

## HOW TO BE RIGHT WITH GOD

Romans 1:8-17

Key Verse: 1:17

*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.”*

In today's passage, St. Paul teaches us how we sinners can be right with God. He first explains why he was so eager to visit Rome. He really wanted to share the gospel of Jesus with the believers there. Then he says he was not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes. May the Holy Spirit open our hearts as we listen to the word of God!

### I. PAUL'S PRAYERS FOR THE CHRISTIANS IN ROME (8-13)

Look at verse 8. *First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world.* Paul called God “my God.” He had a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. I pray that each of us may also call God “my God.” Paul thanked his God for the Christians in Rome because their faith was being reported all over the world. Paul did not plant the church in Rome. He did not know most of the believers there. They were not his Bible students. Yet, he prayed for them continually. He said: *“God, whom I serve in my spirit in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times”* (9-10). Paul was thankful for their faith in Jesus Christ, especially because their faith was being reported all over the world, inspiring other people to come to the Lord.

We can understand why Paul was thankful for their faith if we know how difficult it was for them to live by faith in Rome. At that time, the Roman Empire ruled the western world with its might. Its powerful army conquered many countries and brought back the wealth from its colonies. Rome became the center of wealth and luxury of the world. The city boasted all kinds of fun places like coliseum, theaters, luxury restaurants, shopping centers, bath houses, gyms, and, of course, bars. It was also a magnet for various religions and philosophies. The emperor was only one of many idols that people in Rome worshiped. In this hedonistic, materialistic, and idol worshiping environment, there was a small group of people who put their faith in Jesus Christ. They were mostly immigrants to the city with a low social status. Some of them were slaves. They were marginalized and persecuted by others. In this difficult environment, they kept their faith in Jesus. They refused to follow the trend of the world. They were willing to endure hardship to keep their faith in Jesus. They loved Jesus with a pure motive. In Paul's eyes, their faith was so precious and beautiful. To him, they were like shining stars in the dark sky. Paul was deeply thankful to God for their faith.

Paul did not stop at just thanking God and praying for them. He wanted to do something for them personally. He wanted to visit and encouraged them with the word of God. He said: *“I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you. I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make*

*you strong—that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith. I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, 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” (10-13).* Paul says he had attempted many times to visit Rome. Why? To many people today, Rome is a popular tourist destination along with Paris and London. They would love to see the Coliseum, St. Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican, and the ruins of the Roman Forum and the Palatine Hill, the Spanish Steps, and the Trevi Fountain. But Paul didn’t want to visit Rome as a tourist. Then what was his purpose?

Paul longed to see the Christians in Rome because he wanted to give them some spiritual gift. What was this spiritual gift? It was the word of God that would make them strong in faith. He wanted to study the Bible with them so that they would be mutually encouraged. He envisioned having group Bible studies with them and sharing personal testimonies with them. He really wanted to have spiritual fellowship with them so that they would be raised up warriors of faith in the midst of the fierce persecutions in Rome. As I think about Paul’s longing to see the believers, I am moved by his shepherd’s heart for them. Paul was eager to share the word of God with them. He cared about them deeply. His shepherd’s heart rebukes me as well—how I should pray constantly for our Bible students and how I should long to see them each week so that our Bible study can make them strong in faith.

## II. I AM OBLIGATED TO PREACH (14-15)

Look at verses 14-15. *“I am obligated both to 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 in Rome.”* Paul said he was obligated to preach the gospel. In the original Greek words, he said he was a debtor (*opheiletes* (ὀφειλέτης)). What did he mean by this? Did Paul borrow a lot of money from many people? No, he was talking about the debt of love from Jesus. He had received the grace of salvation from Jesus when he did not deserve it. Jesus also called him to be an apostle. The love of Jesus for him was greater than all his sins. He knew that he could never pay it back. So he felt compelled to “pay it forward.” He felt obligated to share the good news of Jesus with others who were still in sin. He said, “I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks.” Did he mean some college fraternity brothers, sorority sisters, and those who don’t pledge? Actually, by Greeks and non-Greeks, he meant all people of the world, regardless their language and culture. He also said he was obligated to preach to the wise as well as the foolish—those who are educated and the uneducated. Paul knew that all people are sinners and they are in need of the salvation grace. Satan is an equal opportunity tempter. Sin knows no political, cultural and racial boundaries. Everyone needs the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul said to those in Rome, *“That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome.”*

Do you have a sense of obligation to share the gospel with others? Consider a parable Jesus tells us in Matthew 18:22-35. There was a man who owed 10,000 talents (that is, millions of dollars) to his king. It was impossible for him to repay the debt. According to the custom, he would be sold as a slave to pay the debt. But when he pleaded

for mercy, the king took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. So the man should've been very grateful to the king for forgiving his debt. But what did he do? On his way home, he met another man who owed him a hundred denarii (that is, a few dollars). He grabbed the man and began to choke him. He demanded immediate payment, ignoring his pleas for mercy. The point of Jesus' parable is that we should appreciate the forgiving grace of God and show our mercy to others. This man did not really know the grace of forgiveness. He had no sense of obligation to share God's mercy with others.

We Christians also received God's grace of forgiveness through the blood of Jesus Christ. We are great debtors to God. He forgave all our sins because of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. If we really know this grace, we should also have a sense of obligation for others, like St. Paul did.

