

Recovering the Gospel

Living With Forever In Mind – Part III

Romans 1:17

Introduction

Some of you have traveled to Europe and have seen, as I have, some of the great cathedrals that literally took generations to build. One of the most famous is St. Paul's Cathedral in London, which is considered to be among the ten most beautiful buildings in the world. The designer of that enormous cathedral was famed astronomer and architect, Sir Christopher Wrenn, (not to be confused with Christopher Robin of *Winnie the Pooh!*).

Christopher Wrenn was given the task of designing the interior of the Town Hall in Windsor. His plans for that interior project included massive columns that were beautifully carved and placed in such a way as to support the high ceiling of the Town Hall. When construction was completed, the city fathers toured the building and all expressed concern over what they considered to be a problem – those pillars. They were convinced that there were not enough columns to support the massive roof of the Town Hall, and, despite Wrenn's protests, ordered him to add four new pillars immediately. He did exactly as he was told and added four new columns.

The columns remain, I have read, to this day. They are not hard to identify though, because he cleverly designed them so that he could, in fact, prove they were unneeded. Those four beautifully carved pillars do not quite reach the ceiling; they support no weight at all; they are fakes. He installed them to simply look good and to satisfy the town fathers of his day, who knew nothing of architecture.

By the time Wrenn's ploy was discovered, the Town Hall was already proven to be built solidly

enough without them, but they were left standing. They are beautiful columns, but are merely ornamental and serve no purpose other than to satisfy the eye. In fact, when it comes to supporting the building, they do no more than a picture hanging on a wall.ⁱ

In I Timothy, chapter 3, verse 15, Paul reminded Timothy that the church is “the pillar and support of the truth.” In other words, the church is to hold up the truth, just as a pillar of stone or steel is to hold up a ceiling or roof.

The church, Paul wrote, is the pillar and support of the truth. However, like those pillars in the town hall outside of West London, the church can merely look good. It can be more interested in ornamental things that satisfy the eye than biblical truth that satisfies the soul.

The church faces the constant threat of the enemy, not so much of destruction, as distraction. And the truth is, if the enemy of the church can distract our attention and focus, it has effectively destroyed our message. If the church, today, has lost its power, it is because it has lost the gospel. And, it has lost the gospel because it has become distracted and has lost sight of the Savior.

The experts and church growth specialists are running around telling the church to invest in everything from telemarketing strategies to entertainment schedules. One author wrote,

Plainly declaring the truth of God's word is regarded today as unsophisticated, offensive and utterly ineffective. We're now told we can get better results by first amusing people

or giving them success tips and pop-psychology, thus wooing them into the fold. Once they feel comfortable, they'll be ready to receive biblical truth in small, diluted doses.

Compare that to II Corinthians, chapter 5, verse 11, where Paul wrote,

. . . knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men . . .

If you were on board a sinking ship at the time it began to go down, the last thing you would ever think of doing for someone else is getting something for them to eat or grabbing another cushion for their chair.

One well-known pastor made a new year's resolution that revealed his deception by current trends when he wrote, "I will waste less time with long sermons and spend much more time preparing short ones. People, I've discovered, will forgive even poor theology as long as they get out before noon."

In other words, bad doctrine is acceptable; a long sermon is not. The important thing is not holding up the ceiling of truth, but getting your audience out for lunch.

The trouble is, he is not alone. Thousands of churches in America today, actually survey their neighborhoods to determine what the unbeliever wants and then, promise that if they will come to church, they will get it. If it is casual clothes they want, then wear them; if it is hot coffee, they will get it for free; if it is short sermons, they will get that every week; if it is teaching that does not mention sin and holiness, but instead is filled with self-help tips on family, finances, and feeling good about yourself, they will get that too.

It is simply called "consumer-oriented ministry," to give people what they want. The audience has become sovereign, God no longer is. The gospel is not supported, the consumer's desires are supported.

