

Clarified Vision Through a Gospel Lens

Romans 1:1-8:11

*“For I am not ashamed of the **gospel**, for it is the **power of God for salvation to everyone who believes**,*

Introduction: Erin and I celebrated our 25th anniversary in May, which meant it was 26 years ago that I ventured into downtown L.A, parking in Pershing Square and climbing to the 7th floor of a building on 6th and Broadway. Intimidated would be a good word to describe my state of mind, not only because it was a busy and bustling place that I had never been to, but because I was meeting Al Al the Diamond Pal to pick out an engagement ring. Or to be more clear, an **engagement diamond**. At the time I had a positive cash flow of hundreds of dollars and a negative net worth of thousands (thank you, school loans!), so this purchase was not only going to cost a big chunk, but it would last a lifetime. But something amazing happened in the next hour. I went from knowing nothing about diamonds except they were expensive and pretty, and Al explained the nature of diamonds, including *cut, clarity, carrot, and color*. Each of these had a bearing on the *value* of the diamond, but it was the cut that brought about its brilliance. A typical round cut has **57 facets**, 58 if it is less pointed at the bottom, that are skillfully designed to bring about the sparkle, the rainbow, the dazzling light that we love so much. These are the cuts that have you ladies look down at your ring in a room with great lighting.

The gospel is like an exquisitely cut diamond. It shines brightly, is brilliant in its beauty, and is a marvel to behold. Al used to tell me that diamond’s beauty was in the eye of the beholder, and that is true of the gospel since so many **miss it** and thus **miss out**. In some ways, knowing nothing about the four C’s of a diamond allows us to simply look at this pretty stone and admire it, but we also know that the more we understand about it, the more we grow in appreciation of its worth and value. This is the approach of Paul in **Romans**, as he spends the first eight chapters explaining the *facets of the gospel* ---- a message of good news that is brilliant in its simplicity: *A Holy God, welcoming back sinful mankind by forgiving their sin through faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus* ---- but of which the depths can be plumbed for a lifetime, each facet bringing to bear a different level of enjoyment.

Why did Paul go into such detail about a truth that can be understood by an elementary child? Why the courtroom drama, why the lawyer language, why the answering of so many supposed and possibly proposed problems? **First**, it was to make sure that the Roman church, whom Paul had never met, would be able to enjoy **true unity** and thus partner together for greater fruitfulness among the nations. A faithful, true, and complete understanding of the gospel is the foundation for any partnership, gospel relationship, and unified mindset. **Second**, I believe it is because the nature of the gospel is **NOT INTUITIVE or FULLY GRASPED by most of us**. We are frankly *busy, distracted, and engaged in full lives*, most of which are genuinely good things. We get lulled into thinking that true engagement in the mission that God has for our lives will happen sometime later, when we have time, or opportunity, or financial flexibility. **But mission and full obedience are rarely convenient** ---- *they are accomplished in the midst of all the other responsibilities of life*. What happens when we wait for the **‘right time’** or when we **‘feel ready’** for the most important things: NOTHING! Except perhaps continued grinding out a life here that believes this life is all there is.

Life is both *short and quick*, so Paul urges the Roman church to think about life through the lens of the gospel for greater **clarity, perspective, and future action**. Before blazing forward in Romans 8, I wanted to make sure that we are all caught up to speed on where we’ve been. For those of you who’ve been with us the last year, this will be a type of review. For those who have joined us since then, this may put

some pieces together. For those who are planning on being with us moving forward, this will set the stage for the rest of one of the most powerful chapters in Scripture, as well as a look forward with God's plan in the future in 9-11. We are going to walk through the first 7+ chapters together, seeking to summarize the flow of thought, and will do it around **three main thoughts**: the *goal of the gospel in our lives, the global mission of the church, and the power and breadth of the gospel in Jesus Christ*. Our hope is that you will see and savor the brilliance of the gospel in the **person of Jesus Christ**.

The Gospel Shatters False Motives Through Belonging

"The Christian life is lived in the free gift and earnest pursuit of a relationship to Jesus Christ." – John Piper

From the Fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden until now, mankind has struggled in their relationship with the God of the universe. We each have a built in desire to **be God**, as well as an aversion to anyone else **being God in our lives**. But we also each possess an inherent knowledge that God exists and is real, so it puts us into tension once we come to that level of cognition. Mankind tries to **appease, placate, deceive, persuade, and sway** God to look fondly on us, posing as someone who is better than most or deserving of positive action. The gospel shatters all of this, of course, but even Christians who understand the gospel can struggle with our **motives** of obedience and worship in terms of the God of the universe. We can easily be like the Galatians who "began by the Spirit but thought they could be perfected in the flesh" (Gal. 3:3).

