

The Righteous Will Live By Faith
Romans 1:8-17
Key Verse: 1:17

by Dr. Jim Rabchuk

"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.'"

In today's passage, Paul shares his heart's desire to preach the gospel at Rome. Paul summarized the content of the gospel message as follows: "The righteous will live by faith." May God show us through today's passage how to live by faith, so that we might be counted as one of the righteous!

1. Paul, a righteous man (8-15)

First, Paul was a man of prayer. When we think of the apostle Paul, we tend to think of a man of action. For example, when the Corinthian church complained a little bit about Paul's harsh words of rebuke in his first letter, Paul shared with them some of his qualifications as their shepherd and spiritual father. 2nd Corinthians 11:23-27a says, "I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ... I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep." Paul's power and spirit to do something for God was indeed amazing. But we must know that Paul was first of all a man of prayer. Look at verses 8-10. "First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you." Indeed, Paul's service to God was so powerful and spirited because he strove first to pray, and then to act.

Paul prayed with a thankful spirit. When we read of Paul's shepherd life, we might guess that Paul would have nothing to be thankful about, and everything to complain about. Would you have a thankful mind about being beaten with rods and the lash? Of course not! And yet, Paul maintained a thankful spirit in carrying out the blood-shedding work of proclaiming the gospel. It is not natural. It is the fruit of Paul's labor of prayer. Paul wrestled with himself in prayer, crucifying his passions and pride, until he could find countless thanksgiving topics in Christ Jesus for himself and for his sheep. He thanked God for the faith of the small Roman church. He even thanked God that after many disappointments, the way seemed to be opening up for him to come to Rome through Jerusalem. Even when his plans were frustrated yet again by being arrested at the temple, Paul waited and prayed until by God's grace he could go to Rome in chains as a political prisoner. From the very beginning of time, Satan's most powerful weapon has been to rob God's people of a thankful mind. On the other hand, those who maintain a thankful mind toward God and his high calling are those who can live by faith.

Paul prayed with a mind for mission. Paul had one clear prayer topic: that the way might be opened for him to come to Rome as a gospel messenger. Here we see Paul's spirit to move mountains through prayer. Jesus strongly encouraged his disciples, "Have faith in God. I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore, I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours" (Mark 11:22-24). Paul depended on this promise of God absolutely, believing that God would move mountains for the sake of his world salvation purpose. As we have already recalled, God answered Paul's prayer by sending him to Rome in chains. But the gospel was not chained, and Rome was evangelized through Paul's humble preaching while in prison. Mission-centered prayer is the spiritual weapon that makes our life of faith in God victorious. May God give us the mountain-moving faith of St. Paul to pray with a thankful mind for the sake of accomplishing the world mission work! Thank God who answered our earnest prayers to register more than 3000 attendants to the Purdue International Conference!

Second, Paul longed to be a blessing. St. Paul was already famous in Christian circles by the time he wrote this letter. So, Paul might have hoped that the Roman Christians would eagerly anticipate his visit, and prepare him a lavish round of feasts! Look, however, at verses 11 and 12. "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." In these verses, Paul expresses his sincere desire to be a source of blessing for the church at Rome. In this way, Paul was following in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus Christ, who said, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk. 10:45). A righteous man is not a burden to others, but a blessing.

What was the spiritual gift Paul wished to impart to the church at Rome? Judging by his letter to the Romans, it is gospel faith. Gospel faith is not merely a confession of Jesus as the Christ. Gospel faith is the faith to live as one set apart for the gospel of God (Ro. 1:1, 12:1). Paul wanted to reap a harvest among the Gentiles in Rome by preaching the gospel. Paul had experienced that when he devoted himself to a discipleship ministry in Ephesus, all of Asia could be reached with the gospel. Now, he turned his attention to Rome. Surely he had a hope that by planting gospel faith in the Roman believers, he could spread the gospel to the entire world!

Paul's desire to strengthen and mobilize the Roman Christians was not a matter of personal ambition. Paul declares, "I am obligated both to Greeks and to 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 yearned to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth until even the Greece-iest and most foolish person might believe and be saved! Why was Paul so indebted to God and to men? It was because from the moment he received salvation from Christ he understood that it was not for his own sake. No, he had been saved so that he might serve others with the gospel. He was in debt to all men, since it was because of God's love for the world that he had been saved.

Paul had not always viewed himself as a debtor. When the crowd laid their clothes at his feet before stoning Stephen to death, Paul felt great. Then he heard Stephen's prayer from the ground, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Stephen's prayer was like a knife in Paul's heart. He tried to cover up this fatal wound by acting ever more outrageously against Jesus and his people. But one day, while Paul was on the road to Damascus, the Risen Jesus appeared to him in a blinding flash of light, knocking him from his horse. "Who are you, Lord?" Paul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up, ...and you will be told what to do." Paul, blinded by the light, was led into the city, where he stayed in prayer. Then Jesus sent Ananias to Paul, and Ananias laid his hands on Paul to heal him and baptize him into the name of Jesus. He told Paul, "God says: [You are] my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel."

