

November 16, 2008
The National Presbyterian Church

The Truth That Lasts

Romans 1:16-17

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Today, we listen to St. Paul. We have an unforgettable sentence from St. Paul to reflect on today. It is at the beginning of his letter to the Romans. Paul writes a letter to a church he's never been to, but he plans to go. He doesn't realize when he writes this letter, he's going to come as a prisoner on a prison ship that will have a ship wreck at Malta and will finally arrive there in that way, but he hopes to come. He's already travelled throughout the Mediterranean world and he wants to go to Rome.

And so he writes to them at the beginning of Romans and says, "I hope to come to share with you what is on my heart," his experience of the good news about Jesus Christ. He says, "God is my witness. I serve with my spirit in the Gospel of His Son." He will share the good news of this teacher who makes the difference, the good news of Jesus Christ. He tells them that he feels obligated to share this gospel with them, and then comes one electrifying sentence. And it's that one sentence that I want us to reflect on today: Romans 1:16 and 17. It's like a manifesto. It's like an opening preface. "For I am not ashamed of the Gospel." He just told them that "I want to preach this good news of His Son to you," and then he says, "I'm not ashamed of this Gospel. It is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, the Jew first and also the Greek. For in it, the righteousness of God is revealed."

By the way, the word for revealed here that he uses is a very strong word. It's a Greek word *apocalypse* or *apocalypsis*. It means "to break through by surprise." In other words, the righteous truth of God has broken through by surprise. That's the sense of that word. It's revealed through faith for faith. He doubles the word "faith" which makes you think of the Old Testament because the Old Testament word for faith is "amen." Literally, the Hebrew word, "amen." And when it's used in the Old Testament, it does double duty. When it's used to refer to God, it means faithful. When it's used to refer to us, it means faith, which gives you an insight into the biblical view

of faith in the Old Testament. Faith is not a leap into the dark; it's putting your weight down on the evidence of the faithfulness of God--faith for faith; amen, amen. And when "amen" is doubled, that's what it means. Our Lord, began many of his speeches with "Amen, Amen." The word "amen" is the word our Lord uses. "Amen, Amen." God is faithful. You can put your faith in this; you can trust it. So, that's the way Paul now speaks the word "faith" in this great text. Notice, "For in it, the righteousness of God has broken through by surprise, faith for faith." God's faithfulness for our faith.

And then being a good rabbi, Paul wants to give a text. That was the tradition of the rabbis-- to quote a text to support what they teach. And now this is what Paul does, he picks a text. And he does it from the Book of Habakkuk. You heard just a few moments ago that text read to you. And here's this text, "For the just shall live by faith." Or, as Martin Luther notes in his commentary on Romans, "The just shall live by the faithfulness of God." And that's his great sentence that starts the Book of Romans.

Let's pray together. Lord, may the words in my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, the acceptable in thy sight, Lord, our strength, our Redeemer. Be our teacher today, Lord, as we look at this great sentence. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

"I'm not ashamed." I don't know about you, but I was struck and a little bit surprised when I first read this text that Paul would begin the sentence with a negative word. Ashamed is a negative word. It's especially a negative word in a culture that is concerned about being shamed. In the first century world, to be shamed would pose an overwhelming crisis for any person or nation. And yet that is the word that Paul uses. It is sometimes translated "embarrassed" or "blushed;" but ashamed, "I'm not ashamed." He starts this sentence with a negative word. That intrigued me.

Why doesn't he say, "I'm impressed with the Gospel?" or "I respect the Gospel"? Why not put it positively? Why put it negatively. "I am not ashamed." I mean, would you sell a car that way? If you're going to try to sell a car, would you say in your ad: "I have this car to sell; and, by the way, I did not turn the odometer back." Why even plant the idea? I mean, why even suggest the possibility that maybe you thought about maybe turning the odometer back, so that instead of reading 20,000 miles, it reads 5,000 miles? Why even suggest the thought?

