

# Back to the Basics

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## Romans 1:15-20 RSV

I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.

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I have a confession to make. What I am going to tell you may well disqualify me for any further ministry in this church, at least to the male members of the congregation. The confession is this: I'm not the world's greatest sports fan. Now, our three sons are the athletic type. I don't know where they get it — not from their Mom, and certainly not from me. For example, they love golf. The last time I played was about ten years ago, and that was miniature golf. One of the boys works out regularly. I try to exercise, but it just takes too much out of my day. The pushups don't take so long; it's the resting in between that takes the time. The guys can sit for hours watching the Cubs or the Dallas Cowboys. After ten minutes I get bored and head for the computer. So as a preacher I do have a handicap, to use a sports term. The best preachers always tell sports stories. Probably Charles Swindoll, Bill Hybels, Steve Brown and the other pulpit giants of our day never deliver a sermon without using some illustration from the world of sports.

In fact it was while listening to Charles Swindoll one day that I heard this story. It happened while Vince Lombardi was coach of the Green Bay Packers. Lombardi, as you know, was big on mastering the fundamentals of football — blocking, tackling, all the basics. One day the Packers suffered a humiliating defeat by a team that never should have beaten them. Lombardi called a meeting for the next morning. With apprehension the players gathered in the clubhouse expecting the dressing down of their careers. Finally the coach appeared, and the room fell silent. Lombardi picked up a football and held it up before this room full of professional players. Then he said something like this: "Gentlemen, this is a football." Turning to the blackboard he drew a large rectangle. "And this is a football field. At the end of the field is a goal line. When you carry the ball across the goal line, you score six points."

Sometimes we just need to get back to the basics, whether in sports, personal relationships, the world of business, or in our spiritual life as disciples of Jesus Christ. Certainly, the apostle Paul recognized the value of returning, again and again, to the basic truths of the gospel. The letter he wrote to the Christians in Rome is, in some ways, the most developed statement of Paul's theology. But he begins the letter with a simple declaration of some basic truths about the Christian message, and he constantly returns to these fundamental truths.

Why does he do this? The Roman Christians weren't new converts. They weren't exactly ignorant of the faith. The church in Rome had been established for many years when Paul wrote to them. I think he wrote these truths for the same reason he wanted to visit them. He said, "I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you, that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine" (Romans 1:11-12). Paul took the Romans Christians back to the basics of the gospel for the same reason that Coach Lombardi constantly went back to the fundamentals of football: to make the team stronger, more effective on the playing field, more focused in working out its mission and purpose.

So Paul begins, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." The first basic truth here is that *there is a gospel*, a message of good news from God himself. Christian preachers have tried to reduce the gospel to a simple statement such as "Christ died for our sins," or "God loves you." These statements aren't wrong, but they're not enough. Nobody cares whether Christ died for his sins unless he knows he has sinned. And we don't care that God loves us, unless we know there's a God to begin with!

So the first premise of the gospel is that *God is real and we have to deal with him*. We can't just go on our way and refuse to acknowledge or obey him. I think that's why Paul goes on, later in the same chapter, to show that nobody has a excuse not to believe in God. For, he says, "since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made" (Romans 1:20). In other words, the fact that the universe exists shows that its creation must also exist. That's still a powerful argument, even in our scientific era. Paul affirms not only that God is real, the very foundation of all we see about us, but He has not remained silent about Himself and our relationship with Him. He has spoken to us in the "good news," the message that in Christ God has acted to reconcile us to Himself.

We begin, then, with a couple of gospel basics: God is there, after all, and he has sent us a message about how to respond to Him. "I am not ashamed of the gospel," Paul begins; and he continues, "for it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." The gospel is *power*. The Greek word Paul uses is *dunamis*, the root of our words "dynamo" and "dynamic." It indicates that energy is being released to accomplish something. When Paul calls the gospel "the power of God for salvation," he's saying that this message from God has an effect on people. And in a few phrases Paul tells us *what* this effect is, *how* the gospel has this effect, and *who* is affected by it.

First, what is the effect of the gospel? Paul calls it the power of God for *salvation*. Here's a word in our Christian vocabulary that has been much abused. Perhaps, because of our American frontier tradition, we associate salvation with responding to some preacher's emotional appeal to stream down the aisle of the revival tent — "to hit the sawdust trail," as they used to say. Perhaps, to you, "salvation" carries an image of letting it all hang out in some highly visible act of commitment to Christ, a commitment that guarantees a place in heaven. For some people salvation does happen that way, and I'm certainly not putting down emotion or visible expressions of commitment — far from it. But, biblically speaking, salvation is more than these things. The Greek word Paul uses, *soteria*, is the equivalent of the Hebrew word *yeshu'ah* which means "deliverance" or "liberation." Salvation is being set free, not in heaven but here and now. When the Old and New Testaments mention salvation, I don't see the focus being on going to heaven at all, but on *a change in this life*. I see it as a transformation involving not just some invisible or spiritual part of us — whatever that might be — but a setting free of our whole self as we relate to the world around us.

