

Romans – The Proposal

I'm particularly excited today because we are beginning a new series from the New Testament Book of Romans that we're calling ***Living By Faith***.

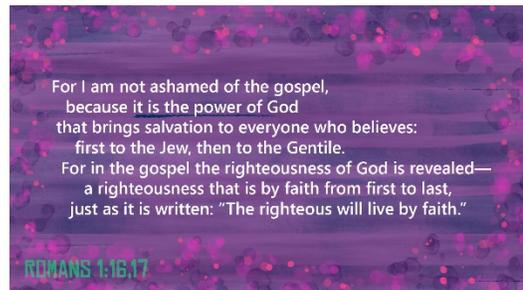


If you've been around here for a while, you know that I like to preach in series, mostly from one of the Books of the Bible (of course I always speak *from the Bible*... but rather than a *topical* or *scattered* approach, I like to allow a Book of the Bible to dictate the structure of a series). I also am liking to keep a couple of series going at a time, so we are still working through our Deuteronomy series, even though we are starting this series in Romans... and we'll break from both of these series for the four weeks of Advent.

As it stands right now, I'm planning on twelve messages in this series from Romans, which will take us up to Easter.

So today will include some introduction to the Book of Romans, including an introduction to the *big idea* of Romans, which is found in what I believe is the key verse to Romans. Let's get started by reading, aloud together, this key verse... starting with Romans 1:16.

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. ¹⁷ For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”^{n 1}



While verse 16 is really important, I believe that the *big idea* of Romans is contained in verse 17 (and am in pretty good company among scholars):

in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”²

So... if you have that *all figured out*, I suppose you can *test out* of this series... but of course there will not be a test (at least not a test here that I'll

¹ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Ro 1:16–17). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

² *The New International Version*. (2011). (Ro 1:17). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

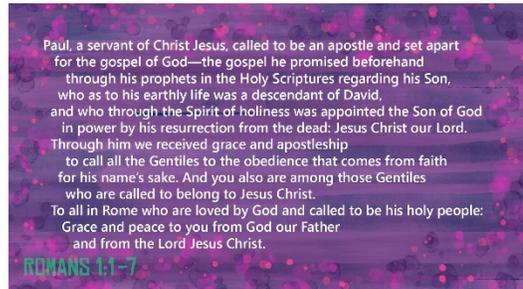
administer), and I'm pretty sure that if we will *stick with* the chapters that follow, we will gain a deeper understanding of just what it means to **live by faith**. This righteousness, this salvation, this justice of God is to be lived... lived by faith. For us who have been at this for a while, I'm sure we'll learn something deeper, richer, and even practical about living by faith. And for those who are curious about this Christian life, or taking some of your first steps in this Christian life, these chapters in Romans will serve as a perfect *user's manual* for this faith.



I'm confident that we'll get all of that in the weeks (and chapters) **ahead**... but let's start by going **back** to the very beginning of Romans.

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—

This is another of the Books in the New Testament written by the Apostle Paul. He is the same Paul who has his *conversion story* recorded in the Book of Acts... the one who was formerly a persecutor of Christians, but was miraculously confronted by Jesus, and called by His Savior to a life of service preaching the Gospel.



Here Paul establishes this message as “the gospel of God,” the Good News **from** God. It is not merely Paul's message, nor even a message that originates with Jesus, but God's *Good News*, God's Gospel and Plan from the Almighty's Heart for all eternity.

It is...

² the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures ³ regarding his Son,

This statement establishes two important foundations of the Gospel:

1. Jesus, the Son of God, is at the center of the Gospel, and
2. This Gospel (Good News, saving plan of God) was promised by God from the beginning.

Not merely a new plan or philosophy, or even a plan-B or *modification* of an ancient theology... but rather God plan, personified in Jesus the Son of God.

who as to his earthly life ² was a descendant of David, ⁴ and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power ¹ by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.

Who personifies the Gospel? Jesus Christ our Lord.

