

CHAPTER III

ROMANS 1:16-17 - THEME, THE GOSPEL OF THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD

WHILE there is common agreement among expositors that vs. 16-17 here represent the definitive theme of Romans, yet they should not be considered in isolation because of their connection with the preceding and proceeding contexts. In v. 15, Paul's indefatigable boldness is sourced in the gospel which in vs. 16-17 finds its justification in terms of its essential and glorious nature. In vs. 18-3:20 the gospel finds its gracious necessity in the condemnation of God that continues to hover over all of mankind. Boice comments that here, "we come to sentences that are the most important in the letter and perhaps in all literature. They are the theme of this epistle and the essence of Christianity. They are the heart of biblical religion."¹

A. GOD'S GOSPEL IS DYNAMIC, V. 16a

Since the birth of the Christian church at Pentecost, biblical Christianity has always been characterized as dynamic and never static, active and not passive, experiential as well as doctrinal. Orthodoxy sans orthopraxy has always resulted in frigid formality that shuns spontaneous manifestations of the life of God in the soul; such passion is condemned as "enthusiasm" and "pietism." During the revivalism of the eighteenth century in New England, Whitefield, Edwards, Tennent, along with their pastoral supporters, were termed "New-Lights" on account of their preaching zeal, in contrast with the more staid "Old-Lights" (Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, pp. 209-216). Doubtless Paul was a "New-Light" as well with regard to his regenerate fervor which is now more profoundly explained.

1. Paul's negative affirmation.

Being "not ashamed of the gospel" is the negative expression of Paul's "eagerness" described in v. 15. The inference is that the world in general, as well as nominal believers, regards the gospel, along with its followers, as something foolish, shameful, lowly, beggarly, disreputable (cf. I Cor. 1:22-23; 4:10-13). Though II Timothy 1:8 indicates that even a pastor is in need of exhortation in this regard.

a. But for what reasons does the world so despise biblical Christianity when at the same time it will at least patronize other world religions?

- (1) Christ and his disciples condemn the world, and to this it responds (John 7:7; 15:18-19).
- (2) Biblical Christianity denounces humanity in total as being thoroughly corrupt (Rom. 3:9-18).

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *Romans 1-4*, p. 103.

- (3) Biblical Christianity worships a crucified, non-Machiavellian Savior (Rev. 5:11-13).
 - (4) Biblical Christianity pursues heavenly/spiritual rather than earthly/material goals (Matt. 6:33; Col. 1:5).
 - (5) Biblical Christianity praises humility, selflessness, and denounces assertiveness, pride (Jas. 4:6).
 - (6) Biblical Christianity confesses personal weakness and dependence (II Cor. 12:9-10).
 - (7) Biblical Christianity condemns human ability intended to impress God (Rom. 3:20, 27-28).
 - (8) Biblical Christianity is intolerant of moral relativism and pluralism (John 14:6; Heb. 12:14).
- b. More positively, what Paul is declaring is that when he comes to Rome, as has been the case when he visited other notable cities, rather than being impressed with the culture and sights, he will arrive with the most glorious message that the patricians, plebeians and slaves have ever heard. It is a message Paul boasts and exalts in with every part of his soul and body (Gal. 6:14).

2. Paul's positive affirmation.

Positively, the reason Paul is "not ashamed" is the fact that this gospel is incomparable being "the power of God for salvation." What specifically is this distinguishing characteristic of "power," δύναμις, *dunamis*?

- a. In Rome is evidenced the "power of man" that in fact portrays the impotence of its religion, the bondage of its corruption that knows no deliverance. However, in contrast with this moral void, this cause of and captivity to degradation, is something radically different, namely God's saving omnipotence that conquers the mighty power of sin. Such saving power was graphically described in the Old Testament (Ex. 32:11; Neh. 1:10; Ps. 77:14-15; Isa. 40:9-10; 52:10; 59:16).
- b. It is the power of God in action, demonstrably evident in the resurrection of His Son (1:4; Eph. 1:19-20); He has not remained fixed on a pedestal, or stood silent with hundreds of other images under cover of a colonnade or shrine. He is the "living God" (I Thess. 1:9-10) who has marched through the earth "for the salvation of His people" (Hab. 3:12-13).
- c. It is the power of God that effectually brings "salvation." The following context of 1:18-3:20 indicates that this salvation is from the wrath of God that hovers over sinful and guilty mankind (cf. 5:9-10, though 13:11 indicates that there is a consummate aspect as well (cf. 8:18-24).

