

A Study in the Book of Romans

6

Romans 1:14-17

Key Verse

‘ 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. ’

In these four verses – **1:14-17** – Paul wraps up his introduction and launches into the core of his message to the Romans.

Paul the Debtor

Read Romans 1:14-15

The *New Living Translation* expresses Paul’s words in this way:

“For I have a great sense of obligation to people in our culture and to people in other cultures, to the educated and uneducated alike.”

J. B. Phillips translates it with these words:

“I feel myself under a sort of universal obligation, I owe something to all men, from cultured Greek to ignorant savage.”

And the *Amplified Bible* expands Paul’s words even further:

“Both to the Greeks and to barbarians (to the cultured and to the uncultured), both to the wise and the foolish I have an obligation to discharge and a duty to perform and a debt to pay.”

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Paul was a debtor because of all he had received from the Lord. He owed everything he now was purely to the grace of God – grace that was not only for his own life, but also grace that was expressed in gifts that enabled him to preach as the apostle to the Gentiles (**11:3**). They were talents entrusted to him by the Lord. He was under an obligation to fulfill the task. He felt a debtor to everyone – even to those in Rome. He *must* preach the Gospel to them also.

As we saw in the last lesson, Paul expressed this sense of debt clearly in **1 Corinthians 9:16-17**:

“...when I preach the Gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me.”

In **2 Corinthians 5:14-15**, Paul goes into greater detail as to what exactly “compelled” him to preach the Gospel:

“For *Christ’s love* compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.”

This sense of indebtedness was also expressed later in the book of Romans.

Read Romans 13:8

Do you notice that Paul now tells us that he is not the only one with a debt. You do too! And this debt of love is, as the *New International Version* calls it, “continuing debt.” J. B. Phillips describes it as the “perpetual debt of love which we owe one another.” The *New Living Translation* says concerning this debt: “You can never finish paying that!” Like Paul, you too are indebted to every person – to share the good news of the love of Christ with them.

Two Classes of People

The two classes of people that Paul refers to in **Romans 1:14** – Greeks and non-Greeks – cover all of mankind. About 350 years before Paul’s time, the Greek conqueror, Alexander the Great, had taken the Greek language and Greek thought all over the world he had conquered, even as far as India. By Paul’s day, a man was not called a Greek because of his race or citizenship, but because he knew and understood the culture and the mind of Greece.

A barbarian (or non-Greek), on the other hand, literally meant a man who says “bar-bar.” In other words, he was a man who speaks in a rough, uncultured language, in contrast to the beautiful and flexible language of the Greek. So to be a Greek was to be someone with a certain way of thought and culture.

When Paul said he was indebted to both Greek and non-Greek, he meant that his debt to preach the Gospel was to both the wise and the simple, to the educated and uneducated, to the cultured and uncultured. The Gospel message was for the whole world – for every person, regardless of cultural or educational background

– and Paul’s desire was someday to bring that message to Rome also.¹

The Core of the Letter

Read Romans 1:16-17

The *New International Version* translates these two verses with these words:

“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. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’”

The *New Living Translation* puts Paul’s words through a different lens:

“For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes – Jews first and also Gentiles. This Good News tells us how God makes us right in his sight. This is accomplished from start to finish by faith. As the Scriptures say, ‘It is through faith that a righteous person has life.’”

The *New Century Version* expresses it in this way:

“I am proud of the Good News, because it is the power God uses to save everyone who believes—to save the Jews first, and also to save those who are not Jews. The Good News shows how God makes people right with himself – that it begins and ends with faith. As the Scripture says, ‘But those who are right with God will live by trusting in him.’”

And J. B. Phillips, in *The New Testament in Modern English*, renders it thus:

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel. I see it as the very power of God working for the salvation of everyone who believes it, both Jew and Greek. I see in it God’s plan for imparting righteousness to men, a process begun and continued by their faith. For, as the scripture says: The righteous shall live by faith.”

Up to these two verses, Paul has been introducing himself and making contact with the people to whom he is writing. The introduction is now over. They now understand his heart. Now he writes down, in summary, the theme of what he really wants to share with them. In these two verses, he summarizes the four major truths of the Gospel that he will enlarge upon in the rest of his letter. These truths are:

- Salvation is God’s power released in our lives
- That salvation is freely offered to every person
- The righteousness that God requires can only come from him
- Righteousness before God is by faith “from first to last”

As we saw in **Module 102**, this salvation is based on three important principles:

- ☞ It is *from God*
- ☞ It is *by faith*
- ☞ It is *from first to last*

As *The Message* explains it:

“[The Gospel is] news I’m most proud to proclaim, this extraordinary Message of God’s powerful plan to rescue everyone who trusts him, starting with Jews and then right on to everyone else! God’s way of putting people right shows up in the acts of faith, confirming what Scripture has said all along: ‘The person in right standing before God by trusting him really lives.’”