1. Jesus: A man with an earthly life; real flesh and blood... not at all detached from humanity.
2. Lord: One who rightly was understood to be King, the promised descendant of King David. Royalty to whom we owe obedience.
3. Christ: Our Savior. God the Son who saves us by His suffering and death. The One powerfully validated to indeed be our Savior through the Holy Spirit's resurrecting power.

⁵Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name's sake. ⁶And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

⁷To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. ³

Here Paul alludes to his own calling: He was called by Jesus to be an apostle to the ***Gentiles***. Paul was called to plant churches, disciple Christian believers, and raise up Christian leaders among Gentiles, among the non-Jews.

It is a funny way to think about things when we classify people as either Jew or Gentile... as if that there is some sort of equivalency in size or scope. While the Jews were a *special people* with a *special purpose*, they were then (as they are now) only a tiny sliver of the population. Gentiles comprise *just about everyone*... so Paul was called to proclaim the Gospel among **everyone**.

³ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Ro 1:1–7). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

This brings up a point that might seem a bit *academic* at first, but I believe leads us to understand something vitally important. Scholars have wondered about the *founding* and *makeup* of the church in Rome; we don't have an historical account of the very beginnings of the Roman Church in the Bible, not in this Book of Romans, nor in the Book of Acts, or anywhere else. It is an interesting question because studying the Book of Romans could lead us to clashing conclusions.

1. We could determine that the Roman church was predominantly Gentile
 - a. Rome, of course, was predominantly Gentile (Jews making up only a small minority of the capitol of the Empire).
 - b. The stated purpose of Paul's ministry was to the Gentiles, and the Letter to the Romans was for the Gentiles.
2. But we see so much clearly written **to** and **for** Jews.
 - a. We see it here in the very beginning in reference to the Jewish Scriptures and the Jewish lineage of Jesus
 - b. We will see it again throughout the Book of Romans.

So we wonder, who was in the Roman Church? Jews or Gentiles. It seems pretty clear that there were both... and it could have been that the Roman Church was *predominantly* Jewish, especially in its founding. The question then gets a bit more complex if we ask, "If the Roman Church was predominantly Jewish, then why all the emphasis on the Gentiles?"

I think answering that question is simple if we just add another question (don't you just love it when people answer questions with another question?). Rather than just asking, "Who was **in** that Roman Church?" We need to also ask "Who was the Roman Church **for**?" When we take that question to the text, the answer is plain to see: the Roman Church was **for** the Gentiles, because Rome was full of Gentiles. The Roman Church had a clear mission to the Roman people.

It is likely that the Roman Church had its beginning like most early churches began, out of synagogues with Jewish Christians as the first believers and leaders. But make no mistake about it, the Church was not merely *for* this tiny segment of the population; the Church was, and is, for **all**.

Are you seeing where I am going? We ask the same question today: “Who is the Church for?” We are not so concerned about whether the Church is for Jews or Gentiles, but rather we struggle wondering if the Church is for just Christian believers, or is it for everyone?



I suppose we would do well to go ahead and restate the question, “Who is **our** church for?” Is Northshore predominantly for us Christians, or is it for everyone? We could ponder the question philosophically, but it is a more meaningful question as it works out in *day to day*, practical questions:

- Do we have more Food Truck Fests, or more prayer meetings?
- More church potlucks, or more distribution nights for our Food Bank?
- More opportunities to *gather* together, or more opportunities to *scatter* throughout our cities?

We have lots of space and many nights of the week, so we don’t often have to really make such choices... but we do have limited resources, especially limited *human resources* to lead and serve (and cleanup).

More often, we confront this *big question* in more subtle ways:

- How will we make choices of style in music?
- How do we respond if someone *gets the finger* in Royal Rangers or hears the *f word* in youth group?

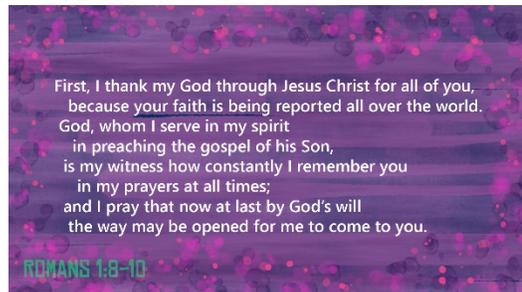
The way we answer questions like these reveals our priorities. It could be that the even better question is who do we think *our neighbors think* the church is for? Do we think they think our church is just for us Christians? If they don’t think that our church is for everyone, how could they ever think that Northshore might be for them?