And yet Paul starts his Book of Romans with that negative thought--"I'm not ashamed." Why even say it, Paul? Why plant that idea so that we think about that possibility? I think he does it deliberately. Because in the Book of

Romans, he is going to routinely do this. He is going to bring up great themes in a question form, almost the Socratic method; and he's going to ask a question of great themes and usually put it in a way that's embarrassing or negative. For example, in chapter 6 of Romans, he's going to start talking about the Christian life but before he does it, first refers to chapter 5, where he told about the grace of God, how wonderful the grace of God is, and that where sin increases, the grace of God increases more. That's the fifth chapter of Romans. And then this is how chapter 6 starts: "What then, shall we sin more to get more grace?" Paul, why mention it? The youth are listening. Shall we suggest that they sin more to get more grace? And yet that's how he starts the sixth chapter. "Shall we sin more to get more grace?" And then he speaks to it. Or take chapter 8, one of his most famous passages. He starts the great poem of chapter 8 this way: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" Remember, Paul is a contemporary of Nero. And those people that get this letter can think of a lot of people who are against them. Nero, after the fire of Rome, is going to irrationally persecute Christians especially in Rome. Tacitus tells us all about it. And so Paul says, "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

Why even suggest that possibility? A little bit like the Prophet Habakkuk does when he starts his complaints and says, "Why are the Babylonians so strong and against us?" And then He speaks to it, God speaks to it. But why bring it up? Why bring up the negative possibility? Because Paul is going to actually speak each way through the Book of Romans by raising questions and then speaking to them. And that's what he does here. "I'm not ashamed of the Gospel." So in a sense, he encourages you and me to ask the question, "Paul, why might you be ashamed." And I think there are four markers in this basic sentence that begins the book where you might wonder about that.

First, let's think of one. If this good news--and Paul calls it the good news of God's Son Jesus--if this good news were exclusive and tribal--and, by the way, Paul lives in an exclusive and tribal era where everybody is focused on clan and territory. And you know that hasn't changed, unfortunately. Our world today is so tribal. There is so much tribal warfare in the world today. And the mark of tribalism is that everything that's good is exclusively for us, not for others. So what if the Gospel is that? After all, Paul is Jewish. He comes up out of a Jewish tradition with the hopes for a king like David and a father like Abraham and a deliverer like Moses. But what if those great promises are meant only for a select few, then he would be ashamed. He'd be ashamed if an outsider, who happened to be hanging around outside of the synagogues where Greeks often did when Paul taught, might hear this good news and come up to Paul and say, "Paul, can I come in, too? Can I be

a part of this as well?" And then he'd have to say, "Oh, I'm sorry. This is just for our group. You have your own, this is for us." He'd be ashamed. He'd be ashamed that someone outside might want in and he would have to say they can't come in. Hold that thought for a minute.

Think of a second one. What if this good news is not true? In matters of fact, what if it sounds good--and you know a lot of things sound good--but it's not validated in any actual truth test? If there were an actual truth test, this good news of the beloved Son is not true. Then Paul would be ashamed in another way. He'd be ashamed if anyone were to ask truth questions.

I don't know how old you are here but do you remember--I can remember when I was a teenager that we sat around and watched radio. Do you remember that? That's before television. We didn't sit around and listen to radio; we sat around and watched it. Now, we watch television, but then, we watched radio. Do you remember that? And I used to brag about it to my kids and say, "Oh, you're watching television. But I used to listen to "Inner Sanctum" and I love the mystery on radio and it was more exciting and scary than watching it on TV, because then my own brain did all the imagining." And so, yeah, they said, "Yeah, sure. I'm sure, Dad."

And then one day, my kids actually bought some tapes where you could buy old radio shows. They bought "Inner Sanctum" and it scared the daylights out of my kids. Then they bought the Bud Abbott-Lou Costello Show from 1944 which--because they knew I loved the Bud Abbott-Lou Costello's skit, "Who's On First? What's On Second? I don't know - Third Base." And so they knew I loved that show and they bought that tape. And one day--my kids were teenagers then and we all sat around on the floor and listened to the 1944 Camel cigarette, Bud Abbott-Lou Costello Show. We heard the whole show including the ads. And we listened and Bud Abbott and Lou Costello were really funny, but my kids laughed the most at the ads. The ads were really funny. They weren't meant to be funny but they were really funny. Here was one that everybody was rolling on the floor. See if this brings back a memory. My daughter wrote down the exact ad as it was. "Three independent leading research organizations asked this question of 113,597 doctors, 'Doctor, what cigarette do you smoke?' The brand name most was Camel. Now, you'll probably enjoy rich full flavor and cool mildness in a cigarette just as much as doctors do. And that's why, if you're not a Camel smoker now, try a Camel on your T-zone." Listen to this folks, it gets worse. "T-zone. That is your true proving ground for any cigarette. See if Camel's rich flavor of superbly blended choice tobaccos is extra delightful to your taste. See if Camel's cool mildness isn't in harmony with your throat. And see if you, too, don't say that 'Camel soothes my T-zone to a T.'" My kids were rolling on the floor laughing and said, "Dad, did you hear this?" I said, "Yes, we listened to it and we all took up smoking, too."