From that time on, Paul preached the gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ to Jews and Gentiles alike. He bore every kind of suffering and hardship. Though he had been a proud and nationalistic Jew, he humbled himself to serve the Gentiles and their kings, with a sense that it was his greatest privilege to do so. Through faith in Jesus Christ, Paul had been changed from a cursed man, an enemy of God and a burden to others, into a man of God's grace, a servant of Christ Jesus and a source of blessing to many. He labored with a sense of privilege that such a wretched sinner was now given grace through the gospel to reap harvests of blessings among men. Are you a creditor or a debtor? The answer is not on your credit card statement. The truth is we are all debtors before God and men. Let's learn from Paul how to serve God's sheep with a sense of privilege and obligation. It is indeed a privilege that God wants to use us to make this nation a kingdom of priests and a holy nation!

2. The righteous will live by faith (16-17)

As we have studied, when Paul believed the gospel of Jesus Christ, he was changed from a violent man into a source of blessing for all men. For this reason, Paul considered the gospel to be the most precious gift of God, and he was eager to impart it to anyone willing to hear it. Every Christian must thank God that he imparted it so thoroughly in this letter to the Romans. But before laying out his theology in full detail, Paul summarized the meaning of the gospel message in verses 16 and 17. Let's read these verses together. "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.'" Let's think briefly about Paul's summary of the gospel's meaning.

First, the gospel is the power of God for salvation. Look again at verse 16. "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." Why would anyone be ashamed of the gospel? It is because the gospel seems to make people powerless. Jesus did not fight to defeat all his enemies, but surrendered himself to the cross like a lamb to the slaughter. Paul himself was beaten so many times, yet never beat anyone back! The believers in Rome were a small minority, consisting mostly of Jews, living in the heart of the world's military and economic superpower. What could they do? And what about us in this post-modern generation? How can we hope to fight YouTube, iPods and text messaging for young peoples' attention? But Paul said, "I am not ashamed!" It is because the gospel message is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.

Salvation is not a baptism ceremony! Salvation is the only way to change our reality. The circumstances of our lives change from generation to generation. When I was born, digital computers had just been invented! But the unchanging reality for us and for every person born into this world is the curse of sin, death, judgment for our sins and the torment of hell. Only the gospel has the power to save all men and change our curse into blessing, death, judgment and hell into praise from God and eternal life in God's kingdom. The gospel is not a matter of opinion and lifestyle preference. The gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes! Let us not be ashamed, but labor with all our heart to bring our friends, Bible students and family members to hear the gospel message at the Purdue International Conference!

Second, in the gospel, a righteousness from God is revealed. How does the gospel change our reality? In a word, the gospel makes us righteous. Many people understand righteousness in many ways. For example, some people would consider that righteousness is not eating any red meat. Some might say that righteousness is sporting a long beard, while others would say "no, the righteous are clean-shaven." But this is all self-righteousness. It is sinful man's attempt to exalt himself over other, "worse," sinners. The Bible, however, clearly defines righteousness as the state of being right with God and man, and not just with men (Gn. 6:9; Jn. 5:44). Self-righteousness might impress people, but it cannot make us right with God.

The Jews of course claimed that they already had in the Law of Moses a righteousness from God. The law is good, because it reveals God's standard of righteousness. It is the standard which our Lord Jesus came to fulfill (Mt 5:17). But for sinners the righteousness found in the law is like an ocean of salt water to a thirsty man. It's all around, but you can't drink it! For whoever depends on the law for righteousness will be condemned by it when he breaks the law (Ja. 2:10). Should we therefore despair of ever being righteous? Is our best defense to say, "well, yes, but everyone else is a sinner, too"? No. Human beings need to be righteous before their Creator God. Only the righteous will be permitted into the kingdom of heaven (Is. 35:8; Eph. 5:5). We need a righteousness that empowers us to change.

In the gospel, a righteousness from God is revealed. It is not a replacement for the law. Instead, the gospel is the fulfillment of God's promise to write his righteous standard on human hearts. Jeremiah 31:33-34 says, "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time. I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people...they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." When we believe in Jesus' death and resurrection, what we were powerless to do because of sin, we have received power to do. We can rejoice and be thankful, always! We can pray, continually! We can be a source of blessing to all men! By faith in the gospel of God, sinners can become instruments of God's righteousness!

In this way, the true nature of God's righteousness is revealed. God's righteousness is not just the holy standard of truth and justice. God's righteousness is also the holy standard of divine mercy and love. The righteousness from God saves sinners by lifting us up on wings of grace until we can meet the holy standard of God's truth. It is a righteousness that took the enemy of God, Saul, and transformed him into Paul, the servant of Christ Jesus and one set apart for the gospel of God. It is a righteousness that is changing me from an international Romeo living under curse into a blessed shepherd and father of many nations. The righteousness from God has the power to save all men of every generation, including those from communist and Muslim nations, and make them apostles of light to a dying world.

Third, a righteousness that is by faith. The testimony of the Scriptures is that this righteousness from God is ours by faith in Jesus Christ. And once we have repented for our sins and believed, how can we stay righteous? Should we get baptized again and again? Should we depend on our superior knowledge of the Bible? The answer is: Keep on believing. Look at verse 17b. "...a righteousness that is by faith, from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith." Our struggle is to keep depending by faith on God's righteousness in the face of our past and future sins, in the face of all the enemies arrayed against us. We never have to be ashamed. We must simply take our stand on what Jesus has done for us at the cross. We just have to believe that, if God is for us, who can be against us? Paul summarized the joy of righteousness by faith in Romans 8:38-9, "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." The righteousness that is ours by faith is the righteousness that we can never lose except if we lose our faith. The righteous will live by faith.

May God bless us to be the righteous for the sake of his world salvation purpose!