And, of course, this is not an *either or* question. Our church is for Christians, and it is for everyone... and (by the way) it is for God. We describe it as being **upward facing, inward strong, and outward focused.**

I think it sounds a little easier than it is. This is what we strive for. We'll get it right sometimes... but not always. This is for sure: We won't settle for merely being an inward-focused church.

It is clear that Paul intended to lead the Roman Church as an outward-focused church. He had great affection for this church that we can see as we read on.

⁸ First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. ⁹ God, whom I serve in my spirit in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you ¹⁰ in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you.⁴



This reveals an important distinction about this Letter to the Romans. In most other cases, these letters to churches, which make up a lot of our New Testament, are written *back* to churches. For example, we finished up a series from the Book of Galatians a few weeks ago; that was a letter from the Apostle Paul written *back* to the churches in Galatia, churches that Paul had established.

This letter to the Romans is a letter not written *back* to a church Paul had established, but rather a letter written ***ahead*** to church he intended to visit. Not a letter written back to solve some problem or answer some question, but rather a letter written ahead to *pave the way* for his arrival.

We could wonder why write the letter (this long, theological letter) at all. Why not just tell them when he got there? I think there are a couple of reasons:

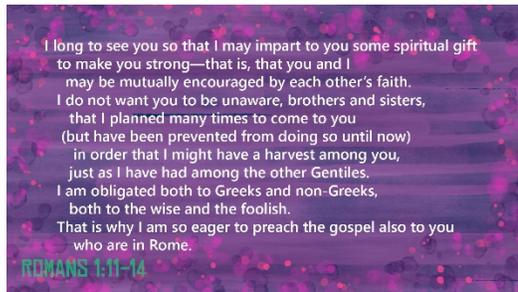
1. He wasn't sure that he would get there. He tried, and was diverted. We know from the account in the Book of Acts that Paul did eventually get to Rome, but not how he had planned... he arrived as a prisoner in chains (reminding us that God sometimes delivers on His promises in unexpected, even difficult, ways).

⁴ The New International Version. (2011). (Ro 1:8–10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

2. Paul had theological heavy-lifting to do in the Roman church as he carried out his responsibility to lead the Church. This letter was the pre-reading for this graduate level class, the homework that ought to be studied and understood before the first session.

And that is what makes Romans so wonderful for us. All of the Bible is good for us, but Romans is special in its approach to methodically teach us the Gospel of God. It was good homework for the Romans, and it remains great homework for us too.

¹¹ I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—¹² that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. ¹³ I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters,^c that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles.



¹⁴ I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. ¹⁵ That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome. ⁵

What do we suppose is that **harvest**?

1. Converts – Harvest and other farming metaphors are often used in the New Testament to indicate believers joining the people of God by faith. There is no doubt that a *harvest of new believers* was part of Paul's hope and plan.
2. Financial Support – Paul was a missionary... and missionaries need support. He aspired to go beyond Rome as he spread the Gospel from Jerusalem, through the provinces of the Roman Empire west to Rome, with hopes of moving on to Spain. His ministry included the practical activity of collecting offerings and getting those funds to places of need. It is an endeavor not foreign to us as we support missionaries, and raise funds to meet needs like we have through Convoy of Hope.

I think the harvest he had in mind included all of that, converts and gifts, but so much more. Paul anticipated the mutual encouragement that springs among people of faith, a harvest of the fruit of the Spirit.