- d. It is the power of God applied in a converting manner, through faith, “to everyone who believes” (I Cor. 1:18, 24), that is “the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe” (Eph. 1:19-20). Here then is something worthy of boasting in; this gospel is matchless to such a degree that it makes the best of Roman religion to appear tawdry and shabby.
- e. Illustration. Morris comments: “The gospel is not advice to people, suggesting that they lift themselves. It is power. It lifts them up. Paul does not say that the gospel brings power but that it *is* power, and God’s power at that. When the gospel is preached, this is not simply so many words being uttered. The power of God is at work. When the gospel enters anyone’s life, it is as though the very fire of God had come upon him. There is warmth and light in his life.”²
- f. Illustration. Lloyd-Jones explains: “The gospel is the power of God. It does not depend upon me and my faithfulness. If it did we would all be lost. It is God’s power to keep, to justify and to sanctify and to glorify - to take us right into heaven itself. . . . nothing can stop it. It is certain. The gospel works and will work, until all that God has purposed by its means shall have been completed.”³

B. GOD’S GOSPEL IS UNIVERSAL, V. 16b.

1. It is to the Jew and Gentile.

It is “to *everyone* who believes,” that is Jew and Greek (non-Jew), but *only* to those who believe with works renouncing faith (3:22-23; 4:11; Gal. 3:22, 26-28). Here the *sola fide* (faith alone) emphasis of the Reformation is plainly and definitively stated. The power of the gospel is not in faith but in God Himself as faith’s object. Faith, divinely generated, is non-meritorious linkage to the atonement of Christ. Here a universal gospel is offered on account of a universal problem that transcends human distinctives. Murray states: “There is no discrimination arising from race or culture and there is no obstacle arising from the degradation of sin. Wherever there is faith, *there* the omnipotence of God is operative unto salvation. This is a law with no exceptions.”⁴

2. It is to the Jew first.

But why does Paul, apostle to the Gentiles, maintain that priority be given to the proclamation of the gospel to “the Jew first”?

- a. The inauguration of the gospel by apostolic proclamation was wholly Jewish. Jewish disciples preached a Jewish Savior from Jewish Scriptures in the capital of Judaism with the result that the first Christian church was Jewish. The times of the Gentiles will conclude with the salvation of Israel (11:23-28; Luke 21:24).

² Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 67.

³ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans 1:1-32*, pp. 286-7.

⁴ John Murray, *Epistle to the Romans*, I, p. 28.

- b. There is a priority given to Jews and Jerusalem, grounded in grace (Deut. 7:6-8), that is maintained in the New Testament (Matt. 15:24; Luke 24:47; John 4:22; Acts 1:8; 13:46). Paul never abandoned Judaism as a whole (9:1-5; 10:1); in fact he continued to identify himself as a Jew (Acts 21:39; 22:3). In his missionary endeavors, he habitually first visited the local synagogue (Acts 17:1-2) and just as regularly experienced fierce opposition. Because of this, on two occasions he declares his intention of subsequently ministering to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46; 18:6), but this was only in a local sense since after spurning the Jews in Corinth (Acts 18:6), he moves to Ephesus and first ministers at the synagogue (Acts 19:8).