If salvation is *freedom*, then we have to understand what freedom really is. Today we have some confused ideas about that. For some people, freedom means the right to do whatever they like, especially with their own bodies. In America many people confuse it with civil rights, or with absolute individualism. There are people who expend all their energy proving they don't have to conform to what we might consider "traditional values," because they have the right to "do their thing." But I've noticed something about these folks — they're not free at all! I guess our typical image of such advocates of individual rights would be the hippies of the 1960s and 70s — and they're still around today. Did you ever see a hippie guy who was free to wear something other than the standard uniform: long hair, beard, scruffy clothes? Did you ever see one wearing a three-piece suit and tie? Today's "freedom protestors" are really hide-bound conformists; they all look alike, think alike and talk alike. They're enslaved by the politically correct values of their cultural group, and what's more, they're angry and unhappy. They certainly don't enjoy "salvation," and we certainly shouldn't confuse salvation with the freedom these groups represent. We also shouldn't confuse salvation with that self-centered individualism expressed by Frank Sinatra when he sang, "I did it my way." These are false freedoms that have nothing to do with the salvation effected by the gospel, and the people who live by those false freedoms are in desperate need of the true freedoms the gospel brings.

Salvation, in fact, is being delivered from these illusory freedoms into genuine freedom. The philosopher Spinoza once defined freedom as "the recognition of necessity." In other words, we aren't free when we don't have to do anything in particular, because then we feel we have to do everything! That's what's wrong with our modern idea of freedom. We're really free when we know those *few things* we really must do. I think that's why the gospel of Christ sets us free. It lays before us the one requirement that brings order to all of life: the duty to worship God, to acknowledge that He is in charge and to live our lives consistently with His purposes. When we recognize this one necessity, we're indeed free.

When God called Israel to serve Him, He gave them the Ten Commandments. People have criticized the Ten Commandments for being negative and restrictive. But, when you think about it, ten

commandments *not to do* certain things leave you free in all other areas. Compared to the requirements of our permissive age, in which we never seem to know what's right and what's wrong, God's commandments set people free by bringing us into a worshipful relationship with God. The gospel creates in us this freedom, or salvation. That's a fundamental truth we need to understand.

Secondly, *how* does the gospel bring salvation? Paul answers this question when he states, "For in it [the gospel] the righteous of God is revealed." The good news of the gospel in Christ sets us free by revealing God's righteousness. But wait — what do we mean by *righteousness*? Like "salvation," "righteousness" is one of those religious-sounding words we think we understand. Doesn't being righteous mean being holy or good? When we look into the Scripture we find that isn't really the case, after all. In the Bible, righteousness doesn't refer to a quality you or I might possess. Instead, righteousness is a relationship word. It means *being faithful to a relationship* with your family member, your friend, members or your community, or with anyone else. A righteous person is a person you can depend on to honor the relationship you have with him or her.

Suppose, in these difficult economic times, the company you work for shuts down and you lose your job. This is not so theoretical; it's happening to a lot of people. After a fruitless search for another job, you finally lose your home, too, and in desperation you start across the country looking for work. Nothing turns up. One day you find yourself on the streets of a strange city, homeless and hungry. You've just spent your last dollar for gas, but you don't even know where to go. And then you remember — you know some people who live here! Over the years you've exchanged cards and letters, and you've even visited on the phone occasionally. You don't see them often, but you haven't ignored them. You've maintained the relationship; they're still your friends. Now they're living in this very town where you've come to the end of your rope. With your last coins you call up. Your friends take you into their home, make you feel welcome, listen to your story and provide for your immediate needs while you get on your feet again.

Something just like this happened to one of our sons several years ago. He drove a new Mercedes from Chicago to Florida to deliver it to a professional baseball player. After dropping off the car, he went to the beach. While he was swimming someone stole his wallet and camera. There he was, a thousand miles from home, with nothing but a few clothes. When he called us we didn't know what to do. We were hard-pressed ourselves, and had no money to send him. Then we remembered that some people we knew lived in Florida, in the very next town! We called our friends, and they picked up our son and took him into their home for a few weeks until he could manage to get back to Chicago. This was righteousness at work, in the Biblical sense. Because these people were our friends, because we had a relationship with them, our son was "saved" — delivered from his lost condition.