⁵ The New International Version. (2011). (Ro 1:11–15). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

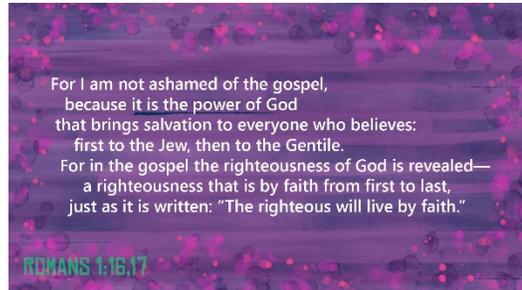
²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,
²³ gentleness and self-control.⁶

Paul's work was an obligation, a response to a call from Jesus to suffer and serve... but it was work that Paul eagerly anticipated with joy and enjoyment. He looked forward to a bountiful harvest of generous fellowship with these spiritual brothers and sisters that he had not yet met.

This brings us back to the where we started:

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.⁷

By declaring that he is not ashamed of the Gospel draws attention to just how absurd the Gospel might first sound.



- Salvation apart from works or wealth or nationality or anything other than faith alone
- A Gospel that includes suffering, not only by the founder of the faith, but often for those who follow as well
- A story from an occupied land and poor people (absurd in the capitol of the Empire)

Absurd... maybe... but True and powerful, and salvation for everyone who believes. For those from whom the promise originally came (the Jews) and for all.

¹⁷ For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”^{n 8}

This is the Gospel: the righteousness of God. It is salvation because nothing less than this, the righteousness of God, will do. Our systems and strivings alone cannot meet the standard. The only righteousness that meets God's standard is His righteousness; it cannot be attained, only received.

⁶ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Ga 5:22–23). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁷ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Ro 1:16). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁸ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Ro 1:17). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

It is by faith from first to last. It begins by faith, ends by faith, and is sustained by faith all the way through. It is faith when we first hear and believe, it is faith that takes us into eternity... and we **live** by faith.

The Gospel is this simple in that it is entirely capture in these six words: “The righteous will live by faith.” And the Gospel is so profound that it will take the 16 chapters of Romans to unpack and explore... it really takes a lifetime.

We can look forward to the study and messages ahead, but let’s be sure to take away something important, today, from this passage. Consider the timeline revealed... from first to last, and the living in between.

We’re going to see that the chapters ahead in Romans will unpack the Gospel this way, both as a **beginning** and a **living**, both as something that God **does** and something that God **is doing**... both as the righteousness that God gives, and the righteousness that God *works out* in us and through us over time.

There are theological words for this:

- Imputed righteousness, the full gift of God’s righteousness... our justification before our Holy God that comes by faith in Jesus, and
- Imparted righteousness, the *working out* of God’s righteousness day by day, bearing with us in the struggle, sanctifying us through a life of faith in Jesus.

The theological words are interesting... but how this *works out* is really important for us. When we get this wrong, it is often because we think of salvation, righteousness before God, as one or the other.

When we think of salvation as merely a onetime event, some spectacular moment of salvation only, we might neglect the full life of growth that God has in store for us. Or we might miss out all together because we are never satisfied or sure that we’ve experienced that one spectacular moment.

When we think of salvation as something that is only about **us** working it out in our life, then we might fail to fully trust God... hoping instead that somehow we’ll earn enough points on our own.

When we fail to understand that the righteousness of God is both a gift fully given and a gift that we receive and enjoy over time in this life, when we get that wrong we might miss all that God has for us.

I think some commonly do it when we observe others. We watch those who claim to be Christians and see that they routinely fail and conclude that maybe all of this doesn't work after all.

And you know what is worse than observing it in others? Observing it in ourselves. Perhaps you've given it a try, believing in Jesus but not satisfied with the change... that it didn't all happen at once or didn't *stick* the way you wanted it to. Maybe you have determined that it doesn't work, or you didn't do it right.

Take heart today in knowing that God's gift of righteousness is yours when you believe. That in believing there is the full gift of righteousness that qualifies you and welcomes you to the people of God. And that the life of faith lies before us... with victories and defeats, mountain tops and valleys, abundance and poverty, success and even failures. It is a life of faith to be lived, among God's people, pursuing God's plan, joining God in His mission.

Today is a day to believe. And today is a day to pray. Come to faith today, and walk in faith today. Perhaps today is a day to return in a way to living by faith... receiving forgiveness and making a new start. Perhaps today is a day to simply bring today's challenges and concerns as we live by faith together.