C. GOD'S GOSPEL IS RIGHTEOUS, V. 17a

The connection here with v. 16 is rooted in the pronoun "it," which clearly refers to "the gospel" which Paul so exalts in. Hence, what follows is an enlargement of this enthralling theme, though the essential term that describes this glorious gospel is "the righteousness of God." Thus in Romans 1:17 we come to that verse which for Martin Luther was, "the climax of his difficulties,"⁵ although it appears Psalm 31:1 had earlier raised for him the same problem. However, it is also true that Romans 1:17 provided for the Reformer "open doors into paradise."⁶

1. How is the gospel to be understood as "the righteousness of God"?

This phrase occurs eight times in Romans (1:17; 3:5, 21, 22, 25, 26; 10:3 twice), and its strategic importance is obvious. For Paul this was an imposing expression that he marveled at since it wedded with perfect harmony both God's holiness and grace. However, the source of this gospel truth is not so much Paul as the Old Testament. Our understanding of this point will only enhance our understanding of God's sole plan of salvation.

a. "Righteousness" in the Old Testament.

It means to be "straight" in a moral sense, "loyal without deviation." It is the positive aspect of God's holiness.

(1) Essential righteousness.

God is intrinsically "righteous" (Ex. 9:27; Deut. 32:4; Job 4:17; Ezra 9:15; Ps. 129:), though this attribute has its active manifestation (Ps. 145:17; Dan. 9:24).

(2) Required righteousness.

God demands righteousness from man that conforms to His own righteousness, and the law is a transcript of this expectation (Deut, 7:9; 12-13). This requirement is for perfect, total, everlasting righteousness. Man is to respond with righteous, active obedience (Ps. 4:5).

⁵ Gordon Rupp, *The Righteousness of God*, p. 127.

⁶ Introduction, p. 1.

(3) Judicial righteousness.

God maintains His righteousness in the economy of mankind, and while it is remunerative (Deut. 7:9, 12-13; Ps. 58:11), the pervasiveness of sin makes it more distinctively condemning (Lev. 19:15; Deut. 16:20; I Kings 10:9; Ps. 7:11-16; Jer. 22:3).

(4) Saving righteousness.

The predicament of sinful man finds relief in God's saving righteousness, that is a righteous way of saving unrighteous man.

(a) In Genesis 15:5 concerning Abraham (Rom. 4:1-5, 9-25), and Habakkuk 2:4 as quoted in this verse, we are told of righteous *standing* that comes from God to sinners through work's-excluding faith.

(b) Further, David cries out to God, "In Thy righteousness deliver me" (Ps. 31:1; cf. 71:2). However Isaiah, notably in the second division of his prophecy, gives repeated emphasis to "saving righteousness" for unrighteous sinners (Is. 45:8; 46:12-13; 51:5-8; 56:1; 59:16-17; 61:10; 62:1).⁷ In these instances we have described the righteous, saving *activity* of God.

b. "Righteousness" in the New Testament epistles of Paul.

It is to be expected that Paul adheres to the Old Testament categories of this term. Here it is obvious that the apostle is focusing attention upon God's "saving righteousness." But specifically what meaning does he have in mind here?

- (1) The context of Habakkuk 2:4 and Romans 4:1-5, 9-25, and the vital role here of "faith alone," indicate that in the gospel, God has provided a righteous standing, a "gift of righteousness" (5:17; Phil. 3:8-9). Thus "the righteousness of God" is that judicial provision of an objective righteousness which He, the righteous God finds acceptable. In other words, the believing sinner, through faith, receives an alien, substitute, satisfactory righteousness.
- (2) Illustration. Charles Hodge comments: "The righteousness of God, therefore, which the gospel reveals, and by which we are constituted righteous, is the perfect righteousness of Christ which completely meets and answers all of the demands of that law to which all men are subject, and which all have broken."⁸
- (3) Illustration. Martyn Lloyd-Jones comments: "The ultimate end and objective of the Christian gospel is to answer the question that was propounded by Job long centuries ago: 'How shall a man be just with God?' That is what it comes to. The business of the gospel is to make us righteous in the sight of God, to make us acceptable with God, to enable us to stand in the presence of God. Now you

⁷ Murray, *Romans*, I, pp. 344-5.