Proud of the Message of Christ

Even before Paul describes the nature of the message he has been called to preach, he first declares his pride in that message. In the natural, there was every reason to be ashamed. The message Paul preached brought him ridicule and persecution everywhere he had gone. In any given town that he set foot in, Paul would go into the local synagogue on the Sabbath and preach the Gospel, knowing that in the Jews’ eyes it would be considered as heresy – and Paul knew all too well what the Jews did with heretics. He had been a persecutor of “heretics” himself (see **Acts 7:51-8:3; 13:9-10; Galatians 1:13-14; Philippians 3:6**).

Because of his preaching, Paul had been chased out of four cities; beaten, stoned or imprisoned in three; smuggled out of others; and laughed at in another. The Gospel was “foolishness” to the educated Greek mind and a “stumbling block” to Jewish sensibilities (**1 Corinthians 1:18-24**).

But in the face of all this, Paul declares with great conviction: “I am not ashamed of the Gospel – and I’m ready to preach it in Rome too!” The Romans prided themselves on their wisdom and culture. The average Roman may have considered the Gospel “foolishness” but, says Paul, “it is the power of God unto salvation” (KJV).

The Gospel is the Power of God!

You will note that Paul doesn’t just say that the Gospel *tells* us about the power of God, or that the Gospel *releases* the power of God. Paul says the Gospel *is* the power of God! Indeed, in **1 Corinthians 1:18**, Paul has this to say about the very nature of the Gospel:

“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.*”

The proclamation of the Gospel – this “power of God” released in the life of the believer – is, Paul says, “first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.” As Eugene Peterson paraphrases it, this is an “extraordinary Message...starting with Jews and then right on to everyone else!”

Some might think that this “Jews first” policy is an example of racial prejudice, but this is not the case, since Paul in **Romans 2:9-11** shows that the “first for the Jew, then for the Gentile” principle also applies to God’s judgment, and ends with this declaration: “For God does not show favoritism.”

God’s “Jews first” policy is not a matter of racial prejudice but of covenantal priority. In **Romans 9:4-5**, Paul explains concerning Israel:

“...Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.”

It was to Abraham that God made the original covenant and, as the natural descendants of Abraham, the Jews are the natural beneficiaries of this covenant. Without the Jews, there could be no Gospel to the Gentiles. It was for this reason also that Jesus commissioned his disciples in **Acts 1:8**:

“...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Do you notice the order? The Gospel has always been first for the Jew, then for the Gentile – not because of favoritism or discrimination, but because of the nature of the New Covenant itself.

Let’s take a brief look at these two groups of people identified by Paul as recipients of the Gospel message:

First for the Jew

The Gospel is the power of God for salvation, first to the Jew. The Jews are the people of the Sinai Covenant. They had been given God’s Law and had been chosen as a nation to be the vehicle to bring about God’s plan of salvation for the world. But they, as a nation, had failed to understand what God was doing, and had not recognized that Jesus was the fulfillment of everything that God had been telling and showing them down through the centuries.

Even in Paul’s day, the Jews were still clinging to the Law that God had given them, as well as all the religious regulations and ceremonies of the Sinai Covenant, hoping that through these they would find salvation. But Paul says to the Jew, the Gospel is the power of God for salvation! The Gospel takes the Jew out of self-effort and self-righteousness and gives him salvation through God’s power alone!

Then to the Greek

The Greeks – the self-acclaimed “cultured and wise” of Paul’s day – were looking to their own philosophies in order to find the answer to the meaning and purpose of life. To them, too, Paul says, the Gospel is the power of God for salvation!

The Gospel is not just a new code of rules and regulations for a man to try to obey

in order to bring him closer to God. Neither is it a new philosophy or theory concocted by man to try to explain life and understand its meaning. The Gospel is the power of God! It is God performing a miracle in our lives. It is God doing what we could never do ourselves. The Jews' way and the Greeks' way had this one thing in common – it was man in his own effort trying to save himself. But the Gospel is *God* at work – a power outside ourselves, saving us when we could not save ourselves, and giving us eternal life when would could not give it to ourselves.