After all, Humphrey Bogart smoked. Everybody else did, every movie actor smoked.

Folks, that ad is joyous, it's filled with good news, but it's not true. Cigarettes damage the T-zone and harm taste. When you do a truth test to it, it comes out as not true. Now, media in America is not allowed to have those kinds of untruths told in the ads. It has taken some of the joy out of the ads—that Ambien ad about getting a good night's sleep sounds so wonderful with their butterflies all flying around in the ad, until they give you the warnings of all the dangers if you were to take this to sleep. And then the Viagra ad is downright terrifying. This ad in 1944 was not true. It was good news but not true good news. What if the Gospel that Paul's preaching is not true? Then he wouldn't want anybody to look too closely at it. He'd be ashamed if they did.

Or what if it's true in a mild sort of way but without any consequences? There are some things that are true encyclopedically. You can say, "Oh, yes, some of these things actually happened and there was a Jesus and all those things may be true." Like you'd find them in encyclopedia but they have no impact. They have no result. A little bit like 'deep thoughts.' Remember that era when there were deep thoughts? And we use to have jokes about that, too. Here was one of the deep thoughts that was on Saturday Night Live: "The earth is old but time moves slowly." And they would have organ music with the waterfalls, and then they would say a deep thought. And people scratch their head. We even played that little joke on friends once in a while at a supper together—my son would say, "Hey, Dad, I thought of something." Then he'd say, "The earth is old but time moves slowly." And then I would say, "Jon, you are onto something there. I mean, that's a great thought." And our guests would try to figure out what in the world is so great about that. It's not untrue. It's not a lie. But it doesn't mean anything. John Updike said, after reading Ralph Waldo Emerson, he described Emerson's thoughts as "paint that doesn't stick to anything." I mean, think of paint that doesn't stick to anything. It's colorful but it doesn't stick to anything. It has no impact. What if the Gospel were that way? Truisms, things that are cheerful but they're not of any impact. Then Paul would be ashamed.

Or finally, what if it's called good but what if, in fact, it's bad? And we know a lot about religion like that. A lot of religion is extreme and devout but it has a toxic effect in your life. A lot of belief systems are that way. We live in a century where a lot of people believe a lot of things strongly and they are toxic. It was Pascal in the 16th century who said, "Men never delight in doing evil as much as if they can do it for religious reasons." Doesn't that scare you? And we know it's true. We've seen it. But what if that's the way the Gospel is? If you were to believe it, it would really have a

bad effect in your life, not a good effect. Then Paul would be ashamed.

In this preface and in the Book of Romans itself, Paul is going to make a bold claim. Hold your breath. He is saying that he is not ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus Christ because it is true. It is powerful. It is universally inviting to all people and it's totally good. It has won his respect. It's true. I believe that's the force of the use of the word "righteous." He says, "In it, the righteous character of God," and that's the way everyone will understand that word *dikaios* in the first century, "the righteous character of God has broken through. Faith for faith; amen, amen." God is faithful. You can put your weight on it.

You know, something that's beautiful about the Christian Gospel is the Christian Gospel thrives on truth. Nowhere in the Bible are we ever encouraged to empty our mind or silence our minds in order to believe. As a matter of fact, the Gospel stirs up your mind. It makes you a better scientist. It makes you more inquisitive to study all the ideas that are out there. We are not afraid of science. That Gospel has an instinct for truth. We have a built-in alliance with truth. Do you believe that? Don't you ever hesitate--you young people, don't you ever hesitate to study science. Open the doors. The Christian faith endorses knowledge, wants you to grow with your brain as well as your heart. John put it this way, "God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all." Paul fully agrees. "I love the Gospel," he says. "I'm not ashamed of the Gospel because it's the truth of God. Amen, amen. God's faithfulness for our faith has broken through."

