, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes, including you and me. He is not ashamed of the gospel because he knows the gospel is true. He is not ashamed of it because he knows it is effective. He knows the difference the gospel makes. And he is not ashamed of the gospel because, as he says in verse 17, the gospel is God’s way of putting sinful men and women and girls and boys “in the right” with Him. Look at verse 17: “For in the gospel, a righteousness from 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.”

The message of the gospel is the answer to the question: “How can a righteous God forgive sinners and still be righteous?” How can God possibly forgive all our sins and disobedience and rebellion against Him and still be just and holy?

In Hebrew, the word “righteous” (*saddiq*) means “in the right.” Righteousness is one of the unchanging attributes of God’s character. It is God’s nature to always be “in the right.” We, of course, are not. But, as one Bible commentator says, the gospel tells how sinful men and women can come to be “in the right” with God. Further, it tells how God’s righteousness is shown in the very act of declaring sinful men and women righteous (F. F. Bruce, *Romans*, 74). Another expositor says that the gospel reveals the way in which God makes men and women who are “in the wrong” to be “in the right” without jeopardizing His own righteousness (Stuart Briscoe, *The Communicator’s Commentary: Romans*).

Erdman quotes an unnamed Puritan who said that the righteousness of God is the righteousness that God’s righteousness requires Him to require of us (Erdman, 32). Got that? The truly good news of the gospel is that *God Himself* provides the righteousness we need *in*

Christ for Him to declare us righteous before Him. What He demands *from us*, God gives *to us*.

I love the way John Stott explains what Paul means by the righteousness of God in this context: “‘The righteousness of God’ is God’s righteous initiative in putting sinners right with Himself, by bestowing on (us) a righteousness which is not (our) own but His. ‘The righteousness of God’ is God’s just justification of the unjust, His righteous way of pronouncing the unrighteous righteous, in which He demonstrates His righteousness and gives righteousness to us. He has done it through Christ, the righteous one who died for the unrighteous And He does it by faith when we put our trust in Him, and cry to Him for mercy” (Stott, 64).

Righteousness, in the sense of being “in the right” with God, is not a matter of measuring up. It is not a matter of proving yourself good enough. It is not based on performance. It is not earned. It is received. By faith. The righteousness of God revealed in the gospel is not works-based. It is faith-based. That is, the only way to get it is to receive it by faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ our Savior. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:21, “He who had no sin” – Jesus – “became sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.”

This is what we call the “Great Exchange.” Jesus took our unrighteousness – all our sin – upon Himself and paid for it in His suffering and death on the cross. In exchange He gave us His righteousness. He made us to be “in the right” with God the Father. This way of being right with God is the only way to be right with God. There is no other way. It is all by God’s grace, which comes free of charge to people like us who don’t deserve it and never will. It is based on faith. It is received through faith. And it is for everyone who believes.

This “everyone” includes you. If you already believe the gospel, rejoice in the right standing with God that is yours in Christ. If you do not yet believe the gospel, if you have not yet come to the place of surrendering in faith to the Lord Jesus, if you have not yet received the gift of salvation and the righteousness before God that only Jesus can supply, do it today. Trust in Jesus and what He has done to make you right with God. Take this step of faith in your heart right now. Don’t put it off.

Regardless of what the world around us thinks, may we never be ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last.

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