

“The Book of Romans: A Timeless Truth”

The apostle Paul writes (to the church in Corinth) that “the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved it is the power of God.”

He says the cross is foolishness to those who (don't know Jesus), who don't understand what God has done in his Son. But to those who do, who are being saved and (who know), it is the power of God.

On this Kickoff Sunday, I want to start by saying that everything we stand for (as a church), all that we're about as a body of believers, any hope we have for today or tomorrow or for our future, it all comes back to the cross. It all comes back to what God has done for us in Christ. It all comes back to God doing and accomplishing for us (in Jesus) what we could never do or accomplish for ourselves.

Today we're starting a series in the Book of Romans in which (over the next eleven weeks) we're going to be working our way through. Our prayer, throughout this series, is that the message of the cross would become more than just a message about the cross, but that it would work to draw you closer to one who gave his life on it for you.

If you have your Bibles with you, in front of you, (a Bible app), I'd encourage you to find it, chapter one is (where we are today): in the New Testament, (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts), and then, the book of Romans.

Before digging in too far, let's start with a few of the basics. The book of Romans is one of the foundational books for the Christian community. All of the important teachings of our faith are found in it. It's a book in which all of what we consider to be essential to what we believe is laid out in a very orderly fashion.

In seminary, there was a department of learning, a discipline, referred to as systematic theology. The book of Romans is a systematic letter. It presents the teachings of our faith in a logical order, one step at a time. It presents our theology, what we believe about God, in a very orderly and systematic way.

In fact, of all the letters in the New Testament, there are 27, (the apostle Paul wrote 13), Romans is the most systematic of all of them. It lays it all out: A leads to B, B leads to C, C leads to D...and so on.

Now, if you look at Paul's letters (in Paul's letters), most of them he wrote to places and to people where he had already been or had met. He'd be reminding them (in his letters) of things he had already shared (with them) in person. He'd be recalling (for them) things they had already talked about. He didn't need to go through it.

The book of Romans is different. Paul had never been to Rome. He'd never met the people. He wanted to and eventually he would. But because he hadn't been there and had never met them, he included (in his letter) all of the things that (if he had been there) he would have shared.

For that reason, Romans is the most doctrinally-complete letter (we have) in the New Testament. It tells us everything we need to know about the gospel, about what God has accomplished for us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The book of Romans, if you study Church history, almost every revival (in the Church) had two things in common: prayer - the people were praying, they were seeking God's will and power. And, two, a study of the Book of Romans.

The Reformation, for Luther, it all started with his study of Romans. The Wesleyan Revival, as it made its way across Great Britain, it was the same thing. The Book of Romans was at the heart. And so there's a lot of power in this book, a lot of history in what it brings.

In chapter one, (that's where we are today), Paul is introducing himself to a group of believers he has never met, only by reputation. (They had never met him). And so he starts by telling them about himself, what he had come to know and to believe.

The key verses in this chapter, (in the entire book) are verses 16 & 17. Paul says, “This is what you need to know about me.” (He says), “I am not ashamed of the gospel. I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes; first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a

righteousness from God is revealed, (a righteousness from God is made know, a righteousness from God is given to us in the person and work of Jesus Christ)...a righteousness that is by faith from first to last.”

In other words, our righteousness, our salvation, our being made right with God, it's not by what we do. It's not by how we live or measure up. It's not by following a set of rules or standards. It's by faith...by faith in Jesus Christ. And then he quotes from Habakkuk, “just as it is written, ‘The righteous will live by faith.’” The righteous will live by faith. That's what you need to know (Paul says) about me and about the gospel.

Now, the word “gospel” literally translated (and we've said this many times) means “good news.” The gospel is the good news of what comes to us in the death and burial and resurrection of Jesus. In that sense, it's more than what we find in the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John). It's a word used to describe the work God has been doing from long ago. Paul says it was promised in the Old Testament, through the prophets. This gospel (of which he is speaking) has been part of God's saving plan from the very start.

In his letter, in introducing himself, he says “I am not ashamed of the gospel.” I am not ashamed of what God has said and done and promised (for all people) through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son. I am not ashamed.

Now, let's stop for a moment and think about what Paul is saying. There's a lot (going on) in that one little verse. He says, “I am not ashamed.” (I am not ashamed.)

You tell me. Have you ever been ashamed of something? Has there ever been anything in your life (you've said or done) of which you've been ashamed?

Shame is an interesting thing. It comes in a variety of ways. Often times we associate it with guilt. We did something we shouldn't have done and we feel ashamed. (We're guilty.) Another way to think about it is in terms of embarrassment. We're embarrassed by something we did that (we wish) we hadn't.

What's interesting, researchers tell us that the one thing our embarrassing moments have in common is “unwanted attention.” If something happens and no one is watching, it's no big deal. But if something happens and others see it, it's embarrassing.