⁸ Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, p. 32.

may have comfortable feelings, you may have had marvelous experiences, you may have had a great change in your life, and a number of wrong things may have gone out of your life, but I say that unless you have got something that enables you to stand before God, now, and in the day of judgment, you are not only not a Christian, you have never understood the gospel. This is the central purpose of the gospel - to make a man just with God, to enable us to stand with righteousness in the presence of God.”⁹

- (4) The context of Romans 3:21-22, 25-26 indicates that in the gospel, God actively saves with integrity; He is both a just and a justifying God. Thus “the righteousness of God” is that display or “revelation” as here of His holy mercy, His just forgiveness, His righteous grace, His virtuous love. It is a righteousness that *satisfies* God’s moral requirements and enables grace to abound.
- (5) Concerning the above two perspectives, Moo makes the following comment of reconciliation: “Could we not take ‘righteousness of God’ here to include both God’s activity of ‘making right’ saving, vindicating - and the status of those who are so made right, in a relational sense that bridges the divine and the human?”¹⁰

2. How is the righteousness of God “revealed from faith to faith”?

A literal translation here declares that this gospel of the righteousness of God, “is being revealed [uncovered/unveiled] out of [from] faith into [to] faith.”

- a. Note the parallel with v. 18 where the wrath of God is being “revealed [actively poured out/inflicted] from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.” It is now more than a “promised” gospel, v. 2. Hence, just as God’s wrath is being actively outpoured on account of righteous necessity, so God’s gospel of free grace is being actively showered upon Jew and Greek on account of righteous, universal compassion.
- b. “From faith to faith” has been variously interpreted, but it is related to the continuity of “everyone who is believing (present participle)” in v. 16, and “the righteous man shall *live* [emphasis added] by faith,” v. 17.
 - (1) It is speaking, not so much of progress as *continuity* in faith. Having been saved by initial faith, the genuine saved sinner continues to believe; in this earthly life he shall be continually justified by faith; his shall be the life of faith (II Cor. 5:7).¹¹ Habakkuk 2:4 describes the ongoing faith of the prophet who shall endure Assyrian captivity and national devastation (Hab. 3:17-18). For Paul, as salvation is initially by grace, so it is also continually by grace, as he makes so abundantly clear in Galatians 3:1-3; the same is true with regard to faith (Gal. 2:20; 3:25-26; 6:14).

⁹ Lloyd-Jones, *Romans*, pp. 300-1.

¹⁰ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 74, also p. 75 for further explanation.

¹¹ H. P. Liddon comments: “The Righteousness of God in Man dates from the act of faith which receives Jesus Christ, and tends to produce faith, ἐἰς πίστιν εἰς pistin, as a condition of its being continuously imparted. It is only given to the man who continues to believe.” *Explanatory Analysis St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, p. 18.

- (2) The NIV translation here describes this gospel as being revealed “by faith from first to last.” Paul inclusively describes here “first” faith and “lasting” faith. Such a rather free rendering yet focuses on the heart of what Paul is declaring, namely that, as the German pietist Spenner states, “Faith in Christ, confidence in the grace of God in Christ, is the beginning of our salvation, and will remain its instrument to the end.”¹²

D. GOD’S GOSPEL IS UNIQUE, V. 17b.

1. It is confirmed in the Old Testament.

As in Romans 4:1-25, where Genesis 15:6 and Psalms 32:1-2 are quoted to uphold the one saving gospel of justification through faith, so here Habakkuk 2:4 is referred to with the same purpose in mind.

2. It is claimed through the “faith alone” *sola fide* principle of Habakkuk 2:4.

The prophet Habakkuk complained to the Lord, with much righteous indignation, that He appeared to have neglected the judgment of His backslidden people (Hab. 1:1-4). In reply, the Lord advises Habakkuk that his punishment will be mediated through the savage Assyrians, and when it comes it will astound him with its severity (1:5-11). Habakkuk expresses his dismay that God would use a pagan nation to inflict discipline on relatively less godless Israel. So he awaits the Lord’s response to his objection (1:12-2:1). Then the Lord replies that His plan is certain; yes, the Assyrians are proud and ungodly. However, for the true child of God, he will pass through such a trial on the basis of faith alone in His righteous dealings in this situation. That is, “the righteous [man] will live by [his] faith” (2:2-4). Habakkuk’s ultimate understanding of this principle is declared in Habakkuk 3:16-19).