But let's consider another scenario. Suppose that, alone and desperate in a strange city, you remember you know some people who live there. But you despise those people. You fought with them over petty jealousies and the like, and finally you quit communicating with them and the relationship is now broken. There's no righteousness left by which you can be saved from your distress. Suppose the people who helped our son in Florida had been people we had ignored, or criticized, or failed to treat as friends. Could we have asked them to help him? I think we can all see the point. When we turn away from that covenant of friendship and family loyalty into which God has invited us to enter, there's no relationship by which we can be helped and set free. Instead of righteousness there is wrath — the consequences that follow when the relationship is violated.

In the rest of this first chapter of Romans Paul goes on to describe some of those not-so-good things that happen to people who ignore God. We won't go into them here, but the description of their lives reads like the front page of today's paper or the evening cable news. Whereas the media reveal the wrath of God, the gospel reveals His righteousness: His constant friendship to those who belong to Him, His faithfulness to the covenant. And this righteousness of God is what saves us. Sometimes we don't do such a good job of keeping up that family relationship, but the gospel of Christ says that God sent His own Son to demonstrate that covenant and to die so that it could be extended to everyone who wants to enter it — In Paul's words, "to the Jew first and also to the Greek," or Gentile. As Jesus told his disciples, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28). Where we so often disobey God and betray His friendship with us, Jesus keeps the covenant for us through His own obedience and His intimate love for the Father. The Bible says that Jesus lives to intercede with God

for His special people (Hebrews 7:25). When we belong to Jesus, we're brought with Him into that righteousness that sets us free.

We've looked at the basic *what* of the gospel, the freedom or deliverance it brings. We've examined the fundamental *how* of the gospel, that right family relationship we have through Jesus that makes our salvation possible. But Paul adds a third fundamental to the equation, the *who* of the gospel. Listen again to his words: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'" Who is it that get saved by God's righteousness? Who is delivered by God's loyalty to the covenant He's made with His people? Very clearly, it's those who have faith.

But, again, "faith" is another of those Christian-sounding words that needs to be redefined so we can understand what it really means. In the Bible having faith doesn't mean we believe certain doctrines, or that somehow we imagine that everything will turn out okay in the end. Truthful concepts and a confident attitude are important, but Biblical faith is really *faithfulness* in the sense of loyalty, commitment and obedience. The person who has faith in God is the person who is so committed that he or she obeys God, whatever the cost.

The Bible tells the story of such a committed man. To that man God made a covenant promising that he and his wife would have a son. The Lord fulfilled His promise, but only after when the couple had grown old. Then God turned around and commanded that man to kill his only son. And the man obeyed God — or he would have, except that the Lord himself stopped Abraham from sacrificing his son Isaac, and promised he would have many other descendants because of his obedience. Paul says that Abraham is our spiritual ancestor, because he showed the same kind of commitment through which we may experience God's deliverance in Christ.

So our faith is faithfulness, our loyalty to the covenant God has made with us. Our faith is a commitment that allows us to receive, in turn, the benefits of God's continuing friendship. Faith isn't *something we have* in order to qualify for God's acceptance. Faith is *something we do* — offering to God the worship and obedience that signify our loyalty to Him and our desire to maintain the relationship we share. We do this because only in this relationship are we set free from the false values and bad choices of a self-centered life. To put it back into theological terms: by faith we experience God's righteousness and thus receive his salvation.

It's been helpful to me, putting together these thoughts, to get back to the basics of the gospel. Like Paul, I hope that we've all been established or strengthened through this exercise whether we're a mature and long time Christian, someone just beginning to think about his or her place in God's scheme of things, or the majority of us who fall in between. Coach Lombardi had the right idea when he took his team back to the fundamentals of the game. And it got results, because that year the Packers went on to be undefeated for the rest of the season.

We're looking for results, too, but in a different sense. Being a Christian isn't just another game that ends with a sportscaster wrap-up and one last beer commercial. Being a Christian is the real business of living, day in and day out. How we handle that business has serious consequences, not only for our personal happiness and eternal destiny but also for the welfare of our family, community and nation, and for the greater glory of God. The gospel tells us we can't be spectators. We're on the team — the home team, God's team. What's at stake is not the outcome; the final score was settled at the cross and resurrection of Jesus. What's at stake is our place in the victory of Christ over the enslavement of false values and the darkness of life without God. Through the gospel we gain our freedom, know our God, and find that commitment that keeps our life on target. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph" (2 Corinthians 2:14).

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