

The Gospel of God

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on June 6, 2021.

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 1:1–7).¹

Ever the pastor, the Apostle Paul was concerned about the multi-cultural church in Rome. United by the gospel, Jews and Gentiles came together as one but there were underlying tensions – legalism and licentiousness are enticing taskmasters, mobilizing the enslaved in conflict. Forming the opposite poles of a false gospel, unaddressed they cultivate disunity.

Paul knows this, and he will not wait until he visits the church to address it. And so, he writes a letter, perhaps one of the greatest letters ever written, and sends it to the Roman church by the trustworthy hand of a faithful patron, Phoebe of Cenchreae (Rom. 16:1-2). Personally, Paul would not visit Rome for another three years and then only as a prisoner.

The letter we know as Romans was Paul’s last known correspondence before his imprisonment. It followed his letters to the Thessalonians, Corinthians, and Galatians. In Romans, Paul draws from themes covered in his previous letters, expanding and developing them into a theological treatise. If there is a Pauline *magnum opus*, Romans is it. Yet, this should not detract from the fact that Romans is a personal letter, set to the church, confronting first-century problems in Rome, and dictating doctrine for today. In short, Romans reminds us of this fundamental truth: The gospel is for sinners like you and me.

It is for this gospel, “the gospel of God” as Paul calls it, that he is set apart to proclaim, as a servant of our Lord, an apostle “last of all . . . untimely born” (1 Cor. 15:8). Paul is, as the resurrected Christ called him, “a chosen instrument” of the Lord, predestined to carry the gospel to the Gentiles, even kings, and to the children of Israel (Acts 9:15). Of course, the gospel is not a message exclusive to Paul, nor is it a new one. It is as old as the Fall (Gen. 3:15) and as new as this sermon. It is, as Paul will remind us, the spiritual consummation of Isaiah’s proclamation, the liberation of Zion (Isa. 40-66). What the prophetic word foreshadowed, Jesus fulfilled, the fulfillment of a promise made beforehand.

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

Promised Beforehand

It may surprise some that the gospel is not a New Testament phenomenon. As we work our way through Romans, Paul will remind us that Habakkuk preached, “the righteous shall live by faith” (Rom. 1:17). So also, “the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it” (Rom. 3:21). Who can forget our forefather in the faith, Abraham, who “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness” (Rom. 4:3)? Didn’t Isaiah write, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news” (Rom. 10:15)? Certainly, the gospel runs from the promise of the woman’s offspring in Genesis (Gen. 3:15) to the tree of life in Revelation (Rev. 22:14), a unifying theme from beginning to end through the canon of Scripture.

The distinction is that the gospel that the Old Testament saints believed looked to the fulfillment of God’s promise in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. While on this side of the cross, we look back. So important is this fact that Paul includes it with his introduction. This is God’s gospel, a covenant promise made and declared through the Old Testament Scripture.

What is the essence of this gospel of God promised beforehand? It centers on one particular person. According to natural descent, he was a descendent of King David, a man after God’s own heart (1 Sam. 13:14), who was promised by God, “your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever” (2 Sam. 7:16). Rightly did blind Bartimaeus cry out to this particular person for mercy as the “Son of David,” for he is the rightful and regal heir of the Davidic throne, declared by angelic pronouncement to the church that he is “the root and descendent of David, the bright morning star” (Rev. 22:16).

There is another reason God’s gospel centers on this one particular person. He is the confirmed Son of God. Anyone can claim to be the only and unique Son of God, but only One can substantiate it. By the power of the Holy Spirit, he resurrected from the dead, ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father.

Who is this particular person upon whom the gospel centers? He is “Jesus Christ our Lord” in whom “we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace” (Eph. 1:7). Therefore, the essence of the gospel is not a religious system or moralistic therapy; it is the declaration of the person of Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected for sinners like you and me.

Consider the relevance of this to the Roman church then and to us today: The gospel is for you but not about you. We are by faith recipients of the work of Christ, not vice versa. Yet, sometimes we act as if our faith is a favor to God instead of his gift to us. And sometimes we take for granted that what was promised beforehand was not fulfilled through us but in Christ alone, which is good news. The gospel is declared in Christ.