- a. Habakkuk 2:4 is quoted three times in the New Testament, and on each occasion a distinctive nuance is given. Nevertheless, in all three instances, blessed holy union and acceptance with God is established and maintained through unalloyed faith in His saving and keeping.
 - (1) Romans 1:17. Here justification concerns the righteousness of God received by the unrighteous through faith in Christ.
 - (2) Galatians 3:11. Here justification concerns faith in Christ that totally excludes reliance upon the works of the law.
 - (3) Hebrews 10:38. Here justification concerns faith in Christ that is productive of endurance in the face of adversity.
- b. However, Paul’s quotation of Habakkuk 2:4 here admits of two possible renderings, which Murray succinctly defines: “Are we to render the proposition, ‘The righteous by faith shall live’ or ‘The righteous shall live by faith’? Is the proposition to the effect

¹² Cited by Lange and Fay, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, p. 77.

that the righteous will live or to the effect of intimating how the righteous will live, namely by faith?”¹³ In more simple terms, is the emphasis to be place on “faith” or “live”? To ask this question is, in context, to immediately opt for stress on “faith,” as it relates to righteousness. Moo rightly concludes, “Of greatest significance is the way Paul in Rom. 1-8 consistently links faith with righteousness (cf. the summary in 5:1) and shows how ‘life’ is the product of that righteousness (cf. 5:18 and 8:10. These connections favor the translation ‘the one who is righteous by faith will live.’”¹⁴

- c. Of course there is a danger here that, in giving “faith righteousness” the place of primary emphasis, the “living” as a result of this “faith righteousness” is lost sight of. Nothing could be further from Paul’s mind. So Luther gives balance here when he comments: “The meaning of this passage appears, then, to be as follows: the righteousness of God is entirely from faith, yet growth does not make it more real but only gives it greater clarity - according to II Cor. 3:18, and Ps. 84:7: ‘They shall go from strength to strength.’ And just so also ‘from faith to faith,’ by always believing more and more strongly.”¹⁵ Thus the truly justified through faith alone, those recipients of the free and perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ, are also made alive unto God so that they live through Him (6:11). The biblical Christian will be right with God and alive unto God (Tit. 3:5-7).
3. Illustration. A historical perspective is to be noted here since the essence of this verse is the very foundation of the post-medieval, western society that sprung, whatever its failings may be, from the Reformation with resulting light and liberation from religious tyranny and dark legalistic bondage. In devoting one whole chapter of his commentary to this verse under the heading of, “Martin Luther’s Text,” Boice concludes as follows: “Later in life Luther was to write many things about the doctrine of justification by faith, which he had learned from Romans 1:17. He would call it ‘the chief article from which all our other doctrines have flowed.’ He called it ‘the master and prince, the lord, the ruler and the judge over all kinds of doctrines.’ He said, “If the article of justification is lost, all Christian doctrine is lost at the same time.’ He argued, ‘It alone begets, nourishes, builds, preserves, and defends the church of God, and without it the church of God cannot exist for one hour.’ What a heritage! What a rebuke against the weak state of present-day Christianity! If justification by faith is the doctrine by which the church stands or falls, our contemporary declines are no doubt due to our failure to understand, appreciate, and live by this doctrine. The church of our day does not stand tall before the world. It bows to it. Christians are not fearless before ridicule. We flee from it. Is the reason not that we have never truly learned to stand before God in his righteousness?”¹⁶

¹³ Murray, *Romans*, I, p. 33.

¹⁴ Moo, *Romans*, p. 78.

¹⁵ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, p. 19.

¹⁶ Boice, *Romans*, I, p. 126.