### III. I AM NOT ASHAMED OF THE GOSPEL (16-17)

Let us read verse 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.* Paul was not ashamed of the gospel. I once had a Bible student who carried his Bible in a brown bag. He didn't want anyone to find out he was studying the Bible. In Paul's time, the Jews were proud of their religion. The Greeks were proud of their culture and philosophy. The Romans boasted their military power. Compared to them, Jesus was only a carpenter who suffered all his life and was executed as a criminal in a most cruel way. Humanly speaking, all of his followers were losers in people's eyes. Not only that, it was dangerous for the believers to identify themselves as Christians, as persecutions were intensifying.

It was especially easy for the intellectuals of the time to dismiss the gospel or be ashamed of it. The Greeks and the Romans were proud of their sophisticated culture and history. But the gospel of Jesus seemed to lack sophistication. The gospel says that if we believe in Jesus, all our sins are forgiven and our eternal life is guaranteed. To many people in Paul's time, this was too simple and too easy. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:22-23: "Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles." Many people thought it was foolishness to believe in Jesus. They were ashamed of the gospel of Jesus.

How about us today? The modern civilization now boasts even more sophisticated and advanced culture, science and technology. Some people consider Christians naïve for believing that a guy who was killed 2,000 years ago could save them from their sin and death. I read the following comment posted online by a college student concerning the gospel: "[The idea of] original sin is absurd. It's punishing people for something they didn't do.... The whole Jesus-dying-for-your-sins thing is just absurd. So God sacrificed himself to himself to allow himself to forgive us of a crime we never committed? Awesome, that's the most idiotic thing I've ever heard and the fact that people swallow it is astounding." This student obviously went to Sunday school to learn about the original sin and Jesus' sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. Sadly, it is clear that he never had a personal relationship with Jesus. Likewise, many young people dismiss the gospel of Jesus Christ with a similar logic. In this atmosphere, even some

Christians are reluctant to identify themselves as believers at work, in school and among friends. They don't want to pray in public places when others are watching. They are reluctant to witness Jesus to non-believers, especially to people in higher positions.

But Paul says: *"I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes."* Why was Paul not ashamed of the gospel? He gives two reasons. **First, it is because the gospel is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.** The power of the Roman Empire was indeed great. Its military machine conquered many people and nations. But the glorious empire is gone now. Only its ruins remain. What happened? Many historians believe that it was brought down by its corruption within. The mighty power of Rome could not save its people from their sin and death. This is true for all human beings. Modern medicine and technology cannot save us from our sin and death, no matter how advanced and sophisticated they are. No one but God alone can save us. Only the gospel of Jesus Christ has the power to save us. This is the reason why Paul was not ashamed of the gospel. He said, "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1Co 1:18). The gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. When we believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ, something happens in our lives. The power of sin loses its grip. The power of God transforms us into a new creation in Christ (2Co 5:17). We have a new life, a new value system and a new hope in the kingdom of God. Before he met Jesus, Chris Sherrill used to have two things on his mind—money and women. He worked hard with three jobs and when he found time, he hung around with his cousin, trying to pick up girls. But the power of the gospel has changed him into a man of God with a new purpose and direction in life. God changed him into a servant of Jesus Christ. Only the power of God can do this.

**Second,** Paul was not ashamed of the gospel **because in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed.** Let us read verse 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."* What is "righteousness"? To be righteous is to be right with God. God is holy. Sinners cannot be right with God. We sinners cannot even approach the holy God. The good news is that Jesus came to take away our sins by dying on the cross as the sacrificial Lamb. He removed the barrier between God and us so that we can freely approach God. That is why Paul says that the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel. This righteousness comes only by faith in Jesus from first to last. We can be made right with God only by faith in Jesus. We can be righteous before God only by faith in Jesus. Paul says this is done by faith "from first to last." There is no other way to be right with God.

If you want, you could try to be right with God by keeping all the laws of God. That is what the Jews tried to do. But we know that no one can keep all the laws, all the time. I cannot even keep all the laws of this land, let alone the laws of God. Just between you and me, I often break the traffic law by going over the speed limit. God's laws are infinitely more difficult to keep. This is what Jesus said: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Mt 5:27-28). As we will

learn in Romans 7, Paul himself had tried to be righteous by keep the laws of God. Actually he was pretty good at it. He had no problem with keeping nine of the Ten Commandments. But he got stuck with the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment, which says, “Do not covet.” The more he tried not to covet other people’s possessions, the more desire he had for them. It was impossible for him to be right with God. That’s when he came to realize that we can be right with God only by faith in Jesus from first to last, just as it is written in Habakkuk 2:4, “The righteous will live by faith.” Our salvation is the work of God. It is not something we can accomplish on our own. Jesus finished the work of salvation for us through his crucifixion and resurrection. He opened the gate to heaven for us. All we have to do is to go through the gate by faith in him.

In conclusion, how can we be right with God? Only by faith in Jesus from first to last. There is no other way (Jn 14:6). We cannot be righteous before God by being a nice person, morally upright, or donating a lot of money to charity. Only the gospel of Jesus has the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes. May God help us to have a sense of obligation to share this wonderful gospel with young people of our generation!