Saved!

This is a word we use frequently. We hear it on the lips of Christians and we hear it preached from the pulpit. But what does it really mean?

To be “saved” means to be rescued from certain catastrophe and put in a place of safety and security. A drowning man, helpless in the water and heading for certain death, looks for someone to save him. In the same way, God has come to the aid of the human race, floundering in their sin and heading for judgment (**1 Timothy 1:15; 2 Timothy 1:9**). His power saves us from every area that has been affected by sin and by our broken fellowship with God. We are saved:

From judgment

At the end of the world, when all people stand before God, the righteous Judge (**Revelation 20:11-15**), not one of us would be found guiltless, because all of us have sinned (**Romans 3:10,23**). But God, because of his great love for us, intervened to help us. He sent Jesus, his Son, to take the judgment for our sin in our place. As Jesus hung on the Cross of Calvary, God put all our sin on him. As Isaiah prophesied in **Isaiah 53:5-6**, he took the punishment we deserved:

“But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

God now gives us the choice – we can continue to carry our own guilt, or we can let Jesus carry it for us. If we continue to carry our own guilt, we face the judgment for that guilt at the end of the world. If we let Jesus take our guilt, however, the judgment for that sin has already taken place – on the Cross (**1 Thessalonians 1:10**). We can walk away free, declared innocent because Jesus was declared guilty!

From sin

Sin was like a cruel master who held us in a slavery from which there was no escape. But Jesus not only saved us from the judgment of our sins *in the future*, but saved us from the very power of sin in our lives *now*, as we will see later in our study in **Romans 6:6**:

“For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be rendered powerless, that we should not longer be slaves to sin.”

From the curse of the Law

Jesus has set us from from the constant and fruitless struggle of trying to reach God's standard of goodness by our own effort. The curse that comes from trying to live up to that standard, and failing, is now gone! In **Galatians 3:13**, we discover:

“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’”

From being “lost”

Jesus told several parables to describe the condition of an “unsaved” man. He said that he was like a sheep who had strayed from the fold (**Luke 15:3-7**), or a son who had left home and wasted his life and inheritance (**Luke 15:11-24**). In each case, the condition was described as a “lostness.” We had strayed away from God onto the wrong road – a road that led to death – and we had no other way of finding the right path home. Jesus brought us back, uniting us with the Father again. The Lord says it plainly in **Luke 19:10**:

“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”

From evil influence

There are two evil influences from which Christ has saved us:

The Devil

In Christ we have victory over all the power of the Enemy and can overcome all his temptations through the strength that God gives us (**1 Corinthians 10:13; Hebrews 2:18**). **1 John 3:8** tells us:

“He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work.”

The world

In Christ we can stand strong against all the evil influences in the world – “the decadence all around you caused by evil desires” (**2 Peter 1:4**, NLT). **1 John 5:4-5** makes this pronouncement concerning your life:

“...for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.”

From overwhelming circumstances

Through Christ, no circumstance or problem need overwhelm us, for he brings us through in victory and plans everything to work out for our best. We will look into this in more detail when we come to **Romans 8:28,35-39**.

From physical bondages

Salvation involves our whole being: spirit, soul and body. Speaking of the ministry of the Lord Jesus when he healed the sick and demon-possessed, Matthew writes in **Matthew 8:17**:

“This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: ‘He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases.’”

Read Isaiah 53:4

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:23

Read 3 John 2

The Key of Faith

Only one ingredient is needed in man to release God’s power to work in his life and bring him salvation – and that is faith. Salvation is to “everyone who *believes*,” whether Jew or Gentile, Greek or barbarian.

Let’s take another look at **Romans 1:17**, where in one verse Paul gives a summary of the message of **Romans**.

- **A righteousness from God is revealed** – “Righteousness” means to be in right relationship with God, or, in other words, to be able to stand before God without any sense that we fall short of his standard of goodness. In the Gospel – the message of Christ’s work on our behalf – God’s righteousness is freely given to the believer. A Christian is made righteous by his faith in what Christ has done.
- **This righteousness is *by faith* from first to last** – Faith in Christ makes us righteous and gives us eternal life, and faith in Christ maintains us through life now. Thus faith is both the beginning of the Christian life and the ongoing lifestyle of the Christian.

In these two foundational verses – **1:16-17** – Paul reveals the two vital ingredients of the Gospel:

- God’s power
- Man’s faith

These two, when combined together, produce salvation, righteousness and eternal life!

¹ William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans*.

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