Two, it's powerful. The Gospel changes lives. The Gospel brings hope and healing where there is brokenness. Paul put it this way in Romans, chapter 5, "Where sin increased--" and notice, he does face the fact that there is a power in sin. You heard it in the Habakkuk text. There's a power in Babylon and Babylon does have power. There's a power in evil. And when people go their own way, they develop a certain kind of power from going their own way, centering their lives on themselves. That's what Ayn Rand was working with in *Atlas Shrugged*. There is a kind of power that comes when you are focused on yourself, but it is no match for the power that can heal. One is the power that can break; but the power that can heal is greater. "Where sin increased," Paul says, "the grace of God increased faster." The grace of God can outdistance human sin. It can heal human brokenness. And Paul knows that. He's going to tell the Romans about it throughout this book. He discovered it himself in his own life when Jesus Christ healed him on the road to Damascus. The Gospel is powerful. Do you believe that? Do you believe, if this is so true, that there is no lost cause? There is no person that has gone too far that they can't be healed and can't be made whole and be invited into hope? Paul believes it, and that's why he's not ashamed of the

Gospel.

Three, it's universal. Notice, he says, "I'm not ashamed of the Gospel as a power of God for salvation, to the Jew first, also the Greek." Oh, I'm glad he said that. Chronologically, the good news started with the Jews. Thank God for that. We have that history in our root system. And also the Greek (that's us). It's for all of us. Our Lord said that in his last speech to the disciples: Acts, chapter 1. He said, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the Earth." They're all going to be invited in. I have other sheep you don't even know about that I'm going to draw in (John, chapter 10). And Paul knew that and that's why he's not ashamed of the Gospel. It's universal.

Finally, it's good. I believe that's the force of the use of the word "salvation." "Salvation" is a wonderful word. Did you know that in the Septuagint, which was translated by 70 rabbis where they took the Hebrew Bible and translated it into Greek in 100 B.C., they had to find a word for the great Hebrew word *shalom*, peace. The word *shalom* is the most beautiful word in the Hebrew language. It means "wholeness," it means "health." And they had to find a Greek word to translate it. And so they used three Greek words to translate *shalom*. They used the word *eirene* which is the Greek word for "peace;" but it's a weak word. It means, in classical Greek, "absence of war." And they knew that *shalom* was richer than that. So they chose a second word, *telios*, which means "fulfillment," because peace is fulfillment. And they used a third word, and you know what the third word was? This word, "salvation." "Salvation" means "to be made safe," "to be made whole;" that's what the word means. It's God's peace—be made safe—and that's good. Every one of us needs to be made safe and whole. So, Paul knows it's good. He said, "I'm not ashamed of the Gospel because it's true, because it's powerful, because it's universally relevant and it's good."

Finally, I'm glad he said, "I'm not ashamed." He didn't say "we," he didn't use the plural. This is not a committee announcement. He puts himself on the line. I read a wonderful book by John R.W. Stott who is one of my heroes. He's chaplain to the Queen of England. He's now in his '80s and is now retired from All Souls Church in London. And in a book he wrote called *Basic Christianity*, he tells his own story. Listen to what he says, "A boy in his later teens knelt at his bedside one Sunday night in the dormitory of his public school. It was about 10:00 p.m. on 13 February 1938. In a simple, matter-of-fact, but definite way, he told Christ that he had made a rather mess of his life so far. He confessed his sins, he thanked Christ for dying for him, and he asked Him to come into his life. The following day he wrote in his diary, 'Yesterday really was an eventful day. 'Behold he stands at the door and knocks;' I have heard Him and now He has come into my house.'" That's the way John Stott shared his becoming a Christian. And

then he follows it up with this sentence: “These are extracts from my own diary. I ventured to quote them because I did not want you to think that I was recommending you to take a step which I had not taken myself.” I love the fact that Paul starts his letter to the Romans not saying, “We are not ashamed of the Gospel,” but “I am not ashamed of the Gospel.” I’ve taken the step, too. Paul wants you to know that. That’s why this is such a good news.

Heavenly Father, thank you for this good news. Thank you for St. Paul. Thank you for the way he points us to Jesus Christ at the center and that this good news is true. And it will thrive in every validity test. I’m grateful for that. Lord, may I discover it in my life. Help us to discover your love, your faithfulness, your truth for ourselves. In Christ’s name, may we discover it in our lives, too. Amen.

Atlas Shrugged (35th anniversary edition). Ayn Rand. Dutton, New York, New York, 1992.

Basic Christianity. John R. W. Stott. IVP Books. Downers Grove Illinois. 2006.

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Sunday Worship at 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

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