Now, there are many examples of this. (Not that it's ever happened to me.) Spilling a drink, splitting your pants, shooting an air ball in a game...pushing when it says pull, pulling when it says push, your credit card is declined, your stomach growls in the middle of a sermon. (Now were getting close).

If no one sees it (or hears it), who cares? What makes it embarrassing is when (whenever it is that has happened) gets unwanted attention. Paul says, “I am not ashamed of the gospel. I am not embarrassed about what it is or what it says.”

Now, when he says that, Paul understands the context into which he's writing. He's writing to a group of believers he's never met. He doesn't know them, but he knows their culture. He knows what's happening. The Christians (in that city) would have been just fine with believing in this one called Jesus, but going unnoticed by the people around them. They would have liked that and for good reason.

If you remember the history, the emperor was Nero. Nero was in charge...and Nero was a perverted man. (He was disgusting, some of things he did.) And not only that, but he was a brutal man. He was in charge and if you didn't “line-up” in your life with what he said, it would come at a cost, and not a small one. The Christians would have liked to have gone unnoticed, with no “unwanted attention” being drawn.

Rome, in those days, there were two things that were “values” for that culture. Every culture has its values. Rome had its values. The first, it was a polytheistic culture. The people had many gods. (They were very tolerant in their approach to the gods.) They had many things they worshiped and followed. Nero was one of them. He was one of their gods...and the people didn't care. They already had many gods. Adding Nero to the list was no big deal.

In contrast, Christianity was not polytheistic, but monotheistic. The Christians had only one God, and it was not Nero. What they soon found was that this tolerant city (and culture), with many gods, was not very tolerant of those who had just one.

The other thing about Rome was that it was a very hedonistic culture. Far beyond what we see today, our culture doesn't even come close. Nero was disgusting, but the culture was even worse. The things that were accepted and valued back then, most (if not all) of them are illegal today. It was awful. They valued only that which would bring them pleasure.

As a result, the elderly in their communities were left to their own, marginalized and forgotten. The sick and disabled, they didn't even count, and no one cared. Babies in that day were often abandoned. Infanticide was rampant. It was a sick and a sad reality.

Along come these Christians, in a polytheistic, hedonistic culture preaching of a God who cares and who cures, and who (himself) has no tolerance for other gods. In that first century, it's interesting how the Christians in Rome were called "atheists" because they believed in only one God.

You start to understand what was happening. Try to picture it. This is first generation Christianity. (Don't miss it.) No parents or grandparents who passed it on, no churches. The four gospels had not yet been written; no New Testament scripture. You can begin to see why they (just might have) wanted to go unnoticed.

Now, it's not the same in our world today, not nearly as extreme, but it's still real. (Some of you can relate.) You go to work, you're the only one who believes in Jesus, and it's easier to keep it quiet. You go to school, no one else in your class reads (let alone trusts) in the Bible, but you do, and you don't want to stand out. In your family, for many of us, it's been supportive; for some of you, not so much.

I remember talking (not long ago) with a young man whose Dad made fun of him for going to church, and for (as he put it) "drinking the Kool-Aid." Some of you know that feeling.

Paul understands the challenge. Paul lived with that reality far more than most. In Philippi, he preaches the gospel and ends up in prison. In Thessalonica, he tells them about Jesus and gets chased out of town. In Athens, he's laughed at. Throughout his ministry, he's beaten five times. He's stoned (with rocks) twice. On several occasions, it almost costs him his life.

He knows what it means. He lived it...far more than most. And yet he says, "I am not ashamed...I am not embarrassed about Jesus." In fact (he says), I want the attention. I live for the chance to speak the name of Christ.

He's introducing himself in this first chapter. He's challenging us to be bold in our faith and in living it out. There are a few key phrases worth highlighting.

Verse one, (it says), "Paul a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God..." That word "servant," the third word in what he writes, it's a fair translation of what it says, but it's not the most accurate. It's the word "doulos." In the Greek language, that word "doulos" means slave. Servant is a fair translation. Slave is more accurate.

Paul is telling the believers about himself and he says that he is a slave to Jesus Christ. That's what he wants them to know...and there's a big difference between a servant and a slave, and the people knew it. Of the (about one million) people in Rome at the time, 30% of them (or 300,000) were slaves.

There's a big difference. A servant works for somebody. A slave is owned by somebody. Paul says he is owned by Jesus. (He'll pick up on that again in chapter six, when he talks about how everyone is a slave to something.) We're either slaves to sin "which leads to death" or we're slaves to Jesus "which leads to life."

For a slave, if you're in slavery, the only thing that matters is who is your master? Who is it that owns you? For Paul, right out of the shoot, this is what we learn. This is the level of the surrender he had made in his life to Christ.