How does this play out in our lives? We can approach our life before God with false or misplaced motives, looking at our relationship with Him as something **transactional** (I prayed a prayer or made a commitment) or **fearful duty**. This leads to a Christian life that is both **joyless AND falling short of what the gospel was designed for**. Here is a list (not exhaustive) of how many will live a life before God, even in the church:

- **We try to EARN God's love** – The gospel is not opposed to effort, but it is fundamentally against trying to earn God's love or righteousness. It is a foundational misunderstanding of our own sinfulness
- **We simply FEAR PUNISHMENT** – This leads to walking on eggshells, produces resentment rather than joy, and sees God as a tyrant rather than an object of love.
- **We see God as a COSMIC GENIE** – We wonder what we can get out of Him, how He can help us, or leverage Him for our own gain ----- rather than our greatest goal of worship
- **We seek only HUMAN APPROVAL** – This can happen in the church far too easily. We love the community and family, so we are willing to go with the flow, worried more about our reputation and standing with people than with God.
- **We operate out of SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS** – We believe we are actually pretty good, better than most, and in a subtle way, deserving of salvation and a standing with God
- **We function out of GUILT & SHAME** – We act from a sense of condemnation rather than joyful transformation. This is another form of pride that considers one's self too far gone or too sinful to save.

If you function in any form or part of these above, it means we have yet to comprehend and practice the full of the gospel as it was intended. Here is what I mean. Look back at the first chapter of Romans as Paul explains why he is writing the book:

*‘Concerning His son Christ Jesus’... 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**, 5 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, 6 **including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ**”*

Romans 1:4-6

Now, what I want you to see is the last part of the section in verse 6. The word “belong” is not there in the Greek (the NASB does not have this word in its translation). But the literal rendering of this last verse is **“the called of Jesus Christ”**. This ‘of’ is a *genitive of possession*, one that denotes ownership and relationship (thus validating the ESV’s use of ‘belong’). The drumbeat of the gospel, or the brilliance of what it accomplishes, is not simply to save mankind from Hell, wrath, and judgment, but to bring us into a loving relationship with the God of the universe through faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Why am I pointing this out in terms of the whole of the book? Because it is also emphasized multiple other places, like **7:4**:

*Likewise, my brothers, you also have **died to the law through the body of Christ**, so that you **may belong to another, to him** who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God*

Notice two powerful realities that lead to a monumental implication. We have *died to the law*, meaning we no longer try to earn anything from God through our own effort alone, but **INSTEAD**, we actually **BELONG** to **HIM** through faith in Jesus Christ, and **NOW** we can bear fruit for God as a result of that union. This changes everything in terms of the goal and motive of worship, obedience, service, and fulfilling our mission. But one more to consider:

*You, however, are not in the flesh but **in the Spirit**, if in fact the **Spirit of God dwells in you**. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ **does not belong to him**.*

Romans 8:9

There are two realities in terms of belonging: You either **HAVE** the Holy Spirit dwelling in you, or you do not. If you do, you belong to God in Christ. If you do not, you do not belong. How does this focus of the gospel in Romans bring clarity to our mission as a church?

1. **BELONGING to Christ is the goal of life and gospel** – Are there expectations within relationships? Of course! To say we can have a true relationship with Christ and **NOT** focus on honoring, pleasing, and obeying Him betrays the definition of each word. The gospel of Jesus moved us out of darkness and into light, out of death into life, and out of the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His Beloved Son (Col. 1:13). When we focus on **obedience apart from seeking a relationship with Christ**, we short cut the goal and purpose of the gospel. It would be equivalent to me putting a ring on Erin’s finger, money in her account, groceries on her porch, paying her mortgage and mowing the lawn, but never engaging with her in relational or intimate ways. On one hand I’d be fulfilling a *part* of what a husband is called to, but missing the whole point. In the gospel, we are **in Christ, united in Him, beloved by Him, called to Him, redeemed by Him, receiving mercy and grace from Him**, all because He moved us to belong to Him. This is why mere morality is **NOT** the call of the gospel.
2. **BELONGING to Christ is the basis of everything we do here** – Because of this truth, you cannot truly join and enjoy all that we have here together until you are united and belong to Christ. We can still love each other in kindness, can seek to listen and serve, but we will be inherently

disconnected at a foundational level. ***What does that mean?*** Simply that we want everyone, all who are here this morning or listen to this online or have visited at any point, to see the **holiness of God and recognize your own sinfulness and inability to please Him or get back to Him. So we call you to BELIEVE in Jesus, forsaking your attempts to earn anything, and ask for forgiveness based on His death on the cross, which bore our sin and satisfied the wrath of God.** Turn from you sin and follow Christ, so that you can worship Him and bring Him the glory that is due His name.