When it comes to holding up the truth, as Paul told Timothy that the church was designed to do, the pillars today do not quite reach the ceiling. Although they look better than ever, in this analogy, the ceiling is actually cracking and beginning to give way.

Paul reminded young pastor Timothy, in II Timothy, chapter 4, verses 2 through 4,

Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears

tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.

In other words, "Preach anything to us but Christ; deliver news of anything to us but the claims of the gospel; give us our self-made religion and a Messiah we believe we need. Do not give us the cross of Jesus Christ."

The Foundation of the Gospel is Christ

Yet, the core of the gospel is Christ. Look at Romans, chapter 1, verses 16 and 17.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "But the righteous [just] man shall live by faith."

If you just circled the key words in these verses: power, God, salvation, believe, righteousness, just, live, and faith, what would these words mean without Christ? Absolutely nothing. The words might sound good in your spiritual vocabulary, but without Christ, they are meaningless.

Power

1. What about the key word "power"?

Look at II Corinthians, chapter 12, verses 9 and 10.

And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

Also look at Colossians, chapter 2, verses 8 through 10.

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority [power].

Paul wrote, in Philippians, chapter 3, verse 10,

that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection . . .

If you remove Christ, there is no power for forgiveness or even for daily living.

God

2. And, what about the key word “God”? What is that word without Christ?

Look at John, chapter 1, verse 1.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

Skip to verse 14.

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us . . .

Plato once lamented, “Oh if only some logos, some word, some explanation would come from God.”

In the beginning was the “logos,” the explanation, and the explanation was with God, and the explanation was God. . . . And the explanation became flesh, and dwelt among us . . .

If you lose Christ, you lose the explanation of God and from God.

Salvation

3. Then, what of the key word “salvation”?

According to Luke, chapter 2, verse 30, Simeon, the old man, took up Mary’s baby in his arms and looked up to heaven and said,

For my eyes have seen Your salvation

Also, Acts, chapter 4, verse 12, says,

And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.

If you eliminate Christ, you eliminate eternal salvation.

Believe

4. And what is it to “believe” without the Son of God?

Acts, chapter 16, verse 30, says,

and after he brought them out, he said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved . . .”

I John, chapter 5, verse 13, tells us,

These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

Righteousness

5. Another key word, in verse 17, is “righteousness”. What is righteousness without Christ?

I Corinthians, chapter 1, verses 29 through 30, says,

so that no man may boast before God. But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption . . .

Also look at II Peter, chapter 1, verse 1.

Simon Peter, a bond-servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours, by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ

By the way, that is a wonderful verse on the deity of Jesus Christ and His equality with God the Father.

There is no righteousness apart from Jesus Christ.

Just

6. Then, the word “just” appears in verse 17. This word is simply another description of Jesus Christ.

Look at I Peter, chapter 3, verse 18.

For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit

Live

7. And what about the word “live”? What is life without Christ?

I John, chapter 5, verses 11 through 12, says,

And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life.

Paul wrote in Galatians, chapter 2, verse 20,

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.

Faith

8. Finally, what about the key word “faith”? How does faith relate to the person of Christ?

Hebrews, chapter 12, verse 2, says,

Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith . . .

And, I Corinthians, chapter 15, verse 17, tells us, *and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins.*

The gospel is Christ and Christ is the gospel. We do not believe in a plan, we believe in a Person; we do not follow some human method, we follow the Messiah; we do not adhere to, submit to and believe in religion, we adhere to and submit to and believe in the Redeemer. It is not so much what you believe, as it is Who you believe in.

If you eliminate Christ, you have eliminated the gospel!

The Explanation of the Gospel is Christ

Now, Paul goes on to further explain the gospel in Romans, chapter 1, verse 17.

For in it [that is, in the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed . . .

That word translated “revealed” comes from a Greek word that can be translated, “to take off or lift up the veil”. I never cease to be awed, during the formal weddings in which I have officiated, as the bride comes down the aisle partially hidden behind the veil. She has been dreaming of this moment for years.