Declared in Christ

Paul could say to the Corinthians that he decided “to know nothing” among them “except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2), but it was not a statement exclusively of Christ’s crucifixion. For Paul, to know nothing except Jesus Christ was to acknowledge that he embodies

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the gospel. Consider that “when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law” (Gal. 4:4). And in his incarnation, the Son of God humbled himself in taking humanity upon himself and obeying the will of his Father, even unto death (Phil 2:6-8): “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). But as Paul emphasizes, it is “by his resurrection” that the gospel promised beforehand was fulfilled for eternity.

Declared in Christ is the gospel through which Paul and the other apostles were called. Declared in Christ is the gospel that they deliver, with the prophets, to us. As Paul makes abundantly clear in his letter to the Galatians, the gospel is not Jesus plus Judaism; it’s Jesus plus nothing. He is the gospel of God.

The objective of this declaration is “to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations.” As the gospel is proclaimed, the Holy Spirit gives new life to dead men, women, and children, enabling us to savingly believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Through faith we are then called and enabled to obey the will of our Lord. In fact, he gives us his Spirit that we may know that we are his children and to obey him in thought, word, and deed. We could say that we are saved through faith to walk by faith. The Christian life centers not on the Christian individually but on Christ through faith.

Just as there is an individual aspect to declaring Christ, so also there is a corporate one. Our regeneration and sanctification are a declaration to the nations: There is liberty and life in Christ. The church is “Exhibit A” that God is merciful and gracious to sinners, and through sinners like you and me the gospel is advanced to every tribe, tongue, and nation. It is a commission to all who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

Called to Belong

In an age of fierce independence and identity obsession, the Christian is “called to belong to Jesus Christ.” It is a calling according to the sovereign purpose of God (Rom. 8:28): For “those he predestined, he also called; and those he called, he also justified; and those he justified, he also glorified” (Rom. 8:30 NET). From our new birth to our new body, by God’s grace through faith we belong to Christ.

For this reason, Paul could refer to himself as a “servant of Christ Jesus,” or quite literally a “slave,” and it is why he explains the same to us. In the sixth chapter of Romans, Paul says that prior to our conversion, we were all “slaves of sin,” whether we acknowledge it or not. As such, we could sin as we please without regard to righteousness (Rom. 6:20). However, there is one significant problem for those who live the sin-centered life: It ends not in eternal life but death (Rom. 6:21). Not good.

The good news, that is the gospel, is that through faith in Christ we are “set free from sin” and its eternal consequences. But we are not set free to be our own master. Left to ourselves, as the captain of our soul, we would sell ourself back into slavery to sin. No, we who have been freed from sin now are “slaves of God” (Rom. 6:22), our Savior, Lord, and Master. This is what Paul

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means when he says that we “belong to Jesus Christ”: “You are not your own, for you were bought with a price” (1 Cor. 6:20), the precious blood of Christ (Eph. 1:7).

While the world interprets being slaves of God and belonging to Christ as bad news, it is good news for the child of God, in fact liberating, because we are the beloved children of God. While counterintuitive, in belonging to Christ, possessions of God, we have become heirs with Christ, inheriting an eternal kingdom with him. As a result, because of his love for us and who we are in him, we are called to be holy like him. As he commands his beloved, “You shall be holy, for I am holy” (1 Pet. 1:16). Or, as Paul puts it, we are “called to be saints,” set apart by God for God to be like God. For, all who trust in the Holy One of God are saints of the Most High (Dan. 7:18).

Consider the relevance of this: We are called to live holy lives, not to merit God’s favor but to be like him, to grow in godliness, to mature in Christlikeness. As such, to live our lives in holiness is not a burden of conformity but a family trait to be embraced and enjoyed. What is even more extraordinary about this is that our holy God calls us saints, even now, even as we wrestle with our sinful flesh, even as we are on this side of eternal life. We are saints of God, because of God’s grace alone through faith in Christ to the glory of God alone.

Rightly then does Paul conclude his salutation, saying, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” As grace is the unmerited favor of God, predestined before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4) by God our Father and secured for us by God the Son, we enjoy peace with God. It is a comprehensive and eternal peace that is ours only by God’s grace. It is God’s grace-bestowed peace that the church at Rome needed to be reminded.

So it is for us today: Grace and peace to *you* from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! It is good news, the best news: the gospel of God.