3. **BELONGING to Christ is the motivation for obedience, worship, and accomplishing our mission** – Salvation brings us back to a right relationship so that we can see clearly that all of life is about God in Christ, and we see God is Supreme and Christ is Lord, so we make it the ambition of our life to glorify and seek to please both. We truly cannot make people do anything, and if we could, it would only be through manipulation or some sort of forced service. No, we can only *challenge, encourage, exhort, charge, and call believers to action*, but the motivation and power HAS TO COME FROM THE INSIDE OUT. Anything less falls short of the glory of God.

The Gospel Clarifies and Motivates Reaching the Nations

“Christianity is not a tribal religion, but calls for faith from every tribe, tongue, people and nation.” Piper

Missions is hard, both in the actual sending and going of missionaries, but in the prioritization for individuals, families, and churches. It is exceptionally easy for anyone to push reaching the nations, those who have never heard the message of the gospel, to the back burner without much angst. There is so much in front of us, so many other tasks and responsibilities, and let’s be honest, missions is costly and can seem fruitless. But it is abundantly clear that spreading the good news of the gospel, declaring the glory of God among the nations, and proclaiming the excellencies of Christ is the heartbeat of God (Psalm 96:3; 1 Pet. 2:9). That means following Christ demands we work intentionally to overcome any apathy, distraction, or excuse for NOT spreading the name of Christ for the joy of all peoples.

What struck me about Romans is the clear focus on missions. Go back to 1:5, where we are charged to ***“bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name AMONG THE NATIONS”***. Now, see the bookend of the letter in 16:26, ***“but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith”*** The nations were on Paul’s heart throughout the letter, and it was his purpose to reach the **nations, gentiles, and Jews** (15:19) and the reason he wanted to go to Spain (15:24).

Though we will see this more clearly in chapters 15 and 16, it has already been the focus of Paul:

1:8 – Thank God for the Romans, since their faith is *proclaimed in all the world*

1:13 – I want to reap the harvest among you as well as *the rest of the Gentiles*

1:14 – I am obligation to both to Greeks, barbarians, wise, and foolish

The word for ‘Gentiles’ and ‘nations’ is the same Greek word *ethnos*, which means ‘nation, people-group, or non-Jew’. This means that the good news of the gospel was never intended to stay hidden but to be proclaimed widely, powerfully, and consistently. Our goal is to make disciples of all nations, those in our family, neighborhoods, schools, jobs, in Simi Valley, Southern California, the United States, and in every geographical point in the world. This is why we support what is going on in Lyon, France with

Philippe Viguer and Florent Varak, in **Lodz, Poland** with Czarek, in Togo, Africa with Stephen and Lisa Wreesman, in Osaka, Japan with Matt and Mai Higby and Alanna, and soon to be in Ireland with the Yzbick's. We are not involved because it is glamorous, easy, or a nice place to visit. We are involved because the call to make disciples is among ALL the nations. But is there a powerful enough message to transcend every locale, religion, cultural stronghold, deception, and resistance? This is what Paul laid out in the first 8 chapters of Romans.

The Gospel is Power, and Overcomes All Darkness

*"For I am not ashamed of the **gospel**, for it is **the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes**, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 **For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."***

Like any good teacher or lawyer, Paul provided a clear **thesis** for the argument he'd make in the rest of the letter to the Romans. This is the crux of what he will go on to explain in detail, that the cosmic tension of every person in terms of the **righteousness of God** is NOT solved by anything that mankind can DO, but is an act of God on our behalf. The good news, or gospel, is the power needed, from God, to save mankind from God. This is received by **faith alone**, which sets the tone for the rest of the book but is also revealed in the entirety of redemptive history. God revealing His righteousness AND having sinful man belong to Him is the question that Paul unfurls through argumentation, logic, and Scripture itself in the rest of Romans 1-8. It will be helpful for us to see the logical flow of his argument in summary, not only to clarify again the nature of the gospel and our mission, but also to set the stage for the rest of chapter 8 and beyond. Here is where you need to **open your Bible**.