I'd challenge you (at the beginning of this series) with that same question. Ask yourself. You decide where you're at. Are you a servant of Jesus Christ, willing to do what he says when it's convenient and it fits? Or have you fully surrendered your life to him? Have you turned it all over, given him control, and he's now your master? There's a difference.

Paul says he had "died to himself" and he wanted them to know that, because there was a connection in what he did (and how he lived) as a result. Because he was dead to himself, how could he be embarrassed (or ashamed) about Jesus? (There's a connection.) He couldn't, because what he was sharing was not his own message, but that of his master.

Just think about it. If a delivery man delivers a package to our house and you don't like it, you can complain all you want (to the delivery man), but he won't care. He's just delivering it.

That's how Paul approached the gospel. He was just doing what his master had told him. He was just speaking a word that was not his own. This gave Paul all kinds of freedom. He was just being obedient. (He says), "I am a slave to Jesus."

There's something else Paul says about himself in this first chapter. Look at verse 14. He says, "I am obligated to both Greeks and non-Greeks, (both to the wise and the foolish)...That is why I am so eager to

preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome.” Paul says he carries an obligation in his life to pass on the message of Jesus. Not as a burden in his life, but as an obligation.

Now, as a pastor, I’ve had a number of times when people have given me something to pass on to someone else. Money for someone in need, a gift for someone who had lost their job, a number of times it’s happened. Whenever that happens, it’s not a burden I carry, but an obligation. My task is to pass it on. When I do it, (until I do it), I am obligated...but not as a burden.

For Paul, that’s why he was so eager to go to Rome and to preach. Not because he had to, but because he was given something to pass on. He says, “I am not ashamed of the gospel...” I am not.

The gospel is not – it doesn’t tell us about the power of God. It doesn’t show us the power of God. It doesn’t point us to the power of God. The gospel is the power of God...and that’s why (he says) I’m not ashamed.

What happens in the church (too often) is that it becomes ashamed of the gospel. It’s too offensive, too anti-culture. And so (as a result) it starts watering it down. And it does it, ironically, more often than not, in an attempt to become relevant. To become relevant (and to fit in), far too many churches have changed the message of the gospel, and when the message of the gospel is changed...

My friends, what makes the gospel relevant (in our culture) is not that it’s like our culture and that it fits. What makes the gospel relevant is that it is not like our culture and it doesn’t.

Do you want to know the truth about the gospel and about being relevant? The gospel doesn’t care if the world thinks it’s relevant. (It doesn’t care.) The gospel is the gospel. It is the power of God for salvation in Jesus Christ. And because it is the power of God for salvation in Jesus Christ, it will always be relevant.

There are a growing number of churches (in our world today) who have lost their relevance in an attempt to become relevant. (It doesn’t work.) In trying to be like everyone else (and fit in) they have nothing to offer.

As a church, here at St. Timothy’s, we’re not trying to sell what the world is selling. If the world is already selling it, (already has it), then it doesn’t need us. Why the world needs us, needs the church, is because (in the church), as the church, we have something the world doesn’t have (and needs) and his name is Jesus.

D. A. Carson describes what happens when the church waters down the gospel as “domesticating the gospel.” (He says), We domesticate the gospel when we talk about God, but not about Jesus. We domesticate the gospel when we talk about salvation but not about sin. We domesticate the gospel when we turn repentance and full-surrender into some kind of self-help. We domesticate the gospel when we start believing that the purpose of the church is to make me happy. We domesticate the gospel when we turn it into some kind of moral code.

Paul says, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes; first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.” Not a matter of priority, but of chronology.

The gospel is for everyone. It’s universal. It’s all-inclusive. And it’s timeless. It never stops being relevant. It is always relevant. Don’t ever apologize for the gospel. There’s no reason to be ashamed.

As a church, we are not ashamed. We are privileged. We are slaves, owned by Jesus Christ. And we carry an obligation to pass on what we have been given.

For the next several weeks, we’ll be in the Book of Romans: a systematic letter, one piece of the theological puzzle at a time. Next week it’s chapter one, verse 18 through chapter three, verse 20. (I’d encourage you to read it.) We’ll be talking about how we’re all sinners in the sight of God, every one of us.

I hope to see you then, unless you’re ashamed or embarrassed about being a sinner and needing Jesus. Don’t be. It’s the gospel...it’s the power of God we all need. Let’s pray.

Lord God, we thank you for the good news of what you have done and accomplished for us in Jesus, for the promise we have in him that we are (and always will be) right with you. In this world, caught up as it is in things that are not what you would want, help us to be confident in who we are and what we have to share.

As we make our way through this study of Romans (over the next several weeks), use this time to deepen our theology, our understanding of you, that we might have a better and clearer understanding of ourselves and of life.

Help us not to be ashamed or embarrassed by Jesus, but to fully surrender our lives as slaves, obligated to share with others what you have done for them and for us, in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.