My little seven-year-old daughter and I were at the new church site, walking around early in the evening, and she sighed and then, said, “Yep, this is where I’m gonna get married.”

I thought, “Not if I can help it! You’re staying home with your mother and me for the rest of your life.”

But, here comes the bride, walking down the aisle toward the front of the church, where her future husband stands, entirely unworthy of her. Then I say

that one sentence that her father spent all night practicing to respond to, saying, “Her mother and I . . . Her mother and I . . .”.

The moment comes, and I ask, “Who gives this woman to be married to this man?”

I once had a father look at me and say, “My MasterCard and I.”

The bride’s father says, “Her mother and I.”

Then he leans over and lifts her veil and kisses her on the cheek. It is as if she, at that point, already belongs to someone else. Then she turns, with an open face, toward her groom, as she has been ceremonially released; she has now been revealed to him – the veil is gone.

God’s Righteousness versus Man’s Righteousness

The righteousness of God was once veiled as a mystery. A thick curtain separated humanity from the holy of holies. But the gospel; that is, the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, has taken off the veil. In fact, as Christ hung on the cross and said, “It is finished,” the veil in the temple of Jerusalem that separated the holy place from the people, ripped from the top to the bottom, as if the invisible hand of God reached down and lifted the veil.

The gospel has revealed the person of God through Christ to us. Paul wrote in II Corinthians, chapter 4, verse 6,

For God, who said, “Light shall shine out of darkness,” is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

The veil has been lifted, so that we now have the full revelation of God through the face of Christ, as it were, revealed to us.

And just what has been revealed? Paul writes, in verse 17,

. . . the righteousness of God is revealed . . .

What God is! What man cannot be.

The righteousness of God is different from the righteousness of man. The righteousness of God is what He is! God is perfect holiness and sinless righteousness. What He is, is what we cannot be.

Look at Romans, chapter 3, verse 9b through 10.

. . . for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; as it is

written, *“There is none righteous, not even one”*

God is holy and righteous and we are sinful and unrighteous.

What God has! What man does not have.

In addition, righteousness is not only what God is, but it is what God has! And what He has, we do not have.

Look at Isaiah, chapter 64, verse 6.

For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; and all of us wither like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

It is no wonder that Paul writes, in Romans, chapter 3, verse 23,

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God

The righteousness of God is what He is; it is what He possesses. It is what we are not and what we do not have.

Anyone who thinks that the only difference between human righteousness and divine righteousness is just a matter of degrees; is just that we have less than God; is just that what we have is slightly inferior, that person does not comprehend the revelation of the gospel.

It is not that He has more of it and that, if we work hard enough at it, we will get some of it. That is the religion of human invention, human effort, human self-centeredness, and human self-sufficiency.

People think they will stand before God with thirty percent of their own righteousness and say, “Listen, Lord, I’m seventy percent short, so I’ll need You to make it up for me.”

Others think, “Oh, not me. I’ll stand there and say, ‘Lord, I’m at eighty percent righteousness. I just need You to give me the other twenty percent and I’m in.’”

That is man’s gospel, not God’s, and it cannot satisfy or bring peace to the person who is well aware of their sin. The person who is well aware of their sinful nature knows that they will never satisfy the righteous demands of a holy God.

The apostle Paul once thought he had what it took to stand before God. He had his heritage, his pedigree, his education, his position on the Sanhedrin, his passion for God’s honor in Israel, but

later, when he encountered the gospel of Christ, he said, in Philippians, chapter 3, verse 8, “I considered all of the above as rubbish; as dung; as refuse; as trash.”

That was much of Martin Luther’s personal agony, as he struggled in the Augustinian monastery in the early 1500’s, to keep the Law and somehow earn the mercy of God.

You cannot study Romans, chapter 1, verse 17, without intersecting with the agony of this monk, who would launch the reformation of the church and, ultimately, what we now call, the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther agonized over his soul, even though he called himself an impeccable monk. In fact, his desire to earn peace with God was so great, and his fear of standing before God so deep, having escaped being nearly struck down by lightning, he joined monastic life and nearly wore out his confessors with his daily confessions. He spent hours praying, confessing, going through the Roman church rituals, as well as saying the full mass several times a day.

Later, when Luther earned his doctorate and began teaching at the University of Wittenberg, he began teaching through the book of Romans. It was this verse, chapter 1, verse 17, that caused in him, great anger toward God. He said, “I knew that the righteousness [or justice, which is the same root word in the Greek language] of God was revealed in the Law, but why would the righteousness of God also be revealed in the gospel?”

He wrote,

It’s as though it really were not enough that miserable sinners should be eternally damned with sin, laid upon them by the Law of the Ten Commandments; now must God go and add sorrow upon sorrow and even through the gospel itself brings His justice and wrath to bear. I raged in this wise with a fierce and disturbed conscience.

He later wrote,

I greatly longed to understand Paul’s epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, “the justice or righteousness of God”, because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. Although I was an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would satisfy God. Therefore I did not love a just God, but

rather hated and murmured against Him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant by the gospel revealed in the justice of God. Night and day I pondered until I saw that the justice of God is that righteousness by which, through grace and mercy, God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the justice of God had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me the gate to heaven.ⁱⁱ

Martin Luther learned that God must intervene and give something to us that He is and we are not. God must grant something to us that He has and we can never come to be; something we can never create or generate in and of ourselves.

What God gives! What man must receive.

The gospel reveals that the righteousness of God is not only what He is, and what He has, but to open the door of paradise, the righteousness of God is what He gives. It is something that He provides to bankrupt sinners and all we can do is receive.

Paul wrote in Philippians, chapter 3, verses 8 and 9.

More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith

So, the righteousness of God is not only something He possesses, but it is a righteousness which He provides through faith in Christ alone. Redemption then, is a kind of divine math. When you placed your faith in Christ alone, God subtracted sin from your account and added righteousness to your account. All He could get out of your account was sin, and all you can get out of His account is righteousness.

The phrase, in verse 17, “from faith to faith,” can mean a number of things. I believe it is another way

of saying, “The righteousness of God is revealed by and received through faith alone.”

Salvation is faith alone in the work of Christ alone, as revealed in the scriptures alone.

The Demonstration of the Gospel is Christ

But Paul goes on to finish this classic verse 17 of Romans, chapter 1, by saying,

... But the righteous man shall live by faith.

In other words, the righteous, or the just; the justified; the redeemed, shall live by faith. This means that saving faith reveals itself in living faith. What you believe eventually affects how you behave. The justified man or woman demonstrates their faith in Jesus Christ in obedience to His purposes.

There is a story involving Yogi Berra, the well-known catcher for the New York Yankees, and Hank Aaron, the power hitter for the Milwaukee Braves. The teams were playing in the World Series, and, as usual, Yogi was keeping up his famous chatter, which both encouraged his teammates and distracted his opponents. As Hank Aaron came up to the plate, Yogi tried to distract him by saying, “Aaron, you’re holding the bat wrong. You’re supposed to hold it so you can read the trademark.”

Aaron did not say anything, but when the pitch came, he hit it into the left field bleachers. After rounding the bases and tagging up at home plate, Aaron looked at Yogi Berra and said, “I didn’t come up here to read.”

If we ever hope to recover the gospel in our generation, it will require that we remember why Christ has left us on earth. We will have to remember the purpose of the church. We have not been left on earth to be entertained, accepted by the world, or to be made comfortable. We have become the church, which is supposed to be the pillar and ground of the truth, to deliver the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world, to live with eternity in view and forever in mind.

We are to passionately say, with the apostle Paul,

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “But the righteous man shall live by faith.”

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ⁱ John MacArthur, Pillars of Christian Character (Moody Press), p. 7.

ⁱⁱ R. C. Sproul, Faith Alone (Baker Books), p. 56.