1:18-3:20 – Paul lays out the **universal problem of sin for all people**, regardless of ethnic background or interaction with the Law. All of mankind has known there is a God without a doubt, has chosen to rebel, has created idols, and exchanged the truth of God for a lie. The result is that God gave us over to our sin, so we are not only abject sinners, but we absolutely LOVE OUR SIN.

3:9-11 *"What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, **are under sin**,¹⁰ as it is written:*

"None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God.

*¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; **no one does good, not even one."***

Sin is all inclusive and all extensive. We are born sinners and lack righteousness, which is what is needed to have a relationship with God. We are born under sin with no way out in ourselves.

3:19-20 *"Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, **and the whole world may be held accountable to God. 20 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin"***

Sin is not merely personal (as long as I'm not hurting anyone) or neutral, but demands that we are accountable to God. This accountability leaves us in shambles, since we cannot justify, or make ourselves righteous, by keeping the law, but merely by understanding that we are sinners. **Why does Paul start with this facet of the gospel?** Almost every person who has lived thinks they are **better than they actually are**, and everyone must come to grips with the fact that they have offended a holy God, deserve wrath, and can do nothing about it in and of themselves.

3:21-5:21 – Salvation is the solution, and justification comes by faith in the life and death of Jesus Christ alone.

Perhaps one of the clearest, most straightforward, glorious descriptions of the gospel in terms of God upholding His righteousness while welcoming back sinful man is found in Romans 3:21-26:

*But now the **righteousness of God** has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— 22 the **righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ** for all who believe. For there is no distinction: 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are **justified by his grace as a gift**, through the redemption that is **in Christ Jesus**, 25 whom God put forward as a **propitiation by his blood**, to be **received by faith**. This was to show **God's righteousness**, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. 26 It was to show **his righteousness** at the present time, so that he might be **just** and the **justifier** of the one who has **faith in Jesus***

If you get this passage, you get the gospel and the entirety of Paul's argument. *How did God uphold His righteousness while simultaneously bringing sinful mankind to Himself?* **The answer is stunning:** Sinful man is justified, or declared righteous, **by faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ!** *How did Christ uphold that justice?* He became a **propitiation**, one through whom God had satisfaction for all sin ever committed by those who believe. On the cross, God treated Christ like He should have treated us so that we could have a **foreign righteousness** given or imputed to us that we could never earn. When God sees those who have believed in Christ, He sees **Christ's righteousness, not ours**, so He can welcome us into belonging. This puts stress or emphasis on two fundamentally important parts: **the work of Christ, and the gift of grace to believe**. It is Christ alone, not our contribution or addition, that allows us to be justified. It is **faith alone**, not ANY WORK, that is required, and even that faith is NOT a work but a gift of grace.

Chapter 4 reinforces this same issue from the OT and life of Abraham, who believed God's promise by faith and it was *counted* to him as righteousness, NOT the keeping of the law or the sign of circumcision. Salvation depended on **faith so that the promise would rest on grace for himself and offspring** (4:15)

Chapter 5 is a preview of chapter 8 in that it tells us that those who have been **justified by faith** have peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ (5:1), which gives us assurance, joy, and hope in the midst of suffering and death. Chapter 5 helps every believer answer the question of **death and suffering**, and find its ultimate expression through the fact that the failure of Adam lead to death, but the triumph of the second Adam lead to life.

6:1-8:11 – The justified life will lead to a sanctified, or progressing in faith driven holiness, life. Sin no longer has dominion over us (6:12), and where we used to be slaves of sin, we are now slaves of righteousness (6:18) which means our life is no longer our own. Chapter 7 gives hope to those who struggle and battle with sin (which is the plight of all in this world), reminding us that we **belong to Christ** (7:4) and serve in the new way of the Spirit (7:6). Where do we find solace when we understand the war is being waged in our soul (7:22) and need deliverance (7:24). We give thanks to God, since:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (8:1)

The focus now is life in the Spirit, rather than the flesh. **Where are we going from here?** We are going to look at the assurance of our future, the reason for hope, and the foundation for joy in the midst of suffering. Then we will look at God's sovereignty over salvation, including the past and future for Israel (ch. 9-11). This all allows us to see, savor, and enjoy the brilliance of the gospel, remembering we belong to Christ and